Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel

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CHAPTER 6

The Unsentimental Woman Preacher
of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

That *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is fundamentally a sermon has been a perennial motif of commentary on the novel. In the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1852, George Frederick Holmes wrote:

Mrs. Stowe, we believe, belongs to this school of Woman’s Rights, and on this ground she may assert her prerogative to teach us how wicked are we ourselves and the Constitution under which we live. But such a claim is in direct conflict with the letter of scripture, as we find it recorded in the second chapter of the First Epistle to Timothy—“Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.” “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.”

Holmes’s review castigated Stowe’s unseemly appropriation of male authority with a biblical passage routinely invoked to deny women the pulpit (1 Tim. 2:11–12), even though Stowe had not physically addressed a congregation, led public prayer, or aligned herself with the nascent women’s rights movement and its call for women’s ordination. For Holmes, Stowe was in error not simply because she had distorted the supposed realities of Southern slavery but also because, as a woman, she had no right to speak to men as a moral teacher. Twentieth-century critics echoed the idea that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* addressed readers with a moral force associated with the pulpit. Referring to
Stowe’s childhood in the household of renowned antebellum minister Lyman Beecher, Vernon Parrington wrote that Stowe “could not hope to escape being a preacher [. . .]. She was baptized in creeds and prattled the language of sermons as the vernacular of childhood.” Late twentieth-century criticism offered little elaboration on the novel-as-sermon theme, with Ann Douglas pronouncing it a “great revival sermon” and Jane Tompkins declaring that it “provides the most obvious and compelling instance of the jeremiad since the Great Awakening.” When it came to the relationship between Stowe’s novel and religious rhetoric, the verdict was in, the case closed: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was a sermon designed to harangue the nation into righteousness. By thus comfortably containing the novel’s engagement with religion, we have failed to see how radically this novel reimagines preaching and to understand the political significance of this reimagining.

Both the religious novel par excellence of the American literary canon and the grandmother of American political novels, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a crucial site for investigating the intersection of preaching and authorial ambition. In this chapter, I move beyond the obvious generalizations that Stowe’s novel is like a sermon or can be simply, tediously preachy in order to take the novel’s relationship to preaching as itself an object of analysis. Emphasizing the centrality of preaching to Stowe’s authorial self-understanding, I trace how sermonic voice and the representation of ministers articulate the novel’s ethical and political goals. More so than perhaps any other author in this study, Stowe believed in the power of preaching—in the ability of this distinctively oratorical, religious voice to effect individual and social transformation.

Focusing on how *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* engages with preaching allows for several surprising discoveries and a new sense that however well we think we know this novel, we have only half-read it. Narrowing in on preaching demonstrates, for one, how conflicted Stowe was about claiming the traditionally masculine, culturally authoritative voice at the center of Protestant religious ritual. For as much as she wanted the power and immediacy of the preacher’s voice, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* evinces her ambivalence about adopting it, misgivings overlooked in our general failure to attend to the details of Stowe’s writing, especially its religious aspects. In fact, the authorial persona that Holmes immediately recognized and dismissed as a “woman preacher” takes form only gradually over the course of the novel. Eager to preach yet uneasy about violating gender norms, Stowe created a narrator whose sermonic interventions move steadily from the culturally feminine to the culturally masculine—from sentimentality to theological vision. Further, this theological
vision was one that challenged the boundaries of acceptable religious speech in its grappling with atheistic doubt and in its angry denunciations. Stowe’s qualms about her bold appropriation and rewriting of preaching are strikingly revealed in the afterword to the novel as it ran in the National Era, a fascinating alternate ending long overlooked in criticism on the novel. Listening for the voice of the preacher also shows how roundly the novel critiques and silences male preachers—proslavery and antislavery—and how liberally it puts sermons in the mouths of numerous humble characters, black and white alike. Far from endorsing the efforts of abolitionist clergy or even hoarding sermons for her own narrator, Stowe symbolically transferred the power to preach from the ordained clergy to ordinary people. Stowe’s characters speak heartfelt spiritual truths with passionate conviction across the dividing lines of class, gender, and race. Utopian as it may be, the democratic ubiquity of sermonic rhetoric in Uncle Tom’s Cabin carries liberatory potential that, in its defiance of social, religious, and racial hierarchies, implied new political possibilities.

