

**the uses of  
death in  
*uncle tom's cabin***

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Death scenes sold novels in mid-nineteenth century America. An advertisement for Sarah Evans' *Resignation* (1855) promised fifty-seven death scenes—one every ten pages. "The death scenes are inimitable," claims a publisher's blurb for Susan Warner's *The Hills of Shatemuc* (1856).<sup>1</sup> This obsession with fictional death has frequently been deplored as revealing unhealthy attitudes and then dismissed, or it has been linked (most recently by Ann Douglas' much-discussed *The Feminization of American Culture*) with a general decline in American culture.<sup>2</sup> But the popular death scene, represented here by the deaths of Eva and Tom, the most memorable characters in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is at least in this instance used for positive and significant cultural purposes. The death scenes provide Stowe and her readers the occasion for shared, public mourning and thus attempt to repair one of Victorian culture's major ruptures, the split between the communal, self-sacrificing values that had come to be considered feminine and the individualistic, materialistic values that were associated with the public world of men.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* protests slavery by protesting the values used to defend it, and thus Stowe's book becomes a criticism of her culture at large.<sup>3</sup> Slavery is not for Stowe, as it apparently was for many,<sup>4</sup> a symbol of the profound differences between North and South. Rather it is a symbol of a system of value that places financial gain above all else, a system which, as her original subtitle suggests, reduces a man to a thing. Stowe compares slaves to capitalism's laborers not, as some did, to defend slavery but rather

to condemn any system that is based on “appropriating one set of human beings to the use and improvement of another without any regard to their own.”<sup>5</sup> St. Clare explains to Ophelia that the laborer is “as much at the will of his employer as if he were sold to him” (305). The difference between the two systems, he says, is that slavery is a “more bold and palpable infringement of human rights”; it “sets the thing before the eyes of the civilized world in a more tangible form, though the thing done be after all, in its nature, the same” (305-06). New Englander Ophelia at first resists this argument but then sees that St. Clare is right. While slaveholders frequently claimed that slavery’s extended family was superior to the North’s impersonal relationships, Stowe makes no such distinction. As William Taylor first noted in *Cavalier and Yankee*, life on Legree’s plantation, the nadir of experience in the novel, is life in a factory rather than a home.<sup>6</sup> Workers are machines to Legree; once having tried caring for his slaves, he has decided that it is more profitable to use them up and replace them. But Stowe’s argument is not simply economic in the most obvious sense—for her the problem goes deeper than that. Slavery becomes for Stowe a powerful symbol of the individualistic and materialistic values on which capitalism is based and which are in turn perpetuated by capitalism. She dramatizes conflicting systems of value, and offers, by implication, alternatives to the system she rejects.

Most of the men in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* speak on behalf of the values Stowe rejects; her women generally oppose them. Economic and legal arguments were used to support slavery, and money and law, primarily male concerns, were subject to reason. Against these defenses of slavery, Stowe presents the primarily emotional claims of family, and of Christianity, which by mid-century had been to a large extent abandoned to women and others whose status in the culture was at best ambiguous.<sup>7</sup> Two of the novel’s married couples, the Shelbys and the Birds, embody this split. Mr. Shelby is, by his culture’s definition, a good man, but his priorities are financial. He has concluded that if he does not raise money by the sacrifice of some slaves, all will be lost. His decision to sell Eliza’s son and Tom is thus a reasonable one. But it is not the decision his wife would have made. She understands Tom’s relation to his family as well as to hers, and she especially understands Eliza’s relation to her child. Mrs. Shelby is unable to “reason away” her emotions as her husband can his. Committed to business, Mr. Shelby leaves religion to his wife; he believes his wife has “piety and benevolence enough for two” (55). Senator and Mrs. Bird also represent the dichotomy between heart and head, between the values of the private world and the values of the public world. Mrs. Bird’s immediate response is to help Eliza in her flight toward freedom, but her senator husband argues that the law must be upheld.

