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# **Sentimentality Versus the Crude Reality: a Comparison Between Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

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## Introduction

It is always fascinating to see how two different people interpret a particular time or event in history. Both Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Nobel Prize-winner Toni Morrison have given their representation of slavery and the people exposed of it in their antislavery novels *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Beloved* (1987). Although dealing with practically the same historical period, the time in which the novels were published differs with more than a hundred years and the backgrounds of the two authors are quite different. Stowe was born and raised in a white middle-class family in Cincinnati at the beginning of the 1800s while Morrison, born in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, comes from a working-class family with African American origins.

The first slaves were brought to North America in 1619. During the following centuries, the number of slaves escalated with the Americans' increased need for servants and workers at the cotton plantations (Encyclopedia Britannica). In 1807, however, an act forbade trading slaves from Africa to America. The antislavery movement, which had led to the abolition of slavery in the North, 1804, had at the time of the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the beginning of the 1850's come to wane (Encyclopedia Britannica). In the southern states of the US, having slaves in households and at plantations was very common and the American society, both the North and the South, was impregnated with racism and what we today would call "racial essentialism, a belief assigning innate traits to entire race groups" (19-20 Robbins). It would take until 1865, when Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was being confirmed as the Thirteenth Amendment, for slavery to finally come to an end (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Harriet Beecher Stowe's initial purpose in writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was to contribute to the debate about slavery. In this, it succeeded and immediately became a best seller which only the Bible could compete in number of sold copies (Rosenthal 1). People were moved by the stories and destinies of those who had suffered so much from the impact of slavery, and the novel was eventually to play a prominent role in the reborn abolition movement. Rumor has it that when President Lincoln met the author in 1862 he denominated her "the little lady who made this big war" (qtd. in White 346). Lately, however, Stowe's sentimental portrayal of the various characters has been criticized for being almost caricatures of both Afro Americans and white people and what was primary put forth as positive qualities about the novel has now been put in an other, not so flattering, light.

Toni Morrison's ancestral homage *Beloved*, dedicated to those "Sixty Million or More" Africans who died in the Atlantic slave trade, came out more than a century after

Stowe's novel. The story is set somewhat later than in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, some time after slavery was abolished. The main characters are now free but the different narrators lead the readers through memories and flashbacks to the time when they were enslaved. Many parallels can be drawn between Morrison's novel and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, since there are significant resemblances.

The purpose of this essay, however, is to point out and deal with the differences between these two antislavery novels. They were written by renown authors of their times, with the same aim (at first glance at least) but from completely different backgrounds and active more than a century apart, which makes the comparison interesting. Focus will be put on their ways of representing the various characters and in the end there will be a discussion on how trustworthy these different methods turn out to be.

### **Critical Attitudes to *Uncle Tom's Cabin***

Both contemporary and more recent critics have had widely disagreeing opinions about Stowe's work from 1852. When the novel was first published it immediately became a bestseller with "[t]he first run of 5000 copies sold out in two days" (Rosenthal 29). It was only the Bible that managed to beat the following sales returns (Rosenthal 1). It was highly debated and in the pro-slavery South, many people were upset by it. They accused the novel of being mere fiction without any basis in reality. The abolitionists, however, praised it and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is said to have played a prominent role in the antislavery movement. In the Boston Morning Post an anonymous critic praised Stowe for her brilliancy and her "ability of looking on both sides of one question" (Anonymous 34) and was amazed at how she without any "world-prejudice" could have picked "up so much stuff, and how she could acquire such free and easy manners in disposing of it" (Anonymous 34). Short after its publication, Charles F. Briggs illustrated *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* greatness by emphasizing that it became a success "not because it is a tale of slavery, but in spite of it" and celebrated her way of giving such an "agreeable picture of Southern slavery" with so many "well-delineated American characters" (Briggs 33). Over all, people who supported the cause against slavery were thrilled.

