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"He Hath Wrong'd Himself": Satire as the Driving Force in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

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Why, who cries out on pride  
That can therein tax any private party?  
Doth it not flow as hugely as the sea,  
[ . . . . . . . . ]  
Who can come in and say that I mean her,  
When such a one as she, such is her neighbor?  
Or what is he of basest function  
That says his bravery is not on my cost,  
Thinking that I mean him, but therein suits  
His folly to the mettle of my speech?  
[ . . . . . . ] Let me see  
wherein  
my tongue hath wrong’d him. If it do him right,  
Then he hath wrong’d himself. If he be free,  
Why then my taxing like a wild goose flies,  
Unclaim’d of any man.  
*(As You Like It, 2.7.70-87)*

The words of Shakespeare’s character, Jaques, reflect the power of the best and deadliest kind of satire. Robert Harris claims that this kind of satire does not seek to do harm to any individual but to the vice itself (par. 3). The best satire creates “a shock of recognition” within oneself, and as Jaques tells his audience “If it do him right,/ Then he hath wrong’d himself.” This is the mode of satire found in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Yet most critics do not see *Uncle Tom* as satiric; rather they consider it tragic, didactic, or sentimental. Indeed, Stowe’s book contains all of the aforesaid elements, but it also contains a constant and powerful strain of satire that forms the base of the novel’s persuasive power. Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* effectively uses satire to motivate individuals against slavery, holding a mirror up to the guilty face of the nation.

Oddly, few scholars acknowledge any satire within Stowe’s work. Critics continue to cloak *Uncle Tom* in an impenetrable veil of domestic sentimentalism, confining Stowe to the “mob of scribbling women.” As Ann Wood (Douglass) notes in her 1971 article “The ‘Scribbling Women’ and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote,” women authors in the Nineteenth Century were urged to confine their writing to topics of home, family and religion, “works of sensibility steeped in depoliticized and lofty patriotism and misty,
death-oriented and nonsectarian religious fervor” (7). If Stowe’s focus was purely
domestic, its force would not have been felt beyond the kitchen. Stowe’s novel does
contain the expected religious fervor and heart-rending death scenes, but to narrow the
scope of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in this manner is a gross misrepresentation of a novel
recognized as “by far the most influential piece of writing against slavery of the entire
century” (Koch xvi).

While most critics acknowledge the literary and political magnitude of the novel,
they also allow entrenched theories of its inherent sentimentality to blind them from its
far-reaching satiric force. In the introduction to a 1997 anthology on American satire,
Stephen Koch falls into this trap, claiming that “there is strangely little American satire
directed against slavery,” which he views as the most grievous irony of the Nineteenth
Century (xvi). Koch admits that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was the most influential anti-slavery
work of the entire century, but “not satirical at all” [emphasis added]. He claims that
Stowe was a romantic moralist “fiery with a moral vision in which satire and irony
played no role,” except for its effect in the Twentieth Century when people laugh at
Uncle Toms and Stowe’s “lost sentimental certainties” (xvi). Even those willing to
entertain the possibility that Stowe was a humorist have not been convincing. In The
*Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglass attempts to address the long neglected
influence of women on nineteenth-century intellect and notes that Stowe “became the
only major feminine humorist nineteenth century America produced” (244). Nonetheless,
Douglass fails to include any reference to humor, comedy, or wit in her twenty-two page
index, and her discussion of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom* follows the “tendency of twentieth-
century critics to equate ‘popular nineteenth-century woman writer’ with ‘sentimental
nonentity’” (Warren 2).

Jan Pilditch attempts to unearth the satiric undertones in *Uncle Tom* in her 1994
analysis “Rhetoric and Satire.” Unfortunately, her essay primarily focuses on reasons
why Stowe hesitated to employ satire due to the feminine mores that dictated the sphere
of a woman. She does offer textual examples in her analysis, but these examples are
confined to religious satire and do not represent the full force with which Stowe’s genius
is employed. Over 150 years after the publication of *Uncle Tom*, Stowe is still not
recognized for the humor and satire she used so effectively.

In order to confirm Stowe’s satiric prowess, a definition of effective satire must be
established. *A Handbook to Literature* defines satire as, “a literary manner which blends
a critical attitude with humor and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may
be improved. The true satirist is conscious of the frailty of institutions of man’s devising
and attempts through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodeling”
(Thrall, et al. 436). This definition highlights the key element of successful satire: the
satirist cannot merely subvert; she must also rebuild. Although satire’s corrective
purpose is invariably didactic and moralizing, a true satirist cannot simply ridicule or
condemn (Harris par.6). If a satirist uses only invective satire, which employs abusive
language with little irony and is aimed at a particular target, the result will be defense
rather than recognition and reform. Stowe argues in *Uncle Sam’s Emancipation* that

> If the system alone is attacked, such minds will be the first to perceive its evils,
> and to turn against it; but if the system be attacked through individuals, self-love,
wounded pride, and a thousand natural feelings, will be at once enlisted for its preservation. (42)

Stowe adheres to this principle in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; she employs subtle forms of satire, tempering her attacks with sentiment and humor, to encourage reform rather than to incite anger.

