By most accounts, there have been few, if any, literary works that have had more influence on American culture and history than Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851-1852). The apocryphal account of her meeting Abraham Lincoln in 1862 during the Civil War captures this influence. According to the legend, Lincoln supposedly greeted Stowe by saying “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war.” Whether Lincoln actually said such a thing is probably less important than what the quotation suggests—the way that Stowe’s novel helped to consolidate Northern anti-slavery sentiment in such a way that made the Civil War possible. From its serialization in the abolitionist periodical *The National Era* to its publication as a two-volume novel through the various theatrical and cinematic versions of the novel throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and into the first part of the twentieth century up until the present day, Stowe’s novel has remained controversial, with readers and political, historical, and literary commentators debating its depiction of slavery, its description of African Americans, and its engagement with central American beliefs about Christianity and the family.

While Stowe had published a number of stories and sketches over the course of the 1840s, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* would make her famous and would become the cornerstone of a writing career that would extend well after the Civil War and that would help to establish New England local color writing. Stowe came from a prominent family of activist Protestant ministers, including her father Lyman Beecher, her husband Calvin Stowe, and her brother Henry Ward Beecher, who in the middle of the nineteenth century, was perhaps the most famous minister in the country. That background provided her with a firm foundation and faith in context of the social implications of Christianity. During the 1830s and 1840s, Stowe lived in Cincinnati (where she met her husband), just across the Ohio River from the slave state of Kentucky. During her time there, she met a number of fugitive slaves and became involved with the Underground Railroad and other abolitionist activities. However, it would be the Fugitive Slave Law passed as part of the Compromise of 1850 that would bring her anti-slavery activities to the forefront. While the Compromise was designed to overcome sectional tensions concerning slavery that the end of the U.S.-Mexican War had brought to a boiling point, its different provisions, in particular the Fugitive Slave Law, ended up exacerbating those differences. Although the Constitution included language assuring that Northern authorities would return fugitive slaves to their owners in the South, the law was never strictly enforced. The Fugitive Slave Law sought to put teeth into the law, making it incumbent upon Northerners to actively help return fugitive slaves and rendering it illegal to help such slaves. For many Northerners, the Fugitive Slave Law became a turning point in their relationship to slavery. While many may have vaguely felt that slavery was wrong, it was a problem that largely did not affect them. The Fugitive Slave Law, however, made them participants in the institution, bringing the question to the forefront in a series of famous cases where fugitive slaves were apprehended in Northern cities and forcibly returned to the South.

Stowe makes this controversy central to one of the key early chapters of her novel, Chapter IX, “In Which It Appears That a Senator Is But a Man.” Stowe begins by
introducing us to Mrs. Bird, who in her size (barely four feet tall), focus ("Her husband and children were her entire world"), and demeanor ("she ruled more by entreaty and persuasion than by command or argument") epitomizes the ideal of the domestic angel. Stowe informs us early on that Mrs. Bird did not “trouble her head with what was going on in the house of the state, very wisely considering that she had enough to do to mind her own.” Yet this evening she asks her husband, a senator, about a recently passed fugitive slave law. When he defends the law in order to “quiet the excitement” among Southerners caused by abolitionists’ activities, she critiques his position, arguing that a law “forbidding people to give meat and drink” to those in need is “cruel and unchristian.” While the senator approves of his wife’s “feelings,” he insists that the law is not “a matter of private feeling,—there are great public interests involved.” When he continues to emphasize the importance of rational judgment over feelings, Mrs. Bird proclaims that she “hate[s] reasoning.” At that moment, the Fugitive Slave Law becomes real to both of the Birds when Eliza, escaping with her son Harry because he has been sold down the river, appears at their door. When faced with an actual fugitive slave and her son, whose appearance reminds the Birds of their own recently deceased child (Stowe, too, had lost a child in the years before writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), Senator Bird’s feelings get the better of him and he contrives a way to help Eliza and Harry on their way north. Mrs. Bird largely refrains from reflecting on her husband’s behavior, for she is a “discreet woman,” but after he makes his decision, she proclaims that his “heart is better than [his] head,” reiterating the idea underlying Stowe’s broader sentimental appeal.

