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The Failure of the Free World: Anarchy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Stowe's novel, arguably one of the most influential American novels of the nineteenth century, has been recognized as a definitive exhibit of abolitionist literature and a crucial catalyst towards the American civil war. Interpolating the novel away from the traditional critiques regarding Christianity, women's suffrage, autonomy, and the abolishment of slavery as individual, separate issues, it becomes clear that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* works de facto in the sphere of anarchist literature. We see anarchy in practice within the compounds of the Quaker village which George, Harry, and Eliza stumble upon, which is presented as nearly Arcadian and what George defines as "home—a word that [he] had never yet known" (Stowe 160). Tompkins intimates that the autonomy of the Quaker villages "relocates the center of power in American life, placing it not in the government, nor the courts of law, nor the factories, nor the marketplace, but in the kitchen" (Tompkins 14). This suggestion of equal rights (*not* matriarchy, as some theorists believe—as I discuss later) and autonomy within the homestead as seen in the Quaker village is the most subversive element of the novel, and is "more disruptive and far-reaching in its potential consequences than even the starting of a war or the freeing of slaves" (Tompkins 12). Tompkins is correct in this assessment; however, she does not identify how truly far-reaching the consequences are. Stowe's use of the Quakers in this novel opens the floodgates for an attack on the world outside, specifically capitalism, nationalism, misogyny, hierarchy— and essentially the 'system' itself.

Stowe introduces the Quakers with their own chapter, making it a point to dismiss the arrival of Eliza and Harry into their territory, and opening the chapter with a "quiet scene" (Stowe 151) unfolding, in which all the comforts and pleasures of a simple home are catalogued for the reader. Many theorists have pointed to this chapter as Stowe's attempt to push her feminist agenda forward; however, while the claim that this portrays her feminist agenda is accurate, she is not presenting a matriarchy, as often stated. This is crucial in examining the text in an anarchist lens—the reader watches Rachel Halliday

lead her troop of children in the kitchen, including sending orders out to her son to get the chicken ready, and she—along with Ruth—provide advice on whether to tell Eliza that George is in the settlement. The theorists also crucify the description of Simeon “engaged in the antipatriarchal operation of shaving” (Stowe 159). These theorists fail to examine the act of shaving as it is seen in Quaker society—as it is expressed in *A Brief History of Whiskers Starting with God*, in which the author writes that “it is urged that Friends be watchful to keep themselves free from self-indulgent habits, luxurious ways of living and the bondage of fashion... Undue luxury often creates a false sense of superiority, causes unnecessary burdens upon both ourselves and others, and leads to the neglect of the spiritual life” (Sherrow 360). Essentially, the ‘antipatriarchal operation’ seen is not his place in the patriarchal house/society, but his potentially vain attempt to become trapped in the ‘bondage of fashion’. Stepping away from spirituality and towards consumerism is the most antipatriarchal act he can take, and Stowe identifies this correctly, while her theorists do not.

In conjunction with this, it is necessary to also identify Simeon’s place as the leader of the family outside the confines of the home. The final section of chapter XIII develops into a dialogue between George, Simeon, and Simeon the second, while the women watch on silently to the discussion regarding the escape of George, Eliza, and Harry. Simeon the second asks his father why the laws are so unjust, stating that he “hate[s] those old slaveholders!” (Stowe 160). His father’s rebuttal is simple and resolute, while Rachel is silent at the end of the table. This balancing act of power between Simeon and Rachel is crucial in understanding the horizontality of the people in this society, providing a base identification with anarchist theory.

What we do learn from other theorists from this scene that is pivotal is the development of autonomy within the settlement and solidarity with all those in need—as Simeon says, “I would do even the same for the slave-holder as for the slave, if the Lord brought him to my door in affliction” (Stowe 160). Simeon recognizes the law of the nation, but identifies with his moral (Christian) compass. Oddly

enough, Stowe's utopian society shows "no resemblance to the current social order. Man-made institutions—the church, the courts of law, the legislatures, the economic system—are nowhere in sight" (Tompkins 133). It is because of this that while "ordinary human beings find themselves incapable of aiding the poor, the imaginary Quaker does only what Quakers can apparently do" (Ryan 197). This odd statement does not generate as a response to their chaste station giving them superior strength, but from the solidarity of the society they live in, which is free from financial burdens, the hierarchy of power, and consumerism. They live without the fear of being unable to feed their family if they must aid another human being, and this allows them to live with their morals in first priority over laws made by men with different opinions.

It is interesting to notice that "for all the optimism expressed about these believers in the 'inner light' of Quakerism... no Quaker refers to the Inner Light, no Quaker discusses or even alludes to an inner awareness of spirituality, no Quaker refers to Christ" (Ryan 192). This fact juxtaposes the image presented throughout the novel by nearly every favorable character which finds an idol to reincarnate Christ with (or is such reincarnation), which eventually leads to martyrdom of the Christ-like figure. The lack of Christ in the Quaker society eliminates even the hierarchy within the religious spectrum of their life, providing greater cohesion within the settlement and affectively preventing the *necessity* of a martyr, or Christ-like figure. While "Quaker life is described as illusory or untenable, but somehow necessary in small doses in order to create a virtuous citizenry" (Ryan 207), the lack of religious zeal within the settlement suggests that it is not the overarching Christianity that is responsible for the virtuous citizenry, but rather that the lack of centralized power "necessitates that the people define and organize themselves on their own terms" (Gelderloos 3). In contrast with the brutality that takes place against the Christ-like figures (which leads to their death/martyrdom) both physically (as seen with Tom) and psychologically (as seen with Marie's reaction to Eva's anguish before and after her death), there is

no brutality against those aiding the fugitives in the settlement. The only attack against them is as they attempt to lead the slaves out of the country, in which they are threatened.

