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SOCIAL ETHICS IN THE NOVELS OF HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

Alison A. Case
April 20, 1984

Harriet Beecher Stowe has engendered a good deal of critical contradiction, both in her own time and since. Most of more extreme controversy centers on her popular and influential anti-slavery novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin. Although the New England novels are generally considered to have some merit as examples of "local color" fiction, Stowe earned her place in the canon of American literature primarily on the basis her authorship of UTC. But the place is an uneasy one. UTC's popularity and impact make it too big an event in American literary history for it, or its author, to be disregarded, but disputes about its intellectual, moral, and artistic legitimacy are rife. It has been variously described by critics as disastrous and miraculous, awkward and artful, dishonest and sincere, keenly intelligent and irrationally emotionalistic, racist and anti-racist, feminist and all-too-oppressively feminine.

But whatever else may be said about UTC, few would dispute that Stowe wrote it openly, self-consciously, and unapologetically in a woman's voice, which, for a novel addressing social and political issues of national importance, was at the time something unusual (and controversial) in itself. It is perhaps seems less unusual today, but I would suggest that in some respects the controversy has remained consistent, and that much of the critical argument about UTC may be attributed to the problems of interpreting a woman's voice fairly in a man's world.

Stowe was clearly more concerned in this novel with appealing to popular tastes than with establishing herself as a sophisticated artist. She relied to a certain extent on the forms of the popular women's fiction of the day, and the occasional literary cliches which result have led many to dismiss the novel as an unusually skillfull work of "sentimental"¹ fiction which, predictably and perhaps regret-

tably, achieved the popularity its author was so clearly angling for.

In fact, the word "sentimental" effectively sums up most of the serious critical doubts about Uncle Tom's Cabin, even among those who consider it, in some respects, a powerful and admirable work. Many are decidedly uncomfortable with Stowe's use of the power of emotional appeal on a political issue like slavery. It is hard to dispute that UTC succeeded in raising popular support for abolition where cool, well-reasoned arguments failed. Nonetheless, her appeal to "the heart instead of the head" seems to these critics illegitimate and dangerous, even if the cause was unquestionably a good one. This was the chief complaint of her contemporary critics, and it has been often re-echoed since. Thus C.H. Foster concludes his discussion of UTC (1954) with the following comment:

In furnishing the popular mind and heart with unforgettable symbols of slavery, Uncle Tom's Cabin influenced the people for both good and evil....it enlisted the popular will in the abolition of slavery as no other work had done; but the highly personal nature of its argument also made the Civil War virtually inevitable. After Uncle Tom's Cabin, objective analysis of the slavery issue was almost impossible."²

"Sentimentalism" also sums up the discomfort of some feminist critics. The value Stowe places on feminine "influence" within the home sphere, her emphasis on motherhood and her glorification of female self-sacrifice (all in keeping with the tradition of "sentimental" fiction) make it easy to see her as adopting and promoting an oppressive angel-in-the-house doctrine of feminine "influence," designed by a male dominated society to keep women from any effective, independent action. Ann Douglas, for example, opens The Feminization of American Culture with UTC's Little Eva, and thus places Stowe in the center of the sentimental authors she sees idealizing women as

powerless parasites.³

But both Foster and Douglas see another side to Stowe which is difficult to reconcile with the perceived shortcomings of her "sentimentalism." Foster recognizes in the cynical comments of Augustine St. Clare an intelligent and insightful analysis of the abstract issues of economic and political power which underlie the institution of slavery, an analysis which gives the book its "masculine edge and intellectual bite."⁴ Douglas too, sees an awareness of issues of power, especially as they relate to the sexes, and sees also the glimmerings of a--covert--female activism:⁵ Stowe presents women as, generally, the moral superiors of men, and in her novels they challenge men's judgement even outside their domestic sphere with confidence and conviction. Indeed, her own writing of such an indecorous and unladylike novel as UTC indicates that she could not have been wholly an advocate of passivity and propriety in women.

These virtues seem to both Foster and Douglas inconsistent with Stowe's problematic sentimentalism. Hence Foster argues for a "doubleness"⁶ in Stowe's work, with feminine emotionalism alternating with masculine analysis, and Douglas suggests in her introduction to UTC that beneath Stowe's apparent acquiescence to the feminine values of her time was the hidden, subversive message that feminine influence was ineffective unless backed by "less gentle tactics."⁷

But when critics begin to postulate a kind of authorial schizophrenia in order to be able to reconcile intelligent analysis with emotional response, femininity with activism, perhaps it is time to take a new look at our paradigm for interpretation. The problem, unfortunately, is not confined either to literature or to the 19th century. Carol Gilligan's recent book on the psychology of women's ethical perceptions, In A Different Voice, points out a similar diffi-

culty of interpretation in current psychological research and particularly in her own field of moral development. Gilligan saw women's responses to moral questions being interpreted--and found wanting--in different terms from those in which the women framed moral questions for themselves. She found that women, in contrast to men, tend to see around them "a world comprised of relationships rather than of people standing alone, a world that coheres through human connection rather than through systems of rules."⁸ Women therefore tend to see moral obligation as stemming from a basic sense of connection with and responsibility to other human beings. The key to moral order is the maintenance of relationships, connections, and lines of communication, and moral character may be measured by one's ability to extend the circle of relationship to strangers and even enemies, and by the degree to which one accepts responsibility for anyone within it. Immoral behavior is seen, not so much as rule-breaking, but as a failure in the communication of, or response to, human needs.

This "ethic of care" contrasts with a moral view Gilligan found more associated with men, which she refers to as an ethic of "justice." The latter locates morality in a concern for "fairness"--for applying moral rules with objective equality--according the self no rights not extended to all. Each of these two ethics require a different "logic" for making moral choices. One demands a complex understanding of the psychological realities of a particular situation--a "psychological logic"-- to understand exactly what the needs involved are, how conflicting needs may be weighed against each other, and how they might best be fulfilled. The other requires an equally complex abstract understanding of a hierarchy of moral laws, to be able to determine which takes precedence in a particular situation.

In [the women's] conception, the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract. This conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules.⁹

Though I will be referring to them as "masculine" or "feminine," these views are by no means exclusive to the genders with which they are, in general terms, associated, nor are they mutually exclusive. They are, as Gilligan says, "two views of morality which are complementary rather than sequential or opposed."¹⁰ In fact, as Gilligan points out in her last chapter, at their highest level of development these two ethics merge in the ideal of "justice tempered with mercy" --or perhaps, from the other perspective, "mercy made manageable by justice".

But in real life their relationship is more complicated, and here the gender associations become significant. Although an ethic of care and response may be implicit in the highest ideals of a justice-oriented morality, in our society it has tended to be the masculine perspective which is accorded moral and intellectual legitimacy. From the "justice" perspective, an approach to moral choice which relies on empathy seems dangerous, in that it undermines the "objectivity" necessary for a "good" moral choice. Hence Freud says that the woman's superego is inferior in that it is never "'so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men."¹¹ In addition, because an abstract, rule-oriented logic is the only one recognized as legitimate, the "psychological logic" of the feminine approach seems illogical and unintelligent -- an unreasoned, emotional "gut-response." It is thinking with the "heart" and

not with the "head." Thus while women's values affirm what is missing in the masculine view of morality, namely, "the continuing importance of attachment in the human life cycle," the prevailing standard of interpretation "intones the celebration of separation, autonomy, individuation, and natural rights,"¹² so that interpretation of women's moral thought reaffirms women's inadequacy and justifies their inferior status.

