

# “We Were But Property – Not a Mother, and the Children God Had Given Her:” The Figure of a Child in Abolitionist Literature

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## ABSTRACT

*This article discusses the use of the figure of sorrowing child in slave narratives and in texts by abolitionists and draws attention to the way abolitionist rhetoric employed the sharp contrast between the period's idealization of childhood as a state of innocence and purity and the reality of slave childhood. It points to the ways abolitionist literature challenged the “paternalistic” justification of slavery and exposed it as inhibiting the performance of the ideal of childhood.*

## KEYWORDS

Slave childhood, sorrowing child, abolitionist literature, slave narratives, H.B. Stowe

The child is often seen as the ultimate or archetypal victim. In her book on popular images of childhood Patricia Holland points out that encountering sorrowing children recalls dependence and powerlessness, some of the defining characteristics of childhood.<sup>1</sup> Therefore the figure of a suffering child reminds us of our status as adults, i.e. those in control and in power. The figure of the child represented in opposition to the adult has appeared frequently in American national rhetoric since the early times of the nation's formation, used as a metaphor for nation-building, national identity and also racial identity, as the cultural historian Caroline F. Levander so aptly illustrates in her book *Cradle of Liberty*.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it is because a child is a person in the process of forming, of becoming, and as such it can, as Zofia Kolbuszewska puts it, “function as the unstable signifier”<sup>3</sup> offering itself as a suitable metaphor for a nation that is in the process of formation, seeking to define its independent individuality. Thus, the child's inchoate character seems to invite “projections and transference, serving as a screen onto which culture projects its desires,”<sup>4</sup> and for its instability “the figure of a child is at the same time in a position to prize open cultural contradictions, indicate culture's aporias, and unearth its repressions.”<sup>5</sup> One of the great and grim contradictions of American culture and democracy has been the racial issue.

Although childhood can be seen as a stable phase in the biological development of human beings, ever since the publication of Philippe Aries' groundbreaking book

- 1 Patricia Holland, *What is a Child? Popular Images of Childhood* (London: Virago Press, 1992), 148.
- 2 John Adams used the expression “children colonies;” Thomas Paine desired to break away from the parent country in *Common Sense* (1776), etc. While Revolutionary America saw itself as a child rightly claiming its filial autonomy, the new Republic considered itself the ideal child, a new and indeed perfect creature. See Caroline F. Levander, *Cradle of Liberty: Race, the Child, and National Belonging from Thomas Jefferson to W. E. B. Du Bois* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 3 Zofia Kolbuszewska, *The Purloined Child: American Identity and Representations of Childhood in American Literature 1851-2000* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2007), 21.
- 4 Kolbuszewska, *The Purloined Child*, 22.
- 5 Kolbuszewska, *The Purloined Child*, 22.

*Centuries of Childhood*<sup>6</sup> it is generally acknowledged that perceptions and understandings of childhood have changed historically. Therefore the child is both biologically born and culturally made, or in the words of historian Steven Mintz the biological facts of childhood are “inevitably modified by history and mediated by culture.”<sup>7</sup> Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a new concept of childhood emerged that would influence the general attitude to children and childrearing for almost a century and a half and would have its impact on the texts under discussion. This concept was based on Romantic ideas that perceived children as pure, spontaneous, and intuitive. It also grew out of Jan Comenius religious and pedagogical concepts, John Locke’s theory of human mind as *tabula rasa* and the “liberal Protestant ideal that granted children innocent souls.”<sup>8</sup> Maria Lydia Child, a Boston Unitarian, reformer and a founder of the first American magazine for children and youth *Juvenile Miscellany*, expressed this new attitude to the child’s character in *Mother’s Book*, where she repeatedly calls children innocent, as for example: “They [children] come to us from heaven with their little souls full of innocence and peace.”<sup>9</sup> Childhood viewed as innocent, pure and malleable resulted in a strengthened awareness of the need to protect it from the corruption and unpleasant facts of life, thus leading toward keeping children longer than ever before in the parental home, providing additional formal schooling and withholding children from the workforce until an older age than previously.

