

4 CRITICS DISCUSS

Harriet Beecher Stowe

(1811-1896)

“Mrs. Stowe’s fame is secure as the author of one of the four or five most widely circulated books in the history of mankind. But the book itself has been attacked--justly enough--on historical, sociological, and literary grounds; and other books by Mrs. Stowe have been adjudged much superior in artistic performance. Some of her other works have been hailed as forerunners of regionalism...

Most critics consider her best books those with a New England scene, often based at least partly on her own experiences. These include *The Minister’s Wooing* (1859), *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* (1862), *Oldtown Folks* (1869)...Mrs. Stowe’s prose style leaves much to be desired; she is often repetitious, and shows a defective knowledge of sentence structure and syntax; her descriptions are at times vague and inexact; often her dramatic crises sound amateurish. Yet, at her best, her storytelling drive carries everything before it.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1094

“If there is something to be said for the author’s claim that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was written by God, it is evident that the nine novels which followed it were produced without divine intervention by Harriet Beecher Stowe herself....All of her subsequent books were written in comfort and security and in relative tranquillity of spirit, and none of them--perhaps for this reason--approaches the power of *Uncle Tom*. The absence of this power, in fact--the slackness of the narrative line, the failure in dramatic imagination and the wordiness that tends to blur contours--may come, as one explores these novels, to seem not merely disappointing but astonishing....

The truth was that Mrs. Stowe had in a sense no real interest in literature....A study of the literature of the past as the only true foundation for a literature of the present was outside the pale of her occupations.... Mrs. Stowe did not much care to read novels; the sermon was undoubtedly the literary form by which she had been most deeply influenced....

It evidently bores her to contrive a plot, and she comes to depend more and more and more on conventional Victorian devices, which she handles in a more and more perfunctory way. She has a particularly exasperating habit of first narrating some episode at length, then telling it all over again in a letter or a conversation. The formula that she most relies upon for giving the reader his money’s worth is to do him a pathetic deathbed--Little Eva’s is not the worst--that derives from and outdoes Dickens....She never succeeds, after *Uncle Tom*, in building up a situation and carrying it through to an adequate climax. I say she never succeeds and she hardly even tries....She did not write either commas or periods, and she usually sent off her copy without having read it over. Yet these later books are not simply bad; only rarely does she write pure rubbish....

After *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*...several of her books have considerable interest of another sort. Mrs. Stowe was a very observant and essentially realistic woman. Her intelligence was by no means limited, and of the subjects that most occupied her mind she had acquired a considerable grasp. She will not thrill you as a teller of tales, but she does throw a good deal of light on certain aspects of American society....

Her pity runs to sentimentality, which is to say that it sometimes seems false; but she is never an obnoxious moralist: Her judgment of men is quite sober and her judgment of ideas quite sound.”

Edmund Wilson
Patriotic Gore
(Oxford 1966) 32-5, 58

“Harriet triumphantly displayed the scene of man abject under feminine rule...She recorded an enormous scorn for masculinity itself...To take her revenge on an unjust society, she abandoned a Romantic, essentially historical style for a sentimental approach...Males in these books are either awkward brutes, stumbling amid feminine subtleties, or wistful would-be transvestites. In either form, they are by nature failures, just as the women are by nature successes...”

The writing of *Lady Byron Vindicated* was an important event for Stowe. The book antagonized thousands of readers; but more important, it advertised Stowe’s new-felt freedom in the early and mid-1870s. She was adopting the self-worship inculcated by sentimental feminine antinomianism which her extraordinary intelligence had prevented her from fully assuming all her insecure and chaotic life. She was beginning to boast rather than analyze. Narcissistic rage is at the heart of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s writings of the late 1860s and early 1870s....

Stowe’s new credo could be summed up thus: Salvation comes through the agency of the average woman. And her heroines are “average” with a vengeance, for how else can Stowe demonstrate that any woman is better than any man? Her creative impulse has narrowed perilously near a scorn of any real accomplishment as, by definition, masculine...Stowe’s disintegration as a writer is evident in the New York novels...In Stowe’s narcissistic imagination, the woman has herself become the church, and the man is a rapturous communicant.”

Ann Douglas
The Feminization of American Culture
(Avon 1977) 294-5, 297, 302-03

“Harriet Beecher Stowe...idealized both a maternal state and a maternal deity in opposition to the patriarchal systems she perceived as dominant...She frequently distinguished between harsh male-made doctrine (especially the doctrines of Election and Predestination) and a loving, motherly God...She was disposed to split the Godhead, making a masculine Jehovah the cause of suffering and a feminine Christ the source of comfort. These ideals existed in her writing irrespective of persons, however, so that men and women characters possess ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ qualities with little regard to their gender....

She is calling for self-determined action and for responses by women to institutions beyond the family. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and in *Dred* (the antislavery novel that followed in 1856), all the good women are engaged in various acts of civil disobedience and subversion of the law....

Stowe’s is not women’s fiction, however, because the good women are not engaged in their own cause, either as individuals or in the interest of their sex, but in a cause where their own welfare is not directly involved...We see Stowe’s work as pursuing a course that sometimes appears to go against the secular...current of the popular genre, especially in the emphasis on self-sacrifice. This appearance is particularly marked in her three religious novels: *The Minister’s Wooing* (1859), *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* (1862), and *Agnes of Sorrento* (1862). In each of these novels Stowe develops a heroine who is an embodiment of Grace, an illuminated state of entire and loving trust in God....

My Wife and I...upholds the sanctity of marriage for men and women alike, and argues that in order to make marriage what it should be, women must be educated like men to earn their own livings and thus be free not to marry if they do not want to....The novel attacks the radical fringe of the feminist movement as charlatanism, and exoriates the doctrine of free love and women who adopt men’s clothes and male manners, but it does so largely out of a conviction that such behavior will discredit the really important and right aims of the women’s movement.”

Nina Baym
Women’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870
(Cornell 1978) 232-3, 236

Michael Hollister (2015)