

Gender, Race and the 'Art' of Fiction: Henry James's Criticism and Harriet Beecher Stowe

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Henry James's first review, an account of Nassau Senior's *Essays on Fiction* for the *North American Review* in 1864,¹ was the first expression of what, over the next fifty years, was to harden into something of an orthodoxy in his criticism, namely that European fiction was superior in quality to almost anything that came out of his native America. There is a further evaluative hierarchy in James's criticism. Of the writers James reviewed and on whom he wrote essays, women on the whole came off worst.² The full context of James's aesthetic judgement is the result of culturally contingent forces, many of which have yet to be characterised,³ but the institutional role of the family, especially the influence of Henry James Senior, in the development of aspects of his anti-feminism, has already been identified, as have the double standards of some of the periodicals for which he wrote.⁴ For example, the New York-based *Nation*, for which James was a regular reviewer, was liberal, but male dominated, and tended to look more to the classical literary cultures of Europe for its stance in criticism. In fact its bias against American women writers was such that it provoked Henry Clapp of the *Saturday Press*, whose paper did publish work by women, to nickname it the Stag-Nation.⁵

As James points out, Senior's book is a collection of reviews written between 1821 and 1857 for *The Quarterly*, *Edinburgh*, *London* and *North British Reviews*. It covers the work of four British novelists, Scott, Thackeray, Bulwer Lytton and Henry Senior, and one American, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Nassau Senior was not a professional literary critic. He was professor of political economy at Oxford University from 1825 to 1830 and from

1847 to 1852, and author of a number of books including *An Outline of the Science of Political Economy* (1836). For a time he was an advisor to the British Whig government of the 1830s. As a liberal, Senior's literary criticism of Scott's *Waverley* novels gained him a reputation, but his valuation of the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe, also in the radical liberal tradition, has never been properly acknowledged. For this silence Henry James must be considered to be at least in part to blame. His dismissal of Senior's (forty-page) article on Stowe for the *Edinburgh Review* in 1855 and of the (thirty page) piece for the *Quarterly* in 1857⁶ (collected in *Essays on Fiction*) is summary. He disposes of them in three short sentences: 'As for the article on Mrs Stowe, it is quite out of place. It is in no sense of the word a literary criticism. It is a disquisition on the prospects of slavery in the United States.' (E & W, 1204)

James is wrong on several counts. Stowe's fiction not only has a legitimate place alongside the four British male writers in Senior's book, but his commentary on it is certainly literary criticism. The detailed attention to Stowe's texts on the 1850s, and to the historical and sociological context out of which they arose, provides an important contemporary account of the phenomenal success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As a political economist, Senior notes the effect of the novel on the market. One hundred and fifty thousand copies were sold in the United States and over one million in England which, together with its translation into nine languages before the end of 1852, substantially increased the work's already unprecedented circulation. Senior also gives details of the passage of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into other cultural forms, including its dramatisation in 20 forms in every capital in Europe – ironically one New York production James was to recall nostalgically fifty years later in his autobiography⁷ – and he describes how the windows of Paris bookshops are flooded with copies. Placed against a background of the cultural history of the United States, which includes the history of cotton growing and the number of slaves in America, Senior's commentary signalled for Victorian readers in Britain the work's potential force for change against the repressive legislation on fugitive slaves, enforcing the point that Stowe wrote the book in anger and indignation at the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. But Senior also provided information relevant to historians of culture then and now. The neighbours of the United States earlier in the period were dependencies of distant empires or semi-barbarous or barbarous republics. America had bought from France, for example, all her subjects and all her territories in Louisiana, from Spain, Florida, and Texas was a portion of the defenceless, incoherent Mexican republic. Moreover, the territories which formed the States of Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida were in the possession of their aborigines: Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws and Seminoles, to whom the land had for the most part been guaranteed by treaty. 'But what,' Senior asks, 'is the value of a treaty between the weak and the strong, in a country in which the very name of international morality is unknown?'.⁸

