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Beyond the Pale: Poor Whites as Uncontrolled Social Contagion in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred*

Introduction

DRED: A TALE OF THE DISMAL SWAMP WAS PUBLISHED IN 1856, FOUR YEARS after the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's wildly popular abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Although nowhere as popular as her first novel, *Dred* was nevertheless read by thousands, and even surpassed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in preliminary sales. The racial politics of Stowe's second abolitionist novel are more overt and revolutionary. Perhaps this explains why white readers found the novel less appealing than *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Contemporary reviews found the book less persuasive, more didactic, and the title character a bit of a bore.¹ Since then Stowe scholars have made similar critiques (Korobkin 398²; Whitney 553).

What has been largely overlooked and unremarked, however, is Stowe's scathing depiction of "poor whites." This article seeks to rectify this oversight by examining the depiction of the white working class found in *Dred*. I argue that the lack of a serious discussion on this oppressed Southern population is troubling on several counts. First, Stowe expends considerable energy and time to include poor white characters in her novel. Why has this failed to spark discussion? Stowe's mischaracterizations and stereotypes of poor whites have so far failed to spark serious discussion because those mischaracterizations and stereotypes continue to operate today, both in fiction and popular and

¹See, for example, the contemporary review by the New York State Unitarian Association.

²Although Korobkin argues that this didacticism is truly the strength of the novel: "Stowe's novel mimics the functional power of an appellate court decision, and far extends its reach, by using her fiction to establish a system of higher law that readers must recognize and, she hopes, obey" (405).

academic discourse.³ Stowe's descriptions of poor whites as brutal, tasteless, dirty, and immoral cannot offend readers who find her descriptions accurate.

Second, we can't fully understand Stowe's position on slavery and Southern social relations if we ignore her depiction of poor whites. Entire chapters of *Dred* are devoted to the Cripps family, landless squatters who somehow manage to retain one slave, "Tiff," the Uncle Tom character of the novel. Other important scenes describe the relationship between the ruthless planter Tom Gordon and rootless whites who are encouraged, through alcohol and racism, to enforce the social hierarchy against abolitionists, Northerners, and runaway slaves. Long dialogues occur between Nina Gordon and her relations regarding the proper role of poor whites in the South, unfavorably comparing their idleness and freedom to the much more controlled industrial workforce in the North.

These passages are important and integral to Stowe's abolitionist arguments. She uses poor whites as a doubling contrast to black slaves. Even though Stowe argues passionately against the institution of slavery, she has no problem at all with a rigid class hierarchy between elites and the working class. Freedom from slavery does not connote freedom from mastery. What disturbs Stowe most about the Southern poor is that they are masterless and rootless, unlike the Northern working class that are well controlled by their employers. Southern planters feel no responsibility towards those who are forced to squat for survival.⁴ They

³See, for example, the varied discussions of "poor whites," "Southern rednecks," and "white trash" in Bynum, Carr, Hartigan, Roebuck, Wray, and Wray and Newitz.

⁴Images of poor white squatters were common during the nineteenth century, in art and literature. Charles Henry Beard, artist and ardent abolitionist, painted a series depicting poor white squatters, forced to move in search of employment and land (Husch). A contemporary account of "Poor White Trash" by Southern planter Daniel R. Hundley describes the rampant practice of squatting:

The Poor White Trash rarely possess energy and self-reliance enough to emigrate singly from the older Southern States to the South-west, but usually migrate by whole neighborhoods; and are thus to be seen nearly every summer or fall plodding along together, each family having its whole stock of worldly goods packed into a little one-horse cart of rudest workmanship, into which likewise are often crowded the women and children, the men walking alongside looking worn and weary. Slowly thus they creep along day by day, camping out at night, and usually carrying their own provisions with them—bacon, beans, corn-meal, dried fruits, and the like

take no notice of poor whites except when they need them to form a lynch mob. Poor whites remain on the margins of Southern society and yet they are both crucial to its continued success and a striking example of its moral failure. The lack of serious discussion of Stowe's depiction of poor whites in *Dred* mirrors their marginality in the novel.

