

## To Be or Not To Be (Authentic)

Since the moment Harriet Beecher Stowe finished and released *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it has come under fire from many critics. The plethora of criticism has included challenges to her authenticity. Looking at her from the perspective of being a white woman writing about the brutality of slavery, her critics call out her ability to write about such material accurately. While Stowe's authenticity in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will be the primary focus in this essay, Frederick Douglass and his narrative will also be important, as it is Douglass and his story written from his perspective, which makes critics assume that Douglass's story must be authentic. His authenticity undercuts that of Stowe's. When looking at Douglass's narrative and Stowe's novel together, the black slaves are shown to be vastly different in the manner in which they behave and deal with their oppressive conditions. However, even though a character such as Uncle Tom was much more passive than Douglass, there is still evidence to suggest that Stowe wrote accurate portrayals based on real slaves. Despite her generally small amount of firsthand knowledge, Stowe still created characters that played a large part in examining the difficulties of slavery and have value along with a true narrative written by a man like Douglass. The fictional characters that Stowe created for her novel have come under fire from critics such as James Baldwin.

Stowe's biography is important in this debate as she spent very little time in a southern (slave) state. In the mid-nineteenth century, she lived in Ohio for years, which was a free state. However, even with limited encounters in slave territories,

Stowe was still a witness to important events revolving around slavery. The Kentucky-Ohio border was a popular location for aggression between black slaves trying to get north to the free states and white southern men trying to capture or kidnap colored people and send them back south. In order to examine the conditions present when Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it is important to take a look back at history and the border wars that were taking place in the mid-nineteenth century. Carol Lasser talks about this history in an article she wrote called "Men are from Missouri, Women are from Massachusetts: Perspectives on Narratives of Violence on the Border between Slavery and Freedom." From 1832-1850, Stowe gained her firsthand knowledge of slavery: "supplemented by a few brief trips across the river to Kentucky to visit acquaintances and former students" (Lasser 14). She was able to see anti-abolitionist riots, including a riot in 1836 and another one in 1841 that "rocked" Cincinnati. In 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law escalated these border wars: "triggered a perception of the escalation of attempted slave escapes and, conversely, efforts to recapture and sometimes to kidnap people of color on the northern side of the border" (Lasser 15).

Stowe intended *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to have a political impact on the United States: "She specifically and explicitly worked to harness sentiment to support the black combatants of the border war" (Lasser 15). She did not advocate violence as a means to try and bring out political change, but nonetheless to react on behalf of "humanitarian and political ends." Next to Frederick Douglass, it is obvious that Stowe lacked a large body of firsthand knowledge of slavery. However, her presence in important events such as these race riots and the Kentucky-Ohio border war

meant that she saw the struggles of black slaves trying to obtain their freedom. She also saw the methods that southern white men would go through to try and capture or kidnap colored people and prevent this freedom.

Despite this historical evidence showing that Stowe did in fact witness some of this aggression centering around slavery in these wars between slave and free states, there have been many critics that have gone after her harshly over her story and its supposed lack of authenticity. James Baldwin is one such critic. In his critical essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” he wastes little time giving his opinion about the novel: “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a very bad novel” (Baldwin 533) . . . He elaborates on this feeling as he continues in talking about its sentimentality as “the mark of dishonesty.” He does not even give Stowe the credit due to writers by referring to her as a novelist: “she was not so much a novelist as an impassioned pamphleteer; her book was not intended to do anything more than prove that slavery was wrong; was, in fact, perfectly horrible” (Baldwin 533). Baldwin does not feel that Stowe has created an authentic tale about slavery. At the very least, she has skirted the true issue: “and to leave unanswered and unnoticed the only important question: what it was, after all, that moved her people to such deeds” (Baldwin 533).

Baldwin looks at three specific characters that Stowe created in UTC—George, Eliza, and Uncle Tom. He focuses on these three, as “these are the important ones” . . . Of these three, two are dismissed outright: “two of them may be dismissed immediately, since we have only the author’s word that they are Negro and they are, in all other respects, as white as she can make them. The two are George and Eliza” (Baldwin 534). Since George and Eliza are light skinned, they are both able to pass

for something other than a Negro—as a Spanish man or a white woman respectively. Despite being mulatto and gaining certain tactical advantages this way, it is still odd for Baldwin to be so critical of these characters that still undergo considerable hardships in the novel. George and Eliza both struggle to find their way north and are chased by white men trying to catch these runaways. In a passive way, Baldwin seems to be dismissing more than just these two characters. They are runaways that are trying to get into free territory, and this is the kind of firsthand knowledge Stowe was able to pick up in her time close to these border wars.

