

News of Her Own: Harriett Beecher Stowe's Investigative Fiction

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When the Fugitive Slave Law was passed in September 1850, it made news—a lot of news. With predictably diverse opinions, newspapers across the country reacted to both the new law and its aftermath. The *Constitution* in Middletown, Connecticut, called on readers to support the rule of law, while the *New Hampshire Sentinel*, *Farmer's Cabinet*, and *New York Independent* strongly opposed it, using words such as "obnoxious", "odious", and "iniquitous". Reporting on the transfer of captured fugitive Henry Long's case to a district court, the *New York Evangelist* encouraged the "friends of freedom" to "contribute the means of carrying the case up to the Supreme Court, in case of Long's conviction."¹

One newspaper reader, however, was not content to let the press wage war on the Fugitive Slave Law or on slavery in general. "You don't know how my heart burns within me at the blindness and obtuseness of good people on so very simple a point of morality as this", Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote in a letter to her brother Henry Ward Beecher in February 1851. She continued,

Must we forever keep calm and smile and smile when every sentiment of manliness and humanity is kicked and rolled in the dust and lies trampled and bleeding and make it a moment to be exceedingly cool! I feel as if my heart would burn itself out in grief and shame that such things are. I wish I had your chance, but next best to that it is to have you have it, so fire away, give them no rest day or night.²

Stowe, of course, would get her chance. A little more than four months after she wrote this letter, the first installment of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared in the *National Era*. When it came out in book form the following year, it quickly became the greatest literary sensation of the century, selling three hundred thousand copies inside of a year³ and leaving contemporaries and modern scholars ranging from Charles Dudley Warner to Ann Douglas to

¹"The True Principle", *Middletown (Conn.) Constitution*, November 6, 1850, p. 2; untitled article, *New Hampshire Sentinel*, October 10, 1850, p. 2; "The Fugitive Slave Law", *Amherst (N.H.) Farmer's Cabinet*, October 10, 1850, p. 2; "The Slave-Law, and the Union", *New York Independent*, January 16, 1851, p. 10; "The Case of Long", *New York Evangelist*, January 9, 1851, p. 6.

² Harriet Beecher Stowe to Henry Ward Beecher, February 1, 1851, in *The Oxford Harriet Beecher Stowe Reader*, ed. Joan D. Hedrick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). pp. 63-64. Quotations from this source preserve Stowe's original spelling and punctuation.

³ James M. McPherson, introduction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. xi.

remark on its extraordinary impact on the American reading public.⁴ The most famous of these commentators, Abraham Lincoln, supposedly said to Stowe, upon meeting her in the White House in 1862, “So you’re the little lady who started this great war.”

A number of journalists—notably William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Horace Greely—might have made similar claims for their own roles in building consensus for a war fought largely over the institution of slavery. Journalism historian Rodger Streitmatter has argued that “abolitionist press—black as well as white—succeeded in articulating and broadcasting throughout the nation the moral indictment of slavery that precipitated the Civil War.”⁵ These journalists have much in common with authors such as Stowe and Henry David Thoreau, who were also waging war on slavery through the medium of the printed work. Indeed, reduced to their essences, journalism and literature are essentially the same endeavor: each attempts to capture some aspect of reality, whether it be a current event or some deeper truth, and convey it, through language, to an audience. Stowe's experience, however, illustrates a wider phenomenon that was occurring in American letters in the antebellum era. Journalism, thanks largely to the success of the penny press and to improvements in printing technology, was becoming one of the most important institutions in American life. Meanwhile, literature, as F. O. Matthiessen famously noted, was undergoing a renaissance of its own.⁶ Once part of what was an almost monolithic world of letters—as seen in the experiences of journalist-authors Benjamin Franklin, Philip Freneau, and William Cullen Bryant—both American journalism and American literature were growing, but they were growing apart.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe issues a subtle but clear critique of journalism, implicating not only its producers but also its readers: passive men who, like Senator Bird and Augustine St. Clare, treat their newspaper not as an entry into the world but as a refuge from it. At the same time, she substitutes her own form of what we might call “investigative fiction”, a genre also seen in later works such as Rebecca Harding Davis' short story “Life in the Iron-Mills” and Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*. Using the tools of literature—fictional characters and incidents, dialogue, imagery, and other devices—Stowe replaces the often shallow treatment of slavery in contemporary newspapers with a broader, deeper exposé of an institution that destroyed both individuals and families. In rejecting journalism as an imperfect—or worse—medium for portraying and changing reality, Stowe joined a long line of other nineteenth-century authors in the movement toward reporting a kind of “news of their own”.

