"I've felt that I would be glad to die, if my dying could stop all this misery. I *would die* for them, Tom, if I could." (page 272)

"My soul an't yours, Mas'r! You haven't bought it,—ye can't buy it! It's been bought and paid for, by one that is able to keep it." (page 353)

"I an't a grain afeard to die. I'd as soon die as not. Ye may whip me, starve me, burn me,—it'll only send me sooner where I want to go." (page 375)

Liberty!—electric word! What is it? Is there anything more in it than a name—a rhetorical flourish? Why, men and women of America, does your heart's blood thrill at that word, for which your fathers bled, and your braver mothers were willing that their noblest and best should die?

Is there anything in it glorious and dear for a nation, that is not also glorious and dear for a man? (page 378)

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

Harriet Beecher Stowe

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES
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1869 Stowe loses much favor in England when she publishes *The True Story of Lady Byron's Life*, in which she accuses the poet Lord Byron of having an incestuous love affair with his half-sister, Lady Byron.

1886 Stowe's husband, Calvin, dies.

1896 Stowe dies on July 1 in Hartford, Connecticut. In the landmark case Plessey v. Ferguson, the Supreme Court upholds the Louisiana Court's ruling in favor of segregation of blacks and whites, reinforcing the Jim Crow laws.

1955–1956 Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

1961 With transport segregation still in place in the Deep South, the civil rights group Congress of Racial Equality organizes "freedom rides" to desegregate transportation.

1964 Congress passes the Civil Rights Act.

INTRODUCTION

Before the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1851, Harriet Beecher Stowe was a moderately successful writer from a moderately famous family. Her father, Lyman Beecher, was a Calvinist minister who had made his name preaching against dueling and drunkenness; his *Six Sermons on the Nature, Occasions, Signs, Evils, and Remedy of Intemperance* (1821; see "For Further Reading") argued at great length, and in harrowing detail, that the nation's republican freedoms were everywhere threatened by the "mighty despot" of drink (p. 100). Ten years later, Beecher moved his family from New England to Ohio, where he believed the final battles for the nation's soul would be waged. Fearing that the immigrants flooding the western states would be won over by the network of churches and schools that the Catholics were busily establishing, Beecher sought to fight the Catholics on their own ground by taking charge of a theological seminary of properly Calvinist bent. All six of Stowe's brothers followed their father into the ministry, and one of them, Henry Ward Beecher, would become the most influential minister in postbellum New York. Stowe's husband, Calvin Stowe, was also a minister and one of the most learned Bible scholars of his generation.

The Beecher women were no less remarkable. One of Stowe's sisters, Isabella Beecher Hooker, was an abolitionist and an advocate for women's rights. Another, Catharine Beecher, was an educational reformer and an early home economist: She founded the Hartford Female Seminary, one of the first schools to offer young women a rigorous academic curriculum, including classics, natural sciences, and moral philosophy, and the first to professionalize the work of teaching; later, she wrote a *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841), which sought to rationalize housework according to principles of efficiency. Stowe herself wrote a very successful geography textbook while still a young teacher in her sister's school, and she began, after moving to Ohio, to write short stories about life in New England and in the western states. These stories were published in popular magazines, such as the *Western Monthly Magazine* and *Godey's Lady's Book*, and were subsequently collected and reissued as *The*

Mayflower; or, Sketches of Scenes and Characters Among the Descendents of the Puritans (1843).

The publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* lifted Stowe out of a purely Beecher orbit and put her in the stratosphere of international fame. But the novel is nonetheless indebted, as Joan D. Hedrick shows in her *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (1994), to the many and varied Beecher family projects. The father's battle for the soul of the nation, the brothers' Christian ministries, one sister's advocacy for women and slaves, another's celebration of the properly run home—all of these can be found in *Uncle Tom* alongside Stowe's own gifts: her ear for dialect and her eye for detail, her masterful handling of suspense and pathos, and her sympathetic embrace of all the nation's regions. The result was a novel more popular, and more influential, than anyone could have imagined.

When Calvin Stowe negotiated *Uncle Tom*'s contract on his wife's behalf, he confided to the publishers that he hoped the novel would be successful enough so that his wife could buy a "good black silk dress" (Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*, 1985, p. 165). The novel turned out, of course, to be far more successful than that. Within the first week of publication, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold 10,000 copies; within its first year, 300,000 (this in a nation with a total population of only 24 million). *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the first American novel to sell more than a million copies, and no book of any kind, except for the Bible, had ever sold so well. Astonishing as the sales figures are, even they fail to suggest the full extent of *Uncle Tom*'s popularity. For the book was published in an era when novels were still treated as a kind of communal property, borrowed from circulating libraries, passed from hand to hand, read aloud to entire households at a time; knowing this, one reviewer speculated that *Uncle Tom* had ten readers for every copy sold.

The best measure of *Uncle Tom*'s popularity lies, then, not in numbers, but rather in the kind of anecdotal evidence that Thomas F. Gossett has collected in the book noted above. Reading through the letters and journals of Stowe's contemporaries, Gossett finds Richard Henry Dana, Jr., noting that four men were reading *Uncle Tom* in a single railway car and Ralph Waldo Emerson observing that it was the "only book that found readers in the parlor, the nursery, and the kitchen in every house-hold" (p. 165). Such popularity produced a flood of subsidiary merchandise, as Eric J. Sundquist recalls in his introduction to *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1986). There were innumerable plays, poems, and songs, all elaborating and exploiting the pathos of the novel's most affecting scenes; there were also, more surprisingly, *Uncle Tom* dioramas, engravings, figurines, candles, plates, busts, embossed spoons, painted scarves, needlepoint, and games, including one in which players competed to reunite the families of separated slaves. By the end of the year, three hundred Boston babies had been christened "Eva," in honor of the novel's heroine (Gossett, p. 164).

The success of *Uncle Tom* was not limited to the United States. In Britain, the novel was equally popular, and it was during a triumphal tour of Britain in 1853 that Stowe experienced the consequences of her fame at first hand. When she landed in Liverpool, she found the docks thronged with people who wanted to be the first to catch a glimpse of her. Her subsequent travels toward London confirmed that Stowe could go nowhere in public without attracting crowds who would call out her name and cheer. In London, the Lord Mayor held a dinner in her honor; she was seated across from Charles Dickens and toasted along with him. Over the course of her visit, Stowe was introduced to the most important figures in Britain: the Earl and Countess of Shaftesbury, the Duke and Duchess of Argyll, the Duchess of Sutherland, the Earl of Carlisle, Lord and Lady Palmerston, Lord John Russell, and William Gladstone. Everywhere Stowe went, she was presented with extravagant tributes: a gold purse filled with 130 pounds; a silver salver covered with one thousand pounds; an agate cup filled with one hundred gold sovereigns; and a heavy gold bracelet, made to resemble slave shackles, engraved with the date on which slavery was abolished in the British colonies (Hedrick, pp. 233–252).

