

Mrs. Stowe's Uncle Tom

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There are now two Uncle Toms—the original Uncle Tom, the hero of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the current symbol of defamation and abuse, the "Uncle Tom" who adopts a demeaning inferior status in his relations with the dominant white. Each is associated with a different phase in the struggle for black freedom and equality. When *Uncle Tom's Cabin* first appeared—serially in 1851–52 and in book form in 1852—it became an important event in the struggle to free the Negro and the nation from slavery. Over three hundred thousand copies of the book were sold in the United States in the first year of its publication, and it has been estimated that total sales in that year, including translations and English editions published abroad, amounted to an astonishing 2.5 million. Originally blacks were at one with whites in their approval of Uncle Tom. The Call issued for the National Negro Conference in 1853 in Rochester, New York, concluded the list of reasons "for our union, cooperation and action" with "the propitious awakening to the fact of our condition at home and abroad, which followed the publication of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'" Josiah Henson, the escaped slave whose life story influenced Stowe, wrote in the enlarged edition of his *Autobiography* (1876), "I have been called 'Uncle Tom,' and I feel proud of the title." And he added, "I believe her [Stowe's] book was the beginning of the glorious end." Today the meaning of Uncle Tom has been reversed under the influence of the later struggle to free black Americans from the inherited disabilities of their slave origin, the failure of Reconstruction, and the long frustrating delays in achieving that equal status as free men which the end of the Civil War held out as a promise.

When Richard Wright gave the title *Uncle Tom's Children* to a work of fiction in 1936, he assumed that the pejorative implications of "Uncle Tom" would be generally apparent. The new meaning has for practical purposes replaced the old.

The two conceptions of the character are so diametrically opposed that they exclude one another; but as the new meaning has taken over, the tendency of scholars has been not to restore the original character but rather the reverse, to reinterpret the novel and the character in harmony with the present use. J. C. Furnas in *Goodbye to Uncle Tom* (1956) contends that the unflattering stereotypes of the slave Negroes are a product of abolitionist writers and that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* succeeded largely because it was "compounded of the misconceptions, Southern and Northern, the wrongheadedness, distortions and wishful thinkings about Negroes in general and American Negroes in particular that still plague us today. They might not plague us quite so sore if Mrs. Stowe had not so persuasively formulated and frozen them." Furnas speculates that "the current meanings of the epithet may well have grown, sub- or supra-logically, from the Negroes' general uneasiness about the overtones of Mrs. Stowe's irresponsibly sententious book and the crude plays concocted from it." Similar views are expressed by Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman in *Time on the Cross* (1974). The authors accuse Stowe and other antebellum critics of slavery of having misrepresented the qualities of slaves because of their "racist myopia" and of having perpetrated myths which continue to hold blacks to their cross "by the spike of racism"—"myths that turned diligent and efficient workers into lazy loafers and bunglers, that turned love of family into disregard for it, that turned those who struggled for self-improvement in the only way they could into 'Uncle Toms.'" As social scientists, the authors are impressed "by this exceptional power of ideology to obliterate reality . . . for with few exceptions they were all racists."

These pronouncements seriously misrepresent the argument of those whom they judge. The antebellum observers and critics of slavery did indeed note shiftlessness, prevarication, evasiveness, and the like among slaves—these were common firsthand observations—but they did not consider these qualities as evidence of inherent character defects in the Negro but rather of the debasing effects of slavery. "Slavery robs [the slave] of his moral force," wrote William Channing in *Slavery* (1835), and he believed that even the known horrors of slavery "are not to be named, in comparison with this extinction of the proper consciousness of a