Because poor whites are uncontrolled and without masters or employers, they get into a lot of trouble in *Dred*. Stowe did not believe that the working class could survive on its own. She did not believe that workers were capable of taking care of themselves properly. She thus depicts poor whites as lazy, shiftless, uninterested in culture and education, immoral, and over-sexed. They get sick and die, or starve at an alarming rate. Because of slavery, Southern elites can and do ignore lower-class whites, thus creating, according to Stowe, a virulent contagion of immorality and brutality among the poor white population. The brutality of the white working class can be contrasted with the brutality of the slave owner who loses sight of the humanity of his or her slaves. The much baser brutality of poor whites signifies a lack of cultivation, a rejection of civilization itself. Thus, for Stowe, slavery is not only unchristian (trading people like commodities) but it is also supremely foolish, as far as elite policies go. A society simply cannot

simple and unassuming fare. When they reach a large river whose course leads in the proper direction, they build them a rude kind of flat-bottomed boat, into which, huddling with all their traps, they suffer themselves to drift along with the current down to their place of destination. Having reached which, they proceed immediately to disembark, and to build their inevitable log-cabins, squatting at their free will and pleasure on Uncle Sam's domain; for they seldom care to purchase land, unless they can get it at about a "bit" an acre. Owing to this custom of occupying the public lands without making entry of the same according to law, in most of the new Southern States the Poor Whites are almost invariably known as Squatters. When the lands temporarily occupied by them, finally come into market, the Squatters once more hitch up their little one-horse carts, pile in all their worldly store, together with their wives and little ones, and again facing to the westward, go in search of their New Atlantis—which the poor creatures find so soon as they get beyond the limits of civilization; when they "squat" as before, raise their little "craps" of corn and garden truck, shoot bears, deer, and Indians, and vegetate generally like all other nomadic races. And thus will Rag Tag and Bobtail continue to pass further and further westward and southward, until they will eventually become absorbed and lost among the half-civilized mongrels who inhabit the plains of Mexico. (271-72)

See also Bolton, who argues that by the 1850s most landless whites in the South were technically tenants, not squatters (28). Stowe seems not to have taken notice of this change.

function if it allows a large portion of its working class to go uncontrolled and unchecked.⁵

An ardent abolitionist, Stowe nevertheless appears to endorse continued class hierarchies. One of the things that worried Stowe about poor whites as a group was their apparent lack of place in the social hierarchy. Neither masters nor slaves, poor whites existed on the margins of Southern society. In the North, in contrast, the white working class was kept in check by industrialist employers—whites made up a “working” class, whose labor was free and yet subordinate. One of the problems with slavery, it seemed to Stowe, was that poor whites in the South were neglected by the masters. In this, Stowe was like many other Whigs of the time—“soft” on race but “hard” on class and hierarchies in general (Saxton 72).

In the remainder of this article I will first describe Stowe’s depiction of the (fairly loose) social relationships between Southern elites and poor whites. I will then compare two somewhat contradictory but nevertheless linked portrayals of poor whites and poor white culture—first, the view that poor whites are somehow a race apart, whose bad blood is contagious; second, the view that poor whites are morally deficient because they lack a desire to better themselves through education. Stowe specifically compares black slaves and poor whites, crediting the former with wanting to rise out of barbarism whereas the latter are happy to remain as they are. Both of these rather contradictory images of poor whites support Stowe’s contention that the only good working class is a *legally free* but *socially contained* working class.

Stowe’s depiction of the poor whites is consonant with a long line of literary portrayals of this group of people (see Carr, Cook, and McIlwaine). What is unique about Stowe is her use of these depictions to make a larger point about both the moral desirability of abolition and the necessity of a clear-cut and controlling class hierarchy. Although Mr. Cripps and Polly Skinflint are mere caricatures, they serve an important function in Stowe’s argument that should not be overlooked.

⁵In discussing negative reactions by contemporaries such as Frederick Douglass to Stowe’s work, Crane suggests that the problem with Stowe’s portrayals was not the sentimentality but the depictions of justice in less than consensual terms (59). In other words, Stowe conceived of justice as charity by whites toward blacks, rather than equality.