However, when talking about the reader response from the time of the novel's first publication, Marva Banks meant that there was gap in the rendering of black people's opinions. In 1993, she therefore published an essay where she gives an account of the black antebellum response. Many of these views had been published in Frederick Douglass's *Paper* in the mid 1800s and the opinions went from supporting the idea of Stowe's novel being a

contribution to the abolitionist cause to criticizing her inability to see the Africans as individuals with personal characteristics. Initially, the greatest part of black society perceived the novel as an antislavery one and people were excited (Banks 36-37). Regardless of these first opinions, people soon started to look beyond Stowe's good intentions and noticed her "sympathy for African colonization and her proclivity to racial stereotypes" which also would add up to one of the dominant arguments of proslavery activists, namely "white supremacy" (Banks 37). Even though James Baldwin was active more than a century after the publishing of Stowe's novel, the conclusions he came to from having gathered twentieth-century black critics were somewhat equivalent to the final antebellum black response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. First of all he saw *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as antislavery propaganda (Banks 36-37); he claimed that Stowe "was not so much a novelist as an impassioned pamphleteer; her book was not intended to do anything more than prove that slavery was wrong" and thought it was a shame that she had not dug deeper to "discover and reveal something a little closer to the truth" (Baldwin 10). Moreover, he suggested that the novel was a "promulgator of colonizationist ideas" and "a catalogue of sentimental racism." (Banks 37) The last one, sentimentality, is a concept that many critics, both before and after James Baldwin, have put their focus on when reviewing the novel. The concept of the sentimental novel can be described as "any novel that exploits the reader's capacity for tenderness, compassion, or sympathy to a disproportionate degree by presenting a beclouded or unrealistic view of its subject" (Encyclopedia Britannica) and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became one of the most outstanding examples of the genre.

Despite the fact that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is one of the most famous novels of its sort, Stowe has received much criticism for her sentimental ways of picturing characters. In his essay collection *Notes of a Native Son* (1949), James Baldwin wrote:

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a very bad novel, having, in its self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality, much in common with *Little Women*. Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty. (10)

Even though most people would not go so far as saying that Stowe's sentimentality makes her novel a "very bad" one, Baldwin's frustration is understandable. He wondered what made her

“so depend on the description of brutality” instead of focusing on “the only important question: what it was, after all, that moved her people to do such deeds” (Baldwin 10). While contemporary critics like Charles F Briggs praised the novel for having “broader, deeper, higher and holier sympathies” (Briggs 33), a modern reader may find it hard to look beyond the caricature-like descriptions in her writing and only take it for the antislavery novel that Stowe had meant it to be.

Jane Tompkins explains the term sentimental novel in another way than earlier mentioned by claiming that it is a novel “written by, for and about women” (Tompkins 44). With these criteria, she claims that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was typical of its sort and “the most dazzling exemplar.” She claims it to be “the story of salvation through motherly love” and argues that “the sentimental novelists elaborated a myth that gave women the central position of power and authority in the culture” (Tompkins 44), thus the fact that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a sentimental novel is not a negative concern. It can however have a rather negative ring to it when Stowe uses sentimentality to the degree that Tom has to be portrayed as stupid and slow and Topsy wild and heathen, as will later be examined more closely, to gain the readers’ sympathy. Instead of giving a truthful representation of real human characters, Stowe time after another gives the reader personalities either to feel sorry for or for other white characters to rescue away from the heavy burden of their race. Even though Stowe herself said that the purpose of her writing the novel was to “awaken sympathy and feeling for the African race” (Stowe xxxv), her way of executing it has led to her characters becoming merely stereotypes with little depth and in some cases caricatures too, hence all the critic she has received for it.

### **Stereotypes and Caricatures in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin***

Many critics have had a similar attitude towards *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to the one that the black antebellum critics had, especially when it comes to Stowe’s way of almost letting her characters become not only stereotypes but caricatures instead of going deeper and representing the “human complexity” (Carabine xv). The one character that she has been most criticized for is the protagonist Uncle Tom, whose name even has gained an own entry in the English speaking dictionaries as “a black who is overeager to win the approval of whites (as by obsequious behavior or uncritical acceptance of white values and goals)” (Merriam-Webster). The Civil Rights activists in the 1950s in the United States also used “Uncle Tom” as a name for those who chose to collaborate with the oppressor (Sabiston 96). In the novel Tom is a middle-aged man who lives with his family on a plantation owned by Mr Shelby, a relatively righteous man who is rather kind to his slaves. Tom is portrayed as a good, highly