What is missing in the masculine view of morality?

This, I think, has been the problem in criticism of Uncle Tom's Cabin. The outlines of the ethical view Gilligan delineates in her work are clearly visible throughout Stowe's anti-slavery and New England novels, and Gilligan's analysis can thus lead to a greater appreciation of the coherence and intelligence of Stowe's moral vision, and help us to tease apart "the description of care and connection from the vocabulary of inequality and oppression" in criticism of Stowe's work.

On the most basic level, this ethic manifests itself in her tendency to define characters and situations in terms of their relationships, moral character in terms of empathy and sense of responsibility to fellow-humans, and spirituality in terms of a sense of personal connection to and relationship with God. In other words, Stowe sees a world which "coheres through human connection."

But this ethical view also emerges on the level of a conscious concern--one which is central to both the New England and the anti-slavery novels. Stowe is quite well aware of the association of her perspective with women, and of a more legalistic perspective associated with men which tends to dominate in the public realm and which denies the legitimacy of women's views. Her novels include a critique of this masculine view. Seeing empathy and a sense of personal res-

possibility as the basis for morality, she sees that an emphasis on impersonal rules can become a way of avoiding responsibility, evading the claims on the self which any genuine expression of human need makes. "Objectivity" becomes a mask for self-interest.

With this critique in mind, it becomes necessary to re-evaluate Stowe's narrative strategies in a novel such as Uncle Tom's Cabin. Perhaps her appeal to the hearts of her readers does not preclude one to their heads as well, and perhaps the "objective analysis" which Stowe made "impossible" was not the only intelligent, legitimate response to the moral problem of slavery in the South.

Stowe's New England novels, The Minister's Wooing (1859) and Oldtown Folks (1869), were written several years after Uncle Tom's Cabin, but they can serve to give us a clearer idea of the conception of moral order which is implicit in the anti-slavery novels. Late Eighteenth Century New England seems to represent for Stowe a stable, morally healthy society in which law, social convention, and personal conviction are essentially in harmony. Disruptions in moral order are also breaks in the fabric of the community, which are restored by common effort. By looking at the way Stowe presents communities and characters in this "normal" world, and the way she discusses moral problems, we can perhaps get a sense of the ideal which resides behind Stowe's presentation of the disordered world of the anti-slavery novels.

The conception of moral order in these novels aligns very closely with Gilligan's outline of a feminine "ethic of care," and of the distinctive world-view which shapes it. Underlying everything in these novels is a tendency to view relationships as the primary reality in human life, whether relationships between members of a

family or community, or those between individuals and God. Stowe sees the New England community as one which coheres through a network of personal relationships, centered on those of the home, and extending out to include the whole town, with connections going out from there to the world at large. All notions of class and race, or of economic, political and religious structures are subordinated to this view, in the eyes of the characters as well as the author. She looks at religious doctrine, too, in terms of its effects upon the sense of connection and personal relationship with God and fellow-humans which she considers essential to healthy spirituality.

Stowe defines morality in these novels in terms of responsiveness to the needs of others. Moral characters see themselves as responsible for the whole community, and a strong feeling of empathy leads them to perceive the sufferings of others as their own. In addition to a sense of connectedness with others and an ability to empathize with suffering, an important element of Stowe's conception of moral character is the psychological perception needed to understand what another's needs are and what the best way of meeting them is.

The New England community Stowe describes is fundamentally home- and family-centered. The center of action in both novels is the home--and especially the kitchen--of the major maternal figure of the story: Grandmother Badger in OTF and Widow Scudder in TMW. The home serves as a microcosm of the community; here the representatives of its various parts meet and interact. Thus on a Sunday evening Grandmother Badger gathers in her kitchen an assortment of locals ranging from the eminent Major Broad to the Indians Sally Wonsamug and Betty Poganut who come begging for food and shelter.

Furthermore, it is the interrelationships within the family and

community which serve to maintain order and ensure that differences do not result in destructive conflict. This is most easily seen in OTF, whose story ranges over a broader cross-section of New England society than TMW. Throughout OTF Stowe represents the major social, political, and religious differences of the day -- those between Tories and revolutionaries, Anglicans and Congregationalists, Arminians and Calvinists, or simply rich and poor -- through individual characters, who resolve these differences by subordinating them to a sense of relationship as fellow-members of a family or community. Thus Mr. and Mrs. Badger, Arminian and Calvinist, respectively, resolve the quarrel between these two creeds by subordinating it to the love and respect of a lifetime of marriage. The same is true of Parson Lothrop, the Congregational minister, and his Anglican Boston-aristocratic wife. Within the community as a whole, this resolution is represented, again, by the mingling of classes and creeds in Grandmother's kitchen, and by the meeting-house.

In the meeting-house the entire community, from Lady Lothrop to the poor blacks and Indians who live on the fringes of the community, are all united. Differences of rank may be, as Stowe says, carefully observed in the community, which has its own miniature version of the House of Lords, House of Commons, and humble populace,¹³ but these seem to express themselves more in "etiquette and solemn observances" (OTF, p.93) than in any actual separation of the classes from human contact with each other. They, too, are finally subordinated to the common bond as members of the same community:

But such as we were, high and low, good and bad, refined and illiterate, barbarian and civilized, negro and white, the old meeting-house united us all on one day of the week, and its solemn services formed an insensible but strong bond of neighborhood charity.... rude and primitive as our

meeting-houses were, this weekly union of all classes in them was a most powerful and efficient means of civilization (OTF,p.101).

OTF and TMW also show very clearly a view of morality which stresses a sense of responsibility, based on this same feeling of connection to others, to help anyone in need to the limits of one's ability. The truly moral characters in both novels are those who take on the welfare of the whole community as a personal responsibility. The Badgers in OTF are prepared, despite Aunt Lois's protestations that it will ruin them, to provide a meal and a night's lodging to anyone who comes to their door, Thanksgiving turkeys to all who ask for them, and, apparently, a home and education to any orphan who seems in need of them. Uncle Fliakim, for his part, seems to have no interests or pursuits of his own -- he is continually, and energetically, at the beck and call of his neighbors.

The same is true of the truly moral characters in TMW. Zebedee Marvyn, the prototype of the upright and efficient New Englander, finally has to keep two complete sets of tools: one for his own use, and one to lend out to needy neighbors. Further examples abound, but the point which should be clear is that Stowe is defining virtue in terms of willingness to fulfill the needs of others rather than in terms of adherence to a code of moral rules. There is no "fairness" clause in this moral demand -- in fact, Stowe points out that a continued willingness to supply others' needs will inevitably lead to some exploitation by "those less fortunate persons, who supply their own lack of considerateness from the abundance of their neighbors"¹⁴

Such an ethic might be seen as simply "the law of the Gospel" -- a higher and more difficult moral code rather than a different vision of morality as growing out of a personal sense of connection, sympathy and responsibility. But Stowe also makes clear that sympathy, human

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warmth, and the insight to perceive another individual's particular needs, are crucial elements of her "ethic of responsibility." Further, such sympathy and insight often put the "right" action at odds with logical principles of "duty," or any abstract, impersonal code of behavior.