Beyond the Pale: Fitting Poor Whites into the Social Landscape of Antebellum Society

Stowe does not tell us why there are non-landowning whites in the South. We know nothing from Stowe about immigration patterns—how long poor whites have lived in the South, or where they came from. We don't even know how such people make a living in a society dominated by slave labor. All we know is that such people do exist. Stowe often suggests that landless whites exist as a category due to individual depravity, laziness, and lack of moral sense: after all, Mr. Cripps might be a successful salesman if he didn't drink all of his profits. For the most part, she depicts poor whites as problematic for plantation owners (as when they "squat" on the land, or spread their illnesses to others in the vicinity, including valuable slaves). She also accuses them of fencing for slaves, trading in liquor, and stealing whenever possible (210, 211). Interestingly, "the low white traders" appear to be the only whites aware of Dred's presence in the swamp (212).⁶ Sometimes, however, it appears they are performing a useful function for the slaveowner. First, poor white men may become overseers, who are "generally unprincipled and artful" (39). Second, poor white men form the "mobs" so useful and easily manipulated by ruthless slaveowners like Tom Gordon.

What appears to trouble Stowe so much about this group is its rootlessness and uncontrollability. Because none of the poor whites own land, they are all illegally squatting on someone's extensive acreage. Unlike the slaves, who are controlled by their owners (and cultivated by the good owners), these people have no fixed place in the social hierarchy; they are neither (white) planter nor (black) slave. Unlike the "hands" of the North, they are not regularly employed. There is no supervision whatsoever. To a Whig like Stowe, soft on race but hard on

⁶This is an interesting insight by Stowe, as strong connections between slaves and poor white traders have been documented. Although Forret believes Southern planters overestimated the strength of these relationships (824), there was a widespread fear among elites that an underground economy among poor whites and black slaves existed and that this economy could both foster strong social ties and spark a class rebellion. Lockley argues that trust and mutual advantage were often the result of the trading relationship between slaves and poor whites (57). Southern elites may also have taken note of cross-racial class rebellions that occurred in the North. Linebaugh and Rediker have demonstrated that the social mingling of blacks and whites in taverns and mercantiles created the ground upon which rebellions could be launched. New York City responded to this threat by regular raids on waterfront taverns (174).

class, this is an impossible situation. “I always thought there ought to be a law passed to make ’em all slaves, and then there would be somebody to take care of them,” says the incorrigible Aunt Nesbit (105). This idea is echoed several times by other characters, and was obviously a suggestion that Stowe took quite seriously. In response to her aunt, Nina Gordon claims that it can’t be entirely their fault because “there’s nobody who wants to hire them. So, what can they do?” (105). To the abolitionist Stowe, the answer was clear—abolition would mean free competition of labor and poor whites could then properly be put to work. They would then be under the control of the factory-owner, rather than allowed to float on the margins of society, infecting all with their idleness.

Many chapters later we are introduced to Nina’s Uncle Gordon, a weak planter who oscillates between extreme lenience toward his slaves and an angry ferociousness when pushed by circumstances (or his wife). In the scene that introduces him, Mr. Gordon has just been informed that a family of poor whites is squatting on his land. He would rather leave them be, but his wife will hear none of it. He fumes,

It’s perfectly insufferable, what we proprietors have to bear from this tribe of creatures! . . . There ought to be hunting-parties got up to chase them down, and exterminate ’em, just as we do rats. It would be a kindness to them; the only thing you can do for them is to kill them. As for charity, or that kind of thing, you might as well throw victuals into the hollow logs as to try to feed ’em. The government ought to pass laws,—we will have laws, somehow or other,— and get them out of the state. (190)

Having met the family, however, Mr. Gordon softens—not in his general viewpoint about their worthlessness, but in his statements about extermination. He might still think that’s a good idea but he couldn’t do it personally. He chances his wife’s displeasure and finds some cheap food for the impoverished family, who “breed like rabbits” (191). But he is still dissatisfied with the arrangements. Echoing Mrs. Nesbit, Mr. Gordon wonders, “Why can’t we pass a law to take them all in with our niggers, and then they’d have some one to take care of them! Then we’d do something for them, and there’d be some hope of keeping ’em comfortable” (192-93).

Further on in the narrative, Nina and her uncle have a long conversation about the place of poor whites in a good society. Mr. Gordon has by now refined his arguments. The problem is that “among

us the hands try to set up for themselves,” and without elite leadership only misery results. Uncle John Gordon is the true Whig mouthpiece. Nina asks him to clarify what he means by “the brain ought to control the hands”:

Why, *w*e upper crust, to be sure! We educated people! We ought to have an absolute sway over the working classes, just as the brain rules the hand. It must come to that, at last—no other arrangement is possible. The white working classes can't take care of themselves, and must be put into a condition for us to take care of them.” (218)

