The intellectuals and reformers of the nineteenth century were well aware of ‘the power of the page,’ understanding the innate ability of fiction to change the way people think and thus its power to help bring about social reform. The novel of purpose – a novel that engaged with socially relevant issues within its narrative framework – was particularly influential in the United States in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century. I will examine the ‘power of the page’ through an investigation of the novel of purpose, which was a flourishing, popular and lucrative literary category. This article will explore *Fettered for Life; or, Lord and Master* (1874), by Lillie Devereux Blake, a novel of purpose that has been largely neglected in contemporary scholarship. Often writing pseudonymously, Blake was a prolific writer of fiction and polemics and a Civil War correspondent who later became a prominent figure in the women’s rights movement. *Fettered for Life* was written to promote the ideologies of the nineteenth century women’s rights movement. This text, therefore, provides a literary window into the changing social, cultural and political forces that influenced the course of the women’s rights movement and its call for women’s suffrage. A focus on the pervasive use of the woman-slave analogy, as a rhetorical device and literary trope, will illuminate how Blake aimed to challenge existing power structures throughout this text and, thus, within the broader historical context. As a result, *Fettered for Life* proves a prime example of the effectiveness of the novel of purpose in terms of the ‘power of the page.’
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THE NOVEL OF PURPOSE AND THE POWER OF THE PAGE: BREAKING THE CHAINS THAT BIND IN FETTERED FOR LIFE

At the 1884 convention of the National Woman Suffrage Association, in a speech entitled “The Unknown Quantity in Politics,” Lillie Devereux Blake (1833–1913) stated:

We are tired of the pretence that we have special privileges and the reality that we have none; of the fiction that we are queens, and the fact that we are subjects; of the symbolism which exalts our sex but is only a meaningless mockery. ¹

A nineteenth-century women’s rights reformer, suffragist and writer, Blake was dedicated to disseminating the message of women’s rights. Not only was Blake concerned with the false exultation of the female sex in nineteenth-century society, but also the ‘enslavement’ of the female sex in the eyes of the law, society and the political realm, as well as within the family and the institution of marriage.

The intellectuals and reformers of the nineteenth century were well aware of ‘the power of the page,’ understanding the innate ability of fiction to change the way people think and thus its power to help bring about social reform. The novel of purpose – a novel that engaged with socially relevant issues in its narrative framework – was particularly influential in the United States during the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century. Blake’s novel, Fettered for Life; or, Lord and Master, A Story of To-Day, published in 1874, was a novel of purpose written to promote the ideologies of the women’s rights movement. Furthermore, within this text, Blake made use of the woman-slave analogy, a rhetorical device and literary trope that was pervasive in the works of antislavery and women’s rights advocates throughout the nineteenth century. Through the use of this analogy, Blake sought to challenge existing power structures through this text, as well as within the broader historical context. The analysis of this overlooked text therefore provides a window into the changing social, cultural and political forces that influenced the course of the women’s rights movement and its call for women’s suffrage throughout the late-nineteenth century. As a result, Fettered for Life proves a prime example of the effectiveness of the novel of purpose in terms of the ‘power of the page.’

THE POWER OF THE PAGE

“Would you not rather turn your powers to achieving success for yourself in study, or in literature, than stoop to such humiliating work as this?”

– “Laura Stanley,” in Fettered for Life; or, Lord and Master: A Story of To-Day (1874)

From the antebellum period onwards (between the American Revolutionary War, 1775-1783, and the American Civil War, 1861-1865), movements for social reform – including causes such as antislavery (abolitionism), temperance, moral reform, women’s rights and racial uplift – permeated American society.² According to Mary Kelly, Americans ‘established a host of institutions, ranging from organisations dedicated to benevolence to movements of social reform.’ These institutions consequently became a ‘powerful resource in the making of public opinion.’³ Often, reformers were active in a variety of social movements, with new movements emerging out of existing movements, encouraging a constant exchange of ideas and values. However, the ideology that ‘united’ these many movements for reform was ‘an effort to improve society, specifically by changing some of its aspects while leaving others intact.’⁵ American women became especially involved in movements for social reform. Indeed, the passage of women into public life came about concurrently with the development of

