DAVID S. REYNOLDS

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Battle for America

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Introduction

On January 1, 1863, Harriet Beecher Stowe attended a concert held at the Boston Music Hall in celebration of Abraham Lincoln's expected signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Of the many galas held in the North that historic day, this one was especially impressive. Among the crowd of three thousand were Emerson, Longfellow, Whit­tier, Francis Parkman, and Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Two weeks earlier, Stowe had written her friend Charles Sumner, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “Everybody I meet in New England says to me with anxious earnestness—Will the President stand firm to his Proclamation?” The answer came during intermission at the Music Hall event. A speaker announced that the news had come over the wires that the president had signed the Proclamation, freeing millions of slaves in states disloyal to the Union. The hall erupted with applause, shouts, and handkerchief-waving. Three cheers went up for Lincoln. Three more followed for William Lloyd Garrison, mingled with hisses from those still hostile to the controversial abolitionist.

When Stowe was spotted in the balcony, a new chant swept through the hall: “Harriet Beecher Stowe! Harriet Beecher Stowe! Harriet Beecher
Stowe!" Urged forward by those seated near her, her bonnet toppling off, she went to the railing, bowing and waving to the throng.

At that moment, the plain fifty-one-year-old Stowe, just five feet tall, was the most famous woman in America. Her wide-set eyes, which normally had a distant dreaminess, sparkled with emotion as tears flowed down her cheeks and her ample mouth broadened into a grin. Her aquiline nose gave her face a firm dignity that was softened by her gently sloped forehead and round cheeks framed by graying curls.

The crowd, convinced that she had helped make this moment possible, was responding to the torrent of energy unleashed by Stowe's anti-slavery best-seller *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly*, published a decade earlier.

Did Lincoln feel this way about the novel, too? A month before the Boston event, Stowe had visited him in the White House to urge him to sign the Proclamation. His alleged greeting of her—"Is this the little woman who made this great war?"—is the most famous statement ever made about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Whether he actually said it is moot. In his era, many claimed that Stowe had brought on the Civil War.

Surprisingly, this crucial topic has never been discussed in detail. Although the novel is vaguely associated in most people's minds with the Civil War, several modern commentators have tried to argue that it had only a minimal influence on the political decisions leading to the war. One maintains that "its political effect" was "negligible." Another writes that "sentiment limited the degree to which [the novel] could effect radical political change." A third asks, "In what sense does a novel have the power to move a nation to battle?"

Such remarks ignore the tremendous authority of public opinion in America, which Tocqueville regarded as stronger than the government—an idea Lincoln echoed when he declared, "Our government rests in public opinion. Whoever can change public opinion can change the government." In his debates against Stephen Douglas, Lincoln emphasized, "Public sentiment is everything…. He who moulds public sentiment is greater than he who makes statutes."

No book in American history molded public opinion more powerfully than *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Published in 1852, it set sales records for American fiction. An international sensation, it was soon translated into many languages. The Boston preacher Theodore Parker declared that it was "more an event than a book, and has excited more attention than any book since the invention of printing." Henry James noted that Stowe's novel was, "for an immense number of people, much less a book than a state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness in which they didn't sit and read and appraise and pass the time, but walked and talked and laughed and cried."

James was right. Sympathetic readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were thrilled when the fugitive slave Eliza Harris carried her child across the ice floes of the Ohio River and when her husband George fought off slave catchers in a rocky pass. They cried over the death of the angelic little Eva and were horrified by the fatal lashing of Uncle Tom, the gentle, strong enslaved black man. They guffawed at the impish slave girl Topsy and shed thankful tears when she embraced Christianity. They sneered at the selfish hypochondriac Marie St. Clare and loathed the cruel slaveowner Simon Legree. They were fascinated by the brooding, Byronic Augustine St. Clare and were appalled by the stories of sexual exploitation involving enslaved women like Prue and Cassy.

Recent decades have witnessed a remarkable upsurge of interest in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but much remains to be said about the novel's place in history and what came together in Stowe's life and time to bring her to write it. The time is ripe for a thoroughgoing reassessment that gives the full measure of the novel's rich cultural background and its enormous impact.

This book shows that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* helped redefine American democracy on a more egalitarian basis. It helped rectify social injustice by affirming fairness and empowerment for marginalized or oppressed groups. The first three chapters reveal how the novel's unprecedented popularity can be explained by the fact that it absorbed images from virtually every realm of culture—religion, reform, temperance tracts,
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antislavery writings, sensational pulp fiction, and popular performance—and brought these elements together in memorable characters and two compelling antislavery plotlines: the Northern one, involving the escape of the fugitive slaves Eliza and George Harris with their son Harry, and the Southern one, tracing the painful separation of Uncle Tom from his family when he is sold into the Deep South.

Stowe’s immersion in popular culture set the stage for her affecting novel. Other writers of the day, such as Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman, were also responsive to popular images but transformed them into ambiguous symbols and characters. Stowe, in contrast, channeled them into a realistic human narrative with a crystal-clear social point: slavery was evil, and so were the political and economic institutions that supported it.

As chapter 4 will show, Uncle Tom’s Cabin directly shaped the political debates over slavery. Its dramatic portrait of the evils of slavery intensified the public sentiment behind the rise of Lincoln and the Republicans, while it caused a reactionary surge of proslavery feeling in the South, exacerbating the tensions that led to the Civil War. By the eve of the war, as one Southerner of the day noted, the novel “had given birth to a horror against slavery in the Northern mind which all the politicians could never have created” and “did more than all else to array the North and South in compact masses against each other.”

As will be seen in chapters 5 and 6, the novel continued to provoke controversy through Reconstruction and beyond. Its influence was greatly amplified by tie-ins—popular plays and a host of merchandise known as Tomitudes. Whether play or novel, Uncle Tom’s Cabin was important chiefly as an agent of emancipation. It gave impetus to revolutions in Russia, China, Brazil, Cuba, and elsewhere. In America, the novel remained particularly inspiring for African-Americans and progressive whites. Most recent commentators on the Uncle Tom plays and films have emphasized their dissemination of racial stereotypes. Actually, though, Stowe’s novel and its offshoots gave off unconventional, even revolutionary racial messages that seemed truly dangerous to white supremacists of the Jim Crow era, which lasted from the 1870s to the early 1960s. Most notably, the popular Southern author Thomas Dixon attended an Uncle Tom play in 1901 and was so infuriated by what he regarded as its endorsement of black power that he wrote bitterly of Stowe, “A little Yankee woman wrote a book. The single act of that woman’s will caused the war, killed a million men, desolated and ruined the South, and changed the history of the world.” Dixon responded to Uncle Tom’s Cabin by penning virulently racist, anti-Stowe novels that became massive best-sellers. One, The Clansman, was the basis of D. W. Griffith’s adeptly made yet thematically abhorrent film The Birth of a Nation (1915).

Even as the white supremacists were gaining a wide audience, Uncle Tom’s Cabin and its spin-offs helped keep alive Stowe’s progressive message. Stowe found ardent defenders among African-American leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois and his fellow reformers in the NAACP. Over time, Stowe’s vision gained ascendancy in America. During the civil rights movement—despite the condemnation of being an “Uncle Tom”—those who acted in the spirit of Stowe’s firm-principled, nonviolent Uncle Tom, like Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and thousands who participated in sit-ins and marches, proved the most successful in bringing about progressive change.

That an author could have so great an impact as Harriet Beecher Stowe seems unlikely, if not impossible—especially for a time when women had no political voice and in a nation about which the Scottish writer Sydney Smith had sniffed in 1820, “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? Or goes to an American play?”

Stowe herself had a simple explanation of her success: God wrote Uncle Tom’s Cabin. After the novel became a best-seller and her brother Edward warned her not to become vain about its popularity, she told a friend, “Dear soul, he need not be troubled. He doesn’t know that I did not write that book.” Her friend exclaimed, “What! You did not write ‘Uncle Tom’?” Stowe replied, “No. I only put down what I saw…. It all came before me in visions, one after another, and I put them down in words.”
Stowe's claims about the divine authorship of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may have satisfied her own pious yearnings, but they raise questions about the actual background and repercussions of the most influential book ever written by an American. The issues at the heart of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—race, religion, gender, law, morality, democracy—are just as vital today as they were in Stowe's time. Exploring such questions gets to the very heart of the national experience.
zeal, she was uneasy about his de-emphasis on religion. She reportedly once asked him, “Mr. Garrison, are you a Christian?” which prompted his equivocal reply, “And who is my neighbor?” In a letter she wrote him after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published, she praised his antislavery newspaper *The Liberator* for its bold advocacy of the “progressive element in our times” but added, “What I fear is that it will take from poor Uncle Tom his Bible and give him nothing in its place.” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* did what Garrison and other activists failed to do: it moved millions by promoting abolitionist religion through vibrantly portrayed human experiences and shared emotions. Many reviewers singled out the novel’s religious impact. One wrote that it “spread the gospel of Jesus Christ” and provided “a very perfect antidote to the infidelity which has been generated in other ranks of the Anti-slavery reform.”

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* also put religion to use in another way. The novel staked a claim to act as a redemptive influence on a popular culture that was hurtling toward a tawdriness and commercialism that Stowe wanted to stall.

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**Cultural Beasts**

** Countless readers were inspired by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to embrace Christianity, among them the dying German poet Heinrich Heine. He had long been tormented by religious doubt but regained his faith in the Bible after reading Stowe’s novel. The novel, which stimulated the sale of Bibles globally, was also used as a Sunday school text. One appreciative father reported that his young daughter, dying of cholera, was consoled by the prospect that soon she would join Tom and Eva in heaven—an example of why there were so many adaptations of it as a children’s book.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* not only offered salvation to individuals; it also filtered the most subversive, sensational, or raucous cultural energies of the time through the cult of domesticity, which put the home and the family at the center of life. Women’s rights, graphic reform writing, sensational novels, and zany minstrel-show humor gained broad moral appeal when Stowe recombined their images with domesticity and with antislavery commitment. In doing this, she helped popularize the American home as a center of virtue and took the innovative step of converting it into an arena of progressive politics.
To hostile critics, however, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* only intensified subversive cultural forces and spread them far and wide. Proslavery reviewers insisted that Stowe used religion as a veneer for dangerous reforms and cheap sensationalism. George Frederick Holmes, a leading Southern apologist, associated *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with the anarchic "isms" that he said flooded Northern society, in contrast to the stable, conservative South. "Mrs. Stowe," he wrote, "throws an ultra Christian hue over all her writings" but really was a vehicle for the ideas of "the Abolitionists, the Communists, the Lippardists, the Spirit Rappers, and the whole confraternity of social humbugs, [who] all claim to speak as the oracles of heaven, and as special messengers entrusted with the authority of Christ." She reveled in "scenes of license and impurity, and ideas of loathsome depravity and habitual prostitution," and owed her popularity to "the fashionable favour extended to the licentious novels of the French School, and the women's rights' Conventions, which have rendered the late years infamous, have unsexed in great measure the female mind, and shattered the temple of feminine delicacy and moral graces." Other proslavery commentators made similar charges. The novel was variously branded as "revolting and unjust"; full of "obscene reflections" and "vivid descriptions of sensuality"; "shamelessly profligate"; the product of a shrew who was "deficient in the delicacy and purity of a woman" and who "painted from her own libidinous imagination scenes which no modest woman could conceive of."