**MEN OF HUMANITY**

Stowe uses different types of irony throughout her novel to satirize the inherent hypocrisy of the slave system. Although irony is not the only form satire takes, Robert Harris' “The Purpose and Method of Satire” asserts that “irony is the overriding and guiding principle behind satire” and it “informs the whole work because it is the necessary means of aggressing hypocrites” (par. 20). Stowe puts irony to work on the first page of *Uncle Tom*, establishing slavery and humanity as mutually exclusive. The title of the first chapter sets the satiric tone: “In Which the Reader is Introduced to a Man of Humanity.” The verbal irony employed is evident when the two men of humanity are introduced discussing the sale of a slave, which to twenty-first-century readers is inherently inhumane. In nineteenth-century America, slave owners and traders were not considered the pariahs of moral society, but to abolitionists the sale of a human being was inhumane. Stowe wields the double entendre of impersonal irony when satirizing the two men of humanity, ambiguously noting “that humanity comes out in a variety of strange forms now-a-days, and there is no end to the odd things that humane people will say and do” (6).

Satirists commonly rely on the double-layered phenomenon of irony remarked in D.C. Muecke’s *The Compass of Irony* (19). Using this method, a satirist can expose the object of satire without overt ridicule. Stowe takes this double-layer phenomenon much further, creating layer upon layer of ironic situations within her satire. In the double-layered method, the lower level is the situation as it appears to the victim of irony, while the upper level consists of the observer or the ironist’s view of the situation (Muecke 19-20). Irony asserts an inherent contradiction or incongruity between the two levels, and this contradiction invalidates the posture of the lower level. However, in the discourse between the two men of humanity, Shelby and Haley, Stowe’s satire operates on three upper levels: the in-text irony that Mr. Shelby and the reader see in Haley’s speeches on humanity; the irony that the reader perceives in Mr. Shelby’s actions; and the irony of the reader’s own complicity in the satirized slave system. Each level of Stowe’s irony invalidates the one preceding it, transforming even the observer of irony, and perhaps the ironist herself, into victims of satire.

The first self-professed man of humanity Stowe satirizes is the slave trader, Mr. Haley. Stowe develops Haley as a caricature, an exaggeration of particular features of a target for comic effect (Johnston sec. C). Stowe describes him as “a low man who is trying to elbow his way upward in the world,” with a conversational manner sprinkled

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with profanities and a “free and easy defiance of Murray’s Grammar” (1). The slave trader is depicted as vulgar and silly to highlight the ridiculousness of his discourse on humanity, “the great pillar of my [Haley’s] management” (5).

Haley illustrates his “humanity” in his attempt to separate mother from child for monetary gain; he also cements his role as the victim of irony, the lowest level in Muecke’s double-layer theory. Haley has already convinced Mr. Shelby to sell Tom, his best and most loyal slave, in order to relieve a monetary debt to him. But Mr. Shelby’s humanity interferes when Haley wants to buy Eliza’s child. He claims “I’m a humane man, and I hate to take the boy away from his mother” (5). Haley agrees that it is inhumane to rip a child out of a mother’s arms, but his solution is to covertly sell the child and then give the mother “some ear-rings, or a new gown, or some such truck, to make up with her” (5). Stowe uses the satiric devices of understatement and what Robert Harris’ calls “the list” to expose the inherent absurdity of replacing a child with a trivial bauble. By understating the importance of a child to its mother, Stowe calls attention to the true degree of evil within the slave system. Harris’ list method – “a list of items, people, or ideas generally similar, except for one or two incongruous items, which the satirist is addressing” – highlights the contradiction between Haley’s view of humanity and society’s professed views (par. 27). Haley’s list asserts that for slave mothers, earrings and children hold the same value. Stowe thus leaves the reader to draw conclusions about the absurdity of this assumption.

The irony of Haley’s definitions of humanity does not stop with these inane assumptions about slaves’ inability to feel for the their children. He relates to Shelby a tale of a slave mother who might have been worth a thousand dollars but for bad management. The slave trader, who does not endorse Haley’s humane management principles, “damages the article” by allowing the slave mother to actually witness the selling of her child, which drives her mad (5). Haley contradicts his own beliefs on the feeling capabilities of Negroes, assuming that only if a slave is allowed to witness the evil act will she have any “white” feelings on the matter. Haley concludes that although his humane notions are not popular, “it’s always best to do the humane thing” and that “a little humanity, thrown in along, goes a heap further [...] and it pays better” (5-6). Haley equates humanity with monetary profit, moving against society’s sense of morality but in congress with society’s actions. Haley functions as an exaggerated satiric element in the novel, and this overemphasis operates “to make the unseeing see, and the seeing-but-complacent oppose and expunge corruption” (Harris par. 21).

On the second tier of ironic contradiction, Shelby becomes the target of Stowe’s satire; his hypocrisy invalidates his assumed position of moral high ground over Haley. Mr. Shelby perceives the irony of Haley’s statements on humanity and laughs along with the reader at Haley’s expense, but he fails to recognize that his views on humanity are also incongruous with his actions. Stowe employs the philosophical technique of reductio ad absurdum, literally “reduction to the absurd,” to satirize Shelby’s situation. Using this technique, the author appears to affirm the basic attitudes she wishes to satirize and then exposes the foolishness of these attitudes (Johnston sec. C). For example, when Mr. Shelby tells Mr. Haley that he is “a humane man” (5), to the eyes of the reader Mr. Shelby is presented as a humane slave owner, one of the best and gentlest
examples of the system. Stowe adopts this point of view, then allows the readers to see for themselves through the presentation of subsequent events the inherent contradiction of this view to normative values. Shelby desires to act humanely, yet he still splits up families due to his own mistakes. Shelby does not even remain consistent in his profession of humanity. In a discussion of the humanity of tearing apart slave families, Shelby does not even think about the inhumanity of separating Tom from his wife, two small boys, and baby girl.