Becoming an orator

As a daughter of revivalist Lyman Beecher, Stowe knew the excitement of preaching firsthand, and as the sister of seven brothers who entered the ministry, she learned to see it as a virtual family obligation. Uncle Tom’s Cabin was the logical culmination of Stowe’s long apprenticeship to a de facto ministerial vocation. From an early age, Stowe had seized opportunities to preach to her peers. Biographer Joan Hedrick explains how Stowe, after experiencing conversion under one of her father’s sermons at age thirteen, began writing long notes to the other girls at Hartford Female Seminary, counseling them to seek conversion if they had not yet experienced it and encouraging those already saved to follow Christ’s teachings. When Harriet’s sister Catharine temporarily left the school under the combined care of the school’s teachers, Harriet began to lead classes, faculty meetings, and prayer meetings, emerging in her sister’s absence “as the leading voice of the school.” She wrote to Catharine: “I found my confidence growing so fast that I actually stood and looked in the eyes of all and ‘speechified’ nearly half an hour.” The next week, she added, “I shall become quite an orator if you do not come home too soon.” The fear that Catharine will indeed come home “too soon” suggests Stowe’s desire for just such a transformation. A few months later, at age eighteen, she declared to her brother, “You see my dear George that I was made for a preacher—indeed I can scarce keep my
letters from turning into sermons. . . . Indeed in a certain sense it is as much my vocation to preach on paper as it is that of my brothers to preach viva voce.” Stowe marked her majority by claiming for her writing the same cultural significance and divine imperative as that of her ordained father and brothers.

Actual preaching was, of course, virtually off-limits to respectable white women. The declarations at Seneca Falls and Rochester in 1848 called for churches to allow women the pulpit, but the ordination of women was still anomalous in the elite, white, Northeastern denominations. In fact, the 1830s and 1840s saw a backlash against women preachers even in previously tolerant denominations such as the Freewill Baptists, Methodists, and African Methodists. Female preaching was particularly anathema to Lyman Beecher, who in disputes with Finney vigorously condemned women’s right to preach. Critiquing Finney’s many supposed abuses of orderly worship, which included allowing women to pray publicly at revivals, Beecher brandished the two well-worn New Testament texts traditionally used to justify exclusive male leadership in the church: 1 Timothy 2:11–12 (the same verse Holmes would cite) and “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak” (1 Cor. 14:34). He argued that even if the Bible showed women praying in public, as in 1 Corinthians 11:3–16, biblical women did so only under the “special guidance of the spirit; a preternatural impulse, which amounted to inspiration.” No woman, he said, could address a mixed gathering without an unbecoming loss of “female delicacy.” Actresses were the self-evident argument against allowing women to appear on a public stage.

In light of such censure, Stowe’s notorious assertion that “God wrote” Uncle Tom’s Cabin reads as an attempt to disarm paternal disapproval by claiming the “special guidance of the spirit” that her father had relegated to apostolic times. Unlike some of her female contemporaries, Stowe never sought to address an actual congregation, but by the mid-1850s she was challenging the conservatism of those who would deny women the pulpit. A few years after the Congregationalists finally offered a woman, the eloquent abolitionist Antoinette Brown, a pastorate in 1852, Stowe came to the embattled preacher’s defense: “Can any one tell us why it should be right and proper for Jenny Lind to sing to two thousand people ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth’ and improper for Antoinette Brown to say it?” While staying within the bounds of print, Stowe knew firsthand the difficulties facing a woman who desired to move audiences with the voice of a preacher. Uncle Tom’s Cabin, her first novel, would dramatize her conflicted relationship with this supremely authoritative form of address.
From sentimentalist to visionary

The narrative voice of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is remarkably supple. Stowe plays the local colorist when sketching the Kentucky bar and the Quaker settlement, the humorist when describing dilapidated Western log roads, the ethnographer when making racialist generalizations. But the narrator’s most distinctive strain is one of passionate intensity, in which the story pauses as the narrator strives to shape the reader’s beliefs and values. Many of these fervent narratorial interventions are in sermonic voice, drawing together oratorical form, biblical language, and a tone of conviction. This sermonic voice turns out to be more complex—and less sentimental—than we might expect. It shifts over the course of the novel from sentimental to prophetic, from an acceptably feminine tone to a controversial masculine one—an evolution suggesting that Stowe’s confidence, and perhaps her religious and political frustration as well, grew as her story unfolded in the *National Era* from June 5, 1851 to April 1, 1852.

One of the narrator’s earliest and most quoted sermonic interjections occurs as Tom gazes upon his sleeping children the night before leaving the Shelby plantation. Characteristic of sermonizing early in the story, this passage calls upon readers to sympathize with suffering, especially that of slaves:

> Sobs, heavy, hoarse and loud, shook the chair, and great tears fell through his fingers on the floor; just such tears, sir, as you dropped into the coffin where lay your first-born son; such tears, woman, as you shed when you heard the cries of your dying babe. For, sir, he was a man,—and you are but another man. And, woman, though dressed in silk and jewels, you are but a woman, and, in life’s great straits and mighty griefs, ye feel but one sorrow!13

The markers of sermonic voice are visible in the passage’s parallelism, tone of certainty, and universalizing rhetoric about “life’s great straits” and “mighty griefs.” While politically progressive in its summoning of sympathy across racial lines (if ethically problematic in its collapsing of difference in that “one sorrow”), this passage stays within the bounds of acceptable discourse for a woman writer. The sermonic language is not yet theological or doctrinal, but rather an emotional plea for fellow-feeling. In short, it is sentimental, in the best sense of the word.