Some of the longest proslavery reviews of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* argued that it was written by a radical reformer who had abandoned the domestic sphere and made a shocking entrance into the political arena. "Mrs. Stowe," wrote one reviewer, "belongs to the school of Women's Rights ... one which would place woman on a foot of political equality with men, and cause her to look beyond the office for which she was created—the high and holy office of maternity." In the words of other reviewers, she was a "termagent virago," a "foul-mouthed hag" who "deliberately step[ped] beyond the hallowed precincts—the enchanted circle [of the home]"; "the man Harriet," who had "unsexed herself"; she was "a perfect female Hercules" characteristic of "these days of Bloomerism and Women's Rights, when ... [a woman] puts on her seven league boots, and takes long strides to keep with the glorious march of the masculine mind."

Such comments weren't just outpourings of proslavery venom. They point to tensions within *Uncle Tom's Cabin* between the subversive and the conventional—opposing tendencies in the culture at large and in Stowe's private experience. In its time (and, as shall be seen, in later decades as well) *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could seem seditious and menacing. The novel isn't nearly as conservative as Ann Douglas suggests in *The Feminization of American Culture*, which associates its heroines with "the timid exploits of innumerable pale and pious heroines" of popular sentimental literature. On women's issues, Stowe actually occupied a middle ground. She didn't renounce women's rights, as did her sister Catharine when she signed a petition against awarding women the vote, but she didn't go to the opposite extreme of championing feminism on the lecture trail, as did her half-sister Isabella Beecher Hooker, a notorious agitator. Stowe wanted to reach mainstream readers in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* while making forceful points about both slavery and women. She did so by packaging daring ideas and images in conventional wrapping.

The portrayal of women in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be best understood if we consider it against the background of a large variety of contemporary novels, many of which have been ignored in discussions of Stowe. A few novels of the period tentatively promoted women's rights, but they failed to make a dent in the literary marketplace. Sarah J. Hale's *The Lecturess; or, Woman's Sphere* (1839), for instance, is about a woman who tours about giving lectures in order "to raise woman to that equality with man which is her right by the divine right of nature, and of which oppression alone deprives her." Even though Hale reins in this subversive subject by marrying off her heroine and having her recant her opinions on her deathbed, the novel was far too unconventional for the nineteenth century, and there's no evidence that it had much of a sale. Laura Curtis Bullard's novel *Christine; or, Woman's Trials and Triumphs* (1855) met with a similar failure. Bullard's heroine gives lectures and founds a woman's work bureau. Although she too abandons the reform circuit and becomes domesticated,
this conservative ending was not enough to make the novel tolerable for nineteenth-century readers.

Female lecturers of the day were commonly denounced for abandoning the domestic sphere. One alarmed father said that he'd rather see his beloved daughter dead than have her join the "female croakers" who gave lectures. Stowe knew this conservative attitude well. Her sister Catharine, believing that woman's place was in the home or in the classroom as a teacher, came out strongly against women lecturers like the abolitionist Angeline Grimke, who, she said, compromised her feminine nature by venturing onto the lecture platform. Harriet herself shied away from speaking publicly. When she toured the British Isles in 1853, where many large functions were held in her honor, she didn't give speeches; nor did the crowds who came out to see her expect her to do so. She had her husband Calvin or her brother Charles talk while she sat silently by.

Where Stowe gave a voice to women was in her fiction through her voluble heroines. Many of the conversations in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are dominated by women, most of whom express views that challenge corrupt male-dominated institutions, especially slavery. Emily Shelby, who has "a clear, energetic, practical mind, and a force of character every way superior to her husband," speaks out so strongly against slavery that her slaveholding husband remarks that she is "getting to be an abolitionist, quite." Mary Bird is another woman who outspeaks her husband, a senator who has voted in support of the proslavery Fugitive Slave Law. She lectures him on the wickedness of the law and actually wins him over when runaway slaves arrive at their door. Also talkative is the reform-minded Vermont spinster Ophelia, whom some reviewers associated with so-called strong-minded women or bluestockings.

Many of the enslaved black women in the novel are equally expressive. Cassy, Legree's enslaved mistress, stands out. She wields an uncanny power over her despotic master and is able to manipulate him through language. Also, she tells Uncle Tom the long history of her sufferings at the hands of male slaveowners—an extended narration that Stowe transposed, almost word for word, into her play *The Christian Slave*, a monologue all the more remarkable because Stowe wrote it expressly for Mary Webb, a Philadelphia actress whose mother was an escaped slave. Delivering the play with success in Massachusetts and London, Webb impersonated both the female and male characters, black and white; her rendering of Cassy, Uncle Tom, and Topsy won special praise. This unprecedented performance was at once cross-racial and cross-gender.

But what's most unusual about Stowe's orating women is that they didn't strike most readers of the time as unconventional. For sympathetic readers, Stowe and her characters epitomized true womanhood. One reviewer, remarking that "every word" of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "issues glistening and warm from the mind of woman's love and sympathy," maintained that no other work offered "so many and such sudden and irresistible appeals to the reader's heart, which ... only a wife and mother could make." Even the outspoken Mary Bird seemed like a true woman who remained within her proper sphere. A journalist raved that she exhibited "that refinement of taste, that delicacy of moral sensibility, and that exquisitely elevated and unworldly character, which is the glory of their sex," and therefore is "a woman after our own heart," an "example [to be] universally followed."

It wasn't just the woman orator that Stowe retooled. She took zestful, often rebellious characters from popular culture—the adventure feminist (the tough, active heroine who could assume male roles), the feminist criminal (the willful lawbreaker), the fallen woman (wronged by males and driven to prostitution), and the sensual woman (who defies true womanhood by reveling in sexual pleasure)—and folded them into the era's most virtuous heroine, the moral exemplar. Stowe was the first novelist to couple the kind of feisty, unconventional heroines that often appeared in yellow-covered pulp novels with the upright moral exemplar featured in more conventional best-sellers like Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850).

This coupling produced the multilayered heroines of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Eliza Harris became the century's best-known adventure feminist because of her brave flight across the icy Ohio; but she is also a
devoted wife, mother, and Christian. Even the most degraded females in the novel—Cassy, Prue, and the naughty slave girl Topsy—attract our sympathy because they have an innate goodness that can flower as Christian virtue, as when Topsy tearfully embraces religion at Eva's bidding or when Cassy is moved by Tom's religious words.

Most extraordinary of all is what Stowe does with the stereotype of the feminist criminal, who in pulp novels subverted virtue, flouted convention, and even committed murder (one thinks especially of the scheming procurresses and man-killers of George Lippard's 1845 best-seller The Quaker City). Stowe gives us a range of women characters—Eliza, Mrs. Shelby, Mrs. Bird, and Rachel Halliday—who are, strictly speaking, feminist criminals, since they actively violate the Fugitive Slave Law, the much-touted bill the distinguished statesmen Henry Clay and Daniel Webster had fashioned to hold together the nation. But because the heroines in Uncle Tom's Cabin who break this law are also loving, domestic types, they do not come across as dangerous or subversive. The same applies to Little Eva. Eva actually has something in common with the religiously inspired antislavery lawbreaker John Brown, whom Stowe came to admire greatly when he exploded onto the national scene several years later. Although Eva's gentle approach is light-years distant from Brown's use of weapons (which Stowe eventually recognized as a viable response to slavery), Eva is similar to Brown in that she defies convention by loving enslaved blacks so much that she is willing to sacrifice her life for their freedom. As she approaches death, her joy is strengthened by the fact that she has persuaded her father, St. Clare, to free his slaves. But even though she opposes the laws of the land, Eva remains the good-hearted, angelic moral exemplar throughout. Any qualms that most nineteenth-century readers might have felt over her unorthodox status as a Southern girl opposed to slavery were drowned in tearful sympathy for her.

Stowe's strategy with other phenomena of her time—reform movements, sensational literature, and minstrel humor—was similar to her treatment of gender: she redirected potentially destabilizing cultural energies through domestic feelings that resonated powerfully for multitudes of readers.

The postmillennial dream of reforming America to prepare it for an imminent golden age fostered many reforms, among them temperance, utopian socialism, and moral reform (as the battle against prostitution, lewd behavior, and pornography was then called). At first, many writers and speakers of the period promoted such reforms in conventional writings that emphasized the remedies for, rather than the wages of, vice. But reform literature increasingly leaned toward the lurid and sensational. The rise of penny newspapers, featuring juicy reports of murder, suicide, accidents, and so forth, as well as the flamboyant showmanship of P. T. Barnum's exhibitions of freaks and oddities, whetted the public's appetite for the outlandish and the bizarre. Reformers hoping to attract the attention of curiosity-seekers showed a growing tendency to dwell on grisly or erotic results of vice. As a result, many reformers drifted beyond the boundaries of propriety and left themselves open to charges of crass sensationalism. In the 1830s the moral reformer John R. McDowall presented details about the prevalence of pornography and prostitution in New York City in such graphic detail that his newspaper was lambasted as an "infamous bawdy chronicle," "the most foul and loathsome journal that ever suffused the face of modesty... a brothel companion." That decade also saw the rise of best-selling anti-Catholic works, most notably Maria Monk's Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal, alleging that whoredom, infanticide, and murder were commonplace behind convent walls. The arrival of the Washingtonian movement in 1840 ushered in a new liveliness and vigor to temperance rhetoric, as reformed drunkards described the horrors of alcoholism. Some temperance lecturers were accused of sensation-mongering; even a prominent orator like John B. Gough, despite his sincere commitment to temperance, was variously called a "theatrical performer," a "mountebank," a "humbug," and the like because of his habit of acting out the terrors of delirium tremens on the lecture platform.

