

The Superior Parent: Uncle Tom's Cabin and Abolitionist "Fostering" of Slaves by Lynda L. Hinkle

Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin was unmatched in its impact on the abolitionist movement. It won the hearts and minds of many fence-sitters to the abolitionist cause, and renewed the vigor of those already convinced. Stowe's work capitalizes on and enervates the dominant abolitionist rhetoric of paternalism and the moral superiority of the white abolitionist to not only the slave-holder, but in many respects to the slave. She does this in order to engage the egos, as well as the consciences of her readers. In demonstrating the alleged absolute moral correctness of white abolitionist thinking, Stowe also encourages the view of slaves as affable children that require the "foster parenting" of abolitionists to save them from the cruelty of the "parent"/master down South.

It is no accident that one of the most compelling and pervasive images embraced by abolitionists is that of the kneeling slave, entreating "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" In it, the slave is shackled hand to foot, is half-naked and muscular. He begs on bended knee for the aid of abolitionists to set him free, reminding them that he is not property after all, but human and familial. The shackles are seemingly unconnected to any outside source; the slave is tied only to his own limbs. This suggests, perhaps unintentionally, that the slave's imprisonment is somewhat the result of his own inability to simply know he can run, albeit clumsily—much like a child does not yet know what it can do.

The "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" insignia appeared in many forms—from a Wedgewood Brooch and Medallion that every well-dressed abolitionist seemed to own to its appearance on window shades that abolitionists could display in order to demonstrate their support of the cause just by lowering their shades at night. This image, rather than perhaps a white abolitionist and black slave standing together in rebellion, became the dominant visual rhetoric for a reason. Abolitionists of the 19th century did not generally believe that the races were an artificial construct at all. In fact, they tended toward a racial essentialism, convinced that all races displayed certain inescapable traits which did not make them equal in ability although they were equal in the right to the freedom to fulfill their racially destined potential.

Critic Arthur Riss argues in his essay "Racial Essentialism and Family Values in Uncle Tom's Cabin:

Stowe's understanding of the priority of race in forming a Negro's character certainly would not have surprised her contemporary readers. Indeed, during the antebellum period, it would have been more surprising had Stowe done anything other than attribute cultural differences to race. As one historian of ethnology has stated, "Although the United States shared in a general Western movement toward racialist thinking, American writers in the years from 1830 to 1850 led Europeans in expounding views of innate racial difference."⁸ Turning away from the universalism implicit in Enlightenment thought, American intellectuals, by 1850, had embraced as scientific fact the significance of inherent racial characteristics. By the time Uncle Tom's Cabin was published, essential racial difference was considered a self-evident fact. (520-21)

If racial difference was an accepted fact, it follows that these same intellectuals would be able and willing to define what those differences might be and how they play out in reality. For Stowe, according to Riss, the Anglo Saxon race was conveniently gifted with the racial characteristic of being able to escape its racial characteristics. He writes:

Stowe, however, argues that what [Ralph Waldo] Emerson identifies as the Anglo-Saxon's ability to escape the influence of race is only an expression of the Anglo-Saxon essential racial character. Rather than defying his racial nature, the Anglo-Saxon, in Stowe's account, reveals his most pronounced racial trait when he desires to transcend the force of materialist influences. (522)

The Negro, on the other hand, is completely bound by his or her racial makeup in Stowe's view. In A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin, Stowe defines the essential nature of the race:

The Negro race is confessedly more simple, docile, child-like and affectionate, than other races; and hence the divine graces of love and faith, when in-breathed by the Holy Spirit, find in their natural temperament a more congenial atmosphere. (Key, 25)

Uncle Tom himself, as a character, seems to be exemplary of the best qualities that Stowe ascribes to the race. He lacks any extreme degree of some of the wilder traits she goes on to detail:

They are possessed of a nervous organization peculiarly susceptible and impressible. Their sensations and impressions are very vivid, and their fancy and imagination lively. In this respect, the race has oriental character and betrays its tropical origin....When in distress they actually lift up their voices to weep and cry with an exceeding bitter cry. When alarmed they are often paralyzed and rendered entirely helpless. Their religious exercises are all colored by this sensitive and exceedingly vivacious temperament. (25)

