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out and questions and seeks.⁶

The successive versions of the Eagle Island episode record the growth of an independent artistic spirit away from her mentor. Retaining their common belief in the artist's sensitive spirit and their common use of New England materials, Jewett develops independently a quality of gentle questing in place of Stowe's earnest dogmatizing. She seeks in nature what Stowe finds in God. She speaks in lyric, poetic prose, while Stowe speaks in sermons. She envisions a wild, light, slender white heron instead of Stowe's protesting eagles.

⁶ In "The Child in Sarah Orne Jewett," *Colby Library Quarterly*, VII (September 1967), reprinted in *Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Maine, 1973). Eugene Hillhouse Pool also reads "A White Heron" biographically, although somewhat differently. He argues that Jewett "chooses, psychologically, to remain a child with Sylvia," because she clings so intensely to her memory of her father and his love and thus "repudiates the offer of mature, passionate love that would be inherent in any acceptance of herself as a mature woman." (*Appreciation*, p. 225.)



MRS. STOWE'S NEGRO: GEORGE HARRIS'
NEGRITUDE IN *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

By RANDALL M. MILLER

Given the climate of opinion that obtained in the 1850s when she wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's generally sympathetic, even maudlin, treatment of the American Negro slave started, if it did not shock, readers. Indeed, the Southern response was denial and ban. The book, however, endured, and it remains today often the sole prism through which students assess the nature of the Negro and slavery. This need not be harmful, if we recognize the limitations of the book as sociology and its strengths as a mirror of nineteenth century antislavery attitudes and conceptions of the Negro. For all of her literary failings and paternalism, the well-intentioned Mrs. Stowe at least recognized that Negroes were not all of the acquiescing Sambo variety. Rather, she presented a variety of slave types from the stumbling, ignorant, even childlike "darkie" so long associated

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with the American slave system in the public mind to the aggressive, intelligent slave-resistor who has only recently been resurrected by students of the Negro experience. Unhappily, she exploited her Negro characters in order to advance her colonizationist views. This and her racialist concept of genetics, proclaimed in *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, vitiated the force of her vigorous Negro characters, and thereby invited the kinds of distortions and burlesque which subsequently popularized Tom as a shuffling Sambo and saw the Negroes of energy and enterprise played by and as whites on the nineteenth century stage. This process of emasculation is well illustrated in the character George Harris, husband of Eliza and brother of Cassie.

Mrs. Stowe's description of Harris gives the lie to the notion that antislavery sympathizers had little appreciation of the rich variety of social and psychological experiences available to the slave. Harris was hired out in a Kentucky hemp bagging factory. Described as "a bright and talented young mulatto man" who by his "adroitness and ingenuity" came to be considered "the first hand in the place," Harris was clearly intended to be no ordinary field hand. He well demonstrated his keen mind by inventing a hemp cleaning device which in Mrs. Stowe's words, "displayed quite as much mechanical genius as Whitney's cotton gin."¹

Harris was by Southern standards the foil of the innocent Tom, who accepted, albeit reluctantly in some instances, the fact that his destiny rested in white hands alone. In this Tom had won the affection of his master, but little else since economic necessity dictated Tom's sale down the river. Tom's acquiescence in this impersonal decision contrasted sharply with Harris' response to his own threatened removal.

The hardworking Harris had earned the respect of the factory proprietor, but his master, after a tour of the factory awakened him to the Negro's manly carriage, grew sullen and jealous. Hoping to smother Harris' self-esteem, so dangerous to proper slave discipline and the careful rules of racial deference, the master removed him to the dulling labor of the farm. Harris, however, refused to play the assigned role of Sambo for, as

1 *Uncle Tom's Cabin: or, Life Among the Lowly*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1852). I. 27. All quotations are from this edition and are indicated by page numbers in the text.

Mrs. Stowe observed in her telling indictment of slavery, "the flashing eye, the gloomy and troubled brow, were part of a natural language that could not be repressed,—indubitable signs, which showed too plainly that the man could not become a thing" (I, 29). While on a visit to Eliza's residence (they were kept apart by separate masters), he divulged his plan of escape and pointedly inquired what justice made him a slave and the white his master: "I'm a better man than he is; I know more about business than he does; I am a better manager than he is; I can read better than he can; I write a better hand, — and I've learned it all myself, and no thanks to him" (I, 33).

Disguised as a Spanish gentleman, Harris marched across Kentucky to Ohio where he reunited with Eliza, who had earlier escaped with son Harry. In the subsequent race to safety in Canada Harris emerged as a father figure, something traditionally denied the Negro in the slave system and too often in American literary presentations of Negro life. In a confrontation with a slavecatcher's posse Harris declared, "I'm a free man, standing on God's free soil; and my wife and child I claim as mine. . . . We have arms to defend ourselves and we mean to do it" (I, 272). And do it he did. When tested, he sent a bullet into the advancing slavecatcher, dispersing the posse (I, 283).

The sanction of such violence alarmed readers, but Harris' armed resistance to slavecatchers was in consonance with the growing acceptance among abolitionists of the need for the Negro to defend his freedom from fugitive slave hunters who might use the invigorated, and much detested, Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 as an invitation to intrude into Northern private affairs.² Harris' resort to arms thus suggests that Mrs. Stowe nursed an inclination to antislavery radicalism and heroic methods, an inclination not generally appreciated by scholars.

While Tom struggled in the grips of Simon Legree, Harris found gainful employment as a machinist in Canada. Consistent with the American Negro convention movement's emphasis on self-help as the proper means of Negro uplift, Mrs. Stowe had Harris devote "all his leisure time to self-cultivation" and had him regularly admonish his son to always "depend on yourself."

