

Uncle tom's cabin as a romantic racialist novel



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The cultural repercussions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, are undeniable. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became one of the most widely read and profoundly penetrating books of the nineteenth century. Richard Yarborough remarked that, " *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the epicenter of a massive cultural phenomenon, the tremors of which still affect the relationship of blacks and whites in the United States" (Levine, 524). As a novel that impacted the American perceptions of racial identity and character so greatly, one would hope that the truth was presented. Instead, Stowe's strikingly influential novel was a romantic racist text, which mirrored nineteenth century white racial ideology. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was successful in arousing sympathy for the enslaved and may have strengthened the abolitionist cause. But, ultimately Stowe's portrayal of the enslaved paralleled the romantic racist ideas common to her time. The doctrine of romantic racialism, as presented by George M. Fredrickson in his essay, *Romantic Racialism in the North*, proposes that racial differences exist without inherent hierarchy (Fredrickson, 430). In his essay, Fredrickson outlined various beliefs about the differences between blacks and whites. Caucasians on the other hand were portrayed, in romantic racist thought, to be aggressive, domineering, and yearning to conquer (Fredrickson, 431). The submissive black was the portrayal of the typical enslaved person. The enslaved were thought to be docile, meek, faithful, and childlike. Fredrickson goes on to describe Alexander Kinmont's views of attributes of blacks, consisting of " lightheartedness, a natural talent for music, and above all a willingness to serve" (Fredrickson, 435). This " willingness to serve", docility, and servility were all virtues of true Christians. A Unitarian clergyman, James Freeman Clarke, stated that blacks had " a strong religious tendency, and

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that strength of attachment which is capable of any kind of self-denial and self-sacrifice" (Fredrickson, 436). Harriet Beecher Stowe lived in an era and location that was steeped in romantic racist thought. Kinmont expounded the doctrine of romantic racialism in Cincinnati, Ohio while Stowe was residing in the city. Kinmont's influence on Stowe's racial perceptions, reflected in her writing, is undeniable. If there is any question as to whether or not the novel is a romantic racist text, one only has to look as far as Tom, the main character. Stowe depicted Tom, the docile and pious slave, as an admirable and sympathetic character, willing to sacrifice everything for the common good, his faith, and his master. His traits resemble those in romantic racist thought. Stowe's depiction of Tom as a strong, kind man who also possessed a "humble simplicity" (18) falls into the classic romantic racist characterization of blacks as simple and childlike. Tom refuses to run away upon hearing the news he had been sold by Mr. Shelby into the cruel hands of Haley, an incorrigible slave trader. He chooses not to run for the sake of the rest of the slaves on the Shelby plantation and out of faithfulness to his master. Tom's willingness to serve and Christian virtue are depicted throughout the novel. To reassure his wife Chloe that all will be all right, Tom says, "There'll be the same God there, Chloe, that there is here" (Stowe, 81). Tom's faith in God and docility does not falter even when he is betrayed by his master and torn from his family. Tom's passivity is due to his deep religious values, which compels him to love everyone and selflessly endure great pain throughout his life. Stowe depicts the protagonist of her novel, to be a prototypical enslaved person, according to the precepts of romantic racialism. Tom is humble, docile, faithful to his masters, a perfect Christian, and submissive. His "willingness to serve" is displayed by the

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description of him “ standing wistfully examining the multitude of faces thronging around him, for one he would wish to call master” (Stowe, 289). The novel is focused around Tom's behavior and morals. His virtues align with romantic racist beliefs. It is unavoidable that it is a romantic racist text. Stowe remarks that “...of all the races on the earth, none have received the gospel with such eager docility as the African. The principle reliance and unquestioning faith...is more native in this race than any other... whose abundance has shamed that of higher and more skillful culture” (Stowe, 343). This statement epitomizes romantic racist thinking. It provides a glimpse into the supposed internal persuasions of the enslaved — it displays a difference between whites and blacks while not belittling personal qualities of either race. Caucasian characters within the novel also reflect romantic racist thought. Both Haley and Simon Legree possess the stereotypical characteristics attributed to white men. Haley, the slave trader that purchases Tom from Mr. Shelby, is a harsh and merciless man. He pulls the families apart with no display of emotion or sympathy and speaks of the deaths of slaves as part of business, “ Wal, yes, tol'able fast, ther dying is; what with the ' climating and one thing and another, they dies so as to keep the market up pretty brisk” (Stowe, 86). This characterization of the white slave trader parallels with the romantic racist depiction of white males as being aggressive, dominant, and materialistic (Fredrickson, 431). Simon Legree epitomizes the typical Caucasian male, in regards to romantic racism. Legree is driven to assert his dominance over Tom. In one of the many confrontations between the Legree and Tom, Legree angrily says, “ I'll chase you down, yet, and bring you under...” (Stowe, 339). Legree yearned to dominate Tom, but Tom's unconquerable faith and goodwill prevented the