pious person with a warm heart. There are, however, several parts in the novel from which one can make sense out of the fact that the expression “Uncle Tom” today has a rather negative ring to it. The first thing that the reader learns about Tom is what we see through the eyes of his master, Mr. Shelby. Apparently Tom is an “uncommon fellow” ... - steady, honest, capable” and to this he adds “good”, “sensible and pious” (3-4). Those are attributes that repeatedly appear while reading about Tom. He is trustworthy to the degree that Mr. Shelby can send him on a mission to bring him back some money without Tom ever thinking about escaping or keeping the money himself (4). It is easy to presume that the author, subconsciously may be, wants the reader to believe that it is Tom’s piety that makes him act like he does, without reflection, just obeying his master, but it is equally easy to assume that it is due to simplicity since that also is a term the narrator frequently uses in her description of Tom. Even though Stowe, who was born and raised in a deeply religious home, pictures Tom as the most pious and devoted man there ever could be, it is not without reservation for his almost childlike manners. Although he is said to be “a sort of patriarch in religious matters”, we are also told that “[n]othing could exceed the touching simplicity, the childlike earnestness, of his prayer” and the “simple, hearty, sincere style of his exhortations might have edified even better educated persons” (29). Thus, he is talented but the simplicity of his character remains, or as Sarah Robbins puts it: she [Stowe] repeatedly associated Tom’s religious behavior (and that of other admirable black characters) with blacks’ ‘natural’ affinity for the elements of Christianity that promote child-like affection, docility, and emotion” (Cambridge 44).

The reader is constantly fed with these descriptions of Tom being a poor and simple man, but good and pious nevertheless, which most certainly was a way of appealing to the sentimental side of the implied reader, to get their sympathy. Still, he stands out as a simpleton and in a way, Stowe lets Tom’s features come to represent what appears to be her own stereotypical picture of the African race: a picture that probably corresponded with a high number of Americans’ perception of the black people, since racial essentialism “had a significant impact on Americans’ thinking” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (19 Robbins). One can presume that this is one of the things that upset the abolitionists and the opponents of the white people’s ideal the most. Most modern readers immediately object to the whole idea of it even existing something like collective features for a whole race and find it rather politically incorrect.

From the beginning, the reader is presented with a stereotypical picture of Tom. He “had to the full the gentle, domestic heart, which, woe for them! Has been a peculiar

characteristic of his unhappy race” (88), just as if this was something particular for every man or woman from Africa. From this description, one can clearly see that it was more important to create a stereotype with features that could compete with any white Christian man or woman in being good and pious, which more appeals to her intended audience, than maybe showing how slaves could fight for their rights and freedom. Her motives were “fundamentally religious” (58) as Marianne Noble puts it. She used the sentimental strategies to make her audience “*feel* the urgency of the abolitionist cause” and “wanted to show that African Americans had souls and a spiritual dimension and to oppose the affront to Christianity represented by slavery” (Noble 58). After all, it was not a novel with the purpose to claim anything like everybody’s equal rights, but through sentimental and religious ways preaching that slavery was wrong. One has to bear in mind that during the time concerned, religion and Christianity played a highly important role in society. Christianity was for example thought to be “the best source of leaders and principles to guide the republic” and the concept of “[t]he rightful superiority of Protestant Christianity” was widely spread over North America (Robbins 22). Thus, by presenting the audience a Christian slave character, such as Tom, one could say that Stowe wanted to show the readers that slaves could be as human as any white Christians.

At the first plantation Tom is treated rather well, but even in life threatening situations, the narrator shows that he will not give up his spirituality. After Tom has been sold to Simon Legree and what will become his last plantation (where he is treated far from well) he strongly objects to Cassy’s plan of getting them out of there: “‘Not for ten thousand worlds, Misse!’ he answers Cassy and continues: “‘O, Misse Cassy!’ ... ‘for the dear Lord’s sake that died for ye, don’t sell your precious soul to the devil, that way! Nothing but evil will come of it. The Lord hasn’t called us to wrath. We must suffer, and wait his time.’” (367) The fact is that Tom here chooses acceptance before rebellion for religious reasons. At the first plantation, Mr. Shelby treats him with as much respect as is possible for a slave owner, and so does the second plantation owner, St Claire, as well. At Simon Legree’s, however, the slaves have to stand the worst kind of treatment, and it is hard to assume that people would accept that if there was a chance out. One can easily presume that the slaves, so affected by the enslavement, did not dare to see a way out. Fact remains, however, that Cassy, a minor character in the story, somehow manages to do this while the protagonist Tom does not. At the end of the novel the reader is confronted by the hard reality, when Tom actually dies as a direct consequence of being abused, but this could be seen as yet another way of raising pity from the audience in a true sentimental-novel spirit. Stowe makes it seem as if Tom accepts



