29.12: Using Religion to Internalize Whiteness

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* depicts sympathetic African American slaves that are forced to internalize whiteness. In the first three chapters, we get a glimpse of how white slave owners accomplish this.

It is clear through Mr. Shelby’s and Mr. Haley’s conversation that black slaves are viewed as machines of labor and nothing else. The owners emotionally manipulate their slaves to condition them into subordination. Haley believes that children shouldn’t separate from their mothers when traded because the emotional trauma of separation decreases the mother’s value. “I’ve seen ’em as would pull a woman’s child out of her arms, and set him up to sell… makes ’em quite unfit for service sometimes” (15-16).

White owners also utilize Christianity as a tool to condition slaves. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a slave’s value is only worth how much Christ they have in them. The whites expect their slaves to internalize a false sense of hope. In the opening pages of the book, Shelby recounts his slave Tom and the trust he has for him. “Why, last fall, I let him go to Cincinnati alone… ‘Tom,’ I says to him, ‘I trust you, because I think you’re a Christian–I know you wouldn’t cheat.’ Tom comes back, sure enough; I knew he would” (12). White men weaponize religion for their own purposes. Ironically, the slave George denounces the white man’s religion, but appears more Christ-like than other characters because he sacrifices himself for the betterment of his wife; George rejects life to save those around him that suffer, and thus he embraces good over evil. George’s heathenism empowers him to make choices outside of a religious paradigm.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* deliberately portrays white slave owners as heinous and conceited. This makes the reader sympathize with the slaves; we easily personalize and humanize them. Compared to “Benito Cereno” and *The Heroic Slave*, Stowe uses Christianity as a plot device to enhance the struggles of slave life. It’s hard to combat a power that you know nothing about and have no means to learn more of. Christianity is Stowe’s means of portraying white totalitarianism.