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The Cambridge **Introduction** to Harriet Beecher Stowe

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Preface

Harriet Beecher Stowe is a familiar name to students of literature and history. However, many of the details we "know" about her and about her most famous book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, are based more in myth than in her actual life. One of the goals of this book is to peel back the sometimes contradictory elements of that mythology. Another is to position her work within the context of her own day, while also acknowledging the major critical controversies that have swarmed around her since then.

Although Stowe was a major figure in American and world literary culture throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, she faded from view through much of the twentieth. Feminist scholarship re-ignited interest in Stowe in the 1970s, and research on her life and writing has expanded a good deal since then. Questions about the literary value of her publications and about her personal attitudes on race continue to puzzle general readers and academics, however. And these questions provide one major rationale for studying Stowe today.

Acquiring a clear sense of Stowe's life, her writing, and its place in literary history can be challenging, given the wide range of opinions about her. This book will serve as a basic introduction to such topics. The "Life" chapter offers a biographical overview. "Cultural Contexts" provides a survey of significant issues and trends shaping Stowe's career. The "Works" chapter explores her major publications. Because *Uncle Tom's Cabin* continues to claim the most intense critical attention, and because it was so significant a force in Stowe's own time, much of the "Works" chapter concentrates on that text and Stowe's related anti-slavery writing (*A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*; *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*; and *The Christian Slave*). Other writings are much more briefly introduced, including examples of her regionalist fiction, her travel writing, and her social satire. The overview for each of Stowe's major works includes a concise treatment of the plot, themes, and major characters, with some explanation of key topics recurring in criticism. The "Reception" chapter outlines ways that various groups of readers, influential critics, and other literary artists have responded to Stowe, particularly to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Learning about

the controversies surrounding *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – and their links to literary history – is crucial, since so much of what we see of her today is the product of many divergent responses to her first novel.

For an extensive biographical treatment and analysis of how Stowe's life was shaped by the culture of her lifetime, readers can consult Joan Hedrick's prize-winning 1994 biography, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. Those who would like to learn more about Stowe's individual publications can consult *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe* (ed. Cindy Weinstein) and the list of secondary criticism at the end of this volume.

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Special thanks to colleagues who read sections of the manuscript. Debra Rosenthal checked multiple chapters, sending thoughtful suggestions via email from England. LeeAnn Lands, Catherine Lewis, and Ann Pullen gave careful input on historical analysis. Anne Richards, Laura McGrath, and Katarina Gephardt provided timely readings of core chapters. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders and Mark Sanders gave encouraging and enlightening feedback on my discussion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the responses of various audiences, and the history of criticism.

Ray Ryan, Elizabeth Davey and Maartje Scheltens at Cambridge were supportive guides throughout the project's many stages.

Families of literary historians have to be patient when long-dead writers come to live with us, taking up physical space with books and papers, but also claiming time and energy. Harriet Beecher Stowe can be a particularly insistent presence. I am lucky to have a husband (John) and two daughters (Margaret and Patty) who have been kind enough to let her stay around for so long.

Abbreviations

The abbreviations below are used for frequently cited sources within both the text and endnotes.

Agnes	*Agnes of Sorrento*
Cambridge Companion to HBS	*The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe*, edited by Cindy Weinstein
Dred	*Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*
HBS	*Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*, by Joan D. Hedrick
Key	*A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*
Life	*Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Compiled from Her Letters and Journals*, by Charles Stowe
Life and Letters	*Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, edited by Annie Fields
PL	*Palmetto Leaves*
PW	*Pink and White Tyranny*
SM	*Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*
"UL"	"Uncle Lot"
UTC	*Uncle Tom's Cabin*

her twin daughters to study in Paris. In addition, European travel inspired Stowe with new topics for her writing, including a travel book (*Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*) and a novel set in Italy (*Agnes of Sorrento*).

Stowe's *Sunny Memories* emphasizes her enthusiasm for Europe, including an attraction to aristocracy at odds with her supposed dedication to American republican values. Still, her incorporation of Europe into her writing and her world view was guided by her New England family's background. Her pilgrimages to religious sites were complemented by visits to literary landmarks such as the home of Sir Walter Scott, a childhood favorite. Drawn to some elements of Italian culture, she sought ways to synthesize such features as veneration of the Virgin Mary with her Calvinist frame of experience. Similarly, her friendships with leading European ladies like the Duchess of Sutherland were cast not only as professional literary connections but also around values associated with female Christian virtue. Overall, as she did with other cross-cultural interactions in her life, Stowe negotiated her relationships with Europe and Europeans through the framework of her Beecher family ties.