The women, who follow their emotions and assert the value of family and religion, are right as Stowe sees it, and at least sometimes they put their impulses into action through their influence on others. Mrs. Shelby must wait until her husband is dead to set into motion her plan to free Tom, but Mrs. Bird through emotional appeal convinces the senator to drive Eliza and her child to safety, even though he will be breaking the law

that he as a public person represents. The gentle Quaker Aunt Dorcas, another example of feminine influence, nurses slave-dealer Tom Loker back to health after he has been shot and persuades the evil man to spend his time trapping bears and wolves rather than chasing fugitive slaves. A woman's means of asserting the values of home and religion is her power to persuade others to do what she wants. This is of course Stowe's method in the novel; she addresses mothers repeatedly, whom she expects in turn to influence others.

The growth of individualism involves some withdrawal from the deaths of others; Stowe's death scenes are her insistence that readers not withdraw. In mid-nineteenth century America, the death of a family member was expected to unite the family, and the family was frequently evoked as a model for the nation. Catherine Beecher, for instance, presented the self-sacrificing family as a model for the country, and her sister agreed. In *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870*, Karen Haltunnen discusses the popular mourning literature that responded to and attempted to counteract the diminishing communal significance of the death of the individual. This literature advised the bereaved on how to behave under these new circumstances and explained that weeping over the dead can serve as preparation for a vital religious experience. According to the manuals, the mourner whose heart is softened feels benevolence toward all. Mourning, then, teaches people to love one another, thus making this world more like the heaven depicted by the cult of mourning.<sup>8</sup> Creating social harmony in a world in which connections were broken was Stowe's purpose, and eliciting shared grieving was her method. Eva's death is thus not, as Ann Douglas says, "essentially decorative";<sup>9</sup> it (and Tom's as well) is central.

As slavery is a powerful symbol for the dehumanizing tendencies of Stowe's culture, death is a powerful and complex symbol for a passive but at least sometimes effective response to these tendencies. The deaths of Eva and Tom, the characters who assert feminine values and elicit the emotion that is suppressed in many of Stowe's men, reveal that a traditionally powerless person can become powerful by selflessly dying for others. To put it another way, death can be a means of breaking through ordinary human limitations, or in the cases of a child and a slave, extraordinary human limitations. Dying is the only complete release from self-concern; further, it provides the occasion for a dramatic condemnation of an unsatisfying world.

Eva is of course no ordinary child. She belongs, however, to a class of children familiar to nineteenth century readers.<sup>10</sup> Stowe writes of these children: "When you see that deep spiritual light in the eye—when the little soul reveals itself in words sweeter and wiser than the ordinary words of children, hope not to retain that child; for the seal of heaven is on it, and the light of immortality looks out from its eyes" (341). Eva's death emphasizes her spirituality and allows her to exert influence far beyond that of an ordinary child. St. Clare sees his daughter as a messenger ("O, Evangeline! rightly named . . . hath not God made thee an evangel to

me?” [250]), though he has not taken her message seriously. As the time of her death approaches, however, Eva becomes more effective. Having earlier said that she could understand why Christ died for us and that she herself would die for the slaves if she could, Eva commissions her cynical father to persuade people that slavery is wrong: “When I am dead, papa, then you will think of me, and do it for my sake. I would do it if I could” (360). St. Clare replies that he will do anything she asks. Tom’s freedom, Eva thinks, is to be gained by her death. Because of St. Clare’s procrastination, Eva’s wishes are not to be carried out. (The child’s power here is limited by requirements of plot, if nothing else; if Stowe is to show slavery at its worst Tom must be sold again.) Still, as Eva dies, she has more influence on her father, who could act in the world, than at any other time.

In other cases, however, Eva’s death brings real change. Her love converts the previously unmanageable Topsy to an orderly, Christian life. Eva says to the slave child: “I love you and I want you to be good. I am very unwell, Topsy, and I think I shan’t live a great while; and it really grieves me to have you be so naughty. I wish you would try to be good, for my sake;—it’s only a little while I shall be with you” (366). Eva’s appeal touches Topsy; more importantly, it changes her. Grieving for Eva, Ophelia learns to love and accept Topsy. Eva understands well how to exercise the power of the powerless, and her ability to get others to do what she wants (or at least to say that they will) is enhanced as her death approaches.