As the story grew, Stowe grew bolder as a preacher, with the narratorial interventions taking on an increasingly theological and less sentimental cast. Her greater freedom in preaching may have been due to the enthusiastic
response of her original National Era readers, who were sending her fan mail and writing appreciative letters to editor Gamaliel Bailey. Assured that she was preaching to the choir, as it were, she engaged more liberally in the language of religious exhortation. For instance, when Mrs. Shelby weeps with Aunt Chloe and Uncle Tom before Haley arrives to transport Tom, the narrator exclaims: “O, ye who visit the distressed, do ye know that everything your money can buy, given with a cold, averted face, is not worth one honest tear shed in real sympathy?”

This line in effect rewrites the gospels, borrowing the address and tone of such verses as Matthew 6:30 ("O ye of little faith") and Matthew 16:3 ("O ye hypocrites"), along with Jesus' trademark style of hyperbolic antithesis asserting the worthlessness of material wealth. “[E]verything your money can buy” set against “one honest tear” ensconces sentimentalism in the authoritative syntactic structure of apothegms like “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God;” or “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”

Harnessing the most morally commanding style available, the narrator has progressed from local appeals for sympathy to pronouncements about its inherent spiritual value, thus crossing the line into the masculine realm of preaching.

Stowe assigns the narrator a male preaching voice even more freely once well into the story. When Haley sells Lucy’s baby on the Mississippi and Lucy puts an end to her grief by jumping overboard, the narrator steps in to comfort the reader: "Patience! patience! ye whose hearts swell indignant at wrongs like these. Not one throb of anguish, not one tear of the oppressed, is forgotten by the Man of Sorrows, the Lord of Glory. In his patient, generous bosom he bears the anguish of a world. Bear thou, like him, in patience, and labor in love; for sure as he is God, 'the year of his redeemed shall come.'"

Baldly sermonic, this passage incorporates repetitive theological diction, the parallelism and anaphora of oratory, and biblical quotation (Isa. 63:4) as it tries to convince readers that a loving God will triumph over evil. Such moments may frustrate readers anxious to get on with the story, but they are less islands of stasis than attempts to situate the novel within the larger narrative of divine redemption implicit in every sermon. As Hortense Spillers has put it, “[T]here is only one sermonic conclusion, and that is, the ultimate triumph over defeat and death that the Resurrection promises.” By alluding to the Israelite concept of the “year of his redeemed,” Stowe suggested that the slaves’ redemption would occur not merely at the Resurrection but also in this life. She said, in effect, that though slaves suffered unspeakable horrors now, someday—and the narrator’s urgency suggests it might be soon—they would be physically, tangibly redeemed.
What is most striking about the “Patience! patience!” passage is that, as one of the most sermonic moments in an antislavery novel, its primary goal is not to exhort readers to identify with the slave or to help bring about an end to slavery. The passage silently assumes the reader’s sympathy for the slave, perhaps because Stowe trusted that by this point in the novel, she had adequately trained her readers in such emotional identification. Instead, the sermonic voice takes on the pressing theological problem raised by the everyday tragedies of slavery. How could a loving God allow such suffering? Slavery, like the Holocaust, threatened a crisis of faith for those who sought to empathize with its victims. Stowe explained in the novel’s Concluding Remarks that the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law jolted her into recognizing that she could no longer count on “advancing light and civilization” to defeat slavery, and the rhetoric of the “Patience! patience!” passage fronts this grim realization not with a call for readers to redouble their antislavery efforts but with a strenuous affirmation that God himself will step into the breach. Such rhetoric manifests both Stowe’s frustration with this seemingly inextirpable institution and, more surprisingly, an existential anxiety about whether God acts in the world at all.

In fact, the salient feature of the sermonic moments in the last two-thirds of the novel is that they work valiantly to defend God against charges of indifference. Stowe’s sermonizing for most of the book, then, reflects not a feminized sentimentality but a masculinized theological vision with an emphasis on God’s future action. For example, the night before Emmeline is put on the auction block, the narrator tries to make sense of her mother Susan’s situation:

“But she has no resort but to pray; and many such prayers to God have gone up from those same trim, neatly-arranged, respectable slave-prisons,—prayers which God has not forgotten, as a coming day shall show; for it is written, ’Whoso causeth one of these little ones to offend, it were better for him that a mill-stone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depths of the sea.’”

Sermonic voice announces itself in the oratorical repetition of “prayers,” in the biblical phraseology of “a coming day shall show” and “for it is written,” and in the quotation from Matthew 18:6. The passage is dogmatic in its assurance that God has not forgotten the slave and in its threat that God will punish those who cause “little ones to offend”—or to put it without euphemism, girls to be raped. Despite the warning of divine judgment, which the novel has made clear applies to North and South alike, the overall effect of
the passage is as much comfort as terror, since a punitive God is at least an active one. As Joshua Bellin has argued, the novel is “activated by a profound theological despair,” a despair he links to the prospect of “facing a world in which unendurable atrocities must be endured and in which worse atrocities may loom in the future”—in other words, a world in which God does not and will not act.21 Stowe’s battle against this looming despair defines the narrator’s sermonizing for most of the novel.