his position in life, since God has put him there, and that he thinks that their time will come. So Tom, the character that Stowe most frequently draws parallels from to the whole African race, chooses to wait for salvation and does nothing to rebel against the white tyranny. Admittedly, the urge to fight may not have been Stowe's purpose, but surely the black people would have been better served with a character who was a bit more rebellious and stood up for their kind instead of just serving the author's purpose of demonstrating that slaves could be good Christian people. A more positive example of characters who really break free from the white establishment would be Eliza and George who run away with their child Harry when they decide that they have had enough of a life in enslavement. As earlier mentioned, there is also Cassy who escapes with a girl from the devilish Simon Legree. Their destinies however, will be discussed later on.

In addition to the scenes with Tom, where his features come to represent a stereotypical picture of the African people, there are more episodes in which the narrator continuously speaks of the black people as a race with the same characteristics and therefore fails to represent a human individuality. It is mentioned that the black man "is an exotic" with "a passion for all that is splendid, rich, and fanciful." The "white race," however, is too being discussed in a similar collective manner as being a "colder" though "more correct" (152) race than the slaves. So even if all that is said about the slaves and the black people in general are not negative things, the problematic of generalization remains and as demonstrated above, it is not only the black people that Stowe used for her stereotypes, but white people as well. Even though the slave stereotypes have upset most people since they, after all, were the oppressed ones, the stupid yokel, the always good Christian and the barbarian slave owner also occur. One can clearly see how the descriptions easily turn into caricatures, often by using childlike features or animal references, especially when it comes to giving a portrayal of characters with negative characteristics. Tom Loker for instance, a gruff and unpleasant slave hunter who is hired to hunt down George and Eliza is described in the following way: "Tom, whose great heavy mouth had stood ajar during this communication, now suddenly snapped it together, as a big dog closes on a piece of meat, and seemed to be digesting the idea at his leisure." (64)

Along with Tom and the slave hunter there are more characters that are subject to Stowe's stereotyping. This can be demonstrated with the characters Topsy, George and Eliza and Eva. Topsy, to begin with, is from the first presented as "one of the blackest of her race" with "round shining eyes, glittering as glass beads." Her mouth that was "half open with astonishment" and "displayed a white brilliant set of teeth" and her clothes consisted of "a

single filthy, ragged garment, made of bagging.” Some more descriptions follow, but everything is summoned up with: “Altogether, there was something odd and goblin-like about her appearance, - something, as Miss Ophelia afterwards said, ‘so heathenish,’” (221). The fact that the whole description of this little girl Topsy starts with the statement that she was “one of the blackest of the race”, somehow insinuates that this “blackest of her race” would be something important for what is to come. When St. Clare later is said to be calling on her “giving a whistle, as a man would to call the attention of a dog”, for a modern reader it is impossible to apprehend this as anything but racist, especially when the passage after that goes into a description of Topsy dancing around like some kind of marionette:

The black, glassy eyes glittered with a kind of wicked drollery, and the thing struck up, in a clear shrill voice, an odd negro melody, to which she kept time with her hands and feet, spinning round, clapping her hands, knocking her knees together, in a wild, fantastic sort of time, and producing in her throat all those odd guttural sounds which distinguish the native music of her race. (221)

If using the OADs definition of racism, that is “the belief that all members of each race possess characteristics or abilities specific to that race, esp. so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races” (Oxford American Dictionaries), it is hard to say that Stowe was anything but a racist. However, the fact that 1900-century science supported the idea of “the Anglo-Saxon race as advanced over the African” (Robbins 20), shows that it was not only Stowe’s personal view but a rather common understanding among that time’s Americans that black people did not have “the same capability as the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ race”. Despite opinions like the ones demonstrated above, people could still see slaves as human beings and think slavery was wrong (Robbins 43). Thus Stowe’s sometimes racist descriptions of the black people did not contradict her motives for her novel to be an antislavery one.