² On this point see Jane Pease and William Pease, "Confrontation and Abolition in the 1850s," *Journal of American History*, LVIII (March 1972), 928-929.

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Harris' experience also satisfied prevailing middle class values in the antislavery movement that looked on emancipation as a release from economic torpor to economic and social utility. Too ambitious to remain an artisan, Harris enrolled in a French university where he spent four years in study. Once polished as a gentleman, Harris wrote a letter proclaiming his black consciousness. Although lightly complected, he cast his lot with his mother's darker race: "I have no wish to pass for an American, or to identify myself with them." Rather, it was with the oppressed, enslaved Africans that he went, wishing himself "two shades darker, rather than one lighter" (II, 295-6, 299-300). This distinction between African and American was fundamental to Mrs. Stowe's thinking on the race question, for she quickly reminded readers that whatever trace of Negro blood the impure were not welcome in America.

The function of the character Harris was revealed in his letter. Through the letters Mrs. Stowe interjected her colonizationist views into the scheme — views that were popularly held by many white friends of the Negro, perplexed as to how best resolve the slavery crisis and yet prevent hordes of black freedmen from invading the North to mix cheek and jowl with whites. Harris, established as the dominant spokesman for Negro manhood in the book, called upon his brothers to quit America and establish a Negro-American preserve in Africa as testimony to black enterprise and intelligence and the invigorating effects of Yankee civilization. While Harris' colonizationist appeal reflected Mrs. Stowe's conviction that endemic racism would forever doom the incorporation of the Negro into civil and economic society, her colonizationist views also revealed her doubts as to the Negro's true capacity to prosper on his own talents in a complex, "advanced" civilization. With her views on colonization as the most effectual means to advance the Negro and protect society presented, she packed Harris and his family off to Africa (*ibid.*).

Not surprisingly, Southern reviewers expressed outrage over Mrs. Stowe's portrayal of the slave system, although they hesitated to open a debate on the validity of such characters as George and Cassie Harris. Black abolitionists in the North, however, were not reticent on that score. Particularly disturbing to them was Mrs. Stowe's exploitation of Harris as an agent

for colonizationist propaganda. George T. Downing, an energetic and forceful Negro abolitionist who rejected the inclination of some Northern Negroes to endorse colonization as a viable alternative to a perpetually submerged status in America, argued that Harris had been the sole black character in the book that "really betrays any other than the subservient, submissive, Uncle Tom spirit, which has been the cause of so much disrespect felt for the colored man." For Downing at least, Harris' exile was a cause of much regret. The issue of Harris' conversion to colonization developed into a minor cause célèbre in the 1850s. At the 1853 meeting of the American & Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, for example, the clamor of irate black abolitionists grew so loud that supporters of Mrs. Stowe produced a letter from the harried author reassuring Negroes that if she could rewrite the book Harris would not emigrate to Liberia or counsel Negroes to do so.³

That was the sole concession she made to her detractors. After sales and public attention had swollen her pride, Mrs. Stowe prepared a rejoinder to all of her critics, North and South, in the form of *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Therein she published the documents — largely drawn from Theodore Weld's antislavery compendium, *Slavery As It Is* — from which she had gathered her information regarding Negroes and slavery. Defending herself against those who charged that the character of Harris was overdrawn as to his personal qualities and general intelligence, she cited numerous fugitive slave advertisements from Southern newspapers, which advertised slaves as intelligent and employed in such demanding pursuits as mechanic and river boat pilot. She also paralleled Harris' creativity and diligence in learning to read and write with Frederick Douglass' account of self-education found in his widely read *Narrative*. As to Harris' inventiveness, she recounted how Harris was modeled after a young slave in Kentucky who had invented a hemp cleaning machine similar to the one described in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁴

Unfortunately, Mrs. Stowe undermined the force of her arguments by prefacing her defense of Harris in racialist terms, a

³ Downing to Frederick Douglass, December 6, 1854, in Rochester, New York, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, December 22, 1854; *Thirteenth Annual Report of the American & Foreign Anti-Slavery Society . . . May 11, 1853* (n.p.), 192-193.

⁴ *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston, 1853), 13-21.

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ploy that might have satisfied many of her contemporaries but did little justice to the character Harris or the Negro. Regarding the intelligence of Harris and that of Frederick Douglass, she stated in the *Key*, "In regard to person, it must be remembered that the half-breeds often inherit, to a great degree, the traits of their white ancestors." She included intelligence, determination, and enterprise among the peculiarly white traits that might be passed along to mixed offspring.⁵ Harris was a mulatto, and so forever only half a man.

But it was that half of a man, that whiteness, that was so necessary to understand Tom. Harris, a distinctly masculine figure, served to balance Tom, who was black alone and whose virtues rested in his simplicity and moral strength, nothing more. Secondary mulatto figures such as George and Cassie Harris served to highlight the Sambo in Tom. And by their aggressiveness they had to be removed from society, hence colonization of the Harris family. Harris then provided an alternative course for Negro characters. He demonstrated that Tom's demise need not have been so — if Tom had possessed certain qualities he might have been saved. But these were exactly the qualities he could never possess. Indeed, the emphasis on Harris' white qualities of intelligence and energy in the *Key* negated the whole of his meaning in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Nineteenth century playwrights, who popularized and confirmed the stereotypes of the shuffling Tom, picked up Mrs. Stowe's racial emphasis and cast the Harris family as whites.⁶ In so doing they focussed all attention on Tom and his kind of Negro in the popular plays. With no black countertypes it was easy to reduce Tom to the total Sambo, and to bring the rest of the Negro characters down with him. As such, the utility of George Harris as a genuine model of slave behavior has been lost.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶ On this point see J. C. Furnas, *Goodbye to Uncle Tom* (New York, 1956), 259-284.

