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CINDY WEINSTEIN

Introduction

Harriet Beecher Stowe's most famous introduction took place on or around Thanksgiving Day, 1862, when she was introduced to President Abraham Lincoln, who allegedly greeted her with these memorable words, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!" Even if we grant Lincoln's statement its obvious degree of ironic intention, he, nevertheless, makes quite a claim for the impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on American history. One glance at virtually any of Lincoln's speeches reveals that he, like Stowe, believed that the power of words could alter the minds and hearts of individuals. Stowe's faith in the transforming capacity of language makes a great deal of sense, given that she came from a distinguished family of ministers and social activists – in an 1851 letter to Frederick Douglass, she writes, "I am a ministers daughter – a ministers wife & I have had six brothers in the ministry . . . & I certainly ought to know something of the feelings of ministers." Stowe here refers to her father, Lyman Beecher, President of Lane Seminary, her husband, Calvin Stowe, who served at various times as Professor at Lane Seminary, Professor of the Chair of Sacred Literature at Andover Theological Seminary and Professor at Bowdoin College, and her brothers, the most famous of whom was Henry Ward Beecher, head of the prestigious Congregationalist Plymouth Church in Brooklyn and anti-slavery activist. This list, it should be noted, doesn't even mention her influential sisters, Catharine Beecher, founder of the Hartford Female Seminary and author of many tracts, including *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, and Isabelle Beecher Hooker, whose close ties to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony made Isabelle an important figure in the campaign for women's rights. To what extent Stowe's own words of ministration and protest catapulted the nation toward Civil War is an unanswerable question, but clearly Stowe wanted her novel to bring about great social change and Lincoln thought she had succeeded.[1]

The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe takes as its starting point Lincoln's suggestion that Stowe's writing changed the course of

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history. All of the essays in this volume take the position that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exerted a momentous impact upon the life of American culture (and continues to do so), but the essays significantly diverge on what to make of Stowe's contribution in terms of her representations of race, gender, region, and nation. His words, therefore, serve not as a statement of truth about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s effects, but rather as a provocation to pose a series of questions: How and with what implications might this kind of novelistic influence be possible? How has the history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* intersected with and, perhaps, changed US literary history? How does its narrative structure, depiction of characters, and ideological positioning produce, on the one hand, readings that champion the novel for its progressive call to action and, on the other, indict the novel for its racist prescription for inaction? How does *Uncle Tom's Cabin* produce such vastly different, indeed contradictory, positions, and how is this rich interpretative vortex made richer by the many theatrical productions, consumer products, and films, inspired by Stowe's novel? We might also ask, how does Stowe's great novelistic achievement fit into her own literary history which spans over six decades? After all, by the time Lincoln and Stowe met, she had already written several other texts, including *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), her powerful defense of the novel's authenticity; *Dred: A Tale of the Great Swamp* (1856), her second anti-slavery novel and, according to some recent critics, a more devastating attack on slavery than *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; *The Minister's Wooing* (1859), a masterfully crafted novel (and the one most influenced by one of her favorite writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne), with a critique of slavery as it was practiced in eighteenth-century Newport, Rhode Island; *The Pearl of Orr's Island* (1862); and *Agnes of Sorrento* (1862). Although her celebrity status derived from her authorship of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the fact is that she not only continued to write about slavery, and in ways that interestingly depart from that novel, but she was beginning to lay the groundwork in her writings of the 1860s for the regionalist fictions of Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and many others.

Lincoln's introduction presents us with the Harriet Beecher Stowe who needs no introduction; the woman from Litchfield Connecticut, born in 1811, who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century. It was first serialized in the *National Era* from June 5, 1851 through April 1, 1852, and published in a two-volume book form by John P. Jewett on March 20, 1852. Two cataclysmic but very different events laid the political and emotional foundation for Stowe's inspiration, which first took shape in her famous vision of "the scene of the death of Uncle Tom . . . as if the crucified, but now risen and glorified Christ, ere speaking to her through the black man, cut and bleeding under the blows of the slave whip". First,

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Uncle Tom's Cabin was written as a protest against the Fugitive Slave Law, which was, for many northerners, the most controversial element of the Compromise of 1850 in that it legally mandated them to cooperate in the capture and return of runaway slaves. Second, it was written as a lamentation in response to the death of her infant son, Charley.[2]

