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THE RADICAL IMPACT OF MADAME DELPHINE LALAURIE ON SLAVERY AND THE IMAGE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS, 1831-1840

Madame Delphine LaLaurie was not only born into the upper class, but also the upper circles of society as well. Both of her parents were prominent in New Orleans society, a status they gained through their abundant wealth and class. Their distant family was also well renowned, as LaLaurie's cousin was mayor of New Orleans from 1815-1820. Throughout her pampered childhood in New Orleans, her moral values were constructed around the condition that she received all she desired.

In 1800, LaLaurie married a high-ranking Spanish officer, maintaining her status as an elitist. LaLaurie's first husband, Don Ramon de Lopez y Angullo, succeeded in meeting her standards of living. Together, they had a daughter named Marie Borgia Delphine Lopez y Angulla de la Candelaria whom they referred to as Borquita. It is known that before the birth of the child, LaLaurie and Lopez intended on traveling to Spain. But there are two opposing texts of what occurred in relation to this event. Stanley Arthur, president of the Board of Curators of the Louisiana State Museum, wrote a 1936 report on LaLaurie. This report claimed that Lopez was called to Spain to fill a court position, but tragically died in Madrid before reaching his destination. The other viewpoint is mentioned by Fred R. Darkis through his book, *Louisiana*

History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association which included a section about LaLaurie. The book mentioned Grace King, a historian who studied LaLaurie, who argued that LaLaurie and Lopez arrived in Spain, met royalty, and afterwards the death of Lopez occurred.¹ Regardless, her first husband died four years after their marriage, the cause of his death is unknown.

Four years after the death of Lopez, in 1808, LaLaurie remarried her new husband, Jean Blanque; a prominent banker, lawyer, merchant, and legislator. Using their combined wealth they purchased a house on Royal Street in New Orleans. They had four more children before Blanque died in 1816. Shortly after, LaLaurie married her third and final husband, Leonard Louis Nicolas LaLaurie. The LaLauries purchased a new property on Royal Street, not far from their old home. The property was managed under Delphine LaLaurie's name, and with little involvement from her husband, she organized a three story mansion to be built. The family settled into the house, living there were Delphine and Leonard LaLaurie, as well as two of her daughters. It is this house that became infamous for LaLaurie and her crimes inflicted on her slaves.

In reviewing sources regarding LaLaurie, one must be meticulous. This is due to the unconfirmed series of events which lead to the exposure of LaLaurie; there are several different storylines which do not coincide. The different portrayals of the events that occurred are in support of the opposing viewpoints of the historians. Historians such as Henry Castellanos and Harriet Martineau address LaLaurie as a criminal; their stories are lacking of recognition that

¹ Fred R. Darkis, Jr, *Madame LaLaurie of New Orleans, Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 23: 4, (1982), 386.

LaLaurie was anything before her crimes. While historian Darkis, centers his interpretation of LaLaurie around her being a devilish woman. Through Darkis's perspective and recounting of the events, it is never forgotten that LaLaurie's actions were made by a woman who is deeply sinister and villainous. Cable, similar to Darkis, humanizes LaLaurie as a woman. But in addition, he portrays her as a charming woman who was abusive as a slave owner. Rather than creating on character of representation, Cable defines her as a woman and a slave owner. LaLaurie's characterization is key to understanding her story.

LaLaurie's slave ownership was in common with a large bulk of New Orleans upper class. Slave trade was active and lively in New Orleans during the 1800s, there was an entire society -not just the elite- who were buying and selling slaves. Louisiana maintained no privacy for its slave trade; slaves were allowed to be sold in public parks, ship docks, and other non-discrete locations.² In the beginning of the 19th century, there was an estimate of 40,000 slaves in Louisiana, approximately half men and half women.³ Slaves were valued for both household labor, and agricultural labor. During the 19th century in Louisiana, it was most common for slaves to work on rural farms and plantations, where they were tasked with more manual and domestic chores.⁴ Enslaved women were more commonly assigned to household labor, while men labored in the fields. New Orleans, being a saturated city, had domestic slave

² Anonymous, *Slavery in New Orleans* (Brant Publications Inc., 2015),. 24.

³ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1719–1820*, [book on-line] (University of North Carolina, 1999, accessed 15 February 2019), available from <https://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/about.php>; Internet.

⁴ Louisiana State Museum, *Antebellum Louisiana II: Agrarian Life* (Louisiana Department of Culture Recreation and Tourism, 2017), 17.

labor and agricultural slave labor. Slavery was encouraged, and though there was a population of abolitionists, the pro-slavery forces were too strong for them to have an impact. It was just a regular part of New Orleans culture, it was even a common subject of church. In New Orleanian churches, it was taught that all men who worship christ are equal, even slaves, but somehow they still remain inferior and must follow the orders of their master. For slaves, being a good Christian was being submissive and obeying their master. It was argued that although they were enslaved, if they rejoiced in the love of christ, they were free at heart. It was all a justification to ease the guilt of the slave owning Christian. Christians believed that if slavery was so cruel and unjust, it would have been banished by now. This idea was reinstated by Theodore Clapp through his 1838 sermon on slavery delivered in the First Congregational Church in New Orleans,

At the time our Savior appeared and commenced his public labors, Slavery was universal among the Jews. If it had been, in his opinion, a monstrous evil -the greatest of wrongs-, a thing clearly criminal and irreligious, -must he not have condemned it without qualification or reserve?⁵

All being considered, there were still regulations on slave treatment. The Black Codes set a general set of rules that regarded slavery, they were not exclusive to justice for slaves but primarily focused around how to legally respond to the actions of African Americans, or freed people of color. However, they did include some treatment clauses. For example, article XX which states:

Slaves who shall not be properly fed, clad, and provided for by their masters, may give information thereof to the attorney-general or the Superior Council, or to all the other officers of justice of an inferior jurisdiction, and may put the written exposition of their wrongs into their hands; upon which information, and even ex

⁵ Theodore Clapp, *Slavery: a sermon delivered in the First Congregational Church in New Orleans, April 15, 1838* (New Orleans: J. Gibson Publisher, 1838), 9.

officio, should the information come from another quarter, the attorney-general shall prosecute said masters.⁶

LaLaurie was in clear violation of this article, but never faced any real scrutiny or threat to have all of her slaves sold. She was accustomed to treating slaves however she pleased, and had often used wealth to excuse her from laws.

Slavery was used as a device to demonstrate wealth and class. People of high status could not be seen doing chores of a slave, it was unheard of. This was another reason why LaLaurie found it so necessary to have slaves. Delphine LaLaurie was taught from a young age that image was key to success. Following this value, LaLaurie stayed relevant in New Orleans most inner social circles. Although she was the owner of several slaves and valued their lives less than her own, she was polite to African Americans in public. In addition, she emancipated two of her own slaves; one in 1819, another in 1832.

Even with all of her attempts, acquaintances of LaLaurie could not help but notice the conditions of the slaves who were owned by LaLaurie; it became a local rumor that LaLaurie was abusing her slaves. Guests of the LaLaurie house noted that her slaves always appeared exhausted and malnourished; in addition, her daughters were said to seem very depressed. After visiting LaLaurie, a young Creole man stated: “‘Think,’ some friend would say, as he returned her courteous bow—’think of casting upon that woman the suspicion of starving and maltreating her own house-servants.’”⁷ The people of New Orleans were large gossipers especially when it

⁶ “Black Codes” in *Strange True Stories of Louisiana*, ed. George Washington Cable (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons Publisher, 1889), 204.

⁷ Henry Washington Cable, *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons Publisher, 1889), 193.

concerned higher members of society. The rumors of LaLaurie were spread quickly by Americans, who held resentment against LaLaurie due to her status as a Creole. But the rumors that were hastily and quickly spread were not of false pretenses.