Another issue Baldwin has with Stowe is the overall portrayal of not only blacks, but the portrayal of the whites in comparison to them: “Here, black equates with evil and white with grace; if, being mindful of the necessity of good works, she could not cast out the blacks” (Baldwin 535) . . . Baldwin continues to criticize Stowe and her method for writing her black characters: “she could not embrace them either without purifying them of sin. She must cover their intimidating nakedness, robe them in white, the garments of salvation” (Baldwin 535) . . . He is not mentioning the character Eva here, but connecting the dots leads him to assert that this little white girl represents this idea of cleansing the blacks and purging them of their wickedness. In general, Baldwin does not feel that Stowe has created characters that have a positive impact, but overall do more harm than good: “They emerge for what they are: a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream. They are fantasies, connecting nowhere with reality” (Baldwin 536) . . . In the final paragraph of his essay, Baldwin closes with his final opinion on the failure of UTC in the broader

genre of protest novels: “The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended” (Baldwin 539). In effect, Baldwin sees a protest novel such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as one that is not showing the complete picture of human characters. Stowe did not go all the way in creating characters that represent both the beauty and the dread that human beings are capable of in life.

It is fitting for the case of showing Stowe’s authenticity held within her novel, to give her voice the first chance of defending herself. Stowe wrote *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and it was published in 1853, which happened to be just about a year after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published. It was a way for her to reach out to her critics and inform them on the fact that there was inspiration for the Uncle Tom character and the other characters she created. While there was a specific purpose to her manner in crafting these characters and the overall story, the characters were not written without baseline knowledge in slaves and slavery. In *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe takes it upon herself to give the reader numerous examples of real life people and stories that inspired her: “The character of Uncle Tom has been objected to as improbable; and yet the writer has received more confirmations of that character, and from a great variety of sources, than of any other in the book” (Stowe 446).

One of these numerous stories occurred when Stowe visited the family of a friend in Maine. In the conversation that ensued, the subject of Uncle Tom came up. While In New Orleans, a man told of a negro that embodies multiple characteristics

of Uncle Tom: “he found in his possession a most valuable negro man, of such remarkable probity and honesty that his brother literally trusted him with all he had” (Stowe 446). The man continued to elaborate on the obedience and good nature of this man: “He had frequently seen him take out a handful of bills, without looking at them, and hand them to this servant, bidding him go and provide what was necessary for the family, and bring him the change” (Stowe 446). The story of this Negro man continues further as his slaveholder eventually sold him due to his disdain for anything religious having to do with his slaves. He would use free time to pray, read his bible, and sometimes even pray with others. Certainly, this man has more than one characteristic in common with Stowe’s Uncle Tom. He was even punished for his annoying disobedience to the unchristian order to abstain from all religion: “he constantly disobeyed this unchristian edict, his master inflicted upon him that punishment which a master always has in his power to inflict—he sold him into perpetual exile from his wife and children, down to New Orleans” (Stowe 447).

If we tally up things that Uncle Tom and this Negro man have in common, they both were separated from their families and sent to New Orleans, both read the bible and prayed (sometimes with others) in their spare time, and both contain virtuous personalities that contain so much honesty as to employ a great amount of trust from their superiors. These examples of pious Negroes were not limited to the south or the slave states. Stowe makes note of examples from free states as well. Some of these Negroes have been of such high character, as to impart a lasting impression on their own community long after they are gone: “their biography and

sayings have been collected in religious tracts, and published for the instruction of the community” (Stowe 449).

One such man was convicted and serving time in a New York State prison. It was here in prison that this Negro got his first glimpse of religion and the potential effect it can have on a man: “He became so eminent an example of humility, faith, and, above all, fervent love, that his presence in the neighborhood was esteemed a blessing to the church” (Stowe 449). While Uncle Tom was not associated with any local church, nonetheless, both of these men felt their faith so strongly as to let it guide them to look for and treat every person with genuine kindness. This is evident in the way that Uncle Tom refuses to take a perfect opportunity to kill Legree and end his reign of terror. No matter how badly Legree has Uncle Tom beaten, Tom is still trying to bring out the goodness (what little bit is there) of this slaveholder. These only represent a couple of the many examples that were brought to Stowe after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published and released to the public.