Following Thrall’s definition and her own advice in *Uncle Sam’s Emancipation*, Stowe satirizes the principle instead of the man, acknowledging through Shelby’s voice that he is not a monster but is merely “doing what everyone does everyday” (28). Shelby is not an evil despot, but he nonetheless destroys the lives of two families by selling Tom and by separating Eliza from her only son. These slaves have done nothing against Shelby and are actually good friends of the Shelby family; Shelby’s own irresponsible speculation and money management lead him to destroy the lives of friends to avoid personal discomfort. Stowe’s satire does not accuse Shelby of inhumanity, but helps the reader to see the inhumanity of a system that gives Shelby the power to destroy the family unit and to deal in human property.

Stowe’s most powerful weapon of satire exists on the third tier, or upper level, in which the readers themselves attain an unconscious awareness of their own complicity in the slave system. By covertly satirizing the reader’s collusion in the evils of slavery, Stowe allows readers to recognize the irony of their own situation through the mirror of satire, without directly implicating and alienating them. Stowe never accuses her readers of wrongdoing; she merely presents the truth of slavery’s hypocrisy. The feeling of guilt and responsibility is amplified as the reader is introduced to the humanity of which they have fallen short. Pilditch concludes that “Stowe’s signification of Tom ‘as a type of a class’ of human ideal [...] is placed within the text as a referent necessary for satire” (65). The exaggerated goodness of Tom establishes a normative moral ideal which reflects the values that a majority of society holds. “To adopt a satiric stance requires a sense of what is right, since the target of the satire can only be measured as deficient if one has a sense of what is necessary for a person to be truly moral” (Johnston sec. B). The exaggerated piety and morality that Tom embodies cements Stowe’s moral authority and reflects the failure of society to live up to its own standards. Tom’s character must be unrealistically good in order to emphasize that the best forms of slavery and inhumanity are as devastating as the worst. That this moral ideal is found in a slave makes the novel’s appeal against slavery all the more poignant. The painful irony of the chapter one title is highlighted when the reader understands that the true “man of humanity” is the item up for sale.

**MEN OF LETTERS**

Most satirists assume an educated readership, and scholars on the topic conclude that “satire requires a certain level of education and sophistication in the audience” in order to appreciate the existence of different levels of meaning within the work (Johnston sec. E). Pilditch postulates, however, that Stowe does not align herself with the
traditional superiority of the “man of letters” adopted by Augustan satirists (62). Stowe’s authorial stance adopts the position of the common man as reader, a unique strain of American satire that Koch attributes to post-Civil War satire. He claims that in the latter portion of the Nineteenth Century the former object of satire, the oaf, “began to serve as satire’s vehicle, its voice” (xvii). The idea that the fool may be the wise man, and the wise man is actually the knave is not a new one. In the majority of Shakespeare’s comedies the character of the fool is always given the lines that hold the most wisdom (i.e., Touchstone in *As You Like It*, Feste in *Twelfth Night*). Stowe recognizes all too well that “from the mouths of the ignorant a kind of wisdom might flow that was uncluttered with the deformations of learning” (Koch xvii). Stowe, though, contradicts Koch’s contention that this is a post-Civil War phenomenon; the object of the majority of her satire is the “man of letters” and she is perhaps most harsh on these men because they should know better.

Much of Stowe’s satire on the “men of letters” follows this pattern successfully, so that her readers have that “shock of recognition.” Jonathan Swift, a satirist noted for his *Modest Proposal*, described satire as a mirror in which people see everyone’s face except their own (Johnston sec. F). Stowe might agree that satire is a form a reflection, but her satire is most effective because the target can also see a glimpse of self in that mirror. Reflecting back to Shakespeare’s Jaques, the key to good satire is that the target incriminates himself if he attempts to make a defense. A good example of this reflection is Stowe’s authorial intrusion using Muecke’s classified irony of “pretended defence of the victim” (73). Stowe

beg[s] the world not to think that American legislators are entirely destitute of humanity, as might, perhaps, be unfairly inferred from the great efforts made in our national body to protect and perpetuate this species of traffic. Who does not know how our great men are outdoing themselves, in declaiming against the foreign slave trade [. . .] Trading negroes from Africa, dear reader, is so horrid! It is not to be thought of! But trading them from Kentucky,—that’s quite another thing! (115)

In this paragraph Stowe exposes the irony of the United States’ laws prohibiting the slave trade abroad but allowing that trade at home. She employs *reductio ad absurdum* in an exaggerated defense of her target, the hypocrisy of American legislators. The satire is thinly veiled, but just obvious enough to incriminate any legislator who feels implicated.

Stowe also includes caricature in her satiric arsenal against the “men of letters.” “Black Sam” functions as an exaggerated satiric referent to mock the “men of letters,” or politicians, elected to serve the public, but who more often serve their own interests. The introductory character sketch of “Black Sam” includes two facts: he is “about three shades blacker” than any other slave on the Shelby plantation, and he has “a comprehensiveness of vision and a strict look-out to his own personal well-being that would have done credit to any white patriot in Washington” (37). As previously noted, Stowe is most critical of her representatives in Washington and perhaps so angry and disappointed with their actions concerning the Fugitive Slave Law that her subtle satire takes a back seat in these attacks.