LaLaurie's slaves commonly underwent brutal punishment. She began with a series of lashes and did not stop until the slave was unconscious.⁸ The rumors of the abuse were amplified after an incident in the mid-1830s. One of LaLaurie's neighbors reported to the New Orleans's officers of justice that she saw one of LaLaurie's slaves, a 12 year old girl, plummet off the roof of the mansion to her death. Two theories of how this occurred began to circulate, both aiming the blame at LaLaurie. The most believed theory was that the young girl was brushing LaLaurie's hair when she accidentally hurt the woman, and in avoidance of punishment, she ran away and fell off the roof by accident. The second theory states that LaLaurie pushed her off the roof. Regardless of how the event occurred, the young girl had died at the fault of LaLaurie. This was reported to authorities and a judge intervened, charging the LaLaurie's with slave abuse. This resulted in the LaLaurie's paying a insignificant fine and unwillingly forfeited some of their slaves.⁹

Many turned a blind eye to cruelty of slaves and this incident. LaLaurie also got close to being confronted as her other neighbor, M. Montreuil was suspicious of her behavior regarding her slaves. He became intrigued and sent over a practicing Creole lawyer over to just inform LaLaurie of the slaves of the state -previously mentioned- but the man: "withdrew filled with

⁸ Danilo Cezar Cabral, *Delphine LaLaurie (1775-1842)* (Alphaville Barueri: Strange World Pub., Oct 2010), 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*

indignation against any one who could suspect her of the slightest unkindness to the humblest living thing.”¹⁰ So without interruption, LaLaurie continued her status as a high member of society.

LaLaurie was widely accepted into the Creole society, which was a reigning French society in New Orleans, famous for their abundance of wealth. The Creole society had a large impact on life in New Orleans since the beginning of American colonization, this was when the creolization process began with French colonists. New Orleanians could self-identify as Creoles by speaking French and following Catholicism.¹¹ The Creoles were seen as elegant and powerful, especially LaLaurie. LaLaurie was a prominent member of the Creole society and gained her status through her beauty and grace. She was also known for being a rather strong and independent woman considering the century.

Her hospitality was complimented, as well as her ability to charm people. Being a socialite, LaLaurie was infamous for hosting large and extravagant dinner parties in her mansion on Royal Street. Being accepted into the inner Creole society of New Orleans, LaLaurie had a lot of accompaniments at these dinner parties. She served expensive wine, and had a full staff of slaves. LaLaurie was a master of elegance which was exhibited predominantly by the decor of her house, the *New Orleans Bee* wrote, “ It must, however, been very great indeed, as the furniture alone was of the most costly kind, consisting of pianos, armoires, bufets...”¹² LaLaurie's

¹⁰ Cable, 204.

¹¹ Dianne Guenin-Lelle, *The Story of French New Orleans: history of a Creole City* (Jackson, Mississippi : University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 73.

¹² “The Fire of Royal Street”, *The New Orleans Bee*, (New Orleans, 1834), 7.

talent to exude a life of elegance and success created a lot of envy among Creole women. Creole women in the 19th century felt trapped by a complex created through socio-economic classes,

The women of the upper-class felt watched, being forced into a position where everyone looks at them as a role model and their husbands treated them as objects; this burden is referred to as the “curse of the pedestal.” The working-class women faced a different oppression in which they were unable to move into a better occupational position and were often a part of indentured servitude; this burden is referred to as “the curse of the totem pole.”¹³

LaLaurie was seemingly able to avoid this issue by being exceedingly powerful in contrast to other Creole women. Although she would be categorized as a role model, she was not tied to this label as other women were. She was not an object for her husbands pleasing, she was the more dominant of the two. As the Creole women who faced the ‘curse of the pedestal’ watched LaLaurie’s success, they could not help but have a bitter feeling of resentment towards her. The societal stance of LaLaurie was a slight hatred among Creole women, as well as a deep rivalry that pitted Americans against her as well. Even with her charm and grace which was noted, LaLaurie was not able to win over the hearts of the New Orleans public.¹⁴ Even with this resentment, LaLaurie was able to gather a crowd for her famous dinner parties. There was no doubt she was a romantic charmer with the aid of these parties, but it was a dinner party -or the preparation for one- that led to her own exposure and her plummet on the social ladder.

