

Stowe's Suspicious Sentimentalism: Teaching *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the 21st Century

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Teaching *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) is often a conflicted experience to those of us who teach nineteenth-century American literature. While Stowe's effect on the abolition movement remains uncontested, the narrative strategy she uses to achieve this traction demands critique. Specifically, Stowe's use of sentimentalism ultimately dooms the African Americans she represents to characterizations that are superficial at best and paternalistically infantilizing at worst. Indeed, *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* problematic placement in our own canon makes it the perfect fodder for undergraduates in English. Not only can we debate the relative merits of the novel on various grounds related to all schools of literary theory, but we can also embed historical analysis with contemporary culture and our ever-changing matrices of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Before we can get to any of the interesting work that can be done with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, we need to get students past the deceptive simplicity of the text itself.

As the longest novel I teach in my ENG 381: Studies in 19th Century American Literature course at Shippensburg University, a mid-sized state university in Pennsylvania, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remains effortlessly readable and understandable to my students, often distressingly so. My central goal in teaching this work is to make students uncomfortable with the novel, with its placement in our canon, and with Stowe's suspicious sentimentalism. As Stowe intended, *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* very readability aims to protect readers from the discomfort that I encourage my students to feel. Since I know that students are not likely to

experience this discomfort on their own, I seek early on to lay the foundation for my pedagogical purpose. To do so, I give my students the rationale behind Stowe's sentimentalism and then construct a number of educational experiences that highlight her employment of the philosophy. From there, I move the class to feel uneasiness as we interrogate both the foundational underpinnings and the unanticipated effects of literary sentimentalism. It is most important to me that students leave ENG 381 understanding that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is anything but the flat and breezy read they at first believe it to be.

I begin by showing students that they have already become an ideal audience for Stowe's sentimentalism if they are able to comprehend the early plot unquestioningly. Particularly, I explicitly explain that the tenets of sentimentalism hold that an emotional appeal can prompt readers to act in relation to a cultural problem; for Stowe, of course, this was slavery and her readers were nineteenth-century, white middle class females who largely believed that adhering to religious morality would grant them paradise in the afterlife. Stowe's central issue, as we know, was to move this female white reader to an experience of emotional outpouring for her female black counterpart.

Boiling sentimentalism down to two important steps, I then explain how Step One of sentimentalism is for Stowe to create an identification between the white middle-class female reader and the black female slaves in the novel by focusing on what is the same. And Step Two of sentimentalism is for Stowe to move the white female reader to an emotional outpouring by exploiting what is different. By simplifying and juxtaposing these Two Steps of sentimentalism as I do, I am able to emphasize how Stowe creates a mirror that allows the white reader to see blacks as being similar to whites, but to do so she lessens the otherness

of the other for her purpose. This removal of black particularity allows Stowe to assimilate race to maternal sameness. She heightens the similarities between white and black mothers in the areas of domestic spaces and tasks, maternal love, familial bonds, and Christian devotion, and then sharply contrasts the women's differences in terms of the violence, sexual exploitation, and unnatural family break-up suffered by the black females. This sharp dichotomy between what is the same and what is different between these two groups of women, I tell my students, intends to move the passive reader to the emotional outpouring of sympathy, shame, outrage, horror, and sadness.

Stowe's sad stories, combined with her direct addresses to the reader, encourage a sympathetic identification between the middle class white mother and the black slave mother that prompted women to face the evils of slavery and subsequently react against its inhumanity. Like my explicit instruction of Stowe's sentimentalism, she is equally blatant. In her scheme, female domesticity and reproduction are central, and maternal feeling is the paradigm of pure love and selflessness that motivates change. And we know it worked, for the white female middle-class reader gets her husband involved, maternal politics affects national politics, and abolition gains momentum. At this juncture, important critical questions raised to my students are as follows: Can cross-racial identification occur? What are the potential negative effects of cross-racial identification? Are the goals of this cross-racial identification, such as maternal politics and sacrificial ethics, even desirable? What does black subjectivity lose through Stowe's program of maternal sameness?