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human being, with the degradation of a man into a brute." Frederick Law Olmstead concluded after his extended journeys through the South that civilization and Christianity imposed by force on the slave or acquired by example "but poorly compensated for the effect of the systematic withdrawal from them of all the usual influences which tend to nourish the moral nature and develop the intellectual faculties, in savages as well as in civilized freemen."¹ From the innumerable firsthand reports which make up the bulk of Olmstead's books emerges an indictment of slavery and a refutation of the charge that the deficiencies of the slaves are inherent. Olmstead quotes a slave owner on the corrupting influence of slavery: "They will lie, they will steal, and take advantage of me in every way they dare. Of course they will, if they are slaves." Other owners confirmed his impression that in spite of great handicaps slaves often managed to acquire the white man's skills—for example, the slave who became a good carpenter while assisting on a building project, whose owner commented, "I think niggers is somehow nat'rally ingenious, more so'n white folks," and the one who learned to read at night after work with the help of the owner's sons, to the admiration of the owner himself, "It didn't seem to me any white man could have done that; does it to you now?" Among the charges of Fogel and Engerman against the critics of slavery was that "because of a veil of racial and class biases" they were "prevented from seeing the real content of black family life." On the contrary, these writers were saying that the refusal of the South to recognize the legality of slave marriages and the threat, and not infrequently the reality, of family separation through sale resulted in the mutilation of the naturally strong family feeling of Negroes. Frances Kemble is singled out for special criticism for having referred to the relationship between slave parents and children as "the connection between the animal and its young." Kemble actually is expressing the debasing of slave family relations as she had observed them: she pleaded, in vain, with her husband and his overseer to allow more than three weeks after a birth before sending the mother out for regular work as a field hand. Her *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation, 1838-1839* (1863) reveals the shock of her first intimate experience with slave life, but she reports on the slaves' capacity for improvement with encouragement and reveals her growing respect for some of their qualities. She is deeply moved, for example, by the dignity of the funeral service for a dead slave performed by another slave and ends her account with indignation: "Think . . . of that man London, who in spite of all the bitter barriers in his way, has learned to read, had read his Bible, [and] teaches

1. Olmstead spent fourteen months on two journeys to the South and reported his observations in the *New York Daily Times*. Full accounts of his journeys appeared in three books: *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (1856), *A Journey through Texas* (1857), and *A Journey in the Back Country* (1860). *The Cotton Kingdom*, a condensation of the three books, appeared in 1861.

it to his unfortunate fellows. . . . Like them, subject to the driver's lash; like them, the helpless creature of his master's despotic will, without a right or hope in this dreary world. . . . How can we keep this man in such a condition? How is such a cruel sin of injustice to be answered?" The revisionist historians (victims, perhaps, of their own kind of ideological myopia?) have missed the underlying argument of the critics of slavery, that the Negro's defects are a product of slavery, and that he deserves the equality and freedom promised by American political principles and the Christian faith.

This is essentially Stowe's position. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a series of variations on the theme of the deforming power of slavery on a decent and capable race. Far from having created and sympathetically promoted the "Uncle Tom" of modern infamy, she deplored what she called the "cringing subserviency which is one of the most baleful effects of slavery." She was aware of other stereotypes which the white masters imposed on their slaves. The kind slave owner Mr. Shelby calls Eliza's little boy "Jim Crow" and has him perform demeaning tricks to amuse his guest. The slave dealer in New Orleans entertains and threatens the slaves to forced merriment so that they may appear as the happy, unthinking creatures which Southern propaganda made them out to be. In the St. Clare household, Mrs. St. Clare, the epitome of the conventional Southern view of racial inferiority, opposes her husband's conviction that the flaws of the slaves are a product of the conditions of slavery: "He says their faults are all owing to us, and that it would be cruel to make the fault and punish it too. He says we shouldn't do any better, in their place; just as if one could reason from them to us, you know." "They are a degraded race," she continues, "and always will be, and there isn't any help for them."

Stowe's unmistakable disapproval of Mrs. St. Clare's opinions raises doubts about the grounds on which the charge of racism is founded. The accusation may ultimately rest on the fact that Stowe accepted the notion that there were differences between the races. This was an almost universal opinion in her day. Matthew Arnold, for example, was to write in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), "Science has now made visible to everyone the great and pregnant elements of difference which lie in every race." Stowe's views of the Negro were highly impressionistic. There are no human qualities which she denied to either race, but she associated certain characteristics more with one race than the other. A few differences she attributed to historical and cultural forces of long standing: Eva stood for "the Saxon, born of ages of cultivation," Topsy for "the Afric, born of ages of oppression." There were certain qualities with which she believed the blacks were especially endowed. She was impressed by their strong family ties, and the separation of families was for her an unforgivable tragedy of slavery and played an important part in her narrative. Depicting the distress of Tom and Chloe at his being sold, she