But Nina has a rejoinder to this, as she has actually lived in the North. She claims that there are no classes in the North—that “Everybody works; and everybody seems to have a good time.” To her, “this is better than making slaves of all the working classes, or having any working classes at all” (219). What has happened here? Nina’s radical egalitarian message is surprising in the extreme, but Stowe immediately undercuts her moral authority and knowledge with her uncle’s sarcastic retort, “How wise young ladies always are! . . . Undoubtedly the millennium is begun in New Hampshire!” (219). Aunt Maria then remarkably claims that she is “as great a slave as any of the poor whites” (220) because she works all the time. The argument for equality collapses upon itself in a competition to define hard work, and the scene quickly moves to a discussion of religious camp meetings.

There are a few poor whites making a living in the interstices of plantation society, however. One of these is Abijah Skinflint, whose “establishment was a nuisance in the eyes of the neighboring planters” (231). Planters believed that Skinflint’s merchandise was property stolen from them by their slaves—“But of this nothing could be proved” (231).⁷ Interestingly, Abijah is presented as a “Yankee,” not a native Southerner, and “such a caricature of the thrifty virtue of [his] native land as to justify the aversion which the native-born Southerner entertains for the Yankee” (232). The Skinflint family thus represents both Northern stereotypes of poor whites (crafty, treacherous, mean) and the Southern stereotypes, as embodied in Abijah’s daughter Polly (licentious, lazy, also mean).

⁷See Forret and Lockley for more information on the underground trade and general “hucksterism” that flourished between poor whites and black slaves during this period.

Finally, there is the large mass of unidentified poor white men who are easily manipulated to do the bidding of planters. This social relationship, fueled by racism and whiskey, foreshadows Stowe's later depictions of the Ku Klux Klan. Frank Russel, Clayton's more realistic and cynical friend, describes the relationship between the planters and poor whites in terms of manipulation and power:

Why, our common people are so ignorant that they are in the hands of anybody who wants to use them. They are just like a swarm of bees; you can manage them by beating on a tin pan. And Tom Gordon has got the tin pan now, I fancy. Tom intends to be a swell. He is a born bully, and he'll lead a rabble. (468)

Indeed, this is exactly what happens—Tom Gordon leads a rabble (which he variously refers to as his “tools,” “hands,” and “dogs”) to attack an abolitionist minister, Abijah Skinflint's establishment, and Clayton's sister Ann's Grecian schoolhouse for slaves. By putting these words into one of the more sensible characters (who has no personal investment in what he is saying) and then by enacting Russel's prophecy, Stowe clearly agrees with this point of view. I would suggest that the reality of the antebellum South may have been much more complicated and class-ridden. There is growing historical awareness of the conflicts between land-owning and landless whites before and during the Civil War, for example (see Buck, Lockley, and Wiley). In reality, it appears that it was increasingly difficult to find landless whites interested in “patrolling” neighborhoods for the landowners. In fact, much of the work of these infamous patrols was designed to maintain a strong color line between poor whites and blacks, and thus enforce discipline among the poor generally (Hadden 104). These patrols were often ineffective (Lockley 41). In some areas of the South, especially cities like Charleston, poor whites and blacks lived in the same neighborhoods (Lockley 47). There is also evidence that some poor whites helped slaves run away and allied themselves to slave rebellions. Poor whites have been implicated in both the Denmark Vesey and the Nat Turner insurrections. An interesting letter confiscated by the Governor of Virginia at the time of the latter rebellion includes the following remark, “I do wish they may succeed, by so doing we poor whites can get work as well as slaves or collord [sic]” (Johnston 164). There was also a brisk and mutually beneficial economic relationship between slaves and poor white traders throughout

the South during this time (see Forret and Lockley).⁸ Stowe's image of an undifferentiated mass of poor whites ready and willing to do the bidding of the slave-owners, however, has become the stereotypical image of the Southern white working class ever since.⁹

Two Images of Poor Whites: Bad Blood and Barbarism

Many critics have dissected the racist themes and stereotypes Stowe employs in her novels, but equally striking are the classist themes and stereotypes. These stereotypes frequently overlap, especially in regard to presumptive character defects related to sexuality and reproduction. Both slaves and poor whites are said to be commonly overtaken by sexual appetites. Poor whites are sexual (400) and licentious (403). Blacks are animalistic (46, 245, 328), immoral (39), and closer to nature than

⁸Lockley's close study of social relations between poor whites and blacks in antebellum Georgia dispels many of the myths of white racism and racial segregation. The notion of white privilege wasn't developed until the 1850s, and was then done consciously by elite whites to prevent the types of fraternization between poor whites and black slaves that was conducive to solidarity. It was only after the war, when freed blacks and poor whites were in direct economic competition, that the color line was effectively raised between them.

