

Fall 2022

Literature as a Monument: Uncle Tom's Cabin Reflecting the Morality of a Nation

Shalane Parcenue Conrads

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Conrads, S. P.(2022). *Literature as a Monument: Uncle Tom's Cabin Reflecting the Morality of a Nation*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/7133>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

**Literature as a Monument: Uncle Tom's Cabin Reflecting the Morality
of a Nation**

by

Shalane Parcenu Conrads

Bachelor of Arts
University of Northern Colorado, 2008

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

English

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2022

Accepted by:

Gretchen Woertendyke, Director of Thesis

Brian Glavey, Reader

Tracey L. Weldon, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

© Copyright by Shalane Parcenué Conrads, 2022
All Rights Reserved

Abstract

This essay studies the critical response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by studying the novel's critical reception from publication and into contemporary America to understand how the novel remains an institution of Civil War remembrance. In accepting the polemical status of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as both a literary and historical document, I argue that the novel is a monument in American culture. In studying the wide spectrum of critical response to the novel since its publication, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes a social barometer that reflects the controversial race relations in the United States from the Civil War to modern time.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| ABSTRACT..... | III |
| CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| CHAPTER 2: STUDYING THE CONTINUOUS PRESENCE OF <i>UNCLE TOM'S CABIN</i> IN AMERICA | 4 |
| CHAPTER 3: GENRE AMBIGUITY | 22 |
| CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION | 35 |
| WORKS CITED | 37 |

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Asserting that the novel is the only book of life, placing it ahead of religion, philosophy, and science, is hardly a gesture to be taken for granted.

-Guindo Mazzoni, *The Theory of the Novel*

The past is our only real possession in life. It is the one piece of property of which time cannot deprive us; it is our own in a way that nothing else in life is. It never leaves our consciousness. In a word, we are our past; we do not cling to it, it clings to us.

-Grace King, *Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters*

Like an heirloom, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is passed down from generation to generation. Since its publication in 1852 the novel has never been out of print. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been adapted into plays, films, commercials, cartoons, and various merchandise. The novel's influence permeates into national political discourse and into the vernacular language. Now a cultural myth, it no longer requires being read to be known. To catalog the diverse and fluctuating responses to the novel over several generations is to catalog an evolving American attitude regarding race relations. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* functions as a social barometer that reflects America's tumultuous relationship with racism, while also gauging the morality of a nation. Receiving a wide range of criticism, debates range between dismissing the novel as historically inaccurate

to validating it as a metonym for the socio-political climate leading to the Civil War. Literary scholars locate the novel as belonging anywhere between a literary classic to a poorly written popular fiction novel. More than a novel about the past, the novel continues to engage with the present. This essay studies the diverse critical responses to Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, over the lifespan of the novel, to understand how the novel remains an institution of Civil War remembrance. Crafted to persuade, to edify, and to motivate readers, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* haunts the present because the novel continues to stir controversial reader responses. Varied as they are, the critical responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* require the reader to wrestle with the controversial themes of the novel. To read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through these lenses and with the weight of time is a mental exercise in examining the reader's own personal position on racism and America's historical relationship with slavery. Every generation responds differently, but all readers are confronted with the legend of the novel, the novel's genre ambiguity, and the novel's continuous influence on popular culture. In this regard, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has become a literary monument. A monument can be any size, has a physical presence, acts as a memory holder, and is generally created to commemorate a specific event or person. It is significant that in 2022 we are still using this novel in our classrooms and in public institutions to teach younger Americans about their country's historical past. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is relevant today because it remains a prominent literary source that anchors America's youth to their inherited past. The historical record of the novel's critical response is controversial and fluctuates because every new generation rereads *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and reframes America's race relations trajectory. While asking ourselves why specific monuments still exist among us, "[w]e all

must readjust our thinking. The war has only just begun” (Kenan). Randall Kenan, in an article published on August 18, 2020, declares the Civil War is not over and that we are now in “the season for toppling Confederate monuments” (Kenan). Silent Sam, the monument Kenan is specifically referencing in his article, is a physically large confederate statue on a university campus. I interpret Kenan to be nudging us, as a nation, to critically reexamine our history; to not just accept what has been handed down to us as an explanation or rationality of our nation’s history, or of our own historical moment in time. Kenan stresses, “The coming war will not be about the monuments, but the mentalities” and he asks us to consider what we have learned, or can learn, from history. I am not arguing for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s removal, but that we critically examine why the novel still resonates with the modern reader. Kenan’s final advice is to learn from our past because “[e]ven ghosts can teach us a thing or two” (Kenan). What does the extensive critical reception of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* teach us? *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* continues to have a presence in classrooms, museums, in political discourse, and in American culture. It functions to points us back to the socio-political debates of the Civil War, while also refining our conversations surrounding race today. Like a monument, Harriett Beecher Stowe’s novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, marks the historical significance of the Civil War and encapsulates America’s ongoing struggle with morality and racism.

CHAPTER 2: Studying the Continuous Presence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in America

Southern Critical Reception:

Unsurprisingly, the North and the South responded radically different to the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. Despite Stowe's deliberate attempt to create sympathetic Southern characters, such as Augustine St. Clare and the Shelby family, a majority of Southern politicians and literary leaders of the time accused Stowe of intentionally slandering the South:

Southern reviewers seldom liked any of the white characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. They may have disliked the white southern characters more than the northern ones. They were generally convinced that the southern characters, aside from little Eva, had the single aim of defaming the south. (Gossett 196)

The initial Southern critical response indicates the reverse reaction took place. For several generations, Southerners reject Stowe's representation of the South. Rather than create division, Stowe anticipated "abolitionists to condemn the book as too mild, and Southerners to accept it as a fair representation...[her] intention was not to attack the South but to attack slavery" (Newman 5). Stowe's "objective was to convince readers that abolition was a Christian inevitability rather than the belief only of fanatics" (5). Despite Stowe's best intentions, Southerners vehemently rejected the novel's representation of the South:

The South was not ready to abandon slavery, said Edward J. Pringle, simply because it was not a perfect institution. There is ‘no Divine institution that man has not defaced, no human institution without its errors.’ Stowe had been ‘unjust.’ ‘In dwelling with great skill and dramatic power upon the abuses of the system, and upon nothing beyond, she has given a most false and wrong impression of what slavery is. She has filled her Northern readers with a delusion. (Gossett 208)