remarks, "all the instinctive affections of that race are peculiarly strong. Their local attachments are very abiding. They are not naturally daring and enterprising, but home-loving and affectionate." She attributed to them a strong aesthetic sense: "The negro, it must be remembered, is an exotic of the most gorgeous and superb countries in the world, and he has, deep in his heart, a passion for all that is splendid, rich, and fanciful." She was much taken by their singing, especially of their hymns, "for the negro mind, impassioned and imaginative, always attaches itself to hymns and expressions of a vivid and pictorial nature." She attributed to them a strong inclination to religion, and St. Clare observes that if many slaves are less "animalized" by their exploitation than English factory workers, it is because "the negro is naturally more impressible to religious sentiments than the white." She seemed drawn to the colorful, poetic, religious experiences of the Negro, so different from the cold doctrinaire Calvinism of her early years from which she had liberated herself. It has not escaped her critics, however, that George Harris, who makes a daring escape to Canada, is light of color, has white blood "from one of the proudest families in Kentucky," and had "inherited a set of fine European features, and a high, indomitable spirit." Tom, the pure black, does not attempt to flee the indignities of his slave condition. This, of course, is not the point of Stowe's comparison. The story of the escape of George and Eliza grew out of Stowe's outrage against the fugitive slave laws; Tom's story grew out of her indignation over slavery itself. Each episode calls for its own kind of courage and heroism, and the distinctive merit of Tom is that with no advantages beyond those of innate character he emerges superior to those who enslave him. "Such a fellow as Tom, here," exclaims St. Clare, "is—is a moral miracle."

Stowe tended, in fact, to romanticize the Negro race. "The scenes of this story," she wrote in the preface to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "lie among a race hitherto ignored by the association of polite and refined society; an exotic race, whose ancestors, born beneath a tropic sun, brought with them, and perpetuated to their descendants, a character so essentially unlike the hard dominant Anglo-Saxon race, as for many years to have won from it only misunderstanding and contempt." In a long digression she expressed hopes that their distinctive virtues would eventually carry them to eminence and bring about a regeneration of mankind. Following a description of Tom in his new dress at St. Clare's, looking "respectable enough to be a bishop of Carthage," she observes:

If ever Africa shall show an elevated and cultivated race,—and come it must, some time, her turn to figure in the great drama of human improvement,—life will awake there with a gorgeousness and splendor of which our cold western tribes faintly have conceived. In that far-off mystic land of gold, and gems, and spices, and waving palms, and wondrous flowers, and miraculous fertility,

will awake new forms of art, new styles of splendor; and the negro race, no longer despised and trodden down, will, perhaps, show forth some of the latest and most magnificent revelations of human life. Certainly they will, in their gentleness, their lowly docility of heart, their aptitude to repose on a superior mind and rest on a higher power, their childlike simplicity of affection, and facility of forgiveness. In all these they will exhibit the highest form of the peculiarly *Christian life*, and, perhaps, as God chasteneth whom he loveth, he hath chosen poor Africa in the furnace of affliction, to make her the highest and noblest in that kingdom which he will set up, when every other kingdom has been tried, and failed; for the first shall be last, and the last first.

She was not proposing to wait for this golden age, however. She found in the differences between the black slaves and their white masters no reason to justify an inferior status in the commonwealth. She showed them to be fully capable of learning the white man's skills and of profiting by the same education, which she wanted them to share. She made a plea for equal education in a special appeal to children in her leave-taking at the end of the final installment in *The National Era*: "Never, if you can help it, let a colored child be shut out from school or treated with neglect and contempt on account of his color. Remember the sweet example of Little Eva and try to feel the same regard for all that she did. Then, when you grow up, I hope the foolish and unchristian prejudice against people merely on account of their complexion will be done away with." Every writer of whatever age is dependent on the ideas and knowledge and sensibilities of his own day and, to that extent, is limited by them. Given the choices available to her, we cannot charge Stowe with any serious or crippling defect of vision. The limitations of her age did not dwarf her sympathies, or distort her judgment on the main issues, or interfere with the generosity of her sentiments toward the blacks. She wanted them treated as free and equal and without discrimination.

Misrepresentations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* have a better chance of becoming established now because the novel is no longer much read and because it has fallen in critical esteem. Literary historians and critics concede that the theatrical adaptations, which continued well into this century, popularized a cheapened version of the story and characters, but in general most of them are condescending and speak slightly of the qualities of the novel—it is sentimental, melodramatic, uninformed, and badly structured, and the characters are, "by any critical standard, absurdities."² Opinions like these and the revisionist views of the novel's

2. There were discerning readers from the outset who recognized artistic and technical flaws in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but who, unlike many recent critics, regarded these as of secondary importance when measured against the universally acknowledged power of the novel. Thus, George Sand, in a preface to de la Bédollière's French translation, *La Case du Père Tom* (Paris, 1853), acknowledged the faults but maintained that the novel triumphed over critical

meaning support one another. The editor of *The Annotated Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1964) writes, "That it was effective in helping to abolish slavery must be conceded. Offsetting that, however, is the fact that it also perpetuated false stereotypes of the Negro." It is a thoroughly conventional judgment. Of recent critics of any stature, only Edmund Wilson seems to have exercised sufficient independence to respond to the novel uninhibited by established reservations and stock responses:

