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Title	Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Irish National Tale
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Editor(s)	Kohn, Denise M. Meer, Sarah Todd, Emily
Publication date	2006-01
Original citation	Ó Gallchoir, Clíona (2006) 'Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Irish National Tale' In: Sarah Meer; Denise M. Kohn, Emily Todd (Eds.). Transatlantic Stowe: Harriet Beecher Stowe and European Culture. Iowa : Iowa University Press.
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	http://uipress.uiowa.edu/books/2006-fall/trasto.htm Access to the full text of the published version may require a subscription.
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Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Irish National Tale¹

At the turn of the eighteenth century in Ireland, the novel form was successfully exploited by women as a means of commenting not only on their own relationship to society, but also on the relationship between Great Britain and Ireland, two badly matched partners in a legislative union established in 1801. In fact, the novelists Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) were the most successful of all Irish writers in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, becoming closely associated with the "Irish" or "National" Tale.²

The influence of these Irish models on the early novel in America, particularly the novel as authored by women, is evident in the fact that one of America's earliest women writers, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, dedicated her first novel, *A New-England Tale* (1822), to Edgeworth, and made numerous references to Edgeworth both in her novels and in letters and journals, describing for instance receiving a letter from Edgeworth following the publication of *A New-England Tale* as "quite an epoch in my quiet, humble life" (*Life and Letters* I: 161).

The pioneering studies of early American women's writing acknowledged the influence of figures such as Edgeworth as significant on the development of women writers in America, but gave no consideration to the specifically Irish dimension of this influence. Nina Baym, for instance, unfortunately includes Edgeworth among a list of "English women moralists" whose works formed the "childhood reading" of the first generation of American women novelists, contributing towards a literary tradition which "then developed indigenously in America"

(*Woman's Fiction* 29-30). It is nonetheless increasingly evident that the distinct contribution of Irish – as opposed to English or British – women novelists to nineteenth-century American women's writing deserves special consideration. Writing before Walter Scott, Edgeworth and Owenson had already successfully challenged the definition of the novel as exclusively domestic or romantic in focus. Their concern to address the complex relations between the partners in the recently created "United Kingdom" also created a new space within the novel for representations of and reflections on national identity. Although politically and stylistically at odds, both Edgeworth and Owenson shared a commitment to imagining this new political community as shaped by female concerns and female agency, and as such their work constitutes an important source of influence for nineteenth-century American women's writing, including the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Edgeworth has been acknowledged as an important influence on Stowe's achievements in social realism, and in the observation and representation of characteristic modes of speech in particular, with Joan Hedrick remarking that Edgeworth, "whose novels were part of the literary culture into which Harriet Beecher was born," was the most significant model on which Stowe would have drawn in this regard (210). But the emphasis on Edgeworth's role as a pioneer in the field of social realism and the representation of regional speech and manners fails to take full account of the complex political intervention that her novels (like those of Owenson) were designed to make in the fractured public sphere of the "United Kingdom," thus masking the extent to which these Irish novels provided a model upon which Stowe based her sensationally successful depiction of a nation divided against itself.

Critics have recently begun to address the role played by these Irish novels as a resource for American women writers whose novels also aimed to intervene in the discourse of nation-

formation in the nineteenth-century. This topic has for instance been explored in a study of the relationship between Edgeworth and Sedgwick, both of whom, according to Jenifer Elmore, are "preoccupied with modeling Union – the harmonious union of qualities within the individual, of husbands and wives, of disparate groups within larger societies, and, most importantly, of member states within larger political nations, such as Edgeworth's United Kingdom of England, Scotland, and Ireland, and Sedgwick's young United States of America" (vii). Elmore's emphasis on the desire for "harmonious" union is however insufficiently alert to the tensions the concept of "union" brought with it on both sides of the Atlantic, and in particular the Irish Tale's recognition of its imperfect and problematic reality. Susan Manning's discussion of "the recurrent tension between unity and fragmentation in [...] Scottish and American writing from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (4) is much closer to my own sense of the Irish novelists' engagements with Union and their legacy for women writers in America. Manning's methodology, which focuses less on specific paths of influence than on "more associative and analogical models of comparison [...] derived from the structuring principles" (4) of the texts she discusses is also a very useful point of reference for the approach adopted in this essay.³

