

A theology of the
heart: methodism in
harriet beecher
stowe's uncle tom's
cabin



While lying on her death bed, in Chapter 26 of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, little Eva says to the servants in her house who have gathered around her, "You must remember that each one of you can become angels" (418). In this chapter and the one before it, Eva has actively worked to make the people surrounding her into "angels," taken here to mean one who is saved by God. In chapters 33 and 34 of Stowe's book, Tom similarly works, though more quietly, to turn the other slaves at Simon Legree's plantation into "angels." Both of these scenes, and particularly the evangelical characters within them, reveal Stowe's Methodist theology, a theology that rejects the predestination of earlier American Christianity. In Stowe's theology "each one" of the people can be saved; God's love is universal. Original sin still exists, but now an individual is given control to escape this sin by embracing God's love. At the heart of the theology and the resultant morality that Tom and Eva evince, is a warm, knowable God, who is knowable through love, and the heart. Eva is the most explicit in explaining the dynamic between God and his people. She explains this by asking Topsy, "don't you know that Jesus loves all alike? He is just as willing to love you, as me" (412). Earlier in the book Tom had asked a similar question to a downtrodden woman on the boat with him: "Hain't nobody never telled ye how the Lord Jesus loved ye, and died for you?" (324). God offers everyone this love, but it can only be claimed by loving God in return. Eva pleads with the people around her that they should, "pray every day," (419) so that they can find God as she has. The way that Tom and Eva bring others to see this caring God is by acting in the same fashion as God by loving the people around them in the same way that Jesus did. When Eva draws all of the house servants together, in an effort to convince them all to become "

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angels,” the first thing that she says is, “ I sent for you all, my dear friends, because I love you. I love you all” (418). Like Jesus, Eva goes beyond just telling them of love, she acts upon this love by giving each servant a lock of her hair. In this act she symbolically gives of herself (her hair). While Tom is less explicit in his vocalization of love, he is somewhat more apparent than Eva in his acting out of this love. When Tom and the other slaves are in Legree’s fields, Tom, “ at the risk of all that he might suffer, [came] forward again, and put all the cotton in his sack into the woman’s” (503). By giving up his own cotton Tom shows a willingness to suffer at the end of the day, when the cotton is weighed, so that the woman, Emmeline, does not have to. Tom’s thoughtless willingness to suffer so that others do not have to, makes clear the similarity between the love that Tom and Eva give, and the love that God, through Jesus, gives. When Tom and Eva give in this way, they inspire the people around them to also give. For the first few months in the St. Clare household Topsy does little other than turn everything into her own she takes. Miss Ophelia tells of how Topsy stole her “ bonnet-trimming, and cut it all to pieces to make dolls’ jackets!” (407). But then Eva tells Topsy something that Topsy has never heard before, “ O, Topsy, poor child, I love you” (409). Topsy begins to cry, and in the next few days, she immediately shows a desire to give back to Eva. A few days later Topsy brings flowers for Eva from the garden, and Eva tells her mother, “ You see, mamma, I knew poor Topsy wanted to do something for me” (414). It seems that once one sees that the world can be a loving place, people like Topsy can identify a loving force behind that world. Even by watching Eva deal with Topsy, Miss Ophelia tells Topsy that, “ I’ve learnt something of the love of Christ from her” (432). This loving force is thus transformative. Eva tells <https://assignbuster.com/a-theology-of-the-heart-methodism-in-harriet-beecher-stowes-uncle-toms-cabin/>

Topsy that if Topsy is able to love God, “ He will help you to be good” (410). Before Eva causes this change in Topsy, Topsy, when asked why she behaves so badly, says, “ Specters it’s my wicked heart” (408). When her behavior begins to improve after Eva reveals love to her, it is certain that her heart has been changed too. As in Calvinist theology, God’s grace transforms individuals from the inside out, but in Methodist theology, the individual can seek out God by learning how to love. These acts of love become the central element of the Methodist theology. Many of the means that dominated earlier theology are shown to be far less important than these acts of the heart. Miss Opelia attempts to convert Topsy by teaching her from the Bible; she says, “ I’ve taught and taught; I’ve talked till I’m tired” (407). But as St. Clare says a few moments later, “ your Gospel is not strong enough to save one heathen child” (408). The Bible is certainly not rejected as a source of truth)Tom takes great assurance from the Bible)but Gospel, and training in the Gospel is not truly helpful in saving people. The clergy is not even mentioned in these chapters of conversion. It is people like Eva and Tom, who are schooled in the way of the heart, who are able to help people reach God. Eva, the one who is able to show others such love, first learned about love in her own family. While her mother is not the nurturing mother that could be hoped for, her father fills the caring role. St. Clare loves Eva so much that he is sent into lifeless despondency when Eva dies. Cassy, similarly, tells Tom how she learned of love in her own childhood with a mother an father who nurtured her and allowed her to “ play hide-and-go-seek, under the orange-trees, with my brothers and sisters” (516). In these days, Cassy remembers that she “ used to love God and prayer” (522). The love of the family is the essential source of love in Stowe’s theology. When <https://assignbuster.com/a-theology-of-the-heart-methodism-in-harriet-beecher-stowes-uncle-toms-cabin/>

St. Clare finally gains his peace with God, it is accompanied by an image of his caring mother before him (456). But just as convincing as these examples of a family giving someone access to love, are those examples where a lack of family deprives someone of an understanding of love. Topsy's inability to love stems from her belief that, " can't nobody love niggers." Moments later, Eva implies that this belief makes sense given that Topsy never had " any father, or mother, or friends" (409). While Cassy had understood love at a time in the past, she lost it when she lost her family. It is the moment when her children are sold that she first, " cursed God and man" (519). She loses her love of God and humanity because she is stripped of the very source of this love. Cassy's situation brings to light the important point that just as an individual can gain grace in God's eyes, so can he or she lose it. But the situation emphasizes the larger point that Cassy's source of love was her family. Much of Stowe's novel is seen as a fierce strike at slavery, but Stowe is strongest in condemning slavery because of its force in breaking up families. Cassy's story of the breakup of her family is one of the most vividly told. She tells of how her master would taunt her every day by saying, "' if you don't behave reasonably, I'll sell both the children, where you shall never see them again'" (518). We see Stowe narrating these meta-narratives so as to evoke sympathy in the reader for the characters who have been cruelly pulled away from both their families, and their source of religious faith. Stowe's book was written soon after the death of her own child, and this traumatic experience was certainly one of the motivations behind the writing of the book. Through the death of her own child, it is probable that Stowe saw the pernicious effects of the breakup of a family, and gained

sympathy for the plights of innumerable slaves. In her novel Stowe works to engender that same sense of sympathy in the reader.