Stowe continues to draw satiric parallels between Sam and politicians throughout his brief moment in the spotlight. As Sam contemplates his contrary directives from Mr.
and Mrs. Shelby about catching Eliza, he scratches his head, which "contained a great
deal of a particular species much in demand among politicians of all complexions and
countries, and vulgarly denominated ‘knowing which side the bread is buttered’" (38).
After hitching up "his pantaloons, which was his regularly organized method of assisting
his mental perplexities," Sam concludes with his typical political savvy that "fellers
allers gets more by stickin’ to Missis’ side" (38, 66). "For some singular reason," Sam
and his fellow slaves had the impression "that Missis’ would not be particularly
disobliged by delay," and they all contrived numerous ways to slow the chase (47). Some
readers may have viewed these antics as particularly infantile; however, they bear a
startling resemblance to a certain procedure practiced among politicians: the filibuster.

A rousing political oration completes Stowe’s satiric caricature of Sam. When the
chase ends unsuccessfully, Sam is rewarded for his efforts with a bounteous feast of the
last two or three days leftovers. As Sam graciously gobbles down his reward, he
“speechifies these yer niggers” with oratory skills he has developed while riding “in
attendance on his master to all kinds political gatherings” (64). Beginning his oration
with “Yer se, fellow-countrymen,” Stowe uses Sam’s speech as an extended satiric
metaphor against politicians who claim, “I’ll stand up for yer rights [. . .] and fend ‘em
to the last breath,” but only do so for their own gain (65). Like Sam, who holds principle
and conscience as flexible matters, Stowe implies that many politicians base their
decisions on the benefits they gain rather than on their belief in principles of morality.
The reader might assume, if Stowe were not such a genteel lady, that the sole purpose for
Black Sam’s existence is to make fun of politicians.

On the heels of Sam’s political speeches, the reader meets an actual senator, who
“rather liked the idea of considering himself a sacrifice to his country” (67). The scene
with Senator Bird and Mrs. Bird illustrates Stowe’s genius in successively intertwining
satire and sentiment. She chooses a senator from Kentucky, a border state, to illustrate
her point without grossly offending the more Southern states by mocking their
lawmakers. In order to establish Bird’s “humanity” she shows the loving home life which
the Senator and his wife share. After displaying that the Senator is humane, loving, and
in all other ways wonderful, Stowe sets her trap.

Senator Bird has just arrived home for a brief vacation from his senatorial duties.
Mrs. Bird almost immediately begins to pester him with questions about the passage of
the Fugitive Slave Law. Normally, Mrs. Bird “wouldn’t give a fip for all your [Mr.
Bird’s] politics” but her “unusually gentle and sympathetic nature” rails against such a
law (68). Senator Bird laughs off the protests of his “fair politician[s],” arguing that “it’s
not a matter of private feeling” when following one’s heart “would involve a great public
evil” (69). Mrs. Bird replies that “Obeying God never brings on public evils [. . .] it’s
always safest, all round, to do as He bids us” and she continues to box in the Senator
with appeals to Christian morality. She even challenges her husband’s willingness to
uphold his law and “turn away a poor, shivering, hungry creature [. . .] because he was a
runaway” (69).

Stowe’s satiric Bird trap is one of situational irony, or “irony of events,” wherein
“after we have more or less explicitly or confidently expressed reliance in the way things
go, some subsequent unforeseen turn of events reverses and frustrates our expectations or
designs” (Muecke 102). Stowe creates a situation in which the Senator must immediately act on his professed beliefs, and “if the truth must be told, our senator had the misfortune to be a man who had a particularly humane and accessible nature” (69). Stowe also exercises a type of “impersonal irony” described as “blaming in order to praise” or assigning “blame for having desirable qualities or for lacking undesirable qualities” when she says Bird’s humanity is a misfortune (Muecke 68). Senator Bird’s defect, his humanity, plays him a hard turn when, shortly after his speech to his wife, he is confronted at his door with a shivering Eliza and her Harry.

The peak of the situational irony arrives along side Eliza and Harry, and our “man of letters” begins to look a bit foolish. “What a situation, now, for a patriotic senator, that had been all the week before spurring up the legislature of his native state to pass more stringent resolutions against escaping fugitives, their harborers and abettors!” (77). While Senator Bird feels himself rather foolish for his hypocrisy, Mrs. Bird, a woman unknowledgeable of political rhetoric, understands that it is not necessary to “know anything about politics” to be a woman of humanity (69). Stowe’s satire shows that the man of letters is often the knave because he is blinded by learned rhetoric.

Satire has traditionally been considered a male genre; it was considered unladylike for a woman to be comical or aggressive, two key components of satire. By positioning Mrs. Bird as the fount of wisdom in this scene, Stowe empowers herself with the moral authority vital to her satiric posture. Pilditch asserts that “satire, like sermon, is a literature of authority, and nineteenth-century American women did not have easy access to such authority” (61). Many women deferred to God for their moral authority when moved to speak on a subject regarded as man’s domain: Mrs. Bird quotes the Bible to justify her argument against her husband, God being the only authority that ranks higher than he. One is reminded that Stowe claimed God wrote Uncle Tom through her.