Re-envisioning New England domesticity

Stowe's continued identification with New England as a homeplace and the professional benefits she gleaned from this affiliation are clear in the eagerness with which she returned there after each of her European sojourns. Though she often complained about the pressures of domestic management, she reveled in the ways that her writing income enabled an upgrade in the family's house when Calvin took a post at Andover Theological Seminary. In these efforts, she joined other well-to-do New England women of her generation by acquiring new household conveniences and displaying signs of her family's wealth.

Stowe capitalized on homemaking as a theme by producing magazine sketches and a book on household management, *House and Home Papers*. She became adept at getting double duty from her texts about domestic life. For instance, in 1865, she wrote a series of pieces for the *Atlantic Monthly* that were later anthologized into an expensive gift book (Hedrick, *HBS*, p. 318).

The ambivalence in Stowe's attitude toward New England housekeeping in these years can be traced in part to her family's becoming increasingly dependent on her writing for financial support. In 1863, Calvin Stowe retired from his position at Andover. Then Harriet faced even more pressure to write for immediate financial reward. Longer narratives claimed her interest intellectually, but short pieces could bring in cash more quickly. Sometimes, during this middle phase of her career, she yearned for the chance to focus on a carefully

sequenced novel. Instead, she often found herself negotiating with multiple editors, seeking to put off one who was still waiting for a major project, while enticing another to accept a briefer contribution that could pay some bills right away. The need for high volume, in turn, led Stowe to encourage her unmarried twin daughters, Hatty and Eliza, to take over more day-to-day household affairs. At the same time, she was managing the education of the younger children in her large brood and dealing with her husband's ambivalent attitude toward her continued literary success.

Given the complex feelings Stowe had about her own domestic role in the decades after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, we can see a tension between the writing in which she glorified New England home life – as in *The Minister's Wooing*, *The Pearl of Orr's Island*, and *Oldtown Folks* – and her distaste for daily running of her household. But she continued to seek an ideal model, both in her writing and in the creation of her family's own living arrangements.

In the 1860s, while the Civil War raged, Stowe supervised the building of Oakholm, a large, well-decorated house with features taken from the Italian architecture she had loved seeing in Europe. In Nook Farm, a stylish Hartford neighborhood where the Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) family and her half-sister Isabella Beecher Hooker's clan also lived, Stowe trumpeted her professional success through domestic design. She hired the same contractor who had built Isabella and John Hooker's showplace, and she supervised every element in the construction, including the digging of drains and the architectural refinements.

In this as in other domestic enterprises, Stowe struggled to embody traditional housewifery while also sustaining a busy writing career. The tension between these goals could sometimes work to her advantage, however. She often invoked her pressing domestic duties to put off editors, while she simultaneously used her writing responsibilities to escape housekeeping chores.

The lure of the south

In 1867, Stowe traveled for the first time to an area along the St Johns River, where she and Calvin would construct a second home. Like the "snow birds" of today, for years the Stowes made regular trips back and forth between the north and south, spending summers in Hartford and winters in Mandarin, Florida.

Ever the educator and reformer, Stowe had been drawn to the idea of a southern home partly by a wish to contribute to the Reconstruction-era education of freed slaves. As early as 1866, she had written her brother Charles: "My plan of going to Florida, as it lies in my mind, is not in any sense a worldly

enterprise . . . My heart is with that poor people whose course in words I have tried to plead, and who now, ignorant and docile, are just in that formative stage in which whoever seizes has them."[13] Reflecting both her commitment to blacks' post-war uplift and her continued sense of racial hierarchy, Stowe's comments foreshadowed a work to which she would give much energy – the development of a religious school for black and white children in the neighborhood where she bought a winter bungalow. In this sense, the Stowes' transplanting in Florida was similar to the Beechers' move to Cincinnati decades earlier – with both involving a cross-regional uplift mission.

Stowe was also genuinely charmed by Florida – particularly by its lush natural environment. Troublesome as the treks back and forth would be, challenging though the ongoing fund-raising for the school would become, the retreats to Florida provided a restorative combination of purposeful work and relative leisure, amid an environment of tropical beauty and domestic simplicity. From November through May over many years, Stowe and her husband really seemed to have found new peace far from New England.

