Politics and Melodrama:
A Study of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Ilka Saal

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INTRODUCTION

Dusting off *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

Critics, trained in the modernist tradition, tend to regard nineteenth century sentimental novels, written by women, as a “low” form of literature or even as “trash” – thus, creating a dichotomy of “good” and “bad” literature; the first including intellectual, male authors such as Hawthorne and Melville, the latter referring to popular, female authors like Stowe. The urge of these critics to categorize works of art in those terms forces them to look at sentimental novels in a superficial way, and consequently, ignoring the hybrid and intellectual complexity of a novel such as Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

This complex character is due to the major paradox *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* comprises, trying to reconcile a social and moral order that had become more and more estranged from each other (Fluck 323). Conventionally, critics focus only on the aesthetic aspects of the novel, and by doing so they dismissed the entire novel as propaganda, since to them Stowe could not apply the stylistic innovations that authors such as Hawthorne could. To them, Stowe was anything but a literary genius and her work was anything but art. Then, how could a novel of allegedly poor literary quality grow into the most popular work of fiction?

I believe that Stowe deliberately opted for a sentimental, popular style in order to address a large public, since her aim was to abolish slavery. The novel did gain an enormous popularity in its own time and is up until now the second best sold book in the history of American literature. It was its popularity that made critics refuse to perceive *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in other terms than good and bad. I would like to argue that we study *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by the means it deserves, this is to say, that we no longer apply the dominant highbrow point of view, but turn to the conventions the book gives to us. To put it more simply: we must no longer agree with the general conception that melodrama equals “low” and modernism equals “high” literature. Critics such as Jane Tompkins, Leslie Fiedler and Philip
Fisher – and many others – have taken important steps to reassess Stowe’s work, and have encouraged others to take a renewed interest.

The extensive debate between supporters and opponents of the novel has been going on since the novel’s publication. George Sand wrote in his review of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that he “cannot say that she has talent as one understands it in the world of letters, but she has genius, as humanity feels the need of genius” (461). In contrast to Sand’s overall positive review, George Holmes could not see any sign of genius in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Holmes accuses Stowe of “volunteer[ing] 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” (468). According to Holmes, women are not supposed to deal with the issues Stowe addresses (slave system, politics etc.). His point of view is paradigmatic of other male views, since many men regarded these matters as their responsibilities, not the women’s. In modern times, critics such as Richard Wright and Harold Bloom have discussed the novel. The African American author, Richard Wright, wrote *Uncle Tom’s Children* as a response to Stowe’s novel. However, critics such as Jane Tompkins and Philip Fisher have put forward a different point of view that reassesses the novel.

Tompkins has raised an interesting discussion about the relationship between its mass popularity in the nineteenth century and its low status in modern times. Like Tompkins and others, I consider it imperative to reassess *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, because it has a certain richness that has not been studied at great length. Trying to reassess the novel inevitably implies a reassessment of melodrama in fiction. Hence, I do not wish to define melodrama as an inferior mode compared to realism or others but I would like to stress its difference in strategy without prejudice. It forces me to raise this question: Why is the combination of

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1 Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* (published in 1938) is a collection of short stories, dealing with lynching and mob violence. In comparison to Stowe, Wright’s representation of the race relations in the South is darker.
politics and literature so appalling, that is, when it is not dealt with according to the conventions? I claim that the use of melodramatic stratagems is rewarding to address politics and to suggest a different – perhaps helpful – angle to tackle socio-cultural or political issues.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is most often regarded as “an especially rich and powerful example of sentimentality in the novel” (Fluck 319). While I agree with Tompkins, Fisher, and Fluck that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* contains numerous sentimental characteristics, I think we should pay attention to the melodramatic strategies in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Although, their goals and techniques overlap to a great extent, I do not consider melodrama and sentimentality as two concepts that denote the same mode. Nonetheless, there is no consensus in defining what sentimental fiction is. Notions such as melodrama, realism, and sentimentality are hard to define, because of the similarities (Postlewait 40). Still, I think it could be useful to briefly explain my comprehension of sentimentality and melodrama.

Winfried Fluck gives three definitions concerning sentimentality; it can be defined in philosophical and cultural terms, in terms of a literary genre, or as a “sentimental rhetoric” (Fluck 321). When used in the first definition it points to “a new epistemology or a system of cultural beliefs which developed in the eighteenth century and played an important role in American culture of the nineteenth century […]” (Fluck 321). So, the philosophical definition concentrates on the set of moral principles. In terms of the second definition, it refers to the narrative models used by novelists such as Richardson and Goethe (Fluck 321). Richardson’s *Clarissa* and Goethe’s *Sorrows of the Young Werther* are probably the most prominent paradigms of the sentimental novel. These novels represent the cult of true womanhood, which means that the focus is on female qualities such as piety, submissiveness, pureness, sentimentality, and domesticity (Sundquist 20). Melodrama shares these characteristics with sentimentality, but the manner in which melodrama deals with these concepts is different from sentimental novels. Melodrama seeks to articulate the suppressed desires of these
women by means of suffering. Thus, melodramatic and sentimental novels present a
subversive feminist domesticity, that is, they destroy the patriarchal establishment by means
of putting women in superior moral position. Consequently, melodrama has conventionally
been defined as a woman’s genre; however, this labeling stems from a retrospective
perception (Gledhill 33).³

Chronologically, melodrama originated in the late eighteenth century, “within the
context of the French Revolution and its aftermath”; thus melodrama is a more recent genre
compared to sentimentality (Brooks 60). However, melodrama departs from sentimentalism
and in particular from Fluck’s third definition of sentimentality: “a rhetorical strategy, or […]
as a mode of representation marked by gestures of rhetorical excess and exaggeration […]”
(Fluck 321). Melodrama, nonetheless, slightly alters the sentimental tradition, for instance, the
women are not necessarily the main character – Tom is the main character in Uncle Tom’s
Cabin. Furthermore, there are two important features that are absolutely necessary to make
something melodramatic; this does not have to be the case with the sentimentality.

Melodrama always depends on an emotional and moral teleology, that is, it defines everything
in terms of a final moral and emotional design. In melodramatic narratives virtue is
persecuted and the course of events are designed to reward virtue and punish evil (Gerould
123). Melodrama also appeals to our feelings, that is, it pushes us to respond with empathy.
When we look at Richardson’s Pamela and Clarissa, the novels primarily deal with “good
principles” in contrast to melodrama’s fixation on virtue and villainy (Lipking 2078).

Besides the emotional and moral teleology, other distinct aspects characterize melodrama,

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¹ Melodrama is a broad genre that includes other categories like the western melodrama. In
domestic or family melodramas the presence of sentimental characteristics will be more
appropriate than, for instance, in an action melodrama. Here, I restrict the comparison to
sentimental and domestic melodrama, since this type of melodrama is relevant to my study of
Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

³ For a more thorough discussion see Christine, Gledhill. “The Melodramatic Field: An
Investigation.” Home is Here the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film, ed.
which are not mandatory for sentimental fiction ("melodramatic imagination", "logic of excluded middle", and a Manichean worldview).  

In this dissertation I aim to show that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* deserves close academic attention, because it derives its persuasive power from the clever use of melodramatic strategies; it is an intellectual approach to the great concerns of nineteenth century America; and finally, it was able to change a nation, which – to date – no other book has ever done. The angles, which the book adopts, offer a different perception of America’s history and I believe that its difference is a strong argument to take the novel into consideration.

Chapter I carefully scrutinizes the stylistic, melodramatic qualities of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The starting point is the question: Does the novel have any stylistic qualities that are worthy of our attention, and consequently, if there are any; why are they important to the reception of narrative? The answer to this question is in both cases positive, as will be explained in further detail. The novel has been written in a nineteenth century tradition of sentimentality but that does not turn the novel into a sentimental novel; as I have stated I consider *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a combination of sentimentality and melodrama. *Uncle Tom* relies upon some typical melodramatic strategies that give great strength to Stowe’s claim; these are the very same techniques that modernist critics define as poor.

Chapters II and III deal with the cultural implications of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in The United States of America. The second chapter will focus on the racial issues drawing heavily on critics such as Linda Williams. The depiction of the African American race is another disputed topic in the criticism of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Stowe puts all her effort in humanising African Americans, while critics in modern times frequently consider her depictions as rather stereotypical and racist. This paradox makes Stowe susceptible to scathing criticism. Christian discourse, and matriarchal ideology is discussed in chapter three. In her influential

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essay “Sentimental Power” critic Jane Tompkins pointed to the redefinition of the dominant culture in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin.*\(^5\) Stowe attacks the traditional and supreme patriarchal ideology by means of suggesting to the reader a radical alternative that sustains a matriarchal point of view. According to Tompkins, these two ideologies are in a constant interaction creating a dialogue, which ends in a celebration of motherly feeling and a failure of the patriarchal principles. The final chapter discusses the problem of the American canon, which favours a modernist and formalist model opposed to a more democratic and universal conception of American literature. This section provides a debate between opponents, such as James Baldwin, and supporters like Jane Tompkins. Nevertheless, my aim is not to provide an impression of who likes and dislikes the novel - which is ultimately irrelevant to my argument. Rather, I argue that a number of explanations are responsible for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* exclusion from the American canon. In addition, I claim that we should abandon the dominant traditional canon and aim towards Paul Lauter’s idea of an open canon that celebrates the diversity and similarities between the different cultures.

In short, I argue for a place in the canon of American Literary History for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin.* A book that has proven its importance deserves to be recognized – which does not have to imply that it has to be enthusiastically welcomed by everyone.

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CHAPTER I

The mellow style of Harriet Beecher Stowe

The stylistic features of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are traditionally reduced to flat characters, perverse masochism, mediocre prose, and sentimental clichés. Critics, who are too eager to condemn *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a product of mass culture, do not consider that Stowe might have had a good reason for turning to melodramatic conventions. In contrast to these critics, I claim that the features are accountable for the novel’s power and deserve a careful assessment without prejudice. I restrict the discussion of the melodramatic characteristics to the ones that I deem the most relevant. Furthermore, I have based my study on Christine Gledhill, Peter Brooks, Daniel Gerould, and Linda Williams who have contributed substantial work to the field of melodramatic studies. The question I would like to start from is: how do these stylistic features contribute to or underline the plot line?

1.1 The emotional realm

Firstly, Stowe portrays extremely emotional scenes, which display an excess of feeling. In his analysis of melodrama, Russian formalist Sergej Balukhatyi points out that “[a]ll elements in melodrama – its themes, technical principles, construction, and style – are subordinate to one overriding aesthetic goal: the calling forth of ‘pure’, ‘vivid’ emotions” (Gerould 121). This “calling forth of emotions” was termed by Sergei Balukhatyi the “emotional teleology” of melodrama (Gerould 121). The idea is that these “pure, vivid emotions” are brought forth in the characters, but more importantly in the spectators as well. The goal is to make characters, readers, and spectators feel the distinction between good and

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evil. Melodramatic narratives’ main concern is not psychology, but melodrama starts from within the character – the heart – and pushes the emotions on the external level in order to make them visible. Melodrama’s concern is to act out the – as Gerould calls it – “vivid emotions” (121). An example, occurring early in the plot, is when Tom is carried off leaving behind his family:

Lor, now Missis, don’t – don’t!” said Aunt Chloe, bursting out in her turn; and for a few moments they all wept in company. And in those tears they all shed together, the high and the lowly, melted away all the heart-burnings and anger of the oppressed. O, ye who visit the distressed, do ye know that everything your money can buy, given with a cold, averted face, is not worth one honest tear shed in real sympathy? (UTC 167)

I chose the excerpt because it more or less summarizes the claims Stowe makes in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. First, we are confronted with a crying Mrs. Shelby and Aunt Chloe. The slave system is responsible for separating the Shelby family. The separation triggers the moment where Chloe and Mrs. Shelby shed tears together; the scene elicits “pure, vivid emotions” from the two characters. Additionally, their tears appeal to us in an affective manner so that we feel what is wrong and right. We feel that what is occurring is immoral and should not be happening. Secondly, she supports her claim by pointing out that sympathy is worth more than currency. This is a key argument in the novel: feeling right is more valuable than reason or money, which sustain the slave system. And thirdly, by emphasizing that high as well as low shed tears together, she argues for a “human” treatment of African Americans. Mrs. Shelby’s role is important because she is one of the characters that Stowe’s white female, middle-class readers can relate to and she performs an act of interracial sympathy (Williams, “Leaping Fish” 48). But to return to the emotional teleology, the excerpt explicitly states the novel’s emotional design, that is, our anxiety of family separation, which we – white and African American – can identify with and perceive as wrong.

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7 This is achieved by, for instance, hyperbolical gestures.
8 A human treatment inspired by the Christian values (sympathy, love etc.)
The characters’ emotional state must be acted out. In melodramatic narratives the characters feel the urge to communicate everything, resulting in “sententious speeches” (Brooks 52, Gerould 122-123). To get their state of feeling across as best as possible, their emotions are more basic than the characters in naturalistic or modernist novels, where the psychological condition of the characters is an important stylistic feature. Melodramatic characters function primarily as a medium through which the emotions are expressed, thus they seem less real, since melodrama is not concerned with psychological complexity (Gerould 126). This is why the characters can suddenly change from one extreme emotion to the other extreme; their feelings are simple and basic. To support this argument I refer to the dialogue between Mrs. and Mr. Bird:

‘Now, John, I want to know if you think such a law as that is right and Christian?’ ‘You won’t shoot me, now, Mary, if I say I do!’ […] ‘You ought to be ashamed, John! Poor homeless, houseless creatures! It’s a shameful, wicked, abominable law, and I’ll break it, for one, the first time I get a chance; and I hope I shall have a chance, I do! Things have got to a pretty pass, if a woman can’t give a warm supper and a bed to poor, starving creatures, just because they are slaves, and have been abused and oppressed all their lives, poor things!’ ‘But, Mary, just listen to me. Your feelings are all quite right, dear, and interesting, and I love you for them; but, then, dear, we mustn’t suffer our feelings to run away with our judgment; you must consider it’s a matter of private feelings.’ (UTC 144, italics in the original)

Mrs. Bird compassionately expresses her resentment for the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) and her empathy for the slaves. The difference in discourse is striking when compared to the dry and rational claim made by Mr. Bird. Stowe achieves the suggestion of empathic speech by using several exclamation marks, empathetic adjectives, and words in italics. I would state that Mrs. Bird is indignation and compassion, as is apparent in her impassionate speech. She personifies the feelings she so necessarily needs to act out and the contrast between her compassionate words and her husband’s distant tone persuades us to feel with her. Before Mr. and Mrs. Bird engage in their discussion Mrs. Bird is calm while taking care for her husband. However, her husband suddenly provokes her: “Mrs. Bird rose quickly, with very red cheeks”
(UTC 144). This is the moment when Mrs. Bird’s emotions suddenly change, and when she makes her empathic speech.

Melodrama’s aim is to make us feel rather than think in terms of right and wrong, so occurrences appeal to us in an affective and not in a rational manner. Therefore, emotions carry a strong sense of morality; they are a means that points us to the ethical side of life. Limiting melodrama to a simple indulgence in cheap emotions, is to miscomprehend the workings of the genre, since these emotions have an imperative function.

