



# Harriet Beecher Stowe on Slavery

NANCY KOESTER

**B**eecher Stowe wrote the antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (hereafter, *UTC*) “to awaken sympathy for the African race.”<sup>1</sup> *UTC* ran first as a serial for the abolitionist newspaper *National Era*, and then appeared in book form in 1852. *UTC* went viral: everyone was reading it, reviewing it, selling it, praising and damning it. It became the bestselling book of the century. By portraying slaves as human beings, not property, Stowe persuaded millions that slavery was evil. When war erupted, Southerners blamed Stowe and her ilk for starting all the trouble. No wonder that when Abraham Lincoln met Stowe in the White House in 1862, he is said to have quipped, “So you are the little woman who started this big war.” Everyone knew that Stowe’s fictional characters—especially Uncle Tom—stirred conflicting passions between North and South.

And yet, in a strange twist of history, the term “Uncle Tom” somehow became a racial insult. According to the online *Urban Dictionary*, an Uncle Tom is “a black man who will do anything to stay in good standing with ‘the white man,’” even betray black people. “Uncle Tom” is an insult “used by black people to try to convince other black people that working hard in school, getting a good job, or en-

<sup>1</sup>Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Library of America, 1982) 9.

*As the bicentennial of Harriet Beecher Stowe's birth approaches (June 14, 2011), the author of Uncle Tom's Cabin will be remembered as a Christian writer who, by the best lights she had at the time, called her country to repent the sin of slavery and to choose life.*

couraging their children to do likewise is a sell-out.” Example: “De Shawn got a job? At Ameritech? He’s a Tom.” Synonyms for Uncle Tom include “Oreo,” “traitor,” and “yard ape.”<sup>2</sup>

Stowe would have been appalled. Throughout life, she was an advocate for black people. While she lived in Cincinnati, she hid fugitive slaves in her home and schooled black children along with her own. She wrote many antislavery articles and three antislavery books. She toured Europe to raise moral support and money for the antislavery cause. After the war she helped to found an interracial school and church in Mandarin, Florida. How then did her most famous fictional character become a hissing and a byword?

#### READ THE BOOK, SKIP THE PLAY

It happened at the theater. Staged versions of *UTC* began appearing in 1853 and kept running through the early twentieth century—becoming the most often produced play in the history of American theater. In Stowe’s day there were no copyright laws protecting author’s rights. Stowe had no editorial control over adaptations of her novel and received no profits from ticket sales.

---

*Some early productions of UTC were antislavery plays, in keeping with Stowe’s intentions. But theater managers could, and did, tell scriptwriters to do “anything to cover up the real drift of the play.”*

---

Some early productions of *UTC* were antislavery plays, in keeping with Stowe’s intentions. But most theater managers sidestepped controversy. Theater managers could, and did, tell scriptwriters to do “anything to cover up the real drift of the play.”<sup>3</sup> Characters and scenes that might offend white theatergoers were dropped or given a complete makeover. And speaking of makeovers, white people donned blackface to play the major black characters in staged versions of *UTC*. In the old tradition of minstrelsy, these actors played up racial stereotypes to please white audiences. As jolly darkies sang and danced on stage, slavery was made to look benign. The character of Uncle Tom was likewise degraded. A reviewer of an 1853 production in New York described the Uncle Tom character (played by a white man) as “a meek, pious, and subdued old negro...[a] pathetic” man.<sup>4</sup>

This was not Stowe’s Tom. Her character was in the prime of life, strong and dignified. He was entrusted with much responsibility on the Kentucky plantation where he lived with his family. A believer in Jesus, Tom humbled himself and took the form of a servant. Tom was honest and unfailingly kind; he would never betray

<sup>2</sup>Urban Dictionary, “Uncle Tom,” <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Uncle%20Tom> (accessed October 14, 2010).

<sup>3</sup>Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin in American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985) 277.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 279.

his fellow slaves or lie to please white people. Tom's unwavering integrity was part of Stowe's message: the true worth of a person has to do with character, not color.