benevolent and reform institutions, but also as a result of the ever-increasing educational opportunities available to children. Moreover, many women ‘expressed the widely held belief that they had a special mandate as women to exert a virtuous influence in the world.’ This had a profound influence upon the social developments that took place throughout the nineteenth century, challenging the boundaries of traditional gender relations and expectations and allowing women’s public role and public influence to expand. However, the increasing visibility of women’s public activity, at a time when domesticity was foregrounded as the realm of women, both challenged and transformed social assumptions about gender, race and class, as well as the role of women, in nineteenth-century America.

As a result of the prevalence of social reform, the literature of social reform held a powerful place in nineteenth century American culture. Social movements relied on the widespread dissemination of ideas related to their cause; indeed, nineteenth-century reformers understood that ‘reform takes place within an individual’s own heart and mind,’ making literature a primary method of disseminating the transformative ideas that proliferated American society. The communication of ideologies for social reform was accomplished in speeches, tracts and popular literature, all composed with the purpose of promoting the philosophies of specific movements. Throughout the antebellum period, popular social reform literature could be seen to promote a variety of causes. The rapid increase of literacy rates throughout this period meant that these novels had a wide consumer basis and, hence, a wide social influence. Consequently, the prevailing social and culture climate paved the way for a variety of socially conscious literature that promoted these social causes. As discussed by Charles L. Sanford in his 1958 article, “Classics of American Reform Literature”:

Reform may be defined broadly as the effort by words and deeds to change and improve upon existing conditions. In this sense, American reforming zeal is not confined to spasmodic social protest movements or eccentric experiments, but is characteristic of the American people generally, whatever their class or sectional interests. For some three centuries they have been enlisted in a “permanent revolution” dedicated to progress, to social and individual betterment, variously interpreted.12

However, from his mid twentieth-century perspective, Sanford goes on to discuss the reformatory nature of the works of canonical authors such as James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Mark Twain (1835-1910). As the literature of social reform often attached itself to existing popular literary conventions, ensuring that reform literature was a widely consumed literary cultural product, it has often not been considered amongst the writings of canonical authors, and hence overlooked. In recent scholarship, however, there has been a shift from the analysis of canonical literature toward the analysis of the popular literary forms of the nineteenth century, along with an emphasis on their significance as cultural products.

The popular reform literature of the nineteenth century can be understood in terms of what Amanda Claybaugh calls ‘the novel of purpose.’ While the novel of purpose could be both reformist and non-reformist in its scope, ‘it took its conception of purposefulness from reform,’ ensuring that ‘nineteenth-century novels were written, published, read, and reviewed according to expectations learned from social reform.’13 Furthermore, a variety of nineteenth-century authors, ‘even those who were sceptical of or indifferent to reform,’ could engage with the novel of purpose at different points of their career; however, they often wrote an array of literature that did not always conform to this type.14 This resulted in a great diversity of literature, related to a number of reform-related themes, affected in some way by the conception of the novel of purpose. Consequently, the novel of purpose ‘was understood to act on its readers – and, through its readers, the world.’15 Certainly, Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) challenged her readers to ‘feel right’ in their response to slavery upon reading her sentimental novel of purpose, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852).16 There has been a particular scholarly interest recently in literature that can be understood within the paradigm of the novel of purpose, including sentimental literature, in the writings of Stowe and Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880), and slave narratives, particularly those by Frederick Douglass (circa 1818-1895) and Harriet Jacobs (circa 1813-1897). Analysis of such literature allows for a greater understanding of the relationship between popular literature and the social movements of nineteenth-century America.