In another instance, Eva’s power after death combines with the power of other mistreated or ignored women to haunt Simon Legree, whose evil is the result of his resisting and finally suppressing the emotions elicited by his mother’s piety. The women’s power in this case is transmitted through a lock of hair Eva had given Tom when she was near death. Given to Legree by the overseers who find it around Tom’s neck, the hair becomes an instrument of torture. The “witch thing” twines around his fingers as if alive (469), and he pulls at the hair as if it has burned him. The reason for his extreme reaction, the reader later learns, is that the hair reminds Legree of another lock of hair, this one from the letter which informed him of the death of his mother, who on her deathbed forgave his curses and his rejection of her. Stowe attributes supernatural power to the strand of hair: “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” (472).

As Legree becomes a haunted man, his fears work to the advantage of Cassie, a slave-concubine who, at the expense of her sanity, has gained some power over her master. Hiding in the attic awaiting an appropriate time to escape, Cassie’s young friend Emmaline sings of judgment, parents and children, as Legree sits below fearing that his dead mother will appear. Later, as the man dreams of Cassie holding his mother’s shroud, the slave reaches out in the night and touches his hand, saying “Come, come, come” (531). Cassie and Emmaline escape; Legree drinks more and more

and is left sick and dying. Three powers have joined to destroy Legree—the power of the mother whose values he rejected, the power of the woman he owned and used sexually, and the power of the child who was willing to die to free the slaves. Legree is more out of touch with the values that had come to be identified with mid-nineteenth century women than any other man in the book, and the powers of three women join to administer a kind of justice. Legree is of course given no dramatic death scene.

The daughter, wife and sister of well-known evangelists whose anti-slavery efforts had been less than successful, Stowe suggests that death might provide a young woman opportunities not available to her in this world. When Tom thinks that Eva, after her death, appears to read the Bible to him, Stowe comments, “Was it a dream? Let it pass for one. But who shall say that that sweet young spirit which in life so yearned to comfort and console the distressed, was forbidden of God to assume this ministry after death?” (445) Death thus offers the possibility of access to new power. It also enhances feminine influence.

In addition to serving as a means of exercising power, Eva’s death is a condemnation of a world which has caused her too much pain. On the boat where she meets Tom, she looks at slaves with “perplexed and sorrowful earnestness” and woefully lifts their chains (210). Her heartbreak and her withdrawal from the world are revealed by her reaction to the story of Prue, the bread woman. Rather than weeping or exclaiming as Stowe says other children would, Eva’s “cheeks grew pale, and a deep earnest shadow passed over her eyes” (292). She sighs and says she doesn’t want to go riding as planned. “These things sink into my heart,” she tells Tom, as the blood drains from her lips and cheeks (293). The cook observes that horrors such as Prue’s being left in the cellar until the flies got her should be kept from “sweet, delicate young ladies” because “it’s enough to kill ‘em” (294). Later, hearing of another dead slave, Eva repeats, “these things *sink into my heart*” (311). Stowe says that the “evils of the system under which they were living had fallen, one by one, into the depths of her thoughtful, pondering heart” (343). Eva’s death is her rejection of a world that breaks her heart.

By dying, Eva also rejects the worldly life that awaits her as a privileged white adolescent. St. Clare’s brother visualizes Eva as a sexually attractive woman, saying that she will someday make hearts ache; Marie St. Clare speaks of the jewels Eva will wear when she begins “dressing and going into company” (344). Eva, however, rejects this image of her future, wishing instead that she could sell the jewels for money to move the slaves to a free state and start a school for them.

Eva’s potential womanhood is revealed most through her relationship with her visiting twelve-year-old cousin, Henrique. Fascinated by Eva from the time he meets her, the boy offers to take her under his care. Holding her hand, Henrique tells Eva that he is sorry he and his father will be leaving soon, that he would like to be with her. Already Eva exerts womanly influence over Henrique. When she objects to his cruel treatment of his slave, Henrique flushes and tells her earnestly, “I could love

anything, for your sake, dear Cousin; for I really think you are the loveliest creature that I ever saw!" (354). Eva's total concern, however, is with the slave's welfare; Henrique in fact says he is becoming jealous of Dodo because Eva has "taken such a fancy" to him (348). The unworldly Eva gives no sign that she is attracted to her cousin and is apparently unaware of the nature of his attraction to her.<sup>11</sup>

Immediately after Henrique and his father leave, Eva begins to fail rapidly. She has been, Stowe says, exerted beyond her strength by the stimulation of the cousin's presence. As Eva's death nears, her father, in an apparent effort to encourage her will to live, tells Eva to stay pretty to go visit Henrique. She replies, "I shall never go there, papa—I am going to a better country" (372). Though she regrets that she and her father cannot go together to the "Savior's home," where it is "sweet and peaceful" and "loving" (361), the child eagerly anticipates death.