¹³ *19th Century Creoles in New Orleans, Louisiana*, [book on-line] (World History, 2017, accessed 16 January 2019); available from <https://worldhistory.us/american-history/19th-century-creoles-in-new-orleans-louisiana.php>; Internet.

¹⁴ Cable, 202.

On April 10, 1834, a fire broke out in the LaLaurie house.¹⁵ It is rumored that the fire was started by a female slave who was tasked with cooking. She was chained to the stove, and started the fire as a scheme to expose LaLaurie and commit suicide in the process. The attendants of the party and the LaLaurie's were rushed out of the house; but with no offense, all the slaves were kept inside the house. That night, Judge Canonge -the official for the Parish Court of New Orleans- was called to the site.¹⁶ As he saved slaves from the burning house, LaLaurie mentioned to him that he should not have even bothered to come.¹⁷ He gave a statement claiming there were slaves chained, who had sustained other injuries. It was the kind of slave abuse that was never before seen, it was psychotic abuse.

LaLaurie could not hide her sinister abuse of her slaves after approximately seven of them were brought out of the house. As soon as the judge and fire marshalls entered the house and entered the attic area, they witnessed the crimes LaLaurie had been committing in secret, “Upon entering one of the apartments, the most appalling spectacle met their eyes. Seven slaves more or less horribly mutilated were seen suspended by the neck, with their limbs apparently stretched and torn from one extremity to the other.”¹⁸ It is reported that there were slaves chained, suspended, disfigured, and all were tortured.¹⁹ Most were unable to hold themselves or

¹⁵ Henry C. Castellanos, *New Orleans As It Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life*, (1895, reprint ed., Baton Rouge, La., 1978), 52-62.

¹⁶ Kristin Nicole Huston, “‘Something at least Human’: Transatlantic (re)presentations of Creole Women in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture”, (Ph. D dissertation, University of Missouri, 2015), p. 131.

¹⁷ Quoted in Carolyn Morrow Long, *Madame LaLaurie: Mistress of the Haunted House* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 93.

¹⁸ “The Fire of Royal Street”, *The New Orleans Bee*, (New Orleans, 1834), 5.

¹⁹ Huston, 134.

walk and were covered in sores and wounds. There were claims that an elderly man had his face so beaten it was undistinguishable, and one woman had her back wounded to the point where her bones were visible.²⁰ In addition, there were bottles of blood from extractions of the slaves.²¹ The scene was so gruesome that even the newspaper covering the incident would not go into detail, “Language is powerless and inadequate to give a proper conception of the horror... We shall not attempt it, but leave it rather to the reader's imagination to picture what it was.”²² This was only what was uncovered at the time of the fire. The New Orleans public could no longer turn a blind eye to the rumors of LaLaurie, or ignore the death of the young girl off LaLaurie’s roof. The evidence of LaLaurie’s abuse was all there and it was more dramatic and intensive than anyone could have predicted. It is unknown how long LaLaurie had been torturing her slaves, and to what depth.

