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Racial Condition of America Through ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a novel written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852, remains a seminal literary work to current day. It created a progressive narrative about slavery during the 19th century, and since that time it has undergone multitudes of new editions targeted for different occasions, demographics, and time-periods. When investigating the differences in the editions, readers are allowed a primary glance into the social environment during the time of its publication. Thus, by selecting the same image of Tom and Eva from two different editions that were published in 1938 and 1964, the details in them can be analyzed with the effect of understanding the possible reasons for their artistic divergences. Continuously, from this conclusions can be drawn about how these divergences communicate two different racial attitudes, one that is degrading and one that is mature and realistic, both reflective of the social environments during the times they originate.

The images, when first encountering them, look similar since the text behind the artworks has not been altered. As an illustration of Chapter 16 in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, both images show Tom and Eva sitting together in the courtyard by a lake while Eva is reading to Tom, who is sitting quietly with his hat at his feet. In the novel, this scene of Tom and Eva playing together
takes place after a heated argument among other characters about the treatment of slaves; some of them believing they are animals and others arguing that they should be educated and treated justly. However, the setting does change slightly between these two editions even though the text is the same. In the 1938 version Tom and Eva are shown to be sitting underneath a tree on the ground, with Eva on Tom’s lap. In the 1964 version though, they are sitting on a bench separately, underneath a wooden structure with vines hanging down. At first glance, the scene that the images are illustrating seems consistent in the different works of art, and they appear to show the same picture and have the same meaning. These slight differences in the setting could be understood simply as the how the artists interpreted the passage differently.

When looking at the details of the artwork, divergences in the creative license the artist’s took when drawing them can start to be seen, and can be identified through the differences in the traits of the characters, their body language, and relationship. In the 1938 edition, Eva appears to have an angelic presence. Her hair is curled in perfect blonde spirals with a bow at the top of her head, her skin is porcelain white, her dress is perfectly white and she appears to be sitting up strait, poised, with her right hand in a perpendicular angle and her finger out as if she is providing Tom with an explanation. While her figure looks petite, like a 6-year-old’s, her body has an hourglass figure that is almost womanly and her eyes and lips are dramatized as if she has used make-up, which contributes to the overall doll-like impression she exudes. From this, the reader understands that she is a girl of extreme privilege and grace, and her hyperbolized features make her look like a pure, innocent angel.

Differently from the 1938 edition, Eva in the 1964 version looks appropriately dressed and portrayed for a girl her age. She still has an arm extended and her finger is pointing
something out to Tom. But her features are not perfected and the reader can see un-styled medium length blonde hair and her sitting comfortably in a modest, loose-fitting striped dress. While these appear to be small differences, they create very different tones. The 1964 version shows Eva as a common and helpful little girl making the picture have a sweet and kind tone. Differently, the mature and poised image of Eva in the 1938 version makes her seem overly important and perfect, putting her privileged position (as a white female) on a pedestal. This has the effect of creating a degrading tone towards African Americans that can be seen to its full extent when analyzing how Tom is portrayed.

The differences stylistically and tonally are continually intensified by how Tom is portrayed, and how Tom and Eva interact with each other. Keeping with the racially-charged caricature style, as can be seen in Eva, the artwork in the 1938 edition of this novel paints Tom with several different stereotyped traits common in African Americans. Tom is drawn twice the size of Eva and her head is the size of his bicep. His head shape is more oval than hers, and his lips, nose, and cheekbones are heavily pronounced. With this, he is also drawn with his head up and eyes closed, in a peaceful and docile state listening to Eva.

The stereotyped depiction of Tom is reflective of several different myths about African Americans during the early 1900s, the first being that, “The image of Black people, specifically black males, was of a docile character. The images of buffoonery, blissful ignorance, and juvenile angst were seen as the primary traits of enslaved Blacks” (Smiley and Fakunle 352). This belief was brought about antebellum, the same time that the original edition of this book was published, and is illustrated in Tom by his submissive expression and body language. He appears to have no response to what Eva is saying and is sitting and listening peacefully in a manner that can only
be described as ‘blissfully ignorant’. However, this is not the only racist belief that the image of Tom communicates, as the way his body is drawn also echoes the harmful stereotype of the, “(Black) ‘brute’ that demonized Black males in the 19th and early 20th century” (352). This myth, “Was based on inaccurate anthropological and biological factors,” (353) and showed an idealized back body in a negative and threatening light that communicated they were beast-like and dangerous, which is shown in the image by the hyperbolized size and muscular tone of Tom. While these stereotypes were originated at different times, it is significant that they are both echoed in the image of Tom as they show the lasting cultural understanding of race and racial prejudice.