Yet, there were many distractions and setbacks between Stowe's acquisition of her southern getaway and her final return to Hartford. Readers were horrified by her frank depiction of Lord Byron's purported incest in *Lady Byron Vindicated.* Not since the southern reviews of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had she met with such wrathful responses in print. When all of America became scandalized by charges that her brother Henry Ward had seduced the wife of a parishioner, Theodore Tilton, Stowe became caught up in that controversy as well. Perhaps most painfully, the death of her daughter Georgiana, named for the beloved New England friend of her youth, brought back memories of other tragedies in her children's lives, including Henry's accidental drowning and Fred's recurring bouts with alcoholism. Amid these challenges, Stowe found a continued sense of achievement in her writing. As with her earlier European-inspired texts, Stowe's Florida sketches brim with appreciation for their subject. Meanwhile, enchanted as she was with Mandarin, she also wrote a nostalgic narrative revisiting her own New England childhood in *Poganuc People.*

Final days in Hartford

Despite Stowe's enthusiasm for Florida, when her husband's health slipped markedly in the mid-1880s, she opted to nurse him in Hartford, near her family and friends. Later, in the years after Calvin's death in 1886, Stowe's children would follow suit, tending to their mother's long mental twilight in the comfort of their hometown. Born and bred in Connecticut, Stowe ended

her life there in 1896, the power of her intellect faded and the reservoir of her financial resources nearly exhausted. Stowe's reputation as an author was already waning too, as conceptions of aesthetic value had shifted dramatically over the course of the nineteenth century. It would remain for feminist critics of the next century to begin recovering her status in literary history and to draw new readers to her texts.

Chapter 2

Cultural contexts

Stowe's eighty-five years spanned most of the nineteenth century. So, an important step toward understanding her long career is to identify cultural trends during that era. Major factors shaping Stowe's writing included shifting conceptions of middle-class American womanhood; the growth of American literature; racial politics; Protestant religious influence on US society; and efforts to build a cross-regional and transatlantic social class committed to cultural leadership.

Middle-class womanhood

One important trend in nineteenth-century American society was the separation of men's and women's responsibilities in middle-class family life, supporting belief in domesticity as women's realm of work. Whereas, in the colonial era, husbands and wives had collaborated in a predominantly rural economy to provide subsistence for their families, nineteenth-century urbanization brought with it an increasing tendency for men to work outside the home and women to be in charge of the so-called "domestic sphere." In governing that sphere, cultural arbiters such as magazine editor Sarah Hale argued, women actually exercised enormous social influence by teaching children and guiding their husbands in moral directions. Women were supposed to be particularly adept at "moral suasion," an approach for encouraging enlightened behavior that was linked to females' heightened spiritual sense.[1]

The ideology of domesticity certainly constrained women's opportunities in some ways (for example, by limiting their access to careers). But this vision

of women's rightful leadership as home-based could also be empowering. Through their mandate to manage children's learning, for instance, middle-class women were molding what was often termed the "rising generation," thereby having substantial indirect influence on politics. Extending this role, women began to assert that they were the ones best suited to teach young children outside the home as well. Gradually, therefore, schoolteaching became a women's profession. In a related trend, women used the educational responsibilities assigned to them by the ideology of domesticity to obtain enhanced access to learning themselves. Whether as mothers training their sons or as schoolteachers serving the community, this argument went, women needed to be well educated themselves. Thus, the curriculum for US females gradually shifted from learning "accomplishments" needed to attract a mate to serious study in line with women's anticipated teaching duties.[2]

As dominant as the ideology of domesticity may appear to have been, it was certainly not universally available; nor was it appealing to all middle-class women. Working-class women could hardly enact a model that assumed they would spend their days at home. Indeed, the labor of servants and industrial workers (often immigrants) helped free up northern middle-class women from time-consuming chores such as food preparation, laundering, and clothes-making to devote more energy to learning, teaching, and genteel leisure. In the south, slave women carried out a similar role for mistresses, while also facing such horrific potential abuses as sexual assault by masters and the break-up of slave families. Furthermore, although the rhetoric associated with domesticity depicted the ideology as an ideal, some middle-class women actively resisted its limits – and increasingly so as the century progressed.

One watershed moment occurred in 1848. The meeting of women activists at Seneca Falls, New York, produced the Declaration of Sentiments, modeled on the Declaration of Independence to claim political rights for women. Led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, the American campaign for women's rights operated on multiple fronts: publishing, convenings of women activists, and lobbying Congress to enlist male supporters. Consistent with having acquired some leadership in education, women earned the right to participate on local school boards toward the end of the century, long before they could vote in national elections.