Stowe knew journalism as both an insider and an outsider. Although she was never immersed in the field in the way that Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, and other contemporaries were, and

⁴ Charles Dudley Warner, “The Story of Uncle Tom's Cabin”, in *Critical Essays on Harriett Beecher Stowe*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980), pp. 60-72; Ann Douglas, introduction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriett Beecher Stowe (New York: Penguin, 1981), p. 13.

⁵Rodger Streitmatter, *Mightier than the Sword: How the News Media Have Shaped American History* (New York: Westview, 1997), p. 36.

⁶F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).

although she apparently did not share Nathaniel Hawthorne's obsession with reading newspapers, she was both a producer and a consumer of journalism.⁷ When her brother Henry Ward Beecher took over as temporary editor of the *Cincinnati Journal and Western Luminary* in 1836, she helped him fill his columns. In a letter to her husband from this time, she wrote, "Yesterday evening I spent scribbling for Henry's newspaper in this wise; 'Birney's printing-press has been mobbed, and many of the respectable citizens are moving in the line of their prejudices,'" She noted that their "family newspaper" brought them "not a little diversion". Between March 1833 and January 1851, furthermore, she placed a number of items in the *Western Monthly Magazine*, the *New York Evangelist*, and the *National Era*.⁸ In a letter to her husband from Putnam, Ohio, where she had gone to see her brother William in 1837, she wrote, "Today I read in Mr. Birney's *Philanthropist*. Abolitionism being the fashion here, it is natural to look at its papers."⁹ In fact, between the date of this letter and the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe probably read a number of publications, including the *Western Monthly Magazine* and her brother Henry's *New York Independent*, to which she subscribed.¹⁰

In her biography, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*, Joan D. Hedrick has suggested that what Stowe saw in the American press left her feeling dissatisfied, even livid. Hedrick explains, "The mealy-mouthed postures of editorialists and clergymen who hemmed and hawed and attempted 'to hush up and salve over such an outrage on common humanity' infuriated her."¹¹ In the letters in which she leveled her criticisms, she usually implicated complacent Christians in general without singling out journalists. For example, she complained to Henry in early 1851,

Is it possible that Henry Long is hopelessly sold and that in all this nation of freemen there is not one deliverer brave enough and strong enough to recover him ... and are there Christians that can find nothing better to do than cry peace when such things are done. How I detest that cool way of lumping together all the woes and crimes, the heart-breaks, the bitter untold agonies of thousand poor bleeding helpless hearts, many creatures with the bland expression it's very sad to be sure—very dreadful—but we musn't allow our feelings to run away with us, we must consider &c., &c., &c.¹²

It may be that Stowe, writing to her brother, was reluctant to attack journalists directly, since he was one of them. In another part of this letter, however, she may be singling out one writer from the *New York Observer*. "Today I read over Storrs article in answer to the N York observer," she explains.

⁷David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 255. Reynolds calls Hawthorne "a lifelong addict of popular newspapers" (p. 171) and explains: "His son Julian recalled that he read poetry and romances 'for pleasure and relaxation ... but if study were his object, he would resort to the newspapers and magazines'" (pp. 254-55).

⁸E. Bruce Kirkham, *The Building of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), pp. 43, 46-47, 49, 63-64.

⁹Quoted in Forrest Wilson, *Crusader in Crinoline: The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1941), p. 196.

¹⁰Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 204-5; Kirkham, *Building of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"*, p. 43; Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe Reader*, p. 65.

¹¹ Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*, p. 202.

¹² Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe Reader*, p. 64.