In the case of Miss Asphyxia Smith, the spinster who first takes on responsibility for raising the orphaned Tina, a rigid performance of "duty" to one in need, devoid of any human sympathy or perception, is a crime, and one which which nearly destroys Tina's character. Stowe's narrator calls Miss Asphyxia's method of rearing Tina by a cold and rigid system of rules "soul-murder--a dispensation of wrath and death" and comments "such a person is commonly both obtuse in sensibility and unimaginitive in temperament" (OTF p.170). Against this Stowe places the "grandmotherly logic" of Mrs. Badger, whose theory of child-rearing denies the possibility of abstracting general principles for correct action, and emphasizes behavior suited to the needs of the individual involved. In a discussion with Aunt Lois and Miss Mehitable on the best method for rearing children she argues that:

'One live child puts all your treatises to rout.... There ain't any two children alike; and what works with one won't work with another. Folks have just got to open their eyes, and look and see what the Lord meant when he put the child together' (OTF, p.276).

Stowe closes this discussion with the comment that people who locate "rational" behavior in adherence to abstract principles, like "theorists on education," will see no value in Mrs. Badger's perceptions, and "will pronounce her a pig-headed, passionate, impulsive, soft-hearted body,... entirely below the notice of a rational, enquiring mind" (OTF,p.278). But despite its lack of intellectual respecti-

bility by the standards of the day, Mrs. Badger's views are soundly based on a rationality of their own, the "psychological logic" of an ethic of care, in which Stowe places much greater faith.

This vision of morality as responsiveness made effective by psychological perception ,and its association with women, reaches its clearest expression in Stowe's description of Mary Scudder in TMW. Mary is one of those

soul artists, who go through this world, looking among their fellows with reverence, as one looks amid the dust and rubbish of old shops for hidden works of Titian and Leonardo, and, finding them, however cracked or torn or painted over with tawdry daubs of pretenders, immediately recognize the divine original, and set themselves to cleanse and restore. Such be God's real priests....Many such priests there be among women;--for to this ministry their nature calls them, endowed, as it is, with fineness of fibre, and a subtile keenness of perception outrunning slow-footed reason (TMW p.606).

As the above comments on "theorists" and "slow-footed reason" suggest, Stowe's advocacy of an "ethic of care" is often closely tied to criticism of a more abstract, "objective" approach to morality. Abstract principles in themselves, she feels, are too divorced from humanity to be able to result in any genuinely benevolent action. A classic example of this is Simeon Brown, the slave-trader in TMW who is, briefly, a great fan of Hopkins's complex, abstract system of theology:

In his private life, Simeon was severe and dictatorial. He was one of that class of people who, of a freezing day, will plant themselves directly between you and the fire, and there stand and argue to prove that selfishness is the root of all evil... He was one of those men who suppose themselves submissive to the Divine will, to the uttermost extent demanded by the extreme theology of the day, simply because they have no nerves to feel, no imagination to conceive what endless suffering is (TMW, p.562).

Simeon's shortcoming, like Miss Asphyxia's, is his total unwillingness--or inability--to perceive what another might feel--and this applies to the person shivering in front of him as well as to tormented souls. In fact, Simeon's absolute faith in moral (and theological) logic seems to be part of what leads him astray--he confuses reasoning correctly with doing right, and thus hides his selfishness from himself.

With regard to social ethics, New England as Stowe presents it is essentially at one. Characters like Simeon Brown and Miss Asphyxia may be grudgingly acknowledged as "upright" citizens, but they are clearly on the fringes of the community, and are held in contempt by its more outspoken members. The only real conflict of values in these novels is in the area of theology. TMW and OTF contain an intelligent and complex analysis of New England Calvinism. Stowe's identification of its problems and points of conflict show her posing abstract, formal logic against the "psychological logic," and give a clearer sense of the intellectual basis of her ethical views.

For Stowe, just as social well-being is based upon a sense of connection with fellow-members of a family or community, and morality upon responsiveness to particular individual needs, so, for her, spiritual well-being is based upon a sense of relationship with God, and an absolute faith in His loving responsiveness to the individual needs (though not necessarily the conscious desires) of all His human children. Her major criticism of Calvinism is that it destroys this sense of relationship with God, denying that it is possible without a definite and dramatic conversion experience, and teaching that without this conversion the individual is an enemy to God and hateful to him.

Such a doctrine of separation and hatred between God and the majority of humans seems to her spiritually destructive. She is

particularly concerned with its effect upon women, who she claims found this theology "hardest to tolerate or assimilate," because, as she says, "woman's nature has never been consulted in theology." (OTF p.456). the problem is that women, unlike the male logicians who construct such doctrines, cannot help but make the connection between abstract theories and a human reality which is felt as well as thought:

But where theorists and philosophers tread with sublime assurance, woman often follows with bleeding footsteps;-- women are always turning from the abstract to the individual, and feeling where the philosopher only thinks (TMW, p. 541-2).

Miss Mehitable Rossiter in OTF best describes the kind of anguish that results from such teachings, in a passage which points clearly to a view of human life as deriving meaning from a sense of connection--a belief that a cry of genuine need will be heard, understood, and responded to:

We are in ourselves so utterly helpless,--life is so hard, so inexplicable, that we stand in perishing need of some helping hand, some sensible, appreciable connection with God. And yet for years every cry of misery, every breath of anguish, has been choked by the logical proofs of theology;--that God is my enemy, or that I am his; that every effort I make toward Him but aggravates my offense (OTF p.248).

These are thoughts which Miss Mehitable has in common with several women characters in both novels. But though Stowe associates them particularly with women (since women, by their nature, are more likely to perceive them and feel them deeply than men) she clearly believes that her values are human values. Stowe is careful to include male characters who in one way or another align themselves with the same view, such as Jonathan Rossiter, who is lost in a bitter despair like that of his sister and clings to Christ as an emblem of a pal-

pable human connection between God and humanity, and Harry Percival, who argues for a sense of loving relationship with God as the primary fact from which all theology must derive.

The cruelty of Calvinism is not limited to its separation of the individual from God--what is even more disturbing about it to Stowe is that it seems to demand an unconcern for the ultimate fate of others--whether it is to be salvation or eternal torment. In demanding that believing Christians acquiesce--cheerfully--to the idea that the majority of humans will be damned for all eternity, Calvinist doctrine is working directly against a vision of morality which demands that one look upon the sufferings of others as one's own.

It is this inability to keep from being bound up in the fate of those close to oneself that drives Mrs. Marvyn to the edge of madness when her son James is presumed to have drowned in an "unregenerate" state, and she rails against a God who can, by his own choice, harden his heart against masses of people, each beloved of their families and companions, for his own glory:

'Think of all God's power and knowledge used on the lost to make them suffer!... The number of the elect is so small we can scarce count them for anything! Think what noble minds, what warm, generous hearts, what splendid natures are wrecked and thrown away by thousands and tens of thousands! How we love each other! how our hearts weave into each other! And all this ends...' (TMW p.734).

Even for saintly Mary Scudder, this aspect of Calvinism is difficult to live with:

But when she looked around on the warm, living faces of friends, acquaintances and neighbors, viewing them as possible candidates for dooms so fearfully different, she sometimes felt the walls of her faith closing around her as an iron shroud (TMW p.542).