However, the writings of Lillie Devereux Blake have been fundamentally overlooked. Born in North Carolina to a southern father and a northern mother, Blake grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, following her father’s death. Although born into the plantation society of the South, some of Lillie’s first memories being that of slaves in the field, she was raised among the abolitionists of New Haven, which had a profound influence upon her beliefs throughout her life.17 The young Lillie was educated at the Apthorp School for Young Ladies, and thereafter tutored by a Yale student, ‘following the Yale undergraduate curriculum, the only way a woman could obtain some measure of a Yale education.’18 As a young woman, Lillie began writing (often pseudonymously) and became a prolific writer of fiction and polemics. She was also a Civil War correspondent, writing for such publications as the *New York Evening Post* (founded in 1800), the *New York World* (1860-1931) and *Forney’s War Press* (1861-1865). After publishing in the women’s periodical *The Revolution* (1868-1872), edited by the prominent women’s rights advocates Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) and Parker Pillsbury (1809-1898), Blake became involved in the movement in the late 1860s. As a writer and orator,

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13 Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose*, 7. Similarly, some of the reform literature of this period could be considered in terms of the ‘subversive novel,’ which not only sought to ‘reveal social ills, but also challenge the underlying cultural presumptions’ in a covert manner, so challenge prevailing social attitudes in a subversive manner. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will persevere with an investigation of the novel of purpose.
15 Ibid., 7.
18 Ibid., 12.
'Blake immediately proved to be a maverick who spoke her mind no matter the politics of those around her.' Unafraid of airing her views, Blake’s dedication and enthusiasm for women’s rights is clear in her own words, from her oratorical reply to Reverend Dr. Morgan Dix (1827-1908), who in 1883 delivered a series of lectures on the ‘proper’ place of women:

[W]hen this gentleman uses the position in which he stands, strongly entrenched with all the wealth of the wealthiest church in the country to sustain him, with his social standing, his congregation, his clerical brethren all giving him strength, – when he uses these great advantages to try to arrest the struggles of womanhood for freedom, to bind still tighter the chains she has half cast off, to stifle all her aspirations for a better life, then surely the time has come for some woman, speaking for her sex as well as her powers will permit, to reply to this “clerical dictator.”

This powerful language makes direct reference to the woman-slave analogy, showing how important it was in providing the basis for Blake’s understanding of the issues faced by women in the nineteenth century. However, in spite of, or perhaps because of, her dedication to speaking her own mind, Blake remained only an obscure figure in the women’s rights movement and its history of itself until recently.

In the recent biography, *Lillie Devereux Blake: Retracing a Life Erased* (2002), Grace Farrell came to understand that Blake’s own history, like that of her highly influential writings, suffered ‘in a visceral way, ... [as] authoritative proclamations, however softly whispered, can erase a woman from history.’

**“The Bonds of Womanhood”**

“The thought that I am bound worries me perpetually, and I have lately found it in my heart to envy some forlorn old maids of our acquaintance, because they, at least, are free.”

– “Flora Livingston,” in *Fettered for Life; or, Lord and Master: A Story of To-Day* (1874)

In her review of the first contemporary edition of *Fettered for Life*, published in 1996, Veronica Abbass stated: ‘As the title suggests, the focus of *Fettered for Life* is marriage.’ Although *Fettered for Life* is about marriage, the word ‘fettered’ conjures the imagery of chains and shackles, which has long been related to the concept of slavery or imprisonment. During the nineteenth century, however, the word ‘fettered’ was also metaphorically associated with the concept of marriage, within the context of marital slavery. As stated by Francis Barry in *The Lily* in 1855: ‘Marriage is the slavery of woman. Marriage does not differ, in any of its essential features, from chattel slavery.’ As women found themselves ‘bound’ to their husbands, both legally and culturally, such statements elucidate the significance of the woman-slave analogy to the women’s rights advocates of the nineteenth century. Hence, the word ‘fettered’ evoked associations with bondage, and more specifically, marital and woman slavery.

Many writers, from ancient times to the present, have equated the position of white women to that of the slave. The analogy turns on the perception that, historically, the experience of women has been so persistently restricting that the condition of women was no better, and certainly no freer, than that of slaves. With the evolution of hierarchical patriarchal society, during the secondary products revolution in the early Holocene period onwards, came notions of the state, class and slavery.

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19 Ibid., 122.