It should come as no surprise that a novel produced out of anger and sadness has elicited in the course of its one hundred fifty years in print responses ranging from tears to outrage. The tears were the result of her harrowing and, for many, effective representation of the cruelties of slavery, in particular its devastating impact on slave families. The upset generated by her novel has a more complicated trajectory. Not only were readers devastated by the fact that such brutal scenes were being enacted in slave states, but many readers for very different reasons were outraged by Stowe's depiction of them. Southern whites, in general, objected to Stowe's allegedly false depiction of the peculiar institution, and prominent white abolitionists and African Americans found the stereotypical representation of black characters unpalatable and her seeming endorsement of colonization deplorable. Even Douglass, her staunch supporter, felt called upon to remind Stowe, "the truth is, dear madam, we are *here*, and we are likely to remain." Indeed, the responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provide a medium through which one could construct a history of US black/white relations, one that is, perhaps, framed on the one end by William Lloyd Garrison's attack in March 1852, "is there one law of submission and non-resistance for the black man, and another law of rebellion and conflict for the white man?" and, on the other, with the last words of the epigraph to Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, "Uncle Tom is dead!"[3]

The range of responses to the character of Uncle Tom is here startlingly bracketed: from one perspective, the book that carries his name helped to inspire a Civil War and bring about the end of slavery, while from another, Uncle Tom came to stand for, as Wright puts it, "reluctant toleration for the cringing type who knew his place before white folk." A study of the visual images of Uncle Tom, of sundry collectibles, of musical productions, attests to the noxious, racist deployment of Stowe's central character. But Uncle Tom, it should also be recalled, refuses to flog the exhausted slave Lucy, whom he had earlier assisted by adding to her sack of cotton, and refuses to give Legree any information regarding Cassy and Emmeline's plans to escape – an escape that he has encouraged after listening to Cassy's story of unrelenting suffering. All heroic acts of resistance that culminate in his sacrificial death.

Stowe's depiction of the Christ-like Uncle Tom as docile, maternal, and childlike (characteristics, it should be noted, valued dearly by many in the

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antebellum period), clearly laid the foundation for the deeply racist images that followed. Her racial essentialism, or what historian George Frederickson calls "romantic racialism," provided her with a set of types which she then applied to blacks, southerners, and northerners, and which had, paradoxically, its most tenacious and corrosive effects on the group she was most interested in aiding: African Americans. In examining and assessing the content and form of Stowe's racialism, contemporary critics have been deeply divided as to its racist implications – as divided as the novel's first readers. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may have been written by Stowe in the early 1850s, but the novel has been written many times over since then. In other words, the life of the novel has been extended and the novel has been transformed, virtually since the moment of its publication, through stage adaptations that often borrowed quite heavily from the minstrel tradition, children's editions that heavily redacted Stowe's text, and anti-Uncle Tom novels that inverted Stowe's characters in order to defend slavery. A representative example of this last is W. L. G. Smith's *Life at the South; or "Uncle Tom's Cabin" as It Is. Being Narratives, Scenes, and Incidents in the Real "Life of the Lowly*," in which Uncle Tom appears as a "refractory," lazy (the second chapter is entitled, "The Plantation – Uncle Tom's Laziness"), and "stubborn" slave. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s rich afterlife makes it both inevitable and necessary that many of the essays that follow take up the question of Stowe's contribution to the representation of race and its continuing legacy in African-American literature, in the literature of social reform, in US legal and political thought, to name just a few areas of cultural production where one can examine the influence of Stowe's novel and its endlessly signifying effects. Although Stowe had confidently written in 1852 to Gamaliel Bailey, her editor at the *National Era*, that "there is no arguing with pictures," her novelistic picture of slavery with "its reverses, changes, and the negro character" has done nothing but inspire debate and dialogue. With that in mind, the complexities of Stowe's contributions to questions of race, gender, popular culture, *et al*. neither go away nor are resolved in the essays that make up this volume – that would not be a rational outcome given the hugely disparate range of responses to her work. Instead, these essays present readers with arguments and analyses that at once sharpen the focus, expand the pictures, and clarify the rich and diverse legacy of Stowe's literary efforts.[4]

But why a *Cambridge Companion to Stowe* now? One reason is that, along with Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is taught in virtually every American literature undergraduate and graduate survey course, in addition to appearing on the syllabi for classes in American history, women's studies, and African-American studies. The pedagogical centrality of Stowe's novel has

