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ENGL M13A

14 December 2021

### Excavating the Buried History of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Seldom few texts written throughout recorded human history can be proven to have changed the world, forever altering the lives of millions through the written word. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is one such piece of literature. Originally written in serial form, Harriet Beecher Stowe's infamous story of the reprehensible industry of slavery was first published as a novel on March 20th, 1852. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the first legitimate best-seller in the history of American literature, selling ten-thousand copies in a single week, and over three-hundred thousand copies within the year. The novel became the second best-selling book of the 19th century, surpassed only by the Bible. When it was released, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was truly one of a kind, being the first major narrative surrounding the lives of slaves, brutally detailing the appalling conditions they were subjected to, and the lengths they had to go to in search of freedom. The impact of the book was revolutionary, opening up the eyes of ignorant white American Northerners to the horrors of slavery. The effect was precisely what Stowe had intended, a white Northerner herself, who became inspired to pen the novel after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which legally compelled Northerners to return escaped slaves to their Southern masters. Stowe's anti-slavery message was clear and emphatic, and as the fame of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* grew, so did the prominence of the abolition movement, eventually culminating in the American Civil War. Legend says that, upon meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe, President Abraham Lincoln stated, "So this is the little lady who made this big war?" ("Today in History - June 5").

Much of the novel's impact revolved around the eponymous character of Uncle Tom, a Christ-like figure whose sheer goodness in the face of depravity sent shockwaves into the soul of the nation. However, as time passed, with slavery long since defeated, much of the substance of the novel became lost, and the noble character of Uncle Tom corrupted. Through this bastardized representation, the phrase "Uncle Tom" became and has since remained a slur used by African-Americans against other African-Americans. This unfortunate fact is made that much more disheartening when viewed in tandem with the inspirational role that the venerable Reverend Josiah Henson, an escaped slave and legendary abolition trailblazer, played in the creation of the character of Uncle Tom. By following the path of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* throughout American history, the destruction of the righteous and virtuous character of Uncle Tom becomes clear. As a result of the systematic destruction of Uncle Tom, Josiah Henson, the character's real-life inspiration, tragically becomes another meritorious civil rights trailblazer utterly lost to history, buried beneath the avalanche of mockery and loathing directed towards the bastardized representations of Uncle Tom.

While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* follows multiple characters on the journey through slavery, the most significant character and the true protagonist is the titular Uncle Tom. Stowe herself notes that Uncle Tom, "is to be the hero of our story" (Stowe 31). Living on the Shelby plantation in Kentucky for the majority of his life, Tom grew to not only be respected as a slave in the eyes of Mr. Shelby, but to be nearly admired as a fellow human being. In a conversation with the reprehensible slave trader, Mr. Haley, Arthur Shelby states, "Why, the fact is, Haley, Tom is an uncommon fellow; he is certainly worth that sum anywhere – steady, honest, capable, manages my whole farm like a clock" (4). When Haley adds the caveat of Tom being honest relative to a slave, Shelby insists, "No; I mean, really, Tom is a good, steady, sensible, pious fellow... I've

trusted him, since then, with everything I have, – money, house, horses...” (4). Despite Shelby’s declarations of trusting Tom as much as he does anybody else in his life, and affirmations of Tom’s honor and integrity, he nonetheless engages in the practice of selling Tom in order to pay off outstanding debts. To make matters worse, Shelby had but recently promised to grant Uncle Tom his freedom. When Tom is warned by Eliza, who is fleeing with her young child, who was also to be sold, he reacts in an extraordinary fashion. “No, no – I an’t going... If I must be sold, or all the people on the place, and everything go to rack, why, let me be sold. I s’pose I can b’ar it as well as any on ‘em” (56). Without hesitation, Tom allows himself to be sold away from all that he has ever known and all those whom he has ever loved, in order so that they will not be sold in his place. This remarkable sacrifice closely mirrors that of Jesus Christ, who, according to the scripture Tom so devoutly adhered to, gave up his own life to absolve the world of sin. As written in the New International Version of the Bible, “Greater love has no one than this; to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (NIV, John 15:13).