To expose oneself in maturity to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may therefore prove a startling experience. It is a much more impressive work than one has ever been allowed to suspect. The first thing that strikes one about it is a certain eruptive force. . . . Out of a background of undistinguished narrative, inelegantly and carelessly written, the characters leap into being with a vitality that is all the more striking for the ineptitude of the prose that presents them. These characters—like those of Dickens, at least in his early phase—express themselves a good deal better than the author expresses herself. The Shelbys and George Harris and Eliza and Aunt Chloe and Uncle Tom project themselves out of the void. They come before us arguing and struggling, like real people who cannot be quiet. We feel that the dams of discretion of which Mrs. Stowe has spoken [in her preface] have been burst by a passionate force that, compressed, has been mounting behind them, and which, liberated, has taken the form of a flock of lamenting and ranting, prattling and preaching characters, in a drama that demands to be played to the end.³

The power to produce such a response is that of fiction and drama, whatever Stowe's limitations as a narrative artist. It was certainly not mere skill in reporting or propaganda, however timely the theme or urgent the message, that gripped the attention and emotions of two continents. Because, however, the novel was attacked in the South on the grounds that Stowe was ignorant of and mistaken about the facts of slavery, she wrote *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) to confound her critics. It was ill advised, she admitted, "to disentangle the glittering web of fiction"; but the novel "had a purpose entirely transcending the artistic one," and since it was judged as a reality, "as a reality it may be proper that it should be defended." In spite of some scattered errors, *A Key* was

strictures by its hold on the emotions: "ce livre, mal fait selon les règles du roman moderne en France, passionne tout le monde et triomphe de toutes les critiques" (p. iii). She accepted the faults as one might those of someone who inspired affection: "Si le meilleur éloge qu'on puisse faire de l'auteur, c'est de l'aimer, le plus vrai qu'on puisse faire du livre, c'est d'en aimer les défauts" (p. i). Sand's critical strategy is analogous to that of Samuel Johnson in rejecting the traditional criticism that Shakespeare lacked art: "there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature."

3. Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore* (New York, 1962), pp. 5-6.

an impressive collection of facts and illustrations—Frances Kemble testified to its “truth and moderation as a representation of the slave system in the United States.” It was nevertheless a misdirected effort since it could never persuade those who did not approve of her novel and was not needed to convince those who did. As a work of fiction, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* needed only to make vivid and convincing that, given the nature of slavery in the United States, such things as are delineated in the novel are probable, in fact inevitable. As a protest against the institution of slavery, its persuasive power came not only from the sympathy she aroused for the sufferings of her characters nor from her editorial asides and propagandistic excursions but from the strong implications growing out of the narrative that slavery violated the most fundamental and solemn principles of American government, and of Christianity. The novel emerges from these principles like a plant out of the soil in which it is rooted.

Chattel slavery rested on several ineradicable contradictions. One of these was the anomaly of the slave as property and as a human being. “It is difficult,” wrote Olmstead, “to handle simply as property a creature possessing human passions and human feelings . . . while, on the other hand, the absolute necessity of dealing with property as a thing, greatly embarrasses a man in any attempt to treat it as a person.” To the Southern argument that abolition was an infringement on the right of property, Hinton Helper, in *The Impending Crisis* (1857), replied, “we do not recognize property in man.” Enormities are inflicted upon slaves by their owners, wrote Theodore Dwight Weld in *American Slavery as It Is* (1839), because “he who holds human beings as his bona fide property, regards them as property and not as *persons*.” And it is thus that Josiah Henson explains his master's cruelty: “I was property,—not a man, not a father, not a husband. And the laws of property and self-interest, not of humanity and love, bore sway.” This issue, raised by almost every abolitionist, was also one of great complexity for the Southern courts. Helen Catterall's survey, *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro* (1926), contains a number of decisions supporting the human rights of slaves, but on the whole it is the concept of property rights that prevails, and whatever the courts might occasionally do, legislators regularly acted to preserve chattel rights. To be bought and sold like any commodity, the slave of necessity had to be regarded as an object, a thing. To reduce a man to a thing requires the exercise of power, and therein lay a further contradiction within American slavery. The Declaration of Independence affirmed the equality of all men with respect to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; and the Constitution provided for both a separation of powers so that no one man or group of men could exercise complete arbitrary authority and for a Bill of Rights in order to preserve the essential freedoms. Yet slavery gave to individual slave owners the kind of power once possessed only by absolute monarchs and

