Sentimental Power: 
*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History

JANE TOMPKINS

Once, during a difficult period of my life, I lived in the basement of a house on Forest Street in Hartford, Connecticut, which had belonged to Isabella Beecher Hooker—Harriet Beecher Stowe’s half-sister. This woman at one time in her life had believed that the millennium was at hand and that she was destined to be the leader of a new matriarchy. When I lived in that basement, however, I knew nothing of Stowe, or of the Beechers, or of the utopian visions of nineteenth-century American women. I made a reverential visit to the Mark Twain house a few blocks away, took photographs of his study, and completely ignored Stowe’s own house—also open to the public—which stood across the lawn. Why should I go? Neither I nor anyone I knew regarded Stowe as a serious writer. At the time, I was giving my first lecture course in the American Renaissance—concentrated exclusively on Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman—and although *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was written in exactly the same period, and although it is probably the most influential book ever written by an American, I would never have dreamed of including it on my reading list. To begin with, its very popularity would have militated against it; as everybody knew, the classics of American fiction were, with a few exceptions, all *succès d’estime*.

In 1969, when I lived on Forest Street, the women’s movement was just under way. It was several years before Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” would make it onto college reading lists, sandwiched in between Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris. These women, like some of their male counterparts, had been unpopular in their own time and owed their reputations to the discernment of latter-day critics. Because of their work, it is now respectable to read these writers, who, unlike Nathaniel Hawthorne, had to wait
sentimental novels written by women in the nineteenth century were responsible for a series of cultural evils whose effects still plague us: the degeneration of American religion from theological rigor to anti-intellectual consumerism, the rationalization of an unjust economic order, the propagation of the debased images of modern mass culture, and the encouragement of self-indulgence and narcissism in literature's most avid readers—women. To the extent that they protested the evils of society, their protest is seen as duplicitous—the product and expression of the very values they pretended to condemn. Unwittingly or not, so the story goes, they were apologists for an oppressive social order. In contrast to male authors like Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville, who are celebrated as models of intellectual daring and honesty, these women are generally thought to have traded in false stereotypes, dishing out weak-minded pabulum to nourish the prejudices of an ill-educated and underemployed female readership. Self-deluded and unable to face the harsh facts of a competitive society, they are portrayed as manipulators of a gullible public who kept their readers imprisoned in a dreamworld of self-justifying clichés. Their fight against the evils of their society was a fixed match from the start.4

The thesis I will argue in this chapter is diametrically opposed to these portrayals. It holds that the popular domestic novel of the nineteenth century represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view, that this body of work is remarkable for its intellectual complexity, ambition, and resourcefulness, and that, in certain cases, it offers a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville. Finally, it suggests that the enormous popularity of these novels, which has been cause for suspicion bordering on disgust, is a reason for paying close attention to them. Uncle Tom's Cabin was, in almost any terms one can think of, the most important book of the century. It was the first American novel ever to sell over a million copies and its impact is generally thought to have been incalculable. Expressive of and responsible for the values of its time, it also belongs to a genre, the sentimental novel, whose chief characteristic is that it is written by, for, and about women. In this respect, Uncle Tom's Cabin is not exceptional but representative. It is the summa theologiae of nineteenth-century America's religion of domesticity, a brilliant rebuff of the culture's favorite story about itself—the story of salvation through motherly love. Out of the ideological materials they had at their disposal, the sentimental novelists elaborated a myth that gave women the central position of power and authority in the culture; and of these efforts Uncle Tom's Cabin is the most dazzling exemplar.

I have used words like "monumental" and "dazzling" to describe Stowe's novel and the tradition of which it is a part because they have for too long been the casualties of a set of critical attitudes which equate intellectual merit with a certain kind of argumentative discourse and certain kinds of subject matter. A long tradition of academic parochialism has enforced this sort of discourse through a series of cultural contrasts: light "feminine" novels versus tough-minded intellectual treatises; domestic "chattiness" versus serious thinking; and, summarily, the "damned mob of scribbling women" versus a few giant intellects, unappreciated and misunderstood in their time, struggling manfully against a flood of sentimental rubbish.5
complexity and scope of a novel like Stowe's, or to account for its enormous popular success, stems from their assumptions about the nature and function of literature. In modernist thinking, literature is by definition a form of discourse that has no designs on the world. It does not attempt to change things but merely to represent them, and it does so in a specifically literary language whose claim to value lies in its uniqueness. Consequently, works whose stated purpose is to influence the course of history, and which therefore employ a language that is not only not unique but common and accessible to everyone, do not qualify as works of art. Literary texts, such as the sentimental novel, which make continual and obvious appeals to the reader's emotions and use technical devices that are distinguished by their utter conventionality, epitomize the opposite of everything that good literature is supposed to be. "For the literary critic," writes J. W. Ward, summing up the dilemma posed by Uncle Tom's Cabin, "the problem is how a book so seemingly artless, so lacking in apparent literary talent, was not only an immediate success but has endured."66

How deep the problem goes it illustrated dramatically by George F. Whicher's discussion of Stowe's novel in The Literary History of the United States. Reflecting the consensus view on what good novels are made of, Whicher writes: "Nothing attributable to Mrs. Stowe or her handiwork can account for the novel's enormous vogue; its author's resources as a purveyor of Sunday-school fiction were not remarkable. She had at most a ready command of broadly conceived melodrama, humor, and pathos, and of these popular elements she compounded her book." At a loss to understand how a book so compounded was able to "convulse a mighty nation," Whicher concludes—incredibly—that Stowe's own explanation, that "God wrote it," "solved the paradox." Rather than give up his bias against "melodrama," "pathos," and "Sunday-school fiction," Whicher takes refuge in a solution which, even according to his lights, is patently absurd.67 And no wonder. The modernist literary aesthetic cannot account for the unprecedented and persistent popularity of a book like Uncle Tom's Cabin, for this novel operates according to principles quite other than those which have been responsible for determining the currently sanctified American literary classics.