Two more examples can illustrate the point. On one of La Belle Rivière’s stops, a woman rushes aboard and throws her arms around her chained husband. The narrator soon cuts away: “But what needs tell the story, told too oft,—every day told,—of heart-strings rent and broken,—the weak broken and torn for the profit and convenience of the strong! It needs not to be told;—every day is telling it,—telling it, too, in the ear of One who is not deaf, though he be long silent.”22 This is a strange passage, oratorical in its rhetorical question and in the repetition of “told” and “telling,” yet more like a soliloquy than a sermon, as if Stowe addressed not antebellum readers but her own frustration at God’s apparent absence. Deprecating the potential efficacy of her own story—“It needs not to be told”—she directed attention to the bitter drama of slavery played out daily before a seemingly apathetic God. Stowe heightened her rhetoric here less to convince her readers to renounce slavery than to guard herself and them against the nightmare of divine indifference.

The defense of God recurs as the narrator meditates on the Mississippi at the beginning of the chapter that introduces Little Eva: “Ah! would that [the waters of the Mississippi] did not also bear along a more fearful freight,—the tears of the oppressed, the sighs of the helpless, the bitter prayers of the poor, ignorant hearts to an unknown God—unknown, unseen and silent, but who will yet come out of his place to save all the poor of the earth!”23 Stowe here affirms that God will eventually save the suffering slaves but dwells on his inaccessibility: he is “unknown, unseen and silent.” The passage betrays an anguish at God’s hiddenness that one would sooner expect from Melville than from the daughter of Lyman Beecher. It is as if she poured more of herself than we have realized into the frustrated, angry, religiously skeptical George Harris, and the angst spilled out in narratorial asides that could only partially quell the fear that God would not act or, worse, that there was no God to act. In light of the horror and seeming intractability of slavery, the affirmations of divine justice that characterize the narrator’s preaching in the latter half of the book should be read not as glib reassurances grounded in unshakable faith, but as a continual effort of the will.
“Concluding Remarks”

Stowe’s rhetoric of theological vision crescendos in the “Concluding Remarks,” a term itself sermonic—Lyman Beecher often ended his printed discourses with “To Conclude,” Finney, his with “Conclusion” or “Remarks.” After Stowe, reasserting herself as author, launched a barrage of exhortations calling for readers to renounce slavery (even while telling them it was enough to “feel right”), she finally linked her prophecies of divine intervention to her call for political reform in the novel’s last few paragraphs. What is distinctive about this ending is its excess—the fact that it sounds even angrier and more threatening than a traditional jeremiad or other antebellum preaching. To be sure, Stowe’s closing passage bears numerous resemblances to the American jeremiad as Sacvan Bercovitch defines it. It conflates sacred and secular (the interchangeable hailing of “America,” “the Church of Christ,” the “nation,” and “Christians”), pleads for America’s repentance, and wields the familiar trope of America as the new Israel through references to biblical prophecy, most notably, Malachi 3 and 4 and Isaiah 63. But Stowe differed from other American Jeremiahs in asserting not that America had to reform itself because it had a special mission to the world, but that its slavery crisis was a global force threatening apocalypse: “This is an age of the world when nations are trembling and convulsed. A mighty influence is abroad, surging and heaving the world, as with an earthquake. And is America safe? Every nation that carries in its bosom great and unredressed injustice has in it the elements of this last convulsion.” As Larry Reynolds points out, these lines allude to the socialist uprisings in Europe at mid-century. She interpreted these upheavals, as well as U.S. slavery, through an apocalyptic framework much more menacing than the comparatively sober postmillennialism of New England Calvinism, which held that Christ would return to Earth after the Church brought about a millennial reign of peace and prosperity and that the reformation of the world was a special burden of the Church in America. Against postmillennialism, Stowe warned that the “signs of the times” augured an imminent, universal day of reckoning: “can you forget that prophecy associates, in dread fellowship, the day of vengeance with the year of his redeemed?” Although Stowe’s final paragraphs revolve around a series of rhetorical questions similar, as Helen Petter Westra notes, to the “deliberately hard-hitting interrogatives found in the application portion of many Calvinist sermons,” they outdid the vast majority of such sermons in their apocalypticism and in their attempt to conjure the “theological terror” that James Baldwin took—with perhaps too immediate a sense of these final paragraphs—as the book’s primary emotional energy. Such lurid biblical
language as “that day shall burn as an oven” is hard to come by in the sermons of orthodox nineteenth-century preachers such as Stowe’s father.30

