

Reading Uncle Tom's Cabin as a Text of Non-Violence and Civil Disobedience

Kenneth Ronald DiMaggio, Capital Community College, USA

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Abstract

Recognized as a great anti-slavery narrative, Harriet Beecher Stowe's 19th century novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is often seen as more of a historical document today. Yet the way several of Stowe's characters such as Mrs. Bird, Ophelia, and Uncle Tom himself confront the issues of slavery (or fail to) prophetically mirror the positions of non-violence and civil disobedience that Martin Luther King, Jr. outlines in his 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Thus the vehement, anti-slavery position of Mrs. Bird (whose husband initially supports slavery) echoes a position of civil disobedience where one has the moral right to disobey unjust laws that deny human dignity. In Miss Ophelia, a teacher from the North, (and who opposes slavery) her emphasis on training and religious conversion for slaves marks her more like the sympathetic but over-cautious clergy that supported King's position on civil disobedience but were afraid to act on it. And in the character of Uncle Tom himself, he is almost like a prototype of a protestor confronting social injustice through the means of non-violence and also a tactic that King outlined known as "creative suffering."

Keywords: Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin, Civil Disobedience, Letter from Birmingham Jail.

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Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is often cited as one of the reasons that later helped to ignite the American Civil War, where the Northern states fought to end slavery in the Southern states after seceding from the union in 1859. Not long after the War Between the States (as the American Civil War is sometime referred as) broke out in 1860, the president trying to preserve the union, Abraham Lincoln, invited Mrs. Stowe to the White House. Once introductions were over, President Lincoln is attributed as saying to this petite author from Hartford, Connecticut: "' So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war!'" (Hedrick, 1994, p. vii). Whether true or not, Lincoln's statement reflects the sentiment that many readers have felt about Stowe's classic that was one of the first global best sellers when it was published: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a fiery polemic against slavery in antebellum United States. Such recognition also leads to quick dismissal of the book. Once Stowe's best seller was firmly established as a book that would never go out of print, critics also begin to dismiss it for what they perceived to be its moralizing and even sentimentalizing qualities.

A review from the prominent liberal journal *The Nation* is a good example of the type of condescending criticism Stowe would begin to endure. Along with several other contemporary women writers, Stowe was too much of a woman writer who could not escape her fiery passion. Such female authors, the review noted "thought that all that was necessary to write a good novel was to have a good cause. The work of women was labeled 'earnest,' 'sentimental,' 'didactic,' and bad art" (Hedrick, 1994, p. 350). Yet such criticism overlooks the complexity of Stowe's characters. Despite her unwavering thesis demanding the abolition of slavery, critics fail to see how Stowe approached ending this horrific practice on American soil. In linking Stowe as a writer with a cause (and then as a writer who portrays this cause through a didactical approach), a character like Uncle Tom might not seem to have much presence in the story that is also named after him. Uncle Tom is a slave who does not flee north for his freedom after he learns how his present, kindly master is forced to sell him to a cruel and brutal master.

In such light then, Uncle Tom may strike the reader as being passive and even cowardly. It is a position that James Baldwin (1998) takes in his famous essay attacking Stowe's text in "Everybody's Protest Novel" for which he concludes about the eponymous hero: "Tom, therefore, her only black man, has been robbed of his humanity and divested of his sex. It is the price for that darkness with which he has been branded" (p.14). On the contrary, Tom is far from being a passive character. In addition, he is also a fiery, passionate character. But if readers and critics fail to see such distinctions, it is due to the way they are overlooking how Tom fights against slavery through civil disobedience, more specifically, through acts of non-violence that a 20th century civil rights leader like Martin Luther King Jr. would later take to the streets of Birmingham, Montgomery, Chicago, and other American cities in his fight to end racial apartheid in mid-century United States. As Beatrice A. Anderson (1991) notes in her essay, "Uncle Tom: A Hero at Last:" "Looking at why Tom refuses to rebel against his sale from the Shelby estate, why he rescues little Eva, and why he endures Legree—to a point—and later defies him leads to an understanding of Tom's genuine strengths" (p. 3). What I will extend in this paper, is how Tom's strengths reflect the resolve and philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr's philosophy of civil-disobedient based non-violence, particularly as it is outlined in his famous 1963 "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