Spikes of interests and responses from Southerners are distinct when the novel is first published and at the publication of Stowe’s following novel, *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. After the initial outrage from the South towards both of Stowe’s novels, “[i]t is difficult to find any reference in southern periodicals and newspapers of the South to either of these books or to Stowe herself” (Gossett 209). As early as 1853, South Carolina’s *Newberry Sentinel* requests that Southern publishers “sedulously exclude in future from their columns, every article that makes the remotest allusion to Uncle Tom’s Cabin” (209). Because of a strong Anti-Stowe response in the South, Southerners who praise the novel remained anonymous. Gradually, Southerners stopped publicly engaging directly with the novel: “The southerner reacted at first with anger to Uncle Tom’s Cabin and to its Key, rejecting them as unjust and malicious. Then, wounded and outraged, they resorted to what they apparently meant to be a dignified silence” (Gossett 211). They began to keep to themselves more than directing a response to the North, which was expressed by prominent leaders to be a futile task. Despite forcible, even violent, attempts in the South to prevent *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* from being sold and appeals in Southern newspapers advocating the novel be banned, it is still widely read in the South. Booksellers did not openly sell *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, requiring costumers to know which

vendors sold it and for it to be bought in secret. Southern children knew of it but were actively obstructed by parents and government institutions from reading and knowing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* firsthand. In her autobiography Grace King wrote, "in spite of her [Stowe's] hideous, black, dragonlike book that hovered on the horizon of every Southern child", the book was not allowed to be read in her house (King 77). Regardless of this aggressive attempt to keep *Uncle Tom's Cabin* out of homes, classrooms and out of public discourse, Southerners fail to completely suppress a response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

A growing and defensively postured regional identity is the climate for the initial Southern reader of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Prior to discussions of secession and the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the South did not have a strong regional identity. The Civil War, along with the years of leading up to it and follow it, acts as is a catalyst for the formation of the Southern regional identity. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* compels Southern readers to want to tell their story, to set the record straight, and to defend the South. Fred Hobson defines the Southern desire to tell one's 'truth', or to 'rage', as "[t]he radical need of the Southerner to explain and interpret the South" (Hobson 3). Southern response to Stowe's novel is channeled into the prolific production of Anti-Tom novels. Most of the Anti-Tom novels written by Southerners immediately after publication in 1852, failed to attract a large audience and are considered inferiorly written when they are held against *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. From a literary perspective, many of the Anti-Tom novels lack engaging story lines and are indistinguishable from anti-abolitionist pamphlets. While some fail, Southern defense of slavery through the works of Anti-Tom novels is a strong tradition going into the early 1900s. A trend that continues from generation to

generation, ranging from W. L. G. Smith's *Life at the South; or "Uncle Tom's Cabin" as It Is* (1852), to *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell (1936), to *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley (1976). Whether fiction or nonfiction, after the Civil War, Southern writers are vehemently invested in articulating their truths that are tied to their regional identities. Fred Hobson argues,

the rage to explain is understandable, even inevitable, given the South's traditional place in the nation—the poor, defeated, guilt-ridden member... of a prosperous, victorious, and successful family. The Southern, more than other Americans, has felt he had something to explain, to justify, to defend, or to affirm. (Hobson 3)

Southerners voiced solidarity in their defense of their region in their responses to Stowe's novel. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is perceived as an attack against the integrity of the South.

Early Anti-Tom novels adopt a direct discourse and attempt to rewrite *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in a more truthful (according to the novelist) way in an effort to set the record straight and to defend the South:

The deficiencies of most of them are almost immediately seen in the inability of the authors to imagine more convincing characters and incidents, but ultimately the matter of tone is more important. They are generally emotional. They frequently approach the question of slavery as if it could be adequately defended chiefly by a close reading of the Bible and of the Constitution. They generally ignore the cruelties of the institution and, when such evils do appear in their works, they are often justified by appeals to a crudely racist theory which condemns the blacks to a hopelessly inferior status" (Gossett 213).

Looking at the initial critical responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Southern outrage is not based on a fully developed or unbiased discourse on slavery. A residual reluctance to objectively engage racism today, in America's mainstream culture, can be threaded back to what is revealed in the early critical reception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As a regional Southern identity solidifies, the desire to defend the South both intensifies and morphs into the main stream's tendency to whitewash the racial conflict in America. Early mentalities that have been passed down may be built upon this initial flaw and aversion to fully discuss the "cruelties of the institution" and are derived from a very emotional response. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* heavily influenced popular culture, not only through the novel and Anti-Tom novels, but with several adaptations of plays (loosely based on the novel) and later films. A notable Anti-Tom novelist, Thomas Dixon, wrote three separate novels, *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), *The Clansman* (1903), and *The Traitor* (1909), as an emotional reaction to watching a Tom play. Dixon's novels inspired a popular film entitled *The Birth of a Nation*, which succeeded in propagating racism to a larger audience. Dixon's work is deeply seated in a desire to defend the Old South and slavery, and in response to Stowe's novel.

Northern Critical Reception:

Surprisingly, there is also evidence of a varied reception in the North. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an unlikely literary masterpiece as well as a shocking best seller. At the time of publication, antislavery novels are not popular in the North, which added to the shock of several reviewers when *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became popular. "Even in 1860, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was too radical for the Republican Party. The defiance of the

Fugitive Slave Law expressed in the novel was enough in itself to make it useless to the party” (Gossett 183). Not all Northern readers are as credulous as the popularity of the novel and cultural myths of the North suggest. Northern women are principally moved by the novel and the clergy are widely accepting of it. However, accompanying “a movement in northern churches to make the novel a textbook for Sunday School classes” are also accounts of Northern clergyman who use the Bible to defend slavery and speak directly against the Biblical authority of Stowe’s novel (Gossett 164). And while the novel is famously linked with a quote from President Lincoln and for contributing to the start of the Civil War, Judie Newman argues these claims are not accurate:

[T]he fundamental misapprehension of critics who argue that Stowe somehow caused the Civil War- or indeed that she did not. Both arguments rely on the notion that the war was a defined event, with a clear beginning, middle and end. In fact, the war was under way already, an unstoppable development... the war was already in process when the novel was published, and continued will into the future. (Newman 8)

Rather than explaining and studying historical events through a single variable and linear cause and effect lens, today’s historians lean toward a rhizomatic understanding of the socio-political climate. Historian and scholar T. Austin Graham observes:

Historians of the last four decades have avoided offering unitary explanations for the conflict; they do not feel, as their predecessors often did, that it can be explained by ‘slavery’ or ‘sectionalism’ or ‘economics’ or ‘constitutionalism’ alone. Rather, the modern historian studies the ways in which the era’s many ambiguities, contradictions, complexities, and conflicting issues tended to

exacerbate and bleed into one another as the war approached and was waged.

(“Civil War Narrative History” 174)

Contemporary historians and modern readers are not satisfied with a unitary explanation for one of America’s biggest conflicts. Peeling away at the myth that the North held a moral high ground, Graham observes that at the turn of the century the most influential Civil War histories are written by Northerners, not Southerners. Graham claims these histories are insensitive to racial stakes and are indicative of the dominate prejudice of the time.

Countering the legend of the high morality of the North going into the Civil War, Graham describes the mainstream attitude toward slavery in the North during the 1850s as intentionally ignorant and discombobulated. The myth that Union soldiers set off to war against the South carrying the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is proliferated after the Civil War. Arguing that Paul Laurence Dunbar’s novel *The Fanatics* (1901) is woefully neglected by academics, Graham believes Dunbar’s novel offers essential insights:

There are very few American novels like *The Fanatics*, and there may be none so successful at capturing how frustrating it is, after so much time and in the face of so much evidence, to see the still-resonating Civil War continually misconstrued.”