Finally, in the picture Tom’s head is shown to be more oval than Eva’s, coming to a point at the top which echoes yet another racial prejudice: the outdated pseudoscience of craniometry which was, “The notion that groups of human beings—especially blacks…should be seen as innately different and inferior,” (Leonard 688) due to the difference of their heritable traits. “Although skin and hair differences constituted the most obvious markers of racial distinctness... virtually all parties ultimately accorded skull characteristics the greatest significance…And, notoriously, it was through numerous cranial measurements that racial variations in head size and shape came to be correlated with a notion of ‘intelligence’” (Perrin and Anderson 91). Thus, the oblong shape of Tom’s head conveys and echoes a racial message about his inferior intellectual capacity, ‘civilizability’, and biological status that was created as a scientific justification for racism and white supremacy. Furthermore, in many ways Tom’s enhanced features makes him look like a monkey which continually enforces the racist idea that black people were below white people and they were animalistic. When assessing how Tom is portrayed compared to how
Eva is, this image can be seen as not just degrading, but racist as it glorifies the young white girl, and animalizes the black man.

The interaction of Tom and Eva with their juxtaposed features also contributes to the racist tones already present in their hyperbolized characters. The 1938 version shows that Eva is sitting on Tom’s lap, holding a book, with her finger pointed out creating the illusion that she is instructing Tom. From her poised body language, she seems to be doing this in a patronizing way. Tom is listening to her respectfully with his eyes closed and his hand on his knees. Because of the stylistic choice of the artist, this artwork does more than just show Tom and Eva in the courtyard playing. It presents the viewer a racist image that enforces harmful stereotypes of white privilege and black inferiority from the physical position of Eva sitting on Tom.

Tom’s character in the 1964 version does not work this way, however. While he is wearing a similar attire to 1938’s edition Tom (dark slacks, a clean blazer and a button-up shirt underneath), he is not drawn with similar characteristics. Tom is a proportional size to 6-year-old Eva, and has many conventional features of an ordinary man. Continually, he seems to be engaging with Eva in a conversation as she points something out to him, rather than her instructing him. They are sitting separately on the bench respectfully, and their similar body positions echo a tone of equality between the two. This has the effect of making a very different message for the reader, and Eva and Tom are seen as friends and on the same level rather than one above to the other, a message that the earlier 1938 edition depicted.

The different contexts surrounding the publishing of the two editions could provide evidence for why they communicate divergent messages even though they are about the same work of literature. Between 1938 and 1964 (when these illustrations were published with the
text) there were dramatic social changes taking place in the United States. While there had been pushes for racial equality since before the original publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852, a great deal of progress took place from 1950-1965 including desegregation laws and the black suffrage movement. Many figures and events contributed to this, including Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X, The Black Panthers, NAACP, peaceful protests, and various boycotts. All of these figures and events worked together contributing to a new, socially progressive mindset that was very different from that of the mindset during 1938.

Because of the different social environments in the United States, different mindsets were created from them about race. The drawings in the 1938 edition and the 1964 edition can be analyzed with respect to this. The 1964 edition is more racially sensitive, providing a more realistic and apt drawing of Tom and Eva. The image communicates a much more progressive and equal idea about race, that was common of the time, than the 1938 version. On the other hand, the hyperbolized artwork of the 1938 edition enforces old stereotypes about race that were present in the early 1900s, like the docile black slave, ’black-brute’, and craniometry, due to the fact that people had a less socially progressive mentality. When analyzing these pictures with respect to their historical context, the reader can understand how the differences in the artworks reflect the social state of the United States during their publication, and the mindset created from the social events that occurred.

In conclusion, the illustrations from the 1938 and 1964 editions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* include details in the characters of Tom and Eva, and their interaction to different effects. The 1938 illustration provides the reader with a racially-charged and hyperbolized depiction of Tom and Eva’s relationship that echos harmful racial stereotypes, and shows the privileged position of
Eva as a white female physically above Tom’s position of a black male. While, the 1964 version showed a more realistic artwork with much greater equality and friendship between the races that did not relay any harmful messages about race. Through understanding the social condition of the United States during their publications, these artworks can be identified as a representation of American’s mindsets about race in different time periods. Through obtaining and interrogating different primary sources, the history of the United States can be continuously investigated and understood to a different, more tangible effect. This process exemplifies the importance of interacting with different editions of texts, as our progress as a nation can be witnessed through them.