In the institution of slavery, however, worth was measured by the price a slave would bring in the market. Tom was worth a great deal, and when his owner fell into debt, selling Tom was the quickest way out (never mind the pain of separation for Tom and his family). The papers were signed, the money changed hands, and the slave trader took Tom away to join a shipment of slaves bound downriver for the market in New Orleans. Thus began Tom's pilgrimage of faith. In a contrasting subplot, Stowe had some of her other characters escape to Canada via the Underground Railroad. Tom's journey, however, led him deeper and deeper into slavery, to a place where freedom could only come in death. As a child, Harriet Beecher loved John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. And her antislavery story was an allegory filled with character-types, dialog, and events to teach moral lessons about slavery.<sup>5</sup>

On the way to New Orleans, a little girl fell into the river, and Tom saved her from drowning. As a reward for his bravery, the girl's father bought Tom. Tom's new owner was a kind but cynical man; he thought slavery was wrong but saw no way out of it. Soon Tom, like Joseph of old, proved his worth and was entrusted with much responsibility. Despite all this, Tom grieved for his wife and family and pined for freedom. His master promised to set Tom free, but he died in a barroom fight before the papers were signed. The estate broke up and Tom was sold at a slave market in New Orleans. He was bought by Simon Legree, a Yankee plantation owner who was evil personified. Hearing Tom sing a hymn, Legree ordered him to stop. He told Tom to deny Christ. "Join my church" [worship me] and all will be well!<sup>6</sup> Tom replied that Legree might own his body, but God owned his soul. Later, Legree tempted Tom by ordering him to become an overseer—a job that required him to whip slaves to make them work harder. Tom refused, and secretly helped other slaves pick their cotton. Legree vowed to break Tom. He got his chance when two female slaves ran away; Tom seemed to know something about it, but would not tell (Stowe's Tom refused to be an "Uncle Tom"). Enraged, Legree ordered two strong male slaves to beat Tom to death. Tom prayed for his tormenters, who were so impressed by his faith that they later converted to Christianity. Stowe then arranged the plot so that word of Tom's death reached his old plantation back in Kentucky, making the white folks there see the error of their ways and free all their slaves. Thus, Tom's sacrificial death converted unbelievers and set the oppressed at liberty.

William Lloyd Garrison, abolitionist editor of *The Liberator*, hailed *UTC* for winning converts to the antislavery camp. Yet he challenged Stowe's characterization of Tom. Tom, wrote Garrison, was "willing to be 'led as a lamb to the slaugh-

<sup>5</sup>Samuel Otter, "Stowe and Race," in *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe*, ed. Cindy Weinstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 15–38.

<sup>6</sup>Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 455.

ter,' returning blessing for cursing, and anxious only for the salvation of his enemies."<sup>7</sup> This is Christian nonresistance. Well and good. But were blacks to bear this cross of nonviolence alone, or did Stowe likewise believe "in the duty of nonresistance for the white man, under all possible outrage and peril, as well as for the black man"? Did Stowe imply that whites may use violence to defend themselves, but blacks may not? Here perhaps is a connection between Stowe's *Uncle Tom* and the *Uncle Tom* of modern idiom. Stowe took Garrison's criticisms to heart in her second antislavery novel.

#### UNLOCKING *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

First, however, she had to answer critics from the proslavery side. They claimed that Stowe made slavery look much worse than it really was. *The Southern Literary Messenger* growled that *UTC* was not merely fiction but slander: she was guilty of bearing false witness against her Southern neighbors.<sup>8</sup> A southerner writing for the *New York Daily Times* found Stowe's representation of slavery "so fanciful that it should have been laid in some Oriental region, rather than amidst the sober and commonplace realities of the Plantation States."<sup>9</sup>

Stowe rose to the challenge. Not only would she defend her own work, she would put the slaveholders on the defensive. To do that she needed documentation, and plenty of it. With the help of an informal research team (her clergy brothers, antislavery activists, and countless readers) she gathered her evidence from around the country. Court cases and testimonials, ads for runaway slaves, sales and auctions, sermons and official statements from church meetings, eyewitness accounts—all were gathered, organized, and commented on by Stowe. In compiling this evidence, she found that slavery was much, much worse than she'd thought.

In 1853, Stowe's *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared. The first part defended the veracity of Stowe's characters and the events in *UTC*. It was not enough, however, to prove that her "anti-slavery fictions [were] truths." Stowe must also show "that pro-slavery facts are lies."<sup>10</sup> One such lie was that southern laws protected slaves from brutality. Stowe quoted from the verdict of a celebrated court case in which the judge ruled that "the power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect."<sup>11</sup> The legal system justified any bodily injury that a master inflicted upon a slave, even though that slave "was made as much in the image of God as ourselves" and shared the same "humanity [as] Jesus

<sup>7</sup>William Lloyd Garrison, unsigned review in *The Liberator*, March 26, 1852; also at <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/reviews/rere02at.html> (accessed October 25, 2010).

<sup>8</sup>Unsigned editorial, *Southern Literary Messenger*, October 1852; also <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/reviews/rere24at.html> (accessed October 25, 2010).

<sup>9</sup>Walpole, *New York Daily Times*, June 22, 1853; also <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/reviews/rere05bt.html> (accessed October 25, 2010).