In a society like New England's, in which theology is reality,

such theorizing can be seen almost as an act of violence, and like most of the officially sanctioned violence in Stowe's fiction, it is perpetrated by men who have allowed abstract thought and logical principles to blind them to the lived human reality of what they do. Jonathan Rossiter comments in OTF, in a passage echoed frequently in both novels:

'It is incredible, the ease and cheerfulness with which a man in his study, who never had so much experience of suffering as even a toothache would give him, can arrange a system in which the everlasting torture of millions is casually admitted as an item' (OTF p.257).

Though some of these are men like Simeon Brown, who are simply incapable of feelings for others, Stowe does not, on the whole, want to condemn Calvinist theologians as heartless monsters. Indeed, in her comments on Hopkins and others Stowe makes clear her admiration, if not for their conclusions, at least for the impulse that drove them:

These hard old New England divines were the poets of metaphysical philosophy, who built systems in an artistic fervor, and felt self exhale from beneath them as they rose into the higher regions of thought (TMW p.541-2).

Her criticism is that these theologians failed to see the importance of that combination of a sense of loving unity with God and fellow-humans, empathy, and desire to ease suffering and aid the needy which Stowe summarizes as "feeling" to their own moral and spiritual life. They therefore produce inhuman logical systems of theology, devoid of the warmth and empathy which characterizes them as men.

Hopkins is the prime example of this. Stowe says of him that "the only mistake made by the good man was that of supposing that the elaboration of theology was preaching the gospel" (TMW,p.581). His doctrines alone draw in only "shrewd, hard thinkers, who delighted in metaphysical subtleties"--men like Simeon Brown. The rest, who are

the "deep-hearted, devoted natures," accept the theology out of love for the man, won only by

"the gospel he was preaching constantly... by his visitations to homes of poverty and sorrow... his teaching of those whom no one else in those days had thought of teaching (TMW p.583).

Stowe's final conclusions on Calvinism are too complex to discuss here. But I think it is clear, from her presentation of the community and of the tensions between objective and sympathetic, logical and psychological reasoning on ethics and theology that Stowe sees a world which coheres more through bonds of sympathy, care and gratitude than through any external ~~hierarchical~~ structures, that she places her greatest faith in the moral power of "feeling" rather than that of objective principles, and that she is associates "objective" reasoning, on any subject concerned with humans, with inhuman results.

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The issue here is clearly not "head versus heart." Stowe's criticism of "logic" is not anti-intellectual--in fact, these books, and all of their characters, are deeply concerned with intellectual issues. What she is criticizing is intellect divorced from any reference to a landscape of human relationships. "Feeling" for Stowe is not a substitute for thought; it is rather one of the givens from which any reasoning must start, and it continually ensures that thought never strays too far from a grounding in lived human reality. In moral terms, it is also an important link between thought and action in the community.

Stowe's views on matters of "head and heart" are illustrated best by her portraits of characters like Mary Scudder in TMW, with her "earnest young face, ever kindling with feeling and bright with intellect" (p.583), or like Harry Percival in OTE, For these characters,

intellect and feeling are never at odds--they are so inextricably intertwined that neither would think of trying to separate one from another. Their feeling of connection with God and humanity forms the foundation of their thought on theological and moral matters, and the results often pose challenges to colder doctrines which are logical as well as emotional.

When we come to Stowe's anti-slavery novels we are dealing with a very different world. To Stowe, slavery is the height of immorality, and thus the South (and the North as well, to the extent that it supports slavery), unlike the New England of OTF and TMW, is a sick society in which moral disorder has been legally institutionalized and socially sanctioned. Because in such a society law and morality must be fundamentally at odds, there is in these novels a much more polarized vision of the tensions between a legalistic, "objective" morality and one based on an emotionally rich human response to individuals. The outlines of Stowe's advocacy of the latter and critique of the former are therefore much clearer.

But more important, the situation in which the novels were written is very different. The New England novels are essentially reflections on the past--whatever difficulties Stowe had with Calvinist theology, she certainly did not view it as a clear and present moral threat to the population at large. But slavery was. In these novels, then, we see the response of an ethic of care, taking as its basis the empathetic response of one individual to another, to a problem of institutionalized evil on a national scale.

In Stowe's definition of the evil of slavery, we again see her vision of the centrality of human relationships to moral order and to personal meaning in life. She describes slavery's evil primarily in

terms of its effects upon human and divine relationships among slaves and slaveowners alike.

The clearest--and most often noted--example of this is slavery's destruction of black families. UTC opens with the threatened separation of George Harris from his wife Eliza, of Eliza from her son, and finally of Uncle Tom from his whole family. From here on, Stowe repeatedly portrays slaveowners and traders dividing husbands from wives, brothers from sisters, and mothers from children.

Though Stowe stresses the personal anguish this causes slaves, there is also another point to this. When feelings of connection with others form the foundation of morality, the disregard for family ties exhibited by slaveowners and traders could have moral consequences for slaves. This is the basis for Mrs. Shelby's horror at selling Tom and little Harry:

I have taught them the duties of the family, of parent and child, and husband and wife; and how can I bear to have this open acknowledgement that we care for no tie, no duty, no relation, however sacred, compared with money?¹⁵

Her husband later unknowingly concedes what Stowe considers one of the greatest indictments of slavery--that it makes a morality based on sustaining family connections virtually impossible among slaves--when he responds to his wife that she has "burdened them with a morality above their condition and prospects" (UTC p.373).

It is not only with regard to relationships within the family that slavery is destructive: the slaveowner's denial of fellow-feeling with slaves also has demoralizing effects on both. Augustine St. Clare's impulsive, dictatorial nephew Henrique is dangerously corrupted by his constant association with dependent and subservient people whose emotional and physical well-being he is never obliged to consider. The lighter-skinned servants in St. Clare's own household

imitate this attitude in their contempt and unconcern for darker, less "well-bred" fellow-slaves. Rosa's and Jane's inhuman treatment of black Topsy--responding to her hideous bruises and scars with the comment "'don't that show she's a limb?...I hate these nigger young-uns! so disgusting!'"(UTC p.355)--mimics their white mistress's total disregard for their feelings and needs. Indeed, the ever-present brutality of slavery eventually eats away the humanity of even such a sensitive, loving man as St. Clare--the hopelessness of responding humanely to all the suffering he sees around him makes him finally give up the attempt:

'Of course, in a community so organized, what can a man of honorable and humane feelings do, but shut his eyes all he can, and harden his heart? I can't buy every poor wretch I see. I can't turn knight-errant, and undertake to redress every individual case of wrong in such a city as this. The most I can do is try to keep out of the way of it' (UTC,p.328).

Finally, slavery obstructs that most crucial of relationships: that between the individual, slave or free, and God. This happens, first, in that intelligent slaves and conscientious whites are disgusted by the hypocritical religious moralism of slaveowners, so clearly designed to protect their own privilege. John Van Trompe, a former slaveowner who has turned against slavery after seeing its injustices, comments:

"it was years and years before I'd jine the church, 'cause the ministers round in our parts used to preach that the Bible went in for these ere cuttings up,...so I took up agin 'em, Bible and all' (UTC p.160).

George Harris, though in his heart he wants to believe in God, is similarly held back by the perception that slaveowners seem to have God on their side. Exhorted by his wife to "'trust in God,'" he replies,

'I an't a Christian like you, Eliza; my heart's full of bitterness; I can't trust in God. Why does he let things be so?...I wish I could be good, but my heart burns, and can't be reconciled, anyhow' (UTC pp.62-3).