Pedagogical Strategy 1: Cross-Racial Dinner Party

After having laid the foundational work on both the objectives of sentimentalism and the raising of my students' level of suspicion, my first pedagogical strategy aims to highlight the mirroring between white and black that Stowe injects into her text. To do so, we have what I call a "Cross-Racial Dinner Party." Upon entering the classroom, my students each receive a slip of paper with a character's name upon it and some also have an asterisk next to their assigned character's name. I pull about fifteen to twenty names from the first 150 pages or so; the Shelbys, the Harrises, the Birds, the Hallidays, Uncle Tom/Aunt Chloe, and all of the children are sure to be represented. I also try to give each student a name that reflects his/her own gender if possible, and I make sure to give the most participatory students names that will allow them to fully engage. Since Stowe's novel is littered with many characters, which is no doubt part of her intent, each student must first go back into the text to reacquaint him/herself with the character s/he has been assigned. Next, the married characters are asked to find their spouses and discuss the traits of their relationships. Finally, the whole group comes together for their dinner party and discussion in a circle formation if possible. At this point, I instruct each student to stay in character, both as an individual and as a partner if applicable, and hold a post-dinner conversation.

At first, the students may giggle a bit about my unconventional teaching strategy, but I only usually need to ask, "What do you talk about after a dinner with friends and family?" to prompt their discussion. Like the gatherings around their own familiar tables, our impromptu classroom event encourages conversation about religion, politics, beliefs, and relationships. Once these topics are found as most fruitful, the conversation generally settles on the events of the intersecting plots thus

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far. Important sentimental tropes such as maternal sameness, religious ideology, reactionary wives, converted husbands, domestic primacy, and self-sacrifice soon emerge. (Incidentally, if the class is particularly quiet, I might ask each "character" to locate a quote relevant to him or her as a jumping off point.) Once these emphases are "on the table" so to speak, I encourage smaller groups of characters to hold side conversations heard by the entire group: just the white women, then just the black women, for instance, and then the white men, black men, and children. This part of the exercise aims to illustrate that Stowe is dealing primarily with flat types, as she must to facilitate the kind of seamless identification she intends. Not only are the white women as similar as a group as the black women, but together they are nearly identical except for one main distinction of course. Similarly, the marriages strikingly resemble one another and show that their differences fall, not along racial lines, but along predictable gender categories.

To generalize this information visually for students, I make designations on the board to show the different categories we have enacted: marriage, women, men, children. At this stage, students can easily help fill in the traits of each category in a whole-class discussion, and they are frequently surprised by how racial disparity was marginalized in their own conversations as they reflected Stowe's characterizations. Indeed, the class's acknowledgement of the downplaying of racial difference is my objective for this activity. While the mirroring of black and white is consciously constructed by Stowe to fulfill her purpose, it lends the novel a flat quality that students often misinterpret as ease of comprehension, preventing them from analyzing the assimilation of race in the novel. Though this apparent sameness does encourage readers of the time period to act, it has disastrous consequences for the perpetuation of

African American stereotypes in literature and culture. Some, like "The Uncle Tom," "The Mammy," and "The Pickaninny" have representations in Stowe's work in Uncle Tom, Aunt Chloe, and Topsy, respectively.

Finally, to conclude our Cross-Racial Dinner Party, I ask only the asterisked characters to remain: George Harris, Uncle Tom, George Shelby, Mrs. Mary Bird, John Van Trompe. This smaller circle of students is encased by the larger group in fishbowl fashion. I then ask this smaller group to identify one more similarity they all share, though this one is a bit more covert. Once the small group exhausts its answer choices, I open the same question to the larger circle. Despite the question's relative simplicity, I have yet to have a class where the correct answer is guessed. Typically my students are excited to learn that each of the characters in the inner circle has a similarly named character elsewhere in the novel of the opposing race. George Harris and George Shelby is an easy reference point for illustrative purposes. Once again, the point can easily be made that Stowe intentionally facilitates a cross-racial identification based on sameness; this time of given name. At the conclusion of our social event, my students have a better understanding of the purpose behind the many flat characters, black and white, that populate *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Pedagogical Strategy 2: "Imagine she were white."