From his introduction as a slave on the more genteel Shelby plantation to his brutal death at the hands of the slave-master Simon Legree, Uncle Tom displays an anti-slavery stance rooted in non-violence and civil disobedience. When Tom learns how his master Mr. Shelby will have to sell him along with several other slaves in order to pay off a debt, he seems to resign himself to this fate. Tom will not flee, like his fellow slave Eliza will when she learns how her infant son Harry is among some of the slaves that Shelby will sell. Thus, Tom initially seems passive in his refusal to flee for his freedom. He is even sympathetic for the man who would sell him. “ ‘Mas’r couldn’t help himself, he did right, but I’m feared things will be kinder goin’ to rack, when I’m gone’” Tom says in defense of his reason for not fleeing (Stowe, 2005, p. 47). Tom, however, is aware of how his potential freedom is tied into the fate of his fellow slaves on the Shelby plantation.

Should Tom run off, his owner Mr. Shelby will forfeit a thousand dollar bond. Losing such a bond will force him to sell off the rest of his slaves, a point that the slave-trader Mr. Haley notes with wicked glee. “ ‘And mind yerself,’ said the trader...’for I’ll take every cent out of him, if you ain’t thar’” (Stowe, 2005, p. 48). Ironically, Tom is given a day of freedom before he will be taken away by a slave-trader and sold to a new master. If Tom promises Mr. Shelby that he will not use this temporary freedom to escape, it is a promise made on his faith as a Christian. “ ‘And I jist ask you, Mas’r, have I ever broke word to you, or gone contrary to you, ‘specially since I was a Christian?’” (Stowe, 2005, p. 48). Tom’s Christianity is not just based on his own salvation. Tom’s Christianity ties him to his fellow slaves who will get sold if he does not return back to Mr. Shelby after his brief day of freedom.

In addition, Tom’s Christianity is also tied to the man who is sending him off to a worse fate. Tom knows that by honoring a promise that is rooted in hypocrisy, he will also shame the people who forced him to make this promise. Tom knows that his masters Mr. and also Mrs. Shelby are fellow Christians. As slave owners who are *Christian*, they are troubled by the way their roles as plantation owners contradict the faith they are coming more and more to embrace. Mrs. Shelby in particular is greatly disturbed by the sale of Tom and several other slaves. By honoring his promise to return to the Shelby plantation after his day of freedom, Tom is also bringing at least one of the Shelbys closer to Christianity. Soon after Eliza’s escape with Harry, Mrs. Shelby will do her best in trying to impede the slave-trader Haley from re-capturing them. “The more hopelessly sordid and insensible he appeared, the greater became Mrs. Shelby’s dread of his succeeding in recapturing Eliza and her child, and of course the greater her motive for detaining him by every female artifice” (Stowe, 2005, p. 48). Had Uncle Tom chose Eliza’s path—to run off for his freedom to the free states up north—there would have been less inclination for Mrs. Shelby to expand upon her Christianity as a faith where the individual is never separate from the sufferings of his or her fellow men and women in bondage, and whether they are Christian or not. It is one of the main premises of Martin Luther King’s 1963 piece of writing about the American Civil Rights Movement in the text that would soon come to be known as the “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