(Graham, “The Unacknowledged War” 63)

Graham leans into how themes in Dunbar’s novel parallel the field of agnotology. He notes that the scholars of agnotology “regard ignorance as a force that shapes the world in crucial ways, and they are committed to elucidating its complexities and plumbing its depths” (67). Ignorance, for Graham, becomes a factor in why Americans have chosen

(and continue) to believe different versions of history. Published in 1901, Dunbar's novel is combating the myths of the Civil War and is working to enlighten future generation's understanding of the conflict. An early influential Black poet in American literature, Paul Laurence Dunbar is a fan of Stowe and her novel. Dunbar wrote a poem entitled "Harriet Beecher Stowe", in which he praises Stowe:

She told the story, and the whole world wept
At wrongs and cruelties it had not known
But for this fearless woman's voice alone.
She spoke to consciences that long had slept:
Her message, Freedom's clear reveille, swept
From heedless hovel to complacent throne.
Command and prophecy were in the tone,
And from its sheath the sword of justice leapt.
Around two peoples swelled a fiery wave,
But both came forth transfigured from the flame.
Blest be the hand that dared be strong to save,
And blest be she who in our weakness came—
Prophet and priestess! At one stroke she gave
A race to freedom, and herself to fame. (Dunbar)

As an admirer of Stowe, Dunbar attributes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a positive vehicle of social justice. Constructing a novel with similar political force, *The Fanatics* is responding to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an addendum. Dunbar's novel portrays a North that is not governed by a high call to morality, as suggested by cultural myths of *Uncle Tom's*

Cabin; rather, he portrays a North that ignorantly enters and exits the Civil War. Not to suggest that Dunbar's novel is arguing against *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; rather, I am arguing that both novels can be interpreted as responding to ignorance and didactically working to connect with readers. Stowe never claims the North has higher morals than the South. Putting aside the evidence against Stowe's credibility as a reliable source on the subject, her novel is didactically working to combat ignorance in the public attitude toward slavery and to unite Americans under a common moral cause. Similarly, Dunbar's work is striving to elucidate the public.

Black Critical Reception:

The Civil War has traditionally been discussed as a binary relationship; it has always been presented as the North versus the South. Where are the Black voices? In 1985, Thomas Gossett admits that absent from his study, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* and American Culture", are the opinions of Black Americans. Gossett admits "there is almost no evidence of what former slaves thought of the novel, but there is some" (360). Gossett cites a written narrative by Albion W. Tourgée, an Ohio native and a Union Officer in the Civil War, published after Stowe's death in 1896, in which Tourgée documents interviews with former slaves. Tourgée claimed to have read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to former slaves and asked for their opinions on the novel. In general, Tourgée praised Stowe,

[B]ut he thought she had misrepresented both her black and white characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Her principal error, he thought, had been to transfer the New England tradition of logical debate to the South where it was almost wholly

unknown... More surprisingly, Tourgée thought that the black characters in the novel were also New Englanders.” (Gossett 361)

Tourgée’s account adds weight to the argument, made by many critics, against the credibility of Stowe as a source of authority on the subject of slavery. In this regard, *Uncle Tom Cabin* is most clearly an example of literary fiction and not a historically accurate document. Its greatest historical contribution is the novel’s influence on turning attitudes favorable toward the abolition cause. A controlled response from Black abolitionist leaders, such as Fredrick Douglass, should not be mistaken for agreement and complete endorsement of the representation of Black characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

For while, on the one hand, Douglass couldn’t help but marvel at the positive impact that Stowe’s novel was having on the white population, on the other, he insisted that Northern blacks needed to take their future into their own hands and expressed concern that to speak without restraint required a venue ‘without the presence of white persons’. (Gordon 2)

A hesitation to harshly critique Stowe, or her novel, is witnessed from Black abolitionists. They did not want to distract from the influence it was gaining converting people to antislavery. The flaws of novel do not go unnoticed, nor are they easily looked over by Black abolitionists.

There are enough favorable comments from abolition leaders concerning Uncle Tom’s Cabin that the modern reader may easily misjudge their real opinions of it... After the Civil War, many of them would write their memoirs of the days of antislavery agitation, and it is generally difficult to find in their accounts any mention at all of Stowe or Uncle Tom’s Cabin. (Gossett 175-176)

Fredrick Douglas grappled with a “conflicted sense of the impact of Stowe’s novel on the American public” (Gordon 4). Ultimately, the utility of the work is more important than the aesthetic and literary merit of the work in Douglas’s opinion:

For Douglas, that is, both literature and criticism were valuable to the degree that they were ‘useful’ and dispensable when they weren’t... the moral and aesthetic value of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* resided in its capacity to effect social change, its ‘cultural work’ in Jane Tompkins’s formulation. (Gordon 3)

The “cultural work” that is happening in the 1850s through the early 1900s is a mixed bag. The novel is shown over and over by scholars to positively impact and mobilize the abolitionist cause during this time period. Perhaps because of the historical inaccuracy or because too much historical merit is granted to the novel, critics increasingly begin citing the novel for instigating long term negative damage to race relations in American.

Shifting Opinions: Regions Merge

Southern readers initially are unable to accept Uncle Tom as a credible Black character. After the Civil War, the argument that the goodness of the Black characters is the beneficial byproduct of slavery is commonly held in the South. In 1898, Thomas Nelson Page’s *Red Rock* is a novel that attempts “to show the master-slave, and especially the mistress-slave, relationship as one of deep feeling and attachment on both sides” (Gossett 349). Despite his depiction of the slave holding South before the Civil War as a lost Eden, “Page did not advocate a return to slavery even though he thought that it had been the ideal relationship between whites and blacks. He was even willing to concede that abolition was probably a good thing” and that the nation “was indebted to a

work of genius produced by a woman, a romance which touched the heart of Christendom” (349). A conflicted sense of morality regarding slavery is juxtaposed to the defense of the South in Page’s *Red Rock*. This new Southern willingness to grapple with the possibility of the abstract wrong of slavery reflects a more openminded Southern response to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. A sentiment that is beginning to emerge but is not held unilaterally in the South. Also depicting the South as a lost Eden, Margaret Mitchell’s novel strives to unapologetically defend the Old South. Margaret Mitchell strongly refutes Stowe’s novel in 1936:

When a German reader sent her a fan letter, she replied, ‘I’m happy to learn that *Gone with the Wind* is helping to dispel the myth of the South that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* created.’ As a book, *Gone with the Wind* was a massive best-seller, and it won the Pulitzer Prize. David O. Selznick’s film version won ten Oscars and stands as America’s highest-grossing film ever, adjusted for inflation.” (Reynolds 254-255)

Achieving similar stature as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Gone with the Wind* is a best seller and becomes another novel to blur the line between fiction and Civil War history. *Gone with the Wind* is accredited with doing “more than any other book to shape the popular mythology of the South” (Wicker). Shadowed by the success of *Gone with the Wind*, the abolitionist call in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is now seen as a closed chapter of history. While the critical reception of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* immediately after publication is marked by a distinct division, “[b]y the year 1940, white readers in the United States were often not very far apart in their opinions of it” (Gossett 365). With slavery an institution of the past, a majority of Northern and Southern readers are eager to move past the racial conflict

ignited during the Civil War era. Many do so by continuing a tradition of avoiding the cruelties of racism, just as the early generation had ignored the cruelties of slavery. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the novel, is very unpopular between 1930 and 1960. It became entangled in various adaptations:

Uncle Tom's Cabin became a product, clothed in different packages, recycled in all kinds of ways, and used to advertise other consumer goods. The devaluation of the novel, through cheap editions, Tom shows, the use of distorted images in advertising—which must be understood within the context of the degraded image of African Americans at the time—certainly played no inconsiderable role in the negative critical assessment of the work.” (Parfait 175).

