

Drifting Toward Disunion, 1854–1861

It is an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces.

William H. Seward, 1858

Prologue: Popular sovereignty in Kansas degenerated into unpopular savagery. Embattled free-soilers fought embittered proslaveryites, as the complaisant pro-Southern administrations of Presidents Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan continued to drift.irate Northerners, resenting the Kansas-Nebraska grab, increasingly turned the Fugitive Slave Act into a dead letter. At the same time the newly born Republican party, sired by the same Kansas-Nebraska Act, gathered such amazing momentum in the North as to give the Democrats a real scare in the presidential election of 1856. The sectional tension was heightened by a series of inflammatory incidents, including Representative Preston Brooks's brutal beating of Senator Charles Sumner, the proslavery Dred Scott decision, and John Brown's fantastic raid at Harpers Ferry. Southerners also reacted angrily against the overwhelming approval in the North of such antislavery propaganda as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Helper's *Impending Crisis of the South* (see p. 376). And the imminent election of the Republican Lincoln in 1860 foreshadowed both secession and shooting.

A. The Impact of Uncle Tom's Cabin

1. Tom Defies Simon Legree (1852)

Harriet Beecher Stowe, a busy mother and housewife then living in Maine, was aroused by the recent gains of slavery to write—partly on old wrapping paper—her heart-tugging novel Uncle Tom's Cabin. Reared in New England as the daughter of famed preacher Lyman Beecher, and having lived for seventeen years in Ohio on the route of the Underground Railroad, she had developed an abhorrence of the "peculiar institution." Oddly enough, her firsthand observations of slavery were limited to a brief visit to Kentucky. In her best-selling book, she sought to mollify the South to some extent by representing the saintly slave Uncle Tom as having two kind masters;

¹Harriet B. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: J. P. Jewett, 1852), chap. 33.

by featuring the whimsical Topsy and the angelic little Eva (who died); and by portraying the monster Simon Legree, who finally ordered Uncle Tom beaten to death, as a Yankee from Vermont. In the following scene, the cotton-picking slaves have just returned from the fields, and Legree orders Tom to flog one of the sickly women for not having picked enough. What details of this episode would most offend the anti-slavery North? the proslavery South?

"And now," said Legree, "come here, you Tom. You see, I telled ye I didn't buy ye jest for the common work. I mean to promote ye, and make a driver of ye; and tonight ye may jest as well begin to get yer hand in. Now, ye jest take this yer gal and flog her; ye've seen enough on't [of it] to know how."

"I beg Mas'r's pardon," said Tom; "hopes Mas'r won't set me at that. It's what I an't used to—never did—and can't do, no way possible."

"Ye'll larn a pretty smart chance of things ye never did know, before I've done with ye!" said Legree, taking up a cowhide and striking Tom a heavy blow across the cheek, and following up the infliction by a shower of blows.

"There!" he said, as he stopped to rest; "now, will ye tell me ye can't do it?"

"Yes, Mas'r," said Tom, putting up his hand, to wipe the blood that trickled down his face. "I'm willin' to work, night and day, and work while there's life and breath in me. But this yer thing I can't feel it right to do; and, Mas'r, I never shall do it—*never!*"

Tom had a remarkably smooth, soft voice, and a habitually respectful manner that had given Legree an idea that he would be cowardly and easily subdued. When he spoke these last words, a thrill of amazement went through everyone. The poor woman clasped her hands and said, "O Lord!" and everyone involuntarily looked at each other and drew in their breath, as if to prepare for the storm that was about to burst.

Legree looked stupefied and confounded; but at last burst forth:

"What! ye blasted black beast! tell *me* ye don't think it *right* to do what I tell ye! What have any of you cussed cattle to do with thinking what's right? I'll put a stop to it! Why, what do ye think ye are? May be ye think ye're a gentleman, master Tom, to be a telling your master what's right, and what an't! So you pretend it's wrong to flog the gal!"

"I think so, Mas'r," said Tom; "the poor crittur's sick and feeble; 'twould be downright cruel, and it's what I never will do, nor begin to. Mas'r, if you mean to kill me, kill me; but, as to my raising my hand agin any one here, I never shall—I'll die first!"

Tom spoke in a mild voice, but with a decision that could not be mistaken. Legree shook with anger; his greenish eyes glared fiercely, and his very whiskers seemed to curl with passion. But, like some ferocious beast, that plays with its victim before he devours it, he kept back his strong impulse to proceed to immediate violence, and broke out into bitter raillery.

"Well, here's a pious dog, at least, let down among us sinners!—a saint, a gentleman, and no less, to talk to us sinners about our sins! Powerful holy crittur, he must be! Here, you rascal, you make believe to be so pious—didn't you never hear, out of yer Bible, 'Servants, obey yer masters'? An't I yer master? Didn't I pay down

twelve hundred dollars, cash, for all there is inside yer old cussed black shell? An't yer mine, now, body and soul?" he said, giving Tom a violent kick with his heavy boot; "tell me!"

In the very depth of physical suffering, bowed by brutal oppression, this question shot a gleam of joy and triumph through Tom's soul. He suddenly stretched himself up, and, looking earnestly to heaven, while the tears and blood that flowed down his face mingled, he exclaimed,

"No! no! no! my soul an't yours, Mas'r! You haven't bought it—ye can't buy it! It's been bought and paid for by One that is able to keep it. No matter, no matter, you can't harm me!"

"I can't!" said Legree, with a sneer; "we'll see—we'll see! Here, Sambo, Quimbo, give this dog such a breakin' in as he won't get over this month!"

The two gigantic Negroes that now laid hold of Tom, with fiendish exultation in their faces, might have formed no unapt personification of powers and darkness. The poor woman screamed with apprehension, and all rose, as by a general impulse, while they dragged him unresisting from the place.