But while middle-class children were expected to enjoy their childhoods as a protected period of joyful outdoor play, exploration and education, there was a large segment of the American population whose childhood was not affected at all by the changing attitude to children. The daughters and sons of slaves experienced only a brief childhood, a period of impoverishment devoid of formal schooling, with hardly any opportunity for congruous identity formation or self-determination and filled with fear, humiliation and various losses. While most slave societies in the New World used massive importation to maintain the slave population, “in the US, by contrast, the population sustained itself through reproduction.”<sup>10</sup> A significant portion of the population experienced their youth in bondage; at the beginning of the Civil War, there were some four million slaves and half of that number were children under the age of sixteen.<sup>11</sup>

One way for the abolitionists to support their claims of the wrongfulness of slavery was to point out the terrible realities of slave life. These became available in the form of slave narratives, accounts of the lives of fugitive or freed slaves, written either by themselves or dictated to an editor.<sup>12</sup> Although appearing since the eighteenth century,

6 In the French original *L’Enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l’Ancien Régime* (1960), translated into English by Robert Baldick in 1962 as *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*.

7 Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 4.

8 Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 76.

9 Maria Lydia Child, *The Mother’s Book* (Boston and Baltimore: Carter, Hendee and Babcock, 1831), 3. Accessed September 1, 2014. <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/child/book/book.html#1>.

10 Vilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), xvii. King’s book provides a detailed account of the realities of slave life, including nutrition, work, play, family and kin structures. Apart from slave narratives, it draws mostly from the interviews conducted under the Federal Writers’ Project.

11 Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 94.

12 Most slaves were illiterate because they were not allowed to learn to write. The first law prohibiting slaves to learn to write was passed in South Carolina as early as 1740, while the statute still allowed them to acquire reading skills so that they could read Bible. Laws forbidding the education of slaves grew stricter as a result of panic in the aftermath of the Nat Turner uprising.

the genre became established and more frequent in the decades directly preceding the Civil War.<sup>13</sup> Most slave narratives include an account of a slave childhood<sup>14</sup> and stress the fact that slave childhood was impoverished. For example Thomas Jones summarized his recollections of his early life as a slave as “associated with poverty, suffering and shame.”<sup>15</sup>

Unlike the increasing middle-class emphasis on good nutrition and hygiene, it was not rare for slave children to be underfed and continually hungry – as for example one slave holder allowed his 130 slave children only 15 kg of meat per week, i.e. about 16 grams of meat per day per capita.<sup>16</sup> Another slave owner gave each slave “one peck of corn a week, or some equivalent, and nothing besides.”<sup>17</sup> Slave children in smaller households sometimes fared better, although their status was always made clear to them: “No matter how hungry we [slave] children were, we could not have anything to eat till the white folks had got all they wanted, and then we could have what was left.”<sup>18</sup> This was just one of the many ways in which a sense of inferiority was deliberately planted in slave children in order to keep them more easily in bondage.

Although domesticity and particularly motherhood was among the most appreciated as well as required virtues of a woman, as Barbara Welter so poignantly summarizes in her “Cult of True Womanhood,”<sup>19</sup> slavery either complicated or made downright impossible its performance by slave women. After childbirth slave mothers were allowed only a few days to a few weeks<sup>20</sup> “lying-in period” before having to return back to full day work. In plantation communities, babies were quite early on handed over to nurseries and therefore many slave children were raised in cohorts rather than in a family setting. Vilma King noted that “one of the most unsettling events in the lives of slaves was the early separation of mothers and children.”<sup>21</sup>

The concept of parental authority was very complicated in other ways as well because the white owners, rather than the slave child’s biological parents, were those who held ultimate power over all aspects of the slave child’s life. This was made clear to slave children in the traumatic experiences of witnessing one’s parents or relatives whipped or beaten, which taught the children the painful lesson that their biological parents were powerless and could protect neither themselves nor their offspring. In his

13 Slave narratives have begun to receive thorough critical attention only relatively recently. See Audrey Fish, *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Many slave narratives have been digitalized and thus made widely available on the internet, for example in “North American Slave Narratives” at *Documenting the South*, available at: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>, or via *Project Gutenberg*, etc.