21 The *History of Woman Suffrage*, published variously by Stanton and Anthony, as well as Matilda Joslyn Gage (1826-1898) and Ida Husted Harper (1851-1931), in six volumes between 1881 and 1922.


The woman-slave analogy was thus a particularly effective and pervasive trope in both the political and literary discourse of social reform movements. First employed at length by the white women involved in the burgeoning antislavery movement of the 1830s, the woman-slave analogy encouraged abolitionists such as Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880) to observe that the ‘comparison between women and the coloured race is striking,’ as ‘both have been kept in subjection by physical force, and considered rather in the light of property, than as individuals.’ Although the use of the woman-slave analogy problematically overlooked the experience of black women and failed to encourage white women to ‘examine their sexist attitudes towards women unlike themselves,’ it had credibility when used by and presented to groups of (white) antislavery and women’s rights reformers. Moreover, the need to convince white men, as politicians and legislators, of the need to ‘emancipate’ both slaves and women from their condition of ‘servitude’ compounded the use of the woman-slave analogy by women’s rights advocates. Hence, as a metaphor that had political currency when used by (white) female reformers, the trope was also imaginatively powerful. As a reform novel that germinated from these historical surroundings, *Fettered for Life* employs the woman-slave analogy throughout.

*Fettered for Life* follows the story of Laura Stanley, an educated and attractive young woman, who moves to the big city of New York to earn her own livelihood. Her experiences throughout the novel acquaints her with women from all tiers of (white) society: Molly Bludgett, the abused wife of a working-class underworld figure; Rhoda Dayton, a ‘fallen woman’ working as a seamstress, saloon girl and nurse to another ‘fallen woman,’ the tubercular Maggie; Bridget Malone, a good-natured, working-class Irish immigrant; Mrs. Moulder, a disenchanted middle-class housewife; Flora Livingstone, a college classmate and debutante in New York high society; Mrs. D’arcy, M. D., a wealthy woman physician; and Frank Heywood, a young journalist who is actually a cross-dressing woman. Intelligent, thoughtful and ardent supporters of women’s rights, Laura and Frank together become the voice of author Lillie Devereux Blake. The novel is thus infused with the women’s rights concerns of the day, from issues of marital subjugation and divorce to legal and political reform and universal suffrage. This cast of female characters allows Blake to explore many of the prominent threads in the burgeoning feminist thought of the period. However, the primary trope that Blake uses to examine the difficulties facing nineteenth-century women is the woman-slave analogy. According to Farrell, ‘Blake presents femaleness itself as a fetter that, in a patriarchal social order, enchains a woman for life, limiting her fulfilment as it circumscribes her freedom.’ As Laura herself sees that the ‘inferiority of our sex is forever meeting us,’ she seeks to support herself and endeavours to lead her life so that she remains her own master. However, the

28 Ibid., 263.
33 These concerns were raised as early as the first women’s rights convention, held at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, and remained of concern to women’s rights advocates throughout the nineteenth century. Elizabeth B. Clark, ‘Matrimonial Bonds: Slavery and Divorce in Nineteenth-Century America,’ *Law and History Review* 8: 1 (1990): 25.
35 Blake, *Fettered for Life*, 43.
woman-slave analogy is invoked throughout *Fettered for Life* to explore the various ways in which white women are ‘fettered,’ slave-like, within the limitations and expectations that characterise their social network.