Stowe was keenly aware of her precarious moral authority as a female author and satirist, yet she attempted to bolster her position through characters such as Mrs. Bird. However, despite her best efforts “to be courteous, even in satire” and her attempts to “try not to be personal” (Life and Letters, 83), she suffered many attacks motivated by the wounded pride of learned men. One such man, a Mr. George F. Holmes, writes in The Southern Literary Messenger in October of 1852 that Stowe has “volunteered officiously to intermeddle with things which concern her not—to libel and vilify people from among whom have gone forth some of the noblest men that have adorned the race”(emphasis added) and even implies that “she has forfeited the claim to be considered a lady” (468). He does actually stop short of taking from Stowe the name of “lady,” at least overtly, claiming that Stowe was merely misguided by

the novel doctrines in vogue [...] in the pleasant land of New England [...] which would place woman on a footing of political equality with man, and causing her to look beyond the office for which she was created—the high and holy office of maternity—would engage her in the administration of public affairs; thus handing over the State to the perilous protection of diaper diplomatists and wet-nurse politicians. (469)

Mr. Holmes’ attack against Stowe proves that nineteenth-century readers recognized her satiric voice, even if critics of the Twenty-First Century still relegate Uncle Tom to the literature of “domestic sentimentalism.”
Stowe realized that the male portion of her readership would likely, as Mr. Holmes claims, “suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence,” so Stowe offers an alternative teaching method in her satire of “men of letters” (469). Eliza’s escape serves to introduce many unlettered wise men who can teach Mr. Holmes a thing or two about humanity. While Mr. Bird is gently chided for being the fool, the man to whom he brings Eliza shows his unlearned wisdom: “Honest old John Van Trompe [. . .] had been for some years witnessing with repressed uneasiness the workings of a system equally bad for oppressor and oppressed,” and he finally decides to give up his considerable wealth in land and slave to “enjoy his conscience and his reflections” (79). Although he is a “rough man” who utters “a kind of compassionate grunt,” he is also “the man that will shelter a poor woman and child from slave catchers” (79). Another such unlearned oaf is also willing to assist Eliza in her escape. Mr. Symmes, a neighbor of Mr. Shelby’s, is the first to help Eliza after she makes her daring escape across the river. He tells Eliza she has earned her freedom, and he will not be a hunter and catcher for others:

So spoke this poor, heathenish Kentuckian, who had not been instructed in his constitutional relations, and consequently was betrayed into acting in a sort of Christianized manner, which, if he had been better situated and more enlightened, he would not have been left to do. (53)

Stowe applies verbal irony, blaming in order to praise, to reemphasize that too much learning can lead to immoral action.

Stowe uses another unlettered wise man, John the drover, to satirize slavery and underline the cosmic irony of the slave’s fate under the current system. This cosmic irony becomes a mirror which reflects the culpability of the nation. The drover is caricatured as a rough Kentucky cowman who is not ashamed to allow his heart to guide his conscience. She describes the drover as a

long-legged gentleman, with his chair tipped back, his hat on his head, and the heels of his muddy boots reposing sublimely on the mantle-piece,—a position, we will inform our readers, decidedly favorable to the turn of reflection incident to western taverns, where travelers exhibit a decided preference for this particular mode of elevating their understandings. (89)

The drover spits disdainfully at a runaway slave advertisement, which the reader recognizes as none other than George Harris. In his opinion, men who treat their slaves like dogs deserve to lose them. The drover does own slaves, but he treats them like men, and he also lets them know that if they run away he will not try to catch them. He already has free papers made out for all them, just in case he dies unexpectedly. Stowe gives numerous examples of enlightened slave owners who do not take such precautions to protect their slaves. The drover concludes that his slaves serve him loyally and do not run away, even when they get the chance.

Other men in the room, most likely as unlearned as John, assume that if a slave is punished cruelly he must deserve it. One man claims that “these yer knowin’ boys is allers aggravitin’ and sarcy [. . .] that’s why they gets cut up and marked so” (92). He claims “if they behaved themselves, they wouldn’t” be punished harshly. The drover mocks this argument with a bit of unlearned, satiric wisdom: “that is to say, the Lord made ’em men, and it’s a hard squeeze getting ’em down into beasts” (92).
Unfortunately, cosmic irony makes “the other [. . .] [though] well intrenched, in a coarse, unconscious obtuseness” just as correct in some of his postulations as the humane drover (92). Cosmic irony confronts a slave’s best efforts to elevate himself with the ultimate purposelessness of those efforts (Muecke 150-1) because “what’s the use o’ talents and them things, if you can’t get the use of ’em yourself” (92). The drover quick wittedly replies that his opponent “Better send orders up to the Lord, to make you a set, and leave out their souls entirely” (92).

MEN OF THE CHURCH

The Lord has yet to make this set of slaves without souls, but the ministers who should be attempting to save these eternal souls are instead assisting the politicians in defending evil. These ministers appear to adhere to the biblical interpretations of Eva’s young cousin, Henrique, when he says “Oh, the Bible! To be sure, it says a great many such things; but then, nobody ever thinks of doing them; you know, Eva, nobody does” (237). Henrique had clearly been “instructed by certain ministers of Christianity” to view slavery’s injustices as “every-day incident[s] of a lawful trade; a trade which is the vital support of an institution which some American divines tell us has no evils but such as are inseparable from any other relations in social and domestic life” (113). Stowe hit a specific nerve with this satiric jibe because in the first edition of her novel she named the minister Joel Parker in a footnote to these comments. Mr. Parker was a friend of the Stowe family, and Stowe had apparently heard these very comments come from his mouth. Parker must have agreed with the enlightened Mr. Holmes about Stowe’s libeling and vilifying because he sued her for this footnote.