14 For the Czech audience a more detailed discussion on the genre of slave narrative and on the realities of slave childhood as recorded in them was written by the present author as: Šárka Bubíková, “Dětství v otroctví pohledem dobových ego-dokumentů,” *Theatrum historiae* 6. 8 (2011): 207-25.

15 Thomas H. Jones, “The Experience of Thomas H. Jones, Who Was A Slave For Forty-Three Years. Narrative of a Refugee Slave,” in *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews et al. (Chapel Hill, London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 211.

16 Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 101.

17 Jones, “The Experience,” 212.

18 Allen Parker, “Recollections of Slavery Times,” in *From Bondage to Belonging: the Worcester Slave Narratives*, ed. B. Eugene McCarthy and Thomas L. Doughton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 300.

19 Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly* 18.2 (1966): 151-174.

20 Lester Alston, “Children as Chattel,” in *Small World: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850-1950*, ed. Elliott West and Paula Petrik (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 211.

21 King, *Stolen Childhood*, 13.

narrative Josiah Henson describes at length how his father saved his mother from rape by striking the white offender – an unpardonable crime in the slave society. “And the penalty followed: one hundred lashes on the bare back, and to have the right ear nailed to the whipping-post, and then severed from the body.”<sup>22</sup> William Brown vividly recollects the trauma of seeing his mother punished for being fifteen minutes late for work: “I could hear every crack of the whip, and every groan and cry of my poor mother. [...] The cold chills ran over me, and I wept aloud.”<sup>23</sup> Thomas Jones similarly recollects the painful trauma of witnessing the whipping of his sister.<sup>24</sup> Slave parents were equally helpless when it came to protecting their children from the master’s or other white people’s cruelty: “Often, my mother, after being in the field all day, upon returning at night, would find her little children’s backs mangled by the lash of John Wagar [the master’s son] [...] [b]ut there was no redress for her grievance [...] for if she complained, her own back would be cut in a similar manner.”<sup>25</sup> Jacob Stroyer once complained to his father that his master beat him often and for no apparent reason, but his father could only respond: “I can do nothing more than to pray to the Lord to hasten the time when these things shall be done away, that is all I can do.”<sup>26</sup> James Curry, on the other hand, recorded his frustration at not being able to protect his mother from the cruelty of the master and his children: “Oh! it was dreadful, to see the girl whom my poor mother had taken care of from her childhood thus beating her, and I must stand there, and did not dare to crook my finger in her defense.”<sup>27</sup>

The most striking evidence of the violation of the otherwise prevailing sanctity of domesticity and family life were slave family disintegrations due to sale. Slave owners traded in adults as well as children and even babies without respecting the slaves’ wishes or family ties. “We were but property – not a mother, and the children God had given her,”<sup>28</sup> Josiah Henson concluded. It was not exceptional for slave owners to divide families, and because they wanted to avoid trouble, children were frequently taken away without prior notice, giving the child and mother no chance to even say goodbye. William Brown recorded the selling of his own family: “[A] circumstance occurred which caused me great unhappiness. My master sold my mother, and all her children, except myself. They were sold to different persons in the city of St. Louis.”<sup>29</sup> Later he witnessed the grief of a slave mother whose baby was taken away: “When I saw this woman crying for her child so piteously, a shudder – a feeling akin to horror, shot through my frame.”<sup>30</sup> Sojourner Truth recollects how often she found her mother in tears and when asked what the matter was, the mother answered: “I am thinking of

22 Josiah Henson, “The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself,” in *Black Slave Narratives*, ed. John F. Bayliss (London: Collier Books, 1970), 36.

23 William Brown, *Narrative of William Brown, A Fugitive Slave, written by Himself* (Boston, 1847), 15-16.

24 Jones, “The Experience,” 214.

25 John Thompson, “The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave,” in *From Bondage to Belonging: the Worcester Slave Narratives*, ed. B. Eugene McCarthy and Thomas L. Doughton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 46-47.