Flora Livingstone becomes the primary expression of the woman-slave analogy. Blake considers the character of Flora starkly within the terms of feminine enslavement, a position exacerbated by her class and financial status that is very different from the physical abuse endured by the working-class characters. When Laura encourages Flora to pursue her interest in the law, and potentially take it up as her career, Flora is refused permission by her father who instead gives her money to buy a dress: ‘Flora took the money, and thanked her father; but as she left the room, she felt as if she had bartered away her birthright for a mess of pottage.’ As discussed by Elizabeth B. Clark, *Fettered for Life* is emblematic of the liberal feminist thought of the nineteenth century, illustrating how ‘...a right to hold a job, to pursue a career or profession, came to be seen as a critical part of woman’s emancipation.’ This situation is relevant to the character of Flora, who, once faced with the inability to pursue a career of her own choosing, is instead forced into pursuing the socially conditioned and expected ‘career’ of a young belle. Yet it is her social position that makes her vulnerable, especially in terms of the marriage relation. When Flora exhibits the desire for a life that does not include marriage in the immediate future, her mother will not let her entertain the idea: ‘Mrs. Livingston had at one period of her life protested against her destiny as bitterly as did ever any revolted slave; but having for years past been contented with her chains, she could endure no thought of revolt in others.’ Ultimately, both parents willingly sacrifice their daughter — Mr. Livingston by preventing Flora from studying the law and Mrs. Livingston by encouraging a disagreeable, though fashionable, marriage — to the social expectations of New York high society.

The slavery endured by Flora is primarily that of mental anguish. At the beginning of her courtship with Ferdinand Le Roy, the most eligible bachelor of several seasons, Flora initially boasts about his attentions: ‘I don’t care to be his slave for life, though I would like to see him at my feet.’ However, eventually coaxed into marriage to a man she does not love, Flora’s virginal sensibilities are shattered when her suitor kisses her. Throughout this ordeal, Le Roy murmurs: ‘come, my sweet trembling little prisoner, you are fairly caught. Give me your promise.’ Flora henceforth feels bound to him: ‘she was no longer free, no longer belonged to herself, she had received a master, and been compelled to submit to the symbol of his power. ... ‘I have passed under the yoke,’ she thought, ‘I am a slave.’’ An intelligent and literary young woman, Flora realises the woman-slave analogy, in terms of nineteenth-century social expectations for women, and languishes beneath its ideological implications. So as not to flout social convention, Flora goes through with the marriage which is abhorrent to her, despite admonitions from Laura. Experiencing intense mental and emotional suffering after her marriage, Laura suggests to Flora that she again take up her passion for writing to give herself a sense of purpose. The publication of some poetry gives Flora a small flicker of hope; however, when her husband forbids Flora to continue her writing, she develops a nervous fever to which she succumbs. Flora dies with a plea on her lips: ‘Mamma, don’t let any of the other girls marry men they don’t love. ... I want you to remember this. ... [W]omen as well as men need an occupation for their energies, and ... marriage without love, is worse than death.’ Hence, the marital ‘slavery’ is compounded by the fact that Flora remains ‘condemned’ by the expectations of the husband from whom she does not feel ‘free.’

The woman-slave analogy sometimes appeared in more subtle manifestations. The metaphorical construction of women as ‘caged birds’ has been a familiar trope within the realm of Western literature and art, which would have been particularly familiar to nineteenth-century audiences. Mrs. Moulder, Laura’s landlady, is literally and figuratively characterised as a caged bird – in direct reference to her own pet bird, the yellow canary Cherry, an animal that is appreciated while it is safely in its cage but creates havoc when it gets ‘out.’ According to Joan Dunayer, ‘applying images of denigrated nonhuman species to women labels women inferior and available for abuse; attaching images of the aggrandised human species to men designates them superior and entitled to exploit.’ The image of the ‘bird in the cage’ reveals itself in various artistic contexts; however, as discussed by

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36 Ibid., 102.
37 Clark, “Matrimonial Bonds,” 34.
38 Ibid., 102-103.
39 Ibid., 73.
40 Ibid., 128.
41 Ibid., 129.
42 Ibid., 73, 129.
43 Ibid., 350-351.
44 Ibid., 146, 244.
Elaine Shefer, ‘the women – seen in the wrong cage, seen outside the cage – are all ultimately linked to the home-cage syndrome.’ As birds can fly and sing – but can also be restricted in these pursuits by a cage – the caged bird metaphor is effective for the nineteenth-century women that became ‘encaged’ in marriage and the home. The artistic representation of the caged bird has various manifestations: the ‘woman at the window’ is representative of the woman’s attempt to get outside her ‘cage,’ the positioning of women as ‘pets,’ which is ‘often manifested by their feeding and playing with birds,’ the appearance of women in ‘unconventional cages,’ such as nurseries and brothels, in opposition to their ‘proper cage’ of domesticity in the home. Consequently, these images make the distinction between the ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ cages for women in the nineteenth century. The use of such metaphorical language can also be read in terms of the woman-slave analogy, due to the striking overtones of being ‘caged’ – the cage acting as a ‘prison’ – and hence the connotations of servile imprisonment.