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master from doing so. In order to assert his supremacy, Legree had to kill Tom — by having him beaten to death. Female characters, within Uncle Tom's Cabin, are also held to romantic racist stereotypes. Aunt Chloe, Tom's wife, is depicted as a jovial cook who loves to serve. When the readers meet this character she is described as the typical "mammy". Stowe portrays Aunt Chloe as fat, pitch black, and that when company came to the house it "awoke all the energies in her soul" (Stowe, 17). Another "mammy" characteristic that Aunt Chloe possessed was that she was the controller in her household, as displayed when reprimanding Mose and Pete, "Stop dat ar, now, will ye? Better mind yourselves, or I'll take ye down a button-hole lower, when Mas'r George is gone!" (Stowe, 22). The "mammy" stereotype is not the only aspect of racialism attributed to Aunt Chloe. She also is assigned the trait of being "home-loving and affectionate" (Stowe, 82). In reference to Aunt Chloe's distraught reaction to her husband's fate, Stowe remarks, "In order to appreciate the sufferings of the negroes sold south, it must be remembered that all the instinctive affections of that race are peculiarly strong" (Stowe, 82). This is an incredibly romantic racist comment. Stowe is saying that the "instinctive affections" are unique to that race. It touches back to the romantic racist sentiment of racial differences without inherent hierarchy (Fredrickson, 430). It is also worth noting that the only slaves who rebelled against their masters were all of mixed race descent. George and Eliza Harris, as well as Legree's servant Cassy, all escaped to the North and rid themselves of their white oppressors. This trend of the character's actions can be attributed to the romantic racist stereotypes of both blacks and whites. When these two races mixed and produced mulatto offspring, these people possessed the supposed attributes

of both races. Eliza had a great "willingness to serve" her mistress and was devoutly religious, as displayed when she said to her husband, "...but, after all, he is your master...I always thought that I must obey my master and mistress, or I couldn't be a good Christian" (Eliza 14)"(Stowe, 13-14).

Conversely, all three mulatto characters had the aggressive and crafty characteristics (as defined by romantic racist doctrines) of Caucasians. The mix of these supposed traits, produced characters that Stowe depicted as rebellious and victorious. Eva, the St. Claire's virtuous daughter is depicted as a model of acceptance and goodness. The young girl is a perfect Christian who has one of the highest moral standings among all the characters of the novel. She deplors the institution of slavery and believes in equality. After befriending Tom, Eva becomes one of the most important figures in his life. In death, Eva becomes one of the text's central Christ figures. Eva represents all that is good and perfect. She is a true abolitionist. She is also Caucasian. The perfect character, in a novel about slavery, is white. While most of the black characters possessed characteristics of weak, docile creatures. This undermines Stowe's aspiration for her novel to be a bold abolitionist text. Even when faced with death, "Tom stood perfectly submissive...that submissive and silent man, whom taunts, nor threats, nor stripes, nor cruelties could disturb...Tom's whole soul overflowed with compassion and sympathy for the poor wretches by whom he was surrounded" (342). At his demise, Tom was not allowed by Stowe to shed the romantic racist characteristics put upon himself, and his whole race. The racial stereotypes that pervaded Stowe's novel kept it from being a bold abolitionist work. The author may have succeeded in awakening sympathy

within her Northern readership, but through the portrayal of her characters she greatly misrepresented the enslaved.