feudal lords, and then protected the arrangement by law. Replying to Stephen Douglas in Chicago on 10 July 1858, Lincoln said, "Arguments . . . that the inferior race are to be treated with as much allowance as they are capable of enjoying; and that as much is to be done for them as their condition will allow—what are these arguments? They are the arguments that kings have made for enslaving the people in all ages of the world." Kings and tyrants had been abolished in the state, only to be revived on the plantation. The logic of slavery, Channing affirmed, was not that of the Declaration or the Constitution; it was "the logic of despotism." And he continued, "we must have studied history in vain, if we need to be told that they will be continually the prey of this absolute power." There was, finally, a contradiction more important to more people in Stowe's day than in our own, and more important to Stowe than to some other abolitionists: slavery was an anomaly in a Christian society. "What! own a spiritual being," wrote Channing, "a being made to adore God, and who is to outlive the sun and the stars!" This dilemma was at the center of some uneasiness in the South in the matter of the religious education and church attendance of slaves. The usual solution, Kemble reported, was a compromise between "how much they may learn to become better slaves, and how much they may not learn, lest they cease to be slaves at all."

These primary themes of antislavery thought are woven into the texture of Stowe's novel. In the announcements of "a new story by Mrs. H. B. Stowe" which appeared in *The National Era* for 8 and 15 May 1851, the title is given as "Uncle Tom's Cabin, or the Man that was a thing." With the first installment of 5 June 1851, the title was changed to "Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life Among the Lowly," and this is the title which appeared on the book in 1852 and by which it has since been known. But the original subtitle was firmly in Stowe's mind, especially during the early portions of the novel. Of the handsome and capable George Harris she writes, "Nevertheless, as this young man was in the eye of the law not a man, but a thing, all these superior qualifications were subject to the control of a vulgar narrow-minded, tyrannical master." The paradox enters ironically in chapter headings. The first chapter, in which the humane Shelby agrees to sell Tom to the unctuous slave trader Hayley, is entitled, "In which the Reader Is Introduced to a Man of Humanity." The heading of the chapter in which Tom learns that he has been sold reads, "Showing the Feelings of Living Property on Changing Owners," and the one in which Tom is taken away, "The Property Is Carried Off." The chapter in which Tom first appears is taken up largely with a heart-warming sentimental picture of Tom's family life but contains a dramatic change of scene in the last few lines in which we see Hayley and Shelby completing the sale of Tom, an act which shatters forever this endearing group and confirms Tom's status as chattel. Tom's trip down the river is full of ironic allusions to property rights in man. "La Belle

Rivière . . . was floating gayly down the stream, under a brilliant sky, the stars and stripes of free America waving and fluttering overhead. . . . All was full of life, buoyant and rejoicing;—all but Hayley's gang, who were stored, with other freight, on the lower deck." Lucy, the sorrowing slave who has learned that her child had been secretly sold, is "the poor suffering thing that lay like a crushed reed on the boxes; the feeling, living, bleeding, yet immortal *thing*, which American state law coolly classes with the bundles, bales, and boxes, among which she is lying." There is no more cutting statement of Stowe's feelings about the fugitive slave laws than the ironic observation on Hayley's discomfort on discovering that this valuable slave had leaped overboard at night and drowned herself: "there was no help for it, as the woman had escaped into a state which *never will* give up a fugitive,—not even at the demand of the whole glorious Union."

The closely related issue of power, almost never treated ironically, becomes increasingly important and culminates in the conflict between Tom and Legree. It is debated between Augustine St. Clare, who found he could not endure the running of the family slave plantation, and his brother Alfred, who successfully took over its management. Alfred considers the Declaration of Independence as "one of Tom Jefferson's pieces of French sentiment and humbug." "Never fear for us," he tells Augustine, "possession is our nine points. We've got the power. This subject race . . . is down and shall *stay* down." But Augustine does fear for the South because he is convinced, like other Southern critics of the peculiar institution, that irrespective of what it does to the slaves, slavery would undermine and destroy the slave-owning whites. He feels powerless in the face of the brutality of other slave owners: "They have absolute control; they are irresponsible despots." With his death, Stowe exposes the fallacy in the argument of the kind and indulgent master. A decent slave owner masks the evil of the institution for at his death, "nothing remains. The number of those men who know how to use irresponsible power humanely and generously is small. Everybody knows this, and the slave knows it best of all." There is no redeeming form of slavery, St. Clare contends, for slavery can exist only because the strong have power over the weak: "I defy anybody on earth to read our slave-code, as it stands in our law books, and make anything else of it. Talk of the *abuses* of slavery! Humbug! The *thing itself* is the essence of all abuse."

