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The Absence of Revenge in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

More than any other character in the Afro-American literary canon, Stowe's Uncle Tom beguiles, mystifies, and elicits vitriolic hatred from even the most ardent of pacifists. Critics from Martin Delany to major figures from the Harlem Renaissance have labeled Uncle Tom as "impotent" and "weak." These critics seem to desire an adherent of what Steven Justice calls the 'Christian Old Law': "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" [Justice, 272]. Yet, surely Harriet Beecher Stowe, the daughter of the prominent Protestant minister Lyman Beecher, would have been aware of this ancient Christian doctrine. She would also have certainly been aware of New Testament scripture condemning revenge, most notably the passage from Romans 12:19:

Dearly Beloved, avenge not yourselves,  
but give place unto wrath: for it is  
written, Vengeance is mine: I will  
repay, sayeth the Lord...Be not overcome  
of Evil, but overcome evil with goodness [Romans 12:19].

Indeed, this dialectic between the Old Law and Christian New Law, or reliance on God to grant divine justice, is what Justice claims has shaped modern notions of revenge [272]. The absence of revenge in Stowe's novel is problematic, especially in light of Uncle Tom's treatment by such nefarious characters as Haley and Simon Legree. On the one hand, revenge functions as an absent

signifier, a center about which Uncle Tom's development (particularly in the later stages of the novel) revolves, and yet whose very absence highlights the sharp distinction between active vengeance and passive acceptance, between Christian Old and New Law. Justice delineates how violent revenge is linked to the Old Law with its focus on possession and ownership of a soul-- that is to say, the act of revenge is a response to an encroachment upon the Self or one's "earthly goods." In order to claim ownership over these temporal objects, one must be prepared to fight for them, to stage litigations, wage wars and fight battles [Justice, 280]. Of course, it is precisely these forces which Stowe is fighting against in her novel. Rather than fixate on the material possession of individual bodies in adherence to Old-Law revenge, Stowe argues for and indeed enacts a metaphorical abolishment of slavery through the creation of a unified Christian body that can only be achieved by the absence of revenge and an adherence to the New Law. Stowe ensures the creation of this spiritual Body through a series of crucial steps: Firstly, Uncle Tom must espouse Christian New Law mercy, with its belief in divine justice; secondly, this New Law demands a transformation from the physical body to a communal Body; thirdly, through the adoption of basic tenets in Augustine's *City of God*, Stowe illustrates the inevitable rise of slavery as an institution and advocates the formation of a new City in which there exists communal ownership as stipulated by New Law doctrine.

Refusing to espouse the vindictive and Machiavellian tactics of Old Law doctrine, Uncle Tom adheres to the Christian New Law. Although he is bound to

Legree, the incarnation of worldly evil and human baseness, Tom placates his fears of Legree's violence through his belief in divine justice. This law can be fulfilled "only by faith" [Justice, 273], a faith which Tom kindles through the reading of his Bible. Paradoxically, it is through his knowledge that death will bring eternal peace that Tom finally gains his freedom: "after ye've killed the body, there ain't no more you can do. And O there's ETERNITY—the word thrilled the black man's soul with light and power" [Stowe, 283]. This is the moment of Tom's transcendence, at which point he relinquishes his corporal self to assume his immortal identity.

Yet, Uncle Tom's unyielding adherence to the New Law and his refusal to engage in revenge prove to be problematic. Rather than merely canonize her protagonist, Stowe uses his absent revenge to de-center and de-localize boundaries, to blur the distinction between the self and the community, slave and master. Stephen Justice writes that "because they share in the New Law of faith, Christians are quite literally members of one Body, and must act as such, bearing with wrongs rather than revenging" [273]. Suddenly, the boundaries between white and black are not so clear: the body of the slave has been replaced with a communal Body which is race-blind. In his moment of transcendence, Tom's soul is filled with "*light* and power" [Stowe, 283], at once an incorporation of whiteness which serves to dissolve racial boundaries and also an acceptance of his African Self. By refusing to allow Uncle Tom to engage in Old Law practices, Stowe stages an emancipation through fiction, successfully effacing the racial boundaries which were so clearly demarcated. An absence has suddenly

become a very real presence, whereby the absent signifier, revenge, has been replaced with a liberation of sorts.