Briefly stated, my aim in what follows is firstly to show the striking similarity between some of Stowe's narrative structures and those employed by Edgeworth, Owenson, and Sedgwick, all of whom are concerned with the imaginative construction of a nation, and whose texts sift the elements out of which this nation is to be composed. Locating Stowe's novel in the context of these earlier texts provides us with an opportunity for fresh reflection on her construction of the nation through the balancing of contrasting qualities and the exploration of the potential conflict between northern and southern values and perspectives. The potential of this approach to contribute to re-readings of Stowe is suggested by a recent essay on Stowe and

regionalism by Marjorie Pryse. Pryse notes the importance of both Sedgwick and Edgeworth as influences on Stowe's achievements as a "regional" novelist, but she concludes that although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* displays the influence of regionalist writing, it cannot be term a regionalist novel (unlike some of Stowe's later fiction such as *The Pearl of Orr's Island*). The reason for this, according to Pryse, is that Stowe writes about the South from an outsider's perspective: "Stowe imposes a perspective on a region she did not know from lived experience" (134); "crossing sectional lines and writing a northern nationalist novel for a sectional readership, she writes a powerful but hardly regionalist novel" (135). Issues of external perspective and audience are however not unique to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: they in fact form a defining characteristic of the Irish Tale as pioneered by Edgeworth and Owenson. The very obvious presence of an "outsider" perspective in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* therefore suggests not, or not simply, the "sectional" nature of Stowe's mentality, but her use of a method of representation which had originated with the Irish Tale and which had proved highly adaptable to an American context.

Another aim of my essay is to consider the ways in which Stowe departs from the tradition she inherited. The sentimentality for which Stowe became notorious in the twentieth century is often presented as an aspect of the "feminization" of American literary culture in the nineteenth-century (Fiedler, Douglas), but as I will argue here, the sceptical approach to rationality which characterises *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is not specifically "feminine," as it represents a departure from the Enlightenment tradition of Edgeworth, Owenson and Sedgwick, all of whom predicated their advocacy of women's agency on the basis of Enlightenment thought. Stowe's work therefore both draws from and breaks with an existing female tradition, offering (amongst other things) a radical critique of the limitations of Enlightenment concepts of the individual and the national community.

Leslie Fiedler proposes that "the novel and America did not come into existence at the same time by accident" (32). The same could be claimed of the emergence of the novel in Ireland, where the advent of political union focused attention on the "strange country" which had been incorporated into the United Kingdom. The newly-won independence of the American colonies seems, however, to form a stark contrast with the dependent status which marked Ireland's entry into the nineteenth century, the century of nationalism. Critics of nineteenth-century Irish writing have tended to focus on this apparent anomaly, and argue that the literature of this period is characterised by an unhealthy concern with Irishness *in relation to* Englishness. Both Edgeworth and Owenson habitually engage in a process of comparison and contrast, defining Irish national character with reference to that of England. A number of critics including Seamus Deane have argued that the effect in Edgeworth's case is to create Irishness as an inferior and deviant quality, only and always recognisable in so far as it fails to mimic Englishness perfectly (Deane 28-36). Owenson's depiction of Ireland, particularly in her hugely popular *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) is, if anything, even more intensely focused on representing Ireland as England's Other. The effect in her case is a difference that produces desire, and renders Ireland attractively exoticized.

Joep Leerssen however argues that there is an inevitably "contrastive" element to *all* descriptions and definitions of national character and identity, because, as he says, "The border that surrounds one group is also the border that separates it from another" (20). Leerssen suggests that "what one should look for when dealing with the concept of "nationality" would then, seem to be a pattern of differences or differentiations" (19). Rather than being an anomaly peculiar to Irish writing under the Union, the system of representation characteristic of this period in Ireland is, following Leerssen's argument, available as a model through which other

nationalities could find articulation, particularly in cases where national identity was either emergent or contested.

The external perspective evident in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which is highlighted by Pryse as detracting from its status as truly regional writing, can thus be regarded in another light, as an extension of an existing model for the exploration of national and regional differences held in tension in the form of a political union. As Manning has argued with respect to the connections between Scottish and American writing, it is likely that the Irish model proved particularly compelling for American writers precisely because it was so clearly concerned with the union of contrasting elements, contrasts that were drawn not only between the new nation and its former colonial ruler, but also between the northern and southern states. William R. Taylor's portrayal of divisions within American culture, and the growing differentiation between concepts of North and South before the war, has been qualified by historians like Michael O'Brien, who have also restored a sense of the international cultural and intellectual influences on the antebellum South as well as the North. Nevertheless, O'Brien's own description of an "asymmetrical" relationship between South and North, in which "Northerners knew less about the South than Southerners did of the North," and in which "mutual suspicions and incomprehensions" (27) frequently characterised relationships between the inhabitants of the two regions, strikes a very familiar chord for those familiar with the state of British-Irish relations in the nineteenth century.

