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Teaching American History

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## Christian Characters make Uncle Tom's Cabin Uncle Tom's Cabin

### Uncle Tom's Cabin: great literature?

A recent review of a book on Uncle Tom's Cabin asserts that Stowe's great feat was her ability to persuade white Northerners to care about slavery, an issue they had largely ignored as not relevant to their lives.<sup>1</sup> (Gordon-Reed 120) Stowe was able to persuade Northerners because she created a story that "made slavery palpable to the American people." (Gordon-Reed 122) How was Stowe able to persuade white Northerners to care about slavery to the extent that so many Northern white people would unequivocally and irreconcilably wish to end slavery in the United States?

The answer may lie not in the literary merits of Uncle Tom's Cabin, as the book's status as great literature is questionable. The above-mentioned review alludes to discussion that the "arguments will continue about the novel's literary value." (Gordon-Reed 124) A different review similarly asserts that "the case for [Uncle Tom's Cabin] as a literary work of depth and nuance is dubious." (Delbanco) How can Uncle Tom's Cabin have been so influential that it is justly included in the discussions about pre-Civil War crises, yet at the same time be of questionable literary merit?<sup>2 3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The review is of David S. Reynolds's book 'Mightier than the Sword: "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and the Battle for America,' published earlier this year.

<sup>2</sup> Though an in-depth literary discussion of the book isn't possible here, it can be acknowledged that Stowe's characters in the novel don't develop — they just *are*. Her characters can be viewed as a panorama of the types of individuals living in 1850's America and their attitudes regarding slavery: the kind and cruel slaveholder; the industrious, humorless Northerner who abhors slavery while simultaneously harboring antipathy towards black people; pious, activist Quakers; a wild slave child; brutalized slaves; a spoiled, self-centered Mistress; and the Christ figure of Tom. When characters do develop, their developments are not necessarily literarily compelling. Examples include Tom, as he experiences his crisis of faith, and Topsy, as she becomes more 'human' and less animalistic.

### Stowe's Christian characters appeal to readers

Stowe was able to persuade white Northerners to care about slavery in large part because Christianity played a central role in her characters' self-identity. This Christian aspect of the novel's characters facilitated reader identification with the characters. When a character would inevitably feel the adverse effects of slavery, the readers would be sensitive to the juxtaposition of their Christianity with their society-sanctioned, slave-system induced fates.<sup>4</sup>

### The methods Stowe used to "Christianize" her characters

Stowe utilizes three methods to steep her characters in her definition of Christianity – a Christianity in which slavery is abhorrent to God. First, Stowe uses descriptive passages when introducing her characters; second, the voices of the characters themselves reflect their religiosity; finally, Stowe occasionally leaves the story and appeals directly to the (Christian) consciences of her readers when slavery has dealt her Christian characters a rough fate.

### Stowe's use of religion to describe her characters

The first method that Stowe uses to "Christianize" her characters, and thereby facilitate the readers' identification with them, is usually seen when she introduces the readers to a character. When Stowe introduces the reader to Mrs. Shelby (Uncle Tom's mistress) she writes that she possesses the "natural magnanimity and generosity of mind which one often marks as characteristic of the women in Kentucky [as well as having a] high moral and religious sensibility and principle." (Stowe v.1, 26) Few readers would object to Stowe's description of

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<sup>3</sup> How many high school students read Uncle Tom's Cabin today? Our school has a class set that doesn't seem to have ever been read. For that matter, how many high school English or social studies teachers have read the book? Perhaps fewer than would be suggested by book's impact during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup> Stowe's use of anti-slavery Christian message could only have been so successful in a country where religious sentiment was widespread, as was the case in pre-War America. Daniel Walker Howe discusses the popularity and extent of the Second Great Awakening in America in "What Hath God Wrought," pages 186-195.

Mrs. Shelby, whose attractive personality Stowe has made inseparable from her religious convictions.