This theme of fantastic sacrifice recurs prominently as tragedy follows Tom throughout *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. After the sudden death of Tom’s subsequent master, who had likewise promised to free Tom, he was shipped down to New Orleans and bought by the barbarous Simon Legree. Unlike his former owners, Legree was a malevolent creature who took nefarious glee in the destruction of his slaves, in both body and soul. As Legree states, “Use up, and buy more, it’s my way; – makes you less trouble...” (484). Legree’s intent with Uncle Tom was to break down his humanity in order to make him into a driver; a slave in charge of overseeing the other slaves, charged with dehumanization and dispensing brutality upon their fellows. However, Tom, possessing incorruptible morality, refuses to take up this deplorable task, enraging Legree, who begins viciously beating him. Still, Tom does not falter, insisting, “Mas’r, if you mean to kill me,

kill me; but, as to my raising my hand agin any one here, I never shall, – I’ll die first!” (508).

Tom’s resolute religious constitution infuriates Legree, a depraved man who despises Tom for the strength he garners from his faith. After the escape of his two enslaved mistresses, Legree’s rage reaches a boiling point, and he commits himself to beat Tom until he dies or reveals the whereabouts of his escapees. As Stowe writes, “Speak!” thundered Legree, striking him furiously. “Do you know anything?” [Tom] I know, Mas’r; but I can’t tell anything. *I can die!*” (586). As Legree continues battering him, Tom states, “Mas’r, if you was sick, or in trouble, or dying, and I could save ye, I’d *give ye my heart’s blood...*” (586). Displaying almost alien compassion, Tom not only sacrifices himself for the continued safety of his two friends, but also professes he would lay down his own life to save the life and soul of Simon Legree, his wicked overseer – and his murderer. In his martyrdom, Tom inspired George Shelby, the son of Mr. Shelby, to free all the remaining slaves on the Shelby plantation, leaving Uncle Tom’s cabin as a shrine to Tom’s sacrifice.

In spite of all his laudable qualities, Stowe is not undeserving of criticism for her representation of Uncle Tom. Stowe frequently portrays Tom in a way that could be described as passively demeaning, using belittling adjectives such as “simple” and “child-like” to describe him. As Richard Yarborough, professor of English and African-American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles argues in his essay, “Strategies of Black Characterization in Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Early Afro-American Novel,” “Although Stowe unquestionably sympathized with the slaves, her commitment to challenging claims of black inferiority was frequently undermined by her own endorsement of racial stereotypes” (Yarborough 25). Stowe had pure intentions in writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but she could not entirely absolve herself of prejudice, likely due to honest ignorance. In many ways, it is unfair to expect Stowe to adhere to

the modern standards of racial tolerance and acceptance, as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was penned during a time when black individuals were widely viewed not as human beings, but as property and chattel. Today, Stowe's depictions of African-American slaves can reasonably be considered racist and offensive, but they were radically progressive during the era, for which she deserves some degree of credit. While Stowe's unfortunate beliefs and narrow-minded views cannot be wholly absolved, it is imperative to acknowledge that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* represented an exponential leap forward for the depiction of African-Americans in literature, and was, overall, unequivocally beneficial to American society as a whole.

Following the Civil War and formal emancipation of all slaves in the United States, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* understandably began to lose relevancy. With its ultimate goal of sparking abolition movements a resounding success, the novel's purpose had been achieved, and it no longer packed the emotional gut-punch that made it such a phenomenon. Still, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* maintained a great deal of brand recognition throughout the later 19th century and into the early 20th century. Predictably, many individuals sought to profit off of Stowe's initial success, with theatrical renditions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* popping up across the United States. The majority of these new interpretations, however, included significant changes to the original story as written by Stowe, with the character of Uncle Tom left virtually unrecognizable. Although some aspects of Stowe's Uncle Tom are deeply flawed and prejudiced, Uncle Tom is still an indubitably noble, virtuous, compassionate individual, possessing both tremendous physical and moral strength. In theatrical depictions, Uncle Tom was almost entirely stripped of his admirable traits and reduced to a demeaning parody of himself. As Dr. David Pilgrim describes in his essay, "The Tom Caricature," "But the reconstructed Uncle Toms are passive, docile, unthinking Christians. Loyal and faithful to white employers, they are duplicitous in their dealings with fellow blacks"

(Pilgrim). Whereas Stowe's Tom repeatedly sacrificed himself for others, eventually giving his life to save two fellow slaves, the theatrical caricatures would do anything to garner the favor of their master, including betraying his compatriots.