Stowe’s satire against the church is vigorous because she believes that “Not all the force out of the church could sustain slavery an hour if it were not sustained in it” (Albert Barnes, qtd. in Life and Letters 134). Reverend Parker was not the only minister who attempted to defend slavery; many others used scripture to claim superiority over the black man. Stowe includes a scene in her novel depicting such a defense. Mr. Haley has carried away husband from wife and child from mother on a boat headed to New Orleans, and one of the ladies on the boat exclaims that it is “a shame to our country that such sights are to be seen” (106). A little debate ensues between the passengers that would not have been out of place in Mr. Bird’s senate. Another “genteel woman” retorts that “there’s a great deal to be said on both sides of the subject,” and she has “been down south, and I must say I think the negroes are better off than they would be to be free” (107). The genteel lady responds to concerns about the separation of families by stating nonchalantly, “that is a bad thing, certainly [. . .] but then, I fancy, it don’t [sic] occur very often” (107). This genteel lady is the unaware victim of Stowe’s dramatized irony, employed to attack the cultural blindness of a presumed Christian. The dramatic ironist “arranges that the characters of his play or novel [. . .] expose themselves in their ironic predicament directly to the audience or reader” (Muecke 92). In the pages directly preceding and proceeding the genteel lady’s defense of slavery, the reader watches Mr. Haley split up at least four slave families as “an every-day incident of lawful trade.”
Mr. Haley does not need to worry about his actions, however, because a minister on board immediately comes to the slave trader’s defense, preaching “It’s undoubtedly the intention of Providence that the African race should be servants [. . .] ‘Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be’ [. . .] and we must not set up our opinions against that” (107). Stowe reintroduces John the drover to manipulate her satiric scene by using the mode of impersonal irony that Muecke refers to as “pretended advice or encouragement to the victim” (69). The drover agrees “we’ll all go ahead and buy up niggers [. . .] if that’s the way of Providence” (107). After teasing the minister for his comments, he turns to Haley to confirm “Niggers must be sold, and trucked around, and kept under; it’s what they’s made for. ‘Pears like this yer view’s quite refreshing, an’t it stranger?’ Surprising enough, this encouragement from the drover fails to comfort Haley. He almost questions the legitimacy of the minister’s ‘Cursed be Canaan’ argument when he says, “I couldn’t have said as much, myself; I ha’nt no laming. I took up the trade just to make a living; if ‘t an’t right, I calculated to ‘pent on ‘t in time” (107-8).

Mr. Haley often expresses his uneducated reserves about his own trade and then confirms his intentions to repent later for his current evil deeds. Stowe satirizes these ministers of the Lord for supporting Haley’s “sin now, pray later” philosophy, and she creates an interesting juxtaposition to Mr. Haley’s compatriot in evil, Tom Loker, who reprimands Haley:

“Tan’t that you care one bit more, or have a bit more feelin’,—it’s clean, sheer dog meanness, wanting to cheat the devil and save your own skin [. . .] And your ‘getting’ religion,’ as you call it, arter all, is too p’isin mean for any critter,—run up a bill with the devil all your life, and then sneak out when pay time comes!” (58)

This caricature of Tom Loker allows the irony of Haley’s philosophy on several levels. First, the reader notices the hypocrisy between the religion Haley professes to believe in and the trade in which he works. Second, the reader notices that the minister on the boat praises the trade that has been previously depicted as unchristian. When the minister praises and defends the principles of slavery, he incriminates himself as a victim of satire because he praises the institution for having undesirable qualities. Haley and the minister both become pawns in dramatic irony, though the reader has knowledge of the evils that have taken place in the name of slavery. There is yet a third level of irony in Mr. Haley’s philosophy, in which the person (Loker) handing out legitimate criticism is caricatured as the devil’s twin brother and as “a bull-dog come unto man’s estate, and walking about in a hat and coat” (57, 54). The character of Loker, who’s “every organ and lineament [is] expressive of brutal and unhesitating violence [. . .] in a state of the highest possible development” displays Stowe’s true satiric genius because Loker is the only person calling Mr. Haley to task for his hypocrisy (54). In this attack Stowe avoids blame for the criticism by placing it in the mouth of inherently evil man.
Satire in Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin

Stowe relates the poignant situational irony of ministers who drive the congregation away with their sermons. John Van Trompe, the honest farmer who took Eliza in, says his lack of learning kept him from joining the church for years. He recalls that “the ministers round in our parts used to preach that the Bible went in for these ere cuttings up [...] I couldn’t be up to ’em with their Greek and Hebrew, and so I took up agin ’em, Bible and all” (80). Not only were ministers defending evil men and neglecting to save eternal souls, but according to Van Trompe, they were also driving humane men from the church with their “Cursed be Canaan” rhetoric.