"You don't know how my heart burns within me at the blindness and obtuseness of good people on so very simple a point of morality as this."¹³ Whether her target was the press or its readers, Stowe was clearly exasperated with what she regarded as some Christians' complacency, which left her feeling, as she stated to her sister Catharine Beecher, "almost choked sometimes with pent up wrath that does no good."¹⁴ Hedrick suggests that Stowe felt stifled because of limitations on women at the time that prevented them from acting in the public spheres of academia, church, and politics.¹⁵ Ultimately, of course she found her voice. As Hedrick records, Isabella Beecher wrote to Stowe, saying, "Now, Hattie, if I could use a pen as you can, I would write something that would make this whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is." Stowe responded by standing and announcing, "I will write something. I will if I live." By the middle of March, she had begun writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.¹⁶

The novel that emerged out of Stowe's exasperation with the current responses to slavery reveals even more about her attitude toward journalism than her letters do. Far more nuanced than Poe's sarcastic digs in "The Mystery of Marie Roget" or Thoreau's explicit attacks on newspapers, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* nevertheless participates in the widespread denunciation of journalism coming from the pens of American authors in the nineteenth century.¹⁷ In her critique, Stowe indicts both the impotence of newspapers and the complacency of their mostly male readers, neither of which is taking abolition seriously enough. Indeed, instead of doing the reform work that she expected of journalism, newspapers in her novel provide a form of escape or, worse, act as an agent abetting slavery.

A brief examination of literary and journalistic theories may help illuminate the nature of Stowe's argument with the press. As James Baldwin famously noted, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* belongs to the genre of the protest novel.¹⁸ More recently, George Goodin has included it in a long tradition of "victim-of-society novels". Whatever the label, Stowe's work is an obvious attempt to expose—and to right—a wrong. There is, of course, nothing unique in such an attempt. As Goodin notes, examples of novels of social protest go back at least to the late eighteenth century.¹⁹ What makes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and similar works notable is the explicit critique of a competing genre. Journalism has long played the role of social critic and reformer; indeed,

¹³Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁵Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*, p. 202.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 207-8.

¹⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Mystery of Marie Roget", in *Poetry and Tales* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984); Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley, *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 93-95; Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts", in *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick, *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 99-102. Also see Thomas Leonard, *News for All: America's Coming-of-Age with the Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 93-100. Poe, writing a fictional parallel to the story of the murder of Mary Rogers, criticized journalists for a number of shortcomings, including bias and ignorance. As Leonard has shown, Thoreau, despite his excoriating attacks on journalism, read newspapers from time to time, especially after John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. Indeed, in *Walden*, he describes his habit of reading the papers in which his dinner was wrapped (p. 42).

¹⁸ James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel", in Ammons, *Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe*, pp. 92-97.

¹⁹ George Goodin, *The Poetics of Protest: Literary Form and Political Implication in the Victim-of-Society Novel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), pp. 1-2.

righting wrongs—or at least calling attention to them—is an integral part of the journalistic endeavor. Although Theodore Peterson has noted that the "social responsibility theory of the press" is largely a product of the twentieth century, the belief that journalism could play a role in reforming society goes back at least to philosopher James Mill, who, as J. Herbert Altschull has noted, "perceived the press as the *main* instrument to force the government into making social change."²⁰ Furthermore, a look at journalism as it was practiced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveals that newspapers frequently took up causes. By the time Stowe was reading newspapers in the 1830s and 1840s, journalists ranging from James Franklin to William Lloyd Garrison had helped establish exposure and reform as major goals of the journalistic endeavor. In the eyes of authors such as Stowe, however, journalists were not fulfilling the promise of their profession. In what amounted to a decades-long, detailed, and penetrating critique of their counterpart in the world of letters, Poe, Thoreau, Davis, William Dean Howells, Henry James, Mark Twain, and other American authors picked apart the practice, purpose, and conventions of journalism. Poe, for instance, took issue with the news criteria of timeliness and novelty, and Howells and James bemoaned the tendency of newspapers to appeal to readers' base interests. Ultimately, these authors argued that journalism did not and could not capture the truth of the human experience.²¹