<sup>10</sup>Cindy A. Weinstein, "Uncle Tom's Cabin and the South," in *Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 39–57.

<sup>11</sup>Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Arno, 1968) 133.

Christ.”<sup>12</sup> A Calvinist by birth, Stowe was not squeamish about original sin. She knew that slavery tempted slaveholders to sin by giving them absolute authority over their slaves. And human beings, sinful by nature, should never be trusted with absolute authority over others.

A second lie was that public opinion protected slaves in those rare instances when the law failed to do so. Stowe demonstrated that public opinion protected slave *owners*. She showed how in schools and families whites were taught to dehumanize blacks. Public opinion perpetuated the lies, for example, that blacks did not suffer physical pain as acutely as whites, that physical punishment was necessary to make blacks work, that blacks did not feel the pain of separation from family members in the same way whites did, and so on. Public opinion was no help to slaves.

The last part of *The Key* dealt with slavery and Christianity. Stowe charged that slavery was a form of heresy. “Is not the doctrine that men may lawfully sell the members of Christ, his body, his flesh and bones, for purposes of gain, as really a heresy as the denial of the divinity of Christ?”<sup>13</sup> she demanded. Slaveholders taught their slaves that God wills slaves to “have nothing but poverty and toil in this world” and that disobedient slaves will suffer both temporal punishment and eternal torment in hell. Stowe quoted one slaveholder as saying that religion was more effective for controlling his slaves than a whole wagonload of whips.<sup>14</sup>

---

*as a nineteenth-century woman, Stowe believed in the sacredness of family and saw slavery as a plague on all families, black and white*

---

Stowe now saw slavery as a systemic evil affecting both North and South. Not only must slavery be abolished in the South, but the North also must throw off the “system of caste.”<sup>15</sup> She called for the transformation of the entire society—church, courts, schools, business, politics, and family. Yes, family, for slavery was toxic to family life. Slavery meant separating families by sale, denigrating black marriage, and giving white men license to become sexual predators. White women, meanwhile, were supposed to pretend that they didn’t know where all those light-skinned slave babies came from. As a nineteenth-century woman, Stowe believed in the sacredness of family and saw slavery as a plague on all families, black and white. “I suffer exquisitely in writing these things,” Stowe lamented. “This horror, this nightmare abomination! Can it be in my country!” She felt as though “forced by some awful oath to disclose in court some family disgrace.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 407.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 481.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 494, 496.

<sup>16</sup>Charles Edward Stowe, *The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Compiled from Her Letters and Journals* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2004) 203.

Stowe closed *The Key* by appealing to her Christian readers: Look at the “mournful march of slave coffles...follow the bloody course of slave ships on your coast. What...does the Lamb of God think of all these things?”<sup>17</sup> She warned that in the last judgment, Christ will say, “I have been in the slave-prison—in the slave-coffle; I have been sold in your markets; I have toiled for naught in your fields; I have been smitten on the mouth in your courts of justice; I have been denied a hearing in my own Church, and ye cared not for it, Ye went, one to his farm, and another to his merchandise.’ And if ye shall answer, ‘When Lord?’ He shall say unto you, ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it to the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.’”<sup>18</sup>

Preparing *The Key* for publication made Stowe more radical. Once, she’d positioned herself as a moderate antislavery person, appealing to the average reader. But now she called on all Christians to seek “the entire abolition of slavery” and to break laws that supported it.<sup>19</sup>

#### FROM THE CABIN TO THE SWAMP

Stowe’s second antislavery novel showed her new radicalism. It was published in 1856 under the strange title, “*Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp.*” The swamp was the refuge of escaped slaves who did not go north; it also implied that the country was mired in slavery and sinking into war. As for the name “Dred,” Stowe did not refer to the famous trial of Dred Scott, the slave who claimed freedom by virtue of having lived in free states and territories (including Minnesota). Rather, Stowe invoked the name of an insurrectionist from a past slave rebellion. Stowe’s Dred was an escaped slave, plotting violence against the white masters.

Stowe took care to make the character of Dred contrast with that of Tom. Where Tom forgave, Dred swore vengeance. Tom endured slavery, but Dred fought it. Tom’s Christ-like behavior changed hearts, but Dred wanted to break chains. It has been much remarked that Stowe’s plot had Dred die before he could carry out his threats. Even so, she gave black agency larger place, no longer assuming that blacks must wait patiently for whites to repent.

In *Dred*, Stowe explored what it meant to be black, white, or brown in the antebellum South. We have already met the black hero, Dred. The brown hero was Harry, the child of a white master and a slave. Highly intelligent and skillful, Harry ran the family plantation. Compared to other slaves, he had a place of privilege. But when his wife was sexually harassed by Harry’s white half-brother, Harry confronted the fact that as a slave he lacked even the right to protect his own wife. Harry took his wife to Canada.