In popular fiction, there was a trend toward sensationalism that some-
times reached gloomy depths, as in George B. Cheever’s *Deacon Giles Distillery*, in which demons produce barrels of liquor, or *The Confessions of a Rumseller*, in which a drunkard kills his daughter and drives his wife insane, or Timothy Shay Arthur’s best-seller *Ten Nights in a Bar-room*, with its horrific portrayal of the collapse of a respectable community into complete moral degradation after the establishment of a saloon and a distillery.

The major writers of the American Renaissance felt the influence of the dark-reform mode, which used a reform pretext to explore irrational, sometimes criminal behavior. Poe, who battled alcohol dependence and periodically joined temperance groups, used dark-temperance imagery extensively in tales like “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Black Cat,” in which alcohol fuels homicidal madness. Whitman’s Washingtonian novel *Franklin Evans* enjoyed a strong sale because of its melodramatic narrative of murder and savagery caused by tippling. Melville integrated dark-temperance scenes into *Moby-Dick*, as when the bartender in the Spouter-Inn served sailors “poison . . . deliriums and death” in “abominable” tumblers, or when the harpoon-maker Perth is described as a gloomy man whose once-happy family had been destroyed by “the Bottle Conjuror.” “Upon the opening of that fatal cork,” Melville writes, “forth flew the fiend, and shrivelled up his home.”

The quintessential example of dark-reform literature was George Lippard’s *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall* (1845), America’s best-selling novel before the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, based on a famous case in which a man was acquitted after murdering his sister’s seducer. *The Quaker City* is ostensibly devoted to exposing vices such as rape, intemperance, and upper-class hypocrisy. But it dwells at such great length on the eroticism and perversity associated with such ills that it was denounced as “the most immoral work of the age” and became “more read, and more attacked, than any work of American fiction ever published.”

In the novel, Lippard can’t describe a drunkard without registering his surrealistic inebriated visions, or a woman on the verge of being seduced without dwelling on her “snowy globes,” or a lascivious clergyman without noting his lip-smacking sexual hunger, or a monstrous pimp without mentioning his sadistic love of blood. One of Lippard’s critics complained that his fiction was “founded on the principle that human nature must be reformed, by an exhibition of its lowest degradations and by the delineations of its vilest passions. This is a ruinous doctrine.”

The Beechers, as a reform-minded family bent on changing society, found themselves confronted with such sensationalism in popular culture. Catharine Beecher’s response to such writing was firm: she completely avoided descriptions of vice that might be considered excessive. She thought that reform and religion could be promoted by fiction only with the utmost caution, since, as she wrote, “works of imagination . . . are often the channel for conveying the most widespread and pernicious poisons.” Women, Catharine argued, must be especially careful not to embark on public reform projects other than conservative ones like edu-
cation or domestic reform. When Catharine impugned Angelina Grimke for speaking out publicly on slavery, she insisted that abolitionism generated only "denunciation, recriminations, and angry passions," whereas "woman is to win everything by peace and love." Her sibling Edward was also notably restrained in his accounts of vice.

Brother Henry was passionate in his attacks on vice but did not go beyond accepted limits. He denounced sensational novels as "monster-galleries" that exhibited "loathsome women and unutterably vile men, huddled together in motley groups, and over all their monstrous deeds,—their lies, their plots, their crimes, their dreadful pleasures, their glorying conversation." As a moral reformer, he showed warning signs of the libido that later made him the central figure in the century's most famous adultery scandal. In a reform lecture on "The Strange Woman," he described the magnetic attraction of brothels for young men, lingering on the temptations of these dens of iniquity. The typical house of prostitution, surrounded by lush gardens, seemed irresistible: "In every window are sights of pleasure; from every opening, issue sounds of joy—the lute, the harp, bounding feet, and echoing laughter. Nymphs have descried this Pilgrim of temptation;—they smile and beckon." Inevitably, he said, a man tempted by prostitutes finds himself in a hellish vortex of shame and sin.

In 1848 Beecher caused a sensation when he auctioned in his Brooklyn church the enslaved teenagers Mary and Emily Edmonson, who were threatened with being sold in the Deep South. Dwelling on the girls' physical charms and spiritual virtues, he invited his listeners to imagine to what use the sisters were destined. He implored his congregation to donate sufficient funds to save the girls from the sexual slave trade; the plate was passed, with his audience contributing everything from cash and coins to watches. More than enough was raised to purchase freedom for the sisters, whom Harriet and Calvin later lodged in their home before sending them to be educated at Oberlin.

Henry Ward Beecher, in short, knew how to be titillating without venturing into the openly erotic. There was good reason why he was able to convince a jury of his innocence (despite his probable guilt) when in the 1870s he was brought to trial for having an affair with the wife of a parishioner. He was a superb salesman of morality and was one of the most influential reformers in America.

Stowe became even more influential than her brother by finding her own middle ground between the sensational and the conventional in her reform writings. Unlike Catharine, she did not shy away from entering the public debate over major reforms. At the same time, she never plunged into the debate as vigorously as did half-sister Isabella, who created a scandal on the lecture platform as a women's rights advocate and a violent
critic of establishmentarian hypocrites—including half-brother Henry during his adultery trial. Unlike Isabella, Stowe not only believed in her brother’s innocence but avoided giving reform speeches.

The great popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be attributed largely to the fact that it advocated controversial, sometimes subversive reforms without straying into the merely sensational or the openly transgressive. The proslavery reviewers who called the novel lewd or licentious failed to recognize that it dealt with popular reforms in a way that was new for American fiction: it was bold in promoting reform, but it never crossed the line into the kind of commercialized sensation-mongering that characterized some reform writing. To the contrary, its message of uplift and reform redirected it toward middle-class mores and heartfelt religion.

Stowe's sensitivity to her era's reform movements and popular culture has not been sufficiently recognized. Her father had been a pioneer in delivering sermons on reform issues, and she was a path-blazer in integrating reform into popular fiction and essays. During the Cincinnati years she tested out various ways of integrating such topics in magazine writings whose themes look forward to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Like her father, she was strongly attracted to the cause of temperance. Lyman Beecher recognized the very real dangers of alcohol abuse. He had grown up in a time when the consumption of alcohol was rising quickly. The amount of absolute alcohol consumed annually by the average American increased steadily to more than seven gallons by the mid-1820s (over three times today's per capita consumption). In 1820, Americans spent $12 million on alcohol, an amount that exceeded total expenditures by the U.S. government. People of all backgrounds drank. "Everybody asked everybody to drink," Thomas Low Nichols wrote of his youth. "There were drunken lawyers, drunken doctors, drunken members of Congress, drunks of all classes." Abraham Lincoln, a temperance advocate, said liquor was "like the Egyptian angel of death, commissioned to slay, if not the first, the fairest born in every family."

Lyman Beecher in 1814 took a stand against drinking among clergymen. He successfully called for an end to alcohol being served at ministers' ordinations. Eleven years later he delivered a series of firm but restrained temperance addresses. He did not wallow in the vicious behavior that resulted from alcohol abuse. He was more interested in possible solutions to the drinking problem than in horrifying examples of drunkenness. Only one of his six lectures focused on "The Evils of Intemperance," whereas three explored a ban on liquor sales. In 1826, a year after he gave the lectures, the American Temperance Society was founded, marking a shift toward total abstinence and the temperance pledge. Within a decade, membership in the society reached 1.5 million.

Stowe and several of her siblings were swept up in the temperance cause. Stowe was so devoted to it that she lambasted fiction that contained drinking scenes. One of her objections to Charles Dickens' writings was "the strong flavor of brandy and water, and spirituous drink of all sorts, which everywhere pervades them." She added, "If this age be *par excellence* a temperance age, we think that the writings of Dickens are as much *par excellence* anti-temperance tracts."

Like others in the temperance movement, Stowe wrote fiction promoting the reform. Her temperance tales, ranging from a conventional story on avoiding drink to dark sketches of alcoholism's ravages, had a variety of tones that were also registered in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In her 1842 tale "The Coral Ring: The Temperance Pledge," the heroine, Florence Elmore, saves a friend, George Elliot, from a possible drinking problem through a game by which he promises to follow her orders once she gives him a cross-shaped ring. When Florence spots him at a party on the verge of sipping wine, she rushes to him and warns him not to drink the vile substance. He obeys her and vows to take the pledge of total abstinence. This tame story is a throwback to temperance fiction of the 1820s, most of which stressed virtue rather than vice.

Still, Stowe knew how to dramatize the miserable results of intemperance. In "The Drunkard Reclaimed," she depicts an initially happy couple, Edward and Augusta Howard, whose marriage is destroyed by alcohol. At first, the lighthearted newlyweds laugh at a relative who urges them to take the temperance pledge. Augusta sniffs, "This tiresome tem-
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perance business! One never hears the end of it, nowadays. Temperance papers—temperance tracts—temperance hotels—temperance this, that, and the other thing, even down to temperance pocket-handkerchiefs for little boys! Really, the world is getting intermately temperate.” Soon, though, Edward and Augusta start going to parties where alcohol is served. He develops a drinking habit that leads to his abandoning his family. He moves to a faraway city, and Augusta follows him. He becomes a brutal drunkard and she a miserable woman: “There was the mother, faded and care-worn, whose dark and melancholy eyes, pale cheeks and compressed lips, told of years of anxiety and endurance. There was the father, with haggard face, unsteady step, and that callous, reckless air, that betrayed long familiarity with degradation and crime.” Edward is finally helped by a friend who convinces him to become a teetotaler.

Two of Stowe’s other dark-temperance stories, “Somebody’s Father” and “Woman, Behold Thy Son!,” present vignettes of drunken misery. In the former tale, a busload of people mocks a red-faced inebriated man who is groveling in the street; the jeers cease when a woman passenger points out the tragic probability that this ruined man has left behind a sad family. “Woman, Behold Thy Son!” traces the backsliding of a young man who takes the temperance pledge but then begins drinking wine at parties, which leads to his drunkenness and finally suicide.