Married at seventeen in romantic folly, Fettered for Life presents Agnes Moulder as trapped in her supposedly idyllic middle-class setting. She is the disenchanted arbiter of the ‘cult of true womanhood,’ a nineteenth-century cultural ideology that promoted the sanctity of women’s activity in the home while attempting to limit their activity to this domain. According to Nancy F. Cott, the ‘cult of true womanhood’ grouped together mother, father, and children within the private household to maintain both cultural and social stability and promote the pursuit of happiness. This was defined by four cardinal virtues of femininity – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity – through which women, their husbands, and society at large were encouraged to make judgement. Consequently, women were increasingly encouraged to inhabit a ‘separate sphere,’ ‘promoting’ the assumption that home and work constituted distinct domains that fell to women and men respectively. Promoted in such popular magazines as Godey’s Lady’s Book (1830-1878), the majority of American women abided by this demarcation. Many women therefore confined their activities to the domesticity and safety of the home, thus creating a sisterhood based upon the ‘bonds of womanhood.’ However, women’s rights advocates criticised the restrictions it placed upon women through the ‘cult of true womanhood.’ Although not all women reformers opposed the ‘separate spheres’ ideology, as some women understood the political realm as ‘an extension of domesticity and a result of their moral nature,’ others found such gender demarcations galling. Indeed, participation in any variety of social reform involved activities beyond the ‘encaging’ confines of the home, allowing the separation of ‘work’ and ‘domesticity’ to be interpreted in terms of woman slavery. In her condemnation of the idea of ‘separate spheres,’ Paulina Wright Davis (1813-1876), editor of the women’s rights publication The Una, stated: ‘It is not a question of sex, but a question of conditions, not a difference between man and woman, but a difference between freedom and slavery.’

As Agnes Moulder attempts to live up to these standards of femininity in Fettered for Life, she finds herself restrained, both mentally and socially, by the expectations of her domineering husband. Mrs. Moulder welcomes the addition of Laura Stanley, a boarder, to their household as her uplifting conversation about women’s rights is inspiring. Yet, Agnes is never able to put the advice into practice as she is encumbered and ‘encaged’ at every turn by the desires and expectations of her husband. Moreover, the same gendered dynamics are seen to be replicated in the next generation: Minnie is a dutiful replica of her mother, while the disobedient son Aleck is unable to be controlled by his mother and somewhat encouraged by his father. The silencing and metaphorical death of Mrs. Moulder is acted out upon her escaped pet bird, a ‘frail little creature,’ killed by her husband in his impatient and frantic attempt to get the bird back in its cage:

46 Elaine Shefer, Birds, Cages and Women in Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite Art (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), xxiv.
47 Ibid., xxiv-xxv.
51 Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood, 196.
Mr. Moulder took a heavy towel and rushed after the now trembling and frightened warbler. He flapped
at him once or twice, Mrs. Moulder crying piteously, “Oh, Alexander! don’t, please, please don’t strike
so hard! oh Alexander, don’t, don’t!”

Her words were of no effect; Mr. Moulder seeming to be enraged by the bird’s escape, beat the cloth at
him viciously, and presently with some effect, he hit the fluttering yellow wings; struck them again and
again, and in a moment, brought a mere ruffled mass of feathers to the floor, Mrs. Moulder picked up the
tiny crushed object, “You have killed him, Alexander,” she said, with intense mournfulness; “my little
pet is dying! Little Cherry, dear little Cherry!” putting her cheek down against the soft yellow down.

“His heart scarcely beats; poor little bird, poor dear little bird!” trying to smooth his broken plumage; “It
is no use! he is dead!”