1.2 Moral awareness

Apart from the emotional component there is a moralizing counterpart as well, which Balukhatyi labeled as “moral teleology” (Gerould 122, 123). This second feature is described as a system that rewards the good characters and punishes the evil ones. It “is perceived […] as a ‘natural’ reflection of the basic ‘laws of morality,’ predetermined by the course of events” (Gerould 123). The laws are “basic” since they are the never changing “laws of justice”, which determine the human conduct, especially that of the middle-classes (Gerould 123). Melodrama endorses the middle-classes’ sense of morality; their actions and feelings are reflected upon, and the outcome of these actions and feelings is either punishment or reward. Since the “laws of justice” determine the human conduct, the moral rules are acted out in a logical response to the idea of justice. Hence, a clear distinction is made between the virtuous and vicious characters, if not the moral values will not come across as powerful as they should.

In the novel there is one group of characters that act as the moral authorities and these are the women.9 Mrs. Bird’s function in the novel is to embody Stowe’s moral claim against

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9 It must be pointed out that not all the women in the novel are representatives of morality. Marie St. Clare, for instance, is an example of selfishness and not of morality. Prue, the woman on the boat, and Cassy lose their children, which could imply that they are bad
the Fugitive Slave Act and slavery in general. The dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Bird takes place when she finds out that a law is passed, which forbids northerners from helping runaway slaves (cf. *supra*). Besides the opposition between judgment and feeling, it is also a good example of how emotional teleology supports the moral teleology. To sustain her argument Mrs. Bird turns to a higher authority (the Bible). She appeals to her husband’s Christianity and feelings. Mr. Bird admits that her feelings are right, but dismisses them since he considers them as different from and inferior to his rational judgment. Ironically, Mrs. Bird has the upper hand because her feelings express a judgment as well. Mrs. Bird’s much stronger judgment is based on Christian morality, whereas the new law is simply based on political expediency. The Northern States restricted their interactions with the Southern States to diplomatic and economic relations. Nonetheless, when Mr. Bird is confronted with Eliza; he becomes genuinely moved by her story of the loss of her first child. Mr. and Mrs. Bird went through a similar experience, since they recently lost a child of their own. Hence, the threat of losing Henry appeals to Mr. Bird’s parental feelings, and persuades him to do what is morally right (helping Eliza).

In melodrama “everything moves forward by sharply isolating the crucial”; deeply affective moments like Mr. Bird’s confrontation with Eliza are isolated from other moments (Gerould 123). Gerould continues that melodramatic plots do not have to be “psychologically or realistically motivated”, the course of events happen for no reason whatsoever (Gerould 127). “Chance” plays a major role in the plot, since melodramatic plots depend on unexpected twists (Gerould 127). The dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Bird is interrupted by Eliza’s appearance; by pure coincidence she ends up at the Birds’ house, where Mr. and Mrs. Bird mothers. However, they feel that to keep their children save from the slave system killing them is the only solution. Contrary to Marie, these three women are capable of genuine motherly love, which makes Marie the only bad mother. Although, the act is contradictory to the Christian religion, they are forgiven. Tom takes up a special position, because he is described in maternal terms. I will deal with Tom’s feminine features in chapter III.
fortuitously have a conversation about helping slaves. Eliza’s story achieves to persuade Mr. Bird to go against the law, which Mrs. Bird’s speech probably would not have achieved. Another example is Tom’s stay at the Legree plantation. He was sold to Legree by chance, and at the plantation Tom is literally isolated from all other surroundings. His death scene is the ultimate moment where our emotions are elicited, and we are forced to feel the distinction between good and evil. Tom’s death sets a number of events in motion where virtue is displayed. Legree is punished for his wrongdoings, and Quimbo and Sambo are affected by Tom’s death that they mend their old ways. Thus, the course of events is an end in itself, but melodrama always strives for a happy ending and the elicitation of vivid emotions.

1.3 The rule of innocence

A third typical melodramatic aspect is the locus of innocence, which is a beautiful and peaceful place where virtue is omnipresent and “[takes] pleasure in itself” (Williams “Md. Revised” 65). The locus of innocence, nonetheless, does not remain excluded from villainy. The plot proper begins when the villainous person or someone to whom bad characteristics are attributed to, encroaches upon the harmonious place (Williams, “Md. Revised” 65). Thus, what is truly at stake here is not the place itself, but the values it stands for. Virtue is threatened and the quest for restoration is inherent to melodramatic plots. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* starts with such a locus of innocence:

> In front [the cabin] had a neat garden-patch, where, every summer, strawberries, raspberries, and a variety of fruits and vegetables, flourished under careful tending. The whole front of it was covered by a large scarlet bignonia and a native multiflora rose, which, entwisting and interlacing, left scarce a vestige of the rough logs to be seen. Here, also, in summer, various brilliant annuals, such as marigolds, petunias, four-o’clocks, found an indulgent corner in which to unfold their splendors. (66)

The description of Tom’s cabin presents the reader with a peaceful place. There is a little garden where fruits and vegetables can grow and flowers that embellish the cabin with their
bright colors. Implicitly, Stowe stresses the presence of virtue through this idyllic setting, since nature – the flowers – and man – cabin – live in perfect harmony. Stowe does not only implicitly but also explicitly inform her readers that Tom’s cabin is the locus of innocence. The narrator describes the Shelby plantation as “the mildest form of the system of slavery [that] is to be seen in the State of Kentucky” (UTC 50).

The opening chapter of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has already revealed a threat that will disturb the idyllic surroundings. Haley will take Tom with him in order to sell him to another master. Although Haley’s integrity might be questionable, he is not the true embodiment of evil. Stowe makes clear that the slave trade has made the trader: “His heart was exactly where yours, sir, and mine could be brought, with proper effort and education. The wild look of anguish and utter despair […] might have disturbed one less practiced; but he was used to it” (UTC 208, my emphasis). The real clash between villainy and virtue takes place during the ultimate confrontation between Tom and Legree. Haley is the one who triggers the plot; he is in power because the law is on his side. For Stowe, the real villain is the slave system and the laws that maintain it. From the moment the initial harmony is disturbed up to Tom’s arrival at Legree’s plantation, Tom cherishes the hope to return to Kentucky. This hope will not be realized, for the obvious reason that it would undermine Stowe’s argument against slavery. To Stowe, Kentucky is a wolf in sheep’s clothing, because “[w]hoever visits some estates there, […] might be tempted to dream the oft-fabled poetic legend of a patriarchal institution, and all that; but over and above the scene there broods a portentous shadow– the shadow of law” (50-51). Stowe ought to propose an alternative locus if she wants to sustain her claims. She does this by giving us two alternatives: one that is achieved through dying (Tom plot) and one by running away from bondage (Eliza plot). In both cases the return to the old locus is impossible and therefore the narrative presents a substitute. Eliza’s new locus is Canada and
Liberia; Tom’s new locus of innocence is heaven, which is ultimately more agreeable to Tom as he tells George that “Heaven is better than Kintuck” (UTC 590).

1.4 Black and white, but no grey

Juxtaposition is essential to melodrama, since melodramas depend upon stark contrast (Gerould 123). With regards to its moralizing theme, Uncle Tom’s Cabin presents a Manichaean way of thinking and a “logic of excluded middle” (Brooks 62). The Manichaean worldview is a way of looking at the world in terms of black and white. It means that characters and events can be labeled as either virtuous or villainous. The logic of the excluded middle is, according to Brooks, “the very logic of melodrama” (62). It is a Manichean polarization that is transferred into moral absolutes. Melodrama does not seek a middle ground, because the polarization is essential to prove its point. The logic of the excluded middle is a crucial characteristic in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. If Stowe chose to strike the golden mean, then she would let Tom return to the mild form of slavery in Kentucky. By doing so, the course of events would be entirely useless and her claim against slavery would be unsubstantial. Stowe needs to let her hero die to stress that his death is – on the one hand – a consequence of the evils of slavery, but on the other hand the victory of virtue over villainy.

1.5 The Home of Eden

The characters, thus, are instruments to express the ideology of the melodramatic plot. What they do is carry the emotional and moral teleology of the plot (Gerould 126). They are archetypical figures such as a father, mother, son, and daughter. The novel focuses on characters that are part of a family, for instance, the white middle-class or the African American mother. The slaves are never just slaves, but take up the roles of father, mother, uncle, and aunt. This is a clever way to humanize the African Americans. Mammy, for
instance, functions as a surrogate mother for Eva; she provides Eva with the love and care she misses from her biological mother. The slaves are part of the larger household family; they are “met within the family itself, within the realm of domestic feeling and intimacy which are the primary spheres of sentimental experience” (Fisher 101). The readers are introduced to the slaves in a family that is a safe haven where children experience their first emotions resulting in an emotional bond with their parents (especially the mother) and also with the slaves. This place offers the members a chance to escape the harshness of the outer world and protect the weakest ones from harm. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, chapters two and three confront the readers with two of the most important family members, namely “The Mother” and “The Husband and Father” (54-65). In contrast to readers’ expectations of being introduced to a white middle-class mother and father, they become acquainted with Eliza and George who are two slaves of African American descent.10

Thus, through emphasis on the stereotypical family roles melodrama places the concept of the home in the centre of attention:

The Edenic home and family, centring on the heroine as ‘angel in the house’ and the rural community of an earlier generation, animate images of past psychic and social well-being as ‘moral touchstones’ against the instabilities of capitalist expansion and retraction could be judged and in which both labourer and middle-class citizen could confront the hostilities of the modern world. (Gledhill 21)

All the elements that Gledhill mentions in her observation are distributed over three different narratives in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. “The Edenic home” refers to Tom’s Kentucky family, Little Eva takes up the role of “angel in the house”, and the “rural community of an earlier

10 In the novel, the African Americans are a father, a mother, a brother, or a sister, and at the same time they are attributed with childish features. Eliza is like a daughter to Mrs. Shelby, Rachel Halliday, and of course she is the biological daughter of Cassy. Moreover, Stowe often describes the slaves’ minds as simple, which leads readers to comprehend it as a statement that the African American race in general was uncivilized and more impressible. Due to this, Stowe has been placed next to “romantic racialists”, because they believe that African Americans are inferior to whites in political and social matters, but are superior when it comes to virtue and Christian values (Sundquist 32).
generation” is the Quaker home of Rachel Halliday. They are the “moral touchstones” that give a sense of security and morality in difficult times, for instance the slave system. The home and family of the middle-class citizen are symbolically charged with moral legibility (Gledhill 21). Additionally, Stowe’s restructuring of the middle-class home – with the dominant, emancipated matriarch as the head of the family – is linked to Stowe’s design to restructure the nation (Fisher 87). Her political intention to abolish slavery is inseparably intertwined with her desire to improve the position of women. She tries to liberate two oppressed groups from the dominant institution, by proposing a democratic, matriarchal household as model for the nation. I shall return to this point in chapter 3.

1.6 Victims are moral winners

The safe Kentucky family sphere – the locus of innocence – is broken up by the workings of the slave system, which brings about a long phase of suffering for Eliza and Tom. This breaking up draws attention to the weak position some of the characters find themselves in. The family sphere cannot protect them anymore; their position has shifted from family members to victims. Thomas Elsaesser argues that one of the typical features of melodramatic narratives is the concentration on “the point of view of the victim” (64). Victimization and suffering are the imperative means to recognize virtue; hence, victimization is linked with moral legibility (Williams “Md. Revised” 66). The muscular Tom that we have met in the beginning of the novel contrasts with the weak body that is beaten to death by Legree. Tom’s death scene is a confrontation between the oppressor and the oppressed or the master and his slave, but it is through the slave’s weak position and his suffering that virtue can be acknowledged.

In Uncle Tom’s Cabin the position in which we find ourselves is different from other works. Winfried Fluck claims that “the novel manages to transform us from an imaginary
participant in a conversation with the authorial voice – and thus from the position of a social equal – to the stance of a helpless onlooker” (326, 327). Thus, the shift to the victim’s point of view provokes a shift in the reader’s position. We are forced to leave our comfort zone (distance) and engage in the narrative by becoming eyewitnesses ourselves. The novel’s formal level, in fact, mirrors the characters’ victimization, since the readers’ victim position involves a subjection to the narrator’s authorial voice and puts them in direct emotional response to the victim’s woes (Fluck 327). However, to create a feeling of great intensity, Stowe had to transcend the limits of the novel. Fluck states that “sentimental texts want to eliminate aesthetic distance, but in order to achieve this, they first have to make us experience such distance as painful” (327). What he means, I think, is that by transforming the gap between reader and character into a painful experience, readers will automatically long to unite with the character in order to escape the pain. Melodramatic narratives strive to erase the distance that prevents readers from responding in – an affective way – to the character’s trials and tribulations.

1.7 Family matters

The expression of fundamental sentiments request a rendering of basic roles often found in the nuclear family, such as a father figure, mother, or an innocent child (Brooks 53). These are the characters that are the most liable to elicit our identification. Moreover, they function as symbols.¹¹ For instance, a stern father in a melodramatic narrative might symbolize the dominant patriarchal institution. The pressures of society are transmitted onto the nuclear family, which is the focus of the domestic melodramatic narrative¹², where they

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¹¹ The characters are archetypes of the family nucleus, representing basic functions (father, mother). Their psychology is reduced to a minimum, because they embody a function.

¹² There are different categories of melodramatic narratives ranging from western melodrama to domestic melodrama (Elsaesser 53-55). I will only focus on the domestic and family melodrama.
are resolved in the system of rewards and punishment. This means that melodrama works on a
fictional level, but for it to work on the realistic level – this is the world outside the text – it
ought to offer points of identification (Gledhill 37). As Christine Gledhill suggests,

melodrama balances between imagination and credibility, that is, if shifts occur in the realistic
criteria, melodrama is obliged to adjust itself in correspondence with the new criteria of
realism (37). Melodrama’s concern is to propose superior alternatives by uncovering the
hidden moral values; however, despite its urge to socially engage, it does not always succeed
to put pressure on the social structures of the world outside the narrative. What distinguishes
melodrama from other discourses – whether realistic, naturalistic, or modernist – is the desire
to push beyond a mere depiction or a psychological account of the world. Let me support my
claim by stating that the aim of realism, for instance, is achieving a truthful depiction of
reality. Melodrama relates to the real world in order to be recognisable to its witnesses, but its
aim is to let the stratagems work on both the imaginative and realist level (Gledhill 37).

1.8 The obscure, but glorious sacred

The main intention of melodrama, thus, is to describe a clear moral order, unearth it,
and establish a reconnection with the distant, glorious past (Gledhill 21). This is what Peter
Brooks calls – in his essay “The Melodramatic Imagination” – the “moral occult” (53). The
“moral occult” is:

[T]he domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and
masked by the surface of reality. The moral occult is not a metaphysical system;
it is rather the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred
myth. It bears comparison to unconscious mind, for it is a sphere of being where
our most basic desires and interdictions lie, a realm which in quotidian existence
may appear closed off from us, but which we must accede to since it is the realm
of meaning and value. The melodramatic mode in large measure exists to locate
and articulate the moral occult. (53)

Brooks points to a hidden presence of moral laws, which provide a different reading of the
world. This morality is only legible on a deeper level that Brooks compares to the condition
of the mind in its unconscious state. It is situated in and at the same time sealed off from everyday life; nevertheless, it is accessible, for instance through hyperbolic gestures and sententious speeches. The ethics, therefore, are present in a latent form, but it depends on the witness’ willingness to give voice to this understanding of morality. So, melodrama’s mission consists of a search for the moral and spiritual order, which is tied to the sacred (Brooks 53, Williams “Md. Revised” 52). ¹³

According to Brooks, to be able to get in touch with the hidden spiritual values – the moral occult, melodrama calls upon the melodramatic imagination (56). It is the way of looking at things, which is essential to compose anything melodramatic. The melodramatic imagination puts pressure on the surface of reality to make it yield the deeper meaning. This meaning can be found in the moral occult and it is pertinent to recover the values that have been latent. Thus, melodramatic imagination depends on both “document” and “vision” (Brooks 56). Document refers to the surface of reality, which simply is or exists, while vision signifies an idealistic hope of what should be or uncovers the underlying values.