One of the most unusual features of Stowe’s peroration is that it concludes with a threat, a rhetorical strategy rare in Protestant preaching and one that in this case underscored that the longstanding problem of slavery had reached a crisis point. An antebellum sermon’s last sentence or two typically reminded listeners of God’s love and mercy, reiterated the path of salvation, invoked God’s blessing, or otherwise struck a note of hope. Stowe briefly made this gesture—“A day of grace is yet held out to us”—but then thundered to a close, warning readers that “injustice and cruelty shall bring on nations the wrath of Almighty God!” 31 Nineteenth-century preachers seldom ended an address on such gloomy terms. For instance, Lyman Beecher concluded one of his own quasi-political discourses, an election sermon to the Connecticut legislature, with “Jesus Christ is going on from conquering and to conquer; nor will he turn from His purpose, or cease from His work, until He hath made all things new.” 32 Even Puritan jeremiads typically ended more hopefully than Uncle Tom’s Cabin, as when Increase Mather’s sermon “The Day of Trouble Is Near,” coupled a threat with the means of avoiding its fulfillment: “And let us remember the words of the Lord Jesus, Luke 21.36. Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be counted worthy to escape all these things which shall come to pass.” 33 Stowe defied with impunity the convention that ministers close sermons by showing listeners the way to God’s grace. Confronting a national crisis seemingly impervious to the usual rhetorical appeals, she crafted a hyperbolic sermonic rhetoric designed to shock and frighten the nation into action.

But then, in the novel’s final installment in the National Era, Stowe retreated from this threatening persona. Her afterword to the paper’s readers, which appeared immediately after the Concluding Remarks in the April 1, 1852 issue, betrayed a certain anxiety about the stern rhetoric of the Concluding Remarks’ final paragraphs. It was as though she had scrambled down from the pulpit and settled into Rachel Halliday’s hearthside rocker:

The “Author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin” must now take leave of a wide circle of friends, whose faces she has never seen, but whose sympathies, coming to her from afar, have stimulated and cheered her in her work.

The thought of the pleasant family circles that she has been meeting in spirit weekly has been a constant refreshment to her, and she cannot leave them without a farewell.

In particular, the dear little children who have followed her story have her warmest love. Dear children, you will one day be men and women; and
she hopes that you will learn from this story always to remember and pity the poor and oppressed, and, when you grow up, show your pity by doing all you can for them. Never, if you can help it, let a colored child be shut out of school, or treated with neglect and contempt, because of his color. Remember the sweet example of Little Eva, and try to feel the same regard for all that she did; and then, when you grow up, we hope that the foolish and unchristian prejudice against people, merely on account of their complexion, will be done away with.

Farewell, dear children, till we meet again.

Separated from the closing jeremiad by only the shortest of printer’s lines, this demure, feminized afterword placed the author firmly within the family circle. Retreating from the male authority of judgmental biblical quotation, she aligned herself instead with the feminine authority of maternal affection by offering the “dear little children” who “have her warmest love” the moralism of children’s literature: remember and pity the poor and oppressed, do not hold a prejudice against colored children, remember the model child of the story. The final line reinforced her role as a symbolic mother. The effect of this authorial postscript, nearly invisible in the scholarship on Uncle Tom’s Cabin, is to subvert the preceding jeremiad by transforming it from direct address into a mimesis of direct address, a mere playing with sermonic voice. The wizard behind the curtain turns out to be only a little lady with a pen. Because the final installment of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in the National Era ran twelve days after the book version appeared, it is tempting to speculate that as the novel began to circulate among readers, Stowe sought to distance herself from its fiery rhetoric. Perhaps the most generous reading of Stowe’s strange, forgotten dual ending is that she was trying to have it both ways—to claim the masculine authority of preaching and the feminine authority of motherhood. If the masculine and feminine modes of speech unsettle one another, they also reveal both as literary performances capable of operating independently of the writer’s gender. The dual-gendered ending suggests that on the page, one can speak both as a man and as a woman and so attain a fullness of voice—and, theoretically, authority—unavailable to reformers obliged to address audiences in person.