The ultimate representation of the evil of slavery, life on Simon Legree's plantation, is a cruel and total inversion of the vision of a community sustained by connection and sympathy seen in the New England novels. While the New England community coheres through connection and love, Legree holds his plantation together through isolation and hatred:

Legree...governed his plantation by a sort of resolution of forces. Sambo and Quimbo cordially hated each other; the plantation hands, one and all, cordially hated them; and, by playing off one against the other, he was pretty sure, through one or the other of the three parties, to get informed of whatever was on foot in the place (UTC p.493).

With human connections constantly thwarted, morality is virtually impossible. On his arrival, Uncle Tom finds nothing but "the gross, unrestricted animal selfishness of human beings, of whom nothing good was expected or desired" (UTC,p.495). These people have been torn away from all the natural connections of family and home community, and everything conspires against their developing any fellow-feeling among themselves: Cassie tells him, "When you've been here a month, you'll be done helping anybody; you'll find it hard enough to take care of your own skin!" (UTC p.504). She sums up the reigning philosophy of the place when she says:

'And what are these miserable low dogs you work with, that you should suffer on their account? Every one of them would turn against you, the first time they got a chance. They are all of 'em as low and cruel to each other as they can be; there's no use in your suffering to keep from hurting them' (UTC p.513).

Cassie herself has long since decided that attachments can only

cause pain to a slave--she kills her last son in his infancy, and she stops Emmeline's gesture of affection with the words "'you'll get me to loving you; and I never mean to love anything, again!'" (UTC,p.580).

In this atmosphere of personal isolation and despair, any sense of God's presence and concern is also missing. Told by Tom that God is everywhere, a slave woman replies "'Lor, you an't gwine to make me believe dat ar! I know de Lord an't here'" (UTCp.497). Cassie also tells Tom, "'There's no use calling on the Lord,--he never hears... there isn't any God, I believe; or, if there is, he's taken sides against us'" (UTC,p.512). Even Tom himself has a long, hard struggle to cling to his faith in the face of God's apparent silence here.

In contrast to Legree and his demonic world, "good" slaveowners in UTC, like the Shelbys, are those who have a nurturing, almost parental attitude toward slaves, and try to turn their plantations into family-like communities founded on trust and love. Mr. Shelby's hold over Tom is not one of power and violence--Tom feels an almost maternal affection and responsibility toward him because he has cared for him since infancy. Similarly, Mrs. Shelby acts as more of a mother than a mistress to Eliza, and the latter's obedience stems from the dutiful love of a child rather than from fear or compulsion. Even the embittered George Harris sees in this bond of love a genuine claim on his wife:

'There is some sense in [obedience], in your case; they have brought you up like a child, fed you, clothed you, indulged you, and taught you, so that you have had a good education; that is some reason why they should claim you' (UTC,p.62).

But such harmony and unity in slavery, Stowe stresses, is ultimately unsustainable, because unsupported by the external structures of the society:

Whoever visits some estates [in Kentucky], and

witnesses the good-humored indulgence of some masters and mistresses, and the affectionate loyalty of some slaves, might be tempted to dream of the oft-fabled poetic legend of a patriarchal institution, and all that; but over and above the scene there broods a portentous shadow--the shadow of law. So long as the law considers all these human beings, with beating hearts and living affections, only as so many things belonging to a master,--so long as the failure, or misfortune, or imprudence, or death of the kindest owner, may cause them any day to exchange a life of kind protection for one of hopeless misery and toil,--so long it is impossible to make anything beautiful or desirable in the best-regulated administration of slavery (UTC,pp.50-1).

Law is here presented as a system alien to the moral community, which disregards and cuts across its bonds. This vision is at the core of the critique of objective "logic" and structures of rules as a means of making moral decisions, which Stowe returns to continually throughout UTC and Dred. On one level, Stowe's difficulty with these structures is obvious: the external, objectivized structure of society--its religious and social values as well as its laws--is naturally designed to uphold that society as it is. In a slaveholding society, it is supportive of slavery, and its support serves as a further sanction of the original wrong: thus ministers find that the Bible supports the institution of slavery and the rights of the master, and a social "code of honor" makes it "ungentlemanly" to cheat a trader of his slave.

This tendency is most evident in the legal system. Stowe reiterates throughout UTC that the law places no limit on the power of a master over a slave, and that therefore it can do nothing to ensure any sort of humanity in the institution of slavery. In Dred she devotes several pages to a legal decision by Judge Clayton, in which, while lamenting the conflicts between "the feelings of the man and the duty of the magistrate," he overturns a previous decision in

favor of an abused slave woman. He concludes that it is

the imperative duty of the judges to recognize the full dominion of the owner over the slave....And this we do upon the ground that this dominion is essential to the value of slaves as property, to the security of the master and the public tranquillity, greatly dependent upon their subordination¹⁶

In other words, judges are obliged to decide on legal cases in a way that maintains order in the society as it is, not to decide on the justice of the society's institutions. But the Judge is unusual in his recognition of a possible gap between what must be upheld legally and what can be upheld morally. Ordinary citizens, less conscious than a judge is likely to be of the ambiguities of law, tend to associate what is legal with what is good and proper, so that slave-holding law gives the power of the master over slave a kind of moral sanction.

This is apparent, for example, in the conversation between George Harris and Mr. Wilson, his well-meaning and essentially sympathetic former employer. Mr. Wilson "deem[s] it his duty to go on talking good" to George, despite the fact that he "'can't pretend to defend" his master's treatment of him. He exhorts George to return to his cruel owner, on the grounds that his running away is both "'setting [him]self in opposition to the laws" and "'wicked--unscriptural.... the angel commanded Hagar to return to her mistress...and the apostle sent back Onesimus to his master'" (UTC p.183). These pro-slavery structures of law and religious doctrine have become the arbiters of "goodness," so that Mr. Wilson actually feels that he is doing wrong by giving in to his subjective desire to help George.

Such a critique of these structures may not seem necessarily incompatible with with an objective, justice-oriented view of morality. Judge Clayton's son Edward, for example, abandons the pursuit of law

in the South as a means of doing good because he realizes that the law as it stands in the South is incompatible with his own ethic of justice extended equally to all. His disagreement is primarily with the content of the law in a slaveholding state, which he realizes makes justice for the slave impossible, rather than with law per se. One might say that, at least for Edward Clayton, Southern law is not objective and impersonal enough, in that it does not accord blacks the same treatment as whites.

But beneath this obvious critique of immoral content in the codes and structures of slaveholding society there is a more far-reaching critique of the moral problems inherent in objective codes and structures themselves as guardians of morality. Stowe is concerned about the ways that objectivity, logic, and legalism--in a slaveholding society or out of it--can be used as a means of blinding oneself to the inconvenient moral claims made on one by other individuals. Turning a living, breathing human being into an abstraction, Stowe recognizes, is often the first step toward allowing oneself to behave inhumanly toward him or her.

This insight is at the core of Stowe's criticism of slavery. Throughout UTC and Dred she portrays the supporters of slavery as people who have retreated into abstract arguments to prevent themselves--with varying degrees of success--from seeing and responding to the human reality of the institution they support. This is easiest--and hence the greatest temptation--for the makers of public policy, such as politicians, church leaders, and social theorists. They are dealing with institutions and abstractions and the people they are affecting are, for the most part, strangers to them. Remaining indifferent to the individual suffering they cause is simply a

matter of not making the effort to seek it out, and this indifference is sanctioned by a moral code which would condemn such a concern as "weakness" or lack of "objectivity."