Furthermore there is the couple of George and Eliza Harris, he a mulatto and she a quadroon girl. Like all the mulattoes or quadroons in the novel they are both rather well educated and speak properly and overall, they are given rather positive descriptions. George is described as “a very light mulatto, brown curly hair; is very intelligent, speaks handsomely” and “can read and write” (99). Eliza is pictured in a similar manner but with more focus on her looks than the way she carries herself: “There was the same rich, full, dark eye, with its long lashes; the same ripples of silky black hair ... Her dress was of the neatest possible fit, and set off to advantage her finely moulded shape; - a delicately formed hand and a trim foot

and ankle” (6). Other mulatto characters are described in a comparable way: “The boy was a handsome, bright-eyed mulatto ... He had white blood in his veins, as could be seen by the quick flush in his cheek, and the sparkle of his eye” (246). Sometimes it appears that the mulatto people are almost too fine and too educated. George’s boss is feeling threatened and experiences an “uneasy consciousness of inferiority” (13) due to the fact that George “talked so fluently, held himself so erect, looked so handsome and manly” (13). However, comparing this to how the really black people like Topsy, the “heathen,” and Tom the slow and rather stupid one, are being portrayed, there are significant differences.

A character who is presented as the opposite to Topsy is Eva, St Claire’s angel-like child:

There stood the two children representatives of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brow, and prince-like movements; and her black, keen, subtle, cringing, yet acute neighbor. They stood representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, command, education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil and vice! (228)

Eva seems to be completely perfect with no faults and occasionally she is almost too good to be true. When she is discussing the slavery question with her father and he asks her if she prefers a house with servants, like theirs, or without, like it is at their relatives’ up north, Eva answers: ““Oh, of course our way is the pleasantest,’” and explains it by saying, with complete honesty: ““Why, it makes so many more round you to love, you know”” (172). She is also, despite the fact that she finds it rather pleasant to be surrounded by slaves, the one person in the novel with the clearest stated ideas on how wrong she thinks slavery is. Before she dies, she pleads to her father to try to free all the slaves and go around and tell people that what they do is wrong (257). It is clear that Eva is the character which Stowe wants to collect most sympathy for; she is perfectly wonderful, kind and pious and wants everything and everybody well, and on top of that she manages to convert Topsy into a good Christian. When she then falls sick and finally dies one can imagine what kind of reaction that elicited from the readers.

Stowe herself supported the idea of renouncing “any intention of interfering with slavery in the United States and advocated the return of the blacks in America to Liberia in West Africa” (417). In the end of the novel this opinion is clearly stated:

Let the Church of the North receive these poor sufferers [the slaves] in the spirit of Christ; receive them to the educating advantages of Christian republican society and schools, until they have attained to somewhat of a moral and intellectual maturity, and then assist them in their passage to those shores [West Africa] where they may put in practice the lessons they have learned in America. (412)

Thus it is plain to see that Stowe recognized the problems with slavery and saw a colonization of Liberia as a solution to these. To a modern reader, however, the solution she offers seems rather absurd: to first educate them in Christianity, since they are “ignorant” and “inexperienced” (412), and then send them back to Africa where they could spread the white culture, in a true white missionary spirit. So the fact that Eva makes Topsy her Christian project, to behave and become a better Christian only adds up to the picture of how white people saw themselves superior to the black people.

In Stowe’s descriptions it is always very obvious what complexion her characters have. A lot of focus is put on describing what people look like and their different features instead of giving them a greater depth. It seems that color plays an important role and what we can see from the portrayals above is that black people are most often described as childish, stupid and over all rather simple people. Topsy, who is “the blackest”, one could say represents this picture the best. When it comes to the portraits of the mulattoes and quadroons we can see that a step has been taken away from the stereotypical black man and they have more authority than the black people. Then there is Eva, the angelic little girl, the bright one, who is stainless in every regard. In a way, these stereotypes may give a hint to how the author really perceived people of different kinds of backgrounds, and like mentioned above, these kind of perceptions of black people were not uncommon in America in the 1800s. The overall sensation however, is that the author seems to have a special liking for exaggerating her characterizations, which has made them into stereotypes, sometimes caricatures, irrespective of the person being black or white.

### **The Crude Reality in *Beloved***

After having read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and then going over to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, one immediately sees a difference in the latter author’s way of representing the people who have been exposed to slavery. Even though the story itself does not take place in the same period as

Stowe's work, but some time afterwards, there are several flashbacks made by the different characters which give the reader a deep insight into the abuse that the slaves were being exposed to. Morrison herself has said in interviews that "traditional slave narratives always 'drew a veil' (qtd. in Matus 104) over the shocking and painful incidents of their past" and that they were "unable to bear the fullest possible witness to the interior lives of the slave-narrators" (Matus 104). Even though *Uncle Tom's Cabin* contains several awful incidents, they do not reach the same effect on the reader as the ones in *Beloved* do. Morrison has not put her focus on giving a report of how the slave owners mistreated their slaves, even though this is also given an account of, but more on how this violation and oppression affected the black people and what consequences it had on their own actions towards people in their vicinity, or as Morrison herself puts it: "*Beloved* is not about slavery as an institution; it is 'about those *anonymous* people called slaves'(qtd. in Matus)" (Matus 39). Thus, more than anything else, it is about the people.