Compared to the harsh modern critic view of James Baldwin, Jane Tompkins offers a more levelheaded approach to critiquing Stowe’s novel. Even still, Tompkins lobbies a remark early in her essay “Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History” that shows she was not a huge fan of Stowe when speaking of her former home open to the public: “Why should I go? Neither I nor anyone I knew regarded Stowe as a serious writer” (Tompkins 539). However, Tompkins is more than willing to assert that there was great importance to Stowe’s novel and what it did for the country as a popular domestic novel: “a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman’s point of view; that this body of work

is remarkable for its intellectual complexity, ambition, and resourcefulness” (Tompkins 541) . . . She puts *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* on a level higher than that achieved by other acclaimed writers such as Melville and Hawthorne when it comes to the critique of American society.

If for no other reason, Tompkins sees tremendous value in the novel based on its lengthy reach: “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was, in almost any terms one can think of, the most important book of the century. It was the first American novel ever to sell over a million copies” (Tompkins 541) . . . She characterized this novel as a sentimental work, and in being so, this was written for women. Along these sentimental lines, this novel’s purpose was very clear: “the sentimental novel, which make continual and obvious appeals to the reader’s emotions and use technical devices that are distinguished by their utter conventionality” (Tompkins 542) . . . The way in which UTC was written goes against what was considered to be good literature in regards to its place in sentimental fiction. Not only has the novel seen great success, but also it has endured in the decades and centuries since its debut.

When looking at the depiction of slavery in other popular novels, one that comes to mind is *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. While *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has been faced with considerable criticism, Douglass’s narrative has not been subject to harsh reactions based on its level of authenticity. On the surface, it would seem that they are vehemently opposed in terms of their viewpoints—one being a fictional work written by a white woman, and the other, the narrative of a black slave as he experienced its brutalities. Many critics have seen Douglass’s work to be the true vision of slavery while Stowe’s represents that of an outsider trying to jump



into the mix of slavery that is best left alone from her point of view. An important question to ask in regards to these two works is: must they be mutually exclusive from one another? Can they not both contribute to an accurate and authentic picture of slavery? Frederick Douglass is obviously the focal point of his narrative and it could be argued that Uncle Tom is obviously the focal point of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. If these two stories are so different, it is necessary to look in the texts themselves to see how they differ from one another.

In Douglass's narrative, *the* pivotal moment occurs when he feels like he has no other choice but to fight back against Mr. Covey. Douglass even recognizes the importance that this event held in his life: "This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood" (Douglass 43). This event helped him to regain a sense of his own self, and also renewed the determination to gain his freedom. In this scene, things start off with the passive and docile nature that is not dissimilar to Uncle Tom: "Long before daylight, I was called to go and rub, curry, and feed, the horses. I obeyed, and was glad to obey" (Douglass 42). The willingness to do what he was ordered to do is gone in a flash when Mr. Covey enters with a lengthy rope. It is here and now that Douglass reaches his breaking point and the something that must does indeed give: "he caught hold of my legs, and was about tying me. As soon as I found what he was up to, I gave a sudden spring, and as I did so, he holding to my legs, I was brought sprawling" (Douglass 42) . . . The resistance that Douglass gave to the expected beating from Mr. Covey completely caught him off guard.

The reaction of Covey only further fueled the spirit of Douglass as Covey “trembled like a leaf.” This represents the biggest difference between Frederick Douglass and Uncle Tom. Douglass fights back in a physical manner when he feels it is necessary. Uncle Tom foregoes physical resistance for a spiritual variety, as his shield is his faith, instead of his fists or his strength. Uncle Tom’s Covey is Simon Legree. When confronted by the threat and use of force from a brutal slaveholder, Uncle Tom refuses to hurt anyone. It is the one way in which Tom will refuse to follow through on a given order: “It’s what I an’t used to,--never did,--and can’t do, no way possible” (Stowe 324). Tom has his own kind of breaking point. However, he refuses to harm anyone, no matter how cruel they are or what they have done to others.