Uncle Tom was received quite differently, of course, in the southern states. In some regions, the book was not sold at all, while in others it was not advertised. Those southerners who did read the novel were nearly all outraged, and it was the subject of scathing reviews. While a few of these reviews limited themselves to defending the South from what were taken to be Stowe's unfair attacks, the majority of them took the occasion to attack Stowe in turn. George Frederick Holmes, of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, called her "an obscure Yankee school mistress, eaten up with fanaticism, festering with the malignant virtues of abolitionism, self-sanctified by the virtues of a Pharisaic religion, devoted to the assertion of women's rights, and an enthusiastic believer in many neoteric heresies" (Gossett, p. 189). William Gilmore Simms went even

further, in the *Southern Quarterly Review*: "Mrs. Stowe betrays a malignity so remarkable," he claimed, "that the petticoat lifts of itself, and we see the hoof of the beast under the table" (Gossett, p. 190). Nor was the southern response confined to reviews. It also took the form of an astonishing new genre, what Gossett calls the anti-*Uncle Tom* novel (pp. 212–239).

The titles of these novels often reveal their agendas: Mary H. Eastman's *Aunt Phillis's Cabin; or, Southern Life as It Is* (1852); Robert Criswell's *"Uncle Tom's Cabin" Contrasted with Buckingham Hall, the Planter's Home; or, A Fair View of Both Sides of the Slavery Question* (1852); and John W. Page's *Uncle Robin, in His Cabin in Virginia, and Tom without One in Boston* (1853). Despite the references to slaves in their titles, these novels tend to focus on the debate between slave owners and abolitionists. Sometimes abolitionism is shown to be merely foolish and misguided; more often, however, it is shown to be a form of hypocrisy, as when abolitionists prefer to sympathize with distant slaves than to care for the exploited workers around them or, worse, when abolitionists use the cause as a pretext for pursuing cross-racial desires.

The slave owners, on the other hand, tend to be wise and humane, but their widely varying attitudes toward physical punishment suggest a deep confusion about what, in a slave-owning society, wisdom and humanity might mean. In some of these novels, for instance, the owners do not punish their slaves at all, for reasons either of kindness or self-interest; in others, they punish their slaves only on the rare occasions when it is deserved; in still others, they punish their slaves often because it is only through punishment that slaves can be governed; others insist that it is only the rare owner who punishes his slaves and that he is sure to be shunned for his cruelty, or that it is only overseers who punish and that they do so without the consent of the owners. With such confusion about the ethics of slave-owning, these novels leave it to the slaves themselves to articulate a defense of slavery, which they are remarkably happy to do.

In postbellum novels nostalgic for plantation life, a genre that culminates in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936), slaves tend to be passionately devoted to their masters and mistresses; in these antebellum novels, by contrast, loyalty matters less than self-interest. As one slave says in Martha Haines Butt's *Antifanaticism: A Tale of the South* (1853), "Dis nigger never leab his massa to go wid nobody, 'caze he know dat nobody ain't gwine treat him good no how like massa does" (Gossett, p. 224). Other slaves offer a more abstract defense of slavery as the system best suited to the needs and capacities of blacks. Some of these slaves may wish to be free themselves, but they recognize that freedom is not possible for the majority of those in their position. Aunt Phillis would have been very happy, the narrator tells us, to receive her freedom, but she "scorned the idea of . . . obtaining it otherwise than as a gift from her owner" (Gossett, p. 228). As Phillis lays dying, her owner at last offers to free her and her children, but she refuses, arguing that her children will be more secure enslaved on a plantation than free in the North or in Africa.

The sheer number of anti-*Uncle Tom* novels offers an inadvertent measure of the popularity of *Uncle Tom*, while the vehemence of their attacks on abolitionism is a backhanded tribute to its potential to effect political change. This potential was ultimately realized. Twelve years after Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Abraham Lincoln emancipated the slaves, and the connection between these two events is vividly condensed in the much-repeated story of Stowe and Lincoln's meeting. In December 1862, after the Emancipation Proclamation had been announced but before it went into full effect, Stowe was invited to the White House to have tea with Lincoln and his wife. It was on this occasion that Lincoln is famously rumored to have called Stowe "the little woman who made the great war." Hedrick can find no evidence that he actually said this: In a letter written to her husband that evening, Stowe describes nothing more specific than "a real funny interview with the President," and her daughter's diary concurs that their visit was "very droll" (p. 306).

While the story may be apocryphal, it nonetheless captures a crucial truth. *Uncle Tom* may not have "made" the war single-handedly (a host of political, economic, and social differences had made sectional war all but inevitable), but it did help to set the terms on which the "great war" would be fought and won. For the novel not only increased the number of antislavery activists and strengthened their resolve, but it also, in doing so, provided the North with a powerful language through which the long struggle for union could be articulated and sustained. By taking slavery to be the chief difference between North and South and by framing the issue of slavery in apocalyptic terms, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, like Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic," made the coming war seem inevitable, righteous, even holy.

Uncle Tom might also be said to have won the Civil War in a rather

more concrete way. A crucial question, in the early years of the war, was whether Britain would support the North or the South. British economic interests lay squarely with the cotton-producing South, and indeed the British textile industry suffered catastrophic unemployment in the early 1860s because of the northern naval blockade. But while Britain recognized the Confederate States of America and refused to aid Lincoln in suppressing what it took to be a second American Revolution, there was still enough abolitionist sentiment in Britain to prevent the government from actually supporting the South.

Stowe ensured that this sentiment stayed strong. During Stowe's first British tour, the Earl of Shaftesbury had written "An Affectionate and Christian Address of Many Thousands of Women of Great Britain and Ireland to Their Sisters the Women of the United States of America" (1853), which reminded U.S. women of their obligations, as mothers, sisters, and wives, to protect the sanctity of slave families and to ensure that slaves are instructed in the Bible. The earl's "Address" was signed by a half million women from every region and every class; their signatures filled twenty-six volumes, which were ceremonially presented to Stowe at the end of her visit. Nine years later, in the week before her visit to President Lincoln, Stowe wrote a reply to the "Address," which cited the coming emancipation of the slaves as proof that the North was committed to the abolitionist cause and then chastised the British for failing to support the cause (Hedrick, p. 305). But just as the signatories were the most significant part of the "Address," the content of the "Reply" is less important than its addressee. For by replying to the "Many Thousands of Women of Great Britain and Ireland," Stowe was constituting them anew as a political body. She was conjuring up once more an otherwise unseen lobby, the mothers, sisters, and wives capable of persuading their husbands, brothers, and sons to sacrifice their economic interests on behalf of the suffering slave. And they did. Britain remained neutral during the war, thereby permitting a northern victory.