Furthermore, Tom was predominantly portrayed in minstrel shows and later in the film as old, emaciated, sickly, and cowardly – a far cry from the powerful and resolute figure in the novel. Adding insult to injury, Uncle Tom was also frequently played by white actors in blackface. As Pilgrim writes, “In 1903, Edwin S. Porter directed a twelve-minute version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This was the first black character in an American film; ironically, Uncle Tom was played by an unnamed white actor colored with blackface makeup” (Pilgrim). These deplorable interpretations, of Tom as a cartoonish, childlike servant, would become prominent fixtures in early American cinema, appearing in pro-slavery films such as *For Massa's Sake* (1910) and *Birth of a Nation* (1915). On stage and in film, Uncle Tom was used to deify slavery and encourage racial stereotypes, with Patricia Turner, Professor of African-American Studies at the University of California, Davis claiming, “I think they were interested in using their stage shows to revise the image of slavery that Stowe had,” a goal that was ultimately successful (“Why African Americans Loathe ‘Uncle Tom’”).

As time passed, the true character of Uncle Tom, created by Stowe to further the abolition movement, was gradually overtaken by the humiliating caricatures present in theater and film. The name “Uncle Tom” grew to be associated less with Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where he is an imperfect, but deeply virtuous man, compassionate and fiercely loyal to his fellow slaves, and associated more with a cowardly figure who would do anything to please his white masters. It is this bastardized and warped characterization of Uncle Tom that has endured, and in modern

America, “Uncle Tom” is defined as “a black person who is humiliatingly subservient or deferential to white people” (Pilgrim).

Today, “Uncle Tom” is a racial epithet predominantly used by African-Americans against other African-Americans, synonymous with pejorative terms like “oreo” and “race-traitor.” Considered by most as deeply offensive, “Uncle Tom” is a title or description that has been attached to many men throughout history, including the U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and even Martin Luther King Jr. Through the systematic debasement of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Uncle Tom,” African-American culture and American culture as a whole was robbed of what Tom originally represented; honor, piety, sacrifice, and kindness. While Stowe’s representation of Tom is deeply flawed, he is nonetheless the first real black hero of American literature, whose Christ-like virtue in the face of abhorrent oppression helped inspire a nation to abolish slavery. Gradually replaced by a demeaning mockery of a stereotypical idiotic slave who was both happy to be a slave, and who would do anything to please his master, Stowe’s Uncle Tom all but vanished from the cultural zeitgeist.

The true tragedy inlaid into the deprecatory path of Uncle Tom throughout history, however, relates to the character’s origin. One of the foremost criticisms leveled against *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, almost exclusively by white Southerners, was that the novel inaccurately portrayed slavery in an excessively negative light and that it was either “wholly false, or at least wildly exaggerated” (Stowe, *The Key*). In response, Stowe indignantly wrote and published *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1854, wherein she deliberately identified the sources she used and real-life experiences she compiled to craft the narrative of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In *The Key*, Stowe fiercely defends her story and effectively proves that nearly every aspect of the narrative, including characters and plot elements, was based on irrefutable facts and credible first-hand accounts.

This includes the eponymous protagonist, Uncle Tom, with Stowe writing, “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, *The Key* 38).

While Tom’s character was influenced by a variety of sources and historical figures, it is widely agreed upon that the real inspiration for Uncle Tom was the Reverend Josiah Henson. Stowe herself asserts, “A last instance parallel with that of Uncle Tom is to be found in the published memoirs of the venerable Josiah Henson” (Stowe, *The Key* 43). Born into slavery in 1789, Henson was soon after separated from his mother and sold to a trafficker, eventually falling into the abusive hands of Isaac Riley. As Jared Brock of *Smithsonian Magazine* describes in his article, “The Story of Josiah Henson, the Real Inspiration for ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’” He endured countless beatings as a child—especially after an ill-fated attempt to learn to read. Henson had great physical strength and leadership ability, and eventually became Riley’s market man in the nation’s capital” (Brock). Similar to Tom, who was also depended on by his owner, Henson also grew to become a prominent religious leader in his community, even though he could not read until later in his life, relying purely on devout passion and natural eloquence in his sermons. In another parallel with the character of Uncle Tom, Henson was sold by Riley as he was on the verge of freedom, and transported by Riley’s nephew, Amos, to New Orleans. Amos, however, would fall ill with malaria before reaching New Orleans. Instead of letting Amos die, Henson showed immeasurable grace and compassion to the cruel overseer, loading him onto a steamboat back North to receive medical aid. So as Tom frequently showed benevolent kindness to his oppressors, Henson risked his prospects of freedom to prevent the death of the man charged with selling him like chattel.



