

Revisiting Uncle Tom

Suffering, Subservience, and Racial Betrayal in American Cultural Memory

Caio Fernandes

Abstract

This paper examines the evolving figure of Uncle Tom in American cultural memory, tracing how Harriet Beecher Stowe's original character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) transformed into a contested symbol of Black identity, morality, and betrayal. While Stowe portrayed him as a devout martyr, later representations reduced him to a stereotype: the noble sufferer, the submissive servant, and the racial sellout. Analyzing selected literary and cinematic portrayals from the 19th century to the present, the paper explores how Uncle Tom has served as both a figure of empathy and a target of scorn. It considers the racial politics of suffering, respectability, betrayal, and survival, highlighting the tension between resistance and complicity. Through comparative close readings, the paper argues that Uncle Tom's legacy reveals the shifting burdens placed on Black representation in U.S. culture and sheds light on broader questions of race, memory, and identity in the American literary tradition.

Keywords:American literature, stereotype, African American representation

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Introduction

In the eighth edition of M. H. Abrams's *Glossary of Literary Terms*, 'sentimentalism' is defined as a "now pejorative term applied to what is perceived to be an excess of emotion to an occasion, and especially to an overindulgence in the 'tender' emotions of pathos and sympathy" (293). When sentimentalism is established as a literary procedure, critics often regard it as a flaw, a marker of a 'bad' novel or poem. Yet, this critical judgment does not erase the text's cultural significance. Indeed, public reception of sentimental aesthetics is often positive and has fuelled a revisionist critical tradition.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, first published as a serialized novel in 1852, exemplifies this dynamic. Though dismissed by some critics as "so seemingly artless, so lacking in apparent literary talent" (Ward 75), Stowe's sentimental narrative about a loyal slave sold away from his Kentucky masters became an immediate commercial success. It is widely regarded as the first American bestseller and credited with mobilizing "white Americans previously uninterested in the slavery question, moving them to condemn the legal system of chattel slavery they had established and sustained for generations" (Fagan Yellin VII).

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Uncle Tom's suffering occupied a prominent place in collective American consciousness, establishing the character as a cultural icon. Tom's passive, docile nature and unwavering faithfulness were read as a touching portrayal of a noble sufferer – a Christ-like figure rooted in "a tradition that privileges sympathy for the unjust suffering of Black victims" (Williams 16). However, by 1920, as critic Michelle Wallace notes, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "was almost a dead letter" (144), increasingly criticized for its racist elements, including the depiction of the slave as "a White-identified, elderly and cowardly bootlicker" (145).

Over time, the figure of Uncle Tom has been subject to growing antagonism. In contemporary African American culture, calling a Black man an 'Uncle Tom' is a severe insult, "equivalent to calling someone 'a White man's ni—'" (Wallace 143). Politically, the label is often directed at Black men who align with right-wing or conservative ideals, paralleling Tom's choice in the novel to remain a slave despite chances to escape. Additionally, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has largely disappeared from school curricula, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, once celebrated as an abolitionist, is now sometimes blamed for perpetuating "the stereotyping and the long-standing biases" (Nichols 333) against African Americans.

This shift in reception cannot be simply attributed to changing times or sociopolitical developments that hardened cultural attitudes. Rather, the dismantling of the Uncle Tom icon has unfolded in distinct phases, each linked to historical moments and echoed in cultural productions since the character's debut. Importantly, Uncle Tom has always been – and remains – a transfictional and transmedial figure, circulating through literature, film, television, and other art forms in both positive and negative lights, maintaining his role as a key figure in African American cultural representation.

This paper aims to analyze Uncle Tom's evolving presence in American culture through selected works produced since Beecher Stowe's novel. The character will be examined both as a

fully developed figure and as a literary archetype that critic Charles Nichols calls “so much part of the American literary tradition” (Nichols 333). For clarity, I categorize Uncle Tom’s cultural renditions into three types, which often overlap rather than follow a strict chronology: (1) Tom as the noble sufferer, (2) Tom as the submissive servant, and (3) Tom as the sellout. The primary corpus includes fictional works across literature and film, alongside references to Uncle Tom’s presence in politics and journalism to illuminate themes resonating beyond fiction.