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At first glance, the fact that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was both a phenomenal popular success and an influential political tool might not seem surprising. Indeed, one might even imagine that its popularity was necessary for its influence, but the two actually arise, I would argue, from very different

sources. For the fact that *Uncle Tom* was so immediately popular points to its essential familiarity. The novel describes what might be unfamiliar events, such as slave auctions and slave escapes, but it does so in ways that conform to what its readers already believed about the world, specifically about gender and race. But the fact that *Uncle Tom* was so ultimately influential points to the fact that the novel was seeking to transform the world it describes, to bring about unfamiliar ends through familiar means. Specifically, the novel sought to turn contemporary beliefs about gender inside out and to pursue contemporary beliefs about race to their logical, and often surprising, conclusions. Stowe was working, that is to say, with the received ideas of her culture, ideas that she herself fervently believed, but she found in these ideas unexpected resources, tools for remaking the world. It is for this reason that *Uncle Tom* was, in its own day, both a bestseller and a revolutionary text, and it is for this reason that the novel causes so much confusion in our day: Stowe was both conservative and radical at the same time.

This argument is fairly straightforward with respect to gender. Nineteenth-century culture, in both the United States and in Britain, was divided into separate, but putatively equal, spheres: a public sphere understood to be masculine and a domestic sphere understood to be feminine. Stowe does not contest this division. Rather, she celebrates it, most elaborately in chapter 9. The narrator introduces Mrs. Bird, the wife of an Ohio senator, by saying approvingly of her that she seldom "trouble[d] her head with what was going on in the house of the state" because she understood that "she had enough to do to mind her own [home]" (p. 78).

But while the narrator here affirms the division between the public and the domestic spheres, the scene that follows redefines these two spheres in revolutionary ways. Senator Bird has voted for a law forbidding the people of the North from assisting fugitive slaves, and his wife protests that the law is too cruel, that it would be heartrending to deny aid to those in need of it. Her husband responds that "private feelings" must be set aside when "there are great public interests involved" (p. 79). What Senator Bird is implying, in saying this, is that the treatment of fugitive slaves is a "public," and therefore exclusively masculine, concern. Mrs. Bird does not dispute him. Nor does she say anything, a few minutes later, when a pair of fugitive slaves suddenly appears at the door and her husband is so moved by their plight that he is tempted to break

the law in order to help them. "[Mrs. Bird] was a discreet woman," the narrator tells us, "[and she] sat very quietly in her chair, and looked quite ready to hear her liege lord's intentions, when he should think proper to utter them" (p. 86). His intention, it turns out, is that the fugitives should be led to a safe hiding place. Senator Bird is a "liege lord" no longer, except ironically. As his rational weighing of the "public interest" gives way to a rush of "private feelings," the "house of state" in which he legislates is entirely enfolded within the home his wife superintends.

This scene is crucial to our understanding of Stowe, for it dramatizes her own relation to the gender expectations of her time. Like Mrs. Bird, she does not dispute the presumption that the public sphere is properly masculine. Instead, she redefines public questions as domestic ones and thereby claims them as her own. And again like Mrs. Bird, she understands the value of keeping a "discreet" silence, as demonstrated most vividly during her British lecture tour. The British, even more than the Americans, set strict limits on the circumstances in which middle- and upper-class women were permitted to appear in public and entirely forbade them to speak. British lecture halls contained special "ladies' galleries," in which women were hidden behind wooden lattices so they could see without being seen, and Stowe conformed to this custom as closely as she could. She sat silently in a gallery to the side of the stage while others, most often her husband or her son, spoke on her behalf (Hedrick, p. 238).

We might take this to be meek submission to the constraints of gender, but I would argue it was a canny strategy for turning those constraints toward her own ends. By sitting silently while her husband or son spoke on her behalf, Stowe was not simply conforming to the expectations of her audience, but also dramatizing her conformity and thereby transforming conformity into a source of power. Her silence in the side gallery confirmed that the words being read aloud were the words of a properly reticent woman. These words only gained in authority from her womanly refusal to speak them, just as Mrs. Bird's words become all the more resonant because she knows when to say nothing at all.

With respect to gender, then, Stowe pushed the most conservative ideas of her culture to their logical extreme and, in doing so, found in them radical consequences. But Stowe's mix of conservatism and radi-

calism is more complicated, and more self-contradictory, with respect to race. In part, this reflects divisions within the antislavery cause. Antislavery activists were split between the colonizationists, who believed the slaves should be resettled in Liberia, and the abolitionists, who believed that the slaves should be emancipated and allowed to live free in the United States. The abolitionists were further split into the "gradualist" and the "immediatist" wings, the former associated with Lewis Tappan and also with some of the New England transcendentalists, and the latter with William Lloyd Garrison. The word "immediatist" is somewhat misleading, as the historian Ronald G. Walters points out in his *American Reformers, 1815–1860* (1978), for it refers not to the immediate freeing of the slaves, but rather to the immediate conviction, in the abolitionist's mind, that the slaves should be freed. (The belief that it was the actual freeing that should be immediate was largely confined to violent insurrectionists, such as Nat Turner and John Brown.) From this immediate conviction follows certain consequences: The immediatists felt no sympathy for the plight of slave owners, they had no interest in compensating slave owners for the losses abolition would entail, and they were increasingly certain that the best argument against slavery was the equality of all human beings. The gradualists differed from the immediatists over some or all of these beliefs. These three factions were then further subdivided by the two most urgent debates within the antislavery movement, the debate over nonviolent versus violent resistance and the debate about whether female activists should be permitted to speak publicly (Walters, pp. 79–99).

Although the Beechers all opposed slavery, they replicated the divisions within the antislavery movement by variously occupying all possible positions within it. Lyman Beecher famously suppressed the abolitionists within his own seminary (Hedrick, pp. 102–104), but his son Edward founded an antislavery society and his son Henry Ward gave sermons and wrote editorials of an increasingly Garrisonian cast. Isabella Beecher Hooker fervently admired Sarah and Angelina Grimké, Quaker sisters who had become abolitionist speakers, while Catharine Beecher, in her *Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duty of American Females* (1837), argued that female abolitionists should confine their activities to the home. Stowe herself wavered among these positions, at one point lamenting that there was no "intermediatist society" for people as ambivalent as she (Hedrick, pp. 108–109).