It is not my purpose, however, to drag Hawthorne and Melville from their pedestals, nor to claim that the novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Fanny Fern, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps are good in the same way that Moby-Dick and The Scarlet Letter are; rather, I will argue that the work of the sentimental writers is complex and significant in ways other than those which characterize the established masterpieces. I will ask the reader to set aside some familiar categories for evaluating fiction—stylistic intricacy, psychological subtlety, epistemological complexity—and to see the sentimental novel not as an artifice of eternity answerable to certain formal criteria and to certain psychological and philosophical concerns, but as a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time.

The power of a sentimental novel to move its audience depends upon the audience's being in possession of the conceptual categories that constitute character and event. The storehouse of assumptions includes attitudes toward the family and toward social institutions, a definition of power and its relation to individual human feeling, notions of political and social equality, and above all, a set of religious beliefs which organize and sustain the rest. Once in possession of the system of beliefs that undergirds the patterns of sentimental fiction, it is possible for modern readers to see how its tearful episodes and frequent violations of probability were invested with a structure of meanings that fixed these works, for nineteenth-century readers, not in the realm of fairy tale or escapist fantasy, but in the very bedrock of reality. I do not say that we can read sentimental fiction exactly as Stowe's audience did—that would be impossible—but that we can and should set aside the modernist prejudices which consign this fiction to oblivion, in order to see how and why it worked for its readers, in its time, with such unexampled effect.

Let us consider the episode in Uncle Tom's Cabin most often cited as the epitome of Victorian sentimentalism—the death of little Eva—because it is the kind of incident most offensive to the sensibilities of twentieth-century academic critics. It is on the belief that this incident is nothing more than a sob story that the whole case against sentimentalism rests. Little Eva's death, so the argument goes, like every other sentimental tale, is awash with emotion but does nothing to remedy the evils it deplors. Essentially, it leaves the slave system and the other characters unchanged. This trivializing view of the episode is grounded in assumptions about power and reality so common that we are not even aware they are in force. Thus, generations of critics have commented with condescending irony on little Eva's death. But in the system of belief which undergirds Stowe's enterprise, dying is the supreme form of heroism. In Uncle Tom's Cabin, death is the equivalent: not of defeat but of victory; it brings an access of power, not a loss of it; it is not only the crowning achievement of life, it is life, and Stowe's entire presentation of little Eva is designed to dramatize this fact.

Stories like the death of little Eva are compelling for the same reason that the story of Christ's death is compelling: They enact a philosophy.
as much political as religious, in which the pure and powerless die in order to save the powerful and corrupt, and thereby show themselves more powerful than those they save. They enact, in short, a theory of power in which the ordinary or "commonsense" view of what is efficacious and what is not (a view to which most modern critics are committed) is simply reversed, as the very possibility of social action is made dependent on the action taking place in individual hearts. Little Eva’s death enacts the drama of which all the major episodes of the novel are transformations, the idea, central to Christian soteriology, that the highest human calling is to give one’s life for another. It presents one version of the ethic of sacrifice on which the entire novel is based and contains in some form all of the motifs that, by their frequent recurrence, constitute the novel’s ideological framework.

Little Eva’s death, moreover, is also a transformation of a story circulating in the culture at large. It may be found, for example, in a dozen or more versions in the evangelical sermons of the Reverend Dwight Lyman Moody, which he preached in Great Britain and Ireland in 1875. In one version it is called “The Child Angel” and it concerns a beautiful golden-haired girl of seven, her father’s pride and joy, who dies and, by appearing to him in a dream in which she calls to him from heaven, brings him salvation. The tale shows that 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. The power of the dead or the dying to redeem the unregenerate is a major theme of nineteenth-century popular fiction and religious literature. Mothers and children are thought to be uniquely capable of this work. In a sketch entitled “Children” published the year after Uncle Tom came out Stowe writes: “Wouldst thou know, o parent, what is that faith which unlocks heaven? Go not to wrangling polemics, or creeds and forms of theology, but draw to thy bosom thy little one, and read in that clear trusting eye the lesson of eternal life.” If children because of their purity and innocence can lead adults to God while living, their spiritual power when they are dead is greater still. Death, Stowe argues in a pamphlet, entitled “Ministration of Departed Spirits,” enables the Christian to begin his “real work.” God takes people from us sometimes so that their “ministry can act upon us more powerfully from the unseen world.”

The mother would fain electrify the heart of her child. She yearns and burns in vain to make her soul effective on its soul, and to inspire it with a spiritual and holy life; but all her own weaknesses, faults and mortal cares, cramp and confine her till death breaks all fetters; and then, first truly alive, risen, purified, and at rest, she may do calmly, sweetly, and certainly, what, amid the tempest and tossings of her life, she labored for painfully and fitfully.

When the spiritual power of death is combined with the natural sanctity of childhood, the child becomes an angel endowed with salvific force. Most often, it is the moment of death that saves, when the dying child, glimpsing for a moment the glory of heaven, testifies to the reality of the life to come. Uncle Tom knows that this will happen when little Eva dies, and explains it to Miss Ophelia as follows:

“You know it says in Scripture, ‘At midnight there was a great cry made. Behold the bridegroom cometh.’ That’s what I’m spectin’ now, every night, Miss Feely, – and I couldn’t sleep o’er hearin’ no ways."

“Why, Uncle Tom, what makes you think so?”

“Miss Eva, she talks to me. The Lord, he sends his messenger in the soul. I must be thar, Miss Feely: for when that ar blessed child goes into the kingdom, they’ll open the door so wide, we’ll all get a look in at the glory, Miss Feely.”

Little Eva does not disappoint them. She exclaims at the moment when she passes “from death unto life,” “O, love! – joy! – peace!” And her exclamation echoes those of scores of children who die in Victorian fiction and sermon literature with heaven in their eyes. Dickens’s Paul Dombey, seeing the face of his dead mother, dies with the words, “The light about the head is shining on me as I go!” The fair, blue-eyed young girl in Lydia Sigourney’s Letters to Mothers, “death’s purple tinge upon her brow,” when implored by her mother to utter one last word, whispers “Praise!”