Disowning the men in black

Far from an afterthought, the frustration with preaching-as-usual visible at the end of the Concluding Remarks defines the novel. Despite Stowe’s
loyalties to the Beecher clan, the novel mocks, silences, and marginalizes the preachers in its pages.35 The critique of proslavery preaching is blatant, occurring primarily through two scenes in which a married couple reviews a sermon at home, a situation that reinforces the novel’s well-known argument for the moral authority of mothers. In the first scene, Mrs. Shelby rejects her husband’s attempt to cite “Mr. B.’s sermon, the other Sunday” as justification for selling Tom and Harry and censures all proslavery preaching: “Ministers can’t help the evil, perhaps,—can’t cure it, any more than we can,—but defend it!—it always went against my common sense.”36 Her critique deflates all preaching on the slavery question—proslavery preaching for defying common sense, antislavery preaching for its apparent futility. Preaching is again tried before a domestic tribunal at the St. Clare home, when Marie paraphrases the “splendid” sermon of “Dr. G—” on the divinely ordained social order: “that some were born to rule and some to serve, and all that, you know.” Marie’s languid recital of Dr. G—’s racist ideology causes Augustine to fume, and he condemns proslavery religion as being “less scrupulous, less generous, less just, less considerate for man” than his own unredeemed nature. St. Clare’s sermonic fervor demolishes the second-hand bromides of Dr. G—, but it is ultimately his mother who deserves credit for his moral reasoning. The scriptural citations of proslavery sermons have no weight with him because, he says, “The Bible was my mother’s book.”37 As with Mrs. Shelby, the faith of pious mothers carries more moral authority than the sermons of a corrupt clergy.

Stowe’s most audacious critique of proslavery preaching was the note in Chapter 12 attributing to Philadelphia clergyman Joel Parker the statement that slavery contained “no evils but such as are inseparable from any other relations in social and domestic life.” Alleging that his words had been taken out of context, Parker made his grievances public in the New York Observer, and between May and November 1852, he and Stowe sparred in print—he in the proslavery Observer, she in the antislavery Independent. Hedrick points out that although slavery was the main issue, Parker was also rankled by the “audacity of a woman daring to publicly challenge a man and a minister.”38

When, during this debate, the editor of the New York Observer remarked on the “decidedly anti-ministerial” bent of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, he was likely noticing more than its critique of proslavery preaching.39 The novel defines itself against preaching as an institution by never showing an antislavery minister in the pulpit or crediting the Northern churches for participating in the abolitionist movement. Only one antislavery minister appears, briefly. As Haley takes Tom south on La Belle Rivière, a clergyman tells a group of women discussing slavery that Providence has intended the “African race” to
be kept “in a low condition,” sententiously citing, “‘Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be.’” A young man who turns out to be a clergyman interrupts, “All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them. I suppose . . . that is scripture, as much as ‘Cursed be Canaan.’” It is significant that this antislavery clergyman achieves authority precisely insofar as he distances himself from his profession. His invocation of the golden rule is devoid of theological embellishment or oratorical style, and in contrast with the proslavery clergyman, who signals his interest in receiving all due respect through his black outfit and grave demeanor, the antislavery clergyman wears no identifying garb and does not mention his clerical status. When the steamboat docks and a woman runs aboard to her chained husband, the young minister rebukes Haley for his trade: “Look at those poor creatures! Here I am, rejoicing in my heart that I am going home to my wife and child; and the same bell which is a signal to carry me onward towards them will part this poor man and his wife forever. Depend upon it, God will bring you into judgment for this.”40 By having the clergyman cite as antislavery evidence his own domestic affections—and, too, with a “thick utterance” that implies strong emotion, even welling tears—Stowe feminized him, effectively subordinating him to her own more masculine, visionary narrator. It is also telling that Stowe limited the clergyman to condemning the slave-trader. Careful herself to show how North and South, slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike were complicit in the system—“But who, sir, makes the trader?”—she kept the clergyman focused on the obvious scoundrel.41 By thus domesticating and circumscribing the antislavery minister’s censure, Stowe nodded to the clergy while reserving to herself the power of a more comprehensive critique.

Democratizing sermonic voice

The flip side of Stowe’s reluctance to endorse the clergy was her commitment to the sermonic speech of the laity. Over and above the novel’s many scenes of impassioned testimony—most notably those involving Eliza, George Harris, and Augustine St. Clare—a surprising number of characters speak in sermonic voice. The leading lay preachers are, of course, Eva and Tom, both of whom derive their moral authority from an intuitive evangelical spirituality and their confrontations with death. Pained that slaves should suffer and ultimately martyred to her sorrow over slavery, the Little Evangelist comes into her own as a preacher when she is about to die: “Listen to what I say. I want to speak to you about your souls [. . . ].”42 Her salvific message is to the
point: her listeners must pray and read the Bible (or have it read to them) so that they can become angels and join her in heaven. As one critic puts it, “The most clearly professional of Victorian preaching heroines is little Eva on her deathbed.” But of course Eva is professional only insofar as she has a polished rhetoric of exhortation; the word implies a performativity alien to her strenuously affirmed romantic innocence.

