

Text of “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in Its Historical Context, Part II: The Book”

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Harriet Beecher Stowe, daughter and wife of New England Calvinist ministers, found herself emerging from the rising clamor of voices produced by the Fugitive Slave Act with a totally unexpected runaway bestseller. In its first year, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* sold a record 3000,000 copies in the United States, and an amazing million and a half copies overseas, with immediate translation into at least twenty foreign languages, and many more in subsequent years. Given that the book’s sole purpose was propaganda—an indictment of American slavery and a call for its abolition—it is remarkable that its popularity at home and worldwide continued long after the Emancipation Proclamation, with more translations, dramatic versions, movie versions, TV versions . . . Despite criticism from groups as diverse as southern slaveholders and later African American writers, the book maintains a grip on the popular imagination, and in fact underwent a critical revival in the 1970s and 80s. How and why did all this happen?

As is usually the case, there is no single reason, but a combination of factors that came together at just the right moment: such factors as the state of popular culture, Stowe’s relationship to the reform movement, her innovative literary approach, and many others. In the two decades preceding the writing of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe’s sympathies were aligned with the reformers supporting “immediatism,” the individual’s immediate repudiation of institutions that supported slavery. Their view was that because the Constitution and federal laws condoned slavery, America itself was guilty, not just the south. Stowe had this idea clearly in mind when she began her book, which stresses that citizens of the free states are equally implicated—her immediate audience should understand that they were not reading about issues that did not

concern them, but faced personal moral corruption if they allowed the atrocity to continue. This stance in and of itself accounted for much of the book's impact on its initial publication. It insisted that readers both identify with the characters' plights, and recognize their own responsibility in making such plights possible: "[Sen. Bird] had never thought that a fugitive might be a hapless mother, a defenceless child . . . and so . . . he was, as everyone must see, in a sad case for his patriotism" (101). Where Stowe parted company to some extent with the immediatists was in their repudiation of colonization; the ending of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appears, at least, to endorse it.

When Stowe began her career as an author, which eventually compassed several novels, and hundreds of stories, articles, and essays, American commercial popular culture was beginning to take off. In the previous century there had been very little, and that mostly imported from Europe, especially England. But technological advances and the integration of the economy in the nineteenth century meant that the production and circulation of literature increased enormously, as did other aspects of popular culture such as circuses and the home-grown minstrel-show. The popular literature of the time tended to divide into masculine and feminine types. The former included genres such as southwestern humor, and was full of action, racial stereotypes, and often violence. The feminine type of popular literature was the opposite—sentimental, romantic, and religious in a way that tied in with the reformist movement. For reasons of gender, temperament, and conviction, then, Stowe chose this literary approach when she found herself outraged enough by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 to want to do something about it. In fact, she said, she was moved by divine inspiration to combat it. For a woman at that time, writing was one of the few avenues available—done correctly, it could also be one of the most powerful. Hence the form of her inspiration.

Stowe was not the first woman to take up her pen in favor of abolition: in 1833 Lydia Maria Child had published *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, and has written antislavery stories published in periodicals, focusing on many of the same issues as Stowe, such as the effect of slavery on women, and the separation of families. Other notable predecessors included Catharine Maria Sedgwick, who created a character similar to Uncle Tom, and Angelina Grimke Weld. In fact, it was the new literary focus brought to the work of nineteenth century women, especially those working in largely gender-specific genres such as the sentimental novel, that was mostly responsible for the new interest in Stowe in the 1970s and 80s. And of course many nineteenth-century men had also written in the antislavery cause, including former slaves, although few in the form of fiction. But Stowe hit upon a combination of factors that none of her predecessors, male or female, white or black, had attempted, and, quite simply, it worked.

Perhaps the most important of these factors was the use of the novel-length narrative, which enabled readers to get to know characters and their circumstances in unprecedented detail. The characters' psychological depths could be explored in detail, so that Stowe's white, middle-class, mostly female readers could become intimately familiar not just with the Shelby family, for instance, who resembled them in race and class and with whom they might be expected to identify, but also with the African American characters, slave and free. Many of Stowe's first readers would never have encountered an African American--these readers would have been primarily northerners, as the book was quickly banned in the south. When they had, it was often in the context of abolitionist meetings. Stowe wanted to mobilize readers to protest slavery, and one of her key strategies was to take the issue out of the lecture hall and personalize it, so that her readers could understand slavery not just as an abstract concept, but as it affected real

people—moreover, people who were not so different from themselves as they'd been led to believe. “If it were *your* Harry, mother, or your Willie that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader, to-morrow morning . . . how fast could *you* walk?” (56). This is one of the reasons Stowe stresses the lightness of Eliza's skin early on, mining the already-established stereotype of the tragic mulatta. Any readers who had been thinking of slaves as belonging to an inferior species, as the science of the time dictated, were forced to re-examine exactly how and if this slave woman differed from them, except in legal status. Over the course of a novel-length narrative, readers could look beyond legalities and ethnicity, and get to know Eliza and her family as people—and also through the conventions of the sentimental novel they came to know and care about characters like the indisputably black Uncle Tom, or George, Eliza's husband. This was a new and enlightening experience for many readers, Stowe's intention again being to stress the human connections that underlay the legal distinctions. She further emphasized the extent to which all humans are connected by using such strategies as repeating names, pairing characters, doubling scenes, all across racial lines—the names of George Harris and George Shelby, for example. No pairing had such an impact as that of the characters of Uncle Tom and little Eva, however. Both of them are presented in explicitly Christ-like terms, forgiving their enemies as they die sacrificial deaths that transform others: little Eva's redeems the slave child Topsy (with whom she is also paired) into a fuller humanity and moral sense, and Uncle Tom's inspires George Shelby--Mr. Shelby's son, who arrives too late to save him—to devote himself to the abolitionist cause.

Both death scenes mine the sentimental tradition fully—their whole purpose is to be unashamedly tear-jerking. “When George [Shelby] entered the shed, he found his head giddy and his heart sick. ‘Is it possible,--is it possible?’ said he, kneeling down by him. ‘Uncle Tom,

my poor, poor old friend?’ Something in his voice penetrated to the ear of the dying. He moved his head gently, smiled, and said, ‘*Jesus can make a dying-bed/Feel soft as downy pillows are.*’ Tears which did honor to his manly heart fell from the young man’s eyes, as he bent over his poor friend” (474-5). Stowe wanted to break hearts and evoke emotion: one reader at a time, hearts as well as minds needed to be won over to the abolitionist cause. Tear might lead to anger, which might lead to action. Readers of novels, Stowe knew, were predominantly women, who lacked political power—but women had husbands, and those husbands soon found themselves listening to their wives’ and daughters’ emotional entreaties, and having the book thrust into their hands. And there waiting for them was the character of Senator Bird, a decent, authoritative figure such as most male readers would like to imagine themselves to be, who supports the Fugitive Slave Act when it is simply an abstract concept to him, but, through knowledge of Eliza’s personal plight, comes to understand and repudiate the immorality of the whole system.