Of course, it could be argued by critics of sentimentalism that the prominence of stories about the deaths of children is precisely what is wrong with the literature of the period; rather than being cited as a source of strength, the presence of such stories in Uncle Tom’s Cabin should be regarded as an unfortunate concession to the age’s fondness for lachrymose scenes. But to dismiss such scenes as “all tears and flapdoodle” is to leave unexplained the popularity of the novels and sermons that are filled with them, unless we choose to believe that a generation of readers was unaccountably moved to tears by matters that are intrinsically silly and trivial. That popularity is better explained, I believe, by the relationship of these scenes to a pervasive cultural myth.
which invests the suffering and death of an innocent victim with just the kind of power that critics deny to Stowe's novel: the power to work in, and change, the world.

This is the kind of action which little Eva's death in fact performs. It proves its efficacy not through the sudden collapse of the slave system but through the conversion of Topsy, a motherless, godless black child who has up until that point successfully resisted all attempts to make her "good." Topsy will not be "good" because, never having had a mother's love, she believes that no one can love her. When Eva suggests that Miss Ophelia would love her if only she were good, Topsy cries out: "No; she can't bar me, 'cause I'm a nigger!—she'd soon have a toad touch her! Ther can't nobody love niggers, and niggers can't do nothin' I don't care."

"O, Topsy, poor child, I love you!" said Eva, with a sudden burst of feeling, and laying her little thin, white hand on Topsy's shoulder; "I love you, because you haven't had any father, or mother, or friends;—because you've been a poor, abused 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."

The round, keen eyes of the black child were overcast with tears;—large, bright drops rolled heavily down one by one, and fell on the little white hand. Yes, in that moment, a ray of real belief, a ray of heavenly love, had penetrated the darkness of her heathen soul! She laid her head down between her knees, and wept and sobbed,—while the beautiful child, bending over her, looked like the picture of some bright angel stooping to reclaim a sinner. (p. 283)

The rhetoric and imagery of this passage—its little white hand, its ray from heaven, bending angel, and plentiful tears—suggest a literary version of the kind of polychrome religious picture that hangs on Sunday-school walls. Words like "kitsch," "camp," and "corny" come to mind. But what is being dramatized here bears no relation to these designations. By giving Topsy her love, Eva initiates a process of redemption whose power, transmitted from heart to heart, can change the entire world. And indeed the process has begun. From that time on Topsy is "different from what she used to be" (eventually she will go to Africa and become a missionary to her entire race), and Miss Ophelia, who overhears the conversation, is different, too. When little Eva is dead and Topsy cries out "ther ain't nobody left now," Miss Ophelia answers her in Eva's place:

"Topsy, you poor child," she said, as she led her into her room, "don't give up! I can love you, though I am not like that dear little child. I hope I've learnt something of the love of Christ from her. I can love you; I do, and I'll try to help you to grow up a good Christian girl."

Miss Ophelia's voice was more than her words, and more than that were the honest tears that fell down her face. From that hour, she acquired an influence over the mind of the destitute child that she never lost. (p. 300)

The tears of Topsy and of Miss Ophelia, which we find easy to ridicule, are the sign of redemption in Uncle Tom's Cabin; not words but the emotions of the heart bespeak a state of grace, and these are known by the sound of a voice, the touch of a hand, but chiefly, in moments of greatest importance, by tears. When Tom lies dying on the plantation on the Red River, the disciples to whom he has preached testify to their conversion by weeping: "Tears had fallen on that honest, insensible face,—tears of late repentance in the poor, ignorant heathen, whom his dying love and patience had awakened to repentance." (p. 420). Even the bitter and unregenerate Cassy, "moved by the sacrifice that had been made for her," breaks down; "moved by the few last words which the affectionate soul had yet strength to breathe,... the dark, despairing woman had wept and prayed" (p. 420). When George Shelby, the son of Tom's old master, arrives too late to free him, "tears which did honor to his manly heart fell from the young man's eyes as he bent over his poor friend." And when Tom realizes who is there, "the whole face lighted up, the hard hands clasped, and tears ran down the cheeks" (p. 420). The vocabulary of clapping hands and falling tears is one we associate with emotional exhibitionism, with the overacting that kills true feeling off through exaggeration. But the tears and gestures of Stowe's characters are not in excess of what they feel; if anything, they fall short of expressing the experiences they point to—salvation, communion, reconciliation.

If the language of tears seems maudlin and little Eva's death ineffectual, it is because both the tears and the redemption they signify belong to a conception of the world now generally regarded as naïve and unrealistic. Topsy's salvation and Miss Ophelia's do not alter the anti-abolitionist majority in the Senate or prevent southern plantation owners and northern investment bankers from doing business to their mutual advantage. Because most modern readers regard such political
and economic facts as final, it is difficult for them to take seriously a novel that insists on religious conversion as the necessary precondition for sweeping social change. But in Stowe's understanding of what such change requires, it is the modern view that is naïve. The political and economic measures that constitute effective action for us, she regards as superficial, mere extensions of the worldly policies that produced the slave system in the first place. Therefore, when Stowe asks the question that is in every reader's mind at the end of the novel—namely, "What can any individual do?"—she recommends not specific alterations in the current and political and economic arrangements but rather a change of heart.

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. See, then, to your sympathies in this matter! Are they in harmony with the sympathies of Christ? or are they swayed and perverted by the sophistries of worldly policy? (p. 448).

Stowe is not opposed to concrete measures such as the passage of laws or the formation of political pressure groups; it is just that, by themselves, such actions would be useless. For if slavery were to be abolished by these means, the moral conditions that produced slavery in the first place would continue in force. The choice is not between action and inaction, programs and feelings; the choice is between actions that spring from the "sophistries of worldly policy" and those inspired by the "sympathies of Christ." Reality, in Stowe's view, cannot be changed by manipulating the physical environment; it can only be changed by conversion in the spirit, because it is the spirit alone that is finally real.