Describing this period as “a prolonged eclipse” for the novel, Claire Parfait attributes the negative opinions of Stowe’s novel during this time period stem from the many plays, Broadway adaptations, and even films that are inspired by the novel but are not true representations of the novel.

Adaptations are so popular immediately after publication (a phenomenon that carries strong momentum exploding into a Broadway hit *Topsy and Eva* (1927), Mickey Mouse cartoons in the 1930s, and into films) that many critics confuse the novel with them. Uncle Tom plays are generally viewed multiple times, making the story line and characters very familiar to Americans. In the early 1900s Uncle Tom plays are more popular and better known than the novel. “Along with the mass distribution of the Tom plays came a reflection of racial issues in America. Very real racial tensions sometimes lurked even in apparently comic aspects of the play” (Reynolds 199). Tired of the lazy, trickster and subservient roles assigned to Blacks in Tom plays, some Black Americans

began to reject Uncle Tom and critically reframed Black abolitionists against *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A perspective shift is detected in the introductions of new editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* beginning in the 1960s. "While editions of the late nineteenth century revealed a deep-seated desire to leave the past behind and obliterate bad memories, the paratext of the 1960's reinscribed the past as a painful but unavoidable component of the present. Therein lies the main reason for this spate of editions: the civil rights movement gave Uncle Tom's Cabin a new relevance" (Parfait 185). Both negative and positive comparisons of Uncle Tom begin to circulate in the 1960s. J.C. Furnas, in his *Goodbye to Uncle Tom* (1965), claims Stowe "is the most important single source of the prejudice against blacks which afflicts modern society. [Furnas is quoted] 'The devil could have forged no shrewder weapon for the Negro's worst enemy... Mrs. Stowe's book was obviously decent and Christian, obviously warm with the hopes of helping poor people with dark skins'" (Gossett 391) Yet despite being acknowledge to hold good intentions, Furnas contends Stowe "unconsciously fastened upon [Black Americans] a degrading racial stereotype which was a burden comparable to that of slavery itself" (Gossett 391). The term "Uncle Tom" is heavily used in the vernacular language during the Civil Rights movement. A heated debate ensued between influential Black leaders on the merit of Uncle Tom as a hero among the community:

A militant speaker at a Black Power conference in 1967 declared, 'A black man today is either a radical or an Uncle Tom.'... The phrase became truly feared...

At times it seemed that the epithet would tear apart the whole movement for black rights. *Life* reported, 'It has become increasingly difficult for a Negro leader of any recognizable stature to avoid being called an Uncle Tom.' Even Malcolm X,

who as Alex Haley Wrote, “‘Uncle Tommed’ practically every Negro leader in the nation’ received the label” (Reynolds 260).

During the Civil Rights movement, “Uncle Tom” is a derogatory term used to undercut any Black leader who is seen as weak and submissive. Leading up to his eventual novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), Alex Haley defends Stowe and her hero Uncle Tom in 1964, in an article “Uncle Tom for Today” published in *The New York Times Magazine*:

Haley knew *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* well—not just the novel but the story of its afterlife in plays and its use as a reference point in the civil rights movement. He defended Stowe’s novel and its hero in a 1964 article for *The New York Times Magazine*, ‘Uncle Tom for Today.’ He pointed out that the Uncle Tom epithet that was hurled about freely by black activists was in fact a misrepresentation of Stowe’s character, who, he insisted, was not a weak, yielding sell out but rather a person of dignity and quiet strength. Haley saw ‘deep irony’ in the fact that even though *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had ‘helped to end the institution of slavery,’ now, a century after its publication, ‘the very name of Mrs. Stowe’s hero is the worst insult the slaves’ descendants can hurl at one another out of their frustration in seeking what all other Americans take for granted” (Reynolds 265).

Haley is not alone in advocating for the merit of Uncle Tom. In 1969, Kenneth Rexroth argues that rather than a meek subservient character, Uncle Tom is the strongest character in the novel. Comparing him to Martin Luther King, Jr, Rexroth “was convinced that it is the moral leader and not the advocate of violence who truly regenerates a society” (Gossett 402-403).

Indeed, during the civil rights era it was those who most closely resembled Uncle Tom — Stowe's Tom, not the sheepish one of popular myth — who proved most effective in promoting progress. Rosa Parks didn't mind the Uncle Tom label, since she believed that great change could result from nonviolent moral protest. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., though often called an Uncle Tom, also stuck to principled nonviolence" (Reynolds, *Rescuing the Real Uncle Tom*). Eventually, it is the people who are labeled "Uncle Toms" who break through racial barriers.

In the mid 1980s, Gossett and Wicker are defending the racism of two white female authors; at a time when academic scholarship is invested in interrogating the intersection of canonical literature and race theory, a trend that explodes in the 1990s, as is depicted in "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness': Remapping American Culture" by Shelley Fisher Fishkin (1995). Not dismissing Stowe's racism, Gossett argues it is unethical to pluck Harriet Beecher Stowe from her era and judge her by modern standards:

Furnas's indictment is not wholly untrue, since Stowe was following the lead of the thought of her time in ascribing traits of intelligence and character to blacks. What she was apparently attempting to do was change the much more virulent racism espoused by intellectuals, as well as by ordinary people, and to make it flexible enough to admit the idea that the blacks as a people are innately capable of both civilization and citizenship. Her ideas concerning the racial character of blacks were strongly resisted, and not merely by apologists for slavery. What has perhaps been demonstrated in this study has been the truth that Stowe's racism

before and after the Civil War was much more milder than that of even northern intellectuals generally. For sixty or seventy years after its publication, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would frequently encounter the charge that it showed blacks as more capable and, above all, as more noble than the facts about the race warranted. To turn on the person who attempted to modify the racism of her time and charge her with the great tide of racism which was characteristic of the nineteenth century is – to put it mildly—unjust. (Gossett 392)

Tom Wicker's defense of Margaret Mitchell's racism mimics Gossett's defense of Harriet Beecher Stowe's racism. In a *New York Times* article published in 1986, "Why, Miss Scarlett, How Well You've Aged", Wicker commemorates the fiftieth anniversary *Gone with the Wind* and defends Mitchell by reminding American reader of the 1980s:

But it should be remembered that Margaret Mitchell was born in 1900, when the Civil War was barely 35 years in the past and Reconstruction was even more recent... Mitchell was a child of her time, not ours, and is unfairly judged by the 70's or 80's view of racism. And anyway, her book's major transgressions on this point are those of white Southerners in the post-Civil War years. Mitchell registers no authorial dissent, and it would have been unusual, in the Atlanta of the early 20th century, if she had not shared these attitudes and the historical view of Reconstruction presented in her novel. (Wicker)