For his role in coordinating a non-violent march against racism in Birmingham in April of 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., and several other march leaders were arrested and held in the city jail. While he was in jail, King read a story from a contraband newspaper citing the tepid reaction from liberal white religious leaders—ostensibly allies in his cause against “Jim Crow” or racial segregation between Black and White Americans that was the status quo in many Southern U.S. states at that time. “They branded King and his colleagues outsiders and extremists” is how Jonathan Rieder (2013) describes the liberal moderate clergy that supported King up until his march in Birmingham (p. xv). Initially, his letter (written on smuggled in scraps of paper along with paper provided by his attorneys) was a rebuttal and also moral chiding of the allies who deserted him. More than just an indignant rebuttal, the letter also outlines King’s philosophy and strategy on non-violence, or civil disobedience. “The ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail,’ the vision of nonviolence it argued for, and the disinherited children of God it sanctified played a critical part in dismantling Jim Crow” (Rieder, 2013, p. xvii). In like manner, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a text trying to dismantle slavery in antebellum America. Stowe is trying to do so, however, through the civil disobedience that her protagonist Uncle Tom displays throughout her novel. Later in the novel, Tom is sold to the cruel slave owner, Simon Legree, who often whips him. Legree initially hoped that Tom would become more like a junior overseer for him, a position that Tom refused. This refusal periodically ignites Legree to whip Tom. In doing so, Legree hopes that Tom will return to the fold, or in this case, the status quo of slavery, but where Tom will occupy a more privileged position as a junior overseer rather than a frequently abused field hand. After seeing Tom reading a Bible, Legree chides him: “ ‘Come, Tom, don’t you think you’d better be reasonable?—heave that ar old pack of trash in the fire, and join my church!’ ” (Stowe, 2005, p. 330).

But Tom cannot. Tom is not reading the Bible for his own solace (as Legree assumes). Slave he may be, but Tom is also a missionary, and his mission is to help free his fellow slaves and also his slave master. Martin Luther King Jr. chose to march in Birmingham because it was one of the most resistant cities to desegregation. Consequently, any challenge against the city's Jim Crow laws would be met with the harsh response of mounted police officers and truncheons. If Jim Crow was going to be dismantled, it would have to begin here in Birmingham. "so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home and town.

Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid" King writes (King, 2000, p. 86). Tom will carry the gospel of freedom to Legree's plantation, where he will meet the ferocious lashes of Legree's whip. Before one lash sears his flesh, he is already immune to the pain. Like a civil rights protestor who will march with King, he or she will first attend a creative workshop in suffering; the protestor must prepare to meet this upcoming violence with nonviolence. Only then, can a man or woman face the mounted police officers that will charge them and beat them. Such passive but painful resistance must only come as a last resort. King outlines how nonviolence is broken down into four steps—the last being direct action, where the protestor will surrender his or her own body to the violence of men trying to uphold an immoral system known as Jim Crow. By making such surrender, the protestors are also creating an act of conscience that defies the immoral laws of Jim Crow. Such acts of conscience are also the weapons (ironically) in this engagement based on nonviolence. Such acts are designed to get the moderates to become more engaged in helping to end Jim Crow, and such acts are even meant to help weaken the immoral resolve of the police officers who will soon attack these protestors. "We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action," writes King, "whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community" (King, 2000, p. 88). Before doing so, King's followers must engage in "a process of self-purification" (King, 2000, p. 88). For Uncle Tom, self-purification appears to be an ongoing part of his nature.

The workshop which helps him evolve to this state of self-purification is his Christianity. Thus, by the time Legree violently whips him for refusing to become an overseer, Tom's position of civil disobedience is already well-established enough for him not to suffer the blows. "But the blows fell now only on the outer man, and not, as before, on the heart. Tom stood perfectly submissive; and yet Legree could not hide from himself that his power over his bond thrall was somehow gone" (Stowe, 2005, p. 333). It is Legree and not Tom who is starting to break. And it is Tom and not Legree, who is becoming the instructor. Such a position was also behind King's philosophy of nonviolence outlined through his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Early in the letter, King (2000) cites St. Thomas Aquinas who makes a distinction between just and unjust laws: "Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust" (p. 94).

More than that, by creating an act of civil disobedience which shows how the laws of the oppressors are unjust, it will also erode the false moral superiority of their position, a point that Rieder (2013) in his study of King's famous letter titled, *Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr's Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle that Changed a Nation*. Thus, King's letter (and his philosophy of nonviolence) is also there to instruct and change the hearts of the oppressors. "The other part of this subtext is subversive in the context of the time and the place: the confident black man schooling the white men in the tenets of their own faith" (p. 66). Legree may initially present himself as a man of no faith, but soon after whipping Tom, his conscience has become greatly altered.