This is the nature of the moral and ethnic context Senior gives British readers as a background to Stowe's abolitionist fiction, a context clearly determined by what Thomas W. Laqueur has recently described as humanitarian narrative.⁹ Laqueur defines this form of narrative as a discourse characterised by 'its reliance on detail as the sign of truth', and groups under the rubric the realistic novel, the autopsy, the clinical report and the social enquiry. In Laqueur's model humanitarian narrative is predicated on quantities of fact, of minute observation about people who had in the past been beneath notice, but who during the development of the humanitarian sensibility of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries became the building blocks of what he calls the 'reality effect', which includes the literary techniques through which the experiences of others are represented as real. Laqueur's focus on the humanitarian narrative as one which relies on the personal body as the locus of pain, and consequently on the common bond between those who suffer and those who would help, has much to offer in analysing Senior's cultural position within the history of abolition, which could not have been more different from that of the young Henry James. Senior was an intellectual descendant of the British abolitionist viewpoint of the previous century and earlier, during which, as Anstey has documented,¹⁰ poets, novelists and dramatists from Aphra Behn to Fielding gave vent to abolitionist sentiments on Britain and the Atlantic slave trade. In this context, then, James's dismissal of Senior's reading of Stowe's text as a mere disquisition on slavery must be interpreted as a serious misrepresentation, a response especially disappointing because of the circumstances behind Senior's objective to have his work on Stowe recognised. Strongly abolitionist on the American South, and irritated that *The Edinburgh Review* had cut his unsigned article, Senior prepared the original manuscript for inclusion in his book *Essays on Fiction* when, as the Civil War was drawing to a close, he himself was terminally ill.

It is possible to overlook James's resistance to the contemporary reception of Stowe's work in the market place as literary criticism, but issues of a theoretical and textual nature, characteristic of early to mid nineteenth-century criticism, are a more serious denial. Senior embeds his account of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a political pamphlet in disguise, for example, in a defence of the fiction on aesthetic grounds. To those who attacked its lack of plot, Senior argued that these judgements were based on expectations of plots structured on elaborate entanglements and clever unravellings. Observing how Stowe's handling of the fortunes of her characters are connected by time rather than by causation, he defends the fiction's 'overcolouring' on the basis that it matched the writer's loathing of cruelty and oppression. Laqueur's approach to plot in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is to argue that the break-up of the slave family far more than the slave's lacerated back is the imaginative vehicle for abolitionist sentiment.¹¹ Senior's line on the discourse of human affection in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an earlier expression of this idea. He praises Stowe for her bravery in abandoning one of the conventional

badges of fiction, namely the aid of a pair of lovers. Thus, Senior attributes Stowe's break with what we might call the 'love convention' in the fiction of the period to a maturity which allows her to concentrate on other more important cultural – and for Senior, socio-political – issues.

Senior takes a similar critical line on *Dred*. But in considering the relationship between the political commitment of the content and the style in the later text, he observes that if Stowe is writing for posterity and if she wishes her works, after they have served their immediate purpose of anti-slavery pamphlets, to take a permanent place in literature, she should pay more attention to the quality of her writing.¹² In contrast to *Uncle Tom*, then, the weaknesses of *Dred* are greater than its strengths. As a character Dred is a failure;¹³ his place in the plot is too mechanical and his language unrealistic. Nevertheless Senior considers these weaknesses to be redeemed by the strength of the counter discourses within the humanitarian narrative, such as the clerical conference at Dr Cushing's, where representatives from a Presbyterian church, divided on the subject of abolition, debate injustices, especially the law denying education to slaves. Senior argued that this satire on the hypocrisy of the church is masterly because of the way it shows how interest, timidity, ambition and party spirit can blunt perception and distort reason (p. 492). Anstey has described how the humanitarian sensibility derived predominantly from Christianity, and Stowe's criticism of the church from inside – she was a Congregationalist – were quickly picked up by Senior.