In many ways, this chapter encapsulates the argument of the novel as a whole: its attempt to make Northern readers sympathize with slaves by having them identify with the slaves’ heart-break due to slavery’s “unchristian and cruel” destruction of the most sacred family ties. Repeatedly, Stowe calls on her readers to imagine themselves as either mothers (more often) or fathers in similar situations, frequently using the still-common experience of losing children to childhood illnesses to connect her readers to the slaves she depicts. From the beginning of the novel—when Harry and Uncle Tom are sold by their relatively benign owner Mr. Shelby, thus breaking up two families—to the end—when Uncle Tom sacrifices himself in Christ-like fashion to allow Cassy and Emmeline to escape and eventually be reunited with their long-lost families—*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* repeatedly focuses on slavery as being unchristian due to the damage it does to families, primarily those of the slaves, but, in the case of the St. Clares, those of the owners as well. As Mrs. Shelby reflects early on, all of her attempts, “as a Christian woman,” to teach the slaves “the duties of the family, of parent and child, and husband and wife” amount to naught under the American system of slavery in which “no tie, no duty, no relation, however sacred, compare[s] with money.”

Stowe’s appeal to sentimental sympathetic connection through recognition of the sacred nature of familial ties provided the foundation for the incredible success her novel found. In her accounts of the weakest members of society struggling to achieve a stable family situation and in the process, to overcome the immoral temptations to lose faith, to depend on their own strength rather than God, and to fall into anger and violence, Stowe’s description of the lives of slaves largely mirrored the plots focusing on orphaned girls in popular domestic sentimental fictions such as Susan Warner’s *Wide,
Wide World (1851) and Maria Cummins’s The Lamplighter (1854), the only two novels during the 1850s that could approach the sales Uncle Tom’s Cabin achieved. Stowe’s success and its dependence on her evoking emotional responses grounded in Victorian American platitudes about Christianity and family have been the central causes of both its critical dismissal for most of the past century and its critical revival in the last few decades. Where, for most of the twentieth century, academic literary critics tended to disregard Stowe’s novel as a trite and propagandistic expression that refused to address the deeper psychological and philosophical complexities that the great (largely unpopular) works of the era explored, more recent critics have found its power to question American society in its very ability to tap into commonly accepted beliefs. Perhaps most influentially, in an argument alluded to earlier in this course, Jane Tompkins made the case that sentimental power articulated a more profound critique of American society than that offered by canonical authors, because it was able to access the beliefs shared by most Americans. In the decades since Tompkins’s important intervention, critics have complicated her account of Stowe’s novel (and others) through a more in-depth focus on the role of Christianity, racial characterization, and sympathetic identification in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, in sentimentalism, and in abolitionism.

While Northerners bought and read Uncle Tom’s Cabin in unprecedented numbers, many Southern states attempted to ban the novel, and its success prompted the rapid publication of a number of “anti-Tom” novels such as Mary Eastman’s Aunt Phillis’s Cabin; or Southern Slavery As It Is (1852). Such works attempted to correct Stowe’s description of slavery as unchristian by depicting Southern slavery as a benign, patriarchal institution. Other Southern writers responded with scathing critiques and personal attacks on Stowe for being unwomanly in entering into the political fray. Repeatedly, Southern and Northern critics contended that Stowe had provided an inaccurate and unfair picture of slavery, one based in her imagination rather than in fact, that there was never a slaveholder so evil as Simon Legree or a slave as good as Uncle Tom. In response, Stowe published A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin in 1853, compiling documentation of the horrors of slavery from a variety of sources, but largely relying on accounts from Southern newspapers.