Stowe's frustration with the impotence of journalism on the slavery question can be seen in the role that newspapers play in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Not once does a character find any inspiration in a newspaper, even though Senator Bird, Augustine St. Clare, and, in a flashback, St. Clare's father continually read them. Although she never divulges exactly what Bird and the St. Clares are reading in their papers, other parts of the novel point to particular journalistic failings. The press, Stowe suggests, is insensitive to the situation of American slavery and is not recognizing its gravity:

When despairing Hungarian fugitives make their way, against all the search-warrants and authorities of their lawful government, to America, press and political cabinet ring with applause and welcome. When despairing African fugitives do the same thing, —it is—what is it?²²

As Stowe sees it, when the press does cover fugitive slaves, it reveals only a small part of the story; indeed, she attributes Senator Bird's insensitivity to the plight of fugitive slaves at least partly to the failure of the press to cover the whole story (see p. 125). Journalism's sins, in Stowe's eyes, were not entirely those of omission. Newspapers were also supporting slavery in a

²⁰Theodore Peterson, "The Social Responsibility Theory of the Press", in *Four Theories of the Press: The Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Soviet Communist Concepts of What the Press Should Be and Do* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), pp. 73-103; J. Herbert Altschull, *From Milton to McLuhan: The Ideas behind American Journalism* (New York: Longman, 1990), p. 157.

²¹This critique is too extensive to discuss here. The numerous works in which nineteenth-century American authors lodged explicit and implicit complaints against journalism include Poe's "The Mystery of Marie Roget", Thoreau's *Walden*, Davis' "Life in the Iron-Mills", William Dean Howells' *A Modern Instance*, Henry James' *The Bostonians* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, and Mark Twain's "The Wild Man Interviewed".

²²Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. Mary R. Reichardt (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009), p. 259. Subsequent quotations from this edition will be cited in the text.

variety of ways. In addition to publishing the kinds of advertisements that Senator Bird reads, which help slave owners to recover fugitive slaves, papers often announced impending slave auctions like the ad that Mr. Haley sees (see p. 161). Some newspapers, furthermore, openly promoted the cause of slavery, as St. Clare notes when he responds to his wife, who has mentioned a church sermon defending slavery, "I can learn what does me as much good as that from the Picayune, any time, and smoke a cigar besides; which I can't do, you know, in a church" (see p. 241).

In suggesting that the press was not adequately addressing the slavery question, Stowe was only partially correct. In fact, a number of newspapers—including abolitionist papers such as Garrison's *Liberator* and Douglass' *North Star*, and mainstream papers such as Greeley's *New York Tribune*—regularly reported on issues surrounding slavery. In her brother Henry's *Independent*, furthermore, Stowe could have found a number of such articles. For example, "A Voice from New England", which appeared in the January 2, 1851, issue, promises opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law:

We shall lift no hand of violence against the sovereign law of the land. Nor *shall we lift a hand against him who flees from unrighteous bondage*. Nor shall we shut our mouths and promise to be dumb henceforth in regard to the iniquity of the system of Slavery. We shall bear the penalty which the law may inflict upon us. We shall dare to speak the truth, however unpalatable it may be.

The front page of the same issue features a lengthy disquisition, "The Civil Law: Man's Obligation to Obey It", in which the author, quoting Scripture, argues that Christians must obey God's law instead of human law, including the Fugitive Slave Law. Such responses to slavery, however, could hardly have satisfied Stowe, for her feelings on the subject went well beyond logical analysis. Hedrick argues that "the namby-pamby postures of 'good people'—so disproportionately reasonable and scripture-quoting and full of lengthy, dull, and tedious explanations that lost their audience and left them wondering what all the fuss was about—made Harriet feel as though she would explode."²³ Stowe's exasperation was not unwarranted. Even in a relatively passionate article appearing in Greeley's *Tribune*, known for its antislavery position, a curiously complacent undertone is evident. Noting that some Americans would like to see the slave trade abolished in Baltimore, as it had been in the District of Columbia, the correspondent goes on to editorialize on the horrors of slavery: "If there is any sight more harrowing to the feelings of a *man* than another, that sight is a gang of Slaves, chained together, being marched to a vessel to be transported to the Southern States. I have seen those who have been torn from parents and friends, thus marched off to a separation for life, from all that they held dear, or could desire to live for." The reporter concludes these remarks, however, in a noncommittal manner: "But enough, the day is not so very far distant when this disgrace will be seen, or heard no more, in Maryland."²⁴

²³ Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*, p. 205.