While Justice uses Augustine's *City of God* to explain the presence of violence in a world that does not know the New Law, Stowe likewise espouses Augustine's tenets to explain the presence of slavery in the South: "And since this [earthly] good is not of the sort to cause no difficulties for those who love it, the earthly city is generally divided against itself [Augustine, 4:425]. Thus, the worldly society becomes stratified over an act of possession, with the commodity in question being human slaves. Stowe constructs a fictional landscape (pre-Civil War America) which is closely modeled on Augustine's worldly City, a center of depravity where Old Law is the order of the day. However, there is the possibility of redemption through the espousing of the New Law: "The goodness that a person possesses is, in fact, not at all diminished if it comes to be shared with another...and the more harmony there is among men, the further that possession extends" [4:429]. What we have therefore in this new city is the replacement of individual ownership with a communal ownership, a "city" where slavery is not possible.

In a moment of confrontation with Simon Legree, Tom proclaims the abolishment of the Old Law and the ushering in of the New.

Mas'r Legree, as ye bought me, I'll be a true and faithful servant to ye. I'll give ye all the work of my hands, all my time, all my strength...Ye may whip me, starve me, burn me—it'll only send me sooner where I want to go" [p. 378].

Tom surrenders his physical body, his "hands," his "strength," to the creation of a communal body. The dissolving of the body of the slave marks concurrently the dismantling of slavery as an institution. Tom states to Legree that he will be a "faithful servant," though Stowe implies a clear distinction between Tom's earthly master, Legree, and Tom's heavenly master, Christ. In fact, before Stowe converts Tom's physical body to a spiritual Body, she constructs her protagonist in the image of Christ, surrendering "the work of his hands" like the Heavenly carpenter; sacrificing "all my time" as Christ died for the eternal salvation of mankind; relinquishing "all my strength" as Jesus sacrificed his body on the Cross. Tom then states that Legree will only send him "sooner where [he] wants to go," departing the earthly realm to become part of a larger spiritual body. Even Tom's transformation from physical body to Spiritual Body is communitarian in nature, as Tom creates a congregation and preaches to the slaves. His certainty in joining Eva and Christ in Heaven, to become part of a larger social order, emphasizes Stowe's shift from Old Law justice to New Testament doctrine which supports the creation of communal essences and the establishment of a universal Body.

Ironically, Paul states that the New law can only be achieved "in newness of Spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter" (Rom. 7:6). Yet, it is precisely through her text that Stowe succeeds in representing the embodiment of this law, Uncle Tom, and re-instilling the fear of divine retribution. Stowe assures us that a "day of vengeance" [388] is at hand for those who have been guilty before God. Interestingly, Stowe writes that it is the *Christian Church* which is to blame and

must provide answers. Thus, what we have with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a dismantling of the religious texts and cant which have so dominated the justification of Slavery, with the substitution of Stowe's text. Stowe's sermon-like language comes to constitute a religious text in itself, reminiscent of Old-Testament rhetoric yet thoroughly rooted in the certainty of Divine wrath, the "stronger" and "eternal" [388] law which has both shaped and been shaped by Stowe's novel.

Ironically, Stowe's rhetoric shifts from New Testament empathy to Old Testament jeremiad, as she appropriates the voice of vengeance which Tom has refused to espouse throughout the novel. She herself lays claim to the right to seek and enact revenge, to "possess" the knowledge of an imminent divine revenge. In this sense, Stowe becomes a Cassandra-like figure, a prophetess of doom who ensures the reader of the impending "wrath of Almighty God" [388]. Stowe assumes the prophetic voice which she has silenced in Tom throughout the text, becoming the harbinger of Old-Testament justice. The tenets of Christian New Law and Mercy and the absence of revenge become a very real presence, namely, Stowe herself-- powerful female figure; vengeful authorial presence; and even divine messenger.

#### Works Cited

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