The elevation in status of non-elite whites was combined with the stricter enforcement of laws pertaining to biracial contacts. Those whites who failed to join the new racial solidarity of the 1850s, for example by continuing to trade illegally with slaves or helping runaways, were dealt with more severely by civic and local authorities than they had been previously.

. . . . Demonstrating that nonslaveholders became more aware of their racial and class position is not to claim they consistently applied their new ideology. It is entirely possible that nonslaveholders were totally inconsistent in their relationships with African Americans: protesting about economic competition, while going home to a black lover or to a bar frequented by slaves.

Once the war was over and the slave population of the lowcountry freed, the old patterns of biracial interaction between nonelite whites and African Americans were not recreated. Indeed, the lack of slavery to form a clear legal distinction between white and black evidently necessitated the creation of a much more robust mental color barrier. (167-68)

⁹This is not meant to deny that some members of the white working class have been used by the Tom Gordons of history to uphold the white racist regime. The more we understand of Southern history, however, the more we see that things were always more complicated than this simple image allows. The work of Linebaugh and Roediker and others is important in demonstrating that interracial class solidarity did sometimes exist. Not all poor whites bought into the regime's racialization (see previous note).

their masters (274). Both blacks and poor whites are idlers, in contrast with Scots industriousness (36). Both black women and poor white women make terrible mothers, as they are respectively “totally unfit to govern or care” for their children (35) and “breed like rabbits” (191).

There are some crucial differences, however, in the understanding of the sources of these otherwise similar character deficiencies. Here it is important to recognize that Stowe uses poor whites as a foil against her overall more positive depiction of blacks. Stowe’s slaves often desire education and literacy (Tiff laboriously ponders over the Bible, Ann Clayton creates a school for her slaves akin to a Greek Temple, Harry’s wife keeps a clean and tidy cottage, and many other slaves learn how to read in defiance of local laws). Indeed, the conflict between this desire for civilization and Southern laws that criminalize literacy and all attempts at education goes to the heart of Stowe’s outrage at the institution of slavery. What good Southerners like Clayton and his sister Ann want is a slow and steady cultivation of the black race, with abolition as the end goal. What bad Southerners want is to keep blacks uneducated and uncivilized so that slavery need never end. In sharp contrast, poor whites are depicted as uninterested in education (96). They are “lower in ignorance and barbarism than even the slaves” (38) and lie in “a yet lower deep of degradation” than slaves (39). Whereas blacks may be like children, and so closer to God, poor whites are “violent” (403) and known for their natural inclination to “wastefulness and rapacity” (38). They are barbarians of a completely different sort, easily led by men like Tom Gordon into acts of real violence and sin. Whereas “blacks as children” signals some hope for eventual adulthood, “poor whites as barbarians” are irredeemable. They have little respect for themselves or others and certainly do not know well enough to keep to their place. Finally, poor whites are so stupid that they collude with and support planters like Tom Gordon, even though it is men like him who keep them poor in the first place. Thus, the only way for a society to function with such people in its midst is to learn how to effectively *contain* the problem. Unlike the North, Southern slave society cannot do so because it does not provide steady controlled and master-driven employment for this population. Lack of containment causes contagion and barbarism.

Blood and Contagion in Class Relations

Even though Stowe remarks upon how the lack of employment for poor whites in the South contributes to poverty, she nevertheless blames their overall degradation on personal and cultural, not structural, forces, as in her depiction of the Cripps marriage. Mrs. Cripps (“Sue”) was a young woman of “quality,” as Tiff continues to remind us, who eloped with what appeared to be a dashing young man. Unfortunately for her, Mr. Cripps was merely an “idler,” and her young life ends miserably after she bears three children in fairly quick succession. Stowe is also making a point about sexuality here. Although we may pity Sue Cripps, she intends for us to understand that Sue’s own sexual urges led her down this destructive path.¹⁰ Good women, like Nina Gordon, die before their marriages are consummated. As Sue Cripps lies dying, she warns her daughter, “don’t you ever marry! Mind what I tell you!” Tiff is quick to blame the *type* of marriage—“Dis yer comes of quality marrying these yer poor white folks! Never had no ’pinion on it, no way!” (86).

