

ANALYSIS

Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852)



Harriet Beecher Stowe

(1811-1896)

“*Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was great in its social effects rather than in its artistic qualities. Its author's resources as a purveyor of Sunday-school fiction was not remarkable. She had at most a ready command of broadly conceived melodrama, humor, and pathos, and of these popular elements she compounded her book. In spite of the intensity of her feelings while writing, Mrs. Stowe showed admirable tact in refraining from attacks on the people of the South. All the villains of her story are Northern renegades. Her emphasis was clearly placed on the unavoidable evils of slavery, the separation of Negro families by sale and the brutality inseparable from the pursuit and recapture of fugitive blacks. Abolitionists at first considered her book too gentle, and Southerners saw no reason to resent it--until the extent of its effect on the public became evident. Nothing attributable to Mrs. Stowe or her handiwork can account for the novel's enormous vogue in the Northern states, in England, and throughout the world. When she went abroad, the reception accorded her was little short of hysterical. She had become a symbol.”

George F. Whicher
Literary History of the United States
(Macmillan 1946,1963) 583

“The book is an account of the trials, sufferings, and innate grandeur of Uncle Tom, a Negro slave who is cruelly mistreated by a Yankee overseer named Simon Legree and finally whipped to death by him. Uncle Tom is deeply devoted to Little Eva, daughter of his white owner, Augustine St. Clare. Other characters include the mulatto girl Eliza; the impish Negro child Topsy; Miss Ophelia, a precise New England spinster; Marks, the slave catcher. Two famous scenes depict Little Eva's death and Eliza's escape over the ice of the Ohio, carrying her boy Harry; her husband George follows her via the Underground Railroad to Ohio and they manage to outwit the slave catchers. The background is plantation life in Kentucky and Louisiana....

She wrote it as a contribution to the cause of abolition, but showed more fairness to the South than was generally realized. Her despicable villain is a Vermonter from her own part of the country; she vents her

sharpest ridicule on a Yankee woman. On the other hand, she depicts in admiring colors the true southern gentleman and the genuine southern lady. Mrs. Stowe's primary fear was that the abolitionists would denounce her; she had always avoided approving their cause and she liked the South."

Max J. Herzberg and staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1167

"She takes for granted...that great art is a form of onslaught. That was indeed the art of Calvinism...and of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe wrote her masterful anti-slavery novel in part to show up the faint-hearted American clergy... *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a great book, not because it is a great novel, but because it is a great revival sermon, aimed directly at the conversion of its hearers."

Ann Douglas
The Feminization of American Culture
(Avon 1977) 295

"It is a much more impressive work than one has ever been allowed to suspect. The first thing that strikes one about it is a certain eruptive force.... Out of a background of undistinguished narrative, inelegantly and carelessly written, the characters leap into being with a vitality that is all the more striking for the ineptitude of the prose that presents them. These characters--like those of Dickens, at least in the early phase--express themselves a good deal better than the author expresses herself.

The farther one reads in *Uncle Tom*, the more one becomes aware that a critical mind is at work, which has the complex situation in a very firm grip and which, no matter how vehement the characters become, is controlling and coordinating their interrelations. Though there is much that is exciting in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it is never the crude melodrama of the decadent phase of the play; and though we find some old-fashioned moralizing and a couple of Dickensian deathbeds, there is a good deal less sentimentality than we may have been prepared for...

The novel is by no means an indictment drawn up by New England against the South. Mrs. Stowe has, on the contrary, been careful to contrive her story in such a way that the Southern states and New England shall be shown as involved to an equal degree in the kidnapping into slavery of the Negroes and the subsequent maltreatment of them, and that the emphasis shall all be laid on the impracticability of slavery as a permanent institution. The author, if anything, leans over backwards in trying to make it plain that the New Englanders are as much to blame as the South and to exhibit the Southerners in a favorable light.... Simon Legree is not a Southerner: he is a Yankee, and his harsh inhumanity as well as his morbid solitude are evidently regarded by Mrs. Stowe as characteristic of his native New England....

Her assumption, in writing *Uncle Tom*, is that every worthy person in the United States must desire to preserve the integrity of our unprecedented republic; and she tries to show how Negro slavery must disrupt and degrade this common ideal by tempting the North to the moral indifference, the half-deliberate ignorance, which encourages inhuman practices, and by weakening the character of the South through the luxury and the irresponsibility that the institution of slavery breeds. For Harriet Beecher Stowe, besides, the American Union had been founded under the auspices of the Christian God, and she could not accept institutions that did such violence to Christian teaching. [Except for Quakers] not one of the other white groups that figure in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is living in accordance with the principles of the religion they all profess. It is only the black Uncle Tom who has taken the white man's religion seriously and who--standing up bravely, in the final scene, for the dignity of his own soul but at the same time pardoning Simon Legree--attempts to live up to it literally."

Edmund Wilson
Patriotic Gore
(Oxford 1966) 5-9

Michael Hollister (2015)