Why did James refuse to accept that, with points of this kind, Nassau Senior's essays on Stowe were literary criticism? In the opening paragraph of his review he says that he expected a book entitled *Essays on Fiction* to treat the nature and principles of the subject:

We opened this work with the hope of finding a general survey of the nature and principles of the subject of which it professes to treat. Its title had led us to anticipate some attempt to codify the vague and desultory canons, which cannot, indeed, be said to govern, but which in some measure define, this department of literature. We had long regretted the absence of any critical treatise upon fiction. But our regret was destined to be embittered by disappointment. (E & W, 1196)

James is not playing quite straight here. By omitting to mention that Senior fully recognised that *Essays on Fiction* as a collection of reviews could in no way represent a coherent theory of fiction, he does him another injustice. Also if James's reading of Senior had been more attentive he would have picked up on the latter's discussion of the 'genera' of fiction, if not on the tension between the reformist intention and the aesthetic quality of Stowe's abolitionist texts. Of the 'genera' of fiction, Senior wrote,

Fictions may be divided and again cross-divided into many different genera, according to the principles on which the different classifications are founded.

They may be divided, for instance, as to their form, into narrative and dramatic; as to the emotions which they propose to excite, into serious, comic, and satirical; as to the instruments which they employ, into verse and prose; as to the subjects which they paint, into elevated and familiar; as to their matter, into allegorical, historical, and purely invented; as to their premises, or the state of things which they presuppose, into supernatural and real; and, lastly, as to their peculiar merits, into those whose principal aim is excellence in plot, in characters, or in scenery. (189)

There is much material here for a discussion of the principles of classification, so was the twenty-one year old James not sufficiently versed in the complexity of the critical issues raised to deal with them? It is more than likely. Schooled in the European culture of classical literary criticism, Senior's application to nineteenth-century fiction of Aristotle's *peripateia* and Horace's *in medias res* is certainly material for the literary critic, as is the relationship between fiction and the politics of social reform. Senior had been involved in writing the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 which, although an improvement on the existing system for relieving the poor and the destitute, was rightly attacked by Dickens in *Oliver Twist* as over-harsh. As an architect of social legislation, therefore, Senior had himself been an indirect target of criticism by a novelist. This would probably have made him particularly sensitive to the relationship between fiction and social reform, an experience which might go further in explaining his deep interest in Stowe's fictional engagement with events associated with the origins of the Civil War, and one even acknowledged by Lincoln. The latter's recognition of the causal significance of Stowe's work is revealed in his comment – while entertaining her at the White House – ‘So this is the little lady who made this big war?’¹⁴

James's review of Senior's book was written just two years after this remark by Lincoln, and as the Civil War, in which members of the James family had fought, was drawing to a close. So young Henry's failure to give public recognition to Senior's perspective on American cultural history is all the more surprising. Not only did James's misrepresentation of Senior's attempt to authorise his (anonymous) reviews of Stowe's work fall on stony ground in the *NAR*, Pierre de Chaignon la Rose's reprinting fifty years later of the Senior notice under the misleading title ‘Fiction and Sir Walter Scott’ (E & W, 1196–1204), compounded an injustice which later critics, taking on trust James's interpretation of the primary text, have further compounded.¹⁵ Leon Edel, for example, has admirably described the first paragraph of James's first review as one which not only strikes the note for his entire career, but as the work of the man who was to write two decades later an historic paper on ‘The Art of Fiction’ and who was to codify, in his late prefaces, at least those ‘laws’ of the novel which had governed his own work.

Thus James's critical judgement, until now unquestioningly followed by those who have accepted the authority of 'the Master', gives a significant glimpse into the way the patriarchal canon has been constructed.

In 1864 James's aesthetic ideology, namely, what he believed constituted 'art' in fiction, was in the process of development, a process which was in turn determined by patriarchal assumptions in the period about women's writing and the nature of literature. Jane Tompkins has convincingly put the case that critics have been unable to appreciate the complexity and scope of a novel like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or to account for its enormous popular success because of their assumptions about the nature of literature.¹⁶ Henry James must be seen to be one of the earliest of these critics. For, although in editorial circles in the 1850s, the battle lines between abolitionists and anti-abolitionists had been firmly drawn on Stowe – the editor of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, for example, had looked for a reviewer who would write a review 'as hot as hell-fire, blasting and scarring the reputation of the vile wretch in petticoats who could write such a volume'¹⁷ – James Russell Lowell and Charles Eliot Norton, co-editors of the *North American Review* in 1864, were liberal on the issue of abolition. Lowell's dedication to this cause went back to the 1840s. His first wife, Maria White Lowell, author of the abolitionist poem 'Africa', was an influential woman with strong political tendencies, and much of Lowell's writing shows commitment to the same cause, especially *Conversations of Some of the Old Poets* (1845), which includes pleas for abolition, some 50 anti-slavery articles (1845–50) and his *Biglow Papers* (1848) – the last of which satirises the Mexican War as an attempt to extend the area of slavery. This gives an idea of the cultural politics of the editorial background against which James's first review was published, tending to confirm that his silence on Senior's literary criticism of Stowe and abolition was the result of a personal not an editorial decision.