He understands full well that it was GOD who was standing between him and his victim, and he blasphemed him. That submissive and silent man, whom taunts, nor threats, nor stripes, nor cruelties, could disturb, roused a voice within him, such as of old his Master roused in the demoniac soul, saying, 'What have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth?—are thou come to torment us before the time?'. (Stowe, 2005, p. 333)

Such an example shows a more extreme form of the civil disobedience that King espoused. Also, King is not asking his followers to become martyrs. King asks them to resist the oppression of racism, but through nonviolent means. "The negro has many pent-up resentments" writes King. "So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to city hall; let him go on freedom rides—and try to understand what he must do" (King, 2000, p. 101). Nevertheless, just because King disavows any radical or violent means to end racial segregation does not mean that his message and means to carry it out is tepid. In a similar manner, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was later misinterpreted in a similar vein. To quote James Baldwin (1998) again: "The figure from whom the novel takes its name, Uncle Tom...is phenomenally forbearing" (p. 14). Baldwin fails to see how Tom's overindulging forbearance is also his strength. Furthermore, Baldwin glosses over the deeper roots to Tom's forbearance. His nonviolent resistance to Legree is a rich example of the extremism that King argued for, despite presenting himself as a man of peace.

Yet King is an extremist, but not in a manner that many might come to associate with that term. In one of the more compelling lines in his Birmingham letter King (2000) writes: "So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love?" (p. 102). King will be an extremist for love, and so too will Stowe's protagonist in the novel that is named after him. Stowe vehemently opposed slavery. Her opposition against it, however, can be found in the various acts of civil disobedience that her main character undergoes. Stowe is not an abolitionist; neither is she the anti-slavery radical in the vein of John Brown whose raid on a federal armory only helped to ignite the American Civil War. Stowe will show how the ideals of Christian-based love, forgiveness, and to a certain extent, martyrdom, can overcome the evil system of slavery. Only a select few can take on this extremist role rooted in the Christian view of love based on forgiveness, and Uncle Tom is that character. Like King, Stowe knows that only a few can take the fight to this advanced level. Those who cannot must be dissuaded from pursuing such a course. Uncle Tom presents such dissuasion to the slave Cassy who is planning to kill Legree before fleeing his plantation. As a

Christian, but also as a practitioner of nonviolence, Uncle Tom cannot condone any act of violence, particularly murder. Thus he rouses all his Christian learning and ideals of nonviolence to persuade Cassy not to kill the master who brutalized slaves like her. By killing off Legree, (who in this scene is in a drunken sleep) many of her fellow slaves would also be able flee and find some refuge in the swamps. Her act may strike many as noble and even justified, but Uncle Tom feels otherwise when he cries out: “ ‘No, ye poor, lost soul, that you mustn’t do. The dear, blessed Lord never shed no blood but his own, and that he poured out for us when we was enemies. Lord, help us to follow his steps, and love our enemies” (Stowe, 2005, p. 335). King (2000) echoes similar sentiments in his “Letter from Birmingham” when he writes: “Was not Jesus an extremist for love: ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you”” (p. 102).