Eva's death figuratively becomes her marriage. She is entirely surrounded by the color of innocence on her deathbed: she wears white, her bed is draped in white, and all the objects in the room are shrouded in white napkins. As Eva's death approaches, Tom waits outside her room. "There must be somebody watchin' for the bridegroom," he says (379). Like death itself, Eva's disease is personified as a male figure who comes for the female. Miss Ophelia cannot be fooled by the illness; she "knew well the first guileful footsteps of that soft, insidious disease, which sweeps away so many of the fairest and loveliest, and before one fibre of life seems broken, seals them irrevocably for death" (342). Eva's temporary improvement is only "one of those deceitful lulls, by which her inexorable disease often beguiles the anxious heart" (357). Eva rejects worldly life because it is incompatible with her spiritual nature.

Although she is a privileged white child, Eva has much in common with the slaves, especially with Tom. Like Eva, the slaves exhibit personalities and behavior generally labeled feminine (although actually characteristic of groups without traditional power).<sup>12</sup> The slaves' interests center around the home, and their emotions rule them. Stowe says that "the full, the gentle, domestic heart" is a "peculiar characteristic" of the "unhappy race" (151). Like women, their talents are domestic ones. Cooking is "an indigenous talent of the African race" (279), and the slaves who add "soft, poetic touches" to Eva's death room have the "nicety of eye which characterizes their race" (384). Their "instinctive affections" are "peculiarly strong," and they are "not naturally daring, enterprising, but home-loving and affectionate" (153). Especially "impressible," they cry easily, "after the manner of their susceptible race" (374).

If the slaves generally are like nineteenth-century women, Tom is like the ideal woman.<sup>13</sup> He embodies the cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity, the Cult-of-True-Womanhood values that Barbara Welter found recommended repeatedly in women's magazines published between 1820 and 1860.<sup>14</sup> Tom is known even to his oppressors for his religious devotion, and he remains faithful to his family though separated from them without reasonable hope of reunion. His submissive-

ness is illustrated by his willingness to sacrifice himself always for the good of others. He submits to being sold because that is what his master wants and because he does not want to risk the welfare of the other slaves, and so endures his suffering passively. Tom's domesticity reveals itself not only with his own family, but with his owners' families as well. In fact, he is allowed to assume symbolically the most exalted role of nineteenth-century woman—that of mother. As she is dying, Eva depends on Tom more than anyone else. Marie St. Clare's selfishness precludes her playing a significant role in caring for her daughter; thus Tom is free to give Eva motherly care. Near the time of her death, Eva insists that Tom be the one to carry her from place to place, even when this means excluding her father.

Like the novel's women, Tom exercises power indirectly, and, like Eva, he gives his life for others and is most powerful when dying. As a kind of missionary, Tom begins to have a "strange power" over the slaves on Legree's plantation (497). Beaten for refusing to reveal the hiding place of Cassie and Emmaline, he says he would give his life's blood to save his master's soul. The tyrannical and sadistic black overseers Quimbo and Sambo, touched by Tom's passive response to his beating, are finally converted by his death. They are so impressed by his peacefulness that they try to call him back to life. Tom's death also inspires young George Shelby not only to free the Shelby slaves but also to vow to do "what one man can" to rid his land of "this curse of slavery" (527). Stowe comments directly on the parallel between Tom's death and Christ's: "But, of old, there was One whose suffering changed an instrument of torture, degradation and shame, into a symbol of glory, honor, and immortal life; and where His Spirit is, neither degrading stripes, nor blood, nor insults, can make the Christian's last struggle less than glorious" (518-19). Like Christ, Tom triumphs through death.<sup>15</sup> In a world that excludes him of traditional power, he effects change the same way Eva does—he welcomes death as a way of revealing that there are things more important than an individual life.