In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Stowe skillfully blends dark and conventional temperance images. She advances the temperance cause indirectly in scenes in which evil schemes are hatched in an atmosphere of drinking. In the conversation that leads to the sale of Uncle Tom and little Harry, Arthur Shelby and the slave-trader Dan Haley drink wine—an ominous sign for readers familiar with temperance writings. Later on, when Haley meets Loker and Marks in a tavern to plot the capture of the fleeing Eliza, the three are drinking heavily. Haley orders “plenty of the real stuff.” Loker guzzles “a big tumbler full of raw spirits” followed by “half a glass of raw brandy.” Marks drinks a mint julep and then mixes “a tumbler of punch to his own taste.” In the scene where the Harris family is being hunted down, their pursuers are described as “eight or ten [men], hot with brandy, swearing and foaming like so many wolves.”

Later in the novel, the temperance theme takes on an even darker tone. Augustine St. Clare is killed when he tries to break up a brawl between drunken men in a café. The enslaved woman Prue, after years of sexual exploitation, becomes a wretched alcoholic who declares that she would rather spend eternity in hell than remain alive in the hands of slaveholders. Another sex slave, Cassy, drinks to drown her despair and encourages others to do likewise. When her friend Emmeline rejects brandy as “hateful,” Cassy says, “I hated it, too; and now I can’t live without it.”

The nefarious Simon Legree overindulges in drink. His mother had tried to guide him toward virtue and clean living, but he rejected her: “He drank and swore, was wilder and more brutal than ever.” Before she died, she sent him an envelope containing a lock of her hair. He opened the envelope while “carousing among drunken companions” and burned the hair, after which he tried “to drink, and revel, swear away the memory” of her, which was impossible, for her ghost haunted him. He continued his drinking, which led to his murderous cruelty, and he recognized alcohol’s power for degradation. Shortly before torturing Tom, Legree plies his lackeys Sambo and Quimbo with liquor and carouses with them. The three are in a state of “furios intoxication . . . singing, whooping, upsetting chairs, and making all manner of ludicrous and horrid grimaces at each other.”

Alternatively, the novel portrays the benefits of not drinking by the presence of many virtuous characters who have no interest in alcohol. The kindly people who help the fugitives—the Birds, the Hallidays, the Van Trompes, and Phineas Fletcher—are portrayed as upright, temperate folk whose strongest drink is tea. The novel’s main voice for temperance is Tom. When St. Clare warns Tom not to drink too often, Tom replies emphatically, “I never drink.” Marie St. Clare says of Tom, “I know he’ll get drunk,” but her husband assures her that Tom is “a pious and sober article.” Not only does Tom avoid liquor, but he pleads with St. Clare to
follow his example. Concerned about St. Clare's regular frequenting of places where drink is consumed, Tom worries about his master's spiritual condition. Tom warns St. Clare that he risks the "loss of all—all—body and soul." Tom gives biblical sanction for his hatred of alcohol, declaring, "The good Book says, 'it biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder.' "]

Tom's temperance plea is effective, for St. Clare vows to stay away from liquor. Later on, Tom also brings about redemptive change in other drinkers such as Cassy, Sambo, and Quimbo.

Having Tom inspire both whites and blacks to embrace temperance was a daring move on Stowe's part. In antebellum temperance reform, segregation was overwhelmingly the rule. For instance, in 1850 one of the largest national organizations, the Sons of Temperance, passed a rule against admitting black people, provoking the ire of Henry Ward Beecher. He publicly announced his resignation from the group, whose racist regulation he found "morally offensive to the last degree." Harriet went beyond her brother's protest and made an affirmation of the moral efficacy of black Americans. She created a black hero who brought about the regeneration of a dissipated white man.

The temperance message of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was so compelling that after the novel appeared, an Edinburgh book publisher, Constable & Co., reportedly offered Stowe a $10,000 advance to write a novel devoted solely to temperance. Although she did not write the book, she had struck a chord among reform-minded Americans who made an analogy between chattel slavery and enslavement to alcohol. In July 1854 she traveled from Andover, where she and Calvin then lived, to Maine, where she attended a temperance and antislavery picnic held in her honor and accepted a post as the corresponding secretary of the Maine Ladies' Temperance and Anti-Slavery Association.

When Stowe realized that slavery was growing despite her challenge of it in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, her bitterness was reflected in her intensified use of temperance themes in her next antislavery novel, *Dred*. She believed she could turn more people against slavery if she linked it to the more widespread issue of alcoholism. The novel's villain, Tom Gordon, matches Simon Legree's cruelty and outdoes his penchant for liquor. The debauched Gordon, devoid of morality and decency, brutalizes slaves and takes sexual advantage of enslaved women. And there is no Uncle Tom to sober him up.

Another movement that influenced Stowe was moral reform, which in that era focused on the fight against illicit sex, especially prostitution. For her, moral reform was closely connected to antislavery feeling. As a child, she reportedly heard about the sexual abuse of slave women through an oft-repeated story about her mother's sister, Mary Foote. In 1803, Mary was married to a planter from Jamaica, John James Hubbard, and moved there with him. Mary was overcome "with constant horror and loathing" witnessing slavery there. According to family legend, she was appalled to learn that her husband had sired several of his slaves. Despite the shame of leaving her husband, she was so distraught that she returned to America. In 1850, just before writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe used her aunt's feelings to describe her own about the Fugitive Slave Law: "I feel as Aunt Mary said—I feel as if I could be willing to sink with it were all this sin and misery to sink in the sea." The words also made it into the novel. St. Clare says he has often thought that "if the whole country would sink, and hide all this injustice and misery from the light, I would willingly sink with it."

From all sides, Stowe received testimony of the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. One of her housekeepers in Cincinnati, Eliza Buck, was a fugitive slave who had for years been the kept woman of her Kentucky master, who was the father of her children. Eliza had been a "very handsome mulatto girl," in Stowe's words, with "refined and agreeable" manners, who had been raised in "a good [white] family" in Virginia before being sold first to Louisiana and then Kentucky, where her master repeatedly took sexual advantage of her.

Eliza Buck was sadly representative of enslaved women, as Stowe well knew. It was commonly reported that female slaves were more valuable than males because of their capacity to be breeders or mistresses. While marriage between slaves was forbidden in most Southern states,
procreation was viewed as a crucial role of enslaved women. The sexual partners of these women were often masters or male slaves chosen by their masters. Besides providing sexual gratification for slaveowners, this system guaranteed a steady increase in plantation workers. Thomas Jefferson, who may have fathered at least one child by his slave mistress Sally Hemings, had written, “I consider a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man on the farm.” A historian of the African diaspora found that planters in the American South expected their labor force to double every fifteen years because of breeding. Some children of breeders were kept at their home plantation, but many were sold away, causing unspeakable heartbreak for their mothers.

Enslaved women were not only raped by their owners, but also frequently sold into prostitution. Light-skinned enslaved women were very profitable in the “Fancy Trade,” a prostitution network featuring so-called bright or brown-skinned girls that was centered in New Orleans and also prospered in cities such as Lexington, St. Louis, and Charleston. Anti-slavery minister Theodore Parker noted, “Girls, the children of mulattoes, are sold at a great price, as food for private licentiousness, or public furniture in houses of ill-fame.” William Lloyd Garrison branded slaveowners as “monsters who have...given over to prostitution and ravishment, with all possible impunity, a million and half of helpless females.” The black abolitionist David Nelson declared, “Of the grown females belonging to more than two millions of our race, nearly every one is either a prostitute or an adulteress, and every grown male is either a fornicator or an adulterer.” Abolitionist Wendell Phillips called the South “one vast brothel.” Although the statistics on the sexual abuse of enslaved blacks cannot be known with certainty, there’s no doubt that the scope of the problem was enormous.

How was Stowe to deal with this explosive issue? On the one hand, she was painfully aware of the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. But she was still like her housekeeper Eliza Buck, who, when describing her relationship with her Kentuck master, “always maintained a delicacy and reserve.” Unlike some moral reformers, whose gloating over the details of tabooed behavior made them objects of derision or censure, Stowe had a genuinely puritanical distaste for any violations of her era’s sexual standards, which discouraged sex outside of marriage. She and Calvin appear to have had an active sex life (their surest form of birth control were long periods of separation, as when her ten-month stay at a Vermont water-cure establishment was soon followed by his fourteen-month visit there). But she was shaken to the core by reports of illicit sex. The sensational cheap literature of the day was full of accounts of sexual misdeeds on the part of clergymen and other outwardly respectable types.

Stowe was truly horrified when she heard about such extramarital sexual escapades. When in 1844 her brother Henry told her of a number of ministers who had frequented brothels, she was revolted. Henry’s “frightful list” of fallen clergymen, she said, “pursued me like a nightmare.” Pitying the wives of such men, she wrote Calvin, “I can conceive now of misery which in one night would change the hair to grey and shrivel the whole frame to premature decrepitude!” She imagined the anguish she would feel if her husband committed adultery: “As I am gifted with a most horribly vivid imagination in a moment I imagined—nay saw as in a vision all the distress and despair that would follow a fall on your part till I felt weak and sick.” She quickly assured Calvin that she knew he was faithful, but she said she had learned how devilishly strong the male sex drive could be: “What terrible temptations lie in the way of your sex—till now I never realised it.” (Imagine her reaction had she known of Calvin’s private confession to his father-in-law: “I try to be spiritually-minded, and find in myself a most exquisite relish, and deadly longing for all kinds of sensual gratification.”) She had a “horrible presentiment” that one or more of her clergymen brothers would someday fall, though she was confident that Henry would not be one of them. As she wrote, “Henry the other night speaking of these shocking disclosures in the church said ‘Well I thank my God that I can stand up as strait as a poplar in the judgment day for any sin of that kind.’”

Henry’s statement, complete with its pre-Freudian image of a straight-standing tree, oozes with irony, given his later trial for sex with a married
parishioner. But the irony exists only in retrospect, since Henry's failings surfaced—and probably only occurred—years later. At the time he made the statement, in the 1840s, he and Harriet shared an authentic disgust for religious figures who compromised conventional morality. Sensational novels and newspapers were full of hypocritical characters—not just the reverend rake but many other immoral types as well—that fascinated the public and helped generate the complexities in works by Melville, Hawthorne, and other major writers.