Stowe's religious bias permeates the novel, and it is readily misunderstood. The role of the church among blacks has been mistrusted as a tranquilizer for black discontent, an attitude ironically expressed by Richard Wright in his account of the religion of the mother in the story "Bright and Morning Star": "Long hours of scrubbing for a few cents a day had taught her who Jesus was, what a great boon it was to cling to Him, to be like Him, and suffer without a mumbling word." Stowe

herself does not promote the virtues of institutional Christianity in her book. She exposes several times the sophistry in the attempts of the Southern clergy to support slavery through Scripture. In her second novel, *Dred* (1856), she has an account of a meeting of clergy, from both North and South, to discuss the breach in the Presbyterian church between the New School which came out against slavery and the Old. Not a single clergyman escapes unscathed except the pious Dixon, who later is driven out of the South. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* only the Quakers earn Stowe's unalloyed admiration. She appreciates why someone like the fugitive George rejects the consolations of his wife's Christian belief: "They tell us that the Bible is on their side; certainly all the power is." St. Clare speaks out in indignation against the cant of the churches: "Is that religion which is less scrupulous, less generous, less just, less considerate for man, than even my own ungodly, worldly, blind nature?" Stowe was aware that the Christian church had largely failed in the matter of slavery, but the principles of the Christian faith were for her the "higher law" to which one could appeal in light of the failure of the American democratic political institutions to include the slave. In the concluding section of "The Freedman's Dream: A Parable," which appeared in *The National Era* on 1 August 1850, she wrote, "Of late there have seemed to be many in this nation, who seem to think that there is no standard of right and wrong higher than an act of Congress, or an interpretation of the United States Constitution." Of the "heathenish Kentuckian" who comes to Eliza's rescue in her river-crossing over the ice, she remarks that he "had not been instructed in his constitutional relations, and consequently was betrayed into acting in a sort of Christianized manner, which, if he had been better situated and more enlightened, he would not have been left to do." The Christian faith offered the slave something more than consolation and belief in a happier future life. It provided assurance, which the Declaration of Independence seemed powerless to do for the Negro slave, that all men are one as children of God. Henson reports in his autobiography that from his first sermon he learned that Christ died "for every man. . . . I date my conversion and my awakening to a new life—a consciousness of power and destiny superior to anything I had before conceived of—from this day so memorable to me." Tom, we are told, had been converted at a camp meeting. Religion consoles him in adversity, but more than that, it is the source of his moral strength because it gives him assurance that he is a man equal to others.

The character of Tom has the proportions of a mythic figure. His story has little of the melodrama of the secondary plot for his heroism in meeting the trials of slavery is manifested not in outward risks and adventures but in inner strength. In Simon Legree, Tom's final adversary, Stowe provides a perfect antithesis, an ultimate image of what slavery must do to the master who takes advantage of his position and

uses his power without restraint; for Legree is an ambitious Vermonter, not a Southerner, an owner, not an overseer, and a product of the raw, final phase of slavery in the cotton plantations of the deep South. Legree bends every effort to brutalize Tom as though of necessity to prove that he and the South are right about Negroes and slavery, and Tom remains firm in his humanity and so disproves the sordid myth of his oppressor. It is Legree who is dehumanized by the institution of slavery. Tom emerges from the struggle as an example not simply of a black Christian slave, but of heroic man in the face of intimidating and humiliating power.

Tom comes ill prepared by his past for his final trial. His situation at the beginning of the novel is happy; many a nineteenth-century factory worker would have envied his lot. But Shelby's plantation is not "the oft-fabled poetic legend of a patriarchal institution" because "so long as the law considers all these human beings . . . only as so many *things* belonging to a master . . . so long it is impossible to make anything beautiful or desirable in the best regulated administration of slavery." The story begins with the sale of Tom to a demanding creditor, and his exile from his old Kentucky home begins. Tom conducts himself honorably and with dignity. He will not use his pass contrary to his word in order to escape, and if the sale will save Shelby's estate, he will accept the sacrifice for the common good. But in Eliza's case he recognizes a difference and urges her to escape if she can to avoid separation from her boy: "'tan't in *natur* for her to stay," he says. He is saved from the humiliation of being sold in a slave market only because he rescues a small child from drowning and is bought by Augustine St. Clare, the child's grateful father. St. Clare's home proves to be another haven, though not in essence a happy one. Tom is comforted by the love of Eva and the decency of St. Clare, but he cannot suppress his sorrow at being separated from his family and likens himself to Joseph in Egypt. St. Clare's home is like a hothouse that nourishes exotic blooms. St. Clare, powerless against the slavery he loathes, escapes, resigned and sardonic, into an urbane melancholy. His wife, neurotic and petulant, shares none of her husband's feelings and convictions. Eva, mature beyond her years, delicate and haunted by death, possesses an extreme sensitivity to the plight of the slaves, whom she embraces without the reserve of her abolitionist aunt Ophelia. It is as though a vague malady permeates the house, an infection from the social illness of slavery which surrounds them and from which they cannot isolate themselves. And in the end, this febrile haven will break Tom's heart. In spite of promptings from his Northern cousin, St. Clare puts off acting on his promise to free Tom, and one day at his club St. Clare intercedes in a senseless fight and is mortally wounded. Stowe makes him a victim of his environment, of that "haughty, overbearing irritability" which Kemble observed in Southern gentlemen and their impulsive quickness to pick a quarrel. His death