Tom's death, like Eva's, is a condemnation of a materialistic world which he willingly leaves for a better home. On his way down the river (a journey toward death), Tom reads haltingly from his Bible: "In—my—father's—house—are—many—mansions" (208). Later, death to the overworked slave means rest; he reads from his Bible, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (443). Tom insists that he anticipates his approaching death eagerly and fearlessly, and when George Shelby arrives too late with the money to secure his freedom and take him home, the slave assures the son of the man who sold him that all is well. Legree, Tom says, has only opened the gate of Heaven for him. Tom's death, like Eva's, is a means of asserting values that were being rejected.

Though it is less important than Tom's and Eva's transcendence of limits, there is nonetheless an element of escape in their deaths. Their influence in the world continues to be felt, but Eva and Tom themselves no longer experience the pains the world has caused them. The element of

escape in Eva's death seems larger than that in Tom's, perhaps because the child becomes the focus for personal and professional conflicts experienced by Stowe. Karl Menninger, who says that tuberculosis often develops in response to sorrow, moral shock and worry, found through psychoanalysis that some tuberculosis patients reveal a striking "substitution of the disease for an *affaire d'amour*."<sup>16</sup> Eva, who bears a remarkable resemblance to Menninger's description of many tuberculosis patients as having a "certain wistful, ethereal beauty,"<sup>17</sup> chooses to die and go to heaven rather than to visit the male cousin who finds her attractive. Stowe thus avoids for her young heroine the role of a sexually mature woman, a role that must at least sometimes have been frustrating to Stowe, whose correspondence suggests that her determination to limit the size of her family conflicted with her husband's sexual wishes.<sup>18</sup>

Her letters reveal that Stowe shared her characters' preoccupation with death. She complained regularly about her health and often felt herself near death. In 1827 she wrote to her sister Catherine, "I don't know that I am fit for anything and I have thought that I could wish to die young, and let the remembrance of me and my faults perish in the grave rather than live, as I fear I do, a trouble to everyone. You don't know how perfectly wretched I often feel; so useless, so weak, so destitute of energy."<sup>19</sup> These words express more than the passing mood of a teenager. Living in Cincinnati as a young married woman, Stowe read *Night Thoughts*, contemplated death and wrote to her husband that she was "probably not destined for long life."<sup>20</sup> In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe refers to living as "this slow, daily bleeding away of the inward life, drop by drop, hour after hour—" and asks: "Have not many of us, in the weary way of life, felt, in some hours, how far easier it were to die than live?" (490). Stowe admired the kind of woman who might have wakened St. Clare from his malaise had he married her. But her preoccupation with death suggests that she also sometimes desired relief from responsibility.

The conflict between engagement and withdrawal is characteristic of Victorian culture; for women writers, this conflict could be especially intense. In *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth Century America*, Mary Kelley discusses the stresses inherent in the newly emerged profession of authorship for women. Socialized to perceive their only appropriate sphere as domestic, the popular women writers, finding themselves on a public stage, were beset with conflict, conflict which informed their works as well as their lives. As Kelley says, the consciousness of the writers she calls literary domestics combined a "vision of power and a lament of powerlessness."<sup>21</sup> Stowe's depiction of Tom's and Eva's deaths dramatizes the ultimate self-sacrifice as a means of effecting change, but her characters also look forward to death as a release from restricted lives.

Dying enhances their powers but at the same time removes Tom and Eva from the necessity of exercising those powers; the novel likewise calls for action but reveals the ultimate irrelevance of that action. To point out this contradiction is not to criticize Stowe's art or her vision; rather it is to

recognize a conflict that is perhaps inevitable in the work of a religious reformer of the secular world, who seeks to change the world but must reveal its relative insignificance at the same time. Stowe perceives her age as one in which “nations are trembling and convulsed” and a “mighty influence is abroad, surging and heaving the world, as with an earthquake”; she warns of a coming judgment day when “injustice and cruelty shall bring on nations the wrath of Almighty God” (560-61). But she also suggests that endurance in this world is rewarded in the next. The next life that rewards Tom and gives Eva opportunities denied her in this world will correct the injustices suffered by Topsy as well; Eva tells her she can go to Heaven and be an angel “just as much as if you were white” (366). The book’s repeated, explicit message is that readers must use their influence to stop slavery. Stowe expects feeling to lead to action: “There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race” (556). Feeling can, however, end in itself; it does not necessarily lead to action. Intended to end slavery, Eva’s death for some readers calls attention only to itself; crying over the death of the child can dissipate the very emotions that have been aroused by what the reader has seen of slavery.