The amount of critical attention which James paid to Stowe compared to other female writers – some ten pieces on George Eliot, eight on George Sand and essays on Constance Fennimore Woolson, Mrs Humphry Ward, Matilde Serao and Fanny Kemble, for example – is slight. Its importance lies in the focus it provides for his troubled relationship with women's writing and the critical assumptions behind his conception of 'art' in fiction. In accordance with the prevailing viewpoint in nineteenth-century criticism that realism in fiction was objective, these assumptions were based chiefly on the notion of truth to life. Accordingly, a year after his review of Senior's book, James made a brief but disparaging reference to Stowe, which anticipates his later criticism of her. The occasion was his review of Harriet Prescott Spofford's novel, *Azarian*, which beside Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet*, an exemplar of realism for James, he regarded as a failure in 'truth' (E & W, 607). (It is worth noting that Harriet Prescott Spofford was the New England novelist who changed Pope's dictum into 'the proper study of womankind is woman'.) In this review James advanced a gendered classification of Spofford

with Stowe, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Sand and Gail Hamilton as writers who all possessed 'in excess the fatal gift of fluency' (E & W, 610). What was 'fatal' about this 'gift'? James does not enlighten us by elaborating, as perhaps he could have done, on the markedly different styles of each of these writers, whose historical period and socio-cultural origins – an English woman, a French woman and three American women – are reflected in their subject matter and style. (Elizabeth Barret Browning was in any case a poet, although *Aurora Leigh* has been described as a verse novel.) Instead this homogeneous grouping of five women was followed a year later by James's withdrawal from a proposal to the *Northern American Review* to deal critically with Stowe. Writing to Charles Eliot Norton, James told him that in rereading two or three of her books he found them lacking those 'solid merits [which] an indistinct recollection of them had caused me to attribute to them'.¹⁸ Though we have no way of knowing what James meant by the phrase 'solid merits', a critical assessment of Stowe's work in 1866 would almost certainly have meant acknowledging the abolitionist novels of the 1850s which had made her name. Another important novel of the 50s was *The Minister's Wooing*, where the political and cultural targets shifted to Calvinism. We can probably assume from this that Stowe's writing fell so short of James's conception of the art of fiction even at this very early stage in his life as a critic that he was reluctant to write on her.

The founding of the *Nation* in 1865 with its emphasis on the rights of the Negro, popular education, democratic principles, equality of the labouring class and political rights for women, gave James the opportunity for a new classification of Stowe. In a digression in his 1868 notice of Rebecca Harding Davis's *Dallas Galbraith* (E & W, 224–25), he reclassified her with Davis and Anna Dickinson, as a writer of the so-called sentimental school, as well as being a perpetrator of 'counterfeit criticism' for her support of Dickinson, author of *What Answer?*, a novel which treats positively the subject of interracial marriage. Not surprisingly, the battle-ground was still realism or 'truth' to life. In his 1867 review of Davis's *Waiting for the Verdict* James had criticised 'lachrymose sentimentalism' (E & W, 221) because it compromised his notion of realism. In the *Galbraith* notice he introduced a distinction between sympathy and pity to underpin his argument against the quality of the writing of this group of American women, again ignoring their distinctively different backgrounds and styles (E & W, 225). Sympathy, James implies, is a positive emotion for the realist novelist, pity a negative one. In a broad sweep, he attacked these apparent peddlers of pity each of whose particular brand he failed to define, but which he maintained affected their style, arguing that the sympathetic novelist whose style is untainted by pity – Dumas is now the chosen example – produces a broader, more faithful canvas. This categorisation has lasted for well over a hundred years, for even as recently as the 1990s, Ammons is still using the culturally homogeneous classification of Stowe as a sentimentalist.¹⁹ Sharon Harris also falls back into this