The notion that historical change takes place only through religious conversion, which is a theory of power as old as Christianity itself, is dramatized and vindicated in Uncle Tom's Cabin by the novel's insistence that all human events are organized, clarified, and made meaningful by the existence of spiritual realities. The novel is packed with references to the four last things—Heaven, Hell, Death, and Judgment—references which remind the reader constantly that historical events can only be seen for what they are in the light of eternal truths. When St. Clare stands over the grave of little Eva, unable to realize "that it was his Eva that they were hiding from his sight," Stowe interjects, "Nor was it!—not Eva, but only the frail seed of that bright immortal form in with which she shall yet come forth, in the day of the Lord Jesus!" (p. 300). And when Legree expresses satisfaction that Tom is dead, she turns to him and says: "Yes, Legree; but who shall shut up that voice in thy soul? that soul, past repentance, past prayer, past hope, in whom the fire that never shall be quenched is already burning?" (p. 416). These reminders come thick and fast; they are present in Stowe's countless quotations from Scripture—introduced at every possible opportunity, in the narrative, in dialogue, in epigraphs, in quotations from other authors; they are present in the Protestant hymns that thread their way through scene after scene, in asides to the reader, apostrophes to the characters, in quotations from religious poetry, sermons, and prayers, and in long stretches of dialogue and narrative devoted to the discussion of religious matters. Stowe's narrative stipulates a world in which the facts of Christ's death and resurrection and coming day of judgment are never far from our minds because it is only within this frame of reference that she can legitimately have Tom claim, as he dies, "I've got the victory."

The eschatological vision, 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. Groups of characters blend into the same character, while the plot abounds in incidents that mirror one another. These are the features not of classical nineteenth-century fiction but of typological narrative. It is this tradition rather than that of the English novel which Uncle Tom's Cabin reproduces and extends; for this novel does not simply quote the Bible, it rewrites the Bible as the story of a Negro slave. Formally and philosophically, it stands opposed to works like Middlemarch and The Portrait of a Lady in which everything depends on human action and decision unfolding in a temporal sequence that withholds revelation until the final moment. The truths that Stowe's narrative conveys can only be reembodied, never discovered, because they are already revealed from the beginning. Therefore, what seem from a modernist point of view to be gross stereotypes in characterization and a needless proliferation of incident are essential properties of a narrative aimed at demonstrating that human history is a continual reenactment of the sacred drama of redemption. It is the novel's reenactment of this drama that makes it irresistible in its day.

Uncle Tom's Cabin retells the culture's central religious myth—the story of the crucifixion—in terms of the nation's political conflict—slavery—and of its most cherished social beliefs—the sanctity of motherhood and the family. It is because Stowe is able to combine so many of the culture's central concerns in a narrative that is immediately
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. To demonstrate what I mean by this kind of narrative organization—a demonstration which will have to stand in lieu of a full-scale reading of the novel—let me show how it works in relation to a single scene. Eva and Tom are seated in the garden of St. Clare’s house on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain.

It was Sunday evening, and Eva’s Bible lay open on her knee, she read,—“And I saw a sea of glass, mingled with fire.”

“Tom,” said Eva, suddenly stopping, and pointing to the lake, “there’s it.”

“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.”

“True enough, Miss Eva,” said Tom; and Tom sang—

“Oh, had I the wings of the morning,
I’d fly away to Canaan’s shore;
Bright angels should convey me home,
To the new Jerusalem.”

“Where do you suppose new Jerusalem is, Uncle Tom?” said Eva.

“Oh, up in the clouds, Miss Eva.”

“Then I think I see it,” said Eva. “Look in those clouds—they look like great gates of pearl; and you can see beyond them—far, far off—it’s all gold. Tom, sing about ‘spirits bright.’”

Tom sung the words of a well-known Methodist hymn,

“I see a band of spirits bright,
That taste the glories there;
They are all robed in spotless white,
And conquering palms they bear.”

“Uncle Tom, I’ve seen them,” said Eva. . . .

“They come to me sometimes in my sleep, those spirits;” and Eva’s eyes grew dreamy, and she hummed in a low voice.

“They are all robed in spotless white,
And conquering palms, they bear.”

“Uncle Tom,” said Eva, “I’m going there.”

“Where, Miss Eva?”

accessible to the general population that she is able to move so many people so deeply. The novel’s typological organization allows her to present political and social situations both as themselves and as transformations of a religious paradigm which interprets them in a way that readers can both understand and respond to emotionally. For the novel functions both as a means of describing the social world and as a means of changing it. It not only offers an interpretive framework for understanding the culture, and, through the reinforcement of a particular code of values, recommends a strategy for dealing with cultural conflict, but it is itself an agent of that strategy, putting into practice the measures it prescribes. As the religious stereotypes of “Sunday-school fiction” define and organize the elements of social and political life, so the “melodrama” and “pathos” associated with the underlying myth of the crucifixion put the reader’s heart in the right place with respect to the problems the narrative defines. Hence, rather than making the enduring success of Uncle Tom’s Cabin inexplicable, these popular elements that puzzled Whitcher and have puzzled so many modern scholars—melodrama, pathos, Sunday-school fiction—are the only terms in which the book’s success can be explained.