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Little Eva functions as the personification of this moral occult. Her self-sacrifice is the symbol of compassion, humanity, and unselfishness, which are all qualities virtuous characters like Eva and Tom possess. She functions as the catalyst to get the members of her family in touch with the spiritual values. To Stowe dying involves a great spiritual cleansing, because “by dying even a child can be the instrument of redemption for others, since in death she acquires a spiritual power over those who loved her beyond what she possessed in life” (Tompkins 128). I would say that especially the children serve as the ultimate instrument of redemption, since they are the symbol of pure innocence. Along with the elderly, they are considered to be the weakest member of the family, but in contrast to the

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¹³ The “Sacred” refers to the sacred values represented by Church and Monarchy. The Enlightenment dismantled these sacred values; hence, Brooks calls it: “remnants of the sacred myth” (52, 60).
former they are yet untouched by corruption and, hence, thought to be in closer contact with
the spiritual values. Stowe stresses Eva’s exceptional status when she introduces Eva to her
readers:

Her form was the perfection of childish beauty, without its usual chubbiness
and squareness of outline. There was about it an undulating and aerial grace,
such as one might dream of for some mythic and allegorical being. […] The
shape of her head and the turn of her neck and bust was peculiarly noble, and
the long golden-brown hair that floated like a cloud around it, the deep spiritual
gravity of her violet blue eyes, shaded by heavy fringes of golden brown,— all
marked her out from other children […] Always dressed in white, she seemed
to move like a shadow through all sorts of places […] (UTC 230-231).

Stowe gives Eva unearthly features, which makes her more of an angel than a human being
(Tompkins 128). In fact, her grace is associated with a “mythic and allegorical being”;
furthermore, she is exceptionally beautiful and stands out from her peers. Her innocence is
emphasized through the whiteness of her clothes; consequently Eva is the embodiment of true
virtue. Eva’s description foreshadows her early death, as her grace is aerial and she moves
like a shadow. All these elements, on the one hand, suggest a sense of bodily fragility, but on
the other hand, they also imply a moral superiority.¹⁴

Eva is, thus, the one who reconnects others with the spiritual values, which are hidden
from reality.¹⁵ The miraculous change of Topsy is perhaps the best illustration of the power of
the moral occult. The uncontrollable, goblin-like girl only needs to be loved to transform into
another person and become a good Christian. The love, however, is a special kind of love;
namely motherly love. As Topsy never had a mother who cared about her, she does not know
how to behave in a proper way. Evangeline’s actions trigger Ophelia’s maternal instinct that
encourages her to open her whole heart to Topsy. By dying Eva takes the sins of the

¹⁴ Throughout the novel there is a link between, on the one hand, psychical strength and moral
weakness, and on the other hand, spiritual and moral strength, but psychical weakness. Tom’s
femininity suggests psychical weakness, but he is morally and spiritually superior to Legree
(who is psychically stronger, but morally weaker).
¹⁵ In Eliza’s story the Quaker matriarch Rachel Halliday personifies the values of the moral
occult (cf. Chapter 3).
bystanders onto herself (similar to the scapegoat mechanism) so that they can live the rest of their lives in the Christian spirit. The difference with Christ’s death is that Eva has chosen the role for herself; however, she aims for a similar result (to take away sins).

During the death scene Eva distributes locks of hair, which is one of the most moving moments in the novel so that “[i]t is impossible to describe […], as, with tears and sobs, they gathered round the little creature, and took from her hands what seemed to them a last mark of her love” (UTC 419). Tears are the response to a highly emotional event when words are failing. Jane Tompkins considers the tears in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as “the sign of redemption” (131), while Philip Fisher calls them the sign of passivity, since they show the witness’s inability to take action (108). But at the same time they show the bystander’s ability to feel as intensely as the victim. The only response that can be shown is one of deep compassion, which emphasizes the other’s helplessness. Williams argues that the tears in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are not merely a “passive wallowing in powerless tears”, weeping is “the agency of the recognition of virtue” (‘Leaping Fish’ 53). She clarifies her claim by referring to the power of tears that can forge a bond between a black mother (Chloe) and a white mother (Mrs. Shelby), thus performing an act of interracial sympathy (Williams, “Leaping Fish” 53). Although I concur with these arguments, I think that they are also the sign of a moral cleansing. Of course, this is a rather literal interpretation. The tears, I think, take the person’s sins with them so that the body and soul are purified. In the weeping moments the second group of witnesses (the readers) can relate to the characters’ feelings. On the formal and thematic level, thus, the one option is to respond with tears.

The tears’ symbolic value is reflected in each lock of hair, as it is a token of redemption, the recognition of virtue, and a memory of Eva’s love (Fisher 108). But the lock has yet another important role to play and its real significance is revealed when Simon Legree casts his eyes upon it:
‘Where did he get that hair? It couldn’t have been that! I burnt that up, I know I did! It would be a joke, if hair could rise from the dead!’ Ah, Legree! that golden tress was charmed; each hair had in it a spell of terror and remorse for thee, and was used by a mightier power to bind thy cruel hands from inflicting uttermost evil on the helpless (UTC 531, italics in original).

Apparently, the lock enfolds a double meaning, since besides redemption, Legree associates it with his own mother.16 The curl draws its strength from what it symbolizes, which is motherly love and virtue. This scene in the novel, I believe, signifies the turning point where, from now on, virtue turns out to be the stronger one. The narrator explicitly mentions that Legree will not be able to do any more harm. With regards to the melodramatic discourse, I would like to point out that this little piece of hair is the “hidden sign, […] which can have decisive significance for the denouement when it is correctly recognized in the final moments of the play” (Gerould 127). The thing, according to Gerould, “may bring about the restoration of a violated series of relationships” (127). This is precisely so in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Eliza and George arrive safely in Canada, Cassy and Emmeline succeed in their escape, and George Shelby travels to Legree’s plantation to buy Tom back. A true reunion takes place in Canada, where lost ones are found again. The only one who cannot be reunited with his family is Tom, but he will be united with the Lord.

1.9 Why Melodrama?

The perverse masochism, conservatism, one-dimensional characters, or unsatisfying resolutions are one way to define the melodramatic mode, but – here I agree with Linda Williams – in order to completely address the problems that are rooted in the American culture we ought to turn to the melodramatic form (“Md. Revised” 82). It is the by far the best way to approach a novel like Uncle Tom’s Cabin, which is so intensely rooted in nineteenth century politics and sentiments (religion, family etc.). Stowe’s interweaving of the position of

16 Eva, thus, is not only a mirror of her grandmother (Evangeline), but also of Legree’s mother, who represents the same values.
women, the struggles of African Americans to obtain a place in American society, and the radical powers of the Christian discourse make it difficult for us to fully grasp *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s importance as an American work of art (Sundquist 7). I suggest that we read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a melodramatic narrative; it gives Stowe the opportunity to depict the slaves as victims, and consequently elicit sympathy from white middle-class women. For Stowe, the melodramatic narrative was thus an ideal instrument to sustain her anti-abolitionist claim.
CHAPTER II

“[I]n the gates of eternity, the black hand and the white hold each other with an equal clasp” (UTC 456).

2. The blackness of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a cultural artefact that altered the cultural perceptions of African Americans. On the one hand, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is primarily a product of its time, but on the other hand it has outgrown its own time. Immediately upon its publication, a true Anti-and Pro-Tom culture emerged that resulted in stage and film adaptations, which in turn contributed to the novel’s status as a hypertext. I will not discuss the film productions; although, I will focus on one common similarity that the blackface minstrelsy and the novel share. Furthermore, I will discuss the techniques that Stowe utilized to humanize African Americans in general and her attempt to alter the white woman’s perception of the African American race. The consequence of the Tom culture entailed severe alterations to the original racial, social, and political nature of the text.

2.1 Representing African Americans

In Stowe’s own time *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* resisted the conventional attitude towards African Americans, but now the same arguments against unfair treatment are comprehended as portrayals of African American servility (Williams, “Leaping Fish” 46). In the debate about the racial portrayals in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* critics are frequently concerned with the question if Stowe saw African Americans as real human beings or just objects of sympathy? I do not attempt to provide an answer to this question; however, a discussion about race in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is inseparably linked to Stowe’s individual perception of African Americans. After all, Harriet Beecher Stowe aimed for the abolishment of slavery, which suggests that she had to create a different, human image of the African American. Let me start by pointing out that Stowe’s representations of African Americans are open to two potential
readings. On the one hand, readers may experience them as stereotypical and racist; or on the other hand, they may consider Stowe’s efforts a starting point for a different portrayal of Africans. The first point of view was taken by the African American writer James Baldwin, who opposed to the image of servility; Williams is one of the critics who adopts the second stance, discussing the importance of *Uncle Tom’s* cultural implications.

Stowe’s technique is highly visual and she states that “there is no arguing with pictures, and everybody is impressed by them, whether they mean to be or not” (Stowe qtd. in Sundquist 9, italics in original). Scenes like Eliza’s crossing or Tom’s beating are visually powerful; hence they are ideal to elicit sympathy from the onlookers:

> With one wild cry and flying leap, she vaulted sheer over the turbid current by the shore, on to the raft of ice beyond. It was a desperate leap—impossible to anything but madness and despair; and Haley, Sam, and Andy, instinctively cried out, and lifted up their hands, as she did it. (UTC 117-118)

This particular scene elicits “a high degree of feeling” from the onlookers; it brings about an “emotional shock” for the characters and readers (Gerould 121). The moment Eliza takes the leap and risks falling into the ice-cold river, Sam, Andy, and the slave trader Haley respond instinctively. Although they are too far to help Eliza, the act of lifting up their hands demonstrates their wish to assist Eliza. Arguably, at that moment Haley’s emotions reach their climax, enabling him to perceive Eliza as a human being and not as a slave. The emotions, thus, disable Haley’s rational sense; nevertheless, when she safely reached the river’s bank, the emotions settle down and Haley’s reason is in charge again.

Sundquist, however, refers to the disadvantage of such a highly visual strategy:

> “[Stowe] appeared willing to ignore a problem of which critics of sentimental literature had long been aware – that simple pictures are easily reduced to stereotypes” (10). For instance, Tom’s beating represents a highly docile slave who is obedient to his white master. His servile attitude was a confirmation of the common belief that African Americans were servile by nature; yet, this is not Stowe’s primary intention. The scene contrasts Tom’s moral
superiority with Legree’s depravity and draws a parallel with Christ’s crucifixion. Tom’s passiveness and resignation are obligatory to emphasize his virtue. Besides, Tom’s uncorrupted soul is highly valued, whereas the body and all material things are trivial. Stowe’s intention, thus, was hardly one of derision: nevertheless, the combination of one-dimensional characters and stereotype-like scenes were easily introduced in the minstrel show, leading (in the cheapest plays) to far-reaching distortions of the original characterization (Henderson 455).

Some critics attacked Stowe’s dichotomy of virtuous African Americans and villainous white males. Linda Williams points out that “the black and white, Manichaean stereotypes of melodrama need to be judged, not in relation to authentic and objective historical ‘truths’ apparent to all, but in relation to previous, and subsequent stereotypes” (“Leaping Fish” 65). She suggests that the melodramatic characters need to be seen in relation to previous melodramatic stereotypes. For instance, Uncle Tom’s Cabin introduced a reversal of the conventional perception of evil. The villain in melodramas used to be associated with blackness; evil “is a swarthy, cape-enveloped man with a deep voice” (Brooks 61). As Fluck notes, “blackness may have held connotations of various possibilities, but not that of genuine morality” (325). Thus, blackness was semantically tied with eroticism, passion, and evil, whereas virtuous characters were white females or men. Melodramatic characters “share the common function of revealing moral good in a world where virtue has become hard to read” (Williams, “Md. Revised” 54). So, when Stowe writes: “Tom, who had the soft, impressible nature of his kindly race, ever yearning toward the simple and childlike”, these features do not intend to stress his inferiority (although it is an affirmation of stereotypes) but they are primarily used to make virtue legible in a world of slavery (UTC 231). To bring forth white compassion, Stowe obliterated the sexual threat of African American males and assigned her African American characters the role of victims.
The portrayal of servile African Americans was not new; however, the reversal of victim and villain roles was. The passive, suffering Tom provoked a long, heated debate amongst African Americans who did not want to be associated with this idea (Yarborough 72). James Baldwin, for example, wrote one of the most disapproving reactions to Stowe’s bestseller and could hardly appreciate Stowe’s creation of Tom. For Baldwin, Tom’s emasculation was a sign of Stowe’s disrespect for the (male) African Americans (498). Additionally, the novel stimulated other African American authors such as Richard Wright to write their own accounts of slavery: “Black writers could not help but be convinced that if enough of the right ingredients were combined in the right proportions under the right conditions, they too could concoct deeply political novels that might tap the same mass audience that Stowe did and thereby shape the attitudes of whites toward the black minority in the United States” (Yarborough 72). These African American protest writers tried to elicit an equal amount of sympathy from white audiences. They did not completely imitate the strategies of Stowe’s book, however, they used some of Stowe’s character types to achieve their goal. After all, the white audiences now expected these characters to appear in the novels (Yarborough 72). Uncle Tom’s Cabin, thus, did not merely influence the stereotypical conventions, but was also seen as a standard for African American authors to write their own slavery protest novels.

Uncle Tom critics habitually refer to the absence of psychological depth concerning the characterization. In his essay “Strategies of Black Characterization” Richard Yarborough discusses Eliza Harris’ characterization and he argues that “[u]nfortunately, her maternal dedication and unshaken piety constitute virtually the entire range of her characterization; we see little real psychological depth or intellectual vigor” (51-52). Of course, this is a correct assessment of Eliza; however, Yarborough’s angle is modernist since he evaluates the features “psychological depth and intellectual vigor” as assets while an absence of these traits
is inseparably associated with literary ineptitude. I do not want to denigrate the modernist mode; I only want to point out that we cannot apply modernist standards onto works of art written in a melodramatic style. Thus, Eliza’s character that is devoid of psychological and intellectual depth embodies a clear function (the loving mother) as all melodramatic characters do. Eliza’s excessive motherly feelings for her son, Henry, are not out of place, but underline the melodramatic patterns and Stowe’s claim that motherly love can be a powerful instigator to bring about change.

2.2 Living apart together

In the debate about race in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, critics consider Stowe’s position problematic. The main issue is the novel’s ending where she decides to eventually emigrate the entire Harris family to Liberia, which insinuates she cannot picture the family – and African Americans in general – living in Canada or the United States. Discussers and opponents have to acknowledge, as Linda Williams points out that “the ‘happy’ ending of the novel posits the recovery of a racially pure ‘mother-home’ that challenges the law of paternity and the foregoing lessons of racial sympathy” (“Leaping Fish” 59). Stowe’s “racially pure ‘mother-home’”, on the one hand, undermines her plea to show interracial sympathy; on the other hand it defies the dominant ideology by posing matriarchs as the nation’s leaders (Williams, “Leaping Fish” 59). It seems that almost all her arguments founded on family and maternal love are also applied to realize her racially purified home.