²⁴ "The Slave Bills—The Causeway—Political War—Fall Trade, &c.", *New York Tribune*, September 18, 1850, p. 6.

Such insufficient coverage must have appalled Stowe. With or without the slave trade in Maryland, she was aware that Southern slavery continued to crush men, women, and children, and Northerners were bound by the Fugitive Slave Law to return escapees to its horrors.

In Stowe's eyes, a problem greater than newspapers' inept coverage of slavery may have been the complacency of newspaper readers. For some, Stowe suggests, journalism was merely a form of refuge from uncomfortable realities. That newspapers could serve as a form of escape might have come as a surprise to Poe, whose characters are more likely to escape *from* them into realms of fancy or contemplation.²⁵ For Stowe, however, newspapers were failing readers precisely because they were not presenting enough of reality. As such, they could serve as an acceptable form of retreat for men in particular, especially when they were confronted by their wives with prickly questions about the "peculiar institution".

Like his father, who "betook himself to a nap, or the newspaper" after dismissing his wife's "pathetic appeals" (see p. 297), Augustine St. Clare regularly retreats into his newspaper when challenged. After watching his wife, daughter, and cousin leave for church, he acknowledges his daughter Evangeline's role in bringing him to God. Nevertheless, "he smoked a cigar, and read the Picayune, and forgot his little gospel" (see p. 240). Later, when Ophelia demands some official word that she has control of Topsy, he promises to provide it but instead "sat down, and unfolded a newspaper to read" (see p. 400). In the most telling of these episodes, two forms of news compete for St. Clare's attention when Ophelia tells her cousin, who has been reclining with his paper, that Prue has been whipped to death. Although he hears Ophelia "going on, with great strength of detail, into the story, and enlarging on its most shocking particulars" (see p. 288), St. Clare is nonplussed, responding only that he "thought it would come to that, some time". When Ophelia urges him to action, he merely concludes, "The best we can do is to shut our eyes and ears, and let it alone" (see p. 289). He returns to his newspaper, preferring the apparently unchallenging "news" he finds there over the shocking dose of reality that his cousin has just delivered to him.

Although St. Clare notes that newspapers occasionally report on the "horrid cruelties and outrages" of slavery (see p. 322), it is not surprising, of course, that antebellum Southern journalists did not tell the whole story. In her scenes featuring Senator Bird, however, Stowe suggests that the same could be said of Northern newspapers. After Mrs. Bird challenges his support of the fugitive slave legislation, the Ohio senator experiences some "vexation"; nevertheless, "seating himself in the arm-chair," he "began to read the papers" (see p. 115). As in the case of St. Clare's retreats, we never learn exactly what Bird finds in his journalistic refuge on this occasion. The subject of the articles or advertisements, it seems, is not significant, but what is clear is that Senator Bird's newspaper reading, like that of Clare, provides him with an opportunity for escape and relaxation.

²⁵See "The Mystery of Marie Roget", in which the narrator "Strange as it may appear, the third week from the discovery of the body had passed, and passed without any light being thrown upon the subject, before even a rumor of the events which had so agitated the public mind, reached the ears of Dupin and myself. Engaged in researches which had absorbed our whole attention, it had been nearly a month since either of us had gone abroad, or received a visiter, or more than glanced at the leading political articles in one of the daily papers" (*Poetry and Tales*, p. 510). See also "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall", in which the protagonist disparages the public's fascination with current events and finds escape in a balloon (*Poetry and Tales*, pp. 951-1001).