While Southerners attacked the novel for its negative portrayal of slavery, some abolitionists criticized it for what George Fredrickson has termed its “romantic racialism.” Like many Northerners with anti-slavery sentiments, Stowe seems to have readily accepted racial differences as inherited and eternal. In particular, in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, she tends to equate Africans with a more feminine, more spiritual, less energetic demeanor—“the gentle, domestic heart, which woe for them! has been a peculiar characteristic of [this] unhappy race”—in contrast to the “high, indomitable spirit” of the “Anglo-Saxons.” In his influential study from the early 1970s, Fredrickson denounced this idea, one popular throughout the North during the era, as racialism rather than racism for it was most often deployed to provoke sympathy for African-Americans or to celebrate their racial gifts rather than as a way of denigrating them. Near the conclusion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, for example, George Harris embraces his mother’s African heritage, rather than his father’s “hot and hasty Saxon” blood, for “If not a dominant and commanding race, they are, at least, an affectionate, magnanimous, and forgiving one.” These characteristics mean that the African race’s “peculiarities” make them “morally” of
“a higher type” than the Anglo-Saxon and that “the development of Africa is to be essentially a Christian one.” For a novel—and a culture—so invested in domesticity and Christianity, to characterize a race as innately more domestic and Christian was, potentially, to make them superior.

That racial judgment, of course, was a double-edged sword, as it implied that African Americans would not be able to compete with Anglo-Americans in terms of material (and, it seems, intellectual) development, even if they were superior morally. Further, George Harris’s identification with his mother’s African race comes in a letter in which he announces his plans to abandon the United States for Africa. This plot device, wherein the most prominent living former slaves all leave the United States, became central to much of the critique of the novel by abolitionists. While anti-slavery advocates, such as William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, were cheered by the success of the novel and its potential to convert more Northerners to the anti-slavery cause, they worried, in public and in private, over its apparent turn to colonization—the movement to transport former slaves to Africa—as a solution for post-Emancipation society.

Further, Stowe’s characterization of the African race as “naturally patient, timid and unenterprising” is most fully realized in her most famous character, Uncle Tom, the center of most criticism. From the 1850s onward, African-American critics in particular have been troubled by Tom, leading to his name becoming an epithet for someone who sells out his race or gives in completely to white power. Stowe clearly did not intend for her Uncle Tom to be an “Uncle Tom”—his refusal to go free in order to stay and help St. Clare on his journey to a true Christian faith and his martyrdom at the hands of Legree rather than physically resisting make him the Christian hero of the novel. Yet, for Douglass, Martin Delany, and many other African-American abolitionists, Stowe seemed to be suggesting that the slaves should simply bide their time, to accept violence rather than resist it, implying a moral double-standard. Drawing on Stowe’s success as a model, Douglass’s short story “The Heroic Slave” and William Wells Brown’s novel Clotel, usually considered the first works of published African-American fiction, both appeared in the year following Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s publication, but both can be read as subtle critiques of Stowe’s depiction of slavery and slaves.

The rapid integration of Stowe’s novel into popular cultural forms, especially commercial theatre and minstrel shows, both evidence the text’s ambivalence about race and exacerbated the tendency among some readers to see it as merely racist. Within months of the novel’s publication, competing, non-authorized stage versions of the novel had appeared on the stage in New York. Building on the incredible popularity of blackface minstrelsy (to which Stowe’s novel alludes in the opening scene when Mr. Shelby refers to Harry as “Jim Crow”), these productions played down the anti-slavery argument of the novel in favor of focusing on its sensational elements (Eliza’s crossing of the Ohio, for example) or elaborating minstrel-influenced versions of slave life on plantations. A pro-slavery theatrical version even appeared in Baltimore. These kinds of productions became so common and so intertwined with blackface minstrelsy in the years following the Civil War that “Tom shows” became all but synonymous with minstrelsy. As one of the primary ways that Uncle Tom’s Cabin pervaded all of American culture, these shows’ tendency to fall into a widely accepted racism detached
from Stowe’s abolitionism shaped the way readers have viewed the novel itself. Twentieth-century African-American writers, such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin, responded as much to the influence of Stowe’s novel as to the novel itself in their powerful denunciations of the damage it inflicted on African-American writers. Stowe’s use of racial characterization, her dependence on commonly accepted ideas of Christian sympathy, and her deployment of a subtle kind of feminism based in a woman’s place in the domestic sphere have been central to the revival of interest in her novel. While the exact relationship among these different elements of her text remains a critical question, what continues to be clear is the lasting importance of her novel as a consolidation of America’s long-standing and continuing ambivalence about race, family, and religion.

Further Secondary Reading


Levine, Robert S. “Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Frederick Douglass’ Paper: An Analysis of Reception.” American Literature 64.1 (March 1992): 71-93.

