5. A tipping point: the middle decades of the twentieth century

Even after World War One, sentimentalism still predominated, but the inter-war decades were not to prove static.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

This 1922 edition shows how nothing immediately changed in the fervid atmosphere following World War One, as modernity tightened its grip.

All the ingredients we have come to expect are present: high sentimentalism; an anachronistic modernization of apparel; an exploitation of an iconic scene for commercial advantage; and an emphasis on religious conversion, moral instruction, and education (literacy). The design appears on the hardcover, but it needs to be noted that by now dust jackets were beginning to be more widely and commonly used.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*
With designs by James Daugherty. New York: Coward-McCann Inc., 1929

However, during this post-World War One period, a particularly startling *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published. This was an edition brought out by Coward-McCann, featuring drawings and designs by the well-known illustrator, James Daugherty.
Daugherty came briefly into the spotlight in 2006, when his depiction of Israel Putnam, the hero of Bunker Hill, in a mural commissioned by the WPA and placed in Hamilton Avenue School in Greenwich, Connecticut, in 1935, was restored to reveal a violent scene, including snarling animals, tomahawk-brandishing American Indians and a half-clothed General Putnam tied to a stake in a bonfire. The school’s administrators objected to the violence revealed by the restoration and ordered that the mural be removed. Daugherty’s images in his Uncle Tom illustrations are equally disconcerting, from the disturbingly stereotyped and minstrelized Topsy on the book’s front cover through to the many images within the book’s pages which reinforce the more or less racist stereotyping carried on the cover:
James Daugherty, ‘Some of your plantation niggers would be singing and whooping’, 

The over-done portrait of African American carnival carries within it all the exaggeration of minstrelsy, with all the connotations of racial condescension and prejudice that this carries. But the portrait of Topsy is a truly shocking epitome in this respect:
We certainly need to remind ourselves at this point that the book actually advertises itself on its front cover as having been ‘edited specially for children;’ and that it ‘is admirably suited for use both in home and at school’. Again, the capacity for this text to misguide people into racist ways of thinking is enhanced by its illustrations.

Having said this, Daugherty’s images can project a more ambiguous set of connotations. The double-page spread on pages 162-163 — near the center of the book — exemplifies this. The ‘lower deck’ (left) half of the picture, depicting the ‘lower deck’ on the paddle-steamer, the Belle Riviere, contains both stereotypical exaggerations and caricatures of what Stowe ironically calls ‘the freight’ — a phrase which loses much of the force of its irony in a welter of ambiguities about how to read the depictions. The African bodies are exposed to view — both the central chained man and, to his left, the woman with her torso and breasts bare — produced for (white) consumption as an exotic ‘Other’. But also some sense of both nobility and suffering is conveyed (though perhaps too much tending towards ‘nobility in suffering’, with all its connotations of passivity and acquiescence). Meanwhile, the upper deck, ‘crowded with well-dressed ladies and gentlemen’, carries far from idealized portraits of the white Americans on the steamship — with the men coming across as more-or-less effeminate rakes and the women ignorant snobs, unable to see the realities of slavery (the African American holding the horses’ bridle – Tom?). The exception is the young girl (Eva?), who reaches out
toward the lower decks (whose black inhabitants do not notice her gesture), but with a facial expression that is a curious amalgam of hauteur and condescension:


Contemplating the ambiguities of this illustration is one way of leading on to a consideration of arguably even more unsettling images. It is difficult to be sure what to make of the image of “Human Property is high in the market” on page 315. Plainly it is, again, laden with stereotyping and carries a prurience within its portrait of a female naked from the waist up. Yet there is also a disconcerting defiance in the posture of this woman on the auction block that is also redolent of knowingness — about what is to happen and perhaps how she will deal with it — which it is difficult to negotiate. In the end once again, certainly, negativity overwhelms the reader — the image might be reasonably categorized as racist. But this image is not unremittingly negative in its effect — it is deeply disturbing too:

The features of the black woman seems to carry in their delineations an allusion to those of the Statue of Liberty, in a pointed reference to how the institution of slavery had deprived a segment of the human race of their liberty and denied them proper human succor.

Another equally difficult image appears on page 351. Again, stereotypicality is laid on heavily – here black passivity and white dominance predominates, and the Christian motif supplied by the shadow transmogrifying into a cross cements this negative sense of passivity and helplessness. Yet, also, the clear allusion is to the slave (Tom) as Christ, in an image that is almost overwhelmingly powerful – it does indeed move the viewer. Again, one has to end on a note of censure, but the reader’s reaction, we contend, cannot be singular but must rather be divided along the dark parallel and jagged shadow-lines of the drawing, that suggest that darkness surrounds and invests slavery.
However, we want to end by analyzing another extraordinary image, if only to drive home how we accept that Daugherty’s images end up as unacceptable. Here, in Eliza’s flight across the Ohio river on page 77, the way she is borne up by a white angel to aid her in her flight deprives her somewhat of her agency, and though the hand of what we take to be slavery that reaches up to drag her down is also white — and as such carries a strong sense of the sinister quality of the reach of white power, nevertheless she is caught between two white places in a profoundly negative portrait of her options: she is trapped into passivity as ‘the black mother’ — though it has to be said, ironically, that this draws out an aspect of Stowe’s text and its own shortcomings.

Perhaps Daugherty’s complexities have something to do with what was at that time the recent, 1925, Scopes trial — the famous ‘Scopes Monkey Trial’, as it was generally known — which tested the Tennessee law passed earlier in 1925 forbidding the teaching of evolution insofar as it suggested that humans were descended from animals and not made in God’s image. This of course inevitably renewed scientific racist debates about the relative evolutionary positions of blacks and whites and re-energized the disturbing currents of American racist discourse. Perhaps Daugherty’s images — to a degree — treat, if unsuccessfully, with these complexities.

After this explosive re-reading by Daugherty, most succeeding images come as something of an anticlimax. A modernism collides with Stowe’s sentimental novel in Daugherty’s complex, layered outlook on the text, but Stowe’s tale was by now so anchored in established pictorial iconographies that subsequent illustrators more or less were to retain their course.

Anon [abridged and adapted from Harriet Beecher Stowe], *Uncle Tom, Eva and Topsy* London and Edinburgh: McDougall’s Education Co., 1950
Inevitably, it seems, we must note how *Uncle Tom*'s ‘Sunday School Reading’ representational tradition, as it were, continues on — right into the second half of the twentieth century:


This cheap, abridged 1950s pamphlet even comes complete with improving exercises at the back:
‘Say, Write, and Do’, *Uncle Tom, Eva and Topsy*, London and Edinburgh, McDougall’s Education Co.1950, p. 64.

However, it needs to be noted that the image on the first page of this pamphlet points to the slave trade origins of the problem that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* addresses, however un成功fully. This point is picked up in the eighth exercise on the “Say, Write and Do” page (‘How did black slaves come to be in America?’). There are clear signs here, in the post World War Two period, of recognition that the colonial era is coming to an end in the 1950s and issues concerning the legacy of colonialism will need to be addressed. This suggestions reinforced by other editions from slightly later in this era, which tend to show an increasingly deministrelized Tom, depicted with some degree of dignity.

[Return to Index]

[Proceed to: The Decline of Territorial Colonization and the Changing Roles of Tom]