If Tom, the novel’s other leading preacher, irritates today’s readers, it is in part because he, too, lacks performativity, despite being a grown man. Yet for all Tom’s innocence, his preaching is a disruptive force with powerful political implications. On the surface, his piety looks innocuous. “A sort of patriarch in religious matters” among the Shelby slaves, he preaches with a “simple, hearty, sincere style . . . [that] might have edified even better educated persons.” Haley even cites Tom’s preaching ability as one of his assets as he tries to close the deal with St. Clare. Although Tom never delivers an actual sermon in the novel, he does offer earnest, biblically informed guidance to an astounding array of characters—to Chloe, young George Shelby, Lucy, Prue, St. Clare, Cassy, Sambo and Quimbo, and Legree. His fearless speeches to his masters are arresting for how they claim moral and spiritual authority over whites. Before leaving the Shelby farm, Tom commands young George to obey his parents, especially his mother, and to “‘Member yer Creator in the days o’ yer youth.” At the St. Clares’, he pleads for his master’s soul with tears and prayers and countless gestures of humility, but he never stops citing Scripture or speaking from a position of spiritual superiority. And at the Red River plantation, he presents Legree with the ultimate sermonic threat. He declares that his own troubles will soon be over but that “if ye don’t repent, yours won’t never end!” Holding the note, Stowe extended this climactic, virtual “Go to hell!” by comparing Tom’s outburst to a “strange snatch of heavenly music” and noting the “blank pause” of Legree’s mute outrage. Tom’s exhortations to his white masters make visible the radical potential of sermonic voice—how it licenses a reversal of power in which spiritual strength triumphs over social conditioning and physical force.

Stowe affirmed a connection between spiritual power and social power by restoring Tom as a religious patriarch among the slaves. “[M]any would gather together to hear from him of Jesus” on Sundays, and Cassy takes to calling him “Father Tom.” Like Eva, Tom achieves his greatest rhetorical authority on his deathbed. When Sambo and Quimbo beg him to tell them about Jesus, he “poured forth a few energetic sentences of that wondrous One,—his life, his death, his everlasting presence, and power to save.” They weep and beg for mercy. Through such scenes, Stowe suggested the superiority of all heartfelt, untutored sermonic rhetoric over professional sermons.
Stowe bestowed the privilege of sermonic voice not on Tom and Eva alone, but also on a host of non-ordained characters. She thus implicitly argued for a democratic religious empowerment in which ordinary Christians were perpetually ready to preach to one another. Mrs. Shelby illustrates this idea when she challenges her husband’s decision to sell Tom and Harry; Mrs. Bird when she tells her Senator husband that “[o]beying God never brings on public evils”; Augustine St. Clare when he denounces slave-holding ideology to Marie and Ophelia, occasionally with biblical flourishes incongruous with his avowed skepticism. Even more radical than these scenes of domestic sermonizing are the examples of preaching across color lines. In counterpoint to Tom’s sermons to his masters, the novel presents whites as having a special burden to offer their own religious conviction as an antidote to black despair. Eva performs this function for Topsy, but the duty bears on adults as well. When Mr. Wilson hears George Harris’s testimony, he counsels him to trust in the Lord, and when George asks whether there is any God to trust in, Mr. Wilson declares, “There is—there is; clouds and darkness are around about him, but righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne. There’s a God, George,—believe it; trust in Him, and I’m sure He’ll help you. Everything will be set right,—if not in this life, in another.” Biblical, oratorical speech invests the timid, rather pathetic Mr. Wilson with a “temporary dignity and authority,” and George verifies the impromptu sermon’s efficacy: “Thank you for saying that, my good friend; I’ll think of that.” Sermonic speech is again aimed at George’s lack of faith at the Quaker settlement, when Simeon describes his own faith in highly metaphorical biblical language then tells George, “Put thy trust in him and, no matter what befalls thee here, he will make all right hereafter.” The narrator affirms that had some “easy, self-indulgent exhorter” made this speech, it might have seemed only a “pious and rhetorical flourish”; the fact that Simeon has risked fines and imprisonment makes his rhetoric credible. With Eva preaching to the slaves, Tom preaching to his masters, and Mr. Wilson and Simeon preaching to George, the novel argues for religious exhortation as a two-way street. In moments of crisis, whites and blacks are called to offer each other the gift of an eloquent testimony of faith. Stowe’s democratization of sermonic address is a utopian vision in which individuals who share responsibility for one another’s moral and religious well-being supplant professional preachers. Sermonic speech, she implied, is most effective not when pronounced by silver-tongued ministers such as her father and famous brother but when gasped out by ordinary people—black or white, high or low—in intense, soul-baring moments.

Stowe’s idealization of the inspired, uneducated religious speaker in Uncle Tom’s Cabin flirts with Methodism, Quakerism, and other forms of laity-
empowering Protestantism without committing itself to an open critique of orthodoxy. In taking the Protestant tenet of the “priesthood of all believers” more seriously than most of her coreligionists in the white, theologically conservative Northeastern churches, Stowe advocated an equality of personhood that challenged not simply the institution of slavery, but also, implicitly, the political subjugation of blacks and women. The novel forces a question: why should those who know the truth and who can speak it so well be denied a voice in the public sphere? The fact that neither Stowe nor her narrator directly articulates this question cannot erase the radical political subtext.