Having set up the image of the Negro as "child-like", "imaginative" and "impressible", Stowe sets her own Anglo-Saxon background in relief, privileging the characteristics that she assumes for the Anglo-Saxon by invoking God's own approval:

The fact is, that the Anglo-Saxon race—cool, logical and practical—have yet to learn the doctrine of toleration for the peculiarities of other races; and perhaps it was with a foresight of their peculiar character and dominant position in the earth, that God gave the Bible to them in the fervent language and with the glowing imagery of the more susceptible and passionate oriental races. (28)

Thus, according to Stowe, it would appear that although God has given the Anglo-Saxon dominion, He figured He'd better make the Bible "child-like" enough to make the Anglo-Saxon work of evangelizing other races a little easier. This emphasis on the Anglo-Saxon responsibility to acculturate and Christianize other races further supports Stowe's brand of abolitionism. It requires the Christian abolitionist to act in the role of a metaphorical foster parent to the slave who, in escaping slavery, must be taught the values and beliefs that Stowe uses to justify their release.

Having established the idea of the Negro slave as possessing the character of a child but also having the right to freedom of any Anglo-Saxon because of the Christian responsibility to fairness and paternalism, Stowe proceeds to demonstrate in Uncle Tom's Cabin that the Southern slave owner is not properly "parenting" this race.

The first example of bad "parenting" of slaves that Stowe offers us is Mr. and Mrs. Shelby. Mr. Shelby considers himself "a humane man" (45). Even the defiant George admits that the Shelby's have been kind to Eliza, saying "...they have brought you up like a child, fed you, clothed you, indulged you, and taught you, so that you have a good education; that is some reason why they

should claim you" (62). Nevertheless, despite the Shelbys' being considered among the best of slaveholders, their Utopian self-deception that they are more like parents than owners is burst like a bubble when Shelby fails to properly manage his "manly" duty, or paternal duty if you will, to retain financial solvency. In order to save himself, he is forced to sell Tom as well as Eliza's son Harry to the unscrupulous trader, Haley. In doing so, he will be breaking up two families, taking children from parents and separating husbands and wives.

The St. Clare's are also considered kind masters, particularly Augustine St. Clare himself, the master of the house. Marie St. Clare, on the other hand, has a deep cruelty and self-centeredness about her that seems bred into her, though her continual self-absorption and imaginary ailments render her generally ineffective at cruelty, at parenting, and at everything else.

Her commitment to the idea that everyone else was lazy and she just a sufferer extends to her relationship with the slaves. They never quite measure up to what she wants them to be, and she would seek to have them sent out to be flogged if it were not for her husband's forbiddance. Despite her conviction that flogging would benefit them, she herself will not make the effort for her own laziness, as usual, renders her utterly ineffectual. She says:

Now, he has set down his foot that, come what will, there shall not be a blow struck in this house, except what he or I strike; and he does it in a way that I really dare not cross him. Well, you may see what that leads to; St. Clare wouldn't raise his hand, if every one of them walked over him, and I—you see how cruel it would be to require me to make the exertion. Now, you know these servants are nothing but grown up children. (267)

Again, Stowe portrays Southern white slaveholders as considering themselves rightful parents of these slaves. Also, again, Stowe uses this fact to heighten the tragedy when the parenting turns cruel. After the sudden, accidental death of Augustine St. Clare, Marie sells Tom South to the horrible Simon Legree, who eventually is responsible for Tom's death. Stowe resurrects and dissects the parent metaphor in describing Tom's state after the death of St. Clare:

The child, who has lost a father but still has the protection of friends, and of the law; he is something, and can do something, --has acknowledged rights and position; the slave has none. The law regards him, in every respect, as devoid of rights as a bale of merchandise. The only possible acknowledgement of any of the longings and wants of a human and immortal creature, which are given to him, comes to him through the sovereign and irresponsible will of his master; and when that master is stricken down, nothing remains. (457)

Stowe demonstrates once more that Southern slave-holders, even those who consider themselves parents or stewards over the souls and care of their slaves, are just fooling themselves and giving moral airs to an immoral practice. You can compare the slaves to children that you must protect all you like, Stowe seems to argue, but when real trouble comes you are forced to remember that they are property to you and that you are committing a sin that, as Mrs. Shelby says, is cursed by God.