The pictures that can easily be reduced to stereotypes and the unfortunate ending, for instance, lead critics, such as Eric Sundquist, to define Harriet Beecher Stowe as a romantic racialist (32). Romantic racialism was not uncommon among abolitionists:

Romantic racialism asserted the moral superiority of feeling over intellect, of affection, docility, and patience over Anglo-Saxon coldness, will, and impetuosity. It could be used to assert the moral – if not the intellectual – superiority of Negroes over Anglo-saxons. To argue for the humanity of slaves
on the basis of the Negro’s childlike, feminine innocence was obviously a two-edged sword, leading, on the one hand, to the assertion of permanent differences between blacks and whites, and, on the other hand, to the politically radical awakening to a common humanity before God. (Williams “Leaping Fish” 57)

Depicting African Americans as morally superior can work either way; it stresses the African American’s otherness, or it can be an effective strategy of humanization. Williams argues that the moral superiority might even be an intellectual superiority over whites. Arguably, romantic racialists did not believe that African Americans were intellectual superior to whites. They considered African Americans inferior to white males when it comes to political and social domains, but superior with regards to Christian values and the code of ethics (Sundquist 32).

Stowe; however, did not let northerners off the hook, as she deemed it their Christian duty to oppose to slavery in the South. During the discussion between St.Clare and his cousin Ophelia, he reprimands Ophelia: “We are the more obvious oppressors of the negro; but the unchristian prejudice of the north is an oppressor almost equally severe” (UTC 452, italics in original). Northerners feared interracial contact and condemned the mixing of races (Sundquist 33). In the novel Miss Ophelia is the character that expresses this fear, as she cannot bear to touch Topsy. She criticizes St.Clare’s indifference to the terrors of slavery; ironically, she is the one who is not capable to regard African American as humans. Ophelia, like the St.Clare slaves, learns by Eva’s example to open up her heart for Topsy and only then she can get through to the young girl. Educating Topsy could not be possible without feeling, because for Stowe, reason alone cannot achieve the same result like the love of a mother can. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was not merely an attack on the southern states, but also on the prejudices of the northern states.

Her most powerful assaults; nevertheless, were addressed to the southern states that favored a hierarchy based on the system of slavery. As Sundquist suggests: “Stowe’s novel, at
least from the southern point of view, appeared to assault not just slavery but the hierarchy of
the family and the economic structure of America itself, both of which could be seen (as
Fitzhugh suggested) as requiring differing forms of ‘enslavement’” (Fitzhugh qtd. in
Sundquist 31). People of the Southern states considered slaves as part of the family; the
amiable contact between the slaves and St.Clare is one example. The Southerners defended
slavery, because “[t]he relationship of master and slave in this system, the defense maintained
is a personal, even familial one” (Duvall 15). Slavery supporters agreed with Stowe’s
portrayal of Uncle Tom because they claimed that he was a result of the slave system; that
slavery had created him just like it can create brutal slaves (Yarborough 60). Although
southerners declare that there are many Toms in the South, Stowe’s Tom is highly
uncommon. He is devoid of selfishness, does not steal nor show any disrespect for his
masters, and is a true devout Christian.

Although Tom is treated well by Shelby and St. Clare; he, like every other African
American in captivity, prefers his freedom to bondage. Stowe has depicted Tom not as a
product of slavery, but as a result of Christian devotion. Tom’s education in the Christian
discourse and his decision to be a good Christian contribute to his virtue, preventing any form
of slavery to influence his character. In contrast to Tom, the slaves in the St.Clare household
are the product of a mild form of slavery; Stowe condemns this by representing the slaves as
disobedient children. Adolph imitates Augustine St.Clare and takes his master’s belongings
without consent. When St. Clare comes home, he notices that Adolph has taken one of his
belongings:

Seems to me, Dolph,’ [St. Clare] added, laying his finger on the elegant figured
satin vest that Adolph was sporting, ‘seems to me that’s *my* vest.’ ‘O! Master,
this vest all stained with wine; of course, a gentleman in Master’s standing
never wears a vest like this. I understood I was to take it. It does for a poor
nigger-fellow, like me.’ (UTC 256, italics in original)
Moreover, he tries to behave in the same manner his master does; however, he is not equally successful, and all his attempts come across as ridiculous. What Stowe intends, is not a denigrating, stereotypical depiction of the slave (although it is implied), but to stress that St.Clare has created Adolph. St.Clare’s negligence has given free rein to the slaves, which consequently turns them into spoiled children. Although, the slaves seem to be treated well, this mild form of slavery is still a part of the slave system. Augustine St.Clare, for instance, is responsible for Adolph’s behavior because he refrains from intervening; there are no strict rules to restrain Adolph. Not only Adolph or the other slaves are a product of the slave system, but presumably St.Clare as well.

Apart from the familial bond, southern slaveholders used another argument to defend the politics of slavery and therefore turned to the Bible. Southerners believed that God had ordained the inferiority of the African American race (Duvall 14). They supported their claim by pointing to the story of Noah and his three sons; it was regarded as conclusive proof to continue chattel slavery. Stowe introduces the religious pro-slavery argument in the novel; when a discussion is raised on the boat, a clergyman says: “It’s undoubtedly the intention of Providence that the African American race should be servants, —kept in a low condition” (UTC 200). An example of how pro-slavery southerners use the Scriptures to their advantage is the dinner-table scene at the St. Clare house. Marie St.Clare went to Church earlier that day and tells her husband about the minister’s sermon:

The text was, ‘He hath made everything beautiful in its season; and he showed how all orders and distinctions in society came from God; and that it was so appropriate, you know, and beautiful, that some should be high and some low, and that some were born to rule and some to serve, and all that, you know; and [Dr. G—] applied it so well to all this ridiculous fuss that is made about slavery, and he proved distinctly that the Bible was on our side, and supported all our institutions so convincingly. (UTC 279)

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17 Stowe refers to the story of Noah and Ham: “‘Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be’” (Gen. qtd. in UTC 200). Noah punished Ham for the lack of respect he had shown his father. Ham and his offspring were ordained to serve Noah’s other two sons.
St. Clare refutes the idea that the Bible – his “mother’s book” – would justify slavery (UTC 280, italics in original). Both sides, thus, can use the Bible for their cause; however, values like humanity and sympathy are contrary to the practice of slavery. After all, the Christian set of beliefs preach reciprocal love, such as the phrase “love thy neighbor”, which implies just treatment for every person.

2.3 Taking the other’s identity

Playwrights who turned the novel into theatrical adaptations made use of Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s melodramatic features, for instance the crossing of the river Jordan was very popular with playwrights. I will; however, not provide a discussion of the entire theatrical production regarding Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Rather – after the example of Linda Williams, – I will concentrate on one aspect (interracial identity) of one theatrical genre that expressed the cross-racial attitudes in the American society. The novel was introduced into the tradition of the minstrel shows, more precisely the blackface minstrelsy. Discussers of the novel have viewed the minstrel shows from different standpoints: either they regard them as damaging to the book’s original voice or they follow a nuanced perspective that favors a dialogue between the shows’ and the novel’s depiction of African Americans. Eric Sundquist leans towards the former, since he concludes that the minstrel adaptations of Uncle Tom’s Cabin repress the novel’s powerful devastating judgment on America’s continuous offense against humanity (5-6). In contrast to Sundquist, Williams, who prefers the latter perspective, argues that we should read Uncle Tom’s Cabin in relation to the tradition of the blackface minstrelsy, because it would enable us to understand the immense power of Uncle Tom in the American culture (“Leaping Fish” 46). In addition, she argues that Uncle Tom’s Cabin should be read as a racial melodrama that altered the public’s perception of African American slaves (Williams, “Leaping Fish” 46).
The blackface minstrelsy was a product of white patriarchal superiority over the African American community, whereas Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was written from a domestic female abolitionist angle (Williams, “Leaping Fish” 65). Additionally, the confrontation between the patriarchal and matriarchal approach included a conjunction of two distinct genres: the blackface minstrelsy that presented a mode of ridicule, and the novel that displayed a melodramatic, sentimental mode (Williams, “Leaping Fish” 70). They both use similar means to accomplish their goal, which is either a derisive or sympathetic image of African Americans. The first mode ridicules African Americans in order to stress the white male supremacy; however, to realize this, white actors had to present the audience with typical features of African Americans. Paradoxically, the act of stressing the differences between white males and the African American race led to a closer contact between the two groups (Williams, “Leaping Fish” 70). As Williams notes, by means of the blackface minstrelsy whites perform an act of identity stealing; they take the identity of the African American race (“Leaping Fish” 70). Thus, in minstrel shows African Americans are seen as objects of entertainment, but in order to achieve a successful recognizable portrayal of African Americans it is imperative that an exchange of identity occurs. Linda Williams suggests that:

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s crossracial sympathies are certainly one form of blackface ‘love and theft.’ Speaking for the freedom of slaves, she says things she could not say in her own voice speaking for the freedom of women. Just as the white, male, working-class minstrels used blackface to escape constrictions of the Protestant ethic, so Stowe’s empathic picture of the suffering black slave permitted her own escape from the impasse of an elite Protestant perfectionism into a more democratic vision of ‘life among the lowly.’ (“Leaping Fish” 70)

Williams suggests that the blackface and Stowe’s book both tried to escape the principles, such as the code of ethics or the discrepancy between reality and beliefs, of the Protestant religion. Stowe tried to escape the contradiction between the Declaration and slavery; however, Elsaesser concludes that melodramas depend on a “radical ambiguity”, which
means that they seem to function as either escapist or subversive (47). Furthermore, he notes that these categories should be interpreted in relation to the historical and social background (Elsaesser 47). *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a socially committed melodrama, addressing issues such as slavery and domesticity, which makes it a subversive novel rather than escapist.\(^{18}\) Stowe’s sympathetic mode performs a strategy of altering the position of (white and African American) men and women. For instance, Cassy, George, and Eliza Harris can all pass as white. They actually take on different identities: Cassy dresses up as a Creole Spanish lady, Eliza cross-dresses as a man, and George as a Spanish gentleman. Cassy and Eliza are oppressed as slaves and as women, which means they are oppressed twice. By giving them the action plotline, Stowe makes two statements: one claim against chattel slavery and another against the inferior position of – white and African American – women. So, her efforts to humanize African Americans include a strong plea to ameliorate the position of women. The example of George Harris is perhaps more apt to illustrate the identity switching:

> [The small one-horse buggy] had a genteel appearance, and a well-dressed, gentlemanly man sat on the seat, with a colored servant driving. The whole party examined the new comer with the interest with which a set of loafers in a rainy day usually examine every newcomer. He was very tall, with a dark, Spanish complexion, fine, expressive black eyes, and close-curling hair, also of a glossy blackness. His well-formed aquiline nose, straight thin lips, and the admirable contour of his finely-formed limbs, impressed the whole company instantly with the idea of something uncommon. He walked easily in among the company [...]. (UTC 180)

Stowe shrewdly dallies the moment when the stranger’s true identity will be revealed. Her description deceives the men in the tavern into thinking a Spanish gentlemen has arrived. Furthermore, the stranger appears to be acquainted with the etiquette as he easily walks into the tavern. Thus, George hides his own identity to replace it with another one that lets him pass as a free man. As the plot unfolds, George encounters an old acquaintance, Mr. Wilson, who remarks that George “hold[s] up [his] head, and speak[s] and move[s] like another man”

\(^{18}\) In chapter III I discuss how Stowe links morality to motherhood, and how she propagates a domestic household.
(UTC 189). George’s declaration is a highly empathic speech, moving Wilson to tears. He addresses the injustice being done to his race, the laws that do not apply for African Americans, and the wish of finding a country (Canada), which laws he will obey. The two have a discussion about George’s escape and George can persuade Mr. Wilson to sympathize with his situation: “‘Yes, certainly poor fellow!’ said the old gentleman, taking the pin, with watery eyes, and a melancholy quiver in his voice” (UTC 191).

Harriet Beecher Stowe uses the switching of identities not to ridicule African Americans like the minstrel shows did, but to force readers to sympathize with the African Americans. The concept of taking someone’s identity is a means for Stowe to create a more human representation of the oppressed. However, cheap dramatizations have maimed the authenticity of many Uncle Tom characters, especially Tom (Henderson 455). Although some of these adaptations have permanently damaged the image of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, they illustrate how the audience has introduced the book into the society. Discussing Uncle Tom’s Cabin inevitably asks for a larger socio-cultural context, since this novel has grown into a hypertext that changed the social, cultural, and political scene of the U.S.

2.4 African Americans as victim-heroes

What made Uncle Tom’s Cabin stand out from contemporary works of art was its African American victim hero. Williams points out that “a remarkable reversal of [the victim-hero whose virtue was visible in bodily signs] occurred in the forging of a new type of victim-hero in the swarthy complexion of Uncle Tom, whose blackness flew in the face of previous conventions of good and evil” (“Md. Revised” 78). As I have argued Uncle Tom’s Cabin, villainy was connected with the dark color of African Americans, making villainy recognizable by one’s appearance. Traditionally, the black exotic skin color involved a sexual threat for especially white women (Williams, “Md. Black and White” 17). Stowe obliterates
this sexual threat by emasculating her hero and placing him in a strong family sphere.\(^\text{19}\)

Moreover, she appoints him as the primary witness of Evangeline’s suffering without even implying the possibility of sexual threat (Williams, “Leaping Fish” 46).

Stowe’s most revolutionary accomplishment is making George Shelby the chief witness of Tom’s suffering, which entails that the white male’s tears are the recognition of African American virtue. Stowe uses the same idea but shrewdly changes the arrangement: Tom replaces Eva while George Shelby now becomes the onlooker (Williams, “Leaping Fish” 48). By means of the mirroring technique Stowe endeavors to elicit a compassionate response of her readers to Eva’s afflictions and hence tricks her readers into an identical emotional response to Tom’s suffering. The core of those two scenes is their representation of interracial philia and by doing so, the position of the African American is modified: “African (Americans) whose primary depiction in popular American culture had previously been as objects of fun, suddenly became, in and through this work, new objects of sympathy by whites” (Williams “Leaping Fish 48).

2.5 Man as woman, woman as man

Tom’s femininity has always been a well-discussed topic in the course of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s criticism, whether it was regarded as an effective technique to humanize African Americans or as a stereotypical portrayal of African American servility. However, the masculine features of the light-skinned African American women – Eliza and Cassy – have been ignored frequently. Linda Williams states that “[i]f what I have been calling the bondage story enacted by a black man is the passive acceptance of suffering on the model of Christ, the escape story enacted by women represents a much overlooked active resistance to bondage” (“Leaping Fish” 63). The two quadroon women are given real active power by Stowe to

\(^{19}\) In chapter I, I have argued that African Americans take up paternal roles such as mother and father.
escape their white masters and at the same time both save a child from slavery. So, while Tom opts for passive resistance, Cassy and Eliza actively oppose their white masters.

