

# “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”

By KENNETH REXROTH

IN the first half of the nineteenth century, American writing made its first large-scale appearance on the stage of world literature. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and others like them, had been international writers or thinkers with considerable influence abroad, but they were essentially Physiocrats or Girondins or Jacobins—in other terms, radical Whigs. The sources of their inspiration were in France and secondarily in England, even though in those countries they were accepted, not as bright provincials, but as full equals in the international community of the Enlightenment that stretched from the court of Catherine the Great to the discussion clubs of Philadelphia. Two or three generations later, American writers were playing a determinative if minor role in international literature.

Harriet Beecher Stowe made the moral horror of slavery visible to all the world, but she also made the Negro, slave or free, visible as an essential member of American society, and she made the full humanity of the Negro visible to all, black or white, all over the world. It is possible to disagree with her idea of what a fully human being should be, but she did the best according to her lights. Her lights were, as a matter of fact, just as illuminating as any that have been lit in a more cynical and rationalistic age, by writers with a different kind of sentimentality.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, like Mark Twain’s weather, is talked about by millions who do nothing about it; that is, “Uncle Tom” is a term of contempt used by everybody today, yet hardly anybody bothers to read the book anymore. The picture of the humble and obedient slave is derived not from the novel but from the “Tom Shows” that toured America for a generation before the First War. Uncle Tom is in no sense an “Uncle Tom.” He is by far the strongest person in the book. Although he is whipped to death by the psychotic Simon Legree, his end is not only a tragedy in Aristotle’s sense—the doom of a great man brought low by a kind of holy hubris—but, like Samson, he destroys his destroyer.

Is Harriet Beecher Stowe sentimental? And rhetorical? Indeed she is. So is Norman Mailer, or for that matter much greater writers, Thomas Hardy or D. H. Lawrence. It is true that we must ad-

just to changes of fashion when we read her novel. The early nineteenth-century rhetoric of Harriet Beecher Stowe takes a little getting used to, but it survives the test of the first twenty pages. Once the reader has accepted it, it soon becomes unnoticeable. The sentimental scenes in the novel, almost the only ones that survived in the Tom Show—Eliza on the ice, the death of Augustine St. Clare, the death of Little Eva—are deliberate devices to hold and shock the popular audience of the time. They drive home, to sentimental readers who give at least lip service to an evangelical Christianity, the overwhelming reality of the rest of the book. How real, how convincing, this huge cast is—as large as that in any novel of Balzac’s or Dostoyevsky’s.

True, the Negroes are seen from the point of view of a white person, but any attempt to “think black” would have been a falsification. Mrs. Stowe simply tries to think human. And human they all are, even at their most Dickensian. Little Eva is not a plaster statue of The Little Flower. The evangelical early nineteenth century produced plenty of saintly little girls just like her. They occur in all the novels of the time, though not in such abnormal circumstances as the Little Missie-devoted slave relationship. When they appear in Dickens they are usually less believable. Mrs. Stowe’s sentimentality lacks the subtle lewdness that invalidates Little Nell and other girls of Dickens, because Mrs. Stowe was a far more emancipated and radical person than Dickens, politically and sexually. Tom, of course, does not function as a slave but literally as an “uncle” to Eva. He takes the place of her neurotic and inadequate father, as he substitutes for so many others who are inadequate, and finally atones for all.

Simon Legree may be a monster but he is a human monster, more human for instance than Dickens’s Fagin or even Mr. Micawber. No one in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is completely a villain. Even at their worst Mrs. Stowe’s characters are battlegrounds of conflicting motives, of Beelzebub and Michael. Simon Legree is not a devil. Devils and angels struggle within him. The slave trader Haley knows the good, but to him it is reduced to the cash nexus. Uncle Tom in his eyes is worth more money than an “ornery” slave.



*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is not only an attack on slavery, the greatest and most effective ever written, it is a book of considerable philosophical or religious and social importance. Its immense popularity was a significant factor in the change in the dominant American philosophy, dominant in the sense of “shared by most ordinary people.” Mrs. Stowe came out of Puritan New England. In her immediate background was the rigid predestination of strict Calvinism and the literal interpretation of Scripture. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is far more tendentious in its constant insistence on a kind of secularized evangelical deism than in its forthright, realistic portrayal of the horror of slavery. The book says, “Slavery denies the integrity of the person of the slave; in doing so it cripples the integrity of the person of the master, but it cannot destroy the humanity of either master or slave.” This is or should be self-evidently true, and it is presented by a dramatic narrative that is convincing as a marshaling of fact. The philosophy of the good life as expounded by Mrs. Stowe through her various spokesmen and spokeswoman in the novel is disputable, but there is no denying that it was the faith by which most of white Protestant America, and most of black, lived until recently.