paradigm, implying that the reuniting of Anny and Nathan in *Waiting for the Verdict* is less sentimental than Stowe's depiction of Eliza Harris in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,²⁰ although she does make the valuable point that, in the case of Harding Davis, one must consider her place in the transition from romanticism to realism, a transition which includes not only those two labels but other designations such as sentimentalism, local colour, domestic feminism and documentary realism.²¹ However this classification still fails to distinguish adequately between the cultural diversity of the three women writers, and Harris does not mention Dickinson at all.

For his definition of realism James depended chiefly on the novels of Balzac and on correspondence theory, drawn chiefly from French criticism. Realism is a notoriously elastic and problematic term, and James's manipulation of it here, principally through his distinction between pity and sympathy, provides him with a vehicle for establishing an evaluative hierarchy between European male and American female writers, and for denigrating the latter. In his review of *Waiting for the Verdict*, a novel on race which explores the fate of blacks and those of mixed blood after the Civil War, James had been careful to dissociate himself from racism (E & W, 218), implying that his disagreement was not with the portrait of the Negro or with those of mixed blood, but with over-sentimentalising the social problem. The realist project to which he had devoted himself, and which reached the first stage of its apotheosis in his essay 'The Art of Fiction' – 'the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life' – blinded him to the way that the objectives of writers such as Stowe, Davis and Dickinson might be related to the social, political or ideological aspirations of wider cultural forces. Stowe clearly recognised this, and retaliated, though not in public, condemning James as 'an insolent man who ... [was] unable to comprehend ... goodness or greatness'.²² In fact it was James's review of *Waiting for the Verdict* which prompted Stowe to write to Rebecca Harding Davis about the prejudices of the *Nation* and women's writing. "The Nation" has no sympathy with any deep and high moral movement – no pity for human infirmity.' said Stowe, 'It is a sneering respectable middle aged sceptic who says I take my two glasses & my cigar daily ... But don't mind them and don't hope for a sympathetic word from them *ever* in any attempt to help the weak & sinning & suffering.'²³ This comment shows Stowe's dedication to the discourse of humanitarianism, but as far as James's public classification of her, this was the end of the matter for the time being. He was not to write on her at length for seven years when he reviewed in the *Nation*, unnecessarily scathingly, her less controversial, but stylistically sophisticated, novel of middle-class New York society, *We and Our Neighbours: Records of an Unfashionable Street*. In this review James made no attempt to classify her work. Instead he picked her up on the dreariness of her content. 'The reader remains in an atmosphere of dense backstairs detail which makes him feel as if he were reading an interminable file of tradesmen's bills.' (E & W, 619).

But, in fact, this text has much to offer a reader interested in cultural change, the histories of the Vanderheyden and Van Arsdel families being an example. James also criticised apparent flaws in Stowe's style, such as lexical ambiguity in the text, giving the impression that she was incapable of putting together a coherent sentence. This criticism is unjust for there can be no doubt that the writer of *We and Our Neighbours* is accomplished not only in sentence construction, diction, use of metaphor, simile and satire, but also at dealing with an innovative narrative which alternates between the use of an omniscient narrator and an epistolary technique. Instead of focussing on any of these compositional virtues, James is patronisingly whimsical, selecting a sentence from the text that is unrepresentative of the whole: '... soon Eva and he,' James quotes, 'were all over the house while she eloquently explained to him the working of the furnace, the position of the water-pipes, and the various comforts and conveniences which they had introduced into their little territories.' 'They – who?' asks James, 'the water-pipes?' (E & W, 619). Although the word 'they' does constitute a lexical ambiguity, the context of the sentence makes it quite clear that the anaphoric reference is to the inhabitants of the house and not to the water pipes. James's perverse reading of this sentence is determined by a wider context, probably provided by William Dean Howells,²⁴ that Stowe's apparently defective knowledge of sentence structure and syntax sometimes brought her to the kind of impasse that apparently needed the combined skill of editor and proof readers to extricate her. However, the following passage describing the social history of the decline of the Vanderheydens, one of the families of the unfashionable street of the title, is perhaps more representative than that given by James; and it also shows Stowe's continuing preoccupation with the ante-bellum era.