The nature of these popular elements also dictates the terms in which any full-scale analysis of Uncle Tom’s Cabin must be carried out. As I have suggested, its distinguishing features, generically speaking, are those not of the realistic novel but of typological narrative. Its characters, like the figures in an allegory, do not change or develop but reveal themselves in response to the demands of a situation. They are not defined primarily by their mental and emotional characteristics—that is to say, psychologically—but soteriologically, according to whether they are saved or damned. The plot likewise unfolds not according to Aristotelian standards of probability but in keeping with the logic of a preordained design, a design that every incident is intended, in one way or another, to enforce. The setting does not so much describe the features of a particular time and place as point to positions on a spiritual map. In Uncle Tom’s Cabin the presence of realistic detail tends to obscure its highly programmatic nature and to lull readers into thinking that they are in an everyday world of material cause and effect. But what pass for realistic details—the use of dialect, the minute descriptions of domestic activity—are in fact performing a rhetorical function dictated by the novel’s ruling paradigm; once that paradigm is perceived, even the homeliest details show up not as the empirically observed facts of human existence but as the expression of a highly schematic intent.
The child rose, and pointed her little hand to the sky; the
glow of the evening lit her golden hair and flushed cheek with
a kind of unearthly radiance, and her eyes were bent earnestly on
the skies.
"I'm going there," she said, "to the spirits bright, Tom; I'm
going, before long." (pp. 261–62)

The iterative nature of this scene presents in miniature the structure
of the whole novel. Eva reads from her Bible about a "sea of glass,
mingled with fire," then looks up to find one before her. She reads the
words aloud a second time. They remind Tom of a hymn which
describes the same vision in a slightly different form (Lake Ponchartrain
and the sea of glass become "Canaan's shore" and the "new Jerusalem")
and Eva sees what he has sung, this time in the clouds, and offers her
own description. Eva asks Tom to sing again and his hymn presents yet
another form of the same vision, which Eva again says she has seen:
The spirits bright come to her in her sleep. Finally, Eva repeats the last
two lines of the hymn and declares that she is going "there"—to the
place which has now been referred to a dozen times in this passage.
Stowe follows with another description of the golden skies and then
with a description of Eva as a spirit bright, and closes the passage with
Eva's double reiteration that she is going "there."

The entire scene itself is a re-presentation of others that come before
and after. When Eva looks over Lake Ponchartrain, she sees the "Ca-
naan of liberty" which Eliza saw on the other side of the Ohio River,
and the "eternal shores" Eliza and George Harris will reach when they
cross Lake Erie in the end. Bodies of water mediate between worlds:
The Ohio runs between the slave states and the free; Lake Erie divides
the United States from Canada, where runaway slaves cannot be re-
turned to their masters; the Atlantic Ocean divides the North American
continent from Africa, where Negroes will have a nation of their own;
Lake Ponchartrain shows Eva the heavenly home to which she is going
soon; the Mississippi River carries slaves from the relative ease of the
middle states to the grinding toil of the southern plantations; the Red
River carries Tom to the infernal regions ruled over by Simon Legree.
The correspondences between the episodes I have mentioned are them-
selves based on correspondences between earth and heaven (or hell).
Ohio, Canaca, and Liberia are related to one another by virtue of their
relationship to the one "bright Canaan" for which they stand; the Mis-
sissippi River and the Ohio are linked by the Jordan. (Ultimately, there
are only three places to be in this story: heaven, hell, or Kentucky,
which represents the earthly middle ground in Stowe's geography.)

Characters in the novel are linked to each other in exactly the same
way that places are—with reference to a third term that is the source of
their identity. The figure of Christ is the common term which unites all
of the novel's good characters, who are good precisely in proportion as
they are imitations of him. Eva and Tom head the list (she reenacts
the Last Supper and he the crucifixion), but they are also linked to most
of the slaves, women, and children in the novel by characteristics they all
share: piety, impressionability, spontaneous affection—and victimiza-
tion. In this scene, Eva is linked with the "spirits bright" (she later
becomes a "bright immortal form") both because she can see them and
is soon to join them, and because she, too, always wears white and is
elsewhere several times referred to as an "angel." When Eva dies, she
will join her father's mother, who was also named Evangeline, and
who herself always wore white, and who, like Eva, is said to be "the
direct embodiment and personification of the New Testament." And
this identification, in its turn, refers back to Uncle Tom, who is "all
the moral and Christian virtues bound in black morocco complete."

The circularity of this train of association is typical of the way the
narrative doubles back on itself: Later on, Cassy, impersonating the
ghost of Legree's saintly mother, will wrap herself in a white sheet.

The scene I have been describing is a node with a network of allusion
in which every character and event in the novel has a place. The narrative's
rhetorical strength derives in part from the impression it gives of
taking every kind of detail in the world into account, from the prepara-
tion of breakfast to the orders of the angels, and investing those details
with a purpose and a meaning which are both immediately apprehensi-
ble and finally significant. The novel reaches out into the reader's world
and colonizes it for its own eschatology: that is, it not only incorporates
the homoey particulars of "Life among the Lowly" into its universal
scheme, but it gives them a power and a centrality in that scheme
thereby turning the sociopolitical order upside down. The totalizing
effect of the novel's iterative organization and its doctrine of spiritual
redemption are inseparably bound to its political purpose—which is to
bring in the day when the meek—which is to say, women—will inherit
the earth.

The specifically political intent of the novel is apparent in its forms of
address. Stowe addresses her readers not simply as individuals but as
citizens of the United States: "to you, generous, noble-minded men and
women of the South," "farmers of Massachusetts, of New Hampshire,
of Vermont," "brave and generous men of New York," "and you,
mothers of America." She speaks to her audience directly in the way
the Old Testament prophets spoke to Israel, exhorting, praising, blam-
The difference is that the jeremiad represents the interests of Puritan ministers, while the sentimental novel represents the interests of middle-class women. But the relationship between rhetoric and history in both cases is the same. In both cases it is not as if rhetoric and history stand opposed, with rhetoric made up of wish-fulfillment and history made up of recalcitrant facts that resist rhetoric’s onslaught. Rhetoric makes history by shaping reality to the dictates of its political design; it makes history by convincing the people of the world that its description of the world is the true one. The sentimental novelists make their bid for power by positing the kingdom of heaven on earth as a world over which women exercise ultimate control. If history did not take the course these writers recommended, it is not because they were not political, but because they were insufficiently persuasive.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin, however, unlike its counterparts in the sentimental tradition, was spectacularly persuasive in conventional political terms: It helped convince a nation to go to war and to free its slaves. But in terms of its own conception of power, a conception it shares with other sentimental fiction, the novel was a political failure. Stowe conceived her book as an instrument for bringing about the day when the world would be ruled not by force but by Christian love. The novel’s deepest political aspirations are expressed only secondarily in its devastating attack on the slave system; the true goal of Stowe’s rhetorical undertaking is nothing less than the institution of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Embedded in the world of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, which is the fallen world of slavery, there appears an idyllic picture, both utopian and Arcadian, of the form human life would assume if Stowe’s readers were to heed her moral lesson. In this vision, described in the chapter entitled “The Quaker Settlement,” Christian love fulfills itself not in war but in daily living, and the principle of sacrifice is revealed not in crucifixion but in motherhood. The form that society takes bears no resemblance to the current social order. Man-made institutions—the church, the courts of law, the legislatures, the economic system—are nowhere in sight. The home is the center of all meaningful activity, women perform the most important tasks, work is carried on in a spirit of mutual cooperation, and the whole is guided by a Christian woman who, through the influence of her “loving words,” “gentle moralities,” and “motherly loving kindness,” rules the world.