Christian, resilient, and Black: Uncle Tom as the noble sufferer

In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks* (1973), Donald Bogle calls Uncle Tom the “Black beginning” (3), marking the start of a cultural phenomenon portraying Black people through White perspectives: “In the beginning, there was an Uncle Tom... And a new dimension was added to American movies” (4). The film referenced is *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903), the first of nine adaptations of Beecher Stowe’s novel, including a 1963 German version, *Onkel Toms Hütte*. Most adaptations emerged during cinema’s early years, when literary works were popular subjects alongside news and sports (Corrigan 13).

As an interracial bestseller aiming to “hold up slavery in the most lifelike and graphic manner possible” (Beecher Stowe 3), *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was a natural choice for film. The story had already achieved stage success through Black theater troupes known as Tom Companies, which brought the novel to performance after the Civil War and gained reputations in diverse genres (Wallace 144). By the time of the 1903 film, multiple versions of Uncle Tom already existed, showing notable variation – especially in portraying him as a martyr – and reflecting the character’s complex cultural legacy.

The characterizations were, however, homogeneous enough to establish core features that would be kept, which directly contributed to the maturation of Tom as a Black stereotype, easily recognizable even when no direct mention of Beecher Stowe’s novel is made. As Bogle reminds us about the versions that can be found in Hollywood, Tom is

the first in a long line of socially acceptable Good Negro characters. Always as toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, n’ver turn against their White massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind. Thus they endear themselves to White audiences and emerge as heroes of sorts. (4–5)

The many renditions of Uncle Tom vary primarily in the emphasis placed on particular qualities attributed to him. When his identity as a hero is foregrounded, Tom is characterized as a man of unwavering faith and resilience amid the moral crises imposed by slavery. His “refusal to submit to spiritual tyranny as he had earlier submitted to separation from his family dramatizes the novel’s major theme” (Fagan Yellin, XVII), marking him as a figure of non-violent resistance. Ultimately, his journey echoes Christ’s, especially in his ability to see the good in his enemies.

Early film adaptations retained this characterization with notable fidelity, though the degree of Christian symbolism varied. For instance, the 1903 film adaptation highlights a pivotal scene where Tom refuses to whip a female slave, emphasizing his moral determination. The scene mirrors the novel, in which Tom’s refusal to betray other slaves leads to his death by whipping.

In the movie, he is then depicted ascending to heaven, welcomed by Little Eva, the young White girl whose Christian friendship with Tom also symbolizes spiritual purity both in the novel and in the movie. Here, Tom's docility is reframed as quiet rebellion; as Fagan Yellin notes, "Tom's refusal to obey his master in obedience to a higher law was a truly revolutionary position in mid-century America" (XIX), framing Tom as a principled hero, whose martyrdom champions universal values, akin to Christ.

While the novel employs allegory to construct this Christian reading – what Fluck calls "an unmistakable tendency to dissolve the sentimental discourse into the typological" (23) – film adaptations, with their visual power, accentuate the religious references more explicitly. A contemporary example is Frank Darabont's *The Green Mile* (1999), which centers on John Coffey, a Black man unjustly imprisoned for the rape and murder of two White girls. Ultimately, Coffey emerges from "the negrophilic Tom tradition," embodying "a Christ-like and Tom-like Black acceptance of racial injustice" (Williams 16).

The actor Michael Clarke Duncan's towering physical presence, enhanced by cinematographic techniques and paired with Coffey's gentle demeanor, cultivates the 'gentle giant' archetype that is relevant in the American literary tradition, as seen in characters such as Lennie, from John Steinbeck's classic novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937). Like Tom, Coffey refuses to escape and meets an unjust death by the hands of White antagonists, despite helping them through miraculous healings. Essentially, Coffey's suffering serves as a "melodramatic spectacle of the Black man embracing the pain of the Whites in the most compromising of ways" (Williams 18). Although this could align Coffey with the submissive servant trope, his spiritual qualities and tragic fate preserve the noble, Christ-like dimension essential to his portrayal.

The presence of this noble sufferer type in the late 20th century is especially striking, given that Uncle Tom had been "thoroughly discredited by Blacks and Whites alike" (Williams 17) by that time. By 1996, when *The Green Mile's* source novel was published, the name 'Uncle Tom' had become a curse among Black communities (Fagan Yellin XXVII). This raises the question: why, then, the persistence?