To escape their bondage the two quadroon women devise an ingenious plan, that is, they cover up their femininity and skin color so that they will not be recognized as slave women. Eliza cross-dresses as a man while her son Henry is dressed up like a girl. Her masculine features are now not merely expressed by means of her actions but also shown by her physical appearance. By means of her cross-dressing she shows who she really is, that is, a strong, powerful woman. Her manly appearance is principally witnessed by George Harris who recognizes her active resistance: “‘Well, indeed,’ said George, holding her off at arm’s length, and looking admiringly at her, ‘you are a pretty little fellow. That crop of little, short curls, is quite becoming. Put on your cap. So—a little to one side. I never saw you look quite so pretty’” (546). Stowe has italicized the word “are” and by doing so, she portrays Eliza as an active insurgent of chattel slavery. Nevertheless, her resistance stems from her maternal feelings for Henry; the danger of losing her son forces her to act. Therefore, maternity in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is linked to active resistance.²⁰

Stowe lets Cassy, the other quadroon woman, carry out a similar act to Eliza’s escape, applying the mirroring technique yet again (Williams, “Leaping Fish” 64). After Cassy has taken advantage of Legree’s superstition, she sets up a pseudo escape where she and Emmeline run away into the night, but deceive the dogs by returning to the mansion and hide in the garret. When Cassy senses that the time is right she and Emmeline are able to escape the place unnoticed, because they have covered themselves with white sheets: “By a singular coincidence, on the very night that this vision appeared to Legree, the house-door was found open in the morning, and some of the negroes had seen two white figures gliding down the avenue towards the high-road” (597, my emphasis). These white sheets transform them into

²⁰ I refer to chapter III where the *Uncle Tom’s* subversiveness is represented by the matriarchal Quaker settlement.
ghosts so that they can hide their bodily appearance and can mask their African American
descent. Crucial to melodrama is that “it demonstrates over and over that the signs of ethical
forces can be discovered and can be made legible” (Brooks 64). Melodrama’s desire to make
morality visible also applies to racial issues, since melodramatic narratives uncover the one-
drop of African American blood (Williams, “Md. Black and White” 14). As Williams
suggests, the racial legibility in melodramas is seen as an absolute polarization between
virtuous and villainous: the one drop of black blood can either be a sign of villainy (sexual
threat) or of virtue (victim of white abuse) (“Md. Black and White” 14-15). In the book,
Stowe portrays her main African American characters as virtuous, while the mischievous ones
– such as Topsy or Sambo – can achieve redemption through the novel’s saintly figures.

Although both Cassy and Emmeline are very light-skinned, the melodramatic mode
makes their one-drop of black blood visible; however, when Cassy and Emmeline put on
white sheets, they hide their African American origins. Instead of making the drop visible,
they perform an act of whitewashing their blackness. Thus, by means of hiding their roots,
Cassy and Emmeline can escape their bondage, since they pass for whites. Stowe’s depiction
of Eliza and Cassy is in fact deeply revolutionary, since they defy the conventional portrayal
of submissive – African American – women. When we look at Stowe’s presentation of the
white mothers we can see a clear distinction between these white women and the African
American women. The white women derive their power from the domestic sphere by means
of subtly influencing their husbands (passive action), while the African American women
draw their strength from their acting (active action).\(^{21}\)

\(^{21}\) This also includes Chloe and Dinah, who are the darker skinned African American women.
Chloe actively contributes to free Tom; that is to say, she goes to work to earn money so that
she could buy Tom from Legree.
2.6 The portrayal of the African American

The flat characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* can easily be caricaturized, which happened when playwrights adapted the novel for the stage. As Williams suggests, Stowe’s book and the blackface minstrelsy apply similar strategies. I have limited the discussion to the technique of identity switching that enhances a closer contact with the other race.

Additionally, Stowe has depicted her main characters as victim-heroes in contrast to the traditional point of view. She obliterated the sexual threat and let her characters perform an act of interracial sympathy. Besides the identity switching and interracial sympathy, the novel includes the reversal of gender roles, presenting light-skinned women, such as Eliza and Cassy, who actively resist their bondage, while the dark-skinned Tom accepts his fate. With *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* Stowe resists the conventions to confront her white readers with morally virtuous African American characters.
CHAPTER III

“There stood by him ONE,—seen by him alone,—‘like unto the Son of God’” (UTC 583).

3. Living the Christian life

Uncle Tom’s Cabin can be seen as a religious product because of the considerable influence of Christianity; hence, this chapter will deal at large with the Christian discourse.

My starting point is Jane Tompkins’s claim that the novel does not merely echo the radical powers of Christianity, but that “it rewrites the Bible as the story of a Negro slave” (Tompkins 134). She argues that the typological dimension of the novel creates its own powerful theory to overthrow the slave system. I will corroborate Tompkins’s argument by paying close attention to Stowe’s use of Christian religion and how she attempts to make a radical claim (freeing of slaves and women) by holding on to such a conservative framework (Christianity). While discussing the Christian implications I rely on the work of critics such as Winfried Fluck, Elizabeth Ammons, and Jane Tompkins.

3.1 The power of the Bible

Religions like Christianity or the Islam represent a sense of timelessness. They propagate an eschatological idea that “by putting all individual events in relation to an order that is unchanging, collapses the distinctions among them so that they become interchangeable representations of a single timeless reality” (Tompkins 134). This allows Stowe to apply biblical events onto her own time and situation while preserving and emphasizing its value. Moreover, by doing so she inseparably links the occurrences in the novel with the Bible, which enables her to derive authority from the Bible and transmit this authority onto her novel. One such illustration is Eliza’s crossing of the Ohio River that is compared to the crossing of the river Jordan. When Eliza arrives at the village we read that “[h]er first glance was at the river, which lay, like Jordan, between her and the Canaan of
liberty on the other side” (UTC 107). This is repeated by Sam who says that “‘she’s clar cross Jordan. As a body may say, in the land o’ Canaan’” and Mrs. Shelby’s contemplation that the crossing is “rather apocryphal” (UTC 133-134). The grandeur of the biblical crossing of the Jordan is bestowed on Eliza’s crossing of the Ohio River, which makes her ordeal and the following success look like a biblical miracle.

The power of drawing on Christian analogies is that it “provides a new stability to the semantic fields of the novel which have been destabilized by the extended melodramatic discourse” (Fluck 331). I agree with Fluck, that the melodramatic plot patterns in the book have altered the semantic meaning of white and African American (331). The white males are now seen as the personifications of villainy, whereas pure blackness is linked with real virtue. By means of associating them with well-known Christian images such as Heaven and Hell, readers could get a grip on the altered meanings. In this way, the never changing Christian concepts acted as a frame in order to place white and blackness in the right moral context. Tom cannot part from his Bible; this constant presence of the Bible emphasizes his virtue, which in turn rules out the presence of any malice.

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* there is an abundance of references to the Bible, Christian imagery, and entire biblical passages are quoted. Stowe’s strategy of letting her characters read the Bible, interpret it literally, and apply it to their lives is her way of instructing the readers. For Stowe, the only way of reading the Bible is in a literal manner; there are no hidden meanings (Tompkins 136-137). Let me illustrate this by referring to the passage where Eva and Tom sit together at Lake Pontchartrain:

It is now one of those intensely golden sunsets which kindles the whole horizon into one blaze of glory, and makes the water another sky. The lake lay in rosy or golden streaks, save where whit-winged vessels glided hither and thither, like so many spirits, and little golden stars twinkled through the glow, and looked down at themselves as they trembled in the water. […] She read, – ‘And I saw a sea of glass, mingled with fire.’ ‘Tom,’ said Eva, suddenly stopping, and pointing to the lake, ‘there ’t is.’ ‘What Miss Eva?’ ‘Don’t you see,—there?’ said the child, pointing to the glassy water, which, as it rose and
fell, reflected the golden glow of the sky. ‘There’s a’sea of glass, mingled with fire.’ (UTC 381)

Together with Tom she reads a passage from the Bible and she literally translates the stories, descriptions, and settings to the reality. Eva gets to see a glimpse of her future home, which is heaven, while the lake is the frontier between earth and heaven.

Jane Tompkins argues that the novel is subject to a high schematization; she states that “every character in the novel, every scene, and every incident, comes to be apprehended in terms of every other character, scene, and incident: all are caught up in a system of endless cross-references in which it is impossible to refer to one without referring to all the rest” (136). I will clarify this by referring to a passage in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The moment St. Clare and Tom read the passage of the last judgement reminds us of Eva and Tom’s reading of the Bible at Lake Pontchartrain:

‘Then shall the king say unto him on his left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire: for I was an hungered, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, an (sic) ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: I was sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they answer unto Him, Lord when saw we thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he say unto them, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of these my brethren, ye did it not to me.’ St. Clare seemed struck with this last passage, for he read it twice,–the second time slowly, and as if he were revolving the words in his mind. ‘Tom,’ he said, ‘these folks that get such hard measure seem to have been doing just what I have,–living good, easy, respectable lives, and not troubling themselves to inquire how many of their brethren were hungry or athirst, or sick, or in prison.’ (UTC 448)

The two scenes are echoes of each other, that is, Eva reads something and then she literally sees it; St. Clare reads the last judgment and applies it to his life. For both the scene initiates a period of conversion – whether it is St. Clare’s own conversion or Eva converting Topsy – that culminates in their death.²²

²² Eva’s death is the cause for St-Clare’s conversion; so Eva is the one who converts others, while St-Clare and Topsy are the converts.
I believe that this moment can be seen as St. Clare’s revelation. The passage allows him to reconnect with his mother and mend his ways. St. Clare’s sin is negligence; he is reluctant to free his slaves because he also needs them to live his carefree life. This is why eventually St. Clare did not free Tom. His negligence to sign the papers comes from on the one hand, the belief that one person cannot change the system; and on the other hand, a selfish desire to keep Tom around after Eva’s death. He claims that the slaves are not educated enough to use the rights of liberty. St. Clare’s passive attitude is maintained by his skepticism towards Christian education and Christianity at large. In fact, to prove his point he presents Ophelia with Topsy so she could educate the little slave. He says to his cousin: “You’re [Ophelia] always preaching about educating. I thought I would make you a present of a fresh-caught specimen, and let you try your hand on her, and bring her up in the way she should go” (UTC 353). In the end, it is Eva who converts Topsy and her father.

The Christian religion guides St. Clare to actively do something; his decision to act, however, immediately brings about his death. This comes across as a contradiction; since Stowe lets her character change for the better, but does not permit him to carry it further than the one single action when he intervenes in a tavern brawl. Perhaps Stowe’s decision to let him die – and here I agree with Philip Fisher – is based on the fact that “[i]mpulsive action and deep passivity are one and the same, both lie on either side of the effective knowing and acting” (104). St. Clare’s action stems from his feelings of guilt about his passive attitude towards the slave system and Eva’s death. Stowe’s statement that effective action can only start with the feeling of true empathy – the ultimate act of empathy is self-sacrifice – is inseparably connected with the Christian belief that the weakest save the powerful. In Uncle Tom’s Cabin only women, children and African Americans possess a close connection with their feelings and more importantly with feeling in the right way.
3.2 Tom as the African American Christ

The principal idea of Christendom is the sacrifice of Christ, who is crucified in order to save humanity from its downfall. This is where I point to Tompkins’s claim that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* repeats the crucifixion of Christ, but the protagonist is a slave of African American descent (134). Both Christ and Tom are at the lowest rung of the hierarchy, one is taken prisoner, while the other is a slave. Although they are the victims and thus the ones without any authorized power, their deaths redeem the ones who are in power. Paradoxically, the powerless become the powerful by saving the oppressors’ souls (Tompkins 128). Tom’s final moments leave such a deep impression on the overseers Sambo and Quimbo that they long to know more about Christ:

They washed his wounds,—they provided a rude bed, of some refuse cotton, for him to lie down on; and one of them, stealing up to the house, begged a drink of brandy of Legree, pretending that he was tired, and wanted it for himself. He bought it back, and poured it down Tom’s throat. ‘O, Tom!’ said Quimbo, ‘we’s been awful wicked to ye!’ ‘I forgive ye, with all my heart!’ said Tom, faintly. ‘O, Tom! do tell us who is Jesus, anyhow?’ said Sambo; ‘—Jesus, that’s been a standin’ by you so, all this night!—Who is he?’ The word roused the failing, fainting spirit. He poured forth a few energetic sentences of that wondrous One,—his life, is death, his everlasting presence, and power to save. They wept,—both the two savage men. ‘Why didn’t I never hear this before?’ said Sambo; ‘but I do believe!—I can’t help it! Lord Jesus, have mercy on us!’ ‘Poor critters!’ said Tom, ‘I’d be willing to bar’ all I have, if it’ll only bring ye to Christ! O, Lord! Give me these two more souls, I pray!’ That prayer was answered! (UTC 584-585)

Sambo and Quimbo are, in addition to the readers, the witnesses of Tom’s suffering. By taking care of Tom’s wounds, and by weeping they recognize virtue. Even in his last moments Tom educates them in the Christian doctrine and tries to save the souls of these two slaves. In contrast to their powerful position as overseers, Sambo and Quimbo are now pushed into the roles of the powerless. They can only weep, which in melodramas is a sign of powerlessness (Fisher 108). Tom’s death compels Sambo and Quimbo to respond affectively, that is to say, to feel with their hearts and feel the difference between right and wrong. This is crucial to melodramatic narratives, because their goal is to make characters and readers feel
the distinction between good and evil. Although Tom is physically the weaker one, he can influence the two heathenish slaves by educating them about Jesus Christ. Their outcry for mercy stimulates Tom to save their souls; hence he acts as a mediator to redeem the ones who have gone astray.

3.3 Christian shepherds

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* the mothers, children, and African Americans are the three groups that can be regarded as the oppressed, but they are also the ones who are deeply influenced by Christianity. Stowe gives voice to each of these groups by choosing for each group a representative that defies the dominance of the slave system. Rachel Halliday is the exemplary mother, Eva represents the children, and Tom exemplifies the African American race. Each of them act as guides; they are the truly virtuous that are capable of converting the others. Sundquist argues that “the influence of women in the novel is largely restricted to the ‘women’s sphere’ of Christian example and moral instruction”, but I would include the other two groups as well (22). On the one hand, we have Eva and Tom – the paradigms of virtue – who rather literally carry out the Christian doctrine by sacrificing themselves. In addition, they continue to instruct others in moral values until the very last moment of their lives. On the other hand, we have the oppressors – the white men – who turn to the founding fathers to sustain their control over the others:

[They] appealed to the founding fathers, whose views on slavery embodied in the Constitution (despite the vision of equality announced in the Declaration of Independence) were ambiguous, open to both proslavery and antislavery interpretation. In doing so, they conceived of America as a social family presided over by benevolent fathers, one in which an inevitably hierarchical structure of white men ruling over women, blacks, and children was the norm. (Sundquist 19)

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23 The exception is Legree (the villain) who, in accordance with the melodramatic conventions, cannot be converted.
Thus, in the novel there seems to be a dichotomy between the male oppressors, who support their actions via law and the founding fathers and the three oppressed groups that rely on morality and the principles of Christian ideology.

3.4 When mothers guide their children to the light

The women, who are represented by the Quaker matriarch Rachel Halliday, are moral guides in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In “The Quaker Settlement” it becomes obvious that the maternal domestic household functions as Stowe’s role for the re-organization of the American nation: “This, indeed, was a home,—*home*,—a word that George had never yet known a meaning for; and a belief in God, and trust in his providence, began to encircle his heart” (UTC 224, italics in original). Stowe prefers the Quaker settlement to the Shelby plantation as the setting of a heaven on earth while the head of this earthly heaven is a woman (Fisher 112, Tompkins 142). This woman is Rachel Halliday, who is the universal, national matriarch: “‘My daughter’ came naturally from the lips of Rachel Halliday; for hers was just the face and from that made ‘mother’ seem the most natural word in the world” (UTC 216). Rachel, as the universal mother, symbolizes the concept of motherhood and motherly love; moreover, this domestic household is an incarnation of the Christian values. Crane points out that “Rachel’s rule represents a kind of natural law ideal where the rule of law is always respected because it is identical with the dictates of conscience” (191). Therefore, transgression will not easily occur since the laws in the Quaker settlement arise from the spirit of morality; so these laws are moral laws.