But Stowe, like all the Beechers and like antislavery activists more generally, was radicalized by the Compromise of 1850. Another in a series of failed attempts to preserve national unity by carefully balancing sectional claims, the Compromise of 1850 admitted California to the union as a free state, while referring the question of slavery in the New Mexico and Utah territories to popular vote. The Compromise also outlawed the slave trade in the District of Columbia, while strengthening the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Law. Under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, the owners of escaped slaves were under two burdens: first, finding their slaves; and second, proving in a legal trial that these slaves were their own. Slave owners claimed that both of these tasks had become increasingly difficult as the northern states had become increasingly antislavery; some judges were committed to nullifying slavery one fugitive at a time, while ordinary people proved all too willing to hide fugitives overnight and help them along their way. In response to these complaints, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 shifted the double burden away from the slave owners. The people of the northern states were now required to assist in capturing and returning fugitive slaves, and they were punished if they refused to do so. At the same time, slave owners were no longer required to prove their ownership before a judge and jury, but merely to assert it before a federal commissioner appointed specifically for the task.

Abuses were rampant. If the old law encouraged nullification, the new law encouraged corruption, for it allowed whites to claim not only fugitive slaves who did not belong to them, but even black men and women who were not slaves at all. Free black communities, particularly the large one in Boston, were terrorized by slave catchers, and many free men and women fled to Canada, knowing that they could not rely on the federal commissioners to protect them. Honorable commissioners, such as Philadelphia's, resigned rather than enforce the law, while some cities, such as Chicago, found it impossible to fill the post. Those men who were willing to serve as commissioner were quite willing to go along with any pretense, not least because they were paid ten dollars for determining that a person was a slave and only five dollars for determining that he or she was free. And under the new law, the judgment of such a commissioner was final. There was no possibility of appeal (Hedrick, pp. 202–207).

That the new fugitive slave law should galvanize existing antislavery

activists and recruit many more people to their ranks is not surprising, for antislavery activism tended to increase at moments when slave law was seen as imposing itself on the citizens of free states. The first such moment was the killing of Elijah Lovejoy, the most prominent martyr to the cause until John Brown. Lovejoy was the editor of an abolitionist newspaper in Illinois, and he was killed in November of 1837 while defending his printing press from an angry mob. The death of Lovejoy proved, antislavery activists argued, that slave power would not confine itself to the southern states and would not occupy itself merely with slaves, but would instead inevitably threaten the most cherished personal liberties of the free men and women of the North (Hedrick, p. 108). Fifteen years later, activists would make much the same arguments against the new fugitive slave law, which abrogated habeas protections and more generally undermined the rule of law. In both cases, what is emphasized is the damage done to northern law, not the violence done to slaves. Henry David Thoreau went so far, in his "Slavery in Massachusetts" (1854), as to argue that the damage the new fugitive slave law did to northern law constituted a form of slavery. Disgusted that his fellow citizens were busily protesting the extension of slavery to the Kansas and Nebraska territories while blithely ignoring the unfettered power now exercised by slave catchers in their own state, Thoreau famously announced, "There is not one slave in Nebraska; there are perhaps a million slaves in Massachusetts" (1854). Through the fugitive slave law, that is to say, the southern states succeeded in enslaving the free people of the north.

In the decades that followed the publication of *Uncle Tom*, Stowe gave three different accounts of its genesis, but the one that she most often repeated connects the origins of the novel to the passage of the new fugitive slave law. The Beecher siblings furiously exchanged letters detailing its abuses in their respective cities, and Isabella Beecher Hooker concluded one with what proved to be a fateful suggestion. "Now Hattie," she urged, "if I could use a pen as you can, I would write something that would make this whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is." Stowe responded to this appeal, one of her children later recalled, by rising to her feet and proclaiming, "I will write something. I will if I live" (Hedrick, p. 207). What she did write was first a short story, entitled "The Freeman's Dream: A Parable" (1850), and then *Uncle Tom* itself, and both of these texts align themselves with Thoreau and other antislavery

activists in emphasizing what "an accursed thing" slavery is for the free citizens of the north.

To be sure, *Uncle Tom* does highlight at least some of the terrible consequences that the new law has had for fugitive slaves. In its opening pages, for instance, the slaves on the Shelby plantation sing of the river Jordan and the land of Canaan that lies beyond, but the novel goes on to show that the promised land is now at a double remove. Eliza Harris must make not one, but two, harrowing crossings—first across the river that separates Kentucky from Ohio, and then across the lake that separates the United States from Canada. But while Eliza's plight is certainly affecting, particularly when she asks her Ohio rescuers whether Canada is very far away, it is not central to the novel's critique. The fullest treatment of the new fugitive slave law comes instead in the following chapter, during the conversation between Senator Bird and his wife, and what is emphasized here are the effects that the law will have on the white citizens of the North. Stowe will somewhat alter the familiar terms of this critique, however, by emphasizing religious, rather than political, effects. Mrs. Bird reminds her husband that their Bible commands them to feed the hungry and succor the persecuted, but their government now threatens them for doing so. A similar point is made in "The Freeman's Dream," when a northern white man is damned for having failed to assist a family of fugitive slaves.

The uniform protest against the new fugitive slave law did not resolve the divisions among antislavery activists, of course, and these divisions are at least partly responsible for the novel's contradictory account of race. For hidden by these many divisions and debates, but implicated in nearly all of them, is a single fundamental question: Are slaves essentially the same as free white men and women? Or are they essentially different? *Uncle Tom* will argue for sameness at some points and difference at others, just as it will contain traces of colonizationist, gradualist, and immediatist positions with no acknowledgment of the contradictions between them. And here we see that the novel's contradictory account of race must also be attributed to the confusions within Stowe's own mind. It is possible for Stowe to hold conflicting beliefs at the same time because hers is not a genius for abstract theorizing, and hers is not a novel of systematic argument. She will argue that slavery is evil because it denies the essential similarities between races, and she will argue that slavery is evil because it exploits the essential differences, two conflicting arguments that neatly correspond to two alternate accounts she tended to give of the novel's genesis. In the course of making these arguments, however, Stowe will often find herself surprised; she will discover unexpected consequences of what she is claiming or stumble over brutally resistant facts. And it is here that Stowe's particular strengths come to the fore. She is not systematic enough to alter her theories in light of this new evidence, but she is too honest to deny its existence. For this reason, *Uncle Tom* is punctuated by moments of contradiction and flashes of insight at odds with the arguments she is trying to make. The result is a novel that is conservative in its debt to certain contemporary ideas about race, but radical in its willingness to recognize, at least briefly, their internal contradictions.