What is wrong with the Cripps marriage is that the contagion of poor white blood has infected the “quality” white folks. Happily, the children of this marriage are not doomed to lead poor white trash lives themselves, as they have access to the quality bloodline. There is hope for Fanny and Teddy, where there is no hope for Mr. Cripps or his new bride, Polly Skinflint. There is never any chance of redemption for this class of people. Nevertheless, they can still contaminate the quality, as they have with Sue Cripps. Such squatting “trash” must be removed before their illnesses affect everyone on the plantation. This is why Tiff must spirit away the children, even if this means taking them to live in the middle of the Dismal Swamp with a band of revolutionaries. Removing them from the poor white environment is crucial for their healthy development. In this book, written in the 1850s, a black man steals two white children and Stowe expects every reader to applaud this theft. There is no attempt to bring the children back to their father, because as a poor white he lies in “a yet lower deep of degradation.” The novel ends with a grateful white family (Fanny and Teddy’s Northern

¹⁰Having a child out of wedlock, if you were poor at least, was often taken as a sign of imbecility during the era of eugenicist thinking. Thus, class and reproduction have often been linked. See Bynum for a general discussion, and Leuchtenberg, Lombardo, and Rafter for specific discussions of eugenic legislation and forced sterilization of poor white women.

relations through Sue) celebrating Tiff's courage and resourcefulness in spiriting the children away from their father and stepmother.

The picture of poor whites as contaminants comes across most clearly in a series of speeches by the hypocritical aunt of Nina Gordon, Mrs. Nesbit. Surely this is one of the most unsympathetic characters of the book, so to have her voice these arguments may be Stowe's way of showing that she does not entirely agree with them. On the other hand, only a character like Mrs. Nesbit could get away with some of the impolite things she says. Stowe uses Mrs. Nesbit to critique unfounded prejudices, while allowing "founded" assertions to stand. What is objectionable in Mrs. Nesbit's speeches, in other words, is not her characterization of poor whites as shiftless and barbaric, but her haphazard application of these characterizations to people associated with poor whites, people like the faithful Tiff and the long-suffering Sue. When Mrs. Cripps (Miss Sue) dies, Tiff petitions Nina Gordon, as the nearest planter, to help with the burial. Mrs. Nesbit refuses to believe there is any truth to the story that the dead woman was of quality, or that the whole family were not "liars and thieves." "Such families," she says,

oughtn't to be encouraged; there oughtn't be a thing done for them; we shouldn't encourage them to stay in the neighborhood. They always will steal from off the plantations, and corrupt the negroes, and get drunk, and everything else that's bad. There's never a woman of decent character among them, that ever I heard of; and, if you were my daughter, I'd shouldn't let you go near them. (105)

Mrs. Nesbit hints that poor whites are of different genetic stock, producing disease and contagion from their very bodies and blood. "There's never any knowing what *these people* die of" (106, emphasis added), she claims. (Later on, we see a visible manifestation of this biological threat when our heroine suddenly dies of cholera.) When Nina chides her for making general assumptions about a family she knows nothing of, Mrs. Nesbit retorts, "I don't know that I know anything against this family in particular; but I know the *whole race*. . . . Everybody that knows anything knows exactly what they are" (106, emphasis added).

Contagion operates physically, through physical proximity, sexual contact, and finally reproduction. We see the contagion of sexuality most clearly in the character (or caricature) of Polly Skinflint, who weds

the widowed Mr. Cripps three-quarters of the way into the book. In many ways, this marriage combined and contrasted with the death of the pure Nina Gordon (whose own marriage to Clayton is thus prevented) is the turning point of the story. It is now that Tom Gordon's brutal rule comes to the *Canema* estate and Polly's licentious rule comes to the small cottage on its outskirts. Both Tom and Polly represent the morally-depraved consequences of slavery as a social system. This is quite clear in Stowe's initial passage describing Polly and her marriage to Cripps:

Evidently, she was one of the lowest of that class of poor whites whose wretched condition is not among the least of the evils of slavery. Whatever she might have been naturally,—whatever of beauty or of good there might have been in the womanly nature within her,—lay wholly withered and eclipsed under the force of an education churchless, schoolless, with all the vices of civilization without its refinements, and all the vices of barbarism without the occasional nobility by which they are sometimes redeemed. A low and vicious connection with this woman had at last terminated in marriage—such marriages as one shudders to think of, where gross animal natures come together, without even a glimmering idea of the higher purposes of that holy relation. (400)