Stowe's depiction of men reading their newspapers for relaxation was not unique at the time. Indeed, as Thomas Leonard has shown, contemporary artistic renderings of newspaper readers presented similar images. For instance, in Nicolina Calyo's 1840 painting *Reading Room, Astor House*; an 1860 sketch by Lefevre J. Cranstone; and an 1857 *Harper's Weekly* illustration entitled "How We Sit in Our Hotel Rooms", men read newspapers while reclining in chairs and resting their feet on tables. Other paintings, Leonard notes, show newspapers serving as barriers between men and family members:

Eastman Johnson gave patriarchs newspapers to hold like shields as they sat in family portraits. These are formidable readers of the parlor. In *The Brown Family* (1869) the gentleman near the hearth is planted like an oak and only tips his paper slightly to acknowledge the child who has reached out to interrupt reading. The father in *The Hatch Family* (1871) sinks behind his newspaper and is oblivious to his fourteen relatives in the drawing room. Evidently the men who commissioned these paintings were pleased to be walled off by the news.²⁶

Leonard's characterization of men "walled off by the news" perfectly captures the attitudes of Augustine St. Clare and Senator Bird, both of whom find refuge in their newspapers from both family members and the day's most pressing issues.

Reality, however, can sometimes penetrate a man's wall. Senator Bird puts down his paper when his wife calls him to the kitchen, where he sees Eliza and her son Harry. While the previous scene is then reenacted, this time the arrival of the two escaped slaves has abruptly introduced a human element into the couple's debate. After Eliza and Harry go to sleep, Bird again turns to his paper, but, unlike the mother and child, he now finds no repose:

Mr. and Mrs. Bird had gone back to the parlor, where, strange as it may appear, no reference was made, on either side, to the preceding conversation; but Mrs. Bird busied herself with her knitting-work, and Mr. Bird pretended to be reading the paper.

"I wonder who and what she is!" said Mr. Bird, at last, as he laid it down.

"When she wakes up and feels a little rested, we will see," said Mrs. Bird.

"I say, wife!" said Mr. Bird, after musing in silence over his newspaper.

"Well, dear!"

"She couldn't wear one of your gowns, could she, by any letting down, or such matter? She seems to be rather larger than you are." (see p. 117)

As if roused from his sleep by an encounter with slavery in all its ugly reality, Senator Bird now only "pretends" to peruse his paper. Ultimately, he contradicts his own position on fugitive slaves and decides to help Eliza and Harry continue their journey. The confrontation with the reality of slavery has overcome the incomplete version of the truth he had found in newspapers, as Stowe explains:

²⁶Leonard, *News for All*, pp. 10-11, 22.

[H]is idea of a fugitive was only an idea of the letters that spell the word, —or, at the most, the image of a little newspaper picture of a man with a stick and bundle, with "Ran away from the subscriber" under it. The magic of the real presence of distress, —the imploring human eye, the frail, trembling human hand, the despairing appeal of helpless agony, —these he had never tried. (see p. 125)

Unlike St. Clare, Senator Bird eventually takes action, not because of anything he has seen in the shallow, apparently soporific, newspapers he reads, but because of the "news" that comes right into his kitchen.

As a number of scholars have suggested, Stowe's rhetorical arguments against slavery may be viewed on several levels. S. Bradley Shaw has focused on her use of "domestic rhetoric"; Mason I. Lowance has shown how Stowe borrowed from biblical rhetoric to set up a typological relationship between Eva and Uncle Tom; and Catharine E. O'Connell has made a compelling case for Stowe's rejection of religious and republican rhetoric in favor of sentimental rhetoric.²⁷ One might go further and say that Stowe also rejected the rhetoric of journalism—both the logical, sermonical approach often seen in religious publications and the sometimes shallow, factual treatment of slavery found in mainstream newspapers—and made her own case against slavery in the form of investigative fiction. By Stowe's time, journalists had long been using the power of words to expose wrongs in both government and society, as James L. Aucoin notes in *The Evolution of American Investigative Journalism*. Aucoin points to the work done by James Franklin and the patriot press in the eighteenth century, the partisan papers of the early republic, and the sensationalistic dailies of James Gordon Bennett and Benjamin Day in the age of the penny press. Abolitionists too were among the reformers who, Aucoin explains, used journalism to fight their battles: "Even more than the penny papers, reform publications adopted the exposé as an instrument for promoting social change, thereby extending the reach of exposure journalism to incorporate the strategy of outraging the public so it will demand improvements."²⁸

Not satisfied with these endeavors, Stowe, however, turned to fiction as a means of effecting change. In "The Freeman's Dream: A Parable", which appeared in the *National Era* in August 1850, she first used fiction to fight the fugitive slave legislation, presenting readers with the story of a man who fails to help runaway slaves and then encounters an angry God.²⁹ In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she again turned to literature to make an impact on readers.