Senator Bird in UTC, for example, argues eloquently in favor of the Fugitive Slave Bill, and against the "sentimental weakness of those who would put the welfare of a few miserable fugitives before great state interests," only because "his idea of a fugitive was only an idea of the letters that spell the word" (UTC p.155). The whole issue is distant and abstract to him, and he considers it immoral to consider it otherwise:

'we mustn't suffer our feelings to run away with our judgement; you must consider it's a matter of private feeling,--there are great public interests involved,...we must put aside our private feelings' (UTC,p.144).

Ultimately, a policy maker or theorist may become so adept at distancing himself this way that even "the magic of the real presence of distress" does not affect him, like the "thorough-paced political economist" Stowe describes in Dred, who,

surprised... by the near view of a case of actual irremediable distress... would soon have consoled himself by a species of mental algebra, that the greatest good of the greatest number was nevertheless secure; therefore there was no occasion to be troubled about infinitesimal amounts of suffering (Dred,II, p.141).

But an even more telling condemnation of this process of retreating into abstraction to deny connection is that it can also operate on the level of the more personal, almost familial relationships of mutual care and trust which should form the basis for a wider-extending ethic of care and responsibility. Stowe's description of the way Mr. Shelby copes with selling Tom and Harry in the first part of UTC is a good example. Mr. Shelby can only begin to feel comfortable with having sold Tom and Harry by distancing himself from the personal

meaning of the event. His wife expresses her outrage at the sale in terms of their relationships with these particular people: "'What! our Tom?--that good, faithful creature!--been your faithful servant from a boy!....[and] little Harry, poor Eliza's only child!'" (UTC,p.82), but Mr. Shelby responds by making a generalized statement about what society sanctions, "'I don't know why I am to be rated, as if I were a monster, for doing what every one does every day'" (UTC,p.82) and appealing to conclusions on the morality of slavery by "'many wise and pious men'" (UTC,p.83).

Shelby also makes plans to avoid witnessing the actual result of what he's done: "'I'm going to get out my horse bright and early, and be off. I can't see Tom, that's a fact'"(UTC,p.86). The connection between this and his arguments is obvious: Shelby's conscience-easing rationalizations are only effective if he can nullify the human connection between himself and Tom, and hence deny his responsibility to behave toward him in a caring way. His need, however, to add physical distance to the psychological distance of abstract generalization, does indicate some discomfort with the morality of what he is doing: "It was in vain that he said to himself that he had a right to do it,--that everybody did it... he could not satisfy his own feelings" (UTC,p.169).

With the discovery of Eliza's flight, however, this discomfort disappears, as does the tone of apology toward his wife. Shelby here can retreat into a clear and established system of rules for behavior--the Southern code of honor. Now in response to Mrs. Shelby's support of Eliza he exclaims, "'Wife, you talk like a fool!....[this] touches my honor!'" (UTC,p.92). Unlike his wife, who covertly aids her servant's flight, Shelby unhesitatingly gives Haley's right to a fair bargain

precedence over his personal, unofficial responsibility to Eliza, telling Haley that he is in no way "partner to any unfairness in this matter" and promising him "every assistance, in the use of horses, servants, &C., in the recovery of your property"(UTC,p.95).

The contrast between this moral outlook and Mrs. Shelby's attempt to uphold the values of connection and care is evident throughout this section-- she immediately refuses to be an "accomplice or help in this cruel business" and resolves instead to give her sympathy and support to Uncle Tom's family, so that "they shall see, at any rate, that their mistress can feel for and with them" (UTC,p.87). The event also leads her to an understanding of the evil of slavery which parallels Stowe's own. It is "'a curse to the master and a curse to the slave,'" and her attempts to "'gild'" it with "'kindness, and care, and instruction'" were doomed to failure because of the institution's fundamental disregard for human connection.

In the final conversation on Eliza's escape, then, we see a clear example of the kind of conflict between the "masculine" ethic of objective rules and the "feminine" one of empathetic response which will be central to the rest of the novel:

'Come, come, Emily,' said he...'you allow yourself to feel too much.'

'Feel too much! Am not I a woman,--a mother? Are we not both responsible to God for this poor girl? My God! lay not this sin to our charge.'

'What sin, Emily? You see yourself that we have only done what we were obliged to.'

'There's an awful feeling of guilt about it though,...I can't reason it away' (UTC, p.133).

The conflict hidden in this conversation goes deeper than a simple difference of opinion. There is a basic gap in comprehension between Mr. Shelby and his wife, which points up the problem of intellectual and moral legitimacy faced by the female advocate of an ethic of care. "Feeling" to Mr. Shelby signifies a purely local emotional

response which is extraneous to the realm of moral and social order. Hence negative feelings about an action which is defensible in "objective" terms are an indulgence, or at least an unnecessary discomfort. "Feeling" to Mrs. Shelby, however, is at the center of moral order. The central experience of connection, care and responsibility she has as a mother is the model for moral relations with the rest of humanity. Here it is abstract judgements, made without reference to the real human connections involved, which are extraneous, so that guilt felt at severing connections can't be "reasoned" away. But because she lacks the terms to argue the logic and legitimacy of her view, her reply leaves the impression that she is simply falling prey to her irrational emotions.

The same problem emerges in Mrs. Bird's conversation with her husband on the passing of the Fugitive Slave Bill. In her husband's eyes, her feelings on the matter are no more than a kind of simplistic, mushy emotionalism, made agreeable by its piety and warm-heartedness, but having no real bearing on the complex social and moral issues involved. Not surprisingly, he views her insistence on them with "a whimsical mixture of amusement and vexation" (UTC,p.146).

But with an awareness of the coherent ethical view which underlies Mrs. Bird's "feelings," and the centrality of that view to Stowe's critique of slavery, her response begins to seem less irrational. From her perspective, the problem lies as much in the terms of the arguments as in their content. Political argument is founded upon premises which mean that discussions will go "round and round a plain right thing" without being able to see it. Mrs. Bird's "'I hate reasoning, John,--especially reasoning on such subjects'" (UTC,p.145), like Mrs. Shelby's refusal to "reason away" her sense of guilt, is

essentially a rejection of argument on those terms. It is not a rejection of any use of the intellect, but rather seeks to replace this particular kind of reasoning with that referred to (negatively) by the selfish woman on the steamboat with Uncle Tom, who in response to a neighbor's comment on slavery's "'outrages on the feelings and affections,'" replies, "'We can't reason from our feelings to those of this class of persons'" (UTC, p.200).