This conflict between means and ends is not peculiar to Stowe. In *No Place of Grace* Jackson Lears says that Puritan and republican jeremiads as well as anti-modernist protests have often reinforced the dominant culture by “reducing social conflicts to questions of individual morality and providing troubled Americans with an innocuous means of discharging half-conscious anxieties about the effects of expanding market capitalism.”<sup>22</sup> Like the anti-modernist critique of modern culture discussed by Lears, Stowe’s protest perhaps unintentionally promotes the values she rejects. Attracted to the power (but not the isolation) implied by individualism, Stowe uses individualist appeal for anti-individualist ends. And to the extent that the private emotional response to her book substitutes for social action and interaction, her means subvert her end.

Stowe and her contemporaries were perhaps no more preoccupied with death than their predecessors had been, but their responses to death had changed significantly. Living in a world between that of the Puritans, who could not be sure of election, and the modern world, which cannot be sure of heaven, they could more nearly view death without fear and dread. Stowe’s father, Lyman Beecher, had years before argued with Calvinist colleagues that the individual could choose God, not simply hope to be chosen. The fate of their souls was up the them, as it had not been to their ancestors. Thus while they expressed their grief more publicly, they could also more confidently perceive death as a moment of spiritual triumph.<sup>23</sup> In such a context, physical reality becomes unimportant—in fact, can be denied. Tom and Eva, who condemn the world’s materialism, are appropriately rewarded by deaths divested of horror. St. Clare believes that his daughter has achieved “the victory without the battle—the crown

without the conflict” (383), and Stowe denies that Eva’s death is real. Because her “farewell voyage” was so “bright and placid,” Stowe says, “it was impossible to realize that it was death that was approaching.” She continues, “The child felt no pain,—only a tranquil, soft weakness, daily and almost insensibly increasing” (378). St. Clare too denies that Eva can die: “There is no death to such as thou, dear Eva! neither darkness nor shadow of death; only such a bright fading as when the morning star fades in the golden dawn” (383). Although he dies from beating, Tom’s death too is peaceful and beautiful; he falls asleep with a smile.

Because Stowe’s language strips death of what is, in context, unimportant physical reality, her affirmations of death have often been perceived as sentimental denial. The death scenes which embody Stowe’s rejection of individualism and materialism are not sentimental; they are part of her positive vision of a world organized differently from the one she lived in. While sentimentality generally suggests a limited and fractured view of the world, Stowe’s vision is broad and potentially unifying. Most of her slaves have more white blood than black, and her male hero is woman-like. Slavery is not different from northern free labor, and Northerners are not, on the important issues, generally contrasted to Southerners. Indulged feelings are not opposed to strict piety.

An unquestioning acceptance of the value of individualism has led some readers to misunderstand anti-individualistic works such as Stowe’s. Richard Allen’s essay contrasting what he calls sentimentality to romanticism illustrates this error. Allen does not discuss Stowe specifically, but *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* provides an example of the anti-individualistic attitude the essay mistakenly labels sentimental. Allen says that sentimentality is always identified with groups on the fringes of a society and that it originates in the difficulty these individuals have in identifying with public life in middle class society.<sup>24</sup> Both the romantic and the sentimentalist reject the public identity, as Allen sees it; but whereas the romantic seeks an identity outside the social structure, the sentimentalist suppresses self. Allen calls sentimentality “inhibited individualism” or “suppressed behavior” because it substitutes “self-sacrifice for self-assertion and sentiment for action.”<sup>25</sup> Sentimentalism is an “alternative for those who, unable to identify with public life, are nevertheless unwilling to follow the logic of individualism to the point of overt defiance.”<sup>26</sup> Stowe is of course unable to identify with the public life of business and politics that supports or at least condones slavery, and certainly she does not understand the “logic of individualism.” Believing that self-sacrifice is the means of transforming a society with which she cannot identify, Stowe argues against the logic of individualism in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. She rejects the romantic impulse, the impulse to place oneself outside society, not because of lack of nerve (as Allen’s analysis of sentimentality would suggest), but rather because she believes that right feeling, which leads to self-sacrifice, can reform society.