2. *The South Scorns Mrs. Stowe (1852)*

Northern abolitionists naturally applauded Mrs. Stowe's powerful tale; the poet John Greenleaf Whittier now thanked God for the Fugitive Slave Act, which had inspired the book. The few Northern journals that voiced criticism were drowned out by the clatter of the printing presses running off tens of thousands of new copies. Southern critics cried that this "wild and unreal picture" would merely arouse the "fanaticism" of the North while exciting the "indignation" of the South. They insisted that the slave beatings were libelously overemphasized; that the worst slave drivers were imported Northerners (like Legree); that the Southern black slave was better off than the Northern wage slave; and that relatively few families were broken up—fewer, in fact, than among soldiers on duty, Irish immigrants coming to America, sailors going to sea, or pioneers venturing West. Why did the Southern Literary Messenger of Richmond find it important to refute Mrs. Stowe's "slanders" as follows?

There are some who will think we have taken upon ourselves an unnecessary trouble in exposing the inconsistencies and false assertions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It is urged by such persons that in devoting so much attention to abolition attacks we give them an importance to which they are not entitled. This may be true in general. But let it be borne in mind that this slanderous work has found its way to every section of our country, and has crossed the water to Great Britain, filling the minds of all who know nothing of slavery with hatred for that institution and those who uphold it. Justice to ourselves would seem to demand that it should not be suffered to circulate longer without the brand of falsehood upon it.

²*Southern Literary Messenger* 18 (1852): 638, 731.

Let it be recollected, too, that the importance Mrs. Stowe will derive from Southern criticism will be one of infamy. Indeed she is only entitled to criticism at all as the mouthpiece of a large and dangerous faction which, if we do not put down with the pen, we may be compelled one day (God grant that day may never come!) to repel with the bayonet.

There are questions that underlie the story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of far deeper significance than any mere false coloring of Southern society. . . . We beg to make a single suggestion to Mrs. Stowe—that, as she is fond of referring to the Bible, she will turn over, before writing her next work of fiction, to the twentieth chapter of Exodus and there read these words—"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." . . .

We have not had the heart to speak of an erring woman as she deserved, though her misconduct admitted of no excuse and provoked the keenest and most just reprobation. We have little inclination—and, if we had much, we have not the time—to proceed with our disgusting labor, to anatomize minutely volumes as full of poisonous vermin as of putrescence, and to speak in such language as the occasion would justify, though it might be forbidden by decorum and self-respect.

We dismiss *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with the conviction and declaration that every holier purpose of our nature is misguided, every charitable sympathy betrayed, every loftier sentiment polluted, every moral purpose wrenched to wrong, and every patriotic feeling outraged, by its criminal prostitution of the high functions of the imagination to the pernicious intrigues of sectional animosity, and to the petty calumnies of willful slander.

3. Mrs. Stowe Inflames the Southern Imagination (1853)

Uncle Tom's Cabin touched the imaginations of millions of readers. Few Americans, North or South, could regard slavery calmly; the "peculiar institution" inflamed the hearts and even the dreams of Americans on all sides of the issue. For Southerners, Mrs. Stowe's novel could unleash frightful images. This print, first published in Louisville, Kentucky, illustrated a dream supposedly "caused by the perusal" of Mrs. Stowe's novel. Why would a novel critical of slavery prompt such a vision? Was this nightmarish vision confirmed by events? What do the images here suggest were the South's deepest fears about slavery and abolitionism? What is the artist's view of Mrs. Stowe?



4. The London Times Demurs (1852)

Uncle Tom's Cabin was also a sensational success abroad, even prompting some Russian noblemen to free their serfs. Lord Palmerston, who had not read a novel in thirty years, devoured this one three times. But the lordly London Times, reputedly the semiofficial mouthpiece of the government, was one of the few important journals in England to express strong reservations. In this portion of the lengthy review in the Times, how sound is the argument that the book was self-defeating because it would hinder the peaceful abolition of slavery?

The gravest fault of the book has, however, to be mentioned. Its object is to abolish slavery. Its effect will be to render slavery more difficult than ever of abolishment. Its very popularity constitutes its greatest difficulty. It will keep ill-blood at boiling point, and irritate instead of pacifying those whose proceedings Mrs. Stowe is anxious to influence on behalf of humanity.

⁴London Times, September 3, 1852.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was not required to convince the haters of slavery of the abomination of the "institution"; of all books, it is the least calculated to weigh with those whose prejudices in favour of slavery have yet to be overcome, and whose interests are involved in the perpetuation of the system. If slavery is to cease in America, and if the people of the United States, who fought and bled for their liberty and nobly won it, are to remove the disgrace that attaches to them for forging chains for others which they will not tolerate on their own limbs, the work of enfranchisement must be a movement, not forced upon slaveowners, but voluntarily undertaken, accepted, and carried out by the whole community.

There is no federal law which can compel the slave states to resign the "property" which they hold. The states of the South are as free to maintain slavery as are the states of the North to rid themselves of the scandal. Let the attempt be made imperiously and violently to dictate to the South, and from that hour the Union is at an end.

We are aware that to the mind of the "philanthropist" the alternative brings no alarm, but to the rational thinkers, to the statesman, and to all men interested in the world's programs, the disruption of the bond that holds the American states together is fraught with calamity, with which the present evil of slavery—a system destined sooner or later to fall to pieces under the weight of public opinion and its own infamy—bears no sensible comparison.

The writer of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and similar well-disposed authors have yet to learn that to excite the passions of their readers in favour of their philanthropic schemes is the very worst mode of getting rid of a difficulty which, whoever may be to blame for its existence, is part and parcel of the whole social organization of a large proportion of the states, and cannot be forcibly removed without instant anarchy, and all its accompanying mischief.