Early on, the reader understands that the characters have been victims of horrible incidents. A great many of these often brutal sequences surround the events at Sweet Home Plantation where one of the protagonist, Sethe, used to work before she escaped to Cincinnati in Ohio. In the beginning of the novel, Paul D, a slave like Sethe, looks back on the day that she arrived at Sweet Home and remembers that he and the other men had decided to "let her be" even though they "were young and so sick with absence of women they had taken to calves" and "rape seemed the solitary gift of life." (12) The reader is given a picture of a number of very violent young men who do not restrain themselves in order to keep from acting on their instincts. There are more parts where the narrator does not mince her words, but the reader is told the crude reality. An example of this is given when Sethe is talking to a little girl who says she does not like "drowned people" and refers to when she was out fishing and saw a "dead nigger float right by" her. Another incident in the novel, which has greater effects on the rest of the story, is when the reader learns about how Sethe tries to rescue her children from the schoolteacher and the other slave hunters by trying to kill them:

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time ... Two were lying open-eyed in sawdust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one - the woman schoolteacher bragged about. (176)

Compared to this kind of scenes, Stowe's characterization of the slaves is truly more flattering in a sense; everybody seems to be quite harmless if less intelligent. Is it not quite naïve to think that people who are being treated like animals become good and pious like the slaves are in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? Through the novel it appears that Stowe had a romanticized version of what slavery really looked like, even though she strongly disapproved of it, and she has been criticized for her lacking of "real knowledge" in the subject (Sabiston 97). The author lived in a time when slavery was still allowed, but Stowe herself was born and raised in Connecticut and later moved to Cincinnati, both of which were states in which slavery was prohibited (Rosenthal 7-9). Therefore, her first hand experiences can be questioned, despite the fact that she had slavery around her.

There is a huge difference to add to this; the narrator in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* never shows any bad impact that white Americans had on the black people that had been drawn to the United States and sold as slaves. Characteristics like wild and exotic that she considers to be so typical of "their race" seem to have followed them from Africa, even though the people she talks about had been away from "home" for several generations and could not possibly be without influence from the society they were now forced to live in. Qualities like "moral and intellectual maturity" (Stowe 412) rather seem to be something that could be learned from the white people since those are the kinds of values that the text considers to be able to "assist them in their passage" in building up a new home in Africa (Stowe 412). *Beloved*, on the other hand, may contain descriptions like the ones above: black people can be rather barbaric and raw, but in opposition to what can be understood from reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, black also stands for something beautiful. This is something never recognized in Stowe's descriptions where everything seems to be a question of to what degree a person is black or white, and the lighter in skin tone the better. In Morrison's novel, in many cases it is not obvious whether the person is colored or not, since that is not the primary concern. When speaking about color, however, the former slaves are given more pleasant attributes as "peachstone skin" (321), "hazelnut man" (14), and "glittering iron" eyes (11), in contrast to earlier mentioned expressions like "the blackest of her race" found in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The fact that the characters in *Beloved* are not as genuinely good or pious as the ones in Stowe's novel only shows the complexity of humankind. People are seldom inherently good or bad, which is a feeling that sometimes occurs while reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In addition to this, the text in *Beloved* implies that the author has another view of how the black people became the way they are. As opposed to Stowe, it is pointed out that these

wild or barbarian features are nothing that is essential for their race, but rather something that the white people are to blame for:

The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. (234)

This can be compared to the "ignorant, inexperienced, half-barbarised race" that the narrator in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* wishes that the "Church of the North" could have mercy on (Stowe 412) and educate in a true Christian manner. Thus she sees the white people, at least the Christians, as the ones who can really save the black people while *Beloved* implicates that it is the white man's fault from the beginning.