In these few lines, Stowe has quickly planted seeds of reader identification in Mrs. Shelby, since most of Stowe's readers likely viewed themselves as Christian. In a sense, Stowe uses the Christian-based description of Mrs. Shelby to lay a trap for the reader: once the reader has a Christian-based sympathy with Mrs. Shelby, it becomes hard to argue against Mrs. Shelby's religious convictions a few pages later when she incorporates her self-identification as a Christian to rail against Mr. Shelby's selling of Tom and the boy Harry to a slave trader. (Stowe v.1 56-58) This is the first instance in which a character's religious conviction comes up short against the realities of slavery. Stowe is able to persuade readers of the evil of slavery because she's juxtaposed an anti-slavery Christianity in a character, with which readers could identify, with one evil consequence of slavery.<sup>5</sup>

When Stowe introduces Tom to the readers, she similarly imbues him with a Christian aura, establishing his Christian credentials, as it were. In a religious meeting, held at the end of the day in Tom's cabin, Stowe describes the 'sincerity and earnestness' with which Tom prays.<sup>6</sup> Stowe makes it plain that Tom is a 'true' Christian, and, though the reader is not yet invested in Tom as a character, she can begin to respect the slave Tom for this aspect of his character. Perhaps even readers not prone to be sympathetic towards black people had a stake in Tom's fate because of their empathy with his Christianity, which Stowe often describes.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Shelby's protestations are worth noting: she uses religion as the basis for her deepest criticism of her husband and entire slave culture. Upset at the news, she decries that she "tried most faithfully, as a Christian woman should" to do her duty toward her slaves. (Stowe v.1 56) She then continues with a grocery list of unobjectionable Christian values ("duties of the family. . . that one soul is worth all the money in the world." (Stowe v.1 57) that she had tried to impart upon her slaves, but, unsuccessfully, as she is now clearly part of a system that has sold their best slave and separated her closest servant friend from her young son.

<sup>6</sup> "But it was in prayer that he especially excelled. Nothing could exceed the touching simplicity, the child-like earnestness, of his prayer, enriched with the language of Scripture, which seemed so entirely to have wrought itself into his being, as to have become a part of himself, and to drop from his lips unconsciously." (Stowe v.1 52)

<sup>7</sup> Another religious-based description takes place when Stowe describes the Quaker home where George, and Eliza, and Harry are staying before their escape to Canada. The morning after having been reunited, George is at the breakfast table, where he is seated "on equal terms at [a] white man's table," a first for him. (Stowe v.1 205) Stowe uses the Quakers' piousness to show readers that even in the most private of places, one's kitchen, egalitarian practice is possible, even natural, if Christian values regarding race were to reign supreme.

## Characters' self-awareness as practicing Christians

Stowe introduces the Christianity of her characters through initial descriptions; she reinforces these Christian sentiments through the characters' voice. In one scene Shelby, Tom's master, discusses Tom's Christianity. As Shelby negotiates the sale of Tom with the slave trader Haley, Shelby invokes Tom's Christianity as an asset, telling Haley that Tom is an honest person, as he "got religion at a camp-meeting." (Stowe v.1 14) Shelby also recounts an earlier episode when he entrusted Tom with money: "'Tom,' says I to him, 'I trust you, because I think you're a Christian – I know you wouldn't cheat.'" (Stowe v.1 15) The reader identifies with Tom as being an honest man because his Christian convictions demand it— his convictions keep him from even considering an escape with the money. As the story continues, and the reader further identifies with Tom, to a large extent because of his Christianity, it will prove difficult for that reader to abandon Tom when he begins to suffer. This hold especially true when Tom continues to profess Christian treatment of his tormenter, Simon Legree, at a point when most readers would recognize in themselves no similar religious-based forbearance.<sup>8</sup>

## Direct Christian appeals to the reader

Stowe's third method of driving home her Christian message occurs when she occasionally leaves the story and appeals directly to the Christian conscience of her readers. In these instances, it's as if Stowe seems to think that she needs to step away from the story for a moment to directly speak to the reader and inform him that, if a true Christian, he must be opposed to this particular slavery-based effect.