26 Jacob Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South*. 1879. In *From Bondage to Belonging: the Worcester Slave Narratives*, ed. B. Eugene McCarthy and Thomas L. Doughton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 186.

27 James Curry, “Narrative of James Curry, A Fugitive Slave,” *The Liberator*, January 10, 1840. Accessed August 27, 2014. <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-antebellum/5336>.

28 Henson, “The Life of Josiah Henson,” 105.

29 William Brown, *Narrative of William Brown*, 26.

30 William Brown, *Narrative of William Brown*, 50.

your brothers and sisters that have been sold away from me.”<sup>31</sup> Sojourner Truth herself would later be sold from her mother at the age of nine. Moses Roper records that his white father sold his mother with the newborn Moses and adds that he was sold several hundred miles from his mother at about the age of six.<sup>32</sup> Harriet Jacobs recollects an auction in which seven siblings were each sold to a different buyer; their mother could only wish to die: “She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, ‘Gone! All gone! Why *don’t* God kill me?’ I had no words wherewith to comfort her. Instances of this kind are of daily, yea, of hourly occurrence.”<sup>33</sup> Frederick Douglass in the very opening of his narrative shows how slavery strips away everything considered part of an innocent and happy childhood – he did not know his father; he hardly ever saw his mother; he was exposed to hunger and hard labor; he was denied education. Thus Douglass indicates how all sense of identity and security is taken away from a slave child: “Slavery has no use for either fathers or families.”<sup>34</sup>

It was this particular aspect of slavery that seems to have had the greatest impact on the popular imagination, in turn helping the abolitionist cause. Many slave narratives implied the discrepancy between the ideal of a happy childhood and the harsh reality of a slave child’s life, while many abolitionist writings and speeches made this discrepancy explicit. Employed successfully in the anti-slavery rhetoric both in non-fiction and fiction, the ordeal of a slave child became a powerful, emotive tool.

Member of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and a fierce abolitionist, Angelina E. Grimké acquired her distaste for slavery as a child. Her parents were rich planters and owned many slaves, so Angelina knew their lot first hand. In her abolitionist writings, she interestingly countered the common pro-slavery argument that slave children are well provided for and therefore their slave parents are free of the responsibility of feeding and sheltering them:

I appeal to you, my friends, as mothers; Are you willing to enslave your children? You start back with horror and indignation at such a question. But why, if slavery is no wrong to those upon whom it is imposed? [...] why not place your children in the way of being supported without your having the trouble to provide for them, or they for themselves?<sup>35</sup>

Appealing to the Christian validation of family life, she concludes that women, although they have no legislative power, should nonetheless “entreat their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons” to abolish slavery so that families will no longer be separated, “no longer husbands [torn] from their wives, and children from their parents.”<sup>36</sup>

In a speech for the American Abolitionist Society, George Barrell Cheever similarly draws attention to the horrors of the separation of families:

31 Oliver Gilbert, *Narrative Of Sojourner Truth, A Northern Slave, Emancipated From Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828* (Florence, Massachusetts: Sojourner Truth Memorial, 2010), 5.

32 Moses Roper, “Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery,” in *North Carolina Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill, London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 41.

33 Harriet Jacobs (AKA Linda Brent), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself*, ed. L. Maria Child (Boston: Published For The Author, 1861), ch. III. Accessed September 10, 2011. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11030/pg11030.html>. (Italics in the original.)

34 Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York and Auburn: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855). Accessed October 2011. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/202/202-h/202-h.htm>.

35 Angelina E. Grimké, *Appeal to Christian Women of the South* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1836), 13. Accessed August 26, 2014. <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/abesaegat.html>. (Italics in the original.)