Here, Stowe begins by situating Polly's depravity in the structure of slave society, but she ends in a vicious "blame the victim" vein. Second, by stating that Polly has all of the vices of civilization and barbarism without any of the benefits of either, she is drawing boundaries first between poor whites and white elites (who have the refinements of civilization), and second, between poor whites and blacks (who have the nobility of barbarism) (Lamont). Poor whites have the worst of both parts. Again, they are practically *useless* in Southern society, wholly without social value. Finally, contagion through sexual contact is clearly enunciated in the final section. Whatever the causes of Polly's depravity, she is now little more than a sexual being whose marriage produces shudders among those who hear about it. Images like these supported the eugenics program of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹¹

Polly's advent at the cottage is presented as a caricature. We are meant to believe, through allusion and quick references, that Polly

¹¹For more on the sterilization of poor white women during the eugenic era, see Bynum. For more on the use of documenting "bloodlines" as sources of poverty and diseases, see Rafter.

spends all of her time drinking and whoring with various men who visit her when her husband is absent; she completely neglects the children (at least until one of her visitors begins to take an unnatural interest in the very young Fanny). Of Polly's inner nature, of her thoughts or dreams, we are told nothing. It is as if Stowe could not even conceive of Polly as a human being, but saw her only as a mark of contagion. This is all the more striking as Stowe saw herself as probing multiple points of view in this, her second novel. "There is no study in human nature more interesting than the aspects of the same subject seen in the points of view of different characters," she remarks (445). She does an admirable job of presenting the points of view of Dred, Harry, and Tiff, at least in so far as she shows them to have a manly understanding of liberty at odds with the view of white planters. And yet when Stowe presents Polly she is at a total loss. All of the poor whites remain ciphers and caricatures.

Cultivation and Education

One of the ways Stowe distinguishes naturally good blacks from naturally bad whites is through their responses to education. The enlightened slaveowners, as illustrated by Edward Clayton and especially his sister Ann, believe that slavery will lose its moral justification when slaves are fully educated. It is thus a good planter's responsibility to ensure that a proper education is available. All the slaves Stowe introduces want to read and gain an education. Not so poor whites like Mr. Cripps. In perhaps his longest speech in the book he tells his wife,

I tell you there's nothing ever comes of this yer larning. It's all a sell—a regular Yankee hoax! I've always got cheated by them damn reading, writing Yankees, whenever I've traded with 'em. What's the good, I want to know! You was taught how to read when you was young—much good it's every done you! (96)

Tiff attempts to comfort "Miss Sue" by distinguishing her genteel background from that of her husband. According to Tiff, poor whites like Cripps "can't be 'spected fur to see through dese yer things like us of de old families" (97). Whereas "quality" folk like Nina Gordon and even Tiff himself (who has learned a thing or two by working for quality) are constantly depicted cultivating gardens, poor whites like Polly Skinflint and her ne'er-do-well male visitors just as constantly stomp on flowers and tear up gardens. They do not cultivate, but

destroy. This is one way poor whites contaminate those who are forced to live near them—they spread their anti-education, anti-cultivating message, happy to simply wallow in an unnatural state of sin and degradation. Blacks may be “animalistic” but for Stowe this is not always a negative thing—it sometimes means they are closer to nature, like children. Poor whites are worse than blacks because they have no excuse for their rude behavior. They consciously and willfully defy civilization.

In many ways, Tiff is the main character of the novel, moving between the world of *Canema* and the Cripps’ dysfunctional household. Tiff is a good man, loyal, desirous of education and religion, and very protective of the two children in his care, the offspring of the misalliance between his mistress, a woman from a “good family” and a poor white. Although Tiff is a kind man, his hatred of poor whites knows few bounds. He never has anything kind to say about Mr. Cripps. Tiff’s role is to protect his charges from becoming poor whites like their father. Tiff is the docile slave, who longs for a benevolent master or mistress like Nina Gordon, the owner of the nearest plantation. He is the Whig dream—a happy black who knows his place and who is grateful for a little bit of cultivation.

