Rethinking Contemporary Criticism of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: Unraveling the Myth of Transparency
By Veronica Margrave

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has been scrutinized for one reason or another since it was first published in 1851. Modern critics attack Stowe’s idealization of characters in the novel, especially that of Eva St. Clare and Uncle Tom, as being uncharacteristically pious and not reflecting the actions of real people. However, what many contemporary critics fail to see is the deep-rooted connection Stowe’s novel makes with the most popular book and source of her time, The Bible. By examining the novel as something other than a popular sentimental novel, one can see the connections made to religious figures and situations. Furthermore by analyzing the prophetic characters of Uncle Tom and Eva St. Clare, the most disputed characters in the novel, one sees clearly that both are meant to be allegorical characters, and Stowe has cleverly crafted them as such. It is only at this point that one can recognize Stowe’s novel as a carefully constructed call to Christianity.

When the novel was first introduced in its entirety, it became part of a literary genre known as sentimental fiction. From the start, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was then doomed to be forever misinterpreted in the literary canon as somehow second rate. As critic Jane P. Tompkins points out, many modern readers and critics try to categorize Stowe’s novel as a sentimental novel and nothing else. However, she believes:

> Once in possession of the system of beliefs that undergrids the patterns of sentimental fiction, it is possible for modern readers to see how its tearful episodes and frequent violations of probability were invested with a structure of meanings that fixed these works, for nineteenth-century readers, not in the realm of fairy tale or escapist fantasy, but in the very bedrock of reality (Tompkins 506).

It is this misinterpretation on the part of the reader that results in an over-critical reading of the text. As if that was not complex enough, Stowe uses popular literary forms that hold a hidden, “complex web of religious narratives and allusions which lifts the literal event of slavery into the realm of the symbolic” (Hovet 5). This web of religion remains largely hidden in contemporary readings and only becomes more so as society becomes more and more secularized. Most Americans do not have the familiarity to *The Bible* nor use Christian imagery in everyday conversation as they did in Stowe’s day, and this leads the modern reader to read scenes that seem overdramatic as idealistic, and thus they miss even the
smallest religious imagery in the novel. An example, as pointed out by critic Theodore R. Hovet, is Stowe’s complex construction of three levels of slavery instead of just one. She could have given the reader one view of slavery, yet she chooses three: Augustine St. Clare’s, Alfred St. Clare’s, and Simon Legree’s, “…which correspond to three well-known periods in the history of human bondage: Joseph’s Egypt, the Classical Age, and the Cotton Kingdom” (Hovet 5). As Hovet also contends, if Uncle Tom’s Cabin was such a transparent text as read by most, Stowe would not include such religious details as when she has them singing a hymn about religious conversion during the Harris’s passage into Canada (Hovet 6). What may seem like religious fervor to modern readers on the part of Stowe is a perfect example of what keeps this novel in the limelight even today, the inability to penetrate the surface of the novel with a lens that is anything but Christian based teachings.

One such teaching brings to light the gentle character embodied by Evangeline St. Clare. There is a well-known passage in the Bible that alludes exactly to the role Eva plays in the novel taken from Isaiah 11.6: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them” (The Access Bible 886.). From this passage one realizes all the roles Eva takes on throughout her short life in the novel. She is the peacemaker, leader, and as her name suggests, evangelist to which all the characters in contact with her throughout the novel feel a strong connection. Stowe is able to insert her beliefs into the mouth of Eva as she asks some of the fundamental questions of the time, “Papa, isn’t there any way to have all slaves made free” and “Doesn’t the Bible say we must love everybody?” (Stowe 237, 241) Furthermore, Miss Ophelia cannot quite stomach the fact that Eva gives kisses to the slaves and treats them as if she sees no inferiority in them. Her relationship with the slaves is so close that as death looms, she calls them all in to give them all a piece of herself, in a lock of hair. At this point an allusion can be made between her giving out locks of hair to Christ’s proclamation at the Last Supper: “Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me’” wherein he symbolically gives a piece of himself as the food they will consume (The Access Bible 122). Here Christ knows he is to be crucified and is at peace with it, just as Eva is at peace with her forthcoming death. In both instances they give something to those they love, and give equally to each person, as a remembrance of them.

Only briefly touching on the death of Eva is to ignore one of the most
heavily scrutinized passages in the novel. Tompkins relates what she feels is the “epitome of Victorian sentimentalism” in the novel, the death of Eva (Tompkins 506). This scene is viewed as overly dramatic and the modern reader cannot help but succumb to an emotional overload, almost to a degree of annoyance. Many critics have also commented on the irony of Eva’s death, “it leaves the slave system and the other characters unchanged,” yet it fits perfectly into the aforementioned grid that Stowe bases her underlying message on: “dying is the equivalent not of defeat but of victory; it brings an access of power, not a loss of it; it is not only the crowning achievement of life, it is life” (Tompkins 506-7). In the scene in which Eva lays dying, Tom remarks: “The Lord, he sends his messenger in the soul. ...for when that ar blessed child goes into the kingdom, they’ll open the door so wide, we’ll all get a look in at the glory, Miss Feely” (Stowe 255). Stowe’s entire representation of Eva is designed with this emotional end in mind. Eva therefore cannot be an ordinary girl because she is an allegorical representation of Christ.