One thing is for certain, LaLaurie masterminded the abuse of her slaves. Although there was some suspicion, not a single neighbor or acquaintance of LaLaurie could have imagined the horrors that were the mutilation of the slaves. LaLaurie kept the torture as a hobby; the slaves she had tortured were abused to the point of defeat, they could not work. The slaves were so damaged that the sight of them would have alerted everyone of LaLaurie’s crimes; there was no ‘accident’ that could have caused that extent of injury among all of her slaves. Using this deduction, it can be argued that LaLaurie reserved slaves just for the use of torturing them. In a way, it was a hobby to her. But a hobby that was morally incorrect and ruined her reputation as

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Cabral, *I.*

²² *The New Orleans Bee*, (New Orleans, 1834), 5.

the sweet, sophisticated, Creole woman. Because of this, LaLaurie kept her crimes hidden. She kept all of her slaves in the attic, with the windows boarded shut; and used that attic as a sort of lair where she conducted her crimes.²³ Because LaLaurie was older than her husband, and oversaw the purchasing of the house, it was easy for her to keep a section of the house barricaded off from him. He knew his wife had a particularly negative attitude towards the slaves, but he was oblivious to the torture that occurred in the attic. As for LaLaurie's daughters, it is unknown whether the girls were aware of the torture or not. But LaLaurie did try to force her hatred of slaves among her daughters. Her daughters, although, were far more sympathetic and attempted to feed the malnourished slaves who were still able to do house chores. LaLaurie responded with great punishment for each act of kindness performed by one of her daughters.²⁴

Given LaLaurie's status, the news of her crimes spread through New Orleans. With the combination of the crowd who witnessed the rescue of the tortured slaves, and LaLaurie's high status, hundreds of people had heard the news just that day. During the afternoon, the people of New Orleans flocked to LaLaurie's mansion, and a crowd began to form around the LaLaurie house.²⁵ The public responded violently to the crimes of LaLaurie, "While valuables were stolen or destroyed, Cable -a historian who studied LaLaurie- expressed reservations about heavy furniture being carted to the top of a four-story building prior to being hurled to the ground."²⁶ Mob mentality broke out as an organized attack on the building began; the crowd gathered

²³ Cable, 203.

²⁴ Darkis, Jr, 392.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

weapons such as axes and began to destroy the house from the outside. Not only LaLaurie's mansion was attacked but her carriages and even the street on which she lived. Then matters continued to worsen as the public witnessed the victims of LaLaurie who were being kept at the local police station.²⁷ This only energized the mob and increased the need to seek justice; they went as far as to enter the house and strip the LaLaurie's of their valuables, which were either stolen or destroyed.²⁸ But the damage to the house was minimal compared to the damage of the LaLaurie name. Quickly, Delphine LaLaurie became one of the most hated people in New Orleans, being described as "the devil, in the shape of a woman."²⁹

LaLaurie's reputation was radically and permanently altered. She transitioned from being New Orleans's most charming host and a prominent member of the Creole society, to being a criminal who was widely hated. Her status, one of her most prized possessions, was nonexistent. This was on account of her gruesome actions, but also was aided by the gossip of the city. Most New Orleanians found pleasure in discussing LaLaurie.³⁰ New Orleans, after being bought by the United States as a part of the Louisiana Purchase, struggled with truly assimilating to the American culture and attitude.³¹ This progression of assimilation was slowed down by the French influence in New Orleans as the French Creole society was successful, which upset many

²⁷ Castello, 56.

²⁸ Cable, 197.

²⁹ Darkis, Jr, 395.

³⁰ Huston, 139.

³¹ John Smith Kendall, *History of New Orleans* (New York: The Lewis Publishing Co. 1922), 407.

nationalists. This resentment, and fight over dominance of culture led to resentment between the French Creoles and the Americans.³² Both groups were side by side as leading societies, and the constant budding heads led both to fight for dominance. The tensions between the two communities ran deep. Most of the newspapers and gossipers were American, and were pleased to see the downfall of a successful Creole family. Because of this, the history of LaLaurie was spread and exaggerated. Once again, the Americans made certain that everyone was aware of the horrific crimes of the LaLaurie, because she was especially eminent in the French Creole Society.³³

The French Creole society was fighting a battle of dominance in New Orleans. Because New Orleans was in America, the French were struggling to maintain a powerful influence on the city.³⁴ LaLaurie, raised with power to her name, had never before felt at a loss of power. She maintained a power dynamic which can be seen in her family. Her third husband was notably younger than her; and unlike most marital relationships in the 19th century, she ‘wore the pants in the relationship’. LaLaurie had a very rich family that was able to support both her and her husband; she handled financial situations, such as the purchasing of the house. In addition, LaLaurie’s two daughters were the children of other marriages so she was the leading parent. LaLaurie had a power dynamic that could be seen through the nature of her family, and this power dynamic could be a psychological insight to the reasoning behind the abuse of her slaves.