Critics' view of this response has tended to parallel that of Mr. Shelby and Senator Bird. Contemporary reviewers usually condemned Stowe for lack of objectivity and respect for law and political process. She was unable, one said, to attain the "judicial seat...fixed high above human passions,"¹⁷ and, in typical feminine fashion, judged issues entirely by her uncontrolled emotions. Foster, who has greater respect overall for the intelligence of Stowe's analysis of slavery, still sees UTC as having "a tendency to split into two books" which work against each other. One is the "literary-sentimental-pious," best represented by Mrs. Bird, which the book would be better without (the novel is "a battle between piety and... talent"), and the other the "sharp intelligence" (and "masculine edge") of Stowe's critique of the institution of slavery through Augustine St. Clare.¹⁸

What Mrs. Bird actually represents, though, is Stowe's own rejection of the premises of pro-slavery arguments because they deny the place of empathy--a rejection which manifests itself as much in Augustine St. Clare's reflections as in Mary Bird's. Stowe is nowhere particularly interested in arguing with slaveholders on their own ground--in trying to prove, for example, that slavery does not bring about "the greatest good for the greatest number." Instead, she attacks the whole idea of dealing with living, breathing individuals as abstractions, terms in a "moral calculus," just as in the New

England novels she condemned theologians who "deal... with the great question of the salvation or damnation of myriads as a problem of theological algebra, to be worked out by their inevitable x,y,z" (OTF, p.562).

To the extent that Stowe does attack the content of pro-slavery arguments, she usually does so by providing an alternative logic which does not so much disprove the original as show the arbitrary quality inherent in the choice of a basis for argument. On the steamboat carrying Uncle Tom south, a clergyman breaks into a conversation on the morality of slavery with the comment,

"It's undoubtedly the intention of Providence that the African race should be servants,--kept in a low condition...."Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be," the scripture says....and we must not set up our opinion against that"
(UTC,p.200).

In response, a young man "with a face expressive of great feeling and intelligence" breaks in and remarks, ""All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them." I suppose...that is scripture, as much as "Cursed be Canaan."" The "honest drover" John concludes, "'Wal, it seems quite as plain a text, stranger,... to poor fellows like us, now'" (UTC,p.201). As the young parson's comment points out, both texts are equally valid bases for a scriptural argument on slavery. The older man's preference for the former is clearly based on unconscious self-interest, while the young man's advocacy of the latter is based on his ability to reason from his own feelings to those of others:

'My friend,... how can you, how dare you, carry on a trade like this? Look at these poor creatures! Here I am, rejoicing in my heart that I am going home to my wife and child; and the same bell which is a signal to carry me onward towards them will part this poor man and his wife forever' (UTC,p.202).

This recognition that seemingly "objective" logical arguments can be constructed to prove the necessity of almost anything is also at the core of St. Clare's cynical commentary on slavery:

'Suppose that something should bring down the price of cotton once and forever, and make the whole slave property a drug in the market, don't you think we should soon have another version of the Scripture doctrine? What a flood of light would pour into the church, all at once, and how immediately it would be discovered that everything in the Bible and reason went the other way!' (UTC, p.281).

St. Clare recognizes that the motivation behind any such argument is an attempt to rationalize and obscure a refusal to respond. The fundamental perspective underlying pro-slavery logic is that of the "aristocrat":

'Now, an aristocrat, you know, the world over, has no human sympathies, beyond a certain line in society....What would be hardship and distress and injustice in his own class, is a cool matter of course in another one' (UTC, p.355).

What St. Clare has done, essentially, is to articulate in intelligent and coherent terms what Mrs. Bird meant by saying "I hate reasoning." The major difference between the two is that Mrs. Bird has a greater faith in the ability (and willingness) of an individual to see through the maze of obscuring logic to a "plain right thing," and then do it. Here too, perhaps both are reasoning from their own feelings, for it is a notable fact that Mrs. Bird acts, while St. Clare does not.

What does such action consist of? In the world of Uncle Tom's Cabin, in which, as we have seen, moral disorder is institutionalized, how does one approach the task of re-establishing moral order? As Stowe's critique of slavery makes clear, in such a world the "objective," rule-oriented approach to ethical reason and action which Gilligan describes as characteristically "masculine" is not appropriate. Positive moral action in these novels tends, rather, to align

closely with Gilligan's description of "feminine" moral priorities.

Moral characters seek first and foremost to maintain relationships, both for the sake of the relationships themselves and because lines of communication must be kept open for moral response to be possible. This explains why, for example, Mrs. Bird and Mrs. Shelby respond to their husbands' morally dubious actions in a way which Ann Douglas associates with the weak and acquiescent credo

popularized by Godeys and other similar ladies' magazines: women were to use the moral suasion of example and mild precept to turn their men to more humane (or feminine) ways; women were never directly to oppose men, no matter how stupid or brutal they might be.¹⁹

Mrs. Shelby would never "threaten to leave" her husband as a way of stopping him from selling Tom and Harry, as Douglas later suggests she ought, because to try to assert the moral responsibility implied in human connections (i.e. his with Tom) by breaking off her connection with him would be a contradiction in terms.

Furthermore, it is this connection which keeps open the possibility of moral change in her husband. This process is akin to what Douglas describes as "the moral suasion of example and mild precept," which was all women were permitted to oppose to the stupidity and brutality of men. But, at least as Stowe intends it, this is not the indirect, unassertive, and oppressively limiting stance that modern critics like Douglas often take it to be. Again, it is important here to "separate the description of care and connection from the vocabulary of inequality and oppression."²⁰ Within a view of moral order as relying on connection and response to need, the "act of assertion" needed to try to reestablish order "is an act not of aggression but of communication."²¹ The concern which both Emily Shelby and Mary Bird show for getting across their moral point without seriously alienating

their husbands stems not from dependence and fear but from a sense that keeping lines of communication open is an important moral priority.

This concern is linked with a determination to maintain the web of universal responsibility and care in the face of an official structure which denies its legitimacy and works to dissolve its bonds. Moral characters persist in viewing situations of moral choice in terms of the varying needs for care and help of the individuals involved, rather than in terms of objective classifications. Thus for Mrs. Shelby, covertly aiding Eliza's escape easily takes precedence over issues of legality or "honor," as for Mrs. Bird the presence of a suffering fugitive makes the existence of a Fugitive Slave Bill irrelevant. This is also the whole basis for moral choice in the Ohio Quaker community Stowe portrays. The Quakers are as willing to give aid to a suffering and abandoned slavecatcher as to a fugitive, even though he could conceivably betray them. Here the Quakers resist the temptation to objectify what they are doing into a "cause" the "greater good" of which is more important than any one individual.

These moral values are also what defines Uncle Tom as a character. He is not concerned with what rights, in fairness, he is entitled to claim for himself, but with what the needs of others around him are which it is possible for him to fulfill. This, rather than acquiescence to an oppressive and unjust law, explains his refusal to run away at the beginning and the end of the book. Although he recognizes that others, such as Eliza and Cassie, can run away without sin, he himself puts concern for others before his own needs: at the Shelybs' the concern is for the slaves who would be sold in his stead, and at Legree's, for those he might yet be able to help to God if he

remains.

Even with an understanding of the ethical perspective which underlies the action of characters like Tom, however, there are still questions which can be raised about what appears to be the limited effectiveness of this approach to the problem of slavery. Stowe's rejection of the kind of abstract, "greatest good" arguments prevalent in politics seems to confine moral action to an individual level--the level of personal help or influence. It is hard then to see how she intends to bring about change on an institutional level. The model for the reformist seems to be Edward Clayton in Dred, who abandons his attempt to reform his culture in favor of flight and the foundation of a model community with his former slaves in Canada, or the Quakers, who help many a fugitive slave but will not resist or "speak evil of [the] rulers" who penalize them for doing so (UTC,p.224).