It is significant to note that in 1985 Gossett is defending Stowe, who is very unpopular at the time; while in 1986 Wicker is sensitive to the subject of racism in Mitchell's novel but *Gone with the Wind* is still described as aging well. Public opinion will shift regarding these two authors and their novels in the years to follow. In 2020 *Gone with the*

Wind the film is pulled from streaming libraries. An event that also is published in *The New York Times* in an article entitled, “‘Gone With the Wind’ and Controversy: What You Need to Know”; from which the public opinion of Mitchell’s novel and the film is no longer described as tolerant regarding the inherent racism in both works:

the primary point of contention is the film’s romanticizing of the antebellum South, and its whitewashing of the horrors of slavery. The film presents the region’s pre-Civil War era as a utopia of tranquil living, and the Northern forces as interlopers, trying to disrupt that way of life. The servant characters are written and played as docile and content, more dedicated to their white masters than to the struggle of their fellow enslaved people (and uninterested in leaving the plantation after the war). (Bailey)

Popular culture and protests concerning race and police brutality influence the decision to pull *Gone with the Wind*. If the late 1800s and early 1900s are characterized as overlooking racism, in 2020 we are witnessing an American public that is increasingly no longer invested in avoiding discussions of race relations or tolerating racism.

CHAPTER 3: Genre Ambiguity

Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the first evidence to America that no hurricane can be so disastrous to a country as a ruthlessly humanitarian woman.

-Sinclair Lewis, 1927 introduction of *Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait*

The potency of literature in the governance of men's minds was forcibly shown when in 1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe published her *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a work of popular fiction

-J. G. Randall, a Northern historian in 1937

Literary Merit

Is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a literary or a historical document? A sensationalizing and instantly popular American novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* quickly became a global best seller. "The large number of copies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, about 300,000, which sold in [America] the first year after publication was greatly outdistanced by the approximately one million copies sold in Great Britain during the same period" (Gossett 239).

Frequently, Stowe's bestseller status is pointed to as an indication that her novel is lacking in literary merit. Since its publication, the writing quality of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has regularly been dubbed as inferior when compared to Stowe's contemporary authors, such as Hawthorne and Melville. The distinction of possessing literary merit is largely withheld initially in the aesthetic value of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Literary scholars are not seriously invested in researching the literary merit of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* until the 1960s (influenced by the civil rights movement) and we see a boom in scholarship in the 1980s.

Gradually, scholarship begins to appreciate the themes and overall goal of the author, along with Stowe's precisional use of Biblical language, and use of realism. Ultimately, it is reader response that Stowe is artfully evoking. A quality the novel maintains and continues to resonate with critics and modern scholars through time.

Initial praise of the novel is founded on its abolitionist influence; beyond that, "[m]any American writers of the time apparently cared little for it. Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, and Dickinson never mentioned it. Washington Irving said nothing about it directly, but there are indications that he did not like it" (Gossett 166). Their silence is notable because the popularity of the novel demanded a response from literary figures. The novel quickly permeated into the popular cultural of America and to not know of it became impossible. Everyone read it and everyone knew about it, but few spoke favorable of the novel's literary components. Since its publication, many critics have dismissed the novel's quality of writing as sentimental, claiming it does not fit their personal tastes. In 1879, William Dean Howells praised the novel, but also notes its shortcomings,

It seems less a work of art than of spirit. The art is most admirable; it is very true and very high, -the highest that can be known to fiction; but it has fearful lapses, in which the jarring and grating of the bare facts set the teeth on edge; there are false colors in characters; there are errors in taste (Gossett 340).

In 1887, Mark Twain publicly praised Stowe and is quoted to say, "Mrs. Stowe, you have made a book, and here given to the stage a drama which will live as long as the English tongue shall live" (Gossett 341). Beyond a generalized and ambiguous acknowledgement

of praise, Twain, like many other contemporary literary figures, does not mention Stowe or critique *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with any detail.

An early positive critical response is in the paratexts written by Kenneth S. Lynn in the 1962 Harvard University edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In which, Lynn questions why “[t]he writers enshrined in the American canon- Hawthorne, for instance- failed to address the most serious moral problem in the history of the nation. Minor writers demonstrated more courage, but in mediocre works” (Parfait 188). While admitting *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is lacking in literary merit in comparison to the great American writers of her time, Lynn does not dismiss the novel as completely inferior example of writing. Lynn’s argument claims literary merit for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* based on the ambitious goal of the author to write about the most pressing and important topics of the time. The lack of interest in taking up similar themes and writing about slavery, demonstrated by the silence on this topic from prominent literary figures of the era, is described as “[t]he shame of American literature” by Lynn (188). Consequently, Lynn’s article calls into question whether *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would still be so prominently distinguished as a novel of the time if Hawthorne, Melville, or another more esteemed (male) writer had written on the subject. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*’s initial literary critical response history highlights a foundational flaw in the American literature canon.

My objective in questioning the canon is not to villainize Henry James, but to draw attention to a foundational variable within the traditional American canon; and that the reader responses and tastes of literary figures of the twentieth century played a role in the formation of the traditional canon. Interestingly, in 1852 Henry James praises the

power of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the actual act of reading Stowe's novel is described as an extraordinary sensory experience. James claimed, "for an immense number of people, [Uncle Tom's Cabin is] much less a book than a state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness, in which they didn't sit and read and appraise and pass the time, but walked and talked and laughed and cried and, in a manner of which Mrs. Stowe was the irresistible cause, generally" (James 131). James is not shy about praising the novel in general and is clear that the novel is not akin in writing quality to other great works of fiction. He is famously and commonly referenced as describing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a "wonderful leaping fish" that is out of water so therefore out of its element. In the introduction of a 1998 edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Jean Fagan Yellin claims,

Its fall from favour was at least partially a result of the influence of Henry James, who characterized the book as not a proper novel, but a freak of nature, 'a wonderful leaping fish'. The Jamesian aesthetic, which came to dominate American criticism in the twentieth century, has no place for the politics or the sentiment of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (Yellin xxv)

Even Henry James's evaluation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is more complicated than is routinely suggested. Read within the whole context, likening the novel to a leaping fish seems to be a positive compliment. Not a man known to express a sentiment in a short sentence, James had a lot more to say about the novel:

Appreciation and judgment, the whole impression, were thus an effect for which there had been no process- any process so related having in other cases had to be at some point or other critical; nothing in the guise of a written book, therefore, a book printed, published, sold, bought and 'noticed,' probably ever reached its

mark, the mark of exciting interest, without having at least groped for that goal as a book or by the exposure of some literary side. Letters, here, languished unconscious, and Uncle Tom, instead of making even one of the cheap short cuts through the medium in which books breathe, even as fishes in water, went gaily roundabout it altogether, as if a fish, a wonderful 'leaping' Fish, had simply flown through the air. This feat accomplished, the surprising creature could naturally fly anywhere, and one of the first things it did was thus to flutter down on every stage, literally without exception, in America and Europe. If the amount of life represented in such a work is measurable by the ease with which representation is taken up and carried further, carried even violently furthest, the fate of Mrs. Stowe's picture was conclusive: it simply sat down wherever it lighted and made itself, so to speak, at home. (James 131)

While Stowe's writing style may not align to the preference of James, he did see redemption for the novel's literary merit in the overall content and in the novel's ability to stir a strong reader's response. It is not within the scope of this essay to flesh out a comprehensive investigation of the American cannon. The point is that the history of literary research on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Harriet Beecher Stowe fits into a larger literary conversation. As the American cannon was forming, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is not seriously considered as a contender. Because of the success and popularity of the novel, the best recognition it received during this time, is a nod of approval based on its historical contribution.