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significantly increased in the last twenty years as literary critics, in particular, have adopted interpretative approaches (new historicism, feminism, cultural studies) that contextualize literary texts in relation to decisive cultural issues of their time. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is obviously an exemplary and provocative text to present in this methodological climate. Students are often disarmed by its seeming simplicity and flustered by its apparent lack of a dominant symbol, whether it be an "A," a whale, or a pond. They find the foundational terms of Stowe's symbolic system, which combines Christianity, her culture's most salient belief system, with slavery, her culture's most divisive issue, at once more and less straightforward. More direct, in that what the novel means – end slavery – seems so obvious that students often feel that there is little to say, other than to observe and often complain about Stowe's propagandistic authorial interventions, the repetition of families being separated, or the incessant tears that accompany those separations. At the same time, students find Stowe to be less direct, in that those very methods for conveying her meaning seem irretrievably remote, decidedly abstract, relentlessly sentimental. The capaciousness of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* invites a range of readings that puts it in the same category as *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick*. Consequently, a key concern among all of these essays is to provide readers with a number of interpretative options that will help them make sense not only of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s aesthetic arrangements and narrative devices, but also of its enormous representational breadth.

This leads us to a second reason for a Stowe Companion. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has become, in approximately the last twenty years, another leviathan in the canon of American literature. Like *Moby-Dick*, which virtually disappeared from the critical radar screen for over sixty years and then experienced a critical renaissance that has no end in sight, Stowe's novel is now an indispensable text through which to convey the volatility of the antebellum landscape as related to race, gender, politics, aesthetics, region, and class. To be sure, the novels radically differ in a variety of ways, including their focus, style and content, to name three of the most obvious: Aunt Rachel and "Madame Leviathan" are the only female characters in *Moby-Dick* compared to the many women who constitute the center of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s plot and politics; the narrative voice in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is much more consistent and obtrusive than in *Moby-Dick*; and the ideal family to which one aspires in *Moby-Dick* is figured by the orgiastic homosocial union in "A Squeeze of the Hand," whereas happy families in Stowe's novel are orchestrated by mothers, such as Eliza, Aunt Rachel (quite different from Melville's character of that name), and Mrs. Shelby. There are, however, intriguing similarities. Like *Moby-Dick*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a book very much preoccupied with the status of books, the Bible in particular, and their hermeneutic

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possibilities. Like *Moby-Dick*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is deeply invested in critiquing antebellum society, which both Melville and Stowe believe can be better. Like *Moby-Dick*, with its relentless representation of how bodies, human and cetological, are violated and turned into things, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is determined to end a system that turns men into things (which was, of course, the original subtitle of the novel). And even though one can argue, and influential scholars have, that their critiques of the status quo are ultimately complicit in the structures of power that they strive to undermine, the fact is that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has borne the particular brunt of contemporary critical disdain.

Stowe's novel has become, in recent years, a critical white whale. And I don't mean as the bearer of interpretative capaciousness, but rather as an object to be spatially isolated (in terms of her career), hermeneutically contained, and thereby classified once and for all. Surely, though, there were reasons why southern readers committed to slavery, for example, were deeply unsettled upon reading the novel. Or why Senator Charles Sumner in his 1852 speech, "Freedom National, Slavery Sectional," invoked *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in his argument against the Fugitive Slave Law. Oddly enough, the woman who was championed by Douglass as having written "a work of marvelous depth and power [to which] nothing could have better suited the moral and humane requirements of the hour," now stands for the racist presumptions of her society. Not only does this position fail to confront fully the historical impact of the novel, it has produced a stalemate in interpretations of Stowe that inevitably places her in the position of the benevolent, though benighted, antebellum woman eager to champion the cause of progressive politics but ideologically paralyzed by her place in time. The reader of *The Companion* is presented with a set of essays and analytical tools that allow him/her to move beyond a critical paradigm in which Stowe can only be either trapped or transcendent. We have instead a multi-dimensional Stowe – progressive, romantic racialist, social reformer, close reader, litigant, Christian, regionalist.[5]

This collection, then, expands our understanding of Stowe's career and her influence in American literature and culture. It presents a heterogeneous and intellectually rich Stowe whose manifold literary productions are best read through as broad a set of contexts as possible, including antebellum reform movements, novels of social protest, eighteenth-century ideals of language, nineteenth-century theories of reading, twentieth-century racial politics, and more. In doing so, the essays illuminate what Jane Tompkins calls the "cultural work" of Stowe's fiction by paying particular attention to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and to the aesthetic and ideological developments in her career as a whole. As this last suggests, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stands as the