36 Grimké, *Appeal to Christian Women of the South*, 25.

We practice the iniquity upon children, innocent children, the natives of our own land. The whole family relation, the whole domestic state, is prostituted, poisoned, turned into a misery-making machine for the agent of all evil. [...] The sacred names of husband, wife, father, mother, son, daughter, babe, become the exponents of various forces and values in the slave-breeding institute.<sup>37</sup>

Maria Lydia Child in her *Appeal* provides many examples to illustrate that black people, contrary to pro-slavery propaganda, have the same deep affections for their children, care for them and educate them as white people do.<sup>38</sup> She draws attention to both maternal and paternal love, stressing the fact that black men feel for their children just as white fathers. Recounting the words of a missionary in Jamaica, she contrasts the tranquility of a Sunday morning in a church with a slave auction on the market place:

A master of slaves [...] exercised his barbarities on a Sabbath morning while we were worshiping God in the Chapel; and the cries of the female sufferers have frequently interrupted us in our devotions. [...] This man wanted money; and one of the female slaves having two fine children, he sold one of them, and the child was torn from her maternal affection. In the agony of her feelings, she made a hideous howling; and for that crime she was flogged.<sup>39</sup>

The suffering of a slave child had a specific character when the child was female. The scandalous implications of this aspect of slave childhood were not as frequently mentioned as other forms of tyranny slavery exposed slave children to. Nevertheless, there are records of the pervasive sexual exploitation of slave girls and women. James Curry stated: "My mother was treated very cruelly. Oh! I cannot tell you how dreadful her treatment was while she was a young girl. It is not proper to be written; but the treatment of females in slavery is very dreadful."<sup>40</sup> John Brown narrates a story of a young slave girl "of smart appearance" who was stolen from her owner, an old lady, by a speculator (a slave trader) "who brutally ill-used her, and permitted his companions to treat her in the same manner" until he later sold her.<sup>41</sup> John Thompson relates the troubles his sister had with her mistress's husband and his "licentious passion" and how often she was whipped for not submitting to his wishes "until the blood stood in puddles under her feet."<sup>42</sup> Stanley Feldstein in his book on slave life includes an account of a slave girl raped by her master and consequently "punished" for it by her mistress:

Maria was a thirteen-year-old house servant. One day, receiving no response to her call, the mistress began searching the house for her. Finally, she opened the parlor door, and there was the child with her master. The master ran out [...] 'though well he knew that [his

37 George Barrell Cheever, *The Fire and Hammer of God's Word Against the Sin of Slavery* (American Abolitionist Society, 1858), available at: <https://archive.org/stream/ASPC0001904900#page/n0/mode/2up>.

38 See Maria Lydia Child, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (New-York: John S. Taylor, 1836), esp. chapter VII. Accessed September 9, 2014. [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28242/28242-h/28242-h.htm#Page\\_177](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28242/28242-h/28242-h.htm#Page_177).

39 Child, *Appeal*, 190.

40 Curry, "Narrative of James Curry."

41 John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia. A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, A Fugitive Slave* (Savannah: the Beehive Press, 1972), 19.

42 Thompson, "The Life of John Thompson," 53.

wife's] full fury would fall upon the young head of his victim. The mistress beat the child and locked her up in a smokehouse. For two weeks the girl was constantly whipped.<sup>43</sup>

In sharp contradiction to the period's emphasis on female purity, female slaves were often victims of sexual exploitation, as Jacobs implies in her comment that puberty was "a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl."<sup>44</sup>

The images of a child and mother suffering under the institution of slavery were not only a frequent rhetorical figure in abolitionist speeches and writings but in fiction as well. The best known anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe masterfully evokes the plight of an enslaved family, particularly the separation of mother and child, to place the mirror of scorn for society which held childhood and motherhood in such high esteem. The obedient Elisa would probably have remained a loyal slave was it not for the threat of losing her child. It is only then, Stowe emphasizes, that she decides to flee in desperation. The famous scene of Elisa crossing the half-frozen Ohio River, the border dividing the slave states from free ones, willing to die with her baby firmly in her arms rather than seeing it sold away clearly suggests that even for a "good Christian mother" death in freedom is preferable to life in slavery. Elisa will risk her and her child's lives rather than give up her role of mother. And since she cannot properly take care of her child and protect it under slavery, she has no choice but to disobey the law and run away.