Stowe locates her domestic Eden in the center of the American continent—Indiana—and in a rural environment, for not the commercial or industrial but the agricultural mode of life is her economic model. The Quaker community which surrounds and mirrors the home is specifically religious, pacifist, and egalitarian. As the home is the center of the
community and the community of the nation, so the kitchen is the center of the home, and at its center Stowe locates the symbol of maternal comfort, the rocking chair, throne of the presiding deity. The rocking chair is "motherly and old," its "wide arms breathed hospitable invitation, seconded by the solicitation of its feather cushions, a real comfortable, persuasive old chair, and worth, in the way of honest, homely enjoyment, a dozen of your plush or brochetelle drawing-room gentry." (p. 185). The image is ideologically charged in a manner typical of Stowe's narrative. Metonymically, the rocking chair stands for the mother and therefore gathers to itself the cluster of associations that the novel has already established around the maternal figure. Ontologically, it represents the "real" thing, as opposed to gaudier versions of itself that, with their plush and brochetelle, exist for appearance's sake. By contrast with the drawing room "gentry," the rocking chair, old and homely, is identified with the lower social orders, but despite this association (though in fact because of it) the rocking chair is morally superior because its wide arms and feather cushions offer comfort and "hospitable invitation." And finally, toward the end of the description, the chair attains the status of a mystical object; its "creepy crawchy" sounds are "music": "For why? for twenty years or more, nothing but loving words, and gentle moralities, and motherly loving kindness, had come from that chair; head-aches and heart-aches innumerable had been cured there, difficulties spiritual and temporal solved there, all by one good, loving woman, God bless her!" (p. 136).

The woman in question is God in human form. Seated in her kitchen at the head of her table, passing out coffee and cake for breakfast, Rachel Halliday, the millenarian counterpart of little Eva, enacts the redeemed form of the Last Supper. This is Holy Communion as it will be under the new dispensation: instead of the breaking of bones, the breaking of bread. The preparation of breakfast exemplifies the way people will work in the ideal society; there will be no competition, no exploitation, no commands. Motivated by self-sacrificing love, and joined to one another by its cohesive power, people will perform their duties willingly and with pleasure: Moral suasion will take the place of force. "All moved obediently to Rachel's gentle 'Thee had better,' or more gentle 'Hadn't thee better?' in the work of getting breakfast... Everything went on sociably, so quietly, so harmoniously, in the great kitchen, - it seemed so pleasant to everyone to do just what they were doing, there was an atmosphere of mutual confidence and good fellowship everywhere." (pp. 141-42).

The new matriarchy which Isabella Beecher Hooker had dreamed of leading, pictured here in the Indiana kitchen ("for a breakfast in the luxurious valleys of Indiana is... like picking up the rose-leaves and trimming the bushes in Paradise"), constitutes the most politically subversive dimension of Stowe's novel, more disruptive and far-reaching in its potential consequences than even the starting of a war or the freeing of slaves. Nor is the ideal of matriarchy simply a daydream; Catherine Beecher, Stowe's elder sister, had offered a ground plan for the realization of such a vision in her Treatise on Domestic Economy (1841), which the two sisters republished in an enlarged version entitled The American Woman's Home in 1869. Dedicated "To the Women of America, in whose hands rest the real destinies of the republic," this is an instructional book on homemaking in which a wealth of scientific information and practical advice is pointed toward a millennial goal. Centering on the home, for these women, is not a way of indulging in narcissistic fantasy, as critics have argued, or a turning away from the world into self-absorption and idle reverie, it is the prerequisite of world conquest - defined as the reformation of the human race through the proper care and nurturing of its young. Like Uncle Tom's Cabin, The American Woman's Home situates the miniatue of domestic life in relation to their soteriological function: "What, then is the end designed by the family state which Jesus Christ came into this world to secure? It is to provide for the training of our race... by means of the self-sacrificing labors of the wise and good... with chief reference to a future immortal existence." The family state," the authors announce at the beginning, "is the aptest earthly illustration of the heavenly kingdom, and... woman is its chief minister." In the body of the text the authors provide women with everything they need to know for the proper establishment and maintenance of home and family, from the construction of furniture ("The bed frame is to be fourteen inches [wide], and three inches in thickness. At the head, and at the foot, is to be screwed a notched two-inch board, three inches wide, as in Fig. 8"), to architectural plans, to chapters of instruction on heating, ventilation, lighting, healthful diet, preparation of food, cleanliness, the making and mending of clothes, the care of the sick, the organization of routines, financial managements, psychological health, the care of infants, the managing of young children, home amusement, the care of furniture, planting of gardens, the care of domestic animals, the disposal of waste, the cultivation of fruit, and providing for the "Helpless, the Homeless, and the Vicious." After each of these activities has been treated in detail, they conclude by describing the ultimate aim of the domestic enterprise. The founding of a "truly Christian family" will lead to the gathering of a "Christian neighborhood." This "cheering example," they continue,
would soon spread, and ere long colonies from these prosperous and Christian communities would go forth to shine as “lights of the world” in all the now darkened nations. Thus the “Christian family” and “Christian neighborhood” would become the grand ministry, as they were designed to be, in training our whole race for heaven.26