Tiff’s dream of education and cultivation is connected with his beliefs on good breeding and blood, thus we can see there is some connection Stowe is seeking to make here. Tiff is a small god of domesticity. He sews all the children’s clothes and makes the cabin a pleasant home by creating a beautiful garden. He constantly reminds Fanny and Teddy that they really do come from a very nice family on their mother’s side. Nina Gordon, recognizing the pleasure Tiff takes in these ancestral memories, always reminds Fanny she is a nice young *lady*, to Tiff’s delight and gratitude.

After the death of Mrs. Cripps, a bond develops between Tiff and Nina Gordon over the education and cultivation of Fanny and Teddy. Harry, Nina’s enslaved half-brother who runs her estate, agrees that the children might be teachable—that perhaps good blood runs in their veins (as it does in Harry’s). He remarks of the late Mrs. Cripps: “She always had a delicate appearance, very different from people in their circumstances generally. The children, too, are remarkably pretty, well-behaved children; and it’s a pity they couldn’t be taught something, and not grow up and go on these miserable ways of these poor whites!” (107).

Not everyone believes that poor whites should be educated, however. Recall Uncle John's laments about the state of poverty among poor white squatters. He never proposes education as a solution. In fact, according to Uncle John, Northern poor whites are spoiled by education:

What do working-men want of education?—Ruins 'em! I've heard of their learned blacksmiths bothering around, neglecting their work, to make speeches. I don't like such things. It raises them above their sphere. And there's nothing going on up in those Northern States but a constant confusion and hubbub. All sorts of heresies come from the North. . . . (289)

Southern poor whites, maintains Uncle John, "are in a devil of a fix" but only because "we haven't got 'em under yet" (289). The solution to white poverty is neither education nor industrialization, but the "contentment" that follows from complete subordination and integration into planter society (289). It is not quite clear from the context whether Stowe means to frighten her Northern readership at another example of Southern atrocities (enslavement of poor whites as well as blacks) or whether she sees subordination of an unruly and uneducable class of people as desirable. For Stowe, poor Southern whites are simply not interested in education.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated some of the harsh class stereotypes at play in popular nineteenth century fiction. Stowe's poor whites are a barbarous social contagion, over-sexed, lazy, and easily led by their passions into supporting and participating in acts of racial terror. Perhaps we can wonder how many of these class stereotypes continue to operate today. The view that poor whites are easily managed by elites (especially because of native racism) still informs much of our understanding of racial politics in the South, for example. Perhaps we should question this view. There may be very real and important differences between coercion, manipulation, and allegiance. For example, we might ask what would have happened to the poor white men if they had refused to support Tom Gordon in his campaign of racial terror. Is it possible that we make assumptions about the intelligence of poor whites, believing them incapable of understanding power relations (if I don't support the master I will be crushed), preferring to see these masses as motivated by racism? Historians remind us of the costs of noncompliance—lynching

was not used on black men alone (Buck; Forret). Patrollers were used to discipline all those who defied the racial hierarchy, including poor whites (Hadden). Even Stowe shows us how the masters could easily ruin a man like Abijah Skinflint by appropriating his stock of whiskey for their own. Is the stereotypical racism of poor whites just another example of the belief that poor whites are over-emotional, licentious, and ruled by passions not reason? Is the image of violent racist white men the cultural analogue of the image of the unruly sexualized white woman?

Stowe's *Dred* is an important work of nineteenth-century literature and American literature in general for many reasons. One aspect of its importance which has been so far overlooked, I believe, is the way in which Stowe depicts poor whites as beyond the pale of society. In many ways, Stowe's depiction is synchronous with a long line of representations of poor Southern whites as uncouth, sexual, lazy, and mean. Mr. Cripps, Polly Skinflint, Abijah Skinflint, and the mobs of angry white men are but caricatures here. But Stowe has set her representation in a particularly strong and detailed social context and she has used poor whites as important vehicles to advance her views on social structure. What is so interesting about Stowe's depiction of poor whites is that it is both comprehensive and coherent, however biased. Here we have a fully-formed theory explaining poverty that depends on a morally-depraved (white) underclass that eschews civilization. For Stowe, civilization meant a proper social hierarchy, in which poor whites had no place. Their rootlessness was dangerous and contagious. These were not docile people. They did not want to be civilized. They were emotional, brutal, and "bred like rabbits." For Stowe, abolitionism meant not only freeing the slaves but also controlling this dangerous class of white people.

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