In the novel's preface, Stowe makes a case for the power of fiction to bring about reform: "The poet, the painter, and the artist, now seek out and embellish the common and gentler humanities of life, and, under the allurements of fiction, breathe a humanizing and subduing influence, favorable to the development of the great principles of Christian brotherhood" (see p. 3). Lest anyone think that fiction, by its very nature, cannot tell the truth, Stowe explains that her

²⁷S. Bradley Shaw, "The Pliable Rhetoric of Domesticity", in *The Stowe Debate; Rhetorical Strategies in "Uncle Tom's Cabin"*, ed. Mason I. Lowance Jr., Ellen E. Westbrook, and R. C. De Prosopio (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), pp. 73-98; Mason I. Lowance, "Biblical Typology and the Allegorical Mode: The Prophetic Strain", in Lowance et al, *Stowe Debate*, pp. 159-84; Catharine E. O'Connell, "'The Magic of the Real Presence of Distress': Sentimentality and Competing Rhetorics of Authority", in Lowance et al., *Stowe Debate*, pp.13-36.

²⁸James I. Aucoin, *The Evolution of American Investigative Journalism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), pp. 21-25.

²⁹Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe Reader*, pp. 57-58.

story has roots in reality. "In the northern states," she writes, "these representations may, perhaps, be thought caricatures; in the southern states are witnesses who know their fidelity. What personal knowledge the author has had, of the truth of incidents such as here are related, will appear in its time" (see p. 4). Later in the novel, she defends her portrayal of one of its central characters with a similar argument: "Eliza, such as we have described her, is not a fancy sketch, but taken from remembrance, as we saw her, years ago, in Kentucky" (see p. 26). Eventually, Stowe would publish an entire book, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, furthering the case for the "fidelity" of her fiction. In both books, she argues that her investigative fiction—like good investigative journalism—is grounded in reality.

Although the phrase "investigative fiction" does not appear in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or in similar works from the era, the term conveniently captures a phenomenon that developed in the nineteenth century as Stowe and others reacted to what they regarded as the failings of journalism. Like Stowe, both Poe and Davis—in "The Mystery of Marie Roget" and "Life in the Iron-Mills" respectively—issued critiques of contemporary journalism, explicitly or implicitly arguing that journalists were missing or ignoring important truths. Poe's Dupin, for instance, accuses these journalists of ignorance, faulty reasoning, bias, and even what modern journalists would call "pack journalism", the tendency to follow others' leads in covering a story. In a much subtler critique, Davis suggests that journalists, perhaps because of a bias toward industry, ignore the working class and become interested in this hidden stratum of humanity only when a sensational story emerges from it. Both authors substitute their fictional versions of events for the news coverage, using literary approaches that shed light on misunderstood or hidden realities. Both, for example, explore character motivation in their attempts to capture the truth of the situations they cover. Because these writers cover the same "news" that reporters were covering—or were supposed to be covering—their alternative form of reporting might be said to belong to the parallel genre of investigative fiction.³⁰