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24 Not every mother that is portrayed in the novel is a good, Christian mother. Marie St. Clare might be Eva’s biological mother, but she lacks the two crucial characteristics, empathy and selfishness that a mother should have. Marie does not have the natural maternal instinct, which prevents her from taking care of Eva. Eva’s real mother (in terms of maternal love) is the African American slave, Mammy. Moreover, Marie belongs to the old aristocratic order and is a Roman Catholic, which is associated with the older, decaying order (melodrama is the mode of the middle-class).
Like Eva in the Tom plot, Rachel embodies the “moral occult”; she expresses the “basic ‘laws of morality’” (Brooks 53, Gerould 123). All the moral values are derived from the Quaker matriarch:

Her hair, partially silvered by age, was parted smoothly back from a high placid forehead, on which time had written no inscription, except peace on earth, good will to men, and beneath shone a large pair of clear, honest, loving brown eyes; you only needed to look straight into them, to feel that you saw to the bottom of a heart as good and true as ever throbbed in a woman’s bosom. (UTC 215)

The Quaker settlement is Stowe’s utopia; it is set up as a temporary substitute for the old locus of innocence. Christianity is connected with the values of pacifism, humanity, and selfishness, and the Quaker home animates this atmosphere of absolute, eternal truths. The Quaker household (image of the Home) reintroduces the code of ethics to a desacralized world. As Williams suggests, “[i]n a postsacred world, melodrama represents one of the most significant, and deeply symptomatic, ways in which we negotiate moral feeling” (“Md. Revised” 61). The settlement acts as a sanctuary for the Harris family that stimulates George to truly feel the empathy and humanity.

Stowe’s idea of mothers ruling the nation is subversive, because it challenges the dominant patriarchal institution. In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the main action arises from women: “Women help each other for the same reason that slaves do: the male ruling class can hardly be counted on to keep the interests of those outside their ranks in mind. It is the women and the slaves, if anyone, who care” (Douglas 19). Mrs. Shelby, by means of her slaves, helps Eliza by stalling Haley and preventing him from capturing the runaways. The real clash is now between Haley and Mrs. Shelby, because Mr. Shelby has signed the contract and therefore he ought to assist Haley in recapturing Eliza (Hada 180). Mrs. Shelby responds with empathy to Eliza’s situation and takes action, because she deeply cares about Eliza. Her husband lacks the maternal empathy, which is illustrated first, by his decision to sell Tom and Henry, and second, by his passive attitude during the chase after Eliza. Shelby’s concern is to
pay off his debts; however, in the end Mrs. Shelby and George settle the debts. Empathy, thus, appears to be more effective than Shelby’s rational course of action.

With regards to the St. Clare plantation we draw a parallel with the Shelby plantation. After St. Clare’s death (like Shelby) the slaves are to be sold at an auction, because (unlike the Shelby plantation) there is no one left who cares enough to free the slaves. Marie does not care, and Ophelia is powerless. St. Clare and Shelby seem to be guiltier of the horrors of the slave trade than the slave trader. Although they are intellectually superior to slave trader, they do nothing to subvert the slave system. Stowe explicitly states: “Who is the most to blame? The enlightened, cultivated, intelligent man, who supports the slave system of which the trader is the inevitable result, or the poor trader himself?” (UTC 212). Ironically, the “respectable” slave owners, who despise the inhumanity of the slave traders, are responsible for the creation of slave traders like Haley. Although St. Clare and Mr. Shelby are not entirely blameless, the narrative does not consider them as the villains. Legree, on the other hand, is the true villain, since he abuses slaves to make profits. In contrast to Shelby and St. Clare, he has not one shred of humanity in him. However, through their active participation in the slave trade (buying and selling of slaves), they maintain the slave system. Kentucky and Louisiana may be mild forms of slavery; they are still part of the slave system, which separates families. The three slave owners lack the motherly love and the Christian values to subvert the system; that part is assigned to the women (and Tom), who do possess these two qualities.

The combination of Christian love with motherhood works well, because they both sustain one another. They both depend on the ability to feel sympathy. Thus, womanhood or motherhood relies on the Christian ideals such as hope, charity, empathy, and self-sacrifice, while Christianity – according to Stowe – depends strongly on the women as its evangelists (Ammons, “Heroines” 170). Hence, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* the women are important characters since they do have real power, that is, through empathy there can be change – at
least that is what the novel tries to uphold. Elizabeth Ammons has convincingly shown that
Stowe has feminized Tom; she has turned him into a heroine by providing him with feminine
features (“Heroines”162). Stowe gives him a “gentle, domestic heart” and “a voice as tender
as a woman’s” (UTC 164, 172; Ammons, “Heroines” 170). Tom is one of the only men in the
novel that is able to feel motherly love and let his actions be defined by it:26

Tom can even forgive Shelby and continue to love the cruel man he cared for
from infancy, much (Stowe implies) as Christ forgave his oppressors or a
mother can continue to love the grown child who breaks her heart. The reason
Stowe gives for such amazingly generous behavior is simple. Tom, like most
women but few men in the novel, really tries to live according to the Gospel’s
injunction to love his neighbor as himself. (Ammons, “Heroines” 170)

As a mother hen he watches over the other slaves whether they belong to his own family or to
the slave population on Legree’s plantation. In fact, he never gives in to cruelty even if Legree
presses him to flog Cassy. He refuses each time and tells Legree that “‘t would be downright
cruel, and it’s what I never will do, nor begin to. Mas’r if you mean to kill me, kill me; but, as
to my raising my hand agin any one here, I never shall,—I’ll die first” (UTC 508). This it
almost a prediction of what will eventually happen to Tom, since he will protect Cassy by
sacrificing his own life. His passive resistance is powerful enough to defeat the villain who
represents the slave system; consequently virtue is more powerful than the corruptive slave
system. Therefore, I think that Tom’s femininity supports Tompkins’s statement that Stowe’s
aspiration was that America would be governed by Christian love and by women, whom she
considered God’s missionaries (Tompkins 141).

25 In chapter II I deal with the aspect of gender-crossing.
26 Tom is not the only character who is feminized; St-Clare is described as “a graceful,
elegantly-formed young man” (UTC 234) But in contrast to Tom, St-Clare is negligent and
that prevents him from truly opposing to the slave system.
3.5 Can religion bring about change?

The Christian analogies are moral instructions for the readers to strive for a more democratic society in which African Americans and women could break free from the white male oppression. Sundquist argues that “Stowe’s novel is itself revolutionary in demanding that the sacred and secular realms be reunited, that the role of God be reinserted into an American political system that paid lip service to Christian ideals and constantly invoked them in its discourse but failed to act upon them seriously” (6). Apart from its subversive domesticity, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* propagated a fusion of Christianity and politics, leading to a nation that would live up to the Christian principles and would reshape its political structure accordingly.

Stowe believed that religious conversion was powerful enough to bring about historical change (Tompkins 133). Eliza, for instance, is one of the few African American women, who is a devout Christian without skepticism. She tries to convert her husband, George Harris, to Christianity so that he experiences a change of heart. The solidarity and the compassion he experiences in the Quaker settlement open George’s heart to his wife’s religion. This change of heart is the foundation to alter a nation. In Montreal, George educates himself, which makes him capable of attending university in France. This combination of education and feeling rightly enables George – according to Stowe – to instruct the African American race in Liberia and hence change an entire nation (this applies to Topsy as well). George’s aspirations are shaping a nation of African Americans that “has a right to argue, remonstrate, implore, and present the cause of its race, —which an individual has not” (UTC 610). The success of such a nation, however, starts with individuals. I concur with Jane Tompkins that Stowe aspired to alter the economic and political system by means of changing the hearts of the individuals; therefore she did not directly attack the dominant system (132). So, effective change can only occur when the positions are modified. To Stowe, altering the
political structure by means of laws alone would be less effective, because the mind that creates these laws remains untouched. Reform, therefore, starts with a firm belief in the Christian values.

3.6 Where conservatism and radicalism meet

Presumably, melodramas are conservative, because they express a strong desire to return to the beginning (the locus of innocence). *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has such a conservative genre structure, which appears to be contradictory to the radical ideas (women as leaders) that are propagated in the novel (Tompkins 142). However, as Williams argues, “[o]ne of the key features of melodrama is its compulsion to ‘reconcile the irreconcilable’ —its tendency to find solutions to problems that cannot really be solved without challenging the older ideologies of moral certainty to which melodrama wishes to return” (“Md. Revised” 75). Stowe poses the problem of injustice to the African American slaves, but the Tom plot wishes to return to the locus of innocence. She tries to reconcile the idea of humanity with the nineteenth century patriarchal ideology that did not grant equality to African Americans and women. Stowe’s novel resists the laws that maintain the slave system, for instance the Fugitive Slave Act. Nevertheless, Williams suggests that the resistance is restricted to one single effect of that offense (“Md. Revised” 76).

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the separate narratives of Tom and Eliza are the “single effect” that resists the patriarchal ideology (Williams, “Md. Revised” 76). Stowe’s account of two highly individual stories enhances the affective response of the readers. Arguably, it is not coincidental that both Tom and Eliza are very devout; therefore, I believe that Stowe considers Christianity as the means to reconcile the return to the patriarchal institution with her radical ideas. Legree’s beating of Tom, for example, where Tom remains loyal to his religion, which gives him the strength to challenge the slave system. Eliza and the feminized
Tom represent the oppressed slave, on the one hand, and the oppressed woman, on the other hand. The African Americans and the women are the victims of the double standard; they are unequally treated compared to white males and do not have any legal power. In their marginal position, they find each other, and Christianity gives them the opportunity to defy the institution. The Christian religion alone does not challenge the patriarchal institution, since it has supported the ideology up until the Enlightenment and still has a great impact on the nineteenth century society.

Stowe’s decision to let Tom die and emigrate the Harris family to Canada, France, and finally Liberia may be her attempt to reconcile conservatism with reform. Tom goes to a place where there are no state laws, except the law of justice. In heaven class, gender, and color distinctions are erased, since every single person is liable to the last judgment. George is determined to create a nation that “is to be essentially a Christian one” (UTC 611). She, thus, creates two new loci of innocence, but places them outside America. The patriarchal ideology was challenged, but ultimately the institution is not overthrown. As Gledhill notes:

Melodrama addresses us within the limitations of the status quo, of the ideologically permissible. It acknowledges demands inadmissible in the codes of social, psychological or political discourse. If melodrama can only end in the place where it began, not having a programmatic analysis for the future, its possibilities lie in this double acknowledgment of how things are in a given historical conjuncture, and of the primary desires and resistances contained with it. (38)

Although melodrama’s structure is conservative, which means that the narrative strives to return to as it was, its strength shows itself in the interaction between the dominant ideology and the resistance that results from it. Regarding Stowe’s book, the slave system is not abolished at the end of the novel; however, the two narratives are two possible accounts of resistance to the system. Stowe aims to show how things should be, and she does this by combining the resistance (women and slaves) with morality and Christianity.
3.7 God save America

Stowe’s novel offers a critique on the contemporary society, and critics have argued that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is an excellent example of an American Jeremiad (Tompkins 140).

Sacvan Bercovitch has defined the American Jeremiad as:

> “a mode of public exhortation that originated in the European pulpit, was transformed in both form and content by the New England Puritans, persisted through the eighteenth century, and helped sustain a national dream through two hundred years of turbulence and change. The American jeremiad was a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, the shifting ‘signs of the times’ to certain traditional metaphors, themes, and symbols.” (“Preface” xi)

A Jeremiad is, thus, a political sermon that offers a critique on the society and strives for a renewal of spiritual values. It is a public exhortation on the wrongs in the society, but the difference between the American Jeremiad and its European predecessor is that the former includes an “unshakable optimism” as well (Bercovitch 7). The American Jeremiad’s aim is to convince people to mend their ways, and it attempts to achieve this by affirming the underlying values of the Founding Fathers. Through *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe wants to show the citizens the wrongs of society (slavery), warn them of God’s wrath, and reinscribe the values (humanity) in the society.

Stowe frequently addresses her female readers to explain realities such as the loss of a child or the separation of families. Especially, in the “Concluding Remarks” her critical voice emerges clearly, where she rather remarkably blames the women of the free states for the introduction of slavery:

> If the mothers of the free states had all felt as they should, in times past, the sons of the free states would not have been the holders, and, proverbially, the hardest masters of slaves; [they] would not have connived at the extension of slavery, in our national body; [they] would not, as they do, trade the souls and bodies of men as an equivalent to money.” (UTC 624)

She, thus, criticizes the women for not feeling properly, but she also encourages them to mend their ways, which means they should feel for the African American race. These apostrophes to
her readers are strongly influenced by the minister’s sermons in the pulpit. As Douglas notes, “[i]f *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is not always ‘well’ written, it is always eloquent. Stowe turned the printed page into a pulpit and a forum” (Douglas 16). For Stowe, slavery was America’s greatest sin, and she felt she could do something about it (Douglas 23). Therefore, she addressed the women of the free states, since they were more open to the adherence of the spiritual values.

3.8 Christianity as inspiration

In short, the Christian principles offered Stowe the ideal foundation to support her allegations against slavery and to add substantial authority to her arguments in favour of African American and the emancipation of women. Moreover, values like trust, empathy, humanity, and love are the answer to free America from its gravest sin. For Stowe, white, Christian women are the chosen ones who can help others convert to Christianity and make them morally aware. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, thus, does much more than rewriting “the Bible as the story of a Negro slave”; it offers a critique of the American society at large (Tomkins 124, 134). Christianity is an inspiration, a guide along the way to achieve a society free of slaves.
CHAPTER IV

“And now, men and women of America, is this a thing to be trifled with, apologized for and passed over in silence?” (UTC 623).

4. The canon’s politics

The relationship between the American canon and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* can at the least be called problematic. First, I examine the problems of the traditional canon and link these problems with Stowe’s work. The main argument is that there are three explanations responsible for the undervaluing of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* qualities; these are unfavorable social conditions, simple bias, and aesthetic theories. Second, I discuss the complex position of the novel. Third, a short account of the possibilities to read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* will be suggested. Fourth and final, I will argue that there are certain conditions to be met to pursue a successful change of the American canon. I do not merely argue in favor of a diverse, democratic, and dynamic canon of American Literature (as others have done before me), but an open canon asks for progressive academic interest in melodramatic narratives as well. I depend to a great extent on scholars such as Paul Lauter, Nina Baym, and Leslie Fiedler.

4.1 A canon out-of-date

Before going into a discussion about Stowe and the American canon, I would like to point out that the art of novel writing (as we understand it) is relatively new. Traditionally, the birth of the “modern” novel is assigned to men like Fielding, Sterne, and Richardson, who generated the interest of the middle-classes (Fiedler, *Love and Death* 3). In his *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler argues that until Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and James’s essay “The Art of Fiction” prose fiction was practiced by non-professionals (5). In addition, he states that “the best-seller was invented in America (the flagrantly bad best-seller) before the serious successful novel” (*Love and Death* 68, italics in original).
His definition of the successful novel excludes sentimental works by authors such as Stowe and Rowson, since he labels them as “bad” mass products. The great age of modernism has produced students who consider popular novels as “trash”, based on beliefs that emotionality reveals incompetence, and that domesticity is defined as backward.\textsuperscript{27} As Tompkins accurately remarks, defining sentimental novels in terms of incompetence implies a womanly inferiority (Tompkins 123). After all, the majority of authors of these bad, popular novels were women, whereas the “intellectual works” of contemporary male authors were hardly recognized by the general public. A famous example of male indignation is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s gripe about the “damn’d mob of scribbling women”, who thwarted Hawthorne’s hope of achieving public renown.