In relief to these disruptive would-be parenting practices of Southern slave-holders, Stowe creates a model of proper fostering in the figure of the Quaker abolitionists who help Eliza and George, as well as in the example of Little Eva.

Stowe writes beautifully of the order and maternal peace that seems to saturate the Quaker home. Stowe means for the reader to compare this to the chaos in the kitchen of the St. Clare home that causes cousin Ophelia to declare, "Such shiftless management, such waste, such

confusion I never saw!" (316). To Stowe, as to many 19th century thinkers, part of true and right parenting involves the proper establishment of domestic order and comfort. In Quaker Rachel Halliday's home, she is revered as an idyllic mother not only by her family, her community and the runaway slaves that pass through her home, but also by Stowe as narrator, who describes her thusly:

...for twenty years or more, nothing but loving words, and gentle moralities, and motherly loving kindness, had come from that chair; -- headaches and heart-aches innumerable had been cured there, --difficulties spiritual and temporal solved there, -- all by one good, loving woman, God bless her! (216)

Rachel fosters Eliza as she lives within her walls, calling her "my daughter" and treating her as one of her own. It is not a true adoption, however, for Rachel knows, unlike the white slaveholders, that this is not a child at all. Rather, she is an adult woman with a child of her own. Eliza, George and Harry's time in the Quaker home is womb-like, comforting; they are reborn into freedom after passing through the fostering care of these abolitionist people of conscience. Stowe calls upon abolitionists of her time to offer this kind of fostering to freedom with Christian patience and affection.

Stowe also calls all Christians to foster slaves into the kind of civilized, educated people that can live within society once freed; a stance that shows both some degree of moral superiority but also a practical interest in re-aculturating a people trained to serve into a people able to exist within the paradigms of free society. Although none of Stowe's freed characters remain in the United States at the end of the book, they have all been properly fostered to Christian benevolence that enables them to do good for themselves and others in other parts of the world.

One of the most significant "foster" relationships in the novel is that of Eva to Topsy. Despite being raised in the South, Eva is an abolitionist because she is pure and has received the truth of this moral stance directly from her intense religious faith. It takes this kind of purity to foster the truly wild Topsy, a true daughter of slavery who is convinced that she "never was born...never had no father nor mother, nor nothin'" (356). Miss Ophelia cannot reach her with education and her attempts to reform her. Topsy's only salvation is the pure love of Eva who tells the child, "I love you because you haven't had any father, or mother, or friends;--because you've been a poor, abused child! I love you and I want you to be good." (409). Eva's taming of Topsy and her education of Miss Ophelia on the proper way to show Christian love, fosters Topsy into a future where she is actually able to achieve free status in adulthood. Nevertheless, the relationship of Eva and Topsy does not undermine, but rather further develops the idea, as Caroline Levander explains in her essay "'Let Her White Progeny Offset Her Dark One': The Child and the Racial Politics of Nation Making", "...that insurmountable, essential racial differences will continue to differentiate these two, even as [Stowe] uses the child to bridge persistent distinctions between slave and citizen" (232). Eva is an example of perfect Anglo-Saxon, Christian love which fosters and saves other races rather than oppressing them. Topsy, on the other hand, with her wild ways and tendency toward misbehavior, is an example of the worst manifestations of the Negro race as Stowe colors it; she is what slavery has made of these essential racial qualities. In the juxtaposition of these two, the reader is given insight into how the best in Anglo-Saxons can cancel out the worst in the Negro race. As Caroline Levander phrases it:

By using the child to insist on the ongoing, inevitable cultural power of whiteness, Stowe, in the tradition of much abolitionist political rhetoric, attempts to persuade her audience that ending slavery will affirm rather than undermine the nation's Anglo-Saxon identity and preserve race as the nation's constitutive and enduring foundation. (233)

In other words, Stowe uses Eva and Topsy to demonstrate that the overthrow of slavery will result in the assertion of Anglo-Saxon dominance through ideology rather than force. Abolition is simply better parenting of one race to another.