In addition to the Compromise of 1850, Stowe cited as origins of *Uncle Tom* both a private grief and a private vision. The private grief was the death of her son Charley in the cholera epidemic of 1849. He was a year and a half old at the time, and it took him nine horrifying days to die. "There were circumstances about his death of such peculiar bitterness, of what might seem almost cruel suffering," Stowe recalled in a letter written a few years later, "that I felt that I could never be consoled for it, unless it should appear that this crushing of my own heart might enable me to work out some great good to others" (Hedrick, p. 192). Who these "others" might be is soon revealed: "It was at *his* dying bed, and at *his* grave, that I learnt what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her" (Hedrick, p. 193). Having learned this, Stowe was moved to write *Uncle Tom*. The analogy that this passage establishes between a slave mother's experiences and her own may seem faulty. It is not clear that Stowe, suffering the death of her child in the bosom of her family, with her grief consoled by friends and recognized by society, felt anything like what a slave mother might feel when her child is sold by a callous master, in front of an indifferent crowd, into a fate that will never be known. But the specific content of the analogy is ultimately less significant, I would argue, than the very fact that Stowe attempts to draw one. For in doing so, she posits a ground of similarity (here, motherhood) that is more meaningful than the difference of race.

An analogy made it possible for Stowe to write *Uncle Tom*, and analogies are important within the world of the novel itself. Indeed, a reliable measure of a character's goodness is his or her willingness to draw them. The worst characters are those, like the callous Marie St. Clare, who in-

sist that there can be no similarity between themselves and the slaves. "There's no comparing in this way," she insists. "Mammy couldn't have the feelings that I should" (p. 172). The best characters, by contrast, rely on analogies to guide their behavior toward others, as when the Quaker Ruth "uses [her]self only to learn how to love [her] neighbor" (p. 136). And the novel encourages us to draw analogies of our own. Describing Eliza's extraordinary flight, the narrator addresses us to ask, "If it were *your* Harry, mother . . . how fast could *you* walk?" (p. 50). In all of these instances, what is emphasized is the shared motherhood of all women, white or black, a point that is underscored by the repetition of certain names. Harry is the name of the son Eliza is trying to save, the name of the son taken from Cassy long ago, the name of the son that Mrs. Bird lost to fever a month before, and the name of the son who might be the reader's own. That all sons are named "Harry" in this novel reminds us that all women are mothers of a kind, and, in demonstrating this fact, Stowe aligns herself with those antislavery activists who held that race does not alter the essential similarity of all human beings.

But Stowe goes further than most antislavery activists, at least briefly, because she is at times willing to pursue her analogies to their logical conclusions, no matter what these might be. She does not merely draw analogies between women in terms of motherhood, but she also draws analogies between men in terms of something that she is at first reluctant to name. Here is her description of George Harris defending a group of fugitives from the slave catchers:

> If it had been only a Hungarian youth, now bravely defending in some mountain fastness the retreat of fugitives escaping from Austria into America, this would have been sublime heroism; but as it was a youth of African descent, defending the retreat of fugitives through America into Canada, of course we are too well instructed and patriotic to see any heroism in it; and if any of our readers do, they must do it on their own private responsibility. When despairing Hungarian fugitives make their way, against all the search-warrants and authorities of their lawful government, to America, press and political cabinet ring with applause and welcome. When despairing African fugitives do the same thing,—it is—what is it? (p. 195).

The analogy is remarkably precise: The fugitive slave is the fleeing revolutionary, the slaves are the Hungarian nation, and the United States is the oppressive Austrian empire. Only in the final line does the analogy falter, and the dashes mark the moment when racial prejudice obscures perception and leaves people unable to name the thing before their eyes. Stowe concludes with a question, "what *is* it?," but the answer is very clear. Patriotism, nationalism, heroic revolution, if only we were able to see. The radical significance of Stowe's recurrent use of the name George becomes clear. George is the name of a proud fugitive slave (George Harris) and the name of a master who will set his slaves free (George Shelby), and it is also the name of the man whose portrait is proudly displayed in Tom's cabin, George Washington. Elsewhere Stowe will celebrate passive resistance on the part of slaves, but in this passage she is at least willing to imagine that Harris's armed struggle to freedom, along with young Shelby's freeing of the slaves, continues the work of nation-building that Washington himself had inaugurated.

While Stowe posits a shared essence that transcends race, whether it be motherhood or the love of liberty, she also was deeply influenced by an intellectual movement that argued precisely the opposite, the movement called "racialism." The Enlightenment had posited a universal human subject, but the parallel rise of romanticism and nationalism at the turn of the nineteenth century had prompted the very different belief that race was the fundamental unit of human experience and that each race differed in essence from all the rest. And so where the Enlightenment had made claims about "man" in general, the nineteenth century attempted to articulate the differences among various groups. Racialism differs from what we would now call "racism" in two crucial respects. First, racialism uses the term "race" where we would use the term "nation" or "culture"; racialist writings are filled with discussions of the Saxon, Celtic, and Iberian "races." Second, racialism does not seek, at least not explicitly, to identify certain races as superior or inferior to others; instead, racialists claimed that each race has its unique genius and unique destiny. In this way, racialism might best be understood as an early attempt to describe the differences between cultures, a kind of protoanthropology.

There were many theorists of racialism, but Stowe seems to have been particularly influenced by Alexander Kinmont, who gave a popular series of lectures in Cincinnati while she was living there. There is no

evidence that she attended these lectures, but it is very likely that she would have read them when they were later collected and published as *Twelve Lectures on the Natural History of Man, and the Rise and Progress of Philosophy* (1839); the historian George M. Fredrickson provides a very useful account of these lectures and of Kinmont more generally in his *The Black Image in the White Mind* (1971). In these lectures, Kinmont develops his claim that God has given each race its own particular mission, suited to its own particular capabilities. Kinmont draws the familiar racialist distinctions between the races of northern and southern Europe, and he further distinguishes the Anglo-Saxon from other northern races, but the central focus of his lectures are the differences between what he called the "Caucasian" and the "Ethiopian." Caucasians are enterprising, commanding, and expansive in intellect; Ethiopians are trusting, responsive to beauty, and ready to serve. In the present era, Kinmont admits, the Caucasian virtues are ascendant. But while their logic and reason have built a civilization that reflects divine wisdom, Caucasians lack the emotional capacities to build a society that reflects divine mercy and beneficence. It is Ethiopians, he concludes, who will create the greatest civilization of all.