Stowe reinforces her satire of these ministers by offering only a brief counter argument from scripture through the mouth of another minister on the boat: “‘All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them’ [...] that is scripture, as much as ‘Cursed be Canaan’”.(108). The honest drover mocks the previous arguments by using the ironic method of “pretended error or ignorance” as well as “pretended doubt” (Muecke 69-70). The reader has heard the drover’s position against the evils of slavery but then witnesses his feigned struggle, reckoning between the two parsons’ scriptural knowledge. He finally decides that the second parson’s argument “seems quite as plain a text [...] to poor fellows like us” (108). Stowe again gains her authorial stance through the pretended ignorance of men, unlearned women, and children, rather than through the enlightened, lettered intelligence of politicians and ministers.

A Nation of Complacency

Stowe wields her most heated satiric attacks against the hypocrisy and complacency of those who feel the inherent wrongs of slavery but refuse to act against them. Volume One of Uncle Tom’s Cabin presents the arguments for ridicule, but in Volume Two Stowe reveals the devastating consequences of this hypocrisy and complacency. Stowe believes it is not enough “to make the unseeing see,” if the injustices continue. She satirizes the “seeing-but-complacent” in order to motivate them to “oppose and expunge corruption” (Harris par. 21).

Stowe takes her Northern brethren to task vigorously for their complicity in the “peculiar institution.” One of her most overtly satiric attacks employs exaggerated praise for having undesirable qualities (apathy) or for lacking desirable qualities (humanity) (Muecke 67). Stowe also applies impersonal irony by omitting direct censure of Haley’s cruel actions (Muecke 72). The reader has just witnessed Mr. Haley’s “humane” management skills at work, as he removes a sleeping slave child from its mother’s arms and sells the child away its mother forever. Stowe explains to the reader that Mr. Haley had simply arrived at the stage of Christian and political perfection which has been recommended by some preachers and politicians of the north, lately, in which he had completely overcome every humane weakness and prejudice [...] His heart was exactly where yours, sir, and mine could be brought, with proper effort and cultivation [...] You can get used to such things, too, my friend and it is the
great object of recent efforts to make our whole northern community used to
them, for the glory of the Union. (112)

Stowe’s satire warns that the “earnest and tender-hearted Christian people [who] seemed
to feel it a duty to close their eyes, ears, and hearts to the harrowing details of slavery”
must rise up against the evil of slavery or be consumed by it (Life and Letters 146).

Without taking more than a few pages of breath, Stowe assumes her satiric attack
again, aiming squarely at the hypocrisy of northern lawmakers and ministers. Mr.
Haley’s humane management apparently backfires when Lucy, the mother of that
sleeping child, bypasses hysterics and jumps into the river, drowning herself. If the courts
could, they would have charged Lucy with destruction of property as “American state
law coolly classes [her] with the bundles, and bales, and boxes” (113). But Mr. Haley can
only “put down the missing body and soul under the head of losses” in his account book
because Lucy “had escaped into a state which never will give up a fugitive,—not even at
the demand of the whole glorious Union” (115). The Fugitive Slave Law brought
Stowe’s outrages and sympathies to the page, so a few jibes at the slave-catching
business are not out of place, even with the tragedy of Lucy’s death. Cosmic irony
envelops the scene, as well; a better life hereafter is the only hope a Negro has under
slavery.

George Sand noted the claw of Stowe’s satire of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in her
December 1852 review, claiming “The saints also have their claw! it is that of the lion.
She [Stowe] buries it deep in the conscience, and a little of burning indignation and of
terrible sarcasm does not [ . . . ] misbecome her [ . . . ]. [She] does not hesitate to bind to the
pillory the hardened tyrant, to show to the world his deformity” (qtd. in Life and Letters
156). However, it is not the hardened tyrant whom Stowe holds most at fault, as
evidenced by this satiric diatribe:

He’s a shocking creature, isn’t he,—this trader? so unfeeling! It’s dreadful
really! [ . . . ] But who, sir, makes the trader? Who is most to blame? The
enlightened cultivated, intelligent man, who supports the system of which the
trader is the inevitable result, or the poor trader himself? You make the public
sentiment that calls for his trade, that debauches and depraves him, till he feels
no shame in it; and in what are you better than he? Are you educated and he
ignorant, you high and he low, you refined and he coarse, you talented and he
simple? In the day of a future Judgment, these very considerations may make it
more tolerable for him than for you. (115)

Stowe invokes the rhetoric of an American jeremiad, a literary work or speech expressing
a bitter lament or a righteous prophecy of doom (“Jeremiad”). The jeremiad is much like
a curse and promotes the satiric element of Stowe’s tirade. The use of curse in satire can
be traced back to pre-classical Greece, where primitive satiric spells and curses were used
to banish and destroy the dark forces, human and natural, which threatened the well-
being of the community (Keman 211). In Uncle Tom the dark force is the system itself, the
institution of slavery. Stowe uses the power of the curse to correct, “to make vice repulsive
so that the vice will be expunged from the person or society under attack” (Harris par. 3).

Stowe regards with regret and contempt the moral complacency of Christian
denominations to the vice of slavery. In an open letter to Scotland after her visit there,
she reports that “as a general thing the professed Christian church is pushed up to its duty by the world, rather than the world urged on by the church” (Life and Letters 209). In Stowe’s mind “this movement [abolition] must and will become a purely religious one” and the churches must step up to the task (Life and Letters 136). Through Uncle Tom she holds out the evils of slavery and demands that Christians no longer avert their eyes. In her attack about “who makes the trader,” she calls on “the enlightened cultivated, intelligent man” to see his own accountability for slavery’s evils.

