The Disappearance of the Strident Protest Novel: ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ at 163

[Books](http://flavorwire.com/category/books) | By [Sarah Seltzer](http://flavorwire.com/author/sarah-seltzer) | March 20, 2015

From *Flavorwire*

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, published on this day in 1862, is known for many things. Jane Smiley thinks it’s an early exemplar of the Great American Novel about race, family, and the American soul, the forgotten yin to *Huck Finn*‘s yang. Many 20th-century appraisers, notably James Baldwin, [excoriate](http://nymag.com/news/frank-rich/james-baldwin-everybodys-protest-novel-2013-11/) it as the originator of deeply racist tropes, most obviously the titular one. Yet Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has [refuted](http://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/uncle-toms-cabin-reconsidered-conversation-henry-louis-gates-margo-jefferson) Baldwin to call it a masterpiece.

Beyond literary criticism, it’s also been enshrined in legend as a book that actually made a huge impact on national sentiment, and the will to spill blood to end slavery. Abraham Lincoln allegedly said to Stowe, when meeting her at the White House: “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war.”

Whether the story is apocryphal or not, the book sold hundreds of thousands of copies, a bestseller even by today’s standards, and is widely credited as playing a major part in shifting popular opinion about the necessity of eradicating slavery. It was a fictional story, wildly melodramatic, that contained the actual truths of the conditions of slavery, particularly the enforced separation of families, that woke many Northerners out of apathy.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*is a protest novel that, in the tradition of Dickens and many other 19th-century novelists, is a direct and unapologetic appeal to the sentiments of readers. Stowe’s virtuous slaves and sadistic owners exist alongside innocent little orphans like Oliver Twist and cruel schoolmasters and workhouse bosses (not to mention the stiff, put-upon Jewish characters of her friend George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*). Despite the lack of character depth, the novel remains a roller-coaster ride of emotions, deliberately manipulated by the author.

This kind of naked polemical treatment of social problems went out of style with the advent of modernism — and as I and many literature fans I know would say, it’s a good thing it did. Jane Tompkins writes about this in her essay, [“Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History”](http://web.princeton.edu/sites/english/NEH/TOMPKINS.HTM):

The inability of twentieth-century critics either to appreciate the complexity and scope of a novel like Stowe’s, or to account for its enormous popular success, stems from their assumptions about the nature and function of literature. In modernist thinking, literature is by definition a form of discourse that has no designs on the world. It does not attempt to change things, but merely to represent them, and it does so in a specifically literary language whose claim to value lies in its uniqueness. Consequently, works whose stated purpose is to influence the course of history, and which therefore employ a language that is not only not unique but common and accessible to everyone, do not qualify as works of art. Literary texts, such as the sentimental novel, that make continual and obvious appeals to the reader’s emotions and use technical devices that are distinguished by their utter conventionality, epitomize the opposite of everything that good literature is supposed to be.

I generally concur with this critique, and yet as a person who has often vacillated between writing and activism, I find myself fascinated by 19th-century protest novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. There is a sheer energy that the pages emit, a moral force the authors put into their stories, using every literary trick in their arsenal — including archetypes and one-dimensional yet compelling villains and heroes — to actually move and influence their readers’ political view. Rather than the page as a lens, or a mirror, in this tradition the page becomes a hand that reaches out and grabs the reader to shake his or her conscience.

Today, that reach-and-grab impetus has moved away from literature, and spread. It’s moved into philosophical morality in science fiction or genre fiction, and into the work that political bloggers and the filmmakers behind documentaries like [*After Tiller*](http://flavorwire.com/430479/the-25-best-films-of-2013)do, or into feature films like [*Fruitvale Station*](http://flavorwire.com/430479/the-25-best-films-of-2013). And yet every time I leave the theater after seeing such a galvanizing film, expecting people to spontaneously start organizing, I end up watching them toss their popcorn into the trash, in a world that’s unfortunately flat and static. There are so many different mediums for expressing protest, the idea of a single work influencing an entire national conversation feels outdated.

Art like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* might exist in a realm in between art and activism, but that shouldn’t disqualify it from serious consideration. Given the fact that many Americans remain in deep denial about our nation’s foundation on chattel slavery and its legacies of sharecropping, lynching, and police violence, I have to wonder whether more readers would benefit from being captivated by its narrative, flaws and all. Jane Smiley certainly thinks so; “I would rather my children read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,even though it is far more vivid in its depiction of cruelty than *Huck Finn*,and this is because Stowe’s novel is clearly and unmistakably a tragedy,” [she writes](http://www.en.utexas.edu/Classes/Bremen/e316k/316kprivate/scans/smiley.html).