The use of the novel as a teaching tool in religious settings is another example of how *Uncle Tom's Cabin* blurs the line between fiction and historical document. The

sentiment of the novel contributes to the mobilization of the antislavery cause. The novel was (and continues to be) widely read. At the time of publication, senators to Shakers (who for religious reasons do not read fiction) read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

The novel also helped overcome prejudices against fiction itself...the scenes of Bible reading help legitimize the novel for readers who would not normally approve of fiction... Usually, fiction in abolitionist papers was a form of light relief from the cause. Here by creating a dialog with the texts that surrounded it, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reshaped the relation between fiction and the network of ideas and images within which it was embedded. (Newman 6)

To persuade a larger audience to read it, the novel is intentionally not marketed as fiction:

Advertisements referred to it as 'a work,' 'a book,' 'a volume,' or 'a narrative' – anything but a novel. And for those who still hungered after facts, not fiction, Stowe swiftly produced *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), substantiating her portrayal of slavery with plenty of documentary evidence. (Newman 6)

Stowe's didactic writing style directly embraces current events with the intent to clearly communicate her themes to the reader. However, this simple writing style is juxtaposed with the ambiguity of the origins of the novel and the loose placement of the novel into a genre. As a secret history, the follow up publication of *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* further blurs the line between genres and adds weight to the novel being interpreted as a historical document.

It is interesting that a novel written by a woman in 1852 is still able to float to the top of American literature despite never been deemed a masterful work of literature.

Controversial in every aspect, the importance of the novel slips into historical merit because *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has never solidly stood on literary quality and accepted within the literature circle.

Beyond the editions themselves, ample evidence suggests that from the 1930s on, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was deemed significant from an historical point of view but negligible from a purely literary one... At a time when the American canon was being defined, literary scholarship frequently dismissed Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and nineteenth-century women writers generally. All were faulted for their sentimentalism, lack of realism and humor. (Parfait 180)

Reluctantly considered an American classic, Stowe's novel is overlooked as an example of great American literature for decades. Eventually, scholars draw the focus of their critiques of the novel away from a dismissal of writing style and place emphasis on the agency the wholeness of the novel proliferates. In 1971, David Levin argues, "to see the richness of the historical evidence in Uncle Tom's Cabin, as in less topical works of fiction, we must study the complete reality of the whole book" (Levin 154). Yes, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is not stylistically equivalent to its contemporary works, but why should it be? In the 1960s and 1970s, we see scholars focusing more on what the book is, rather than what it is not. Levin turns the negative dialog surrounding the sentimentality of the novel into a positive attribute when he argues, "Mrs. Stowe's heavy emphasis on sentiment is itself an intelligent comment on her society...Repeatedly Mrs. Stowe shows us a situation in which logic has gone wild... She has an astonishingly fine ear for the language of racism and the fundamental contradictions embraced by men who must defend slavery" (Levin 135). Through the sentimental framework of the novel women are

shown to hold the moral authority, despite being shielded (or kept) from political discourse. It is through the domestic sphere that the narrative is moved along. Stowe and “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* [do] not belong to the school of Hawthorne, the literary mode valorized by James and his twentieth-century American followers... the special importance of Stowe’s book [is] in relation to African-American literature and to women’s writing. Chattel slavery is, of course no longer at issue. But both sexism and racism persist. Because of its concern with gender, and because of its dramatic mix of anti-slavery and white racism, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* remains particularly vital today” (Yellin xxvi). Moving the academic discussion beyond writing styles, scholars begin to point to the novel’s larger agenda, which is to propel readers to respond. Yellin claims this novel is “particularly vital today” because “sexism and racism persist”. We have not outgrown the topic Stowe put before us in 1852. Readers are still responding to her text in fresh and surprising ways.

While prominent writers of her time framed their literary prowess with ambiguity, Stowe’s writing style is generally described as tediously didactic and direct. Stowe directly engages the reality, as she perceives it, of America in the 1850s. Stowe’s prophetic awareness is achieved through Biblical language. “Stowe remarkably controls both language and imagery appropriated from the Book of Revelation to caution the United States against continued hypocrisy and degradation in the un-Christian practice of slavery” (Lowance 178). Stowe warns her contemporary Christian reader that they should fear the future because God is not on the side of slavery. In Stowe’s opinion, to tolerate the status quo and to allow laws like the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 to go unchallenged is a crime not only against humanity, but more importantly against Christianity. Stowe’s

ability to weave Biblical parallels into American history creates a moral dilemma for the reader. Stowe requires her reader to confront the controversial slave laws of the 1850s in the 1850s. A contemporary reader would feel challenged to question their own morals. When reading about Senator and Mrs. Birds interaction with Eliza, if placed in a similar situation, what will the reader do? Examining the morality of slave laws triggers questioning the morality of America's future, which is intended to motivate the reader into action because the reader is now an active agent in the described scenario. Similarly, a modern reader is challenged to examine the morality of their own reader response against the collective historical awareness of the state of America's morality, both in the context of the nation's past history and its potential future direction. The Civil War history that has been taught to the modern reader may or may not clash with the narrative of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and is juxtaposed with the lived experience and perception of racism and sexism in the present time for the reader. T. Austin Graham argues that the ambiguous Civil War history we inherit directly stems from the deliberate evasive language used by Northerners and Southerners alike. In the 1860s, Americans intentionally avoided defining the Civil War in relationship to race and slavery. If we cannot depend upon the firsthand accounts, Graham claims it is the job of the scholar to shift out the role race played and still plays in America. However it is important to understand that even scholars have a bias:

Every generation since the war has had its own interpreters of the conflict, and their works of history have tended to tell two stories rather than just one. The war of the 1860s is fought again and again on their pages, moving through a familiar series of defeats and triumphs. But these scholars almost always offer a portrait of

their own times as well, dwelling on the preoccupations and prejudices of their present moments even as they turn to the past. (Graham 165-166)

Graham nods to a human tendency to choose how and what we believe, regardless of factual evidence. Graham's argument is that perspectives of Civil War history are always evolving because our relationship to it is changeable. The thread that pulls through Graham's argument is that our professional and personal narratives of history are limited by the "preoccupations and prejudices" of our present moment (165-166). As a result, "the Civil War continues to reverberate not only because of what it was but also because of how Americans have chosen to recall it over the years" (175). If our relationship to the past is not completely sterile or defined by historical factual accuracy, Graham advocates for a critical rereading of the past; in which, it should be the goal of subsequent generations to (hopefully) contend with the failings of their predecessors.