Passive resistance which at its extreme ends in death (and heaven) for the sufferer, is the novel’s most obvious alternative to accepting slavery and

what slavery symbolizes, but this passive resistance is not the only alternative that Stowe envisions. David Donald has suggested that the abolitionists and other reformers of the 1830s were unconsciously motivated by a desire to renew the declining social power of the prominent families from which most of them came.<sup>27</sup> Stowe, however, does not look to this past elite; her ideal is instead an uncommon but real pattern of social organization—the agrarian Quaker family whose love of one another extends to their close community and outward to the larger human community, including, of course, runaway slaves. Rachel Halliday, the loving mother at the center of this family, is as capable as she is gentle. Unlike Mrs. Shelby, she has her husband’s total respect; her power is not restricted. When her son worries that his father might go to jail for helping slaves escape their masters, Simeon Halliday reassures the child by reminding him that his mother can do anything that needs to be done. In this community, men’s and women’s spheres may differ, but there is no division between their values.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of course did not accomplish what Stowe intended; Southerners were not influenced to follow George Shelby’s example and free their slaves, and the values her culture had restricted by identifying them as feminine were not given the authority that Stowe wished for them. In fact the book’s political effect was divisive rather than unifying, and force rather than passivity settled the conflict over slavery. Emotions were awakened by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; readers no doubt felt the sympathy and benevolence that Stowe intended. But she did not take into account emotions such as greed and pride, which were encouraged by individualism and which fueled the conflict over slavery. Her view of the positive power of the emotions seems simplistic today and certainly would have been judged mistaken by her ancestors. This is to say only that her vision of human nature was partial, as all writers’ visions necessarily are. Further, by reconciling piety and indulged feelings, she perhaps promoted the very individualism she protested.

In important ways, however, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* did bring the nation together, did create the community Stowe envisioned. The phenomenal popularity of the book is well known: 3,000 copies sold the first day and 300,000 copies the first year.<sup>28</sup> By 1861 it had sold more copies than any other American novel.<sup>29</sup> Women writers of Stowe’s time assumed an audience of women, but both sexes and all classes read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Evert Duyckinck’s *Literary World* refers to an “Uncle Tom epidemic”: “No age or sex is spared, men, women, and children all confess to its power. No condition is exempt; lords and ladies; flunkies and kitchen maids, are equally effected with the rage.”<sup>30</sup> Emerson, uneasy about his own restricted audience, said *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was “read equally in the parlor and the kitchen and the nursery”;<sup>31</sup> and the *Albany Evening Journal* said the novel seemed likely to “make both ends of the world meet.”<sup>32</sup> Stowe’s affirmation of self-sacrificial death as a protest against the isolating individualistic and materialistic values of her time was one of the centers around which Victorian culture coalesced. By its power to join so many in

a community of grief, it suggested (at least momentarily) that divisions between masculine and feminine values, and therefore between men and women, white and black, and north and south might be healed. Modern readers' dismissal of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* death scenes as sentimental and therefore irrelevant is less a comment on Stowe's vision or her art than on the firm entrenchment of the individualistic and materialistic values against which the writer persuasively argues.

## notes

1. Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860* (Durham, North Carolina, 1940), 342.

2. Brown points out extreme instances of morbidity and says that the novels are characterized by an unwholesome interest in decay (299). Kenneth Lynn, "Mrs. Stowe and the American Imagination," *New Republic*, 148 (June 1963), says that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provided readers "a means of short-circuiting the moral strictures of the era which blocked the pathway to questionable pleasures." Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, rev. ed. (New York, 1966), blames women for ruining American taste by creating the sentimental archetype and thus somehow making it "almost impossible" for other writers to portray a "fully passionate woman" (217). More recently, Ann Douglas' *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977) links popular women writers' domestication of death with the decline of "toughness" and the development of a mass consumer society.

3. Two recent essays discuss Stowe's use of religious traditions in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to criticize the direction of American life. In his discussion of the novel's relation to the Christian mystic tradition, Theodore R. Hovet, "Modernization and the American Fall into Slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *The New England Quarterly*, 54 (1981), 499-518, says that Stowe uses slavery as a symbol of "the profound theological and philosophical issues facing American society as it made the transition from a rural agricultural society to an industrial and urban one" (550). Jane P. Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," *Glyph*, 8 (1981), 79-102, discusses the novel as typological narrative that modernist critics have been unable to appreciate and argues that "the popular domestic novel of the nineteenth century represents a monumental effort to reorganize the culture from the woman's point of view" (81).

4. Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970), 9.

5. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Annotated Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. Philip Van Doren Stern (New York, 1964), 306. Subsequent references to the novel are to the same edition and are identified by page number in the text.

6. William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York, 1961), 310.

7. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, *passim*.

8. Karen Haltunnen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, 1982), 130-31.

9. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 4. Jane P. Tompkins takes issue with Douglas' "trivializing view" of Eva's death and argues, as I do, that death is victory and brings an access to power.

10. Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio, 1976), 11, says that mothers, having been warned that especially advanced mental or religious powers were a sign of consumptive tendencies, watched fearfully for signs of precocity in their children and often interpreted children's deaths as signs that they were too good for the world.

11. Ann Douglas, Introduction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York, 1981), places Eva in the category of women who are "far too young to be the objects of sexual interest" (17).

12. It has often been observed that subordinate groups share attitudes and behavior typically described as feminine. See, for instance, Elizabeth Janeway, *Man's World, Woman's Place: A Study of Social Mythology* (New York, 1971), 214. William H. Chafe, *Women and Equality: Changing Patterns in American Culture* (New York, 1977), examines the race-sex analogy at length. He concludes that, although significant differences exist between the situations of women and blacks, both have been kept in their places by the same methods—physical intimidation, economic control, psychological power of white males to limit aspiration, and socialization within the groups (66-70). The strongest parallel between sex and race, both examples of how social control has been exercised in America, is the use of stereotypes and ascribed attributes (58).

13. Elizabeth Ammons, "Heroines in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *American Literature*, 49 (1977), 173, calls Tom the "supreme heroine of the book" and discusses his "feminine" characteristics. As might be expected, not everyone has reacted positively to Tom's feminine characteristics. James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Partisan Review*, 16 (June 1949), 578-85, observes

that Tom has been "divested of his sex." Baldwin complains of the absence of qualities usually considered masculine in Tom and thinks Stowe has degraded the black man.

14. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly*, 18 (1966), 151-74.
15. Stowe's identification of Tom with Christ further reveals his femininity. John Adams, *Harriet Beecher Stowe* (New York, 1963), 81, points out that Stowe believed Christ had an especially close affinity with women, that she in fact saw him as the union of the feminine and the divine.
16. Karl Menninger, *Man Against Himself* (New York, 1938), 396.
17. *Ibid.*, 395.
18. Mary Kelley, "Harriet Beecher Stowe as Woman in Conflict within the Home," *American Studies*, 19 (Fall 1978), 31.
19. Edward Wagenknecht, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Known and the Unknown* (New York, 1965), 91.
20. Grace Seiler, "Harriet Beecher Stowe," *College English*, 11 (1949), 34.
21. Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage* (New York, 1984), 259.
22. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York, 1981), 6.
23. Phillippe Aries, *Western Attitudes toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore, 1974), 146, calls the nineteenth century "a period of impassioned, self-indulgent grief." Ann Douglas in "Heaven Our Home: Consolation Literature in the Northern United States, 1820-1880," in *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia, 1975), 56, points out that while excessive grief caused by a loved person's dying was often seen as a weakness in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the nineteenth century made a cult of mourning.
24. Richard Allen, "If You Have Tears: Sentimentalism as Soft Romanticism," *Genre*, 8 (1975), 122.
25. *Ibid.*, 121.
26. *Ibid.*, 134.
27. David Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York, 1956), 34. Larzer Ziff, *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America* (New York, 1982), 301, notes that most major writers of mid-nineteenth century America (as well as reformers) came from the classes most threatened by the industrial capitalists and the factory workers.
28. Margaret Banning, "Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe," *Georgia Review*, 9 (1955), 461.
29. Carl Bode, *The Anatomy of American Popular Culture: 1840-1861* (Berkeley, 1959), 185.
30. Quoted by Stephen Hirsch, "Uncle Tomitudes: The Popular Reaction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *South Atlantic Review*, (1978), 303.
31. Quoted by F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York, 1966), 67.
32. Quoted by Hirsch, 304.