Throughout the novel, Stowe paints several moving scenes of the separation of families and stresses the fact that not only cold-hearted slave traders tore families apart but also did good-hearted slave owners when facing financial difficulties. This was therefore not an accidental feature of slavery but one inherent in the core of the institution.

Significantly, in Stowe's novel it is the child Evangeline (rather than an adult preacher) who points to racial issues and reminds the adult characters of the novel that God is the Father of both the white children and black, and that Jesus is the Savior of everybody, the [slave girl] Topsy notwithstanding.<sup>45</sup> On her deathbed little Evangeline calls attention to the treatment of slaves and her words are received with great respect. Because the idealized child is pure and innocent, close to the sphere of angels, it is therefore endowed with great power and thus could become a child redeemer.<sup>46</sup> George Sand proposed that the children are "the true heroes" of Stowe's book.<sup>47</sup>

Drawing on the sharp contrast between the reality of the slave child's life and the nineteenth century concept of childhood, Stowe used a powerful and effective tool for her cause. This was in accord with the period's growing concern for the child and for civic belonging as Sánchez-Eppler states: "Attention to childhood makes visible notions of protection and care, of rights to dependency that match the right to independence, of modes of voice and agency that promise only a partial authority."<sup>48</sup>

43 Stanley Feldstein, *Once a Slave: The Slaves' View of Slavery* (New York: William Morrow, 1971), 132. (Feldstein also incorporated slave narratives published after the Civil War into his anthology.)

44 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 125.

45 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York, London: Norton and Co., 1994), 251.

46 On the use of child deathbed scenes in earlier Puritan literature for children see: Antonella Cagnolati, "'Not too Little to Go to Hell': Literary Representations of Childhood in Seventeenth Century England," *American and British Studies Annual* 2 (2009): 1-12.

47 George Sand, "Review of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," in *Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (Boston: C.K. Hall, 1980), 5.

48 Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: the Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 223.

*The Anti-Slavery Alphabet*, a primer circulated among abolitionists and frequently used as a Christmas gift, refers to the various horrors of slave child's life, especially to the separation of families. Under the letter *I* it draws the reader's (in this case the implied reader is naturally a child) attention to both the forced disintegration of the maternal bond due to sale as well as to the legal status of slaves as chattel:

I is the Infant, from the arms  
Of its fond mother torn,  
And, at a public auction, sold  
With horses, cows, and corn.<sup>49</sup>

The image of a child torn away from his mother is invoked again in the verses accompanying letter *K*. It is worth noticing that the anonymous author of this alphabet book labels the agent openly as a kidnapper, i.e. somebody involved in criminal activity, rather than using the official euphemistic expression *trader*.

K is the Kidnapper, who stole  
That little child and mother—  
Shrieking, it clung around her, but  
He tore them from each other.<sup>50</sup>

Although children were generally considered as lacking power, the introductory note of *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* encourages them to take action: "You are very young, 'tis true/ But there's much that you can do." It continues with practical suggestions of what a small child can do in order to bring about a great change – educate others and alert them to the slave child's lot: "You can with your playmates talk,/ Tell them of the slave child's fate, / Motherless and desolate." Children can even refuse to consume products of the slave economy (namely "Candy, sweetmeat, pie or cake") and justify their decision: "The slave shall not work for me."<sup>51</sup> The author uses the same argument to encourage his little readers to act as Grimké did when she addressed her female audience – although the child has no legal power, it is nonetheless not powerless because it can try to persuade others. *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* even suggests that perhaps adults might be more willing to listen to the child's voice than to that of another adult: "They may hearken what *you* say,/ Though from *us* they turn away."<sup>52</sup>

Abolitionist literature used the figure of the suffering child to challenge the "paternalistic" justification of slavery by contrasting the situation of a child in bondage with the period's idealization of the state of childhood. The trope was used to show how slavery incapacitated slave women from performing their roles as mothers and how it destroyed family relationships. It therefore exposed slavery as inhibiting the performance of the ideal of childhood as well as of parenthood.

49 *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson, 1847), 9.

50 *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet*, 11.

51 *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet*, frontispiece.

52 *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet*, frontispiece. (Italics in the original.)

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