The answer lies partly in the sociopolitical context of the late 20th century, when debates about Black male identity regained urgency reminiscent of abolitionist-era struggles. The 1991 Rodney King brutal beating by police officers and subsequent riots underscored systemic injustice (Enomoto 145). The 1995 O.J. Simpson trial – where Simpson was acquitted despite substantial evidence – further polarized public discourse on race. These events are often described as "two scenarios as epics of 'pro-Tom' sympathy and 'anti-Tom' antipathy" (Fiedler 41).

Accordingly, by the time *The Green Mile* reached audiences, there was a demand for representations of Black men as virtuous figures, not just victims. As Wallace observes of the 1990s, "a reconfigured version of the Tom scenario still seems to be necessary to perform the 'moral legibility' so important in melodrama's recognition of virtue" (17). Ultimately, this maintained Uncle Tom's cultural icon status, as icons "re-unfold, re-disseminate in various contexts, shedding new light on, possibly enriching our comprehension of the source texts in their historical and aesthetic specificity" (Stemberger 22).

However, this endurance also reflects an ongoing effort to reclaim an interpretation lost to stereotyping. From early film adaptations portraying Tom as a noble sufferer to recent ones that revive his martyrdom, there is a spectrum of portrayals. Initially, Tom's quiet resistance was recognized as a form of rebellion. Over time, that docility shifted into the submissive servant stereotype – a figure whose primary function is the happiness of a White superior. This diminished portrayal largely explains the character's antagonistic reputation within Black culture, despite his original role evoking the historical suffering of African Americans.

In sum, Uncle Tom's character and archetype have undergone a complex evolution, oscillating between reverence and vilification. His story as a principled martyr grounded in Christian allegory remains central in some adaptations, such as *The Green Mile*, while other portrayals have recast him as a symbol of subservience and betrayal. As it will be discussed in the following section, the persistence of these competing images speaks to ongoing struggles over representation, identity, and historical memory in African American culture.

Passive, auxiliary, and self-sacrificing: Uncle Tom as the submissive servant

In his 1893 article *Uncle Tom's Cabin Forty Years After*, critic Francis A. Shoup defends Beecher Stowe's novel as a work whose quality relies not only on its achievements regarding the slavery question but also on its artistic merits. He goes even further by saying that

if there had not been a slave in America, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would have taken hold upon the hearts of men, and moved them to indignation just as it did with the case as it stood; and thus it is that, with the slavery issue long since dead, it has as many readers as ever. (89)

The opinion contrasts with the common view that the book's strength lies in its role in abolitionism, as "it has been one strategy of those literary and cultural critics who have retained an interest in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to emphasize the unusual scope and depth of its social analysis" (Fluck 321). Only in archetypal criticism has the book attracted attention somewhat independent of its social impact, though Northrop Fry himself called Beecher Stowe's novel a "centrifugal work," in which "the plot exists primarily to illustrate the themes of slavery" (53). Archetypal analysis notably grew with the story's adaptation to visual media, exemplified by Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coon, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks*.

According to Bogle, one of the earliest instances in which the Tom archetype can be seen in Hollywood is the short *For Massa's Sake* (1911), the story of a former slave who "is so attached to his erstwhile master that he sells himself back into slavery to help the master through a period of financial difficulties" (6). The plot is directly inspired by Uncle Tom's trajectory in the first part of the novel, when Mr. Shelby, the master risking losing his property to debt collectors, finds himself obliged to sell Tom, who, in turn, willingly accepts his fate and refuses to escape, as it can be seen in the following passage:

If I must be sold, or all the people on the place, and everything go to rack, why, let me be sold. I s'pose I can bar it as well as any on 'em," he added, while something like a sob and a sigh shook his broad, rough chest convulsively. "Mas'r always found me on the spot – he always will. I never have broke trust, nor used my pass no ways contrary to my word, and I never will. It's better for me alone to go, than to break up the place and sell all. (Beecher Stowe 44)

Tom's resignation and love for his master are central to satirical portrayals of him as a traitor to the Black race. Additionally, this aspect is also emphasized in early Hollywood's romanticized depictions of slavery and Black servitude, where interracial relationships are presented as loving, thereby negating accounts of cruelty toward Black people. After all, if Tom is a noble sufferer and martyr resisting tyranny non-violently, White people become the tormentors. Not surprisingly, Tom's image soon shifted to that of a servant who fully accepts and agrees with the system that enslaves him.