On a subsequent day of instruction, I aim to give a steadier referent to Stowe's use of direct address to the reader, especially as it punctuates Step Two of sentimentalism, the turn toward an emotional outpouring based on what is different between the domestic and familial lives of the white readers and black characters. This calculated move is epitomized early on in the novel, when Stowe turns to the reader and questions:

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If it were *your* Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader, tomorrow morning, --if you had seen the man, and heard that the paper were signed and delivered, and you had only from twelve o'clock till morning to make good your escape, --how fast could *you* walk? How many miles could you make in those few brief hours, with the darling at your bosom, --the little sleepy head on your shoulder, --the small, soft arms trustingly holding on to your neck? (Stowe 105)

While my undergraduate English majors can certainly recognize Stowe's intent in this passage, few come anywhere close to feeling the emotions she demands. They know it never could or would be *their* Harry and so easily breeze by this passage and others of similar ilk.

With this in mind, I show them a video clip from the movie *A Time to Kill* (1996) starring Matthew McConaughey. Like Stowe, the attorney he plays uses the two steps of sentimentalism to encourage the same type of cathartic outpouring of emotion from a particular audience. Since this movie is familiar to my students, particularly the scene I show, it makes an impact that Stowe's treatise and its remoteness from their own insulated lives fails to achieve in the 21st Century. In this clip, which may be accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7f-BgDgpmE>, McConaughey, playing Jake Tyler Brigance, delivers the closing argument in defense of Carl Lee Hailey, a black man who murders two white racists who beat and rape his ten-year-old daughter in Canton, Mississippi. Using the same dramatic flair as the lawyer, I also instruct my students to "close their eyes" and "listen to the story" as Brigance delivers his close. The story he tells is one everyone in the courtroom already knows: Tonya

Hailey's violent beating, gang rape, and attempted hanging, whose small, bloody body is thrown to the bottom of a "creek bed" when the tree branch fails to support the noose around her neck. "Can you see her?" the defense attorney questions repeatedly.

Of course he knows everyone can see Tonya because her attack and the ensuing murders of Pete Willard and Billy Ray Cobb pushed Canton's racial tensions to their breaking point and brought the KKK and NAACP to focus their opposing efforts simultaneously and force inhabitants to choose sides. So when Brigance pauses dramatically, chokes back his own tears and whispers, "Imagine she were white," a shocked hush fills the courtroom. Defense or prosecution, black or white, each person hearing these closing remarks is jarred to alter his or her perspective, and in this shift, Brigance abides by the doctrine of sentimentalism. When the white courtroom envisions Tonya as she was as black, they had a certain response to her abuse; when, on the other hand, she was made to look a little more like the girls they knew, like Brigance's own daughter Hannah perhaps, their reaction to the crimes her father commits in his daughter's defense changes too. In this case, the emotional appeal of sentimentalism is also successful. When the white jury can identify with the fatherly emotions felt by Carl Lee Hailey, they are able to justify his behavior and promptly acquit him of the murders.

Again, my goal here is to problematize my students' unencumbered reading of Stowe. First, I need them to slow down and recognize Stowe's rhetorical strategy when it appears, despite the fact that it may not move them as it had readers of earlier generations. Second, I would like them to stop and question why white identification of the black plight can only happen when a literal whitewashing occurs. Like the *A Time to Kill* clip described above, where Tonya's humanity is only affirmed when she is

viewed as other than she is, *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* unnatural break-up of black families can only provoke empathy when we change the children to *our* Harry or Willie. This eclipse of black subjectivity should be the purview of our contemporary reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and I believe that *A Time to Kill's* visual immediacy to our current students works to open dialogue along those lines.

Pedagogical Strategy 3: Kara Walker

Whereas our analysis of *A Time to Kill* focuses on what I call the eclipse of black subjectivity, my third pedagogical strategy happens much later in our reading and pushes the class to examine not just the eclipse, but the perversion, of racial identity. For this segment of our reading, I find that the shocking, disturbing, and often comic artwork of Kara Walker continues to destabilize my students and their apprehension of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Walker, whose work and biography can be found at the educational resource (<http://learn.walkerart.org/karawalker>) developed as a companion to her Walker Art Center exhibition, represents race through black paper silhouettes affixed on white walls as room-size murals or tableaux. Walker's use of exaggeration, caricature, stereotype, and violence allows onlookers to contemplate single-dimensional representations of personal identity, as well as the racism and sexism embedded in those visual signifiers. Her wall murals are often difficult to face because she flagrantly depicts transgressive images that mix expressions of sexuality, violence, bestiality, human waste, and nudity without providing a didactic interpretation for the line of sight. Her work provokes emotion and begins conversations that focus on the knot of race, history, and stereotypes.