The literary canon, as we know it, came into existence around the 1920s because of shifts in the fields of politics, ideology, and the literary profession (Lauter, \textit{Canon & Contexts} 23, D’haen 236). The canon is a select collection of authors and works that are deemed important enough to include them in anthologies, college courses, and criticism in order to transmit these to the new generation of students. Lauter argues that the canon is “a means by which culture validates social power”; hence, it contains a dominant set of social norms and values (\textit{Canon & Contexts} 23). Therefore, the conscious exclusion of women alludes to the insignificance of women’s concerns (Lauter, \textit{Canon & Contexts} 23). Although, the canon is liable to change, pressing requests for radical changes failed to occur up until the 1970s. This limited modification is due to a change in taste, that is to say, the works that are introduced into or excluded from the canon depend on the preferences of the ruling generation. As the ruling generations were mostly WASP-men, the modifications were generally confined to male authors; for instance, after World War I authors like James Fenimore Cooper and

\textsuperscript{27} I call it the great age of modernism because modernism is the dominant mode throughout the entire twentieth century, since even twenty-first century readers are traditionally trained in the modernist mode.
Benjamin Franklin were eliminated while Melville and Twain were upgraded (Lauter, *Canon & Contexts* 24). In contrast, there were hardly any African American writers included and almost no white female authors – except for Emily Dickinson, but only after World War I – were thoroughly discussed.\(^2\) In the 1960s shifts occurred in the same fields as during the 1920s; however, these shifts that created the canon in the 1920s, now pressured the academy to change. The Civil Rights Movement played a crucial role in altering the demographic formation of America; in the years after the turbulent 1960s, concepts such as “multiculturalism”, “the melting pot”, and “pluralism” were introduced in the American society (D’haen 233). Scholars, teachers, and others confronted the white Anglo-Saxon males by asking of “[their] courses, [their] texts, [their] research, ‘Where are the blacks?’ ‘Where are the women?’” (Lauter, *Canon & Contexts* 7). They called out in disbelief: How could the works by these authors be ignored?

### 4.2 Restrictions for women

Paul Lauter and Nina Baym both offer three possible explanations for the exclusion of the many women authors in the U.S. For Lauter, the first reason is an increasing “professionalization of the teaching of literature”; secondly, the body of American literature is conventionally categorized in “periods” and “themes”; and thirdly, certain aesthetic theories were developed in order to discuss the canonical texts (*Canon & Contexts* 27). Besides the aesthetic theories, Baym gives two other explanations: the first is “simple bias”, the second is that women were not able to write first-rate works because the social conditions were not favorable for them (Baym 124-125). Since Lauter has discussed the first two explanations at length, I will focus on the aesthetic theory. Additionally, Nina Baym’s two additional

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\(^2\) Writers like Stowe were only occasionally mentioned, since critics felt obliged to name some of these works because of their popularity or social importance.
possibilities will be discussed as well, because they are more relevant to the discussion about Stowe and the canon.

Firstly, the unfavorable social conditions are partially gender related (Baym 125). Nina Baym gives an example of how social conditions and assigned gender roles determine to a large extent the author’s artistic accomplishments. Baym gives a hypothetical thesis: if the norm, whereby the novel’s value is measured, countenances certain features, such as dense metaphors that are only instructed in the men’s education, then the works written by women, who did not receive the same education, will not contain that specific feature (125). Baym’s explanation is an echo of Woolf’s essay “A Room of One’s Own” where she points to the social conditions that hindered women to develop artistic proficiency. Woolf imagines that Shakespeare had a sister, who had the same genius like her brother; however, this woman was unable to overcome the obstacles she encountered. Woolf concludes that women were not given the same opportunities that were given to men; therefore they could not develop a long tradition of female authors. The restrictions women encountered were due to a confluence of gender-roles, social conditions, and own choice; however, this is only one of the reasons why women were hardly represented in the American canon.

Nina Baym accurately sees the prejudice of critics as another reason for the absence of women authors in the canon. Baym’s conclusion is similar to what Jane Tompkins has pointed out, that is to say, the a priori disdain for everything sentimental. Not only male critics contributed to the prejudice; female and feminist critics, who renewed the interest in female authors, adopted a traditional stance defining those works as rubbish (Tompkins 123). Jane Tompkins and Leslie Fiedler are now two critics that admire the novel for its intellectual complexity; however, they used to be biased as well. Jane Tompkins begins her essay “Sentimental Power” with an account of her visit to the Twain house while paying no attention to Stowe’s own house. She confesses that at the time she did not even consider
including *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* on her reading list. In his work of contemporary literature, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Fiedler argues that “[t]here seemed to me [him] no way of passing over in silence Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, since it was at least *marginally* respectable” (Fiedler, *Home* 24, my emphasis). His comment illustrates his (and many others’) reluctance to consider those works as serious cultural products. Fiedler saw these “lowbrows” as severe threats of “culture”, because their authors did not care about the literary standards (Fiedler, *Home* 23). Nevertheless, in “Home As Heaven, Home As Hell: *Uncle Tom’s* Canon” he modified his point of view condemning his previously elitist stance and encouraging an approach that forces the critic to unlearn the literary “standards, by measuring them against Mrs. Stowe’s novel rather than it against them” (*Home* 28). According to Fiedler, a different point of view allowed him to see “the equally valid archetype which underlay it” (*Home* 27). Thus, certain critics, such as Fiedler or Tompkins, readjusted their standards, which made it possible to rate Stowe’s work at its true value.

The third reason that Lauter and Baym both put forward is the aesthetic theory. The two critics, however, adopt a different stance and emphasize different aspects. According to Lauter, there are two aesthetic theories responsible for the canon’s elite character. For the first group of critics, literature had to convey a “usable past” analogous with America’s reputation as a world power (*Canon & Contexts* 32). The second group paid close attention to the formal qualities of literary works (*belles letters*), which means that form is preferred to content (Lauter, *Canon & Contexts* 32). In contrast, Baym gives an evolution beginning from the earliest theories up until the 1960s and 1970s. For Baym, the aesthetic systems that critics have developed brought forth “gender-related restrictions” (125). The earliest critical theories supported the important of a national literature; hence literature was considered a means to confirm an American identity. Baym claims that “[a]merican literary criticism has assumed that literature produced in this nation would have to be ground-breaking, equal to the
challenge of a new nation, and completely original” (125). Baym, thus, suggest that critics favored a break with the past; the male standards emphasized the creation of something entirely new. Lauter’s approach departs from a different starting point compared to Nina Baym’s assessment. Baym starts in the nineteenth century before the establishment of the literary canon, while Lauter begins his evaluation in the 1920s, which is the beginning of the literary canon. Both approaches emphasize that the national responsibilities were almost completely male-related, since, according to the dominant males, focus on female topics like domesticity would not be apt to confirm America’s dominant role in the world. Thus, the creation of an excellent work depended on whether it dealt with the great American issues; it had to present itself as a great American novel. But the question arises: what precisely is a Great American Novel?

4.3 Women cannot write a Great American Novel, can they?

The most obvious answer would be: a novel that is the best representative of the American culture, which implies that it is the most popular, and therefore the one that sold the most copies (Baym 126). Nevertheless, this is hardly what the critics had in mind, since if these were the standards, then *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* would be a respectable candidate on the list. Baym notes that critics agreed that “America as a nation must be the ultimate subject of the work” (127). Defining the idea of an American novel is rather difficult, because personal taste and socio-cultural reality are important factors. Critics generally agreed that topics such as the American identity, America as a democracy, and the difference between America and other countries are applicable to discuss in the work (Baym 127). The subject of Stowe’s book is compatible with the aforementioned aspects of the American culture, then why is she categorized as a marginal author? As Fiedler suggests, “[The Guardians of High Culture] have traditionally been white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. […] Only *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* among
the books best loved by such [marginal groups] has seemed at least problematical to those guardians” (Home 32, italics in original). The traditional way to deal with Stowe’s novel was, thus, either to ignore it completely, or to briefly mention its existence and significance in the American history.

One of the reasons Stowe’s novel did not convince male critics, is that the concerns of women authors were different (Lauter, Canon & Contexts 34). It was not so much the inability, but the disinterest in male responsibilities and difference in subject matter that made their works stand apart from the works of their male colleagues. Hence, “[t]he presence of these women and their works is acknowledged in literary theory and history as an impediment and obstacle” (129-130). In the same context we ought to interpret Fiedler’s comment that women are the chief producers of the “flagrantly bad best-seller” (cf. supra). The idea that women could not capture the heart of the American society implies that only men are capable of doing so; thus (according to this argument) solely men can experience the American culture (Baym 130). This explanation is only partially responsible for the elite character of the canon.

A second cause for the narrowing of the literary canon and criticism is the development of theories concentrating on form rather than content. The formalist theory or New Criticism – the dominant mode after World War II up until the 1970s – is one of the chief movements that helped to define the canon. The focal point of criticism shifted from the text’s socio-cultural and historical context to a thorough analysis of the text itself. Intertextuality, grammar, syntax, and figures of speech were intrinsic features that were highly valued. The problem with this model is that it became the single mode to measure the literary conventions against every text (Lauter, Canon & Contexts 35). Therefore, for those critics there were no alternatives present to assess the novels written in different times and modes. Fiedler, for example, comments on Uncle Tom’s aesthetic qualities: “The words she
finds or does not find simply do not matter, since even when she does find them (as in the
description of Eva’s death), they are woefully inadequate by conventional literary ‘standards’”
(Fiedler, *Home* 40, my emphasis). There is overall consensus amongst critics that *Uncle
Tom’s Cabin* does not have the superior aesthetic qualities of books written by Melville or
Thoreau. I have to agree with this assessment; however, drawing on the same model for books
that do not cherish the “aesthetical”, but the “ethical” is a hypocritical method (Fiedler, *Home*
26). As Williams notes, “we must study melodrama as melodrama, not as a form that wants to
be something else”, which is what modernist critics have done (“Md. Revised” 56). Male
critics applied the same literary conventions to books they have defined as intrinsically
different in subject matter and genre. Thus, “[m]any critical studies of American literature in
this century have found no place for Stowe, and only recently has she been considered at all
central to the great flowering of native literature before the Civil War known as the American
Renaissance” (Sundquist 2). We had to wait until the 1960s and 1970s for a gradually
renewed interest in women’s concerns, for studies that began to move away from the
traditional point of view.

4.4 The problems with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

*Uncle Tom’s* popularity remains unequalled; no other book in the American history
incited a nation to go to war. Nevertheless, the book’s dazzling popularity refrains critics,
trained in the modernist mode, from including it in their exclusive list of “excellent” novels.
They believed that a true masterpiece does not attempt to capture the hearts of its readers, nor
does it cherish the myth of home and motherhood; rather, it represents a myth that moves
away from the settlement and that depicts “the myth of Home as Hell” (Fiedler 28). Male
authors, thus, are concerned with the opposite extreme of society. Furthermore, the nineteenth
century novels that modernists preferred were not as equally successful as Stowe’s work in
their own time. With regards to *Uncle Tom*, the critic was confronted with an impasse, on the one hand, this novel belonged to the sentimentalist and melodramatic genre; on the other hand, the book’s popularity was so immense that it achieved socio-cultural significance. To validate the inclusion of underestimated male authors, such as Melville, implied that popularity became a ground to exclude books from the canon.

Because of the book’s persuasive power and its topical issues, the book gained political and consequently historical importance. The formalists who prefer form to content, aesthetics to ethics, and ratio to feeling cannot reconcile their set of beliefs with novels that express a clear political statement. Modernism, thus, defines Stowe’s novel in terms of propaganda and poor literature, completely ignoring the intelligent (although different) way in which Stowe can capture her reader’s attention. Novels that did not focus on style, but carried out specific political messages could not be called “literature”. A novel like *Uncle Tom* includes a “critique – the questions of ‘evil’, or responsibility – [that] is firmly placed on a social and existential level” (Elsaesser 67). But Stowe’s Jeremiad does more than offering a critique on the American society; it also provides warnings and alternatives to right the wrongs. As I have argued in my first chapter, melodrama tries to uncover that which operates on a deeper level than everyday life. Stowe wants to activate her readers’ consciousness of a common humanity, which has been numbed by the politics of slavery. I do not claim that modernists were against a political declaration, but they favored art for art’s sake, that is to say, works that do not have a function outside the text. However, if an author did choose to write a politically engaged novel, then form and aesthetics were still the required standards.

A third (most obvious) reason is the novel’s sentimental and melodramatic discourse. As Williams argues, “[t]wo major strikes against melodrama were thus the related ‘excesses’ of emotional manipulativeness and association with femininity” (“Md. Revised” 43). Although melodrama deals with emotions at large, the genre is not exclusively feminine.
The Western melodrama, for instance, includes a celebration of manhood and machismo. To date, people presume that emotionalism equals femininity; which is a cliché that the modernist mode is partially responsible for; moreover, subconsciously women authors were perceived as enemies of the conventions (Fiedler “Home” 29). Critics, therefore, generally shunned women authors in their literary surveys. The cliché has lead to a clear opposition between melodrama and sentimentalism on the one hand, and modernism on the other hand; in addition to which the former is regarded as inferior to the latter.

James Baldwin has written one of the strongest claims against *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*:

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a very bad novel, having, in its self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality, much in common with *Little Women*. Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty. (496)

Firstly, Baldwin ranks *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with *Little Women*, written by Louisa May Alcott, suggesting both books share the same poor literary qualities. It also suggests that Alcott’s book is a paradigm of bad literature, and by classifying *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the same category of *Little Women*, Baldwin implicitly defines Stowe’s novel as a bad work. Baldwin concludes that readers with “good” literary taste do not consider these novels as literary valuable. Secondly, he goes on to define sentimentality as dishonest, since a sentimental author does not experience life, which implies that the author tells lies. Finally, Baldwin states that sentimental fiction signifies “violent inhumanity” and is a “mask of cruelty”. These words uncover a deep disdain for sentimental works and their female writers; to him these works are fantasies. He strongly opposed to Tom’s feminization, because Stowe deprives Tom of his manhood, and she uses his femininity as a means to promote the ideology of maternal love.
Women writers after Stowe inherited Stowe’s celebration of motherhood and adapted it in their own works, as Ammons points out:

Stowe’s manipulation of maternal ideology is adapted and remodeled in illuminating ways in the work of American women writers before the 1920s and that, taken together, this body of fiction from Stowe forward constitutes a rich female tradition in American literature that challenges the dominant, twentieth-century, academic construction of the canon in terms of the adventure tale and the antisocial, which is to say antifeminine, escape narrative. (“Mother-Savior” 156)

The women writers after Stowe continued to write about female subjects and responsibilities, which meant that the tradition they established also continued to defy the literary conventions. Critics, like Baldwin, regarded the themes those women addressed as irrelevant, which seemed enough of an argument to condemn them and their works. From the critic’s point of view, including these novels did not cross their minds; after all, “[a]ccepting Freeman, Chopin, Wharton, Cather, Glasgow, and, yes, Stowe, as central to American fiction implies the centrality of women’s experience and woman’s culture”, which indicates that not only the authors on the list would be rearranged, but also the culture it issues and the canon’s institutional character (Lauter, Canon & Contexts 8). To safeguard their own jobs and power, the men claimed that sentimentality and melodrama were inferior to modernism, and unconsciously their misogynist attitude towards the women authors became intrinsically linked with these modes. So, the modernist critics cannot define sentimentalism in any other terms than “inferior” and “feminine”. Therefore, as long as critics measured Uncle Tom by the literary conventions, the novel remained difficult to handle.