The imperialistic drive behind the encyclopedism and determined practicality of this household manual flatly contradicts the traditional derogations of the American cult of domesticity (“mirror-phenomenon,” “self-immersed,” “self-congratulatory”).27 The American Woman’s Home is a blueprint for colonizing the world in the name of the “family state” (p. 19) under the leadership of Christian women. What is more, people like Stowe and Catherine Beecher were speaking not simply for a set of moral and religious values. In speaking for the home, they speak for an economy—a household economy—which had supported New England since its inception. The home, rather than representing a retreat or a refuge from a crass industrial-commercial world, offers an economic alternative to that world, one which calls into question the whole structure of American society growing up in response to the increase in trade and manufacturing.28 Stowe’s image of a utopian community as presented in Rachel Halliday’s kitchen is not simply a Christian dream of communitarian cooperation and harmony; it is a reflection of the real communitarian practices of village life, practices which had depended on cooperation, trust, and a spirit of mutual supportiveness that characterize the Quaker community of Stowe’s novel.

One could argue, then, that for all its revolutionary fervor, Uncle Tom’s Cabin is a conservative book because it advocates a return to an older way of life—household economy—in the name of the nation’s most cherished social and religious beliefs. Even the woman’s centrality might be seen as harking back to the “age of homespun,” when the essential goods were manufactured in the home and their production was carried out and guided by women. But Stowe’s very conservatism—her reliance on established patterns of living and traditional beliefs—is precisely what gives her novel its revolutionary potential. By pushing those beliefs to an extreme and by insisting that they be applied universally, not just to one segregated corner of civil life but to the conduct of all human affairs, Stowe means to effect a radical transformation of her society. The brilliance of the strategy is that it puts the central affirmations of a culture into the service of a vision that would destroy the present economic and social institutions; by resting her case, absolutely, on the saving power of Christian love and on the sanctity of motherhood and the family, Stowe relocates the center of power in American life, placing it not in the government, nor in the courts of law, nor in the factories, nor in the marketplace, but in the kitchen. And that means that the new society will be controlled not by men but by women. The image of the home created by Stowe and Catherine Beecher in their treatise on domestic science is in no sense a shelter from the stormy blast of economic and political life, a haven from reality. Divorced from fact that allows the machinery of industrial capitalism to grind on; it is conceived as a dynamic center of activity, physical and spiritual, economic and moral, whose influence spreads out in ever-widening circles. To this activity—and this is the crucial innovation—men are incidental. Although the Beecher sisters pay lip service on occasion to male supremacy, women’s roles occupy virtually the whole of their attention and dominate the scene. Male providence is deemphasized in favor of female processing. Men provide the seed, but women bear and raise the children. Men provide the flour, but women bake the bread and get the breakfast. The removal of the male from the center to the periphery of the human sphere is the most radical component of this millenarian scheme, which is rooted so solidly in the most traditional values—religion, motherhood, home, and family. Exactly what position men will occupy in the millennium is specified by a detail inserted casually into Stowe’s description of the Indiana kitchen. While the women and children are busy preparing breakfast, Simeon Halliday, the husband and father, stands “in his shirt-sleeves before a little looking-glass in the corner, engaged in the anti-patriarchial activity of shaving” (pp. 141—42).

With this detail, so innocently placed, Stowe reconceives the role of men in human history: While Negroes, children, mothers, and grandmothers do the world’s primary work, men groom themselves contentedly in a corner. The scene, as critics have noted is often the case in sentimental fiction, is “intimate,” the backdrop is “domestic,” the tone at times is even “chatty”; but the import, as critics have failed to recognize, is world-shaking. The enterprise of sentimental fiction, as Stowe’s novel attests, is anything but domestic, in the sense of being limited to purely personal concerns. Its mission, on the contrary, is global and its interests identical with the interests of the race. If the fiction written in the nineteenth century by women whose works sold in the hundreds of thousands has seemed narrow and parochial to the critics of the twentieth century, that narrowness and parochialism belong not to these works nor to the women who wrote them; they are the beholders’ share.29
Notes

2. Edward Halsey Foster, for example, prefaces his book-length study of the work of Susan and Anna Warner by saying: "If one searches nineteenth-century popular fiction for something that has literary value, one searches, by and large, in vain" (Susan and Anna Warner [Boston: Twayne, n.d.], p. 9). At the other end of the spectrum stands a critic like Sally Mitchell, whose excellent studies of Victorian women's fiction contain statements that, intentionally or not, condescend to the subject matter: for example, "Thus, we should see popular novels as emotional analyses, rather than intellectual analyses, of a particular society" ("Sentiment and Suffering: Women's Recreational Reading in the 1860's," *Victorian Studies* 21, no. 1 [Autumn 1977]: 34). The most typical move, however, is to apologize for the poor literary quality of the novels in a concessive clause, and then to assert that these texts are valuable on historical grounds.
3. Ann Douglas is the foremost of the feminist critics who have accepted this characterization of the sentimental writers, and it is to her formulation of the antisentimentalist position that my arguments throughout are principally addressed (The Feminization of American Culture [New York: Knopf, 1977]). Although her attitude toward the vast quantity of literature written by women between 1820 and 1870 is the one that the male-dominated tradition has always expressed—contempt—Douglas's book is nevertheless extremely important because of its powerful and sustained consideration of this long-neglected body of work. Because Douglas successfully focused critical attention on the cultural centrality of sentimental fiction, forcing the realization that it can no longer be ignored, it is now possible for other critics to put forward a new characterization of these novels and not be dismissed. For these reasons, it seems to me, her work is invaluable.
4. These attitudes are forcefully articulated by Douglas, *Feminization*, p. 9.
5. The phrase "a damned mob of scribbling women," coined by Hawthorne in a letter he wrote to his publisher in 1855, and clearly the product of Hawthorne's own feelings of frustration and envy, comes embedded in a much quoted passage that has set the tone for criticism of sentimental fiction ever since: "America [he wrote] is now wholly given over to a d****d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed. What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of The Lamplighter, and other books neither better nor worse? Worse they could not be, and better they need not be, when they sell by the hundred thousand." As quoted by Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Feminine Fifties* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1940), p. 110.