Stowe's method in reporting her news is exactly what one would expect of a fiction writer. Using dialogue, imagery, and description, she fleshes out her characters, allowing readers to see them as human beings deserving of sympathy. Where readers of newspapers might see only "a man with a stick and bundle", readers of Stowe's novel see a black slave with a name, George Harris, who as a child had no family and knew "nothing but whipping, scolding, starving", and who as an adult knows no country (see p. 154). They see a slave mother who is willing to brave the woods and an ice-filled Ohio River to avoid being separated from her son; a slave girl whose sensibilities are so warped by constant brutality that she asks to be whipped; and a host of other characters and scenes that capture the truths of slavery in its hideous detail. As Stowe puts it in her preface, "The object of these sketches is to awaken sympathy and feeling for the African race, as they exist among us; to show their wrongs and sorrows, under a system so necessarily cruel and unjust as to defeat and do away the good effects of all that can be attempted for them, by their best friends, under it" (see p. 4). Several times Stowe presents scenes in which characters arrive at epiphanies only after they are confronted with real people and situations: as already

³⁰Poe, "Mystery of Marie Roget", in *Poetry and Tales*, pp. 526, 541, 527, 530, 523; Rebecca Harding Davis, "Life in the Iron-Mills", in *A Rebecca Harding Davis Reader*, ed. Jean Pfaelzer (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), pp. 12-13, 25-26, 32.

noted, Senator Bird changes his mind about helping runaway slaves after he meets Eliza and Harry, and, similarly, Ophelia's encounters with Rosa help the former understand the reality of "the universal custom to send women and young girls to whipping-houses, to the hands of the lowest of men ... there to be subjected to brutal exposure and shameful correction. She had *known* it before; but hitherto she had never realized it, till she saw the slender form of Rosa almost convulsed with distress" (see p. 415). Through fiction, Stowe is able to provide rounded, more human portraits even of Southern slave owners, capturing, for example, the complex motivation that drives St. Clare's actions—or more precisely, his lack of action.

In Stowe's eyes, however, the most important news of the novel comes not through newspapers or fictional portraits but through the Bible, in itself a form of literature. Stowe suggests this emphasis when she describes Eva's response to the Scriptures:

The parts that pleased her most were the Revelations and the Prophecies, —parts whose dim and wondrous imagery, and fervent language, impressed her the more, that she questioned vainly their meaning; —and she and her simple friend, the old child and the young one, felt just alike about it. All that they knew was, that they spoke of a glory to be revealed, —a wondrous something yet to come, wherein their soul rejoiced, yet knew not why; and though it be not so in the physical, yet in moral science that which cannot be understood is not always profitless. For the soul awakes, a trembling stranger, between two dim eternities, —the eternal past, the eternal future Its mystic imagery are so many talismans and gems inscribed with unknown hieroglyphics; she folds them in her bosom, and expects to read them when she passes beyond the veil. (see p. 338)

Through "mystic imagery" and evocative language, the Bible, like other forms of literature, presents readers with "hieroglyphics", conveying meaning that is both enigmatic and powerful. This is not the quotidian "news" that Senator Bird and St. Clare are likely to find in their papers but something far more profound, something that requires the language of literature.

Eva, of course, soon has her opportunity to "read" this message in full when she moves to the next world. What is more interesting, however, is the manner in which this same opportunity comes to her father. One evening after his daughter's death, St. Clare leaves the house in search of "the news" (see p. 408). At a cafe where he has begun to read a newspaper, he becomes entangled in a brawl in which he is fatally stabbed. On his deathbed, his face shows that he has found peace. Let down by the newspapers of this world, St. Clare, in death, finally receives the Good News—that which his daughter, rightly named Evangeline, tried to convey to him. To Stowe, this is the most important news of all.

In Stowe's view, such good news, as well as the dismal news of slavery, is best delivered through the medium of literature. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* makes this case not only through its critique of journalism and endorsement of fiction but also through its own phenomenal success, which testifies to the impact that literature can exert on readers. "No woman before or since Stowe has so successfully written a novel designed to stir up the nation in the cause of the major issue of the day", states Ann Douglas. Douglas notes that Stowe "helped to make what had been the protest of only a small minority of abolitionists the concern, even the preoccupation, of

hundreds of thousands of Americans."³¹ In proposing literature as an alternative to journalism, furthermore, Stowe added her powerful voice to that of other nineteenth-century American writers who were reacting to the shallow, sensationalistic, and otherwise flawed depictions of reality that they encountered in contemporary journalism by composing news of their own.

³¹Douglas, introduction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p. 13.