Just as Eva cannot be an ordinary girl, neither can Uncle Tom be an ordinary slave. From the beginning of the novel, Uncle Tom takes on a likeness to not only the biblical figure of Joseph, he also transforms into a martyr in the Way of the Cross. His unwillingness to waver from his faith in the face of even the cruelest treatment sets up once again a pivotal martyrdom that is central to Stowe’s message in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Uncle Tom first sets up the parallel for the reader between himself and Joseph; “[he] often compared his more fortunate lot, in the bondage into which he was cast, with that of Joseph in Egypt” (Stowe 176). Joseph was enslaved under the Pharaoh in Egypt after being betrayed by his brothers, as Uncle Tom was betrayed by his assumed friend, Mr. Shelby. After St. Clare dies and Tom is sent to Legree’s plantation, he makes an important transition from “an elegant servant, an Old Testament Joseph, into a homeless Prodigal Son of the New Testament” and therefore begins to walk in an allegorical “Way of the Cross” that Christ had done prior to his crucifixion (Hovet 31). As soon as Tom is in the possession of Legree, his personal belongings are stripped from him in a mockery and divided among the deckhands much like Christ’s stripping and mocking after his condemnation and the division of his things at Calvary (31). At Tom’s death, the connection to Christ is solidified in his refusal to betray those who trust him, and he dies when it would be easy for him to save himself. Like Christ, knowing his inevitable fate, Tom does waver, but is crucified to save the ones he loved, and though he is not hung on a literal cross, he is sacrificed by Legree’s whip, much as Christ was scourged by the Romans. Through the whole ordeal Tom is not angry towards those who have hurt him, even Legree himself as he says, “Ye poor miserable
critter...there an’t no more ye can do! I forgive ye, with all my soul” (Stowe 359). Tom’s willingness to forgive Legree is reminiscent of the plea Jesus makes when crucified, “Forgive them Father, for they do not know what they are doing” (*The Access Bible* 125)

Another disputed scene that troubles many contemporary readers is that Tom chose to stay with St. Clare when he was offered his freedom. To the modern reader it is too often seen in the context of a black slave refusing to leave a white master because of some allegiance, but it is then missing the greater point Stowe is trying to make --it was a Christian man who saw another in need, and chose to be a situational martyr, choosing another over himself. When viewed as one man helping another, Uncle Tom is not a sell-out; he is a noble disciple to his only true master, God. Evidence of this feeling towards Uncle Tom was almost immediate after the release of the novel. In 1853, Edward Clare wrote *The Spirit and Philosophy of Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and included a passage about the death of Uncle Tom, “Tom’s flush of strength gave way, and signs of death were upon his countenance, though victory was on his brow” (Clare 60). He also talks about the importance of Uncle Tom’s work on Legree’s plantation:

‘Twas here through Tom’s instrumentality, that several of his fellow slaves first heard the Bible read: ‘twas here they first thought of religion: ‘twas here they first heard of a God and Jesus Christ; -‘twas here they first though of religion: ‘twas here they finally were converted to the truth, and some of the most hardened and the most cruel were softened: ‘twas here that Tom lost his life for the Gospel and the Christian truth which he so loved... (Clare 43).

By receiving criticism from Stowe’s time period, one begins to understand that Stowe’s contemporaries saw Uncle Tom as symbolizing a man that was truly Christian regardless of skin color. More is not made about the martyrdom of Uncle Tom in the time period because the society was far more religious then present day society, and so the giving of one’s life to the glory of God was consistent with contemporary views of the martyrdom of the saints under persecution.

One critic, Peter Stoneley, has taken Stowe’s representation of Uncle Tom to an extreme and placed nineteenth-century white women writers, Stowe in particular, in a category where “Blackness becomes another opportunity to affirm a Christian, maternal love, even if this result seems to the modern reader to be a rather unconvincing ‘cover story’ for the text’s secret ‘black desire’” and Stowe in particular was attracted by the “black or animal body, yet the morality of [her] fiction dictated that these
projections of desire be beaten into Christian humility” (Stoneley). In his argument he further tries to draw a sexual connection between the first meeting of Uncle Tom and Eva, turning an awkward situation into one that has sexual overtones. This criticism seems to be an important example of how one critic can get carried away with an overboard meaning once they choose to look at a novel outside its historical context projecting modern meanings on an earlier age. It would be very easy for the reader to find almost everything in the novel offensive if they were unable to put it in its historical context as Stoneley has done.

Stowe carefully constructed the story of Uncle Tom to be laden with religious symbolism in an effort to bring light to the one thing she felt should end slavery, the Christian Church of Stowe and the abolitionists. To this end, her whole story was crafted. In her introduction to the novel she discusses how she was only a medium through which God’s word could be written and understood. Whether this is the reason or not, Stowe selected the most popular writing style of the time to craft a romantic tale of the ills of slavery over her master narrative which sat beneath. The hidden quality of this master narrative is what has kept so many modern readers and critics puzzled, because a surface reading only reveals characters that are not quite human, they are too good. However, they are too good to a reader in this day and age, because they are supposed to be allegorical representations of biblical figures, and that in itself suggests a super-human manifestation in the characters. Even the improbable conversion of Sambo and Quimbo at the end of the novel can be explained when a typological reference is made to the thief that hung on the cross near Christ, who seeing that he was really the Son of God, repented and asked for forgiveness, and was thus allowed to enter into heaven with Jesus. The other thief that hung on the cross is symbolized with Legree’s inability to ever accept the salvation Uncle Tom sets before him. It is instances such as the preceding that show a modern day reader that a text that seems to appear transparent at first as nothing more then the romantic fancies of a sexually repressed nineteenth century woman is actually a rich story reflective of societal influences at the time it was written. Stowe’s message, to be fully understood, needs to be viewed through a historical looking glass, that goes to a time far in everyone’s history. Uncle Tom can then finally be redeemed as not a sell-out, but as a martyr for a belief system that has somehow become obscured to today’s secularized society.

Works Cited