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textual centerpiece of the volume – without that novel, clearly there would be no *Companion to Stowe* – but several of the essays examine the critical consequences of interpreting *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as if it were Stowe's only word, and last word, on slavery, religion, and domestic life. A reading of her later works suggests that this isn't the case. For example, the problem of slavery is a matter of much importance to *The Minister's Wooing*. Her abiding attraction to the rituals and romance of Catholicism in *Agnes of Sorrento* is evidence of her dissatisfaction with the aridity and severity of the Calvinist religious forms bequeathed to her by her father. Her defense of Lady Byron in *Lady Byron Vindicated* (1870) registers her ongoing contribution to the debate about women's place in nineteenth-century society. She continued to write well into the 1880s, and although it is difficult to imagine even the most devoted of Stowe readers making a compelling argument for the centrality or literary excellence of a text like *Palmetto Leaves* (1872) or *Poganuc People* (1878), the fact is that many of Stowe's less well known texts are garnering enough interest to warrant republication.

This gets us to the third reason. In 1986, when Eric Sundquist edited *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he prefaced his bibliography with the following statement: "Although the critical literature on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is slight compared to that on the works of other major writers of the period, a number of recent books and essays have given Stowe and her novel more serious attention." These words – accurate then but inapplicable now, a mere two decades later – were written in the wake of the pioneering work on Stowe that was produced by critics such as Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), Tompkins in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (1985), and Philip Fisher in *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (1985). Several of the essays in this volume discuss the institutional and political conditions leading up to this critical renaissance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which include, perhaps most importantly, the impact of the women's movement and the civil rights movement on feminist literary criticism and African-American studies. It is also important to point out that, although there are examples of literary histories of the antebellum period in which Stowe's novel receives more than adequate treatment, more often than not, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was consigned to the margins of literary analysis, and in some cases, completely erased. F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941), Charles Feidelson's *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953), and Richard Chase's *The American Novel and its Tradition* (1957), three key texts in the formation of the canon of antebellum American literature, have virtually nothing to say about the most popular novel written in the antebellum period. The effect of correcting this lacuna has been a critical interest in Stowe that shows no

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signs of abating. In particular, literary examinations of Stowe's ideal of sympathy, articulated at the conclusion of the novel when she urges her readers to "see to it that *they feel right*," has led to enormous interest in the sentimental writers of Stowe's generation, the "feminine fifties," to invoke Pattee's rather dated phrase. Indeed, the starting point for many contemporary readings of Stowe is the debate between Douglas and Tompkins about the ideological effects of Stowe's novel, with Douglas maintaining that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* demonstrates "the political sense obfuscated or gone rancid" and Tompkins asserting that the novel "represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view." Several of the essays in this *Companion*, while engaging the central issues taken up by Douglas and Tompkins, nevertheless depart from their binary approach to Stowe so as to demonstrate the intellectual range and the ideological variability of her cultural work.[6]

There are other important collections, specifically on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that have followed in the wake of these foundational analyses of Stowe, including *The Stowe Debate: Rhetorical Strategies in "Uncle Tom's Cabin"* (1994), edited by Mason I. Lowance, Jr., Ellen E. Westbrook, and R. C. De Prospo, and *Approaches to Teaching Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin"* (2000), edited by Elizabeth Ammons and Susan Belasco. *The Cambridge Companion* differs from these volumes in its commitment to representing scholarly essays that embrace Stowe's entire career, many of which analyze elements of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in relation to that career, as well as its attempt to broaden the conversation by situating the novel with reference to a set of historical contexts that have been heretofore relatively marginalized in examinations of it. These include, for example, the transatlantic aspect of Stowe's celebrity, the appropriation of Stowe's call to sympathy by pro-slavery southern writers, her imbrication in antebellum legal discourse, her fluctuating status as sentimentalist and regionalist, and her place in the tradition of the American novel. It is also worth mentioning that, in addition to the canonical status now accorded to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a renewed interest in Stowe's other texts has followed. Undoubtedly, Joan Hedrick's 1994 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Stowe has much to do with this resurgence as well. A list of recent publications suffices to prove the point: Penguin's 1999 publication of *The Minister's Wooing*, its 2000 publication of *Dred*, a 1992 edition of *Dred* first published by Ryburn Publishing and then picked up by Edinburgh University Press in 1999, a 1998 third printing of *Poganuc People* by the Stowe–Day Foundation, a 1999 University Press of Florida edition of *Palmetto Leaves*, and Houghton Mifflin's 2001 edition of *The Pearl of Orr's Island*. This flurry of publishing activity bespeaks an interest in Stowe's oeuvre to which this Companion responds.