The ancient sisters had few outlets into the society of modern New York. Now and then a stray visit came from some elderly person who still remembered the Vanderheydens, and perhaps about once a year they went to the expense of a carriage to return the call, and rolled up into the new part of the town like shadows of the past. But generally their path of life led within the narrow limits of the house. Old Dinah, the sole black servant remaining, was the last remnant of a former retinue of negro servants, held by old Jacob when New York was a slave State, and a tribe of black retainers was one of the ostentations of wealth. All were gone now, and only Dinah remained, devoted to the relics of the old family, clinging with cat-like attachment to the old place.²⁵

James's only direct comparison of Stowe with a male writer occurred when he twice briefly compared *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with Turgenev's *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*, first in his review of *Spring Torrents* and 'King Lear of the Steppes,' and secondly in his later essay on Turgenev in the 1890s.²⁶ The idea of a comparison between the two fictions was not new, the German critic, Julian Schmidt, probably being the first to make it in 1870.²⁷

But as James tells us in the *Spring Torrents* review, one of the French translators of *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* also thought the fiction made much the same sort of contribution to the issue of Russian serfdom as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had to that of American slavery, and certainly the two novels hold a unique position in the history of fiction, each being a successful protest narrative written against a tyrannical regime of bondage. (The serfs in Russia were emancipated in 1861, and the American Civil War ushered in a new and more just social order.)

The implications for cultural history of these two fictions, then, are vast, coming as they do from different countries of origin and being written in different languages. But for James, a nineteenth-century critic, for whom the aesthetics of fiction was a major preoccupation, the differences between these texts were less important than their similarities. In his 1874 essay James elevates the *Sketches* over *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and assigns to them the term 'art', thereby introducing a critical evaluation into the relationship between the polemic and the aesthetic status of the two texts. He uses the concept of '*pièce de circonstance*' to argue that Turgenev's *Sketches* are less a passionate *pièce* than a disinterested work of art, a strategy which enables him to categorise Stowe and Turgenev as writers of qualitatively different types of polemical fiction. According to James, Turgenev's polemics are 'low in tone', engaging the reader in a 'cumulative testimony of a multitude of fine touches' with only a 'scanty dose of flagrant horrors'. In this way Stowe's novel emerges as a polemically impassioned *pièce de circonstance* with more than its fair share of horrors while Turgenev's, less polemical and more 'disinterested', as morally superior. The latter is thus classified as art on the basis of its formal cohesion. For James,

No single episode [in the *Sketches*] pleads conclusively against the 'peculiar institution' of Russia [serfdom] ... It would be difficult to name a work that contains better instruction for those heated spirits who are fond of taking sides on the question of 'art for art'. It [*Sketches*] offers a capital example of moral meaning giving a sense to form and form giving relief to moral meaning. (E & W₂, 975–76)

In his 1896 essay James is more reflective. He locates the emergence of the two texts within their cultural context, slightly shifting his ground on their role as *pièces de circonstance*, this time observing that each emerged out of a particular historical moment. Both fictions 'sounded ... a particular hour', he tells us. Yet in spite of the slight concession to Stowe he is still anxious to play down the political effect of the *Sketches*, attributing to them 'an art too insidious for recognition', an art which 'stirred the depth more than the surface'. Yet in spite of the fact that the *Sketches* contributed in no small measure to a change of attitude towards the peasants, influencing Alexander II in his final decision to put through the emancipation of the serfs, James still refused to

