**Activism through Poetry:**

In Harper’s poem, “A Slave Mother,” the speaker suffers from enslavement along with the realities of motherhood. The poem specifically focuses on the challenges of motherhood as a black enslaved woman, exposing the multiple layers of oppression and intersectionality that contributes to the black woman experience.

The use of distress diction in these lines contradicts the traditional connection between joy and motherhood. As a result, Harper builds upon the blues motif, a feeling of thoughtful sadness, that many literary works depicting the black experience uphold.

These lines demonstrate the hard truth many enslaved women tackled; their children were not theirs, rather property. As the enactment of Hereditary Slavery Law in 1662 stated, “that all children borne in this country shalbe held bond or free according to the condition of the mother.”

“The Slave Mother”

Heard you that shriek? It rose
So wildly on the air,
It seem’d as if a burden’d heart
Was breaking in despair.

Saw you those hands so sadly clasped—
The bowed and feeble head—
The shuddering of that fragile form—
That look of grief and dread?

Saw you the sad, imploring eye?
Its every glance was pain,
As if a storm of agony
Were sweeping through the brain.

She is a mother pale with fear,
Her boy clings to her side,
And in her kyrtle vainly tries
His trembling form to hide.

He is not hers, although she bore
For him a mother’s pains;
He is not hers, although her blood
Is coursing through his veins!

He is not hers, for cruel hands
May rudely tear apart
The only wreath of household love
That binds her breaking heart.

His love has been a joyous light
That o’er her pathway smiled,
A fountain gushing ever new,
Amid life’s desert wild.

His lightest word has been a tone
Of music round her heart,
Their lives a streamlet blent in one—
Oh, Father! must they part?

They tear him from her circling arms,
Her last and fond embrace.
Oh! never more may her sad eyes
Gaze on his mournful face.

No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks
Disturb the listening air:
She is a mother, and her heart
Is breaking in despair.

“Cruel hands” refers to slavery or white slave owners who took and sold black enslaved women’s children. The speaker blames these “cruel hands” for stealing the only love from her—a mother’s child.

**IMPACT**

By centering the poem around the theme of motherhood, Harper attempts to gain empathy from the white audience. Knowing that regardless of race, every mother could connect with the feeling of family. Harper hoped, that through her poem, white people would be able to understand that enslaved people were just as human and also deserved to know love.

Ultimately, Harper exposes the limitations held against black enslaved women, highlighting the harmful impacts of slavery. Family separation being one of the hard truths that must be reckon with, as slavery resulted in the displacement of many black individuals. Enslaved women were separated from their husbands, children from their brothers and sisters. The endless fear, of never knowing when the last time you’ll be with a loved one, haunted many black women, men, and children. As slavery allowed no room for black people to build, yet alone experience, a family unit.

In 1850, Harper was attempting to empathize and justify freedom to a white audience. Today, Harper remains an important figure in history for telling the painful realities of slavery and the voices we’ve lost. Needless to say, “A Slave Mother,” and Harper’s other poems, are timeless pieces of literature that continue to preserve the history and stories of black enslaved women that have been too often lost.