In the beginning of the story, Eliza informs Tom that he's been sold. Tom's wife suggests that Tom join Eliza and her son in escaping, but Tom declines. He bases his decision by claiming that he can bear the burden of being sold as well as anyone, and that the master wasn't to blame for what happened. (Implicit in Tom's reasoning is his strong faith.) Then,

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<sup>8</sup> Other instances where a Tom directly refers to Christian values: Tom in slave quarters after hearing he's sold; with Eva when he first meets her, as well as when they read the bible together. Other characters are also forthcoming in basing their actions on their Christian self-identity: the Quakers, who both help slaves escape and nurse an injured slave catcher back to health.

Stowe pauses her narrative and appeals directly to the reader. Though Stowe doesn't explicitly mention religion in the following passage, it's clear that she is aware of her faith. Stowe speaks to the reader of Tom, who has put his hands to his face in sorrow: "Sobs, heavy, hoarse and loud, shook the chair, and great tears fell through his fingers on the floor: just such tears, sir, as you dropped into the coffin where lay your first-born son; such tears, woman, as you shed when you heard the cries of your dying babe. For, sir, he was a man – and you are but another man. And, woman, though dressed in silk and jewels, you are but a woman, and, in life's great straits and mighty griefs, ye feel but one sorrow!" (Stowe v.1 64-5) In her appeal, Stowe suggests we are all God's creatures, whether man or woman, white or black.

Another instance of Stowe appealing directly to the reader's Christian sentiments to illustrate the evils of slavery occurs when Tom is on his way downriver. Stopped at port on the Mississippi, the owner of a slaver mother, Lucy, sells Lucy's infant without her knowledge – she only discovers her child missing and sold after the ship has continued its voyage downstream. Lucy then drowns herself in the river.

At this point, Stowe again directly addresses the reader, appealing to the reader's Christianity in condemning slavery. Stowe writes first about Tom's feelings, as he had witnessed Lucy's suicide. Then, without warning, Stowe changes voice and addresses the reader:

"Patience! patience! ye whose hearts swell indignant at  
Wrongs like these. Not one throb of anguish, not one tear of Glory.  
In his patient, generous bosom he bears the anguish of a world. Bear  
thou, like him, in patience, and labor in love; for sure as he is God,  
"the year of his redeemed shall come." (Stowe v.1 192)

Stowe's appeal is effective because she has managed to convey a mother's grief at losing a child, and perhaps the comfort that religion can attempt to offer an individual at such times, and sets these next to the injustice of a slave system responsible for Lucy's loss. Readers considering themselves religious could not but help be affected by such a direct appeal to their (Christian) conscience.

## Conclusion

In writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as the reviewer Gordon-Reed asserts, Harriet Beecher Stowe was able to persuade Northerners to care about slavery. She was able to accomplish this

feat in large part by using the three methods discussed above to endow the novel's characters with strong Christian values, thereby encouraging her audience to identify with the characters. When these characters, in turn, are harmed by slavery, the audience is moved to care about their fate and decry the slave system responsible for it.

Largely through the strong Christian message conveyed by her characters, Stowe was able make millions of Northerners care that American slavery was anathema to Christianity.

### Uncle Tom's Cabin in the classroom

For classroom use, I intend to first situate the novel in early 1850s context and then have students read Northern and Southern responses to the book. But, instead of having students read selected excerpts, as I have done in previous years, I plan to first introduce students to Stowe's method of direct appellations to the reader. I'll then select several chapters, with Stowe's direct appeal removed, for the students to read, in pairs. Students will first try to determine where they believe the most effective place to appeal to readers' consciences as to the evils of slavery would be, and then they'll write their own version of an appeal to the reader. Pairs will then share the placement and content of their appeal with the class before we read Stowe's appeals. As an assessment I may place my own or student appeal next to Stowe's and ask to compare the two: given the context of 1852, explain why one appeal to reader's Christian conscience vis-à-vis evils of slavery is more effective than the other.

## Works Cited

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