Anyone who has taught Uncle Tom’s Cabin to undergraduates knows how thoroughly they resist its preachiness, despite their fascination with its Christian themes and symbols. Students critique Stowe for telling, not showing, for interrupting the action, for bludgeoning the reader with her evangelical message. Nor have professional critics been much better as they have effectively dismissed the novel’s sermonizing as beneath or beyond explication. Looking closely at how Stowe appropriated sermonic voice reveals striking variations in tone and function. Although critics often lump together the novel’s various religious elements and align them with its domesticity and sentimentalism under the phrase “religion of the heart,” much of Stowe’s sermonizing is harsh, desperate, and unsentimental. Yet her afterword in the National Era serialization suggested an author frightened by her own daring, so eager to reintroduce herself as a woman and a mother that she risked making the novel’s closing jeremiad sound like playacting. Perhaps we see Stowe most at her ease when she is preaching through her characters, claiming the right and duty to speak not for herself alone but for all those who lacked official venues.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin reveals the power of a religious novel to overshadow actual preaching. No sermon matched it for worldwide influence: ten thousand copies sold in two weeks and three hundred thousand in the first year in the United States; a staggering 1.5 million copies sold the first year in Britain; and, of course, abridgments, stage adaptations, poems, songs, commemorative plates, translation into dozens of languages, and more. The introduction to the 1852 London edition announced Stowe’s triumph over the usual religious fare: “Those who sleep over other religious books, or who snore at church, can pass the midnight hour as they peruse these pages without a nod.” Stowe had not only fulfilled her early ambition to “preach on paper” but had outperformed the preachers on their own turf. As Ann Douglas writes, Stowe was “an artist whose achievement was to beat daddy at his own game.” The title page of an edition of Lyman Beecher’s “Lectures on Intemperance” published in England in the mid-1850s bears witness to her victory. His name as author is followed by the line, “FATHER OF
Mrs. Beecher Stowe”—the patriarch identified through the daughter, the preacher through the novelist.

For as sweet as this father-daughter reversal is, we must liberate Stowe from her status as daughter altogether if we are to understand the cultural significance of her sermonizing in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. We should see her instead in a broader religious context—alongside, for instance, America’s foremost antislavery preacher, Theodore Parker. A religious and political radical who broke from his fellow Unitarians for denying the importance of miracles to religious belief and who sheltered fugitive slaves in his home, Parker preached to thousands each Sunday and lectured to more than fifty thousand people a year on the lyceum circuit. Stowe and Parker were polar opposites theologically, but both stretched the limits of antebellum religious discourse by condemning slavery with unusual vehemence. Parker’s sermon “The Chief Sins of the People,” delivered a week after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, mocked the preachers cowed by slaveholders. He parroted their evasions—“My modesty forbids me to speak. Let us pray!”—and denounced anyone who would return a man to slavery: “[T]o send a man into slavery is worse than to murder him. . . . I cannot comprehend that in any man, not even in a hyena. . . . I can only understand it in a devil!” Read against Parker’s righteous indignation, Stowe’s efforts to rouse her audience to reject slavery by stirring up their emotions do not seem particularly evangelical or feminine. If *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* comes across as overwrought, it may be only because Stowe had found the key to effective antislavery preaching, regardless of theology or gender.

The antislavery preaching of even so charismatic a figure as Parker reveals the impossibility of literally preaching to a nation—and the gap novels could fill. Parker once wrote to a young man that he knew of “no better position than the minister’s to move the nation,” but his sermon against the Fugitive Slave Law highlights the difficulty of addressing a national audience while standing in Boston. His final paragraphs began, in turn, “O Boston!, “O Massachusetts, noble state!, “America . . . !,” yet the sermon never quite transcended its provincial origins. Despite the fact that he followed the tradition of the American jeremiad in recalling America to its historic sense of mission—“Hast thou too forgot thy mission here [ . . . ]?”—his loyalties were too obviously with New England, which he asserted was “once the soul, although not the body of America.” Full of righteous zeal, he lacked all patience with the South and, unlike Stowe, never addressed Southerners directly. Realistically, he could hardly aspire to. Novels had wings as sermons did not. Ministers might imagine they were “moving the nation,” but on divisive sectional issues, the need to rally a primary audience—the people who looked up at
them each week—precluded the multiple rhetorics necessary for addressing far-flung audiences. Although *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* never entirely sheds its Northern parochialism either, it could combine the religious passion of a preacher with a fullness of voice and perspective impossible to achieve in the pulpit.

Stowe made the most of her constraints. Relegated to preaching in the pages of fiction, she pushed the rhetorical limits of political sermonizing and symbolically empowered women and African Americans by having them preach to white men. If our appreciation of her boldness is hampered by the novel’s inescapable, embarrassing racialism, it is worth remembering that the novel also inspired and provoked numerous nineteenth-century African Americans to create their own preachy novels. The next chapter turns to one of the most immediate and rhetorically savvy of these responses to Stowe.