In *Beloved* the reader is faced with how both physical and psychological abuse affect the different characters. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may be, like James Baldwin puts it: "a catalogue of violence" (10), but what scars of this violence do we see remain in the characters, more than the physical? Admittedly, the concept of psychology was yet to be discovered since Freud's work on the psychoanalysis was not presented until decades after slavery was abolished. Even so, as Denver remarks, the psychological abuse can be much worse than the physical one: "anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore" (295). This sense of the black men and women being completely humiliated is lacking in Stowe's work. One reads about some white people's opinion about the slaves, but they never use their words in an explicit way to do them harm. In *Beloved*, Sethe, for instance, will not even consider taking her children and go back with schoolteacher when he tracks them down in Cincinnati. One reason is his "dehumanizing" and "bestializing view of slaves" (107) as Jill Matus so righteously expresses it. The schoolteacher character is one of the worst kinds. During the day he asks questions and examines the slaves, something that they apprehend as rather harmful, but is more comparable to scientific experiences made on animals. The results of these examinations are later registered in the notebook. He also integrates this work in his teaching where he, referring to Sethe, tells the children to "put her

human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” (229) as if it were quite normal to compare people to animals and treat them as a part of an experiment. He has a highly degrading view on the slaves and threatens them that outside of Sweet Home, they would only be “trespassers among the human race. Watchdogs without teeth” and “gelded workhorses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke” (148). In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* all characters who express these kinds of opinions of the slaves are rather simple-minded ones. St Claire’s almost ridiculed wife Marie is one example who calls them “low-minded” and “brutal people”. When someone like schoolteacher, a man with great authority, stands for these ideals and also passes them on to young children, it makes the white blame even greater; it is not only absurd or comical characters that have this view of the black people, but authorities and more important people as well. This is an interpretation that more likely correlates with how the situation was in reality for it was not uncommon for white people to think of their race as naturally superior, a perception that went for Stowe as well (Robbins 21).

At one point in the novel the reader is let inside schoolteacher’s head. Schoolteacher rages against the former owner at Sweet Home since, in his mind, the owner was far too indulgent with the slaves. According to schoolteacher the slaves are there to reproduce themselves, not to go and get married or “hire out their own time to buy themselves” (267). When the foreign slave trade was criminalized in the United States in 1807, slavery survived through reproduction instead of the yield from the regular transatlantic imports. Thus the slave women were exploited as much for their reproduction qualities as for their productive ones (White 543), a concern that is hardly mentioned or hinted at in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (except for the fact that there are mulatto characters with “white blood in [their] veins” (246)), but is repeatedly referred to in Morrison’s *Beloved*. Denver makes a remark on it when she is thinking over her mother’s situation: “Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them” (247). We see examples of this in Sethe, whose experience of sexual abuse is a strong reason why she could never let her children face slavery again. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, however, there are characters who most certainly should know about this abuse, but except for Cassy, who Simon Legree has made his mistress, the subject is not being further approached. Sexual exploitation was something that Morrison referred to as “Things too terrible to relate” (qtd. in Henderson 81) to, which was the reason why she thought most of the slave narrators, improperly, left these parts out.



Throughout the novel, more of Sethe's terrible experiences, which will shape her way of living her following life, are slowly unveiled. When she was little she had to see her mother hanging dead and unrecognizable from a tree, brutally killed by the men on the farm. Her husband, Halle, left her after having seen her being sexually abused by schoolteacher's nephews, an incident that makes him mad and thus never shows again. When schoolteacher finds out that Sethe divulged their crime, he whips her badly, even though he knows that she is pregnant with her and Halle's fourth child. These and every other bad experience from her life in enslavement strongly influence Sethe's way of approaching her life. When Paul D says that he wants her to have his baby (which is really only a way of not having to discuss an even tougher question), Sethe immediately starts to reflect on its consequences and she is terrified at the fact that she once more has to be "good" and "strong enough, *that* caring - again. Having to stay alive just that much longer." (155) Taking into consideration what she did to her own child as a direct result of her maternal instincts, she is afraid of her love and there is no getting away from the fact that both Paul D and Denver in other parts of the novel are worried about Sethe starting to love too much. Paul D questions Sethe's love for the child Denver and thinks it is very risky, "especially if it was her children she had settled on to love" (54). He thought it better to "love just a little bit ... so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one" (54). Denver, on the other hand, is afraid that Sethe will do the same with Beloved, who, depending on different interpretations of the novel, is the child that Sethe killed when schoolteacher was about to recapture them. In this case, however, Denver is not afraid of someone else doing bad things to the child, but what Sethe will do with it if something threatening happens them. In her mind Denver pleads to her mother: "Don't love her too much. Don't. Maybe it's still in her thing that makes it all right to kill her children. I have to tell her. I have to protect her." (243) Morrison herself calls this kind of love 'the best thing that is in us' but 'also the thing that makes us sabotage ourselves' (qtd. in Rushdy 39). Some memories Sethe has managed to tuck away far back in her conscious but whenever she happens to remember episodes of her dark past, she mourns that she could not go numb like other people: "Other people went crazy, why couldn't she? Other people's brains stopped, turned around and went on to something new ... [a]nd how sweet that would have been". (83) The fact that traumatizing passages like some of the ones above are told to the readers in retrospect, is clear evidence that those hard experiences are something that has shaped the characters and still has an effect on them. In contrast to Stowe, Morrison manages to build up