Uncle Tom's Cabin also "reverberates" with readers from generation to generation. The power of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is that it does not allow its reader to escape reality. Not distancing her critique of slavery in America by setting her novel in the past or by masking her message with ambiguity creates discomfort for the reader. Realism for Stowe is a blending of fiction with reality, enforced with direct engagement of the Bible. "The Bible, she argued, was full of fascinating human stories yet lacked 'freshness and reality' for many who read it often. What was needed, she wrote, was a 'blending together... of truth and fiction' to make it more vivid" (Reynolds 28). It is a story that intentionally implicates the reader and is actively trying to place the burden of response on the reader. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is also a story we have not outgrown. Closely studying

a chronological collection of literary criticism, in *Publishing History of Uncle Tom's Cabin, 1852-2002*, Claire Parfait argues the novel is not only still relevant, but *that Uncle Tom's Cabin* is "the locus of a much heated debate on race relations in the United States" (Parfait 1). Through this study, again we see academic scholarship shifting away from a preoccupation on the writing style of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, instead there is a focus on the wholeness and overall accomplishment of the text that is placed in a larger picture. Parfait's work encompasses the study of prefaces, introductions and other paratexts in the various editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from its initial publication through 2002. Her comprehensive look at the numerous paratexts of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* uniquely situates her study to follow the scholarly critical reception of the novel through the decades. Despite acknowledging the historically inaccurate and problematic features of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Parfait centers the novel in contemporary discussions of race "[b]ecause Uncle Tom's Cabin deals with slavery, the paratext of its succeeding editions also speaks to the way American society has read and re-read its own history over the past century and a half" (5). Parfait studies *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from a historical lens. Concluding that the novel's most significant contributions have been historical and not literary: "In its prefaces and introductions, Uncle Tom's Cabin emerges as an historical document, first because of its important impact on events themselves, and, second, because it has more or less always been used as a representation of slavery" (Parfait 194). At the end of her study, Parfait argues that in 2002 Fredrick Douglas's *Narrative* is being used as a necessary corrective that lends authority to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Parfait observes new editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are being published in the same volume with Fredrick Douglas's *Narrative*, with a portrait of Fredrick Douglas on the cover: "a clear sign that a

hierarchy has been established between the two works” (Parfait 193). This shift in marketing leads Parfait in interpreting that the “desire to assign differing degrees of authenticity and influence to the texts is made clear... the very intertextual phenomenon in the volumes tends to reassert the uncertain status of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, between novel and historical document” (Parfait 205). Douglas’s *Narrative* is gaining importance and is argued to be a necessary companion to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. And it may be, however, Douglas’s *Narrative* is not on display (or mentioned) alongside *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the Fort Sumter National Museum as of June 2021.

How does a novel written in 1852 and surrounded in controversial interpretations find itself standing alone as a literary representative (or historical document) of any era in a national museum? In the small museum on the property of Fort Sumter, the exhibition is chronologically arranged. The first display titled “America on the Verge of Civil War: South Carolina Leads the Way,” consists of four elements: a concise summary of the socio-political climate in the 1860s, a large picture of slaves in a cotton field, South Carolina’s state flag with the date of its secession, and a picture of a novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Fort Sumter). Over a hundred years later, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is used as an educational tool that assists modern Americans in understanding the Civil War.

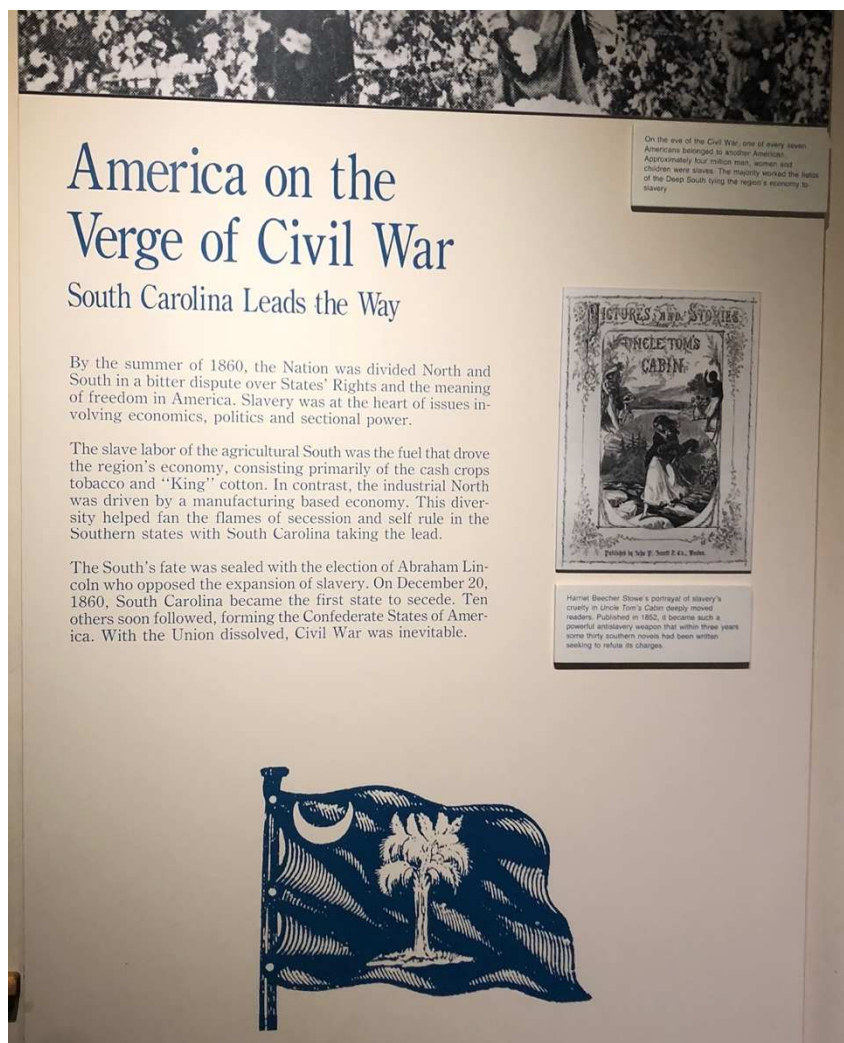


Figure 1.1 A display in the Fort Sumter Museum in Charleston SC, on October 23, 2021.