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8. Ibid., p. 586. Edmund Wilson, despite his somewhat sympathetic treatment of Stowe in *Patriotic Gore*, seems to concur in this opinion, reflecting a characteristic tendency of commentators on the most popular works of sentimental fiction to regard the success of these women as some sort of mysterious eruption, inexplicable by natural causes (Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War [New York: Oxford University Press, 1966], pp. 5, 32). Henry James gives this attitude its most articulate, though perhaps least defensible, expression in a remarkable passage from *A Small Boy and Others* (New York: Scribners, 1913), pp. 159–60, where he describes Stowe's book as really not a book at all but "a fish, a wonderful, leaping, fish"—the point being to deny Stowe any role in the process that produced such a wonder.

Appreciation and judgment, the whole impression, were thus an effect for which there had been no process—any process so related having in other cases had to be at some point or other critical; nothing in the guise of a written book, therefore, a book printed, published, sold, bought and "noticed," probably ever reached its mark, the mark of exciting interest, without having at least groped for that goal as a book or by the exposure of some literary side. Letters, here, languished unconscious, and Uncle Tom, instead of making even one of the cheap short cuts through the medium in which books breathe, even as fishes in water, went gaily roundabout it altogether, as if a fish, a wonderful "leaping" fish, had simply flown in through the air.

12. Ibid., p. 3.
13. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 295–96. This Harper Classic gives the text of the first edition originally published in 1852 by John P. Jewett and Company of Boston and Cleveland. All references to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will be to this edition; page numbers are given in parentheses in the text.
15. Religious conversion as the basis for a new social order was the mainspring of the Christian evangelical movement of the mid-nineteenth century. The emphasis on "feeling," which seems to modern readers to provide no basis
whatever for the organization of society, was the key factor in the evangelical theory of reform. See Sandra Sizer’s discussions of this phenomenon in Gospel Hymns and Social Religion (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979). “It is clear from the available literature that prayer, testimony, and exhortation were employed to create a community of intense feeling, in which individuals underwent similar experiences (centering on conversion) and would thenceforth unite with others in matters of moral decision and social behavior” (p. 52). “People in similar states of feeling, in short, would ‘walk together,’ would be agreed” (p. 59). “Conversion established individuals in a particular kind of relationship with God, by virtue of which they were automatically members of a social company, alike in interests and feelings” (pp. 70–71). Good order would be preserved by “relying on the spiritual and moral discipline provided by conversion, and on the company of fellow Christians, operating without the coercive force of government” (p. 72).

16 Angus Fletcher’s Allegory, The Theory of a Symbolic Mode (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1964) discusses the characteristic features of allegory in such a way as to make clear the family resemblance between sentimental fiction and the allegorical mode. See particularly, his analysis of character (pp. 35, 60), symbolic action (pp. 150 ff., 178, 180, 182), and imagery (p. 171).

17 Fletcher’s comment in Allegory on the presence of naturalistic detail in allegory is pertinent here:

The apparent surface realism of an allegorical agent will recede in importance, as soon as he is felt to take part in a magical plot, as soon as his causal relations to others in that plot are seen to be magically based. This is an important point because there has often been confusion as to the function of the naturalist detail of so much allegory. In terms I have been outlining, this detail now appears not to have a journalistic function; it is more than mere record of observed facts. It serves instead the purposes of magical containment, since the more the allegorist can circumscribe the attributes, metonymic and synecdochic, of his personae, the better he can shape their fictional destiny. Naturalist detail is “cosmic,” universalizing, not accidental as it would be in straight journalism. (pp. 189–99)

18 The associations that link slaves, women, and children are ubiquitous and operate on several levels. Besides being described in the same set of terms, these characters occupy parallel structural positions in the plot. They function chiefly as mediators between God and the unredeemed, so that, for example, Mrs. Shelby intercedes for Mr. Shelby, Mrs. Bird for Senator Bird, Simon Legree’s mother (unsuccessfully) for Simon Legree, Little Eva and St. Clare’s mother for St. Clare, Tom Loker’s mother for Tom Loker, Eliza for George Harris (spiritually, she is the agent of his conversion), and for Harry Harris (physically, she saves him from being sold down the river), and Tom for all the slaves on the Legree plantation (spiritually, he converts them) and for all the slaves on the Shelby plantation (physically, he is the cause of their being set free).

19 For a parallel example, see Alice Crozier’s analysis of the way the lock of hair that Little Eva gives Tom becomes transformed into the lock of hair that Simon Legree’s mother sent to Simon Legree, in The Novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 29–31.


21 Ibid., p. xi.

22 Ibid., p. xiv.


25 Ibid., p. 19.


27 These are Douglass’s epithets, Feminization of American Culture, p. 307.


29 In a recent article, “The Sentimentalists: Promise and Betrayal in the Home” (Signs 4, no. 3 [Spring 1979]: pp. 434–46), Mary Kelley characterizes the main positions in the debate over the significance of sentimental fiction as follows: (1) the Cowie-Welter thesis, which holds that women’s fiction expresses an “ethics of conformity” and accepts the stereotype of the woman as pious, pure, submissive, and dedicated to the home; and (2) the Papashvily-Garrison thesis, which sees sentimental fiction as profoundly subversive of traditional ideas of male authority and female subservience. Kelley locates herself somewhere in between, holding that sentimental novels convey a “contradictory message”: “they tried to project an Edenic image,” Kelley writes, but their own tales “subverted their intentions,” by showing how often women were frustrated and defeated in the performance of their heroic roles. My own position is that the sentimental novelists are both conformist and subversive, but not, as Kelley believes,