Besides suffrage, which was not achieved on a national level until 1920, other concerns of the nineteenth-century women's movement included securing various legal rights for women in abusive marriages (like the right to divorce, the right to child custody), gaining access to additional careers (such as medicine), and, for more radical leaders, developing strategies for limiting pregnancies. Meanwhile, for African American women like Josephine Ruffin,

Frances Harper, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, balancing a commitment to women's rights with devotion to racial uplift was challenging, especially given the racism evident among some white leaders of the women's suffrage campaign.

Although Stowe never became a radical activist in the nineteenth-century women's rights movement, she was highly engaged throughout her career by questions about women's place in American society. Interestingly, Stowe was reportedly frustrated by the constraints associated with her gender as she was growing up. When her brothers went on rough-and-tumble jaunts with her father, she felt left out. At one point, she is said to have put on a boyish black coat and cast aside her needle and thread, preferring to join in a project of gathering wood for the family hearth (Hedrick, *HBS*, 19). But this effort to take on a male role was short-lived for Harriet Beecher, who spent most of her life strategically applying the model of feminine domesticity rather than resisting it.

Stowe benefited personally from the enhanced access to learning gained by proponents of domesticity such as her sister Catharine and Sarah Hale. Stowe's teaching at the Hartford seminary, as well as her work at schools in Ohio and Florida, grew out of her own opportunities to study a curriculum that would have been inaccessible to many in her mother's generation. For most of her adult life, in fact, Stowe was operating some type of school – often managing home-based lessons for her own and neighbors' children. Stowe also made strategic use of domestic ideology's belief in moral suasion. For instance, several white middle-class mother figures in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, such as Mrs Bird and Rachel Halliday, exercise authority through sentimental techniques associated with that framework.

Even though Stowe's younger half-sister Isabella Beecher Hooker would become a vocal leader in the women's rights movement, the oldest Beecher sister, Catharine, was adamant in her opposition to women's suffrage. Harriet generally positioned herself somewhere in between Isabella and Catharine. Stowe was clearly uncomfortable with the most extreme leaders of the post-Civil War era, particularly the infamous Victoria Woodhull. Woodhull, the first woman to run for US president, faced several scandals about her personal life. Though Isabella was a staunch defender, Harriet created a wicked caricature of Woodhull in *My Wife and I*, where Audacia Dangyereyes's off-putting behaviors critique Woodhull and those of her ilk.

Still, Stowe herself could be roused to a more proactive position when unfair assaults on women's morality came into play. Her defense of Lady Byron (*Lady Byron Vindicated*) offered a gendered argument against the abuses her friend had suffered through Lord Byron's profligate behavior. Critics' furious attacks on her treatment of the Byron story may seem surprising, since exposure of

Lord Byron's sins was in line with the mandate for middle-class women to serve as guardians of morality. Unfortunately, in this case Stowe ran head on into a more powerful expectation: that a proper middle-class woman would remain aloof from the darkest elements of society, even if that meant covering them up. Earlier in her career, Stowe had come under similar fire for acknowledging in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that women slaves faced sexual abuse at the hands of their masters. In both of these cases, we can see her commitment to safeguarding women's personal morality, even though she was not ready to lead the charge for suffrage.

Writing American literature

In the decades after the Revolutionary War, American leaders began to distance US from British literature. This effort was part of a larger post-colonial movement to establish a distinctive American culture, independent of the mother country. Creating a national literature was, in some ways, a daunting enterprise. Economically, the lack of an international copyright through much of the nineteenth century meant that it was typically cheaper to buy pirated editions of English literature than to purchase an American-authored book. Culturally, questions were repeatedly raised about the new nation's ability to generate literary texts worthy of serious readership. Along those lines, in a famously dismissive editorial published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1820, Sidney Smith asked: "In the four corners of the globe, who reads an American book?"[3] In fact, for many decades in the US, British authors outsold American ones.

As the century unfolded, though, American writers claimed a growing readership. Authors like James Fenimore Cooper (in his Leatherstocking series), Lydia Maria Child (in *Hobomok* and stories for her juvenile magazine) and Catharine Maria Sedgwick (in books like *Hope Leslie*) often grounded their narratives in America's own past. Poets like William Cullen Bryant and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow took advantage of the grandeur of the American landscape as a literary subject. The literary era sometimes dubbed the American Renaissance emerged in the decades before the Civil War.