This portrayal has roots in the initial backlash against *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its negative depiction of the American Southern way of life. Following the novel's publication, Anti-Tom Literature emerged, "created to counteract the book's message, particularly in the South, portraying the happiness of plantation life and of slaves' efforts to remain in the comforts of captivity" (Glowacki 14). A notable example is Thomas Dixon Jr.'s *The Klan Trilogy* (1902–1907), later adapted by D. W. Griffith in the influential film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

Griffith's films became foundational in early American cinema's portrayal of Black people, countering stories where Black virtue was defined through the presence of White antagonists. Critic Jack Temple Kirby observes that in Griffith's work "Black men are either brutish rebels who threaten White women; or they are docile Sambos (in their later years, Uncle Toms) who obey and reassure Whites of master's righteousness" (120). As *The Birth of a Nation* gained popularity, this representation lingered, reshaping the Uncle Tom image.

Southern apologists for slavery, who "commonly insisted that the novel in general, and Tom in particular, provided proof of their contention that slavery was a 'positive good' for the African" (Riss 519-20), succeeded in promoting their views through this powerful medium. However, between portraying Black men as predators and idealizing the South, the latter dominated, ensuring Uncle Tom's enduring presence in cultural memory. As Critic Stanley J. Lemons notes, "this romantic treatment of the South may have been a necessary part of the softening process which accompanied the improvement of the Black stereotype in the early twentieth century" (110). Consequently, Black men were no longer depicted as moral heroes nor as vicious predators, but as loving subordinate figures to Whites.

The film that explores this new direction the most is perhaps *The Little Colonel* (1935), Shirley Temple's success that, "set in the antebellum South" (O'Loughlin 586), found in the relationship between Uncle Tom and Little Eva a narrative to be explored. In the movie, the girl in question is Lloyd, a sweet child who, in a clear contrast with her racist and temperamental grandfather, does not see herself as different from the Black servants. She goes to church with them, learns the Christian fundamentals, and receives, through singing and dancing, all the joy and happiness that her stern White family cannot provide. In a particular scene, when little Loyd is

feeling sad and refuses to go upstairs, where her room is, Walker, the Tom-like character, tap dances on the steps, charming the child out of her negative feelings.

Walker is played by Bill Robinson and serves as a perfect example of the Tom archetype in this era of Hollywood. He is passive and accepts the abuse inflicted by his master, but takes the risk of disobeying some of his orders if it means somehow aiding Lloyd. His decisions often result in his master's anger, which he endures, knowing it is a small price to pay for the child's happiness. Not surprisingly, Walker has no backstory. Even more pronounced than in the case of Uncle Tom and Little Eva, the child's fears and desires become the servant's; something in his otherness as a representative of another race allows the child's struggles to be confronted and ultimately overcome. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, this something is Christian faith, in *The Little Colonel*, the delights of Black joy.

This relationship between the Tom character and a White child echoes obvious family designs, which, in many ways, not only removes his position as a sufferer but also distances him from stereotypes that depict Black men as dangerous. As Winifred Fluck says, the character receives "a new social role: instead of emphasizing his ethnic identity, he is now presented in the roles of father, husband, and especially that of uncle, which establishes, in the very title of the book, a family relation between White and Black" (327). Moreover, this configuration appears in both film and literature often alongside the Mammy stereotype, a "usually big, fat, and cantankerous Black woman" (Bogle 9) who works as a secondary mother-figure to a White child, as it is the case in *The Little Colonel*, in the example of Mom Beck.

This interracial family design has, however, come to be negatively received by the public over time. Those who discredit Uncle Tom as a valid representation for African Americans in culture were quick to bring attention to how the character sees himself as part of the White family that has him as a slave. When connected to his resignation when faced with the reality of leaving his own family in order to stay loyal to his master, this aspect of his character serves as argument for a reading that sees Tom rather as a White-identified betrayer of his own people. As it will be discussed in the following section, this viewpoint can be found in many cultural instances, especially in the second half of the 20th century, when the dismantling process of Tom as an African American icon continued.