³² Huston, 140.

³³ Cable, 198.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Because she was losing political power through the tensions of the Creole society and the Americans, she felt she needed to look elsewhere to obtain the control she desired.

LaLaurie evaded the law and the angry New Orleans mob as she fled to New Orleans.³⁵ It is not confirmed where exactly she fled to, but it is most commonly argued that she escaped to her roots in France. She remained unheard from, and was never found or punished for her crimes in New Orleans. Even her exact death date and location is unknown. Although, it is rumored that in her elder years she traveled back to New Orleans, and it was there that she died on December 7, 1849. Even with her mystery death, her name and the stories of her crimes live on.

LaLaurie became a common folk story in New Orleans. The public spread news of her maltreatment of her slaves, and everytime the story was told, it was exaggerated just a little bit more. There have been many depictions of LaLaurie, and false stories that have been assumed as true. Even with the fascination and absurdity of LaLaurie's crimes that absorbed the New Orleans public and many historians, the key part of the LaLaurie story is the public reaction. The energy and anger of the mob outside LaLaurie's house that seemingly lasted for days - which resulted in destruction of her house, belongings, and all things she left behind - was a curious response to her crimes. Given that it was the South and 1830s, African American bodies were not respected. They were used as slaves, dehumanized and exploited. It was even seen as good Christian effort to own an obedient slave. But the people of the crowd were indignant and passionate, going out of their way to enact their hatred for LaLaurie and her heinous crimes.

³⁵ Ibid. 212.

Even the newspapers articulated their anger, “We feel confident that the community share with us our indignation, and that vengeance will fall heavily upon the guilty culprit.”³⁶

Crimes against slaves were of no revelation to the United States. Slaves were abused often with physical violence, whipping or lashes were a common form of punishment. In addition, enslaved women were harassed and raped frequently by owners or authoritative men. There were few famous cases of murders of slaves, such as the Trial of Captain John Kimber. Captain John Kimber was tried for the murder of two female slaves, both murders occurring months apart.³⁷ Although the official documentation of the trial was written with a bias against Kimber, there was no real public backlash to the extent of the LaLaurie case. LaLaurie was not the first slave holder to abuse, cause the death of, or torture her slaves. However, she was possibly the first to do all three in a gruesome and inhumane manner to a large population. No slave holder had ever gone to the extent that LaLaurie did while torturing their slaves; her violence was not the result of vengeance or prejudice, but instead sociopathic anger. This is why the public responded unlike they ever had before.

In addition to the heinous qualities of the crimes, it was equally shocking that they were performed by a woman. As population rapidly increased, a wave of crime began occurring in Northern Louisiana at the time, and violence was no stranger to the streets of New Orleans, “During the 1830s newspapers revealed that many outrages occurred in New Orleans. Men were

³⁶ “The Fire of Royal Street”, *The New Orleans Bee*, (New Orleans, 1834), 6.