Fortunately, Henson's life has a much happier ending than that of the fictional Uncle Tom. Henson would successfully escape to Canada with his family, eventually forming a settlement for freed slaves which became one of the final stops on the Underground Railroad, and reportedly saving approximately 200 slaves himself. A prominent preacher and member of the abolition movement, Henson penned a memoir detailing his incredible life, which became a literary fixture amongst fellow abolitionists – including Harriet Beecher Stowe. In a later edition of his autobiography, Henson describes meeting with Stowe in her Andover, Massachusetts home in 1849. As Henson writes, “We went to Mrs. Stowe's house, and she was deeply interested in the story of my life and misfortunes, and had me narrate its details to her” (Henson).

Nonetheless, despite his conclusive role in the creation of Uncle Tom and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a whole, Josiah Henson never truly benefitted from his involvement in the novel. As Brock writes, “Not only would Henson—the real Uncle Tom—never receive a dime from Stowe's publishers, history itself didn't remember him kindly *because* of his connection to the fictional hero” (Brock). The perverse parody of Uncle Tom as an old, feeble, racial sell-out, that ran rampant in the minstrel shows of the 19th century would replace the literary version of Tom, which bore innumerable similarities to Josiah Henson. As Stowe's Uncle Tom was bulldozed and buried by the bastardized Tom of film and theatre, so too was the remarkable story of Josiah Henson. Today, Uncle Tom is remembered synonymously with race-traitors and the visage of a sick, cowardly old slave – and Josiah Henson is scarcely remembered at all. Despite being a true trailblazer of the abolition movement, a gifted preacher, and a man capable of extraordinary acts of compassion and kindness, there are no holidays celebrating Josiah Henson and seldom few novels detail his incredible life. Through his connection with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Henson, a figure that ought to be remembered alongside figures like Harriet Tubman and Frederick

Douglass, has been essentially abandoned by history, becoming an innocent casualty of the destruction of Uncle Tom.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a truly revolutionary novel, exerting a degree of influence upon America that had never before been seen, and has arguably never been seen since. Following the lives of several slaves and meticulously detailing the horrific conditions they were forced to endure in their search for freedom and survival, Stowe succeeded in exposing ignorant Northerners to the horrors of slavery. Credited by many, including Lincoln himself, according to legend, of inciting the Civil War and the resulting emancipation of slaves within the United States, Stowe's impact on American history can not be understated. Much of this impact can be directly attributed to the titular character of Uncle Tom, whose Christ-like compassion and willingness to sacrifice himself for the benefit of others, be they his friends, fellow slaves, or brutal overseer, helped illustrate the immense inhumanity of slavery. Although Stowe has since received criticism for her use of racial stereotypes and demeaning description in the character of Uncle Tom, and rightfully so, the evident truth is that her intentions in crafting Uncle Tom were pure, but execution indubitably flawed. Nevertheless, Stowe's envisioning of Uncle Tom was the first black hero in American literature, whose remarkable qualities succeeded in furthering the Northern abolition movement.

After the conclusion of the Civil War, however, Uncle Tom was purposefully corrupted and degraded by bigoted white showrunners, who altered the story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for theatre and film performances, stripping Tom of all his noble qualities, and rendering him a derogatory farce and prejudiced representation of a Southern slave. Whereas Stowe's Tom showed universal compassion, devout righteousness, and incorruptible morality, the Uncle Tom of perverse minstrel shows, often portrayed by white actors in blackface, was obsequious, feeble,

and willing to do anything to curry favor with his white masters. Lamentably, it is this representation of Uncle Tom that endured, eventually completely overtaking the flawed hero in Stowe's original novel. Today, the phrase "Uncle Tom" has been effectively reduced to a slur used against African-Americans who exhibit subservience to whites or who are otherwise accused of being a traitor to their race. What makes the disregard and destruction of Stowe's original Uncle Tom all the more tragic are that Tom was not simply a fictional character conjured out of thin air, but deeply influenced by the real-life story of Josiah Henson. Once a legendary preacher and eminent abolitionist, who endured the brutality and cruelty of slavery yet retained miraculous compassion to all, Henson has been virtually abandoned by history due to his association with Uncle Tom, and the subsequent debasement of Tom at the hands of Southern bigots seeking to erase Stowe's legacy. In doing so, the legacy of Harriet Beecher Stowe's revolutionary *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the titular Uncle Tom has been irreparably tarnished, with the character of Uncle Tom suffering systematic degradation and eventually becoming a pejorative slur. Consequently, the venerable Josiah Henson, a distinguished man with an exceptional life story that inspired the character of Uncle Tom, fell into deplorable obscurity, with his incredible story forever buried beneath mounds of derision and scorn placed upon the name "Uncle Tom."

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