Turning her guns toward the delicate half of the population, Stowe’s satire informs women that they, too, cannot remain guiltless any longer by hiding behind the petticoats of feminine delicacy. In a burlesque scene involving the drunken trader and slave catchers, the serious topic of slavery is discussed with a cosmic ironic truth that polite society detests. In a tone dripping with sarcasm, Stowe suggests that

If any of our refined and Christian readers object to the society into which this scene introduces them, let us beg them to begin and conquer their prejudices in time. The catching business, we beg to remind them, is rising to the dignity of a lawful and patriotic profession. If all the broad land between the Mississippi and the Pacific becomes one great market for bodies and souls, and human property retains the locomotive tendencies of this nineteenth century, the trader and catcher may yet be among our aristocracy. (62)

Stowe warns that continued complacency will have a subversive effect on the fabric of traditional society, resulting in the disintegration of the family unit, as well.

Stowe’s most poignant satiric vehicle is the aristocratic Southerner, St. Clare. In George Sand’s review of Uncle Tom, George Sand asks, “is there not something of this [St.Clare] even among the bravest and best of men?” She implies that St. Clare is a kind of Everyman who feels injustice but is incapable of enacting change (155). St. Clare’s complacency builds to a point of narcissism as he constantly berates the institution of slavery and all who support it, including himself. St. Clare sees too much recognition in his mirror of satire but never allows himself to be motivated by the shock of his reflection. Stowe portrays St. Clare as a truly good man, beset upon by fate, allowing herself the authority to exercise direct attacks against the “peculiar institution” through his character. St. Clare is caught somewhere between self-disparaging irony and ingênue irony, the second and third modes Muecke describes in The Compass of Irony (SI-92). In these modes the ironist is also the self-appointed victim of the irony.

The reader’s first introduction to Augustine St. Clare presents him as a kind and indulgent father and the “wise guy” of the novel. While conducting the sales transaction to buy Tom for his daughter, St. Clare teases Haley mercilessly for his promotional sale of Tom. As the purchase is concluding, St. Clare asks Haley to “assure me that I really can buy this kind of pious, and that it will be set down to my account in the book up above, as something belonging to me” (130-1). St. Clare mocks Haley’s trade in a satiric manner of feigned ignorance. St. Clare concludes, “I wouldn’t care if I did go a little extra for it,” reminding the reader of fourteenth-century indulgences (131).

Miss Ophelia and St. Clare also serve as representatives for the North and South, pointing out the irony and hypocrisy in both positions. Ophelia constantly sermonizes to St. Clare for acknowledging the evils of slavery but resisting the elevation or
emancipation of his slaves. St. Clare shows Ophelia the difficulty of following her own advice by giving her Topsy as an educational experiment. St. Clare identifies Ophelia’s hypocrisy as one widely held in the North:

“You loathe them as you would a snake or a toad, yet you are indignant at their wrongs. You would not have them abused; but you don’t want to have anything to do with them yourselves. You would send them to Africa, out of your sight and mind, and then send a missionary or two to do up all the self-denial of elevating them compendiously.” (154)

Stowe places her representatives in satiric perspective when St. Clare admits “Nothing is easier than talking” (155). He invokes Portia’s speech from Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, in which Portia concedes, “I could sooner show twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow my own showing” (155).

St. Clare appears as a slaveowner who fell into the job through inheritance from his father. He has never been able to find a moral balance between discipline and cruelty, so he generally treats his slaves like spoiled children. St. Clare serves as an example of slavery at its best, as did Mr. Shelby, reinforcing that the best of the system is still morally unacceptable. The exaggerated evil of Simon Legree, Tom’s last owner, satirically extends by simile to St. Clare. Tom’s arrival at both mansions is paralleled as he takes in the sight of his new home. St. Clare’s mansion is aristocratic and filled with grandeur, while Legree’s mansion serves as the dilapidated picture of what St. Clare’s mansion could become. Legree is a prophecy for the future of the nation if slavery continues to exist. Tom represents the sacrifice of the Christian moral ideal that will occur with a continuation of slavery.

Stowe places her ultimate criticism of complacency in the mouth of a young northern man, who tells his southern companion that “it is you considerate, humane men, that are responsible for all the brutality and outrage wrought by these wretches; because, if it were not for your sanction and influence, the whole system could not keep foot-hold for an hour” (295). The two gentlemen involved in this conversation then agree to disagree and engage themselves in a game of backgammon. A game of backgammon between St. Clare and his brother Alfred also followed an earlier conversation with much the same tone. Backgammon represents “stylistically signaled irony,” which uses words or phrases that are out of place to convey the satirist’s meaning (Muecke 77). Stylistically signaled irony is Robert Harris’ “the list” in extended prose form. By placing a trivial game at the end of two serious and important conversations about slavery, Stowe satirizes the moral priorities behind these men’s arguments. Their conversations equate an immortal soul with a game of backgammon. In these scenes they become foolish, morally reprehensible symbols of northern and southern complacency.

At the conclusion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin Stowe claims “Both North and South have been guilty before God; and the Christian church has a heavy account to answer.” She invokes the satiric curse and predicts that continued complacency and apathy to the plight of the slave “shall bring on nations the wrath of Almighty God” (388). Stowe uses the curse as the climax of her satiric war against politicians, ministers, apathetical Christians, and her inhumane nation. Satire in Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin is, then, the driving element that revealed to her nation that it “hath wrong’d [it]self.”
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