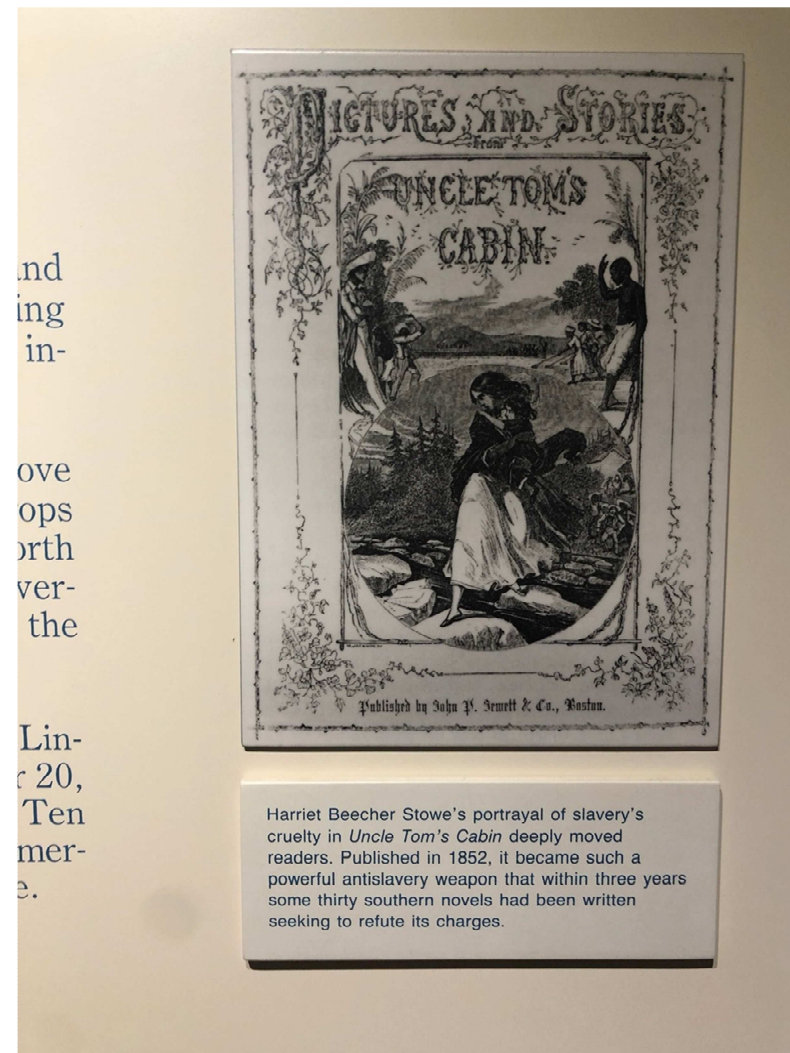


Figure 1.2 A zoomed in picture of the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* caption on the display in figure 1.1.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

From 1852 until recent time, the evolution of dominate American opinions regarding race relations can be traced through the critical reception history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. How the novel is read is redefined through the ages and reframed within differing socio-political landscapes generation after generation. Initial critical responses to the novel, despite being regionally distinct, are heavily emotional and sidestep the root issue of racism. Characteristic of the time, ambiguous language surrounding slavery and race both complicates future generations' understanding of America's relationship with slavery and the Civil War and creates a fertile foundation from which cultural myths are propagated. Harriett Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with the intent to penetrate America's stagnant position concerning abolition directly and didactically. At initial reception the novel is radical and interpreted as humanizing slaves. As the novel ages it is painful for readers to directly confront the past. After the Civil War, readership declines as Americans are more incline to forget the bad and downplay the nation's racial conflict. The novel fades from popularity, but the novel's influence on popular culture grows. As *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes enshrouded within popular cultural, the novel undergoes polarizing critical responses during the Civil Rights Movement. A hundred years later, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remained a crucible on which political and social justice debates leaned on and defined themselves. The novel still had the power to motivate the American public, for better or for worse, out of a middle ground. In the 1960s leading Black activists either embrace the title "Uncle Tom" or they adamantly refuted it. The

novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has an uncanny influence upon the general population, especially in historical moments of heated debates. Despite decades of unpopularity and literary scrutiny, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* always finds new and future readers. A finite genre will probably always be problematic and literary scholars may always find the novel wanting in traditional literary techniques. Still, somehow *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has endured all these years. This quality, the novel's uncanny ability to rise to the top, seems to embody the cliché of Americanism.

As we, as a nation, continue to invest our academic research into unpacking our uncomfortable past, our attention will turn to the monuments that have always been among us. A longitudinal study of the critical reception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reveals roots of a deep-seated reluctance of the American public to discuss the racial conflict directly and objectively within America. New research invests a focus on the unpopular and overlooked texts that are responding to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, such as Paul Dunbar's *Fanatics*, detecting an early pattern of avoidance and brushing public discussions of racism into the peripheral of American culture. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will demand that the reader directly engages with the racial conflict of America on an individual citizen level, not in a theoretical national legislative discussion. When each new generation rereads *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, hopefully, they are refining and critically engaging with why the text remains a monument to the Civil War era, along with how the novel functions to motivate America's past and present relationship with race relations.

Works Cited

- Bailey, Jason. "'Gone With the Wind' and Controversy: What You Need to Know." *The New York Times*, 10 June 2020.
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence. *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Dodd, Mead, 1980.
- Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness': Remapping American Culture." *American Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 3, 1995, pp. 11-29.
- Poetry Foundation. "Paul Laurence Dunbar." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 11 Mar. 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/paul-laurence-dunbar>.
- Fort Sumter Museum. 23 Oct 2021. National Park Service, Charleston SC.
- Gordon, Adam. "Beyond the 'Proper Notice': Frederick Douglass, Uncle Tom's Cabin, and the Politics of Critical Reprinting." *American Literature*, vol. 91, no. 1, Mar. 2019, pp. 1-29.
- Gossett, Thomas F. *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*. Southern Methodist University Press, 1985.
- Graham, T. Austin. "Civil War Narrative History." *A History of American Civil War Literature*, edited by Coleman Hutchison, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 165-78. *Cambridge University Press*.
- . "The Unacknowledged War: Dunbar's History of White Revisionism." *American Literature*, vol. 93, no. 1, Mar. 2021, pp. 59-85.

- Hibben, Paxton. *Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait*. George H. Doran Co., 1927.
- Hobson, Fred. "Fred Hobson on Southern Women's Writing." *Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 3, Summer 2001, p. 404.
- James, Henry, and Peter Collister. *A Small Boy and Others: A Critical Edition*. University of Virginia Press, 2011.
- Kenan, Randall. *Letter from North Carolina: Learning from Ghosts of the Civil War* < *Literary Hub*. Accessed 13 Apr. 2021.
- King, Grace Elizabeth. *Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters, by Grace King*. The Macmillan company, 1932.
- Levin, David. "American Fiction as Historical Evidence: Reflections on Uncle Tom's Cabin." *Negro American Literature Forum*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1971, pp. 132–54..
- Lowance, Mason I. *Biblical Typology and the Allegorical Mode: The Prophetic Strain*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1994.
- Newman, Judie. "Harriet Beecher Stowe and the 'Book That Made This Great War.'" *A History of American Civil War Literature*, edited by Coleman Hutchison, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 3–16. *Cambridge University Press*.
- Parfait, Claire. *The Publishing History of Uncle Tom's Cabin, 1852–2002*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2007.
- Randall, J. G. *The Civil War and Reconstruction*. D.C. Heath and Company, 1953.
- Reynolds, David S. *Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America*. 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Co., 2011.
- . "Opinion | Rescuing the Real Uncle Tom." *The New York Times*, 13 June 2011.

Wicker, Tom Wicker: Tom, et al. "WHY, MISS SCARLETT, HOW WELL YOU'VE AGED." *The New York Times*, 25 May 1986.

Yellin, Jean Fagan. "Introduction." *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Oxford World's Classics, 1998.