In these lectures, we can find the origins of a character like George Harris, for the letter that he sends to his friends at the novel's end does little more than articulate the colonizationist position in explicitly racialist terms. Renouncing what he recognizes as his rightful claim on the United States, Harris announces instead his passionate desire for "a country, a nation, of [his] own" (p. 427). He will settle his family in Liberia. In Liberia, he believes, the African race will realize its destiny at last; it will lead the world beyond the current "pioneer period of struggle and conflict," a period well-suited to Anglo-Saxon dominance, and into a period of "universal peace and brotherhood," a period best ushered in by the "affectionate, magnanimous, and forgiving" African race (p. 428). But while George is the product of Kinmont's racialist theories, Tom arises from a vision of Stowe's own, a vision that extends racialism by taking its abstract claims quite literally. Stowe described this vision several times, but the fullest account of it comes in the *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (1889), the biography that her son, Charles Edward Stowe, compiled on her behalf:

> Suddenly, like the unrolling of a picture scroll, the scene of the death of Uncle Tom seemed to pass before her. At the same time, the words of Jesus were sounding in her ears: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." It seemed as if the crucified, but now risen and glorified Christ, were speaking to her through the poor black man, cut and bleeding under the blows of the slave whip. She was affected so strongly that she could scarcely keep from weeping aloud.
>
> That Sunday afternoon she went to her room, locked the door, and wrote out, substantially as it appears in the published editions, the chapter called "The Death of Uncle Tom."

The significance of this vision does not lie in the literal body it so vividly describes. Stowe may see the "cut and bleeding" body of the "poor black man," but this is a sight the novel denies to its readers. After Simon Legree knocks Uncle Tom to the ground, there appear three asterisks and then the novel's famous refusal to describe the torture that ensues: "What man has nerve to do, man has not nerve to hear" (p. 407). The significance of Stowe's vision lies instead in the allegorical relation it establishes between Tom and Christ. This relation, which came to Stowe in a sudden flash, is something that the novel moves toward slowly. From the opening chapters, there are echoes of Christ in Tom's words and actions, suggestions that Tom somehow resembles Christ. When he learns that he is to be sold, for instance, he refuses to attempt an escape or even to protest, for he knows that if he is not sold then his family and friends will be instead; he chooses to bear all suffering on their behalf. At the end of the novel, however, this metaphorical similarity moves closer and closer to allegorical identity. First, Tom is consoled, at his moment of great despair, by an ecstatic vision of the crucified Christ. Later, when Tom is himself enduring similar torments, the narrator tells us that Christ "stood by him" (p. 408), and the witnessing slaves confirm Christ's proximity to Tom by asking him, "Jesus, that's been a standin' by you so, all this night!—Who is he?" (p. 409). And finally Tom stands in Christ's own place. He repeats Christ's final actions, wondering whether God has forsaken him, praying that God will forgive those who are tormenting him, and through his death redeeming the two criminals at his side.

Stowe was the first to imagine a slave as Christ, and it is in the plot-

ting of Tom's death that her debt to racialist thinking is most clear. But racialism is also everywhere present in the novel's narration. Tom appreciates the lavish beauty of the St. Clare household because, we are told, his race has "a passion for all that is splendid, rich, and fanciful" (p. 161), while Rosa Benoir displays in her flower arranging the "nicety of eye which characterizes [her] race" (p. 294), and Chloe and Dinah are excellent cooks because cooking is "an indigenous talent of the African race" (p. 204). But even as the novel takes racialist claims for granted, it also complicates them in three different ways. Most obviously, the novel emphasizes that there is no such thing, on a southern plantation, as a pure African. The rape of slave women by their masters has created a hybrid race, and Stowe must create new racialist categories to account for this fact. Augustine St. Clare is her spokesman in this. Observing that there "is a pretty fair infusion of Anglo Saxon blood among our slaves," he cites the slave rebellion in Haiti as a weak foreshadowing of the uprising to come. The slaves in the United States are the "sons of white fathers, with all our haughty feelings burning in their veins" and they will not long consent to be "bought and sold and traded" (p. 266).

As this passage suggests, it is possible to accommodate racial mixing within a racialist framework. Far more problematic are those moments when the novel acknowledges that race might not be so determining or that racial essences might not be so easily known. The antics of Sam and Andy raise the latter possibility. Playful, cunning, full of ludicrous affectations, prone to misspeak, willing to do almost anything for a slice of pie—Sam and Andy are a compendium of racialist, even racist, clichés. But it is significant that much of what they do is in the service of delaying the slave catchers in pursuit of Eliza. The novel seems to find humor in their antics (putting burrs under horses' saddles, wildly waving palmetto fans, violently sneezing at the most inopportune of moments), but the purpose of these antics could not be more serious. They save the lives of Eliza and her son. Stowe does not assert that Sam and Andy are acting out of any kind of racial solidarity; she insists, instead, that they are merely trying to please their master's wife, but something close to resistance is nonetheless what the novel describes. More importantly, Stowe recognizes in this scene what she otherwise cannot claim in the novel, that what racialism would identify as the essential nature of the African race might actually be the strategic defenses of a slave. In this instance, what racialism would attribute to African childishness or African

high spirits might at least sometimes serve to mask enterprise and a love of liberty. Here, Stowe anticipates the argument that the historian John Blassingame will make more than a century later, in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1979), about the so-called "Sambo personality" as strategy of survival.

Even more threatening to racialist theory is the possibility that racial difference might not be so determining after all, as the famous comparison between Eva and Topsy suggests:

> Eva stood looking at Topsy.
> There stood the two children, representatives of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brow, and prince-like movements; and her black, keen, subtle, cringing, yet acute neighbor. They stood the representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, command, education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil, and vice! (p. 243).

The passage concludes with a familiar racialist language, but it begins by pointing toward the possibility that what is being described are social, rather than racial, differences. Perhaps, the opening sentences suggest, it is the difference between master and slave, and not the difference between "the Saxon" and "the Afric," that is the more significant. And even the racialist sentences begin to undo themselves, by leaving the question of causation undecided. Is it some essential Saxon quality that has led to "ages of cultivation [and] command," or is "command" the necessary precondition for "cultivation"? Is Topsy properly "oppressed" because of who she is, or has she been warped by those "ages of oppression"? Finally, the comparison of Topsy and Eva is framed by a crucial shift in perspective. It is through the narrator's eyes that we see "two extremes," but what Eva sees when she stands "looking at Topsy" is never specified. In this way, the novel registers the possibility of another perspective, a specifically Christian perspective, that might not see in terms of race at all.

