WORKS CITED


Stowe’s UNCLE TOM’S CABIN

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s best seller *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) has been heralded as the most controversial and most influential antislavery novel written in antebellum America. According to Josephine Donovan, Stowe’s principal intent in the book “was to persuade her audience that slavery was intolerable” (30). And the critical consensus generally supports this contention.

In a recent reassessment of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Richard Yarborough has noted that “although Stowe unquestionably sympathized with the slaves, her commitment to challenging the claim of black inferiority was frequently undermined by her own endorsement of racial stereotypes” (47). Because these stereotyped notions not only appear in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* but show up more frequently than perhaps Stowe had intended, it would seem that Stowe’s attitude toward chattel slavery, or rather how she pandered to her readers’ conflicting attitudes toward slavery, was ambivalent.

The use of racial stereotypes adds credibility to the long-standing notion that Stowe consciously made concessions to the South in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. As Forrest Wilson has pointed out, “the kindest, most philanthropic, and most upright characters were, with some minor exceptions, all Southerners and slave-holders” (276). Among white Southerners and slave owners featured in the novel, Mrs. Shelby and Augustine St. Clare—the former the wife of Tom’s first owner, and the latter Tom’s second master—are for the most part admirable characters. And the novel’s most despicable character, Simon Legree, is a New Englander from Vermont. Stowe herself had always thought that her novel depicted the favorable side of slavery, and the fact that she did so should have appeased the South. The typical Southern reaction, however, did not reflect such an awareness. Indeed, in the eyes of most contemporary Southerners (even those who had never read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) Stowe’s novel was an abomination, utterly false and therefore a full-fledged misrepresentation of the institution of slavery (Johnston 263).

Whereas, in one respect, Southern criticism regarding the veracity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was justified, most contemporary Southern readers of the novel
failed to give Stowe the credit she obviously sought. Still, in both overt and subtle ways, Stowe had consciously attempted to appease the South. One such concession in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, which has been overlooked by previous critics, is found in chapter 19 when Augustine St. Clare recounts to his wife Marie an incident in the past when he conquered an unsubmitting slave with kindness. He does this in response to Marie’s complaint about a lazy slave her father had once owned who did not want to work.

A sensitive, kind, and effeminate man, St. Clare purchases from his brother Alfred an unruly slave named Scipio. The slave had tried to run away into the swamp because he had been struck by one of Alfred’s cruel overseers, then was hunted like an animal, and shot by his pursuers. Proving to be basically intractable, Scipio is a slave who, in St. Clare’s words, “all the overseers and masters had tried their hands in vain” (253). Scipio had run away, St. Clare reports, because he “appeared to have the rude instinct of freedom in him” (254). Yet under the compassionate attention and care of St. Clare, his new master, Scipio becomes “tamed as submissive and tractable as heart could desire” (254). Once St. Clare has nursed the wounded Scipio back to health, he draws up manumission papers and offers the slave his freedom, which Scipio in turn rejects. Apparently self-conscious about Scipio’s rejection of freedom, St. Clare reports: The “foolish fellow tore the paper in two, and absolutely refused to leave me. I never had a braver, better fellow, trusty and true as steel” (254–55). In rejecting St. Clare’s offer, Scipio seems to have come to regard slavery as benevolent and being a slave under a caring and paternalistic master preferable to the uncertainties connected with freedom. Subsequently, Scipio, whom St. Clare has treated humanely and compassionately, becomes a Christian who is “as gentle as a child” (255). Moreover, St. Clare recognizes Scipio’s competence, assigning to him the responsibility of overseeing St. Clare’s lake property, and Scipio “did it capitally” (255). In Stowe’s character portrayal of Augustine St. Clare as a caring and compassionate master and of Scipio as a devoted and contented slave, her portraiture actually conforms closely to the familiar stereotype used to portray other African American slaves and their relationships with their masters that had previously been featured in the antebellum Southern novels such as John Pendleton Kennedy’s Swallow Barn (1832) and William Gilmore Simms’s The Yemassee (1835).