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In my class, I focus on Walker's panoramic titled *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995), which may be viewed on the website in two different frames, which I have represented below:



Conscious of how Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* perpetuates a certain view of African Americans, Walker intentionally creates a dialogue with the novel through her title and represented caricatures. In effect, Walker retells Stowe's novel without revising it; she merely depicts an additional interpretation of Stowe's flat, patronizing characterization. Specifically, Aunt Chloe, Eva, Uncle Tom, and Topsy are represented not as Stowe literally penned them, but as their symbolic stereotypes. The scene referenced by title is the one where young Eva dies from illness so that Tom may live to be free. On her deathbed, she encourages Tom's belief in Jesus and heaven, presents him with a relic of her hair, and tells him that she will see him in the afterlife. Her sacrifice both mimics that of Jesus in the Christian tradition, as well as foreshadows Tom's own sacrifice after his inopportune selling. By referencing both Tom's "end" and Eva's ascension to "heaven," Walker offers another interpretation of their relationship and its effect on each character. Her shocking hyperbole of this sequence of events works to expose the faults of the superficial representations used by Stowe. In the bottom left, Aunt Chloe is the "big black Mammy" who simultaneously breast feeds and suckles another

woman's breast; Eva is the mad, axe-wielding woman in the center; Uncle Tom is on the far right giving birth as he holds his hands high in the air in prayer; Topsy is the young "pickaninny" defecating next to the small animal and wearing an oversized boot. The amalgamation of these allegories occurs, we remember, at the moment of Uncle Tom's sacrificial Christian death when his passivity is equated to heavenly submission: a penultimate sentimental gesture.

For my students who have become well-attuned at deciphering both Stowe's intent and its negative consequences, viewing this tableau, as well as others by Kara Walker, still assaults their senses, as it is intended to. This time, our analysis centers on the characters described above and Walker's choices in terms of their silhouetted depictions. Why do Uncle Tom's Christianity and maternity go hand in hand? Why are the black women all breastfeeding from one another? What does abject fecal matter have to do with this scene of heavenly transcendence? Why is angelic Eva murdering the small black boy at her feet? Again, Walker puts these questions before her viewers in a blatant way. Her shocking representations force us to confront what lies underneath Stowe's novel and her use of sentimentalism. By viewing her images, asking the requisite questions, and having uncomfortable conversations, we are invited as a class to ask the big questions that Stowe demands of her new twenty-first-century readers: What effect has literary history had on the development of racial stereotypes? How do we see these stereotypes at work in society today? Why do the comic and tragic often overlap in powerful ways when it comes to superficial representations of race, gender, and sexuality? Who had the right to constitute these representations of race then? Who has the right to continue these representations now? Have we successfully forged new ones yet?

Pedagogical Strategy 4: Written in her Own Hand

The final pedagogical strategy that I would like to share includes extension beyond *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its flat representation of character to facilitate reader identification. I often conclude this course with either reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) or watching the Jonathan Demme film. In either case, *Beloved* quite obviously *blocks* the reader or viewer identification that Stowe invites. With no perspective on which to attach, readers or viewers observe from spliced multiple vantage points and come away feeling that they can never properly understand what was endured during the time of slavery. The last time I taught this course in Fall 2009, I chose instead to use Hannah Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (18?) edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and found that it complemented *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exquisitely, particularly because it quite possibly is the first novel written by a female fugitive slave. In my inaugural instruction of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, I found that the novel's questionable authorship opened space for analysis and interpretation that Stowe closes down. Whereas I, along with many of my students, believed in Crafts' authorship based on Gates' painstaking authentication through scientific dating and census examination, others were not as easily convinced. This suspicion, however, merely fueled discussion on both the similarities and differences between the two authors. For the purposes of this strategy, consensus on Crafts as author is not needed; what is needed is space to examine the author's depiction of individual interiority, as opposed to Stowe's focus on external identification of sameness.

Purportedly written not only in her own voice but literally in her own hand as a holograph, Crafts fills in the elisions that Stowe does not even dream of approximating. Whereas Stowe all but removes internal depth from her African American women to encourage the two steps of

sentimentalism for her white female readers, through Crafts we "gain unmediated access" to those hidden regions of personal subjectivity (Gates xlvii). In *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, we get what we futilely demand from Stowe: the truth about what female slaves really experienced and what they really felt.