For Henry and Harriet, however, such hypocrites held little attraction. Henry focused on risqué foreign writers whose works, in an age before the international copyright, were freely pirated in America. He insisted that "dangerous" European writers, who created a "lively relish for exquisitely artful licentiousness, and ... vulgarity," were widely read in "an age which translates and floods the community with French novels (inspired by Venus and Bacchus,) and which reprints in popular forms, Byron, and Bulwer-Lytton, and Moore, and Fielding." Harriet was also appalled by the foreign literary invasion. When she read a translation of the French novelist Eugène Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris*, which probed the urban underworld, she felt trapped in a hothouse of amorality. "They are powerful," she wrote of Sue's novels, "but stiflingly devoid of moral principle—tho full of luscious blossom and fruit [they] make you stagger and pant for the air—not the first discernment of any boundaries between right and wrong in them." Eugène Sue was just one of many foreign writers whose morality Harriet held suspect. Among the others were some of the same as her brother's choices (Byron—"many of the best constituted minds ... have been fatally and irreparably injured by him"—and Bulwer-Lytton, whom she blamed for creating "a great rage for pickpockets, highwaymen, murderers," as well as Dickens, who struck her as irreligious).

Even worse, in Stowe's eyes, were many popular American writers. Imitating foreign ones, they wrote about the "mysteries and miseries" of cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, New Orleans, San Francisco, and even Lowell and Nashua. Although these novels never went beyond what today would be considered soft-core pornography, they were shocking for their time, since they often pictured upper-class licentiousness and depravity. The 1840s also saw the rise of "flash" newspapers with names like *The Libertine, The New York Sporting Whip*, and the *Sunday Flash*, whose racy contents appealed mainly to young urban men known as "swells" or "sports." Then there were the mammoth weeklies and story papers that ran serial fiction, much of it with a Dickensian interest in low-life criminality.

Stowe knew such literature, and she was appalled by it. In an article on popular culture, she generalized about the American scene:

Any one who has kept the run of what is called the *trash* literature of the day, must have noticed, that since the appearance of Dickens, it has run very much in a foul and muddy current, full of the slang and filth of low and degraded society. The elegant peculiarities of "flash" literature, and the choice *bons mots* of the "swell" mob, have figured largely in our mammoth sheets, in imitations and reproductions, which had no resemblance to the original, except their constant familiarity of representation of what is lowest and most disgusting in society.

She made these pronouncements in the 1840s, when the nation witnessed an explosion of racy pamphlet fiction, which comprised almost two-thirds of American novels published during that decade. In this working-class fiction—frequently cheap paperbacks with gaudy covers, screaming titles, and melodramatic illustrations—we find many languorous accounts of women in total or partial dishabille. The master of the voyeur style, George Lippard, created an atmosphere of lust around even the most apparently virtuous heroines, such as the innocent Mary Arlington in *The Quaker City*, whom he describes asleep with "her youthful bosom ... heaving up from the folds of her night-robe" as she lies "in all the ripening view of maidenhood." Leslie Fiedler calls fiction like Lip-
Illustration from George Thompson's *Venus in Boston* (1849), typical of the era's erotic pulp fiction

pards' "the male novel," an apt term for these largely male-authored works which typically have omniscient narrators who look upon women characters with a distinctly male gaze.

While Stowe attacked sensational literature as "low and degraded," how was she to portray in fiction the foulest reality in America: the use of enslaved women as prostitutes and breeders? She does so in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where she mixes the frank treatment of illicit sex, characteristic of sensational fiction, with the values of piety and domesticity prevalent in conventional writings. Many of the enslaved women in the novel are directly or indirectly associated with the Southern sex trade. In the opening scene, the light-skinned Eliza Harris is ogled by Dan Haley, who notes how she could bring a good sum if sold in New Orleans because of her beauty. Eliza manages to avoid this fate, but George Harris's sister Emily does not. Prue, the pathetic drunkard and petty thief, has been used as a breeding machine. Emmeline, the fifteen-year-old quadroon girl, is bought at auction by Legree with the apparent aim of taking advantage of her. Cassy herself has an awful history of sexual exploitation. She had been bought by a man she came to love, but he fell into debt and sold her and their two children to a cousin who forced her to be his mistress.

In describing these women, Stowe suggests their sexual attractiveness without being tawdry. Eliza wears a "dress of the neatest possible fit" that "set off to advantage her finely moulded shape." Emmeline has soft, dark eyes with long lashes; her mother asks her to comb back her beautiful curls so that she will not tempt lustful buyers—a plan that backfires when the auctioneer demands the curls, explaining that they "may make a hundred dollars difference in the sale of her." Cassy was called by one man "the most beautiful woman in Louisiana."

Because of such veiled eroticism, some critics were quick to class *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with the sensational pulp fiction of the period. One wrote, "The gross misrepresentation of facts in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' is not a greater violation of fair dealing than the vivid descriptions of sensuality are of female delicacy." Another maintained that Stowe "has found it easier, as most persons have, to make a picture of bad passions and a vicious atmosphere, than one of virtue and purity."

A fairer appraisal came from a correspondent to *The New York Times* who argued that Stowe's novel in fact was not like sensational fiction. Far from contributing to "the swarming issues of a filth-seeking press," he wrote, Stowe dealt with controversial topics in a manner that was "decorous" and "widely wholesome." Indeed, the erotic atmosphere of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is very different from that of the era's sensational literature. There are no "snowy globes," "rose-tipped hillocks," or "seaweed-flanked" clams in the novel. Women's charms are described with relative restraint and from a different vantage point than in sensational fiction. The male gaze is still there, but the men who gaze are proslavery types the reader loathes. The venal Haley, the money-grubbing slave auctioneer, Cassy's deceitful lover, the brutal Legree—these are the ones who size up women's bodies for purposes of profit or pleasure. Stowe always distances illicit sex acts by time or space. They occur in a threatened future (Eliza, Emmeline), in the past (Prue), or offstage (Cassy).
As for the enslaved women themselves, they are distant from the women characters in sensational novels, who range from the sexually voracious, as in George Thompson's novels, to the erotically burgeoning, as in Lippard and others. Most of the enslaved women victimized by rape or sexual harassment in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are surrounded by images of religion or family — and usually both. Emily Harris had been "a pious, good girl,—a member of the Baptist church," before being sold in the Deep South, and at the end she reappears as the good Madame de Thoux. Susan and Emmeline are a loving, Christian mother-daughter pair. Cassy, brought up in luxury, had attended a convent school, and after hellish experiences with slaveowners, she regains a family on discovering that Eliza is her long-lost daughter. Stowe's association of such conventional values with characters who have experienced or are threatened by illicit sex has a twofold effect: it points up the basic goodness of these enslaved women, and it makes their sexual exploitation by proslavery men all the more repugnant.

Stowe also makes a strong statement about sex in her portrayal of Uncle Tom. Tom's faithfulness to his family stood in sharp contrast to the widespread view of black males as lustful brutes. It was commonly thought that blacks lacked domestic feelings and were indifferent about their sexual partners. A Southern reviewer mocked Tom's fidelity, claiming that the typical enslaved man had no scruples about taking a new wife on each plantation. "The negro, in fact, is proverbially a Lothario," the reviewer wrote. "He is seldom faithful to his vows. He loves to rove." Many white Americans felt similarly. Thomas Jefferson had stated that black men "are more ardent after their female [than whites], but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. Their griefs are transient." Even an abolitionist like Theodore Parker could declare, "Lust is [black men's] strongest passion: and hence, rape is an offence of too frequent occurrence. Fidelity to the marriage relation they do not understand and do not expect, neither in their native country nor in a state of bondage." The black male as a sexual powerhouse appeared in antebellum pornography as a titillating figure, as in George Thompson's *City Crimes* (1849), in which a wealthy young woman refuses to sleep with her white fiancé but has a torrid affair with her black servant, explaining that "the fiery and insatiable cravings of my passions" could be satisfied only by "my superb African." In time, the image of the oversexed African-American became highly politicized, as the black rapist was represented as a major threat to Southern white women in Thomas Dixon's anti-Stowe novels, D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation*, and the writings of Jim Crow-era historians like William Archibald Dunning.

Forcefully challenging such racism, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* makes marital fidelity between blacks the driving force of its two main plots: the escape of Eliza and George Harris, and the separation of Tom from his family. Both narratives explore domestic attachments among black people with sensitivity and nuance. In fact, it would not be until the appearance of Alex Haley's *Roots* in the 1970s that the portrayal of domestic affection among African-Americans would resonate as powerfully for both black and white readers as was the case with Stowe's novel.

While Stowe provided domestic alternatives to the sexual explicitness of sensational writers, she shared their interest in adventure, the Gothic, and working-class themes—though, again, she brought moderation and moral purpose to such themes. Omitted from modern analyses of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is its seminal role in the development of adventure narratives, an ongoing phenomenon in American popular culture. As later chapters will show, adventure played a central role in the Tom plays and films. For now, it's sufficient to note that the novel matches the adventurous excitement of the sensational novels of the day. In the words of one reviewer, "The literary taste of our day ... demands excitement. Nothing can be spiced too high. Incident, incident ... crowds the pages of those novels which are now all the vogue. ... For such tastes, Mrs. Stowe has catered well." Another declared that "Mrs. Stowe has been so successful" because of her emphasis on "the exciting, the startling and the terrible."

There were two main types of popular adventure fiction in that era: moral adventure, such as James Fenimore Cooper's novels, which feature a
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hero who remains virtuous in the midst of danger or trial; and dark adventure, which dwells on the violence and irrationality displayed by people in extreme situations. Uncle Tom's Cabin offers a unique combination of moral and dark adventure. In every scene in which adventure or sensationalism is prominent, morality and perversity are simultaneously present, and morality emerges victorious. Eliza evades her heartless pursuers and makes it across the ice floes, despite the odds against her. George Harris and his helpers fend off the drunken slave-catchers in the dramatic rocky-pass scene. Tom saves Eva from drowning in the Mississippi, providing an ethical alternative to the nefarious activities among slave-traders on the riverboat. On Legree's plantation, Tom is a shining, Christ-like presence in an atmosphere of wild revelry and bloody torture.