Met with this refusal, Legree hits him numerous times. Tom feels a liberating feeling that is considerably different from Douglass’s: “In the very depth of physical suffering, bowed by brutal oppression, this question shot a gleam of joy and triumph through Tom’s soul” (Stowe 325). His own freedom is his soul that is completely untouchable from the harm of people like Legree: “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;--no matter, no matter, you can’t harm me” (Stowe 325)! The importance of framing these scenes to show the differing methods of resistance of Uncle Tom and Frederick Douglass is that they can both be authentic in their representation of slaves and slavery. The lack of skepticism about Douglass’s narrative suggests that audiences consider his reaction to the brutality of Mr. Covey to be an accurate portrayal of the slave/slaveholder dynamic. It falls in line with the

perception many had about slaves as being barbaric in nature, and that they must be dealt with brutally in order to keep them in line. This misconception about the general nature of slaves is what Stowe speaks up against in *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. These cases of real people coming to her and informing her of people very similar in nature to Uncle Tom shows that there were slaves with this docile and spiritual nature. Not every slave was out for blood and itching for an opportunity to fight back against the white slave master. In short, both interpretations can be authentic and represent a broader spectrum of the varying behavior of slaves.

In Randall Fuller's article "The First Great American Novel: It was Uncle Tom's Cabin," Fuller talks about the enormous impact of the novel on both northerners and southerners. The emotional impact that UTC had on its readers is very tough to ignore: "Readers throughout the nation, north and south, found themselves engrossed in the book in ways they had never before experienced" (Fuller 26). Many in the south did not appreciate the emotion and sentiment found in Stowe's work: "Southern editors decried the novel as "unscrupulous" because it enlisted sympathies on behalf of slaves through imaginative identification—an unfair tactic, it seemed to them, in the polemical war over abolition" (Fuller 27). This raises a very important point in regards to some criticism of UTC. When those in the south got up in arms over the content of the novel, they were very possibly doing so with an agenda. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* elicited a strong abolitionist sentiment in America, and this was counter-productive to the continued desires of the American south. It makes one wonder if southern criticism was legitimate in regards to authenticity, or was it just a smear campaign to quell these abolitionist feelings?

Thomas Chase Hagood also wrote about and questioned the harsh critical reactions to UTC in his article “Oh, What a Slanderous Book: Reading Uncle Tom’s Cabin in the Antebellum South.” One of the critics talked about in his article is a man named John R. Thompson. Thompson represented the resentment that many southerners felt towards Stowe: “Thompson described Stowe as a refined writer, but also as one who “intermeddled with things which concern her not”” (Hagood 73). In yet another example, here is criticism from a southern man that is not coming into Stowe’s novel with an objective viewpoint. Thompson sent a shot across the bow in regards to the potentially dangerous precedent set by the novel: “the mouthpiece of a large and dangerous faction which if we [the South] do not put down with the pen, we may be compelled one day (God grant that day may never come!) to repel with bayonet” (Hagood 73).

Overall, the validity of many southern outspoken critics must be questioned in terms of an unbiased viewpoint. When living in the south, there is always the potential that they are worried about riling up abolitionist sentiment and this causes them to lash out at Stowe and her authenticity. Stowe’s *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* offers numerous examples of real people that shared many character traits with characters she wrote in UTC—especially Uncle Tom. It should also be taken into account that Stowe in her lifetime was present during many times of aggression in the border wars between slave and free states. Jane Tompkins and other critics make sure not to undersell the impact of Stowe’s novel. When looking at Frederick Douglass’s narrative alongside UTC, readers can see just how differently Uncle Tom

and Frederick Douglass react to similar situations. However, the result (along with other evidence) shows that both works have an important and authentic quality.

## Works Cited

- Baldwin, James. "Everybody's Protest Novel." Uncle Tom's Cabin: A Norton Critical Edition. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norton 2010. 532-39. Print.
- Douglass, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. Dover Publications, 1995. 42-43. Print.
- Fuller, Randall. "The First Great American Novel: It Was Uncle Tom's Cabin." *Humanities* 34.2 (2013). 24-49. Print.
- Hagood, Thomas Chase. "'Oh, What a Slanderous Book': Reading 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' in the Antebellum South." *Southern Quarterly* 49.4 (2012). 71-94. Print.
- Lasser, Carol. "Men Are from Missouri, Women Are from Massachusetts: Perspectives on Narratives of Violence on the Border between Slavery and Freedom." *Ohio Valley History* 14.2 (2014): 12-19. Print.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. From A Key to "Uncle Tom's Cabin". Uncle Tom's Cabin: A Norton Critical Edition. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norton 2010. 446-49. Print.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin: A Norton Critical Edition*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norton, 2010. 324-325. Print.
- Tompkins, Jane. "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History." Uncle Tom's Cabin: A Norton Critical Edition. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Norton 2010. 539-61. Print.

## Works Consulted

Belasco, Susan. "Uncle Tom's Cabin in Our Time." *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 29.2 (2012): 318-28. Print.