Yet in making this concession to her Southern readers, Stowe created a predicament for herself. Even though she presents Scipio’s character indirectly (St. Clare’s fond memories of him), Stowe seems to allow the considerations of her audience and the matter of political and social expediency to take precedence over honest and consistent portrayal of Scipio’s humanity. Even so, Stowe surely must have realized that in acknowledging Scipio’s trustworthiness and his capability in managing St. Clare’s property responsibly, she
was undermining the racial stereotype. Nor does it seem that Stowe’s contemporary readers likely perceived St. Clare’s ineffectuality to accomplish what he sets out to do—to free his slave—as a reflection of his own moral paralysis, a deliberate counterpoint that serves to enhance Scipio’s personal effectiveness. And not many of her readers, especially her Southern readers, perceived that Stowe may have created in St. Clare’s account about Scipio the disturbing reality that even under the most benevolent of circumstances, slavery is debilitating to the slave as well as to the master. The propaganda leveled against slavery in the Scipio segment is at best subtle, if it exists at all. Rather, in focusing on the slave’s individualized human traits, Stowe seems to have placed a higher premium on Scipio’s character portraiture, giving greater emphasis to her integrity as a literary artist than to the narrowly dogmatic sociopolitical agenda expected of a novelist with an indisputable abolitionist bias. In having St. Clare accentuate Scipio’s loyalty and selfless devotion, a dedication that the slave carries out to the fullest extent during a cholera epidemic by endangering his own health and consequently losing his life by caring for the ailing master, Stowe raises in the reader’s mind (and perhaps her own as well) the question of why a man of Scipio’s capability should have to remain a slave. No doubt, had Scipio lived, St. Clare would have felt obligated to insist that the slave to whom he had offered liberty once before, only to have it rejected, accept his deserved freedom this time.

In retrospect, it seems clear that Stowe had written herself into a quandary, one she had to find a way to resolve, especially if she intended to pacify her Southern readers. In continuing to use St. Clare as a mouthpiece, Stowe prevents the inevitable from occurring: She writes Scipio out of the plot, providing an outlet so that St. Clare does not have to extend freedom to his slave for a second time. It appears that Stowe had found yet another way to make peace with her proslavery readers, many of whom were Southerners, by awkwardly alleviating what now seems a bothersome contradiction and dilemma. But as a consequence Stowe, probably quite unintentionally, creates an ambivalent perspective about slavery. Stowe has St. Clare conclude his story about Scipio by declaring that “I never felt anybody’s loss more” (255), a sentiment that enabled Stowe to wrench Scipio back to stereotypical status, thereby capitulating to Southern expectations regarding race. She anticipated her contemporary Southern reader’s reaction that Scipio should not be regarded as a human being and transformed him into an object of sentimental pathos. And in converting Scipio from a character of viable human potential into what amounts to one who is pathetic and inconsequential, Stowe confirms what seems to have been her intention all along—to proffer yet another conciliatory gesture to the Southern readers of Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

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NOTES

1. A similar viewpoint was expressed by Edmund Wilson, who observed that Stowe, “if anything leans over backwards in trying to make it plain that the New Englanders are as much to blame as the South and to exhibit Southerners in a favorable light” (6–7).

2. For instance, Louis S. McCord, who reviewed Uncle Tom’s Cabin in the Southern Quarterly Review, voiced the familiar Southern reaction, designating the novel “‘the loathsome rakings of a foul fancy’” (qtd. in Hedrick 232).

WORKS CITED


Thoreau’s WALDEN

Biblical allusion in Walden (1854) has generated considerable critical notice over the past three decades, encompassing examination of numerous individual passages along with general analysis of Thoreau’s rhetorical strategies (see, for instance, Ensor, Lang, Cook, and Jacobs). Thoreau’s borrowings from a text regarded by his audience as a repository of spiritual truth enable him to launch ironic attacks on his neighbors’ “mistake[s]” in living, as well as to invoke indirect authority for his own, far from conventional, revelations (5). Notwithstanding the existing body of critical comment, one of the most prominent biblical allusions—what readers have consistently identified as a key moment in the book—has received less critical attention than its centrality warrants.

The famous line describing the spring thawing of Walden Pond, “Walden was dead and is alive again” (3111), derives almost word for word from the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15.11–32. The phrase suits Thoreau’s immediate purposes ideally, capturing the mixture of ecstasy, reverence, wonder, and triumph with which he greets the rebirth of nature. Despite the obvious rightness of tone and sentiment in the appropriated language, however, the scriptural context evokes associations that might seem irrelevant, even antithetical, to Thoreau’s purposes. He is echoing a father’s celebration of his