The death of this beloved pet from the cruelty of the husband prompts a strong emotional response that induces
a miscarriage and subsequent physical deterioration. Mrs. Moulder’s condition, at the end of the novel, is
somewhat improved; yet there is no indication that her domestic and familial situation will ever be. The caged
bird metaphor that infuses the story of Mrs. Moulder thus reinforces Blake’s use of the woman-slave analogy.

Despite the effective use of the woman-slave analogy throughout *Fettered for Life*, Blake, like other white
reformers of the period, renders black characters – the actual slaves of American history – conspicuous because
of their absence. During the antebellum period, white antislavery advocates such as Angelina Grimké (1805-
1879) publically sympathised with ‘the blood and sweat and tears of [their] sisters in bonds.’ As discussed by
Karen Sanchez-Eppler, the bodies of both black slaves and women were ‘read against them’ during this period,
‘so that for both the human body was seen to function as the foundation not only of a general subjection but also
of a specific exclusion from political discourses.’ However, in the wake of the fourteenth and fifteenth
amendments, which enfranchised black men, but not women, women’s rights advocates became increasingly
distanced from the struggles of black women for equality. Although the women’s movement was never entirely
segregated, issues of racism and ideologies of white superiority remained. In spite of the ‘sisterhood’
proclaimed between white women’s rights advocates and their black ‘sisters,’ Shirley J. Yee maintains that
‘white women, as a group, could not always be trusted to evaluate their own complicity in racism or even to
understand black women’s concerns.’ The nuances of this issue are replicated in Blake’s rendering of black
women in *Fettered for Life*.

The only visible black character in *Fettered for Life* is Aunt Phoebe, a faithful black servant who has remained
with her poor white southern mistress, Maggie’s mother, long after emancipation. Aunt Phoebe remains with
‘her’ white family throughout Maggie’s tubercular demise and that of her ailing mistress. Not until all ‘her’
white folk are dead does Aunt Phoebe show any desire to uproot herself and go to visit her own family. Essentially, Aunt Phoebe is presented in terms of ‘romantic racialism,’ which ‘projected an image of the Negro
that could be construed as flattering or laudatory in the context of some currently accepted ideals of human
behaviour and sensibility.’ A mere stereotypical characterisation that becomes representative of black
womanhood as a whole, Aunt Phoebe is reminiscent of all the literary mammies that pervaded popular
American cultural products. Moreover, the entirety of the South is represented in the distant, romantic terms that
accord with to the southern plantation legend. Despite the penchant of the women’s rights movement for
‘likening their own oppression to that of the slave and using as a favourite rhetorical device the image of the
black woman as a victim of double oppression, these oversights and simplifications are typical of white
women’s perception of black women.’ It has been disputed that white women’s rights advocates included the

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‘interests of black women only as a handy rhetorical device,’ a conclusion that is consistent with Blake’s representation experience of black women in relation to her use of the woman-slave analogy.\(^{62}\)

As a novel of purpose, *Fettered for Life* provides contemporary readers with a prime example of the ‘power of the page’ in nineteenth-century popular literature, on account of its implementation of the woman-slave analogy. In *Fettered for Life*, Blake investigates the conventions that promoted the ‘enslavement’ of women. Through her exploration of the woman-slave analogy through the experience of white women, Blake critiqued the willingness of white women to remain part of the status quo of dependency, subversively challenging them to break their own chains and set themselves free. In their adherence of women to the ‘cult of true womanhood,’ Blake criticised the young women who wished to be worshipped by the men that only want them as ‘slaves.’ However, like other women’s rights advocates of the nineteenth century, Blake’s development of the woman-slave analogy overlooked the experience of black women so as to render their experience as ‘real’ slaves insignificant. For Blake – who herself ‘desired to advance with a free step’ but was able to ‘only pace on slowly with fetters on my ankles’\(^{63}\) – the use of the woman-slave analogy throughout *Fettered for Life* became emblematic of its power as a nineteenth-century cultural, legal, social and political critique.

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\(^{62}\) Ibid., 148.