Still, King’s letter is not solely a document on Christian apologetics; it is well known that King’s philosophy of nonviolence and civil disobedience was inspired by Gandhi’s efforts to free his country of India from Imperialist British rule. In some of his sermons, King would cite how Gandhi defied British rule by urging his people to march to the sea and take salt from it in defiance of British law against taking it. “This was the gist of the story King told of Gandhi’s salt march, which he turned into a parable of black triumph against overwhelming odds” (Rieder, 2013, p. 5). King’s philosophy of non-violence is based on courageous acts of engagement against social injustice. Such philosophy then must also take into account the injustice it is battling against. Such a warrior then must go into battle armed with an ethical awareness of the oppression he or she is trying to overcome. It is the thesis behind Beatrice A. Anderson’s (1991) article, “Uncle Tom: A Hero at Last.” Anderson presents an interpretation which shows how earlier misinterpretations and attacks against Tom’s character fail to see the ethical dimension to his character. What might strike some critics as an overindulging forbearance is instead a man putting his own life in danger in order to save the lives of others. Such a position prevents Tom from seeking what his fellow slaves are struggling for: freedom. If so, Tom acts from a higher calling, one where he is willing to make the sacrifices that will let others go free. Writes Anderson (1991): “Tom’s ethical code, in addition to his love for his family and his sense of responsibility toward his community, allows him no such fight for freedom...Tom is not looking for eternal reward. He simply responds instinctively to a visible and immediate human need” (p. 3).

Still, the topography of Stowe’s novel is Christian based—and rooted in a form of nonviolence and civil disobedience that will later get more defined expression in the tactics that Martin Luther King, Jr. outlines in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” In a similar vein, King’s letter is also based on a topography rooted in The New Testament. Without taking into account these theological and philosophical strains, Uncle Tom will strike the reader more as a minstrel-show like caricature rather than a character battling an oppressive social system. In his introduction to *The Annotated Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, critic Henry Louis Gates (2007) explores the sexual tension in Stowe’s novel, while also trying to see beyond the stinging rebuke that Baldwin had for Stowe’s text. Yet Gates (like Baldwin before him) fails to see how Stowe’s text is tied to issues based on nonviolence and civil disobedience. Failing to see those issues, the novel (and particularly the novel’s protagonist) will seem more like caricatures in a work written by an author who was more of “an impassioned pamphleteer” than a novelist, according to Baldwin (Baldwin, 1998, p. 12). While not agreeing with

Baldwin, Gates (2007) also fails to see the deeper, theological and ethical issues behind Uncle Tom's character. "Remove Uncle Tom's mask and what is left? To Baldwin, not much. Forbearance, at least Tom's sort, erases the self, precludes selfhood, just as slavery sought to do" (p. xix-xx).

Finally, in seeing how *Uncle Tom's Cabin* creates a strong character rooted in a Christian tradition of non-violence and radical love, we also have a text that foreshadows the later 20th century American Civil Rights Movement. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* cannot be separated from its theme of anti-slavery; therefore, her novel can also be read as a document of social justice. Such a reading allows Stowe's novel the possibility of sharing an almost familial type relationship with other, social-justice based texts, such as Martin Luther King Jr's, "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Stowe's novel, however, will have such plausible antecedent if her protagonist—Uncle Tom—is given the more complex, critical reading his character displays, particularly towards the end of the novel, when Uncle Tom dedicates his last minutes of life to his master—and for the moral betterment of the man who will soon take his life. "O Mas'r! don't bring this great sin on your soul! It will hurt you more than 't will me! Do the worst you can, my troubles'll be over soon; but, if ye don't repent, yours won't never end!" (Stowe, 2005, p. 349). King (2000) was also aware of the moral darkness his oppressors remained imprisoned in. "I have hope that Mr. Boutwell [the Birmingham mayor supporting segregation] will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive resistance to desegregation" (King, 2000, p. 91).

A few sentences later, King deliberately undermines the hope he just set up, noting how the oppressors seldom give up their divisive privileges and oppressive power. That is when the oppressed must use acts of civil disobedience to bring down the power of their oppressors. For King and his followers, those acts consisted of sit-ins, marches, and filling up their jails with their bloody and broken bodies. For Uncle Tom, he could only use his oppressed body as a moral example to shatter the false moral principles of his oppressive master. Far from being a passive character, Uncle Tom—like Martin Luther King, Jr., is a skillful tactician and also teacher. Uncle Tom—like Martin Luther King, Jr.—is "the confident black man schooling the white men in the tenets of their own faith" (Rieder, 2013, p. 66). And the tenets that both Uncle Tom's author and Martin Luther King, Jr. share first stem from the ethics and values of their faith.

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