acknowledge their full impact in producing any form of agitation. As Stowe was to show in her depiction of the Negro communities in *Uncle Tom*, the *Sketches*, published over a period of several years, showed members of Turgenev's own social class that peasants were human beings, with intellectual and spiritual potentialities – a fact which very few landowners had previously been prepared to recognise.²⁸ In a few of the some twenty-five *Sketches* the reader is presented with images of suffering not only in the references to the landowners' brutality towards the serfs but in the class divisions between the serfs themselves. On the whole, however, brutality in the *Sketches* is not, as in *Uncle Tom*, with its range of different types of cruelty, the break up of families, the whippings and beatings of the Negro slaves, in Tom's case to death, a dominant discourse in the text. James's comparison of the two texts, however, based on the concept of disinterestedness, is fundamentally ideological. Unlike Nassau Senior, who recognised the historical and cultural conditions out of which Stowe's text emerged, James is still too dismissive of her work, using the Kantian concept of disinterestedness as one of his criteria for criticising a style of humanitarian narrative he found less pleasing.

Nearly seventeen years elapsed before James commented at any length again on Stowe's work.²⁹ But, read against the background of his early unsigned reviews and other critical essays, the record in his autobiography of his youthful impressions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* perhaps assumes a more ambiguous tone than has, in the past, been recognised. In her introduction to the Penguin edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Ann Douglas has interpreted as very complimentary James's description of the novel both as triumphant and as a wonderful leaping fish.³⁰ Certainly, his account of *Uncle Tom* as his first experiment in grown-up fiction is very rosy, accompanied as it is by his rapt account of the stage production he saw in his youth, where he recollects, amusingly, flaws in the realism when Tom and Eva reappear dry on stage after their immersion in the Mississippi. Yet the characteristic tone of caution which restrains any sense of real commitment to the novel as 'literature' begins to emerge with an extended metaphor of *Uncle Tom* as a fish out of water, less a book than a state of vision for which there are no classified conditions.³¹ What this appears to mean is that the James of the anonymous reviews is reneging on his earlier classification of Stowe as a fatally fluent novelist of the school of pity, but still resisting a classification of her work as literature. His metaphorical fish out of water appears to be a form of refuge which enables him to avoid a critical evaluation of this text. Furthermore, in the light of his earlier criticism of Stowe's apparent lack of solid merit, how are we to interpret his second metaphor for *Uncle Tom*, namely, that it drove the whole field of 'Letters' to a state of languishing unconsciousness? Tropes of all kinds, especially in their extended form, are a characteristic of a style at which James often excelled in his fiction;³² but its use in his criticism must surely be subject to different evaluative criteria, since criticism and fiction are different discourses with discrete generic functions. This is not to say that

James's fiction and his criticism should never be read in tandem, for his criticism is often embodied in his fiction in the form of rewriting.³³ Perhaps the time has come for a more stringent reevaluation of James's reviews within a framework of a cultural history which would scrutinise more closely the relationship between his critical texts and those of the writers he reviewed. The long term implications of his criticism of Harriet Beecher Stowe does show that an analysis of the narrative and language of her fiction from a perspective of the cultural diversity of her writing, as opposed to a view of it within the outmoded classification of sentimentalism, is long overdue.

Notes

1 *North American Review*, XCIX (October 1864), 580–587, Rpt. Leon Edel & Mark Wilson (ed.), *Henry James: Literary Criticism, Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (New York, 1984), pp. 1196–1204. Subsequent references to Henry James's works are taken from this edition and coded E & W. Nassau W. Senior, *Essays on Fiction* (London, 1864).

2 Cornelia Pulsifer Kelley, *The Early Development of Henry James* (Urbana, 1930), p. 94. Sandra Corse, 'Henry James on Eliot and Sand', *South Atlantic Review*, 51: 1 (1986), 57–68. Christine Richards, 'Henry James and Cultural Differences', *English*, 40:166 (Spring 1991), 79–85. Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York and Oxford, 1994), p. 351.

3 For a discussion of some of the theoretical issues which determine interpretation of fiction see Christine Richards, 'Belief and Context Determinacy in Interpreting Fiction', *Diacritics*, 28:2 (Summer 1998), 81–93. This proposes a pragmatics of culture as a basis for analysing belief and the contexts which determine the interpretation of fiction.