The white hero, Clayton, was a Southern lawyer whose conscience was trou-

<sup>17</sup>Stowe, *The Key*, 503.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 504.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 491.

bled by slavery. When he challenged the legal system, he became a pariah. When he tried to reform slavery by educating his slaves, he was brutally beaten. Clayton came to see the system as harmful to both whites and blacks and as corrupting both North and South. He too went to Canada.

In *Dred*, the white villain was Tom Gordon, plantation owner and half-brother to Harry. Tom Gordon loved to rule by fear, and slavery gave him ample opportunity. But Gordon's cruelty dehumanized him. Thus, in the slave system, everyone was a loser—even those who seemed to be in charge. Stowe later told a friend that the Tom Gordon character was her commentary on Southern pretensions of "being a higher and more elegant class—of being in fact the *only* class of gentleman & ladies." The myth of southern refinement "has been offensively and ridiculously paraded in the face of [our] northern people for many years, & they have been content to smile in silence."<sup>20</sup> Stowe would not maintain that false fiction.

---

*in Dred, Stowe exposed the hypocrisy of religious institutions that aped piety while condoning slavery*

---

In *Dred*, Stowe exposed the hypocrisy of religious institutions that aped piety while condoning slavery. In one scene, an outdoor revival service was in full swing. Religious sentiment ran high, and many people were on the verge of conversion. The suddenly a loud voice (which only the reader knows is Dred) cried out from the treetops. His long rant can be summarized by the words of the prophet Amos. "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.... Take away from me the noise of your songs.... But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream" (Amos 5:21–24). Coming as she did from the Beecher family of preachers and social reformers, Stowe exposed as hypocrisy the thought that one could be truly converted to Christianity and still own slaves.

In *Dred*, Stowe also satirized a minister's conference in which only one odd-ball minister dares to raise the issue of slavery. The miscreant is shushed, for his brother clergy must discuss more important issues, such as their scruples against dancing. Having grown up in a family of ministers, Stowe knew church politics well, and she was disgusted by the failure of organized religion to oppose slavery, and by slavery's power to corrupt the church. Indeed she came to see slavery as a greater menace to Christianity than any ancient heresy or modern skepticism.<sup>21</sup>

## ROMANTIC RACIALISM

Stowe hated slavery, yet her views on race were somewhat eclectic. She seems

<sup>20</sup>Letter of Harriet Beecher Stowe to Lady Byron, October 16, 1856, in the Schlesinger Collections, Beecher-Stowe Family Papers, microfilm folder 244, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

<sup>21</sup>Charles Stowe, *Life*, 266.

to have subscribed to the view called romantic racialism, which tried to account for racial differences without assuming the superiority of one race over another. Stowe may have been exposed to these views through Alexander Kinmont,<sup>22</sup> who taught in Cincinnati when Stowe lived there. In 1839, Kinmont published *Twelve Lectures on the Natural History of Man*. Kinmont saw each race as having its own distinctive traits. Kinmont held that Africans were, by nature, more emotional and intuitive than whites and therefore more receptive to religion. This made blacks (in Kinmont's view) morally superior to whites even though whites were (in Kinmont's view) more advanced intellectually. Today such views are rightly rejected, but in the nineteenth century, Kinmont was attempting to move away from outright claims to white superiority.

Romantic racialism is easy to find in *UTC*. The heartfelt worship by slaves on the Kentucky plantation contrasts sharply with the cold hypocrisy of white Christians. Throughout *UTC*, slaves and children tend to be better exemplars of Christian love than white adults. Stowe dealt not only with race but with gender. She saw women as being more spiritual than men, as having more highly developed moral faculties, and possessing finely tuned relational skills that men seemed to lack. Most important was her belief in motherhood as a universal bond of all women regardless of race. It was this bond of motherhood that stoked her outrage about the separation of slave families.

Like many antislavery activists, Stowe was guided by a Pauline sermon. "From one ancestor [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God, and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'in him we live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:26–28a). Stowe believed firmly that all races share a common humanity as God's creation, and that all people are created to seek and to find God in Christ. This spirit still breathes through Stowe's writing. As the bicentennial of her birth approaches (June 14, 2011), Stowe will be remembered as a Christian writer who, by the best lights she had at the time, called her country to repent and choose life. Though some of her views are outdated, she pointed toward freedom, and the world changed. ⊕

NANCY KOESTER is the author of *The Fortress Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States* (2007). Her current project is a religious biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe. She teaches religion on an adjunct basis at Augsburg College, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>22</sup>Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe, A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 209.