places all the slaves at Mrs. St. Clare's mercy, and Tom finds himself at last in a slave warehouse and is sold to Simon Legree.

At Legree's plantation Tom reaches the first circle of the slave hell. On his arrival, looking among the field hands returning for supper, he sees "only sullen, scowling, imbruted men, and feeble, discouraged women . . . who, treated in every way like brutes, had sunk as nearly to their level as it was possible for human beings to do." Legree's represents the cotton plantation in its most malign aspects. Such plantations were a product of the rapid growth of cotton culture in the deep South, from approximately one hundred seventy-five thousand bales in 1810 to 4.5 million in 1860. The intensive slave labor which produced this boom brought about an extraordinary migration, involving hundreds of thousands of slaves in slightly more than thirty years (three hundred thousand from Virginia alone, according to Kenneth Stamp), from the older slave states to the new cotton frontier. Whatever tolerable accommodations had become established in the Old South after some two centuries of experience with slavery, they were badly shattered by the upheaval of the slave migrations, the size and remoteness of the plantations, the factorylike use of labor, and the isolation of the overseer. Kemble reports that under these conditions anything could happen, "inasmuch as the testimony of a black is never taken against a white; and upon this plantation of ours, and a thousand more, the overseer is the *only* white man, so whence should come the testimony to any crime of his?" Stowe emphasizes the remoteness of Legree's plantation. Cassy, Legree's mistress, tells Tom, "Here you are, on a lone plantation, ten miles from any other, in the swamps; not a white person here, who could testify if you were burned alive. . . . There's no law here, of God or man, that can do you, or any of us, the least good."

Only his religious faith restrains Tom from abandoning himself to despair or becoming brutalized like Sambo under Legree's physical assaults and his abusive ridicule of Tom's religion and his humane impulses. At Shelby's and at St. Clare's Tom's religion was an asset for him and for his masters, but from Legree's point of view, it is a serious liability. On board a small boat on the Red River, Legree, while divesting Tom of his goods and possessions, discovers a Methodist hymn book and learns that Tom belongs to a church: "Well, I'll soon have *that* out of you. I have none o' yer bawling, praying, singing niggers on my place: so remember . . . I'm your church now!" Tom calls to mind the text, "Fear not! for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by my name, Thou art MINE!" It is a challenge to the entire rationale of chattel slavery. Tom's Christianity expresses itself in acts of love and compassion, and on this score too it offends Legree. He decides to give Tom a lesson in hardness and orders him to whip an ailing woman whom he had assisted in the field. Tom refuses. "Didn't you never hear out of yer Bible," shouts Legree, "'Servants, obey yer masters'? Ain't I yer master? Didn't I pay

down twelve hundred dollars, cash, for all there is inside yer ol, cussed black shell? Ain't yer mine, now, body and soul?" But this time Tom will not silently allow the blasphemy that what belongs to God can ever be owned by man: "No! no! no! my soul an't yours, Mas'r! You haven't bought it—ye can't buy it. It's been bought and paid for by one that is able to keep it." This defiance brings on Tom his first severe lashing at the hands of Sambo and Quimbo.