In Uncle Tom's Cabin, only through the fostering of pure, godly abolitionists can slaves be transformed from the troublesome "children" of the Southern slaveholders into free people capable of living within society. Despite what Stowe believes to be the limitations to their potential as members of the "child-like" Negro race, she demands the opportunity for the fulfillment of that potential. She further appeals to the Christian responsibility of the Anglo-Saxon, over whom God has given "dominion", to use their privileged status to promote Christian values of freedom, religious evangelization and paternal affection rather than the cruel "bad parenting" practices evidenced by Southern slaveholders. But was this truly the way to help free the slaves, and does Stowe's horribly flawed perception of race negate the value of the text?

Introducing an argument about Stowe between Frederick Douglass and Martin Delaney, a black nationalist and author of The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of Colored People of the United States (1852), critic Robert Levine asks a form of this question, writing; "...should blacks place themselves under the 'fostering care' of a white philanthropist, particularly one who in her novel appears to be advocating not black elevation but rather emigration under the aegis of a colonization society?" (80). Frederick Douglass, himself, seemed to be negotiating with this question.

Douglass supported Stowe's work, believing it would benefit the abolition cause. Delaney, on the other hand, protested that Stowe "knows nothing about us" and that the only appropriate means to freedom would be entirely from the efforts of blacks for blacks.

This does not mean that Douglass wholeheartedly bought all that Stowe was promoting. He was disappointed, for example, with her relegation of all freed blacks to other countries at the end of the novel, writing to her:

The truth is, dear madam, we are here and we are likely to remain. Individuals emigrate- nations never. We have grown up with this republic, and I see nothing in her character or even in the character of the American people as yet, which compels the belief that we must leave the United States (quoted in Levine, 82).

Nevertheless, Douglass continued to align himself with Stowe and other white abolitionists who persisted in their racial essentialism and belief that freedom could only come through the fostering of whites. Levine argues that:

His efforts to persuade Stowe to rethink her colonialist stance and her racialism suggest that Douglass came to believe that the publication of a text—even one with so massive an authority as Uncle Tom's Cabin—does not foreclose the possibility of dialogue between authors and readers, blacks and whites, oppressed and oppressors, when glimmers of mutual sympathy can be discerned. (88)

Like Douglass, literary critics and historians should continue to interact with and interrogate Stowe's work while celebrating its positive accomplishments. As a reflection of the racial essentialism shared by other intellectuals of the time, Stowe's work captures an important ethnographical moment. Uncle Tom's Cabin portrays slaves as children in need of fostering by white abolitionists because of the cruel parenting of their Southern masters. In this way, it reprises paternalistic rhetoric evidenced throughout the abolition movement and demonstrates to

modern readers that the weed of racial conflict evident even in the twenty-first century has deep and abiding roots even in the most well-meaning of American intellectual gardens.

Works Cited

Horsman, Reginald. Race and Manifest Destiny. Cambridge, MA, 1981.

Levander, Caroline. "‘Let Her White Progeny Offset Her Dark One’: The Child and the Racial Politics of Nation Making." American Literature 76:2 (June 2004): 221-244.

Levine, Robert S. "‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Frederick Douglass’s Paper: An Analysis of Reception.’" American Literature 64:1 (March 1992): 71-94.

Riss, Arthur. "Racial Essentialism and Family Values in Uncle Tom’s Cabin." American Quarterly 46:4 (December 1994): 513-544.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Boston: John Jewett & Co., 1853.

_____. Uncle Tom’s Cabin. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.