³⁷ The trial of Captain John Kimber, for the murder of two female Negro slaves, on board the *Recovery*, African slave ship : tried at the Admiralty Sessions, held at the Old Baily, the 7th of June, 1792 ... [book on-line] (London : Printed and sold by C. Stalker, 1792, accessed 17 February 2019), available from <https://www.loc.gov/resource/llst.061/?sp=40>; Internet.

killed for small causes.”³⁸ But all crimes were limited to a few murders, and almost always the culprit was a man. Given that it was the 1830s, mass murderings were not common given the term ‘serial killer’ had not even been created. The crimes themselves were upsetting enough, but it added a new disturbance when it was revealed that the committee of the crimes was a woman. LaLaurie was an unassuming and elegant woman who was never suspected of being capable of committing such gruesome acts,

But the lady was so graceful and accomplished, so charming in her manners and so hospitable, that no one ventured openly to question her perfect goodness. If a murmur of doubt began among the Americans, the French resented it. If the French had occasional suspicions, they concealed them for the credit of their faction. “She was very pleasant to whites,” I was told, and sometimes to blacks, but so broadly so as to excite suspicions of hypocrisy.³⁹

To the Creoles, who glorified women as fragile subservient creatures, it was disturbing to consider that it was a woman who dominated multiple slaves. The slaves were not only abused shortly after being discovered, the setup of the room suggested a long history of abuse, “They had 266 iron collars with spikes which kept their heads in one position. The cowhide, stiff with blood, hung against the wall; and there was a stepladder on which this fiend stood while flogging her victims, in order to lay on the lashes with more effect.”⁴⁰ LaLaurie had violent habits which she practiced regularly on her slaves, she flogged and beat them nearly daily. This gruesome and inhumane aggression was a routine to her. Men are violent by nature, so it would have been

³⁸ Darkis, Jr, 393.

³⁹ Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel, V. I* (London : Saunders and Otley, 1838), 253.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

understandable had it been a man who physically took out his anger on humans. But to think that it was a woman, it was incomprehensible.

The horrendous acts LaLaurie was capable of confirmed she was demented. She exhibited double personalities; as she took on the role of a romantic charmer, and was able to shift into a dominating torturer. Historian Henry Castellanos, who studied LaLaurie in depth, claimed that, "...her nature was duplex, her heart at one time softening to excess at the sight of human suffering, while at another it turned obdurate and hard as adamant."⁴¹ This was in reference to her work with charities in New Orleans; she was capable of both helping those suffering and within the hour, greatly inflicting suffering on to others. Castellanos proposed that women are often illogical and idiosyncratic, and that LaLaurie was no exception. Because she was a woman, her demented attitude was intensified. Castellanos draws attention to her relations with African Americans; he claimed that her violence could not have been rooted by deep racist values, "Was it a general detestation of the African race? No, for, of her large retinue of familiar servants, many were devotedly attached to her, and the affection seems to have been as warmly returned."⁴² Castellanos argued that rather than a racist motive, LaLaurie felt an unsatisfiable urge to seek revenge among those who have wronged her. To back up this argument, it is true LaLaurie only had a portion of her slaves living in the attic and getting tortured, and the others she maintained good relationships with. But she did need to keep presentable slaves to distract from any suspicion, and this means seven slaves must have had to wrong her in such a way where she felt they deserved endless torture. Historian, W. Adolph Roberts, determined that she

⁴¹ Castellanos, 61.

⁴² *Ibid.*

must be a “sadist”.⁴³ In this theory, she has the mental illness of accessing pleasure from inflicting suffering on others. This is very plausible considering how often she abused her slaves, and the extremity of her abuse. She must have been gaining something out of the agony which overpowered her morality or conscience.

When word spread about the crimes against the slaves at LaLaurie, New Orleanians responded violently. Half out of indignation of the horrendous crimes committed, and half out of fear of the slaves being taken. Southern slave owners were worried that the torturing of LaLaurie’s slaves could be a strong case that the emancipators could use to force the south unto forfeiting their rights to own slaves. They were angry at LaLaurie for abusing her power, but also afraid that it could lead to reform. The public’s reaction was also enhanced because of the sexist ideal engrained into society which made the heinous acts seem much more immoral. In addition, New Orleans public were afraid of mental illness in women, as it had been most commonly seen in males.

⁴³ Robert Tallant, *Romantic New Orleanians* (New York: Dutton, 1950), 181.

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