29.11: “Hot People Are White-Looking and Good, Ugly People Are Evil”

Remember when you’d watch cartoons as a little kid and you’d always be able to tell who the bad guy was because they were painstakingly ugly? Prime example: In Aladdin, our handsome protagonist is a strapping tall glass of water whereas his malicious rival looks like an ironed-out malnourished piece of leather. This unfortunate narrative we get fed as children has more adverse effects then simply implying that you can distinguish the nature of someone’s character by giving them a visual once-over. When race gets tied into the mix, what can happen is that good characters (of a different race) usually have a) lighter skin and b) whiter features. Just take a look at Aladdin vs Jafar… You tell me which one has more Middle Eastern physical features and which one looks like a white boy from Greenwich, Connecticut who just got a tan from an afternoon of sailing.
How does this apply to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*? Not only are the bad characters described as ugly—shout out to Haley who was described as “a short, thick-set man, with coarse, commonplace features”—but the black people in this story (who Stowe wants us to sympathize with and see as the good characters) are hot and white looking.

Let’s look at Harry first. He’s described as “remarkably beautiful and engaging. His black hair, fine as floss silk, hung in glossy curls about his round, dimpled face, while a pair of large dark eyes, full of fire and softness, looked out from beneath the rich, long lashes, as he peered curiously into the apartment.” His mother is treated with the same type of description. Stowe writes that she has “rich, full, dark eye[s], with long lashes; the same ripples of silky black hair. The brown of her complexion gave way on the cheek to a perceptible flush, which deepened as she saw the gaze of the strange man fixed upon her in bold and undisguised admiration. Her dress was of the neatest possible fit, and set off to advantage her finely moulded shape.”

First of all, I’d like to point out that most black hair isn’t silky. Most black women you see on TV are wearing wigs if their hair looks soft and smooth. Yes, Beyonce is wearing a wig. Fine hair is a white feature, and it is culturally still more accepted as beautiful hair than the coarse curls of black women. Which is just one of the white features that is assigned to Eliza and Harry. Later on, the mother-son pairing is also said to be “so white as not to be known as of colored lineage, without a critical survey, and her child was white also, it was much easier for her to pass on unsuspected.”

So are our good characters hot? Check. Do they have white features? Check. The problem with this is that not all black people look white and not every single one of them is heart wrenchingly beautiful. Most people aren’t. To focus so hard on the beauty of the main black characters wouldn’t be as bad if they didn’t look so white. This is communicating a message that the more white a black person is, the more like white people they are. That’s been the point of both this story and *The Heroic Slave*. Look at how similar to white people these slaves are! They’re good Christians! They speak perfect English! I think that’s why people have issues with Babo from *Benito Cereno*. He’s not an acclimated slave. He’s pissed. Frankly, all slaves have the right to be pissed! They shouldn’t be expected to morph into a culture that they were forcibly placed into and only be granted the approval stamp of “human being” once they do it.