By mid-century, some early signs of the eventual divide between high art and literature with a broader appeal were becoming apparent. One dividing line developed around gender. In a trend that would reach fuller articulation at the turn into the twentieth century, serious-minded publications such as *Putnam's Magazine* (founded in 1853) called for a distinction between rigorously conceived American literature by artistically oriented male authors and sentimental "trash" being circulated by women writers. In one 1855 editorial,

for instance, *Putnam's* lambasted American women writers for their lack of "artistic impulse," their emphasis on "pecuniary reward" (i.e., making money from their writing), and their "stereotyped flux of sentiment." Associating female writing with excessive emotion, the editorial exalted an alternative, masculine model that "treat[ed] national subjects like a man" to create a "national and vigorous" literature.[4] Conflating sentimental writing with women's writing, discussions like these began erasing links between this body of literature – admittedly placing a high premium on appealing to readers' feelings – and a serious tradition of writing based on late eighteenth-century male English models of sensibility. Reducing the sentimental – and by extension women's writing – to tears-making, this stance would have lasting effects on American literature, promoting high/low divisions based on gender.

Part of the anxiety about women's writing evident in the *Putnam's* editorials can be traced to the frustration some literary men were feeling over women's rise in the publishing marketplace. Women readers were crucial to the development of a national literature, and women writers aimed to address the desires of those readers. Whether in the seduction-and-fall novels Cathy Davidson examines from the early national period or the mature-and-find-a-husband story Nina Baym identifies from women's fiction between 1820 and 1870, American women writers understood that having middle-class women situated within the domestic sphere guaranteed a large group of readers with an interest in female-oriented topics.[5] And these women readers and writers also helped ensure the popularity of sentimentalism as a literary mode.

Nathaniel Hawthorne grumbled about the "damned mob of scribbling women" dominating the marketplace, but the men turned things around toward the end of the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth when writer-critics like T. S. Eliot, William Dean Howells, and Henry James successfully narrowed conceptions of "the literary" in American culture. With an increasing stress on high-art craft, distanced point of view, and tightly structured designs that became crucial to modernist and New Critical visions of literary value, nineteenth-century women writers would fade from view, especially in academic circles.

Somewhat ironically, women like Fanny Fern (Sara Parton) had helped professionalize American authorship in the first place by demonstrating that writing could actually generate substantial income. Vital to that development was the rise of lending libraries and the periodical press, which provided affordable access to texts for more readers and, at the same time, a potentially profitable venue for writers. Nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines blended reportage with fictive texts in ways that have fallen out of favor today, as publications like the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and the *Atlantic* have become more the

exception than the rule in the US. However, throughout Stowe's career, periodicals for middle-class readers regularly mixed multiple genres – partly based on a much broader concept of what constituted "the literary" than we have now. Blending numerous modes of writing, these periodicals helped authors make a living from their work. For instance, serializing novels in magazines was a common practice, enabling writers to collect income from that first round of publication before earning more from a subsequent book version.

On a parallel track with periodicals for middle-class readers, cheap publications for the working classes came on the scene, especially in the urban northeast. Improving rates of literacy and increasing capacities for print production and circulation all combined to foster this trend. Story papers (inexpensive weeklies printing multiple serials in each issue), pamphlet novels (free-standing novelettes of around 50–100 pages), and, beginning around 1875, "cheap libraries" were all often lumped together under the term "dime novels."[6] Some of these publications recounted wild-west adventures, while others depicted dark, corrupt city life or told detective stories. Often aimed at urban workmen, dime novels would be carried off to battle by Civil War soldiers, but also tucked in the pockets of servant women. Some gentry-class cultural arbiters worried over the publications' potential to corrupt simple-minded lower-class readers, but others saw this expanding market as an opportunity for uplift – leading to publications with overtly reformative goals. In any case, this was a broad field for money-making by authors and publishers.

Stowe was actively involved in all the major trends driving the growth of the literary marketplace in her day. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, we can recognize how well her writing was positioned to succeed in American literary culture. For one thing, her narrative clearly announced itself as a national story: she addressed the most volatile political issue of the antebellum era, thereby drawing her countrymen to her text, while also encouraging European readers to see her novel as a window into a divided American society. For another, by basing her appeal to readers in techniques of sentimentalism, she unabashedly positioned her novel in a tradition of gendered literature. Frequently speaking directly to readers in a motherly voice, she signaled an expectation that women would be her main audience, whether on their own or as directors of a family's parlor reading. Writing initially for serialization in the *National Era* periodical, she showed little concern for honing narrative structure, concentrating instead on spinning out her episodes with a combination of melodrama and moral appeal consistent with that publishing venue and with readers' loose conceptions of literary genre in her day. Once *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in book form, it was re-packaged in formats for working-class readers, both at home and abroad. Indeed, one measure of the novel's success was its unusual ability to