Further, Stowe's rejection of aggression and violence, even in self-defense, seems to doom slaves to the status of victims. The title character in Dred, for example, originally plans a violent uprising as retribution for the sins of the slaveholders, and to rescue oppressed slaves. Through her presentation of his character (Dred speaks almost exclusively in the language of Old Testament prophecy) and situation of slaves in the novel, Stowe makes clear that such retribution would be entirely just. But before the insurrection can take place, Dred is converted from his Old Testament revenge orientation to Christian patience and pacifism, and is eventually killed by slave hunters. The ultimate representation of the pacifist as victim, of course, is Uncle Tom, who passes up the opportunity to kill Legree and free the whole plantation from a demonic and soul-killing master, and is cruelly beaten to death as a reward.

Clearly a large part of the explanation for this orientation lies

in Stowe's Christianity--Tom's reward (and Dred's) is a greater and surer one than this world can offer, so that his fate, and even his effectiveness, on earth is not the only matter for consideration. But there is a more pragmatic reason also for Stowe's rejection of violence, one which relates to the moral perspective I have been outlining here. Stowe quite accurately perceives that violence will cut the lines of communication decisively, making it impossible to bring about change in the perceptions of those doing wrong. Bringing violence into a conflict will polarize all concerned, and make change impossible unless imposed by force (which it would be unlikely for slaves to be able to do).

On the issue of the scale of effectiveness of attempts, within Stowe's moral framework, to restore moral order, we must finally step out of the world of her novels to understand her view. Stowe's view of the proper response to the moral evil of slavery--and of the likely effectiveness of that response--is ultimately to be found not in the actions of any one of her characters but in the act of writing Uncle Tom's Cabin itself. Where moral order is seen as the recognition by all of interconnectedness and interresponsiveness, the conviction that change is possible at all translates into a conviction that people can be made to see and understand suffering and their responsibility for it, and that they will then act on the basis of that understanding. Stowe clearly expresses this conviction in her appeal to her readers at the end of UTC:

when [the author] heard...Christian and humane people actually recommending the remanding [of] escaped fugitives into slavery, as a duty binding on good citizens,--when she heard, on all hands, from kind, compassionate and estimable people,... deliberations and discussions as to what Christian duty could be on this head,--she could only think, These men and Christians cannot know what slavery

is; if they did, such a question could never be open for discussion. And from this arose a desire to exhibit it in a living dramatic reality (UTC,p.623).

With this in mind, Stowe's use of the techniques of "sentimental" fiction, the point on which she has received the most and strongest criticism from both contemporary and modern critics, needs to be re-evaluated. Stowe is undeniably making a conscious effort to appeal to the hearts of her readers--to stir up strong emotions on behalf of her characters. But this is being done neither so that uncontrolled emotion may cloud judgement and reason, as Foster and many others suggest, nor to evoke the kind of complacent, "narcissistic" orgy of feeling which Douglas describes at the beginning of The Feminization of American Culture.²² Rather Stowe is trying to initiate in her readers the kind of "reasoning" process referred to by the woman on the steamboat--the use of one's own experience of relationships to gain insight into another's perspective. An "objectivity" which denies a place to this kind of understanding is actually partiality, for it refuses to recognize the ways reason can be twisted to self-interest:

One might almost imagine that there were no such thing as absolute truth, since a change of situation or temperament is capable of changing the whole force of an argument...We shall never have all the materials for absolute truth on this subject, till we take into account, with our own views and reasonings, the views and reasonings of those who have bowed down to the yoke, and felt the iron enter into their souls. We all console ourselves too easily for the sorrows of others. We talk and reason coolly of that which, did we feel it ourselves, would take away all power of composure and self-control. We have seen how the masters feel and reason....We must add, also, to our estimate, the feelings and reasonings of the slave (Dred,II,p.213).

To this end, the narrator of UTC continually asks the reader directly to consult his or her own feelings: "If it were your Harry... that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader...how

fast could you walk?"(UTC,p.105). Certainly this serves to heighten the emotional intensity of the experience of reading the novel, with whatever pleasure that entails in itself, but the narrator constant reminds the reader that this emotional experience refers outside of the novel to actual society. The reader uses it as a basis for understanding the lived reality of slavery, something he or she is likely to lose track of otherwise, just as the Quaker Ruth "'uses [her] self only to learn how to love [her] neighbor'" (UTC,p.22

This stress on empathy, of course, also explains Stowe's tendency to focus on victims rather than victors. The re-establishment of moral order is dependent on the communication of a need for response and care, and therefore the novel with seeks to make that communication must focus on those who need care rather than on those, like George Harris, who can take care of themselves.

To point out a coherent and distinctively feminine ethical view which underlies the characters, actions, and opinions expressed in Stowe's fiction, to pick out a legitimate and perceptive critique of the dominant masculine view which is contained within it, and to show the ways in which that dominant view can distort, trivialize, and finally disregard both the contrasting ethic and its implied critique --all of these will not eliminate certain recurring problems of awkwardness and cliché in Stowe's writing, problems which make it unlikely that Stowe will ever be classed with the finest literary craftsmen of the 19th century. But it can lead to a greater respect for the intelligence and perception which underlie the novels--their psychological craftsmanship--and to a less ambivalent assessment of the power and appeal of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Stowe may have underestimated the self-interest of the Southerner, and the prejudice of the Northerner, such that the results of her consciousness raising efforts were not

as peaceful, Christian, and loving as she hoped; but on the whole the assumptions on which she wrote UTC were no more irrational, naive, or impractical than any moral view which maintains that actual improvements in the morality of society can be brought about. The ethic which informed the writing of Uncle Tom's Cabin is, in part, validated by the novel's achievement in awakening the nation's conscience about slavery.

NOTES

- ¹Nina Baym, in her book Woman's Fiction (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978) has raised questions about the the accuracy of applying "sentimental" as a negative term to women's fiction in the 19th century which are similar to what I will be discussing in Stowe. My reference here is to critical perception of that fiction, and is not intended to set Stowe's validity in contrast to its inferiority.
- ²Charles H. Foster, The Rungless Ladder: Harriet Beecher Stowe and New England Puritanism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1954) p.59
- ³Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) pp.3-4
- ⁴Foster, p.59
- ⁵Ann Douglas, introduction to Uncle Tom's Cabin (New York: Penguin, 1981) pp.17-19
- ⁶Foster, p.49
- ⁷Douglas, introduction to UTC, p.19
- ⁸Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982)
- ⁹Gilligan, p.19
- ¹⁰Gilligan, p.33
- ¹¹quoted in Gilligan, p.7
- ¹²Gilligan, p.23
- ¹³Harriet Beecher Stowe, Old Town Folks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966) pp.93-95. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be cited in the text.
- ¹⁴Harriet Beecher Stowe, The Minister's Wooing, in Stowe: Three Novels, ed. Kathryn Kish Skylar (New York: Viking Press, 1982) p.588. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be cited in the text.
- ¹⁵Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin (New York: Penguin, 1981) p.83. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be cited in the text.
- ¹⁶Harriet Beecher Stowe, Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp, 2 vols. (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1856) II, p.105. All subsequent references will be to this edition

and will be cited in the text.

¹⁷Anonymous London Times review, Sept. 3, 1982 p.5, reprinted in Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1980) p.25

¹⁸Foster, pp.40-48

¹⁹Douglas, introduction to UTC, p.17

²⁰Gilligan, p.49

²¹Gilligan, p.61

²²Douglas, Feminization, p.3-4

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