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The essays thus expose its readers to the key issues in the literature written by and about Stowe. They are designed to speak to one another, offering readers a variety of compelling and competing interpretative possibilities. A brief word on their organization before explaining their content is in order. They are arranged so that the earlier essays concentrate, in large measure, on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with the middle essays expanding the view of Stowe's career through analyses of *Dred*, *The Pearl of Orr's Island*, and *Oldtown Folks* (1869), and the later essays widening the contextual scope still further to include examinations of Stowe's impact on debates about the law, reform, and genre, which also include analyses of less read texts, including *The Minister's Wooing*, *Lady Byron Vindicated* (1870), and *My Wife and I* (1871). The collection is framed by Samuel Otter's and Kenneth W. Warren's essays on race in Stowe's writing. Essays in between, such as Judie Newman's and Ronald G. Walters's, approach the question of race from a more tightly conceived historical perspective. Several essays, my own and Audrey Fisch's, consider Stowe from the point of view of reader response, with Gillian Brown's essay taking up the very issue of reading itself in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Pearl of Orr's Island*. The essays by Michael T. Gilmore and Lawrence Buell revitalize discussions of Stowe through the relatively absent, but important, vocabulary of aesthetics and genre. Questions of form and narrative are also central to Marjorie Pryse's discussion of Stowe's regionalism and Carolyn L. Karcher's analysis of what she calls the literature of social change and Stowe's essential place in a form of artistic expression that links art and praxis.

Because *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been such a lightning rod for debates about race in US literature, the Companion begins with Otter's "Stowe and race," which explores how Stowe's novel, and particularly the character of Uncle Tom, has come to signify a tradition of representing African-American identity that must be ruptured. Using contemporary African-American readings of Stowe, which resonate powerfully with Martin Delany's 1853 indictment of Stowe – "she *knows nothing about us*, 'the Free Colored people of the United States,' neither does any other white person" – Otter goes on to suggest that Stowe, shortly after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, might very well have understood how Delany reached that conclusion and then revised her next anti-slavery novel, *Dred*, accordingly. Otter proposes that even as contemporary critics have striven to historicize *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through a number of different contexts, race and gender being the most significant, scholars have replicated the antebellum tendency to isolate *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from Stowe's other anti-slavery texts.[7]

That Stowe continued to be a reader and reviser of her own work and ideas means that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be productively analyzed in the

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context of her developing and, as he suggests, changing notions of race. In "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the south," I examine how the south's reception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, particularly reviews of the novel and the anti-Tom novels that challenged Stowe's representations of slavery, assumed the form of an epistemological debate about evidence and fact. Stowe found herself required to prove the truth of her fiction, which she aims to do in *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by demonstrating that pro-slavery expressions of sympathy are inherently fallacious and that anti-slavery expressions of "feeling right" are founded in fact. *A Key*, in other words, picks up where *Uncle Tom's Cabin* left off, and is, indeed, key. Written almost immediately upon the publication of the novel, it transforms our understanding of Stowe's sympathy by riveting it to fact and by insisting that "feeling right," though a necessary first step toward abolishing slavery, is insufficient to accomplish that end, if divorced from acting right.

If *A Key* is Stowe's attempt to ensure that the meaning of her anti-slavery words is not perverted by pro-slavery appropriations of them, Michael T. Gilmore's "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the American Renaissance" historicizes Stowe's abiding belief in what he calls "the potentially lethal energy of words." Antebellum fiction, he demonstrates, is marked by a hopeful fascination that language could change the world and a fear that, perhaps, words no longer had the power to do so. Like Stowe, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, Cooper, and Poe have inherited a redoubtable verbal legacy, with the republican rhetoric of the Revolution, on the one hand, and the religious rhetoric of America's founding, on the other, each of which inspires acts of linguistic power and conspires, in some cases, to induce anxieties of linguistic failure. The sacramental aesthetic to which his essay's subtitle refers is the condition of language to which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other texts of the American Renaissance aspire; one which closes the gap between aesthetics and acts, between representation and reality. And for Stowe's novel, in particular, one which joins her words and "the Word," or Christ.

Gillian Brown's essay, "Reading and children," similarly takes up the issue of Stowe's ongoing attempt to bridge sacred and secular narrative. Stowe's investment in the child reader (and the reader as child) is crucial both to this operation and the larger project of representing and producing the interiority of children. Through an analysis of Topsy and Eva, and their scenes of reading, interpretation, and conversion in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Brown establishes how Stowe models for her audience correct and incorrect, Christian and un-Christian ways of reading. The "issue of irreconcilable readings" gets reenacted, though not resolved, in *The Pearl of Orr's Island* as its two child protagonists – Mara and Moses – are characterized in terms of their

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