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In its own era, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was understood to be both a political and a literary achievement, as well as an unprecedented popular success. Honored by Lincoln, the novel was also praised as a masterpiece by George Eliot, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, Victor Hugo, and Heinrich Heine. Within a generation, however, its status began a precipitous decline. In part, this was because the Civil War had ended, and the novel's politics now seemed, at best, out of date. Its antislavery arguments were now irrelevant, and its more ambiguous arguments for racial parity appealed neither to the southerners who believed that Reconstruction had gone too far, nor to the northerners who were ashamed that it had not gone far enough. And, in part, the novel's waning reputation reflected important changes in the United States literary marketplace. These changes began, Ann Douglas argues in her *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), with the founding of *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine in 1857, which divided a formerly undifferentiated literary field. *Uncle Tom* had been read in "the parlor, the nursery, and the kitchen," but from now on distinctions would be drawn between adults and children, between men and women, and, most crucially, between high and low. The high would become the province of *The Atlantic* and magazines like it.

The Atlantic would publish one of Stowe's later novels, along with some of her essays and short stories, but Stowe would be increasingly excluded from its canons of literary taste. For *The Atlantic* decreed that the popular, the melodramatic, and the socially engaged were antithetical to high art. By the turn of the century, the division of the literary field was complete. In 1899 *Uncle Tom* was still the most frequently requested book in the New York Public Library, but it had been thoroughly repudiated by the literary establishment. And so when Henry James, in his memoir *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), recalled the effect that the novel had on him when he read it as a young boy, he was willing to praise its power, but not its artistry. *Uncle Tom* was "much less a book," he concluded, "than a state of feeling."

James was among the last to be even so positive. In the twentieth century, the novel's reputation would decline even further, until its title became a byword for the sentimental and the name of its hero a racial slur. So thoroughly was the novel aligned with racism that when the historian J. C. Furnas sought to revise the history of slavery and to reexamine race relations in his own day, he entitled his study *Goodbye to Uncle Tom* (1956). In it, he attacks Stowe directly, in terms that are almost comically

extreme, but his argument is one that many of his contemporaries would make more moderately. "The pity of it is that, if human beings were only born consistently blind, by now there well might be no serious Negro problem among us children of the Sermon on the Mount and the Declaration of Independence," he claims. "As things are, however, we still see Negroes and their plight all too consistently through Mrs. Stowe's always flawed and long obsolete spectacles" (pp. 9–10). This belief that Stowe's novel is responsible for much, if not all, of the racism that persists in U.S. culture was widely shared, and it helps to explain the repeated efforts made by African-American writers to replace Stowe's "spectacles" with more clear-sighted ones. Indeed, many of the most significant African-American writers in the twentieth century have felt impelled, at some point in their career, to rewrite *Uncle Tom*. Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), Amiri Baraka's "Uncle Tom: Alternate Ending" (1973), and Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) are the most obvious instances of a genre that also includes such novels as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).

A recent addition to this genre is Robert Alexander's play *I Ain't Yo' Uncle* (1992), in which George Harris returns from Canada to lead a vigilante band in sacking plantations and freeing slaves. Tom responds to Cassie's sufferings by offering her not prayers, but a gun; and Topsy, upon being freed by Miss Ophelia, heads straight for New York City. *I Ain't Yo' Uncle* is of particular interest because it not only rewrites *Uncle Tom*, but also dramatizes what is at stake in all such rewritings. It quite literally puts Stowe on trial. At the beginning of the play, she is arraigned by her characters and charged with "creatin' stereotypes" (p. 24). By the end of the play, she has recognized her guilt: "I misinterpreted, I misrepresented and distorted you! My book should just be forgotten. It should be burned. I'm guilty" (p. 89). But in dramatizing the act of indicting Stowe, the play challenges us to consider whether a single woman, or a single novel, can ever be "guilty" of the crimes for which they here stand accused. Certainly, the novel is not guilty of creating the precise stereotype that most offends the characters in the play, the stereotype of the shuffling, servile old Uncle Tom. Such a Tom exists nowhere in the novel; he is a creature of the so-called "Tom shows."

Tom shows, which were loosely based on the text of the novel, began in the antebellum period, but became increasingly popular following the Civil War. They peaked at the turn of the century, when nearly 500 troupes of "Tommers," as they were called, traveled the country per-

forming shows that were seen by one and a half million people a year; in London, at the same time, there were five such troupes performing at any given time. Tom shows declined in the early decades of the twentieth century, and in 1931 a theater journal published an article mourning the death of Uncle Tom: After seventy-eight years, it declared, the Tom troupe was no more. Indignant readers wrote in to describe the troupes still performing in various corners of the country, but the continued existence of the Tom show was more securely guaranteed by its move, in the 1930s, from theater to film (Gossett, pp. 367–387). In *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Eric Sundquist reminds us that Bill "Bojangles" Robinson played Tom in *The Littlest Rebel* (1935), Shirley Temple played Eva in *Dimples* (1936), Judy Garland played Topsy in *Everybody Sing* (1938), Betty Grable and June Haver played twin Topsies in *The Dolly Sisters* (1945), and Abbott and Costello played Simon Legree and Eva in *The Naughty Nineties* (1945).

The fact that Judy Garland and Betty Grable once played Topsy highlights the fact that the Tom shows grew out of the minstrelsy tradition, in which white actors impersonated black characters to putatively comic effect; the cultural uses of minstrelsy are explored in Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993). Minstrelsy transformed Stowe's novel into something almost unrecognizable. Playing solely for laughs, the blackface actors presented the black characters as, to borrow the phrasing of one Tom show advertisement, "Morsels of Ethiopian Mirth, Fun and Frolic" (Gossett, p. 373). If the existence of slavery was registered at all, it was only in order to defend, even celebrate, the institution. In the words of a particularly popular Tom show song, "Happy are We, Darkies so Gay." More often, slavery was almost entirely ignored, and Stowe's novel was taken as the mere pretext for singing, dancing, clowning, and a dazzling array of spectacles. At the turn of the century, various productions boasted such wonders as a parade of one hundred ponies; a gold chariot reported to cost more than fifteen hundred dollars; a procession of musicians, including twenty coronet players, fourteen African drummers, and twelve members of an all-female drum and bugle corps; and a race between two steamboats, the *Natchez* and the *Robert E. Lee* (Gossett, p. 369). In 1906 the Tennessee state legislature passed a law outlawing "any play that is based upon antagonism between master and slave, or that excites racial prejudice" (Gossett, p. 375). The law was widely understood to be aimed at the Tom

shows, which were performed only rarely in the South, but it is difficult to imagine how these shows could have ever been seen as depicting the "antagonisms" of slavery—or as promoting any "racial prejudice" other than white prejudice against blacks.