4.5 What type of canon for Uncle Tom?

The introduction of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in the literary canon can only be realized if, on the one hand, the canon expands, and on the other hand, the novel is no longer measured by modernist conventions alone. The former demands a cultural shift, as occurred in the 1960s
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(I will discuss this later); the latter requires an academic, literary change. First, we have to analyze the melodramatic mode by the means of its own specific features. Since I have discussed Uncle Tom’s melodramatic features in my first chapter, I will not recapitulate them (cf. supra). I will, however, point out that melodrama confronts us with stories of individuals who have to deal with the socio-cultural issues of the contemporary society. This is what Elsaesser indicates when he argues that “[t]he persistence of the melodrama might indicate the ways in which popular culture has not only taken note of social crises and the fact that the losers are not always those who deserve it most, but has also resolutely refused to understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms” (47). Elsaesser, thus, notes that because melodrama translates the social problems to the private sphere of the family, it fails to represent the problems’ actual impact on society. However, this private context and emotionalism is imperative, since melodramas aim to make us respond to these problems in an affective way.

A second step we should take is the discussion of the dominant themes or ideology that the novel puts forward. Jane Tompkins has convincingly shown that not the freeing of slaves was subversive, but the domestic home as the ideal example for the nation. Fiedler draws a comparable conclusion; he notes that “[s]o long as I [Fiedler] distrusted the ‘ethical’ and depended on ‘aesthetical’ criteria as defined by modernism, I could find no way to rank Uncle Tom’s Cabin with the ‘classics’ of our tradition” (“Home” 26). The incapacity of Fiedler to line Stowe’s novel up with the “greats”, illustrates that modernist criteria should not be applied to criticize nineteenth century sentimental novels. When Fiedler was able to distance himself from the conventional method, he came across two myths that the novel instructs to its readers. The first is the celebration of motherhood, home, and marriage “as greater goods”, and is inseparably linked with the second one, which is the myth that promotes the home as heaven (Fiedler, “Home” 27). Because the “classics” deal with an
entirely different myth (the other extreme, in fact), an interest in these two myths was non-existent. Fiedler makes an accurate claim, arguing that *Uncle Tom* throughout the years, whether in adapted plays or films, represents a myth that was passed on unnoticed, and to date has not been surpassed nor equaled by any other work of “highbrow” literature (“Home” 30). Tompkins, Fiedler, Fisher, and others have proven that if we break away from the conventions and paying close attention to these “trash” novels, myths are revealed that provide us with an interesting look upon life and society.

Literary works, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, can be discussed alongside the discussions of modernist or postmodern works; they can expand the view on the diversity of American culture (past and present) and enrich the field of literature. As Warren suggests, “[c]hanging the profession to accommodate both Stowe and the concerns of scholars who have found themselves and their needs less than welcome in the world of the literary academy has certainly altered not only the texts that we read, but also the way in which we read texts” (233). The reading methods and the literary academy sustain each other, since the more that various reading methods are encouraged, the more the literary academy’s world is altered; which, in turn, encourages the further expansion of reading methods. The more diverse the canon becomes, the more scholars can debate, learn, and interact in the literary and cultural fields. This sounds very utopian (I am aware of that); however, it is not a mere chimera.

The result of the cultural shifts, which put the male dominance under pressure by questioning its policy, were modest at first; nevertheless, it seems that the canon’s elite character is halted and a more heterogeneous American anthology is a reality – a reality not yet completed, but a reality nonetheless. The shifts of the 1960s continued well into the 1970s and 1980s; labeled by Theo D’haen as pluralistic and multicultural tendencies (233). The canon’s accountability to cultural change implies that when the demographic formation of the
U.S. changes, the body of works will be modified as well. For instance, one generation of academics or professors may prefer Melville to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and vice versa (Lauter, *Canon & Contexts* 24). Although the conventional canon is adaptable to the changes in taste, these modifications remained restricted to male authors.

An alternative to the conventional canon is *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, which Theo D’haen considers as the result of the changes of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, labeling it as “the most ‘democratic’ of anthologies of American literature” (235). The anthology includes African American writers and women authors; for example, fragments of Stowe’s work are included and Jane Tompkins’s introduction gives an overall image of Stowe’s life and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The orientation of *The Heath* includes an emphasis on the socio-cultural and historical background of the United States; attention to the interaction of the cultures; and a look at how these cultures have defined the make-up of America (Lauter, “Heath orientation”). This is a radically different course compared to the modernist thinking where “literature is by definition a form of discourse that has no designs on the world” (Tompkins 125). *The Heath* is a meritorious attempt to open up a debate about literary questions, and it encourages interaction between the different genres, cultures and point of views.

4.6 The step-by-step approach

The possibility of change occurs when one individual or a group of individuals raise their voices against the established organization. Thus, the first step to bring about change is to animate awareness by means of critical work (Lauter, *Canon & Contexts* 210). The 1960s

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29 Feminism, the Civil Rights movement, and the year 1968 were some of the catalysts that altered the make-up of the American society.
30 *The Heath Anthology* ran its first edition in 1989; an introduction to this anthology is accessible on the website: <http://college.cengage.com/english/lauter/heath/4e/students/index.html>.
and the following years motivated that consciousness; however, awareness is only a first step. Changing the canon is not restricted to striking off names and including new ones; the cultural implications are much greater than what a reading list represents. The academy is an institution, and institutions in general react slowly to the shifts that occur outside their world (Lauter, *Canon & Contexts* 214). For instance, since the 1960s women in America have improved their position in public and private life; they “have risen to near-equality in access to jobs, education, and aspirations; and yet, ‘near-equality’ is not equality and the struggle continues on how to create a more just society” (Duncan 141). Although, as Russell Duncan suggests, the presence of women in the academic and political life increased; numbers drawn up in 2004 have shown that women still earned less than their male counterparts and are hardly represented at the top positions of corporate businesses (143-142). These are white women – a majority of Anglo-Saxon descent, – while the opportunities for other minority groups, for instance African Americans, are even more problematic. If we take a closer look at the students of marginal groups, we can see that very few move up to pursue career opportunities in the field of academic research (Lauter, *Canon & Contexts* 217). In addition, students from these groups, who are taken into consideration to develop an academic career, ought to compete with colleagues that are equally qualified, but are often favored because of their “higher” social background. Race, gender, and religion were considered at job applications in the past; although today this attitude is frowned upon, these cultural factors could still be decisive (Lauter, *Canon & Contexts* 217).

Since socio-cultural processes help to determine the formation of the canon, the issues of the American society are translated to the field of the academic institutions. Although universities carry out a democratic policy, Lauter remarks that “almost all the senior faculty are male and white” (*Canon & Contexts* 214). The problem for this low number of women at the top positions is what the standards deem valuable. Since men take up the top position,
they are the ones who define which subjects and research topics are the most estimable (Lauter, *Canon & Contexts* 214). Lauter argues that “the canonical white men are [not] necessarily more important or articles on them more meritorious, but […] younger faculty and graduate students are acutely sensitive to what their tradition-minded and powerful colleagues will deem of merit” (*Canon & Contexts* 216). His observation echoes Tompkins’s observation that students tend to comply with their professor’s ideas. When we look at the academic body of work and the accomplishments set out for students to achieve, we see that these are still conventional. However, the increasing attention to melodramatic, women, African American, and ethnic studies at American universities counterbalances the ascendant (male) teaching method. These programs make students aware of undervalued authors, who have more significance compared to average established male authors (Lauter, *Canon & Contexts* 216). Furthermore, academics, who have a preference for the dominant modernist mode, might be encouraged to take interest in the progress of these studies. Thus, the introduction and further development of these studies do not only alter the academic curriculum, but more importantly their presence and accomplishments affect the make-up of the higher institutions as well (Lauter, *Canon & Contexts* 217-218).

### 4.7 A cultural anthology

Introducing Stowe and authors like Alcott, Cather, and Chopin in the anthology of American literature depends on various factors that are deeply rooted in the cultural society. The process; however, is slow because of the difficulty of changing the institutions. A democratic, dynamic and diverse canon means that it includes different *traditions* (not just one). Perhaps “tradition” is not the appropriate word, since it insinuates a long period of one and the same set of beliefs. The course of history has shaped the United States as a multicultural society where various ethnic groups strike up dialogues constantly. The elite
canon fails to represent this diversity if it focuses on just one of the many cultural constituents. A canon that represents the American literary tradition should reflect the discussions about literature. Therefore, the modernist model is outdated and an open canon, which celebrates distinctions, and likenesses at the same time, is the best alternative to include works of great cultural esteem.
CONCLUSION

“injustice and cruelty shall bring on nations the wrath of Almighty God” (UTC 629).

Read in the melodramatic mode, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* seems destined to display its power afresh. Under the rules of modernism, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s work has been far from the eyes, far from the heart; nevertheless, the novel has endured because of its power. *Uncle Tom* is an impressive work that cannot easily be overlooked; it was inspired by the most prominent concerns of nineteenth century America – discussing them in a passionate, zealous, and vigorous style, bringing the coldest of hearts back to life. The novel’s concluding lines appear to foretell the coming of the Civil War and, with hindsight; many have regarded Stowe’s work as the cause for starting the war. The power to move a nation turns *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* into one of the greatest American novels ever written.

Firstly, the novel’s features were viewed from a melodramatic angle, which proved that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* draws its power from this difference in strategy, turning it, to date, into the most popular American novel ever written. The melodramatic characteristics (moral and emotional teleology, victim-heroes, home etc.) re-introduce readers to a forgotten world where moral laws have the upper hand. The subversiveness of melodrama is an ideal instrument to make a political claim for socio-cultural change; which presumably means that women like Stowe, who was strongly affected by the wrongs of the slave system, consciously preferred sentiment to reason. Thus, their different writing methods did not ensue because of their inability to handle the mode their male counterparts applied, but because sentiment and melodrama were the perfect modes to get the arguments across in the most persuasive manner.

Secondly, the depiction of slaves as humans changed the perception of many Northerners and Southerners; however, at the same time it has lead to the affirmation of old stereotypes and even led to the creation of new ones. In our comprehension of the term
“racism”, Stowe has frequently been labeled a racist, precisely because of these stereotypical portrayals and additionally, the ending where she deports African American characters to Liberia, making America a racially purified nation. Apart from the dubious racial treatment, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has provided America with a character (uncle Tom), that grew into a cult symbol, which whites could sympathize with, but which African Americans dissociated from. The interaction between the two ethnic groups was one of Stowe’s most substantial achievements, illustrated by the interracial identities that reversed the traditional roles of whites and African Americans. She shrewdly took away the male African American threat that led to the introduction of African American men as objects of sympathy. The American culture was re-shaped into a society where the view of African American as villain and victim co-exists.

Thirdly, the novel is strongly influenced by the Christian soteriology and can be read as a rewrite of the myth of Christ’s crucifixion. In combination with the myths of motherhood and home the novel must be understood as, for Stowe, a first step to the salvation of the nation. Stowe could not have introduced a Christ heroine instead of Tom, since it would be much harder to convince readers because her heroine would be suffering a double oppression (female and slave). Alternatively, she opted to feminize Tom – making him the typical Victorian heroine – and to let the women in the novel act. In Stowe’s book motherhood and Christianity are inseparably linked, because they both propagate a motherly love; a love that is more powerful than any other form and can bring about real change. Therefore, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* can be read as a rewrite of the Bible with an African American slave as Christ, but Stowe’s choice to feminize Tom may also be considered as a cautious attempt to make the rewrite of the Bible not only as the story of an African American slave, but also of the oppressed woman.
Finally, the discussion of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has been translated to the field of the literary academy. To change the canon into a broad-minded entity where books like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are included, takes time and determination. One of the crucial steps is the further development of women and ethnic studies that encourage students, academics, and scholars to keep in mind the cultural background of the texts, resulting in different reading methods. Students should be encouraged to study the works of minority groups and be given the opportunity to set up debates, which focus on the cultural context and implications of nineteenth century and contemporary America. Because of its cultural, literary, historical, and political ties the real challenge does not lie in the acceptance of diversity, but in combining all these different voices to shape an American identity that at the same time reflects the heterogeneity and the similarity of the individual constituents.

Although critics and scholars have renewed the interest in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, further course of action would be constructive. In contrast to the works of nineteenth century female writers, Stowe’s work has received considerable attention; however, the possibilities of studying melodrama in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are not yet exhausted. Novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are too frequently described in terms of “good reads” or “best-sellers”, and by so doing; the insinuation of “lower quality” is not far off. The question no one seems capable of answering – with a solid, convincing argument – is: Why is popular culture trash? Melodrama and sentimentalism are successful to this day, labeling it as trash implies that the many readers who enjoy these books have a bad taste in literature. There are a number of steps that can be taken to broaden the academic field of studied literature, of which I will present the four that I deem the most pertinent.

The protest movements of the 1960s have brought about awareness of the minority groups and a change in attitude; nonetheless, this can be improved by a number of steps. First, the bias and the disinterest in sentimentality that still many male scholars share, should be
modified. This can be done by “positive discrimination”, that is, introducing female scholars and scholars of different ethnic background not only into the academic staff, but also in the board and committees of the universities. They can address matters from a different perspective that can lead to constructive measures. The first step is the hardest to come into force; additionally it is the most important, since the successes of the other steps are tied to the first.

The second and third step are closely related and occur in the field of the school system itself (curricula, teachers). Although the universities and colleges offer a wide range of subjects (including melodrama), the curricula of the high schools are more restricted and very conventional. Thus, when high school graduates start university; they are generally trained in an established mode, resulting in a pejorative attitude towards anything different. That is why it is crucial that academics, who are skilled in the traditional mode, are introduced to these other strategies, since the curricula of secondary schools are conformed to the requirements that are set by universities. Institutions like universities are the last ones to change, therefore it is important that students, teachers, scholars who are favoring a democratic canon, continue to do so. The dominance of the modernist mode ought to be abandoned, not modernism in itself. Pressure from inside the institutional system can make the canon more democratic, which would mean that melodrama, sentimentalism, and other modes are studied alongside modernism.

Finally, the American culture plays a considerable part in the progression towards a renewed concern for sentimental novels. Next to the anthology’s liability to cultural shifts, melodrama and sentimentalism are rooted in the American culture; therefore they are liable to cultural change as well, which makes them very topical modes. Furthermore, they range over cultural disciplines such as film, theatre, literature, soap operas etc. One of the reasons for their popularity is that they are easily accessible genres, dealing with topical issues in a simple
and captivating manner. I believe, that academic research, classical debates and comparisons between cultures can lead to some promising results with regards to the melodramatic and canonical field.

The real challenge lies in the perseverance of the progress that has been made and I believe that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* can be a great asset in the process. Stowe’s book has been so popular, politically, historically and culturally important that it can be a great introduction to the many other books that are waiting to be discovered again. *Uncle Tom’s* magic has not yet subsided; it can give teachers and scholars a starting point to substantiate an open canon.
WORKS CITED