Stowe's depiction of Legree and his surroundings draws from Gothic images common in sensational novels. Aptly, Legree reads sensational fiction. We see him poring over "one of those collections of stories of bloody murder, ghostly legends, and supernatural visitations, which, coarsely got up and illustrated, have a strange fascination for one who once engages to read them." Legree himself is like a character in popular sensational works. In particular, he resembles Devil-Bug, the villainous keeper of Monk Hall in Lippard's The Quaker City. Both Legree and Devil-Bug are sadists who love to see the blood of their victims flow. Both inhabit dismal structures that have chambers of horror: Monk Hall has its skeleton-littered cellar where Devil-Bug tortures people, and Legree's home its garret, where he once imprisoned a slave woman who died. Both characters are haunted by the ghosts of their victims: Devil-Bug by a man he murdered and Legree by the dead slave woman and the mother he spurned. Devil-Bug laughs when he hears shrieking victims falling "down—down" through the trapdoors of Monk Hall, and Legree has a dream of falling into an abyss "down, down, down, amid a confused noise of shrieks, and groans, and shouts of demon laughter." Both are ostensibly powerful but in fact are outwitted by vindictive madwomen: Devil-Bug by Long-haired Bess, Legree by Cassy. Both villains get their due at the hands of black people. In a kind of metaphorical slave revolt, Musquito and Glow-worm crush Devil-Bug to death with a boulder. Legree encounters a more benign yet ultimately more damaging revolt—a Christian one that presumably consigns him to hell while his black victims are headed toward eternal bliss. Thus, Stowe puts her religious stamp on the portrait of the villain.

An element of popular sensational literature that held special appeal for Stowe was its egalitarianism. Her subtitle, Life Among the Lowly, highlights her concern for the marginalized. Besides vivifying the plight of blacks, the novel contains passages defending oppressed white workers. Stowe had long-standing working-class sympathies. While growing up in Litchfield, she loved to spend time in the kitchen with her family's servants. When she moved to Cincinnati in the 1830s, she entered a radically democratic environment. Cincinnati, whose population grew from 750 in 1800, when it was just being settled, to over 100,000 by mid-century, was a mushrooming city settled by people of all classes and backgrounds. Tocqueville, who visited Cincinnati around the time Stowe moved there, found that "social ranks are intermingled," representing "democracy without limit or moderation." A settler in the religion attested that "every person felt that he or she was the social equal of every other person." Perhaps stimulated by this intensely democratic environment, Stowe became close to a variety of servants, black and white, who at different times worked in her home.

Much of Stowe's interest in popular literature lay in its democratic themes. Though disappointed over Dickens' neglect of religion, she praised him for bringing "the whole class of the oppressed, the neglected, and forgotten, the sinning and suffering, within the pale of sympathy and interest." She included humble characters in her early short stories, often adding a Christian twist. In "The Bible as Comforter" she contrasts an irreligious wealthy man with a starving seamstress who finds solace in religion. The seamstress, a common symbol of lower-class oppression in that era, reappears in another of her stories, in which a poor woman and her daughters toil tirelessly to produce garments that are unappreciated by the rich ladies who buy them. Charity to the poor is recommended in "The Tea Rose," whose heroine donates beautiful things to the indigent; in "So Many Calls," in which the impoverished Jesus appears to a rich man and
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persuades him to give to charity groups; and in “Christmas; or, The Good Fairy,” in which a rich girl learns to give to “the lowly . . . the outcast, and distressed” in celebration of Jesus, “the brother and friend of the poor.”

These rather conventional expressions of working-class themes gave way to a new militancy in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, which offers a broad vision of whites and blacks degraded by capitalist forces. In the novel, the capitalist marketplace, the driving force behind slavery, is presented as harshly deterministic. It crushes ethics, poisons the law, and shatters families. Even good-hearted Americans become victims of the capitalist system of slavery. Arthur Shelby is a kindly man who is close to his slaves, but he is forced to sell Tom and Harry to avoid financial ruin. This tragic situation, resulting from capitalist speculation, generates all subsequent situations in the novel. On the positive side, Harry is taken by his mother into a Northern community of people, mainly Quakers, who are driven by the values of democratic love, not greed. Negatively, Tom is cast more deeply into slavery, which is governed by money. Religion, talent, physical strength, comeliness—slavery converts them all into marketable commodities. Haley demands a high price for Tom because of his good features. Not only does he embody “all the moral and Christian virtues bound in black morocco, complete!” but he’s “broad-chested, strong as a horse,” with uncommon “calculatin faculties” and “a strong talent for business.” Virtually every chapter in the novel contains examples of middle-class virtues becoming grist for the moneymaking mill of slavery.

Stowe doesn’t allow her readers to bask in the misconception that they are free of guilt. To the contrary, she points out that people like Haley are the product of an economic system that most Americans support. At one point, she directly challenges the reader. Slave-traders like Haley are “universally despised,” she notes,

But who, sir, makes the trader? Who is most to blame? The enlightened, cultivated, intelligent man, who supports the system of which the trader is the inevitable result, or the poor trader himself? You make the public senti-


ment that calls for his trade, that debauches and depraves him, till he feels no shame in it; and in what are you better than he?

Stowe’s economic critique extends beyond enslaved blacks to poor whites. Some reviewers unfairly attacked her for exaggerating the suffering of slaves while ignoring the “wage slaves” in Northern and European cities. Actually, her working-class perspective gave rise to powerful passages in the novel where she extended her critique of capitalism to a prediction of a worldwide workers’ revolution.

She wrote at a time when the world bristled with revolutionary prophecies. During the second half of 1851, just when the weekly installments of Uncle Tom’s Cabin were appearing in The National Era, America was excitedly preparing for the imminent arrival of Louis Kossuth, the exiled Hungarian rebel who had been prominent in the European revolutions of 1848. Fleeing authorities in his native land, he was coming to America to win money and support for another Hungarian revolution in the wake of the one that Russia had thwarted. The press raved over Kossuth, whose struggle against European oppressors was compared to the American Revolution. The National Era, while it was publishing sections of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, joined the Kossuth chorus: “The cause of Hungary was the cause of self-government, of popular rights, of Democracy, of mankind; Kossuth was the life and leader of that cause. No Revolutionist has acted from nobler aims, with purer motives, upon more comprehensive and sagacious views.”

Stowe shared the enthusiasm for the revolutions abroad that Kossuth had helped foster. She had St. Clare announce that “there is a mustering among the masses, the world over; and there is a dies irae [day of wrath] coming on, sooner or later. The same thing is working in Europe, in England, and in this country.” It’s possible that in writing these revolutionary words, Stowe felt the influence not only of Kossuth but also of Karl Marx. We don’t know for sure whether she read Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel’s The Communist Manifesto (1848). But it’s worth noting that although an
English translation of The Communist Manifesto did not appear until 1872, the German edition of this landmark work was reprinted in 1850 in America, where it was widely distributed. Since Calvin Stowe was a foreign-language expert who sometimes read aloud to his wife from German books, translating them into English as he went, it's possible that The Communist Manifesto came to Stowe's attention.

At any rate, it's likely that she read English translations of selections from Marx that appeared in Horace Greeley's New-York Tribune, the era's leading reform newspaper. Chapter 19 of Uncle Tom's Cabin, which contains St. Clare's revolutionary pronouncements, appeared in the November 20, 1851, issue of The National Era. Since Stowe was churning out chapters at a furious pace each month to meet Gamaliel Bailey's deadlines, it's safe to say that she wrote this chapter between late October and mid-November. During these weeks, sections of Marx and Engels' book Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution appeared in the Tribune. In the chapters solely written by Marx, he traced the 1848 revolutions from the early rumblings of working-class discontent to the violent revolts in the German states, Austria, Italy, France, and elsewhere. In Marx's telling, "the working people, one and all, arose at once against a government detested by all," presaging an "impending struggle between the class of capitalists and the class of laborers."

Although we don't have evidence that Stowe read Marx's passages in the Tribune as she was writing her chapter, St. Clare's words about a world-wide revolution seem to echo Marx, especially when he uses Austria and Italy as examples of a forthcoming time "when the boilers [will] burst." St. Clare's cynicism about churches also has Marxist overtones. In one of the chapters in the Tribune, Marx noted that the European religious establishment, Protestant and Catholic, "formed an essential part of the bureaucratic establishment of the Government in helping to suppress the discontent of the masses." A main source of St. Clare's skepticism is his disillusion with American churches, which he saw as complicit with slaveholding and other forms of oppression. "Religion!" he exclaims to his wife. "Is what you hear at church religion? Is that which can bend and turn, and descend and ascend, to fit every crooked phase of selfish, worldly society, religion? Is that religion which is less scrupulous, less generous, less just, less considerate for man, than even my own ungodly, worldly, blinded nature? No!"

Given such passages in Uncle Tom's Cabin, it's understandable that some readers saw the novel as a call for revolution. A reviewer in 1853 remarked that future years would bring "the eruption of the vast volcano that must dash all the thrones of Europe to the dust" in a "fearful struggle" largely influenced by "the notions of freedom ... imbibed from the perusal of a romance by an American woman." Another reviewer agreed that Stowe's novel would "produce a very distinct and decided effect upon affairs in Europe," where people would "give to the book a political significance which feeds the flame that smoulders in the breast of the oppressed millions."

As will be seen, Uncle Tom's Cabin indeed influenced revolutionaries, a number of whom were also inspired by Marx and Engels. But the novel itself cannot be called Marxist. Although it demonizes capitalism, speaks of working-class revolution, and holds established churches responsible for oppression, as do Marx's writings, it doesn't endorse dialectical materialism. Karl Marx was a German atheist; Harriet Beecher Stowe was an American Christian. She can have St. Clare say that church religion is no better than "my own ungodly, worldly, blinded nature," but the novel creates ample religious space outside of the church, a space that St. Clare eventually occupies along with other characters in the novel. Immediately after his words about a mustering of the masses, St. Clare says, "My mother used to tell me of a millennium that was coming, when Christ should reign, and all men should be free and happy. And she taught me, when I was a boy, to pray, 'Thy kingdom come.' Sometimes I think all this sighing, and groaning, and stirring among the dry bones foretells what she used to tell me was coming!"

This is straightforward Christian millennialism. Eva's redemptive
death and Tom's preaching lead him to meditate soberly on religious matters. When he exclaims "Mother!" as he dies, we presume he has joined the religious fold.

Actually, Stowe's revolutionary thinking is closer to George Lippard's than to Karl Marx's. Lippard had always taken a strong working-class perspective in his fiction, and in 1850, just before Stowe wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin, he founded the Brotherhood of the Union, a radical labor group that rapidly spread to twenty of America's thirty states. The Brotherhood and its principles were reported prominently in newspapers. The Brotherhood's main goal, Lippard wrote, was to "protect the men who work, against those usurpers of capital who degrade labor." Lippard endorsed a revolutionary Christian socialism based on the Bible and the Declaration of Independence. Just as Stowe saw the humble Jesus as the representative with whom the poor could identify, so Lippard based his Gospel of Labor on the example of the man he called the Carpenter of Nazareth.