Sluggish, delusional, and White-identified: Uncle Tom as the sellout

The revolutionary ideas of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were widely embraced, as evidenced by its immediate commercial success and significant international support. With the rise of early modernist criticism, however, the book's insurgent nature began to be rejected, increasingly seen as an obstacle to classifying the novel as a legitimate work of art. This led literary figures of Henry James's stature to even discredit the book as literature. James himself described *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as "much less a book than a state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness, in which the audience didn't sit and read and appraise and pass the time, but walked and talked and laughs and cried..." (159-160). The negative critiques focused primarily on the novel's perceived sentimentalism and lack of structural harmony, with little to no attention given to its

problematic racial characterizations. Then, in the second half of the 20th century, these issues gained prominence, largely due to the increasing presence of Black voices in cultural institutions, where they were finally given the opportunity to express their own feelings about the novel. The most famous example of this new critical perspective is perhaps *James Baldwin's essay Everybody's Protest Novel* (1958), in which the author not only explicitly calls *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "a very bad novel" (13), but also denounces Beecher Stowe's failed attempt to create a character capable of illustrating the real extent of the oppression suffered by Black men:

We have, as it seems to me, in this most mechanical and interlocking of civilizations, attempted to lop this creature down to the status of a time-saving invention. He is not, after all, merely a member of a Society or a Group or a deplorable conundrum to be explained by Science. He is – and how old-fashioned the words sound! – something more than that, something resolutely indefinable, unpredictable. In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity – which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves – we are diminished, and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves, and the power that will free us from ourselves. (15)

In the minds of those who experienced the pain that Harriet Beecher Stowe had tried to portray, the author had good intentions, but her efforts "did not include notions of parity between White and Black people", most definitely because "her real concern in writing the novel was not to raise lowly Africans up to a position of equality in American society, but to help bring an end to slavery for the sake of White salvation" (Smith Ducksworth 205). There were, then, two things to be done: to discredit as valid any case that reaffirmed the novel's hero as a representative of blackness and to hold space for portrayals that, for instance, would not reinforce the idea of Black men being neither predators nor plain victims.

Accordingly, many African American authors dedicated their careers in the 20th century to the creation of stories that shed light on the complexities concerning Black men's identities and positions in culture. Besides James Baldwin's works, Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1931) is an example in which the issue of identity is explored by means of dismantling previously accepted notions, such as the one evoked by Uncle Tom. Baldwin himself, in his essay, cites the novel's hero, Bigger Thomas, as a more substantial portrayal: "Bigger is Uncle Tom's descendant [...], so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked in a deadly, timeless battle" (22).

However, as it was proven evident from what one can find in *The Green Mile*, Tom would not simply cease to exist. Besides that, with the emergence of the postmodernist movement, the prominence given to pastiche and satire as artistic procedures opened a channel for literary endeavors that would make direct references to both Tom and Beecher Stowe's novel. While household names like James Baldwin would focus on more earnest and straightforward discourses on Black representation, authors who had achieved prominence in the postmodernist generation made use of satire as a strategy to keep afloat the conversation about the problem of essentialist representations. That is the case of Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), an acid racial satire called by critics at the time of its publication "a demonized Uncle Tom's Cabin" (Charyn 248).

Besides having Black characters that “defy the usual categorization and do not lend themselves to easy explanations” (De Arman 176), the novel occupies a privileged position in the new school of Black storytelling due to its direct critique of Beecher Stowe, who is a character in the book. *Flight to Canada* brings back the fact that most of the episodes found in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were “borrowed from Josiah Henson” (Reed 8), the fugitive slave who, once safe in Canada, published *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself* (1849) and started a new American literary tradition: the Slave Narratives. In Reed’s satire, Harriet Beecher Stowe is characterized as a money-hungry, washed-up writer who used the abolitionist cause to become rich and be able to afford her luxuries:

Old Harriet. Naughty Harriet. Accusing Lord Byron of pornography. She couldn’t take to Lincoln. She liked Nobility. Curious. The woman who was credited with running the Planters was a toady to Nobility, just as they were. Strange, history. Complicated, too. It will always be a mystery, history. New disclosures are bizarre as the most bizarre fantasy. Harriet caught some of it. She popularized the American novel and introduced it to Europe. Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Writing is strange through. That story caught up with her. The story she ‘borrowed’ from Josiah Henson. (Reed 8)

The novel, whose universe reunites many real-life personalities – from U.S. president Abraham Lincoln to television host Barbara Walters –, continues with its fierce critique of Beecher Stowe by means of also having a Tom-like character. Uncle Robin, a slave initially presented as a servant who “knows his place – his place in the shadows” (Reed 19), is revealed, at the end of the novel, to have been only playing the Uncle Tom part and in reality being a very intelligent and feisty man who ends up as the sole heir to his cruel master’s fortune, after falsifying the will in his favor. The message is clear: only clueless and oblivious people, such as Whites, would find believable or acceptable a slave character who loves his master and is subservient to him enough to choose to keep living in slavery.