As the confrontations with Legree become more painful and humiliating, Tom struggles against despair. What Tom fears is not physical pain or death but the loss of his faith, his goodness, and his humanity. He tells Cassy, who has come to help him in his pain, "I've lost everything in *this* world, and it's clean gone forever,—and now I can't lose Heaven too; no, I can't get wicked besides all. . . . If I get to be as hard-hearted as that ar' Sambo, and as wicked, it won't make much odds to me how I come so; it's the bein' so,—that ar's what I'm dreadin'." Cassy argues on a later occasion that it isn't in flesh and blood to love such enemies as Legree; "No, Misse," Tom tells her, "it isn't, but *He* gives us the *Victory*." The text that most moves him when Cassy reads to him from his Bible is, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." But Tom will not beg forgiveness of Legree upon demand: "Mas'r, I know you can do dreadful things, but after ye've killed the body there an't no more you can do. And O, there's eternity after that. . . . I'll give ye all the work of my hands, all my time, all my strength; but my soul I won't give up to mortal man. I will hold on to the Lord, and put his commands before all,—die or live." Legree makes one more attempt to taunt Tom out of his faith. He comes upon him one night when Tom is in a dejection so deep that he has put aside his Bible: "Well, old boy, you find your religion don't work, it seems. . . . Come, Tom, don't you think you'd better join my church. . . . You see the Lord an't going to help you; if he had been, he wouldn't have let *me* get you! . . . Ye'd better hold to me; I'm somebody, and can do something." But for Tom, even an uncertain faith is better than the salvation Legree has to offer: "No, Mas'r, I'll hold on. The Lord may help me, or not help; but I'll hold on to him, and believe him to the last." From the anguish of this incident Tom is saved by a mystical vision of Christ crowned with thorns. All soon become aware of a change in him; he seems at peace and exerts himself to help the debased creatures that surround him, and he is indifferent to Legree's brutality: "The blows fell now only on the outer man, and not, as before, on the heart. Tom stood perfectly submissive; and yet Legree could not hide from himself that his power over his bond thrall was somehow gone."

The final confrontation comes with Cassy's escape. Legree is sure Tom knows what has happened, but Tom refuses to divulge his secret and is aware that this must be the end: "I know, Mas'r, but I can't tell

anything. *I can die!*" Tom's martyrdom increasingly takes on the character of an imitation of Christ, reaching its final identification in Tom's forgiveness of Legree: "Ye poor miserable critter! there an't no more ye can do! I forgive ye, with all my soul!" And whether designedly or not, Tom's prayer for the penitent Sambo and Quimbo recalls the two thieves on the cross. These associations are consistent with what Stowe's narrative implies: only a near Christ-like faith could preserve in Tom a love of others and a belief in himself in the face of ruthless total power bent on brutalizing and dehumanizing its victim. With no other resources, Tom triumphs over Legree and thus becomes one of those who "broke the circle of Evil and reaffirmed the human—for themselves, for us, and for their very tormentors."

This quoted phrase is from an essay by Sartre, "Literature in Our Time,"⁴ and its aptness in the present context suggests a parallel between the consequences of certain political events in our century and those of slavery. The history of our times is distinctive for the variety of ways in which the exercise of total power, employed far beyond the requirements of practical politics, has sought to humiliate and dehumanize those whom it chooses to denounce and oppress. An extensive literature has grown up around this theme, and the attitudes expressed and sometimes even the phrasing recall the writings against slavery. In her essay, "The Iliad, or, the Poem of Force," Simone Weil defines force as "that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*. Exercised to the limits it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense; it makes a corpse out of him. . . . In whatever aspect, its effect is the same: it turns man into a stone." Weil recognizes, as did the critics of slavery, that force thus exercised affects the wielder of power as well as its victims: "Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes; the first it intoxicates."⁵ Self-interest, the antislavery writers argued, has never been a restraint on the anger or frustration of a man who has the upper hand. In deliberately humiliating and degrading its victim, unrestrained power seeks to demonstrate its own sense of righteousness because the victim, after force has done with him, has proved himself contemptible. Sartre describes this sinister ritual: "The supreme irony of torture is that the sufferer, if he breaks down and talks, applies his will as a man to denying that he is a man, makes himself the accomplice of his executioners, and, by his own movements, precipitates himself into abjection. The executioner knows it; he watches for this weakness, not only because he will obtain the information he desires, but because it will prove to him once again that

4. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Literature in Our Time," trans. Bernard Frenchman, *Partisan Review* 14 (June 1948): 636.

5. Simone Weil, "The Iliad, or, the Poem of Force," trans. Mary McCarthy, *Politics* (November 1945): 321, 322, 324.

he is right in using torture and that man is an animal who must be led with a whip. Thus he attempts to destroy the humanity of his fellow creatures."⁶ But there are occasional heroes who will not accept the tormentor's version of this relationship, and who—as Solzhenitsyn has depicted on an epic scale—in resisting, affirm the human. In representing Tom as one of these, Stowe has created an enduring myth. The history of our times enables us to see *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reanimated in the light of modern experience and to understand, in the largest sense, the significance of the martyrdom and triumph of Uncle Tom. He is the hero who refuses to acknowledge that he is a thing and who maintains his integrity as a human being against every assault of uninhibited perverse power. Today he is known chiefly in an altered version; but in his original form he conveys an important and universal meaning, one which has been validated by the harsh experiences of our time.

6. Sartre, pp. 635–36.