Lippard and Stowe shared a vision of America as the place God had chosen to restore social equality. Both writers lamented the distance they saw between the ideals of the founding fathers and social inequities in nineteenth-century America. Lippard wrote fictionalized "legends" of the American Revolution that gained a large readership with their imaginative descriptions of national figures and symbols, such as Washington and the Liberty Bell.

What was especially unusual about the reform envisioned by Lippard and Stowe was that it embraced white workers as well as black people, enslaved and free. Northern labor reformers generally focused on white labor, not chattel slavery in the South. Like other labor reformers, Lippard also emphasized the oppression of poor whites; but he did not exclude enslaved blacks from his agenda. He wrote that "white and black slavery, cloaked under various names, blasphemes the memory of the Revolution, and turns the Declaration of Independence into a lie." America, he insisted, was chosen "for the regeneration of the oppressed of all nations and races."

Uncle Tom's Cabin similarly recognized the oppression of white and black workers. Like Lippard, Stowe considered ways in which capitalist oppression threatened all laborers, regardless of race. Besides predicting a revolution by white workers in Europe, St. Clare brings up slave insurrection. He mentions the Haitian Revolution of 1791, when enslaved blacks began a guerrilla war that drove French colonizers from Saint-Domingue, which became the independent nation of Haiti in 1804. Stowe's racial views, by which blacks were gentle and whites aggressive, prevented her from appreciating fully the Haitian Revolution. Ophelia castigates "that abominable, contemptible Hayti," and the enslaved George Harris, when thinking about a place to establish a separate African nation, declares, "Not in Hayti; for in Hayti they had nothing to start with.... The race that formed the character of the Haytiens was a worn-out, effeminate one; and, of course, the subject race will be centuries in rising to anything."

George himself comes closest to being the kind of black person Stowe thinks is capable of leading a slave insurrection, partially because he is biracial. Stowe emphasizes that "George was, by his father's side, of white descent.... From one of the proudest families in Kentucky he had inherited a set of fine European features, and a high, indomitable spirit, from his mother he had received only a slight mulatto tinge, amply compensated
by its accompanying rich, dark eye." His high energy, which Stowe sug-
gests comes from his Caucasian side, accounts for the fact that he comes
closer than any of the other blacks in the novel to rebelling forcefully
against whites. When Loker and his men pursue him in the rocky pass, he
brandishes a pistol and threatens to kill anyone who approaches him.

In the scene, Stowe uses both the European revolutions and the spirit
of '76 to make her point about such revolutionary action. In his own
"declaration of independence," George warns the slave-catchers, "We'll
fight for our liberty till we die." Besides echoing Thomas Jefferson and
Patrick Henry, George possesses the populist spirit of Kossuth. With bit-
ing irony, Stowe notes how Americans welcome Kossuth, a fugitive from
his homeland, while branding fugitive slaves like George Harris and his
family as criminals:

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 despair­
ing African fugitives do the same thing,—it is—what is it?

When George Harris takes up his pistol, the novel comes close to
justifying violence by blacks, but it backs off from endorsing slave insur­
rection. George Harris is not Nat Turner. He is trying to gain freedom
and wants to protect his family from slave-catchers. Although he shoots
the charging Tom Loker, he's relieved that Loker is not killed, and he
helps carry the wounded man to a woman who tends to him.

In time, when Stowe grew increasingly bitter about the growth of
slavery in the United States, she created a fictional character, Dred, who
inherited violent passions from his father, the insurrectionist Denmark
Vesey. She also became a strong supporter of the era's most notorious
promoter of slave rebellions, John Brown. But when she wrote *Uncle Tom's
Cabin*, she would have been treading on dangerous ground if she openly
praised slave rebellions, which had terrible connotations for most Ameri-
cans. And so, she used the novel to advocate black rebelliousness subtly
and within the accepted norms of her time.

One of her shrewdest methods of doing so was by revising techniques
from one of the most popular entertainment forms of her era, minstrelsy.
Minstrel performers were whites who smeared their faces with burnt cork
and spoke in an exaggerated version of what was considered the dialect of
the "plantation darkey" (Jim Crow) or the "northern dandy negro" (Zip
Coon). Minstrel shows, which took off in the 1840s, regaled thousands
with weird dances, funny songs, and inflated speeches full of butchered
grammar and improbable images.

Those interested in tracing the minstrel roots of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* have
struggled with the fact that Stowe, who shared her family's disapproval of
the theater, may never have attended any of the numerous minstrel shows
that appeared in Cincinnati in the 1840s. Still, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* makes
clear that Stowe had full awareness of the minstrel phenomenon, which
was more widespread than has been recognized.

Actually, she didn't have to go to a theater to know about minstrelsy.
She could have picked up its themes and lingo from one of the most
popular humorous writings of the day, the "burlesque lectures" by "Profes­
sor Julius Caesar Hannibal," the creation of William H. Levison. Born in
New York in 1829 and raised in New Jersey, Levison was a failed busi-
nessman who took a strong interest in minstrelsy when he saw a show
by T. D. Rice, the pioneering blackface performer whose impersonation
of the odd, jumping Jim Crow sparked the minstrel craze. Levison him-
self became a stage comedian before turning to humorous journalism. By
the late 1840s he was writing for a popular humor magazine, the *New
York Picayune*, and soon became its editor. He took the original step of
transposing minstrelsy to the page. In effect, he was a writer in blackface.
From 1849 onward, he published a long series of lectures by Julius Caesar
Hannibal, a Northern black man who pretends to be a college profes-

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politics, fads, science, religion, women, nature—and addresses his crowds variously as "Fellow Citizens," "Blud Bruddren an Sistern," "My Deah Woolly Heds," and so on. Hannibal's addresses instantly caught on with the Picayune's readers and were reprinted in other periodicals. They were later collected in a book titled Black Diamonds.

Melville picked up on Levison's style, as indicated by the sermon given to the sharks by Fleece, the ship's cook in Moby-Dick. Levison's Hannibal gives lectures about animals (including, notably, "De Whale"); Melville's Fleece lectures to the sharks. He addresses the ferocious creatures, Hannibal-like, as "Belubed fellow-critters" and gets frustrated when they ignore his advice to stop devouring the dead whale attached to the ship—a symbol of what Melville calls life's "universal cannibalism," by which all living creatures prey on each other.

Just as Melville enriched minstrel writing in the Fleece scene, so Stowe gave her own version of it in Uncle Tom's Cabin. She knew that few readers—even ones who strongly opposed slavery—could stomach a sympathetic account of slave insurrection, and so she cloaked this explosive issue in minstrel comedy. Two of Arthur Shelby's enslaved blacks, Sam and Andy, team up with Mrs. Shelby to frustrate Haley's efforts to capture Eliza. If Sam and Andy seem like laughable minstrel "darkeys," Mrs. Shelby is the pious wife, similar to mother figures in domestic novels. But in collaborating to help Eliza violate the Fugitive Slave Law, these conventional-appearing characters undermine the authority of the white males—Shelby, Haley, Loker, and Marks—who are trying to enforce the law.

This portrait of a group rebellion, in which two blacks are in partnership with a white woman, ventured toward dangerous territory, but Stowe made it palatable by using the accepted techniques of minstrelsy. Sam is in many ways like Levison's Julius Caesar Hannibal. Proud of his knowledge, he "speechifies" to fellow blacks, whom he comically addresses as "my feller citizens and ladies of de other sex in general." Hannibal, in a lecture on "Polly-tishuns" had described the politician as one who would "pint wich ebber way de wind ob pop'lar 'pinion blow him." Stowe, similarly, compares Sam to a politician ready to bend in different directions. Sam at first sides with Mr. Shelby and then supports Mrs. Shelby, a shift explained by the fact that his head "contained a great deal of a particular species much in demand among politicians of all complexions and countries, and vulgarly denominated ‘knowing which side your bread is buttered on.’ " Like the politicians Hannibal describes, Sam seemingly adjusts his principles according to the exigencies of the moment. And like Hannibal himself, Sam uses malapropisms and convoluted logic when he orates like an "electioneering politician" to his befuddled listeners.

Such behavior can make Sam and Andy seem like deplorable examples of nineteenth-century racist caricature—"bumbling, gigling, outsized adolescents," as one critic calls them. But some have recently noted deeper dimensions in these characters. We can understand them most clearly by contrasting them with the popular Julius Caesar Hannibal, whose lectures reflect the typical racial attitudes of the era, which saw blacks as subhuman, irresponsible, stupid, and lustful. Levison has Hannibal note that "colored folks" have flat noses like the monkey, which in turn is said to be "de connectin link" between blacks and the Fiji Mermaid at Barnum's Museum. Hannibal also tells of a friend, Brudder Cato Puggs, who mistook an orangutan for his grandmother. In a speech on phrenology, the pseudoscience that read character traits in skull bumps, Hannibal maintains that the largest bumps on a black person's head are those of "don't-care-a-d—nativeness" and "Amativeness," or the sex drive, which "plays de debil wid de fair sex" and sometimes "swells to such an extent dat it overwells do wole brain." And in the front of the brain, where the intellect should be, black people have "all bone," which "counts fuly for de nigger's hed being hard 'nuff to butt down de stone fence."

Many antebellum Americans guffawed at such racist passages, just as they did at the protruding lips, woolly wigs, and oversized feet of performers on the minstrel stage. And many laughed along with Stowe's Sam and Andy, who with their antics and clumsy language could come off as minstrel clowns. But they are not minstrel clowns. They are enslaved blacks who, along with an antislavery woman, use their wits to outsmart
white males intent on enforcing an unjust, proslavery law. Besides stalling Haley through tricks like upsetting his horse, they delay him further with intentionally garbled words about which route Eliza may have taken. To make this potentially offensive scene more acceptable, Stowe has Sam seem comically wishy-washy, but his actions on behalf of the fleeing Eliza in fact support his boast that he is devoted to principles he would die to defend.

Stowe's refashioning of minstrelsy controls her portraits of three other black characters in the novel: Eliza's son Harry, St. Clare's slave girl Topsy, and Uncle Tom. Little Harry is surrounded by minstrel images. His master, Shelby, greets him with “Hulloa, Jim Crow…. Come here, Jim Crow,” and orders him to perform for the slave-trader Haley. Harry sings a “wild, grotesque” song and makes “many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body,” including imitations of a rheumatic old man and a psalm-singing churchman. Haley is so pleased that he offers to buy the boy. Behind the apparent fun, however, are pathos and imminent tragedy. The comic performer here is an enslaved child whose innocence makes his prospect of being sold truly alarming. His capers delight white spectators, as on the minstrel stage, but they are the prelude to a threatened separation of Harry from his mother Eliza, a hidden witness to the scene. Our sympathies flow to Eliza when she prepares to save her son, and they turn into cheering support as, with the help of Sam, Andy, and Mrs. Shelby, she uses wile and courage to elude pursuers and carry him to freedom.

