Hell On Earth
Ultimate Evil As a Catalyst for 19th–Century Black Women’s Radical Decisions

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19th century black women best expressed their domination by racism and slavery in exaggerated terms, demonizing oppression and exalting righteous causes.

In doing this, they created a culture of Ultimate Evil, in which they became immersed.

Ultimate Evil appeared as a rhetorical device in their literary efforts with phrases like “Demon Slavery” and “Fiery Darts of the Devil”
19th Century Black Women perceived Ultimate Evil as Satan and his followers.

The closest relatable earthly manifestations of Hell were slaveholders, racists, and spiritual hypocrites.

They understood that slavery’s Ultimate Evil was the greatest imaginable transgressor of their ethical codes.
Maria W. Stewart

- Orphaned at age 5
- Widowed at age 26 in 1829
  - Legally stripped of her inheritance
  - Underwent a “Spiritual Interrogation”
- Became a deeply devout independent woman
- Essayist, activist, and orator
Stewart was the first Black American woman to speak formally in public.

First American woman to speak to both men and women:
- First public speech on September 21st, 1832 at Franklin Hall in Boston
- “Farewell Address” on September 21st, 1833

Short public career due to public resistance.
Stewart was political, literary black woman who was culturally significant for her boldness in defying conventions

- **Important for establishing precedents**
  - Making way for future radical women
  - Demonstrated open opposition to the evils of slavery and racism

- **Religion was a political motivator for Stewart**
  - Stewart communicated using religious imagery
  - She applied symbols of evil to slavery and her opposition
“Methinks I heard a spiritual interrogation— ‘Who shall go forward and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?’ And my heart made this reply— ‘If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!”

From “Lecture Delivered At Franklin Hall”
Barbara Welter defined True Womanhood as a feminine ideal that included “four cardinal virtues— piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.”

If she aspired towards it, a woman became “an empty vessel, without legal or emotional existence of her own.”

“Submission was perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women.”
The woman continued to stare as Miss Bart swept by.
A radical decision is one that defies Ultimate Evil when the latter dominates human beings as a power system.

An oppressive power like slavery compels its victims to radically act upon their ideals. In Stewart’s case, these were her Christian beliefs.

Stewart’s greatest radical decision was that of committing to spoken and literary defiance of white male efforts to manipulate and dehumanize her own race.
Examples of the Rhetoric of Ultimate Evil

• “For with the help of God, I am resolved to withstand the fiery darts of the devil, and the assaults of wicked men.”

• “It is the word of God, though men and devils may oppose it”

• “O ye hypocrites, ye generation of vipers”
  –“An Address Delivered Before the Afric–American Female Intelligence Society of America
“You may kill, tyrannize, and oppress as much as you choose, until our cry shall come before the throne of God… he is able to plead our case against you, and to pour upon you the ten plagues of Egypt”

—“Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality”

“For while these evils exist, to talk is like giving breath to the air, and labor to the wind”

“…it has actually appeared at different periods as though the powers of earth and hell had combined against me, to prove my overthrow.”

—Farewell Address, 1833
Stewart’s works can collectively be interpreted as Jeremiads

“Jeremiads are defined as treatises that reflect the perpetual tribulations of an oppressed people and hold out hope for a brighter future in times of crisis.”

–Willie J. Harrell Jr.
“Black theology is a theology of liberation”

“Black theology, therefore, is that theology which arises out of the need to articulate the religious significance of [the] Black presence in a hostile white world. It is black people reflecting on the black experience.”

–James Cone

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