Uncle Tom was a phenomenon because it sold 300,000 copies in its first year of publication. At their height, the Tom shows routinely drew half again as many spectators in each and every year. By any measure, then, the Tom shows were more popular than the novel, and it is, I would argue, as much from these shows as from the novel itself that our culture's conception of *Uncle Tom* derives. In the novel, for instance, Eliza crosses the icy river with Harry in her arms. It was the Tom shows' love of spectacle that added bloodhounds to this scene: "fifteen, ferocious man-eating bloodhounds," according to one advertisement (Gossett, p. 371). The bloodhounds that many of us may associate with Eliza's escape turn out to be a remnant of the Tom shows that almost none of us have ever seen.

The same is true of Tom himself. In the novel, Tom is not only a devout Christian, but also a vigorous and capable man, the father of young children, the superintendent of his master's farms. On Simon Legree's plantation, he withstands the murderous pace of the cotton-picking season and even manages to help those faltering around him. He does not resist slavery himself, but he does on others' behalf: When Legree tortures him to learn the whereabouts of two escaped slaves, Tom dies rather than reveal them. It was the Tom shows' debt to minstrelsy that transformed this heroic character into a weak and feeble-minded old man, shuffling and grinning at even those who most oppress him. *I Ain't Yo' Uncle* reminds us that our culture has confused the novel with the Tom shows and distorted Stowe's work into something at once hateful and ridiculous. By choosing to revise *Uncle Tom* as a play rather than a novel, Alexander confronts the Tom shows on their own ground. And he reminds us of their legacy.

Even as *Uncle Tom* was being condemned for what seemed to be its racism, the novel was also being dismissed for its sentimentality. In the postbellum period, *The Atlantic Monthly* and similar magazines attacked sentimentalism; in the twentieth century, literary scholars did so. Through much of the twentieth century, indeed until the late 1980s, Uncle Tom was simply not taught in classes on American literature, nor was it included in anthologies or mentioned, except derisively, in liter-

ary histories. The contempt in which the novel was held was demonstrated by Hugh Kenner, an eminent critic of literary modernism, in an essay he wrote for *Harper's* magazine, "Classics by the Pound." Referring to the novel as "Mrs. Stowe's famous eleven-Kleenex tract," he envisioned it "soar[ing] aloft into the Disneyfied sunset of Literature." Within these pungent phrases, we can discern the two central objections to sentimentalism. First, the passage presumes, the sentimental is vulgar and therefore unartful. *Uncle Tom* is not only opposed to "Literature," but even held responsible for its death, for a "sunset" all the more depressing because it has been "Disneyfied." Second, the passage implies, the sentimental is self-indulgent and therefore morally perverse. The disdainful counting of "Kleenexes," eleven in all, suggests that the emotions prompted by the sentimental are necessarily excessive, a form of covert pleasure rather than sympathetic pain.

Crystallized in Kenner's phrases, these two critiques of sentimentalism are elaborated more fully by other detractors of the novel. James Baldwin, in his famous essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949), does condemn *Uncle Tom* for what he sees as its racism, but he devotes far more attention to attacking its sentimentality. Defining sentimentality as the "ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion," Baldwin proclaims it to be "the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel" (p. 579). It is for this reason that the sentimental fails as a mode of social protest: It hardens readers to the very sufferings that prompt their false and fleeting tears. Wright makes a similar point in his essay "How Bigger Was Born," in which he repudiates his earlier collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, for the sentimental response they had inadvertently produced. "When the reviews of that book began to appear," he writes, "I realized that I had made an awfully naive mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about." Because of this, he vowed that his next book would be "so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears" (p. 531). This book turned out, of course, to be *Native Son* (1940).

Sentimentalism was so thoroughly discredited that it was necessary for the mode itself to be rehabilitated before *Uncle Tom* could again be properly read and understood. Two brilliant books, which appeared in the same year, did precisely that: Philip Fisher's *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (1985) and Jane P. Tompkins's *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (1985) offered complementary accounts of sentimentalism's politics and, in doing so, transformed the reading of *Uncle Tom* and the study of nineteenth-century American literature more generally. Fisher begins by observing that we tend to use the word "sentimental" to refer to "all that is cheap, self-flattering, idealizing, and deliberately dishonest." It is our culture's word for "false consciousness of a particularly contemptuous kind" (p. 92). But, he goes on to argue, the sentimental actually has a distinguished philosophical history. For it was the primary mode of radical politics in the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century, and it pursued its radical agenda by extending "normal states of primary feeling to people from whom they have previously been withheld" (p. 98).

While Baldwin and Wright presume that weeping over a novel does nothing to alleviate suffering or rectify injustice in the world, Fisher argues that such weeping actually performs two crucial functions. First, it teaches us to recognize the interiority of those who have hitherto been dismissed as less than fully human—the very young, the very old, the mad, and, as here, the slave. Indeed, sentimentalism runs enslavement in reverse, by re-conferring the humanity that enslavement had once denied. Second, it enables us not only to recognize, but even to identify with, the sufferings of those around us. Witnessing the predetermined unfolding of a fictional plot, we weep because we cannot rescue the characters from the coming catastrophe. And they, of course, are incapable of rescuing themselves. In this way, our temporary helplessness enables us to inhabit the permanently helpless position of the slave; our powerlessness with respect to a fictional world mirrors the powerlessness experienced by the disenfranchised in the world as it is.

Where Fisher concentrates on restoring sentimentalism to its proper place in the history of radical politics, Tompkins suggests that sentimentalism might have much to offer us in our contemporary political moment. She acknowledges that readers tend to find Stowe's vision both too small and too large to count as politics. On the one hand, her scenes of individual change, such as the mutual conversion of Topsy and Miss Ophelia, seem to make too little difference within the world of the novel. On the other hand, her hope that these scenes will somehow affect the world outside the novel by converting each reader in turn seems too utopian to be anything but fantasy. Stowe has nothing to do with what we take to be politics, legislative maneuverings, and economic

negotiations, and for this reason we find her to be naive. But naiveté is, Tompkins argues, what Stowe would charge us with. For it is the particular fantasy of our own era that the world can be changed simply through the writing of new laws, but law, as Stowe recognizes, cannot change the hearts of those who live under them. And this is the significance of the comparison Augustine St. Clare draws between chattel slavery in the South and wage slavery in the North. He is not defending chattel slavery, but rather pointing out that its abolition will mean very little until the world has learned to reject all forms of exploitation, to reject the temptation, in the words of Stowe's original subtitle, "The Man Who Was a Thing," to treat any "man" as a "thing." The failure of Reconstruction and the more ambiguous, and much belated, successes of the Civil Rights era remind us that the novel's valedictory injunction to us readers is not trivial, but fundamental; not utopian, but necessary. "There is one thing that every individual can do," Stowe concludes, "they can see to it that *they feel right*" (p. 438).

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UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

OR

LIFE AMONG THE LOWLY