Stowe also improves upon minstrelsy in her memorable portrait of the enslaved girl Topsy. At first glance, Topsy seems to have walked straight off the minstrel stage and into the novel. She’s “a noted character” in the St. Clare household because “her talent for every species of drollery, grimace, and mimicry,—for dancing, tumbling, climbing, singing, whistling, imitating every sound that hit her fancy,—seemed inexhaustible.” It's understandable that when the Topsy character was later developed in Tom shows, minstrel acts, and films, she became a stock figure of wild silliness, the ancestor of slapstick comedians.

In the novel itself, she possesses minstrel-like qualities along with far richer qualities. Her defiant naughtiness typifies minstrelsy, as does the racial stereotyping associated with her ignorance. But Topsy is a vehicle for Stowe's message that enslaved blacks, even when they were thoroughly dehumanized, are capable of profound human feeling that can obliterate racial barriers. When Topsy announces that she “never was born” but “just grow’d,” we laugh, but on another level we feel the same kind of pity that we feel for Frederick Douglass, who reports in his Narrative that as a child he, like many other enslaved blacks, was barred from knowing basic facts such as his birthday or the identity of his father. Our pity grows when Topsy courts punishment by stealing small household items. She expects to be whipped. “I spects it's good for me,” she says. She jokes about Ophelia's feeble lashings, which she says “wouldn't kill a skeeter,” and adds, “Oughter see how old Mas'r made the flesh fly; old Mas'r know'd how!” This is humorous but at the same time horrible. Repeated torture has inured this child to the horror of the slaveholders' whip.

Topsy's brash wickedness comes not only from years of degradation as a slave but also from the Calvinistic instruction she has received from Ophelia. Announcing, "Tse so wicked!," Topsy gives a mini-sermon in which she declares that all people, white or black, are also sinners. “Miss Feely says so,” she declares. “It's so awful wicked there can't nobody do nothin' for me.” Through Topsy’s comic assertion, Stowe makes another stab at Calvinism, aimed this time at its doctrine of total depravity. Calvinists claimed that it was a religious duty to confront one's inborn evil tendencies. Jonathan Edwards, for example, said he was overwhelmed by his “sinfulness and vileness,” which seemed like “an infinite deluge, or infinite mountains overhead.” When Topsy declares that she is the “wickest critter in the world,” she’s repeating what she learned from Ophelia, whose religious orthodoxy the novel mocks.

The bond that develops between Topsy and Ophelia not only dispels this grim Calvinist dogma but also challenges racial prejudice. Stowe showed that whites and blacks could join through sincere affection. Eva’s declaration that she loves Topsy and wants her to be good may seem sac-
charming today, but in that era it was a radical crossing of the racial divide, one made possible through a full recognition of shared emotions.

A similar use of sentiment to make a racial statement comes through in Uncle Tom, who also has associations with minstrelsy. The cultural historian Eric Lott suggests that Tom can be placed among romantically racialized black figures featured in some minstrel songs, including “Old Uncle Ned, Old Black Joe, and so on,” each of whom, he writes, represents the “gentle, childlike, self-sacrificing, essentially aesthetic” enslaved black man. True, gentleness and self-sacrifice were among the qualities minstrel blacks shared with Uncle Tom. But the soft old Tom whom Lott speaks of actually developed over time in plays and minstrel shows that appeared after the novel was published (in this connection, it is telling that one of the songs Lott refers to, the nostalgic “Old Black Joe,” appeared eight years after the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*).

In the novel, as noted in chapter 1, Tom is both gentle and tough. As such, he possesses contrasting qualities, as did several black characters in earlier minstrel shows. One of the first known minstrel songs, Dan Emmet’s “The Fine Old Color’d Gentleman” (1843), emphasizes the combined mildness and strength in its title character, Sambo:

> O Sambo was a gentleman,  
> One of de oldest kind.  
> His temper was very mild  
> When he was let alone,  
> But when you get him dander up  
> He spunk to de backbone.

The Sambo of this song is like Uncle Tom, but Tom’s character is far deeper than Sambo’s. In Tom, mildness and toughness have Christ-like resonance. While Sambo is mild when he’s “let alone,” Tom’s mildness, in contrast, is his strength. Instead of fighting, he willingly endures the whip because of his firm adherence to religious and moral principle. In the Christian terms of the novel, his perseverance in virtue constitutes both his goodness and his power.

The minstrel songs by the era’s leading writer of them, Stephen Foster, have special connections to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Foster transformed minstrel music by emphasizing that blacks possessed the same feelings and motivations that whites did. Foster compositions such as “Oh! Susanna,” “Nelly Was a Lady,” “Camptown Races,” “Old Uncle Ned,” “Old Folks at Home,” and “My Old Kentucky Home” dramatized a range of emotions among blacks.

The latter three songs are particularly notable in relation to Tom. “Old Uncle Ned” (1848) describes an overworked slave whose death elicits great sorrow in the whites close to him:

> When Old Ned die Massa take it mighty hard,  
> De tears run down like de rain;  
> Old Missus turn pale and she gets berry sad,  
> Cayse she nebber see Old Ned again.

The sadness of “Massa” and “Missus” after Ned’s passing affirms the same kind of racial bonding through emotion that runs through *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, from the closeness of blacks and whites on the Shelby plantation through Tom’s friendship with St. Clare and Eva to the scene where George Shelby grieves over Tom’s death. The song portrays slaves’ labor and suffering sympathetically (“Den lay down de shubble and de hoe, / ... No more hard work for Old Ned”), as does *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Another similarity is the happy afterlife both the song and the novel envisage for the deceased slaves: Ned has “gone whar de good Niggas go,” just as Tom is headed to heaven.

Another of Foster’s songs, “Old Folks at Home” (1851), ushered into minstrelsy the kind of poignant nostalgia that Uncle Tom sometimes displays after he is parted from his family. The opening lines epitomize the song’s somber tone:
Although the geography here differs from that in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—the Suwannee River is in the Deep South, whereas Tom's heart is in Kentucky, far to the north—a spirit of aching grief links the novel and the song. The anguish resulting from Tom's separation from Chloe and his children echoes the pain expressed by the song, which conveys a great sense of loss: "All de world am sad and dreary, / Ebry where I roam." The song, with its evocative gloom, was sung in many Tom plays, including Stowe's *The Christian Slave*. Over time, however, the song contributed to misrepresentations of the novel, especially in later plays, where the plantation was idealized as a lost utopia, the symbol of an idyllic Old South—very distant from the novel, where Tom eventually rises above his memories of home and decides that "Heaven is better than Kintuck."

Another Foster song even more relevant to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is "My Old Kentucky Home," which originated in a composition Foster scribbled in his sketchbook called "Poor Uncle Tom, Good Night" (1852). This early version, which was not published, was written in response to the novel, whose spirit it tried to capture. The first verse, which opens with "De sun shines bright in de old Kentucky home" and portrays the blissful side of plantation life, mirrors the happy early time of Tom in his cabin with his family and friends. The song quickly descends into gloom: "By'm by Hard Times comes a knockin at de door / Den poor Uncle Tom good night." The suffering slave is said to have only "A few more days for to tote de weary load" and "A few more days for to totter on de road before he dies. As in the novel, death brings the promise of heaven, a far better place than Kentucky:

*Oh good night, good night, good night*
*Poor Uncle Tom*
*Grieve not for your old Kentucky home*
*You're bound for a better land*
*Old Uncle Tom*

The song roughly follows the arc of Tom's life, from initial joy through death followed by heavenly relief. But fidelity to the novel diminishes in the song's final version, "My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night!" It may be that Foster, a Democrat, did not want to alienate others in his party and thus changed the song from a sympathetic portrait of an enslaved black to a paean to Kentucky. In revising the song, Foster discarded black dialect and even Tom, whom he replaced with a woman. His chorus became:

*Weep no more, my lady,*
*Oh! weep no more today!*
*We will sing one song*
*For the old Kentucky Home,*
*For the old Kentucky Home, far away.*

This chorus completely changed the song's meaning. Instead of Tom anticipating heaven and putting aside memories of Kentucky, an unnamed "my lady"—presumably a white slaveholder—fondly recalls her old Kentucky plantation, where enslaved blacks had played and worked. Since "My Old Kentucky Home" was often used as song in Tom shows, it helped change the popular image of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which in some circles came to be identified with the plantation myth and, later on, the Lost Cause.

As for Tom, what he longs for is his wife Chloe and the children they are raising—not for the plantation itself or Kentucky. Indeed, *Uncle Tom's*
Cabin was the first novel that depicted the full range of emotions among enslaved blacks. Minstrelsy, as we have seen, was one source of this journey into the emotional life of black people. But minstrelsy took on wholly new progressive dimensions when filtered through Harriet Beecher Stowe's capacious imagination. The same is true of other popular phenomena she observed, including religion, sentimental-domestic fiction, temperance, moral reform, and sensationalism. Stowe embraced all these aspects of American life, investing them with fresh meaning.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was constantly questioned about the roots of history's most influential antislavery novel. Its factual basis was important for the efforts of both abolitionist and proslavery groups.

Indeed, the question has intrigued readers ever since the novel first appeared. Stowe addressed the issue in The Key to "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (1853), in which she presented shocking stories about slavery from newspapers, slave narratives, and personal testimony. But the Key tells only part of the story. It would have been dangerous for her to reveal all of her sources. She was cagey, for instance, about the background of Eliza Harris's escape across the frozen Ohio River. She didn't say she had gotten the story from the Rev. John Rankin, a Ripley, Ohio, clergyman who had aided a runaway woman who appeared at his door after making the daring crossing of the ice. Since Rankin performed such rescues for many years, to reveal his identity might have put him in peril of arrest under the Fugitive Slave Law.

Stowe's interest in protecting friends was not the only reason for the confusion about sources. A more basic one is that there is no single source for any of the major characters or chapters in Uncle Tom's Cabin. We've seen that all kinds of cultural phenomena—visionary fiction, biblical