Uncle Robin’s trajectory in the novel is described through many direct references to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and exaggerations that arise from a deep knowledge of the stereotypes borne from the novel’s success. The romantic relationship between Uncle Robin and his master is made fun of, highly exaggerating what a slave would do for his master’s benefit:

“I don’t permit any of the employees to use the telephone. I permit Uncle Robin to use it because he’s such a simple creation he wouldn’t have the thought powers for using it deviously. He’s been in the house for so long that he’s lost this thirst for pagan ways and is as good a gentleman as you or me”.

“Why, thank you, Cap’n Swille.”

“Don’t mention it, Robin. I don’t know what I’d do without you. He brings me two gallons of slave women’s milk each morning. It keeps me going. He travels all over the South in an airplane, buying supplies for the state. He’s become quite a bargainer and knows about all of the sales.” (Reed 34-35)

The image of Uncle Robin getting his master milk from slave women is especially relevant, for it illustrates the idea of the Tom-like character as a betrayer of his own race. By giving the oppressor what it should be for Black children only, the character can be described as White-identified, as a figure who would not only give his own life to fulfil his master’s needs but also sacrifice the lives of those who are, essentially, equal to him.

Additionally, the anachronistically poignant motif of Robin as the privileged slave who is given the chance to fly on planes and be considered a gentleman satirizes the idea of White identification as derived from Black stereotypes such as Tom. As critic Charles De Arman well puts it, what Ishmael Reed does in *Flight to Canada* is to “take full advantage of the storyteller’s prerogative to manipulate time to suit his tale and to differentiate between character and stereotype by portraying characters who learn from their experiences” (160).

As a postmodernist writer, Reed sees in absurdity something to be artistically explored, and what sounds more absurd to a 20th century Black person than a slave who would willingly choose to live as one? The idea is that accepted absurdities, such as the ones created and expressed either by Harriet Beecher Stowe or by the minds behind Uncle Tom’s later renditions, should not only be made fun of but also completely shut down. After all, in the post-Civil Rights Movement America in which *Flight to Canada* was written, there is no space for the passivity and resignation so prominently evoked by Uncle Tom. However, as I intended to explore in this paper’s conclusion, the character’s trajectory reveals, above any other cultural pattern, how persisting a vision can be, even if its endurance means the diminishment of a whole class’s claim to authority.

Conclusion

To analytically revisit the evolution of a character so prominently displayed in culture is an exercise of meticulous observation. Any new and strange route the character’s trajectory takes usually has reasons beyond the author’s intentions. It is the task of the scholar to be attentive to such motivators and open to their sometimes vague nature, as some of the character’s reintroductions to culture lack depth. In Uncle Tom’s case, as shown in this paper, few changes in his reception are vague. As a controversial figure since his debut, Uncle Tom’s history intersects with key events in America’s identity, from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement.

That said, Harriet Beecher Stowe did not create a deeply complex character destined for literary greatness. Uncle Tom is, indeed, a flat character, limited by his role as hero in the novel, but this very lack of depth is what allowed the many reincarnations. His poor backstory and limited needs made it easy for a noble sufferer to become a passive servant, then a betrayer of his race. With little complexity to resist change, his character was open to reinterpretation.

Ultimately, Uncle Tom represents a series of attempts: first, to expose slavery’s cruelty using sentimentalism; then, to rewrite history by denying Southern horrors through absurd loving slave-master relationships; and finally, to demonstrate what not to do when portraying a Black man, discrediting the abolitionist novel itself in the process.

Revisiting Uncle Tom’s trajectory demands both keen observation and acceptance that a fictional character’s story does not end with the original book. Characters can be reinterpreted, changed, or discredited for urgent or malicious reasons. Because he has had so many lives, Uncle Tom is both the face of abolitionism and the symbol of harmful essentialist portrayals of Black men. To understand him is to recognize this complexity – one created not only by a 19th century abolitionist writer, but also by many other minds who ensured his lasting cultural relevance.

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