IT is absurd that in American universities there are countless courses in rhetorical, sentimental, and unreal novelists like James Fenimore Cooper or worse, and that this book, which played no small role in changing the history of the world, is passed over and misrepresented. Hawthorne, Cooper, Washington Irving ignore the reality of slavery. Yet slavery was the great fact of American life. Harriet Beecher Stowe alone of the major novelists faced that fact and worked out its consequences in the humanity of those involved in it—master or slave or remote beneficiary. She knew that her New England was almost as dependent on the “peculiar institution” as any plantation owner.

And what were the final consequences? They are not yet. Of the immediate ones President Lincoln said when he received her: “So you’re the little lady who started this great war.” As for her literary influence, it is one of the best kept secrets of criticism. Most of the characters of William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams, and many of their situations, can be found at least in embryo in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and the old rhetoric is still theirs. It seems to be necessary in describing Southern life. As for Uncle Tom, he was assassinated in Memphis, and has been before, and will be again, until something like Mrs. Stowe’s secular, evangelical humanism wins out at last—or the Republic perishes.

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## Who Are the Isolationists?

THERE is a growing tendency among those who developed or defended the Americanization of the Vietnamese war to label their critics as "isolationists." Unless we are prepared to take the same stand and the same policy in future Vietnams, they say, we will return the United States to the dangerous ostrich-like position it occupied when the Second World War was first brewing. The coming "Great Debate" on U.S. foreign policy foreseen by Secretary of State Dean Rusk should heighten this issue, as he suggests; but it will not do so if isolationism is projected as the only alternative to Vietnam-type interventionism, as he seems to imply.

To be sure, critics of our policy in Vietnam have been called worse things than "isolationists." But this is more than a question of labels. Many of us share the Secretary's opposition to a return to isolationism. We know America cannot afford to be alone—politically, militarily, or economically alone—in a world dominated by hostile interests. Nor can we in good faith abandon those obligations to

the community of nations which our national power, wealth, and conscience, as well as our national interests impose upon us. We need allies in this world. We need friends. We need respect. And our past policy of escalation in Vietnam hurt far more than it helped in this regard.

If the new Administration insists on a hard line in Paris, seeking at the negotiating table what could not be won on the battlefield—if the new President believes, as some have written, that Vietnam, like Korea, can be settled with the threat to unleash our nuclear weapons—if disappointment and impatience lead to a renewal of the bombing of the North, or an increase in the bombing of Laos and Cambodia, or a new American thrust somewhere else in the world—America will truly be isolated in the worst possible way.

Those who advocate a policy of "no more Vietnams" do not thereby deserve the label of isolationists. They are responsible realists who recognize the practical limitations of our military and diplomatic power. They realize that we

have no more right than the Russians or Chinese to impose either our will or our way upon other peoples. They want us to lead by the force of example, not force of arms, by emphasizing multi-lateral instead of national solutions, and non-military instead of military means. That is not isolationism.

On the other hand, those who developed or now defend these past few years of America's policy in Vietnam—who look upon our role as that of world policeman and who advocate a hard line in the Paris talks today—these are the real isolationists.

Already, escalating the hot war in Vietnam, and the cold war in general, have cost us heavily in terms of international prestige and respect. They have diminished the attention and assistance we have been able to give to the Atlantic alliance, to the Alliance for Progress, and to other key spots around the globe. They have helped to build unnecessary economic barriers between ourselves and the rest of the world.

Because of the war in Vietnam, and its effects on our budget, our economy, our international accounts, and our outflow of gold, we have witnessed unprecedented controls on the overseas investments of American corporations, unsuccessful restraints on American tourism abroad, and a revival of high tariff protectionist sentiment in the Congress.

Because of the war in Vietnam, United States trade in non-strategic goods with Eastern Europe has continued at a pitifully low level, limiting our influence in the evolution of that region.

Because of the war in Vietnam, our Government has been unable and unwilling to assist those less affluent parts of the world whose freedom of choice is threatened by chaos, and equally unable and unwilling to apply sufficient resources at home to the mammoth tasks of ending the shocking conditions of urban deprivation and discrimination which are more responsible than anything else for the worsening of our image around the world.

Because of the war in Vietnam, finally, we have handicapped our nation's prospects for new agreements on disarmament with the Soviet Union, a new approach to Mao's China, and new steps toward a world of law instead of despair.

In short, the dangers of a trend toward isolationism in American foreign policy are very real. But they have been brought on less by doves than by hawks—by those whose responses to the challenge of Communism still assume that American omnipotence and omniscience require our omnipresence—by those, finally, who may have forgotten that this nation was founded by men mindful of their obligations to pay "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind." —THEODORE C. SORESENSEN.