more credibility around her characters in showing that they, like all people, are formed by their experiences.

## **Conclusion**

When Harriet Beecher Stowe first published her novel in 1852, it was generally well received. Her aim was, through sentimental and religious strategies, to persuade people of the wrongness of slavery. The abolitionists praised the novel while the antebellum black response turned from an initial enthusiasm to rather upset reactions. One of the main things that upset the black people was that Stowe's way of pleading to the readers' sentimentality, by constantly referring to the slaves as poor creatures, turned many of her characters into stereotypes, sometimes caricatures. The sentimentality is a question that many, more recent, critics have put their focus on when discussing the novel too. To more easily gain sympathies for the slave characters Stowe uses rather flat characterizations; poor Tom is good and pious although rather simple-minded person. He would never dream of doing anything that would upset anybody and when it comes to it, he chooses salvation through death instead of an escape from the horrors of Simon Legree's plantation. Topsy is the wild heathen who will not change until Eva, the angelic little white girl dies and Topsy turns into a well-mannered girl with a true Christian spirit. By this the narrator manages to demonstrate that for even the wildest person, there is hope. All the mulattos in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are on the other hand portrayed as well-educated, beautiful and intelligent people, which the Harris family is a clear example of. The white people are usually either good Christians like Eva (if not quite to that angel-like degree) or stupid or ridiculous like Miss Ophelia or the slave hunters.

*Beloved* on the other hand, displays more complex characters. Even though descriptions often are rather crude and in some cases brutally accurate, there is more to the people than appears on the outside. Both Sethe and Paul D for instance are scarred for life from their experiences on the Sweet Home plantation; both are afraid to love again since they have experienced losses in their lives which make it harder to try again. In addition to this, humiliation is something that the former slaves have to live with. It is demonstrated how schoolteacher methodically tries to break down his inferiors and sees them like animals more than anything else. Nowhere in the novel is there anyone who is completely good or entirely evil, because who is really? The fact that the slaves in *Beloved* often are given rather coarse features is not strange considering the situation they had to stand. If treated like animals, who would remain good like most of the slaves do in Stowe's novel? It seems that the author there had a romanticized picture of slaves and slavery; of course people were treated terribly badly,

so badly that they had to escape like George and Eliza, but when it comes to portraying the real terror, like the sexual abuse and the personal humiliation that the black people had to stand from the slave owner, Stowe backs out and hides behind the sentimental pleadings.

Even though it is clear and everybody can agree on the fact that *Beloved* gives more realistic portrayals of her slave characters, one can question if Stowe would have been able to influence the slave debate to the degree that she actually managed to do, had she reproduced the crude reality in the way that Morrison does. Since most people had a fixed view of what black people were like, Stowe's novel was controversial in many ways, for example by portraying Tom as the good Christian. And after all, one has to remember what goals the two different authors had with their novels; Stowe mainly wanted to reach out to white people with the message that slavery had to come to an end, while Morrison was more concerned over the fact that so much of the really bad things had been left out in the previous slave narrators and therefore put more focus on giving a more accurate view of the hard reality. Even though it can be difficult for the modern reader to look beyond what most people today would call racist stereotypes, and accept Stowe's solution to the slavery problem: segregation instead of integration, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* actually made an important contribution to the abolitionist cause and was one of the most influential novels of its time. One has to bear in mind that the audience was not the slaves themselves but rather white people whom she wanted a change of mind from. Both authors seem to have reached their individual aims but the fact remains that Morrison's characters are the ones more able to represent the human complexity and maybe more comfortable to read about for a modern critic too.

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