4 Alfred Habegger, *Henry James and the 'Woman Business'* (New York, 1989), p. 37. Richards, 'Henry James and Cultural Difference', p. 82.

5 Edward E. Chielens, *American Literary Magazines: the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries* (New York, 1986), p. 361.

6 [Nassau W. Senior], 'Uncle Tom's Cabin, A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin, Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands. Speech of the Honourable Charles Sumner', (unsigned review) *The Edinburgh Review*, (April 1855), 293–331. [Nassau W. Senior], 'Dred: A Tale of the Dismal Swamp', (unsigned review) *The Quarterly Review*, 101 (January/April 1857), 324–352.

7 Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (London, 1913), p. 167.

8 Senior, *Essays on Fiction*, p. 410.

9 Thomas W. Laqueur, 'Bodies, Details and the Humanitarian Narrative' in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley and London, 1989), p. 177.

10 Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760–1810* (London, 1975), pp. 142–53.

11 Laqueur, 'Bodies, Details' p. 179.

12 Senior, *Essays on Fiction*, p. 481.

13 It is surely not co-incidental that Stowe's *Dred* shares his first name with the real life Dred Scott whose case at the time she was writing the novel had become controversial. The fundamental issue of the case was whether a Negro who had lived in a free state and enjoyed the rights of citizenship could sue in the federal courts. For a discussion of the Dred Scott case, see Brian Holden Reid, *The Origins of the American Civil War* (London and New York, 1996), p. 295.

- 14 Reid, *American Civil War*, p. 147.
- 15 See, for example, Sarah B. Daugherty, *The Literary Criticism of Henry James* (Athens, 1981), pp. 8, 30; Vivien Jones, *James the Critic* (London, 1985), p. 30; Kelley, *The Early Development of Henry James*, p. 27; Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Untried Years 1843–1870* (London, 1953), p. 212.
- 16 Jane P. Tompkins, 'Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History', *Glyph* 2 (1978). Rpt. Elizabeth Ammons, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: Uncle Tom's Cabin: Authoritative text, backgrounds and contexts, criticisms* (New York and London, 1994), pp. 501–522.
- 17 Reid, *American Civil War*, p. 94.
- 18 Leon Edel (ed.), *Henry James Letters I 1843–1875* (London, 1974), pp. 63, 64.
- 19 Ammons, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, p. 523.
- 20 See Sharon M. Harris, *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism* (Philadelphia, 1991), p. 136.
- 21 Harris, *Rebecca Harding Davis*, p. 5.
- 22 Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, p. 352.
- 23 Letter from Harriet Beecher Stowe, January 13 (1869?), Richard Harding Davis Collection, Clifton Waller Barrett Library, Manuscripts Div., University of Virginia Library.
- 24 William Dean Howells, *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* (New York and London, 1901), p. 138.
- 25 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *We and Our Neighbours or the Records of an Unfashionable Street* (London, 1875), p. 13.
- 26 Henry James, 'Frühlingsfluthen and "Ein König Lear des Dorfes"', *North American Review*, (April 1874). Henry James, 'Ivan Turgenev 1818–1883', *Library of the World's Best Literature*, Charles Dudley Warner (ed.), (New York, 1896–97), pp. 15057–15062. Both reprinted in Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (eds), *Henry James Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, Prefaces to the New York Edition*, (New York, 1984), coded E & W₂ pp. 968–99; 1027–34.
- 27 T. S. Perry's review of Julian Schmidt's *Bilder* in *Atlantic Monthly*, 35 (1875), p. 505.
- 28 Leonard Schapiro, *Turgenev: His Life and Times* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 66, 79.
- 29 Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (London, 1913), p. 168.
- 30 James, *A Small Boy*, p. 168. Ann Douglas, Introduction, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London, 1981).
- 31 James, *A Small Boy*, p. 167.
- 32 Christine Richards, 'An Approach to Imagery in the Novels of Henry James', (London University unpublished PhD dissertation, 1977), p. 73.
- 33 Christine Richards, 'The Critical Point of View: Henry James on Matilde Serao', (forthcoming) *The Italianist* (1999).