For most of the novel, my students defiantly argue that Crafts and Stowe could be contemporaries of one another, and indeed they are right. Despite one crucial distinction to be explored later, both female authors similarly display qualities of nineteenth-century fiction, specifically traits related to portraiture, gothic tales, sentience, layered stories, and inherited curses. Additionally, both Stowe and Crafts employ the two steps of sentimentalism and embrace certain representations of African American identity. In fact, each similarly depicts scenes of unnatural family break-ups, sympathetic northern sentiment, positive religious feeling, and cross dressing as a means of escape to name a few. When we discuss these myriad similarities, my students are quick to point out that perhaps Stowe did get it right; maybe she did accurately represent black subjectivity. At the very least, we can all agree that Stowe and Crafts were likely reading the same books at the same time, Charles Dickens for example.

However, beyond these similarities, Crafts' narrative contains an undercurrent absent from Stowe: an acknowledgement of a layer of abuse beyond the physical, a mental anguish or dehumanization that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* never uncovers, a point of dis-identification unless one has been exposed to similar circumstances. Crafts' exposure of this delicate layer reminds us of all that is missing from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and all that was used as filler instead. In contrast to the superficiality presented by Stowe, Crafts writes in her own voice:

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It must be a strange state to feel that in the judgement of those above you you are scarcely human, and to fear that their opinion is more than half right, that you really are assimilated to the brutes, that the horses, dogs and cattle have quite as many priveledges, and are probably your equals or it may be your superiors in knowledge, that even your shape is questionable as belonging to that order of superior beings whose delicacy you offend. (Crafts 206)

Despite the presence of grammar and spelling errors, Crafts poignantly expresses her sense of dehumanization, an actuality that Stowe bestows upon the African Americans she represents without consideration for the depth of feeling beneath her literary belittlement. The "you" in the above quotation bears little resemblance to the "you" of Stowe's heavy-handed direct address. This "you" appears to refer solipsitically back onto the author herself or at the very least onto another black female whose mind the reader temporarily inhabits. She is the "you" treated as an animal, the "you" harshly judged, the "you" of "questionable" humanity; this "you" may only be identified with if the reader has been similarly belittled. Whereas Stowe demands her reader to recall similar feeling, Crafts exposes an interiority unlikely to be matched. In similar contrast, the compliant passivity that Stowe aligns with Christian self-sacrifice, Crafts places on the side of ignorance. "Led away as sheep are led to the slaughter unresisting," Crafts writes, to explain not willful embrace of the afterlife that follows an Earthly existence of hardship, but rather the blind movement toward what is yet to come in this world or the next (72).

This palpable distinction between Stowe and Crafts is the one I would like to leave with my students and their reading of *Uncle Tom's*

Cabin. Stowe's representation of African American subjectivity resides on the flat single-dimensional surface because that is what she needed to illustrate to move her white female readers to action. Privy only to her own internal depth, Stowe remains in the realm of the physical, and the outer periphery at that. Crafts, on the other hand, imbued with her own complicated internal dimension, writes of much more than the outer layer and chastises Stowe's representation in the process:

But those who think that the greatest evils of slavery are connected with physical suffering possess no just or rational ideas of human nature. The soul, the immortal soul must ever long and yearn for a though things inseperable to liberty. Then, too, the fear, the apprehension, the dread, and deep anxiety always attending that condition in a greater or less degree. There can be no certainty, no abiding confidence in the possession of any good thing. (97)

Crafts reclaims this internal soul for the African American women Stowe removes it from. In so doing, Crafts reminds her readers that the complete identification with an other's emotion espoused by Stowe is impossible without acknowledgement of the unique difference that lies beneath the skin. Stowe's removal of this difference shackles *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to stereotypical racial representations that continue to haunt us today.

My belief is that we should continue to teach *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as long as we do so in a way that problematizes Stowe's use of sentimentalism and the novel's lasting placement in the nineteenth-century canon. Students first need to understand the two steps of sentimentalism, then be shaken out of their complacent and complicit reading for plot, and finally be moved to discomfort over Stowe's flat depiction of race. This final

move is the one that holds the most promise for abolishing our stereotypical construction of racial identity, what Crafts calls "assimilat[ion] to the brutes" above (206). The discomfort inherent in dis-identification has productively moved my students toward understanding the nuanced internal depth that Stowe encourages us to ignore.

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