
Transatlantic Aesthetics and Moral Sensibility in Stowe's American Woman's Home and Sunny Memories

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Abstract

The American Woman's Home (1869), coauthored by Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, updates and expands upon Beecher's 1841 Treatise on Domestic Economy. My paper will focus on the chapter on Home Decoration in The American Woman's Home, and specifically on Stowe's use of plants to ornament the Victorian home. Both her focus on ivy and its many uses in the home, and her lengthy description of Wardian cases (a kind of terrarium), are transatlantic imports: ivy has a particular meaning in the Language of Flowers, which originated in Europe, and the Wardian case was invented in Great Britain and imported at mid-century. As a decoration in the home as well as a picturesque element of the landscape, ivy figures in Stowe's writing from the early 1850s through the 1860s—from Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) to Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands (1854) to Agnes of Sorrento (1862) and The American Woman's Home (1869). For Stowe, flowers and vines were never just about being pretty decorations, indoors and out; their aesthetic value is linked to the "moral sensibility" of their presence in the home and in the landscape. This paper explores the relationship between transatlantic aesthetics and moral sensibility in Stowe's writing about plants.

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