Because Stowe's novel treats the idea of anarchy delicately, very few identify it when reading the novel. Attacks were made against her feminist ideals, mocking her opinions, stating facetiously that she was "handing over the State to the perilous protection of diaper diplomatists and wet-nurse politicians" (*New Works* 631). This absurd argument was often supported with attacks on her lack of knowledge of state laws, stating the basis of parts of her novel were founded on illegal activities, such as the murder of a slave, which *The Southern Literary Messenger* describes as "a rare one [crime], and therefore the Reporters have had few cases to record" (*New Works* 635). This, of course, dismisses the fact that the law has essentially no way to be enforced, as any slaves that are witness to such acts cannot simply just head to the police station and report the murder. In regards to the story of Cassy, the critics argue that if Stowe "had been well read in the annals of prostitution in countries where slavery does not exist... she might have found that there was neither any very great peculiarity nor any very remarkable excess in Southern practices in this respect" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 731). This suggests that the raping of slaves is, first, equivalent to a prostitute whom consents to intercourse. Second— ignoring the fact that rape does not equal prostitution— since the Southern practices are similar to other countries, the occurrence of it was acceptable. The absurdity of this argument is laughable, if it were not for the fact that their disposition was sincere.

Stowe's critics—particularly *The Southern Literary Messenger*—continue to attempt to unravel the legitimacy of her argument, stating that "she has volunteered... to intermeddle with things which concern her not—to libel and vilify a people... to foment heart-burnings and unappeasable hatred between brethren of a common country" (*New Works* 630). After seven pages of attempting to prove the falsity of her claims by applying state laws (as shown above) to the novel's stories, the unnamed critic defends the state of slavery by stating that "the world may safely be challenged to produce a

laboring class, whose regular toil is rewarded with more of the substantial comforts of life than the negroes in the South" (*New Works* 637). This defense of slavery is blatantly false, but provides a great insight into the laboring practices of the rest of the nation, chastising the treatment of 'free' men and women in their work. The unnamed critic continues to pluck away at the proverbial tower from which the North looks down at the South, stating that "we are of opinion too that heart-rendering separations are much less frequent under the institution of slavery than in countries where poverty rules the working classes with despotic sway" (*New Works* 638). This proposition, culminated with the statement prior in his critique, suggests involuntarily that the capitalist system is worse for the average worker than slavery itself!

Two months later, the same literary magazine published another article regarding *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but strayed away from the methodical analysis presented in the first essay, focusing largely on tearing the novel from its success in a plea to readers to recognize the novel as a piece of fiction based on falsehoods. This inculcation borders on nationalist fanaticism, as they argue that her novel is an "immaculate encyclopedia of fictitious crimes" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 731) and spend the first seven pages of the ten-page critique proposing no specific arguments against the novel without any specifics other than "it is fiction in its facts" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 722). The critic continues to attack the novel as a piece of Abolition literature, attempting to thwart its intents by stating that "the whole phalanx of Abolition literature... is fully imbued with this self-righteous spirit" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 724). In what may appear to be the last gasping breath of the critic, hoping to incite some flame within the reader, they state that "the argument of the work is... that any society—any social institution, which can by possibility result in such instances of individual misery, or generate such examples of individual cruelty as are exhibited in this fiction, must be criminal in itself, a violation of all the laws of Nature and of God, and ought to be universally condemned, and consequently immediately abolished" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 727). This attempt at hyperbole to leave the reader weary of the novel's intent unintentionally brings back the

image of the Quaker settlement, in which what Stowe presents a land where all such institutions have been, in fact, abolished. The critic authorizes what seems to be his biggest fears, as well as that of the nation's (or what he believed to be the nation's, based on his argument). Merely two pages later, he makes essentially the same argument again, stating that "if it [the novel] was capable of proving anything at all... it would demonstrate that all order, law, government, society was a flagrant and unjustifiable violation of the rights... and ought to be abated as a public nuisance" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 729). His consensus is valid, even though he does not identify with it.

Ironically, these critics crucified the novel, identifying it as the apex of the abolition movement, further positioning it as a critical piece that pushed Stowe's abolitionist agenda forward. However, critics on both sides of the argument managed to ignore the anarchist themes that run rampant throughout the novel, which offers much to the improvement of society. Both the North and the South attack the capitalist system for creating such imbalance; for the North, the need for slaves to drive prices artificially low due to the low cost of labor in the south; for the south, as the journal cited above states "the annual balance sheet of a Northern millionaire symbolizes infinitely greater agony and distress in the laboring or destitute classes than even the foul martyrdom of Uncle Tom" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 728). However, both sides refuse to attack the crux of the problem—the overarching system of government and capitalism itself. By exploring the Quaker image in this novel, we are able to discover that Stowe does, in fact, attack the system itself, and does so in classic fashion—by creating a small, autonomous utopia in the midst of the capitalist warfare.

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