Taylor's use of the term "counterpoint" – for the way in which the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the Northern and Southern characters were compared and contrasted – helps to define one element that American writers may have borrowed from the Irish Tale. Taylor argues that "counterpoint" was used in order to come to some kind of agreed picture of the outstanding virtues of the "American" national character. Although contained within the

notional unity of the American state, the use of "counterpoint" is very similar to Leerssen's contrastive model for the articulation of national characters and to the attempts of Edgeworth, Owenson, and other Irish writers to account both for the differences between Ireland and Britain, and the fact of their political Union.

Leerssen has coined a specific term to describe the defining quality of Irish writing after the Union, labelling it "auto-exotic." For Leerssen, auto-exoticism denotes the ways in which Irish writers told stories about Ireland from the point of view of outsiders, almost always employing English narrators or focalizers. Leerssen thus argues that "the central Irish character is de-Irishized, to a certain extent" and that "the narrative of romantic Anglo-Irish fiction will tend to marginalize its most Irish characters" (36, 37). Auto-exoticism is a pronounced feature of Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* and Edgeworth's *Ennui* (1809). Both novels feature Anglo-Irish protagonists brought up in England whose journeys to and encounters with Ireland are characterised by an initial sense of alienation which gives way to sympathy and understanding.

In American fiction, the same tendency to exoticize the familiar is evident in Sarah Josepha Hale's *Northwood* (1827), in which the central character, Sidney Romilly, is relocated to a Southern plantation, and then shifted back and forth between the North and the South until he seems to have acquired the ideal character. Taylor places great emphasis on *Northwood* as a key text in the development of an idea of American character that rested on the opposing poles of North and South. He points out that Hale was a Northerner and earlier in her writing career had produced a series of sketches of characters representative of New England and the Yankee, and asks what prompted her, in her most successful fiction, to oscillate between North and South. The answer to this, I argue, lies in the examples that American women writers found in the novels of their Irish counterparts.

The auto-exotic scene of encounter between different cultures is, as I have suggested, a staple of Irish writing of the early nineteenth century, and is characterised by a tension between attraction and repulsion. Prior to his first journey to Ireland Horatio, hero of *The Wild Irish Girl*, imagines the Irish "seated round their domestic fire in a state of perfect nudity," preparing "to broil an enemy" (13). The highly didactic purpose of the novel is to dismantle these prejudices and to present Ireland in a favourable light to a British audience who found themselves recently united to this backward province. This aim is pursued via a plot which borrows on the existing genre of the travel narrative as it invites the implicitly English reader to accompany Horatio on his journey to Ireland. His fears of squalor and savagery are banished almost instantly, to be replaced by appreciation of Irish landscape, Irish music and, most of all, Irish womanhood, in the form of Glorvina, the "princess of Inismore." A lingering sense of fear and repulsion is nonetheless evident in Horatio's nightmare in which the beautiful and charming Glorvina, with whom he is by now infatuated, appears to him as a hideous Gorgon (58). This dream, and other motifs such as Horatio's comparison of the Castle of Inismore to the Castle of Otranto, make Owenson's debt to the popular Gothic genre very clear. In *Ennui*, Edgeworth, who normally avoided the sensational in her fiction, and was wary of the political connotations of the Gothic, also draws on its associations with otherness and fear, albeit partly to undermine them, when recording the reaction of the Earl of Glenthorn on his arrival in his dilapidated Irish estate:

The state tower, in which, after reiterated entreaties, I was at last left alone to repose, was hung with magnificent but ancient tapestry. It was so like a room in a haunted castle, that if I had not been too much fatigued to think of anything, I should certainly have thought of Mrs Radcliffe. (191)

The dismissal of the potential for Gothic horror is an important feature of these optimistic and progressive texts, and is also indicative of the dual perspective they present. The "outsider's" perspective is either almost immediately challenged with "realities" that shatter his prejudices, or is insistently ironized and thus revealed to the reader as unreliable – a strategy which we shall see at work in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Edgeworth's *Glenthorn* finds that his encounter with a culture which he initially finds alien and exotic, alternately attractive and dismaying, has a powerfully transformative effect on his character, and he eventually abandons his exoticizing perspective, embracing Ireland as "home". Like Hale's Sidney Romilly, he moves from England to Ireland, then back to England and finally back to Ireland before the transformation is finally complete. It is only by leaving England, returning, and leaving again to return to Ireland that he can acquire all the qualities that are necessary to make him an Irish landlord like none other: educated, progressive, and, most importantly, committed both by reason and sentiment to the people and the land. The repeated journeys to and from highly contrasted locations, which Taylor highlights as a peculiarity of Hale's *Northwood*, are therefore a crucial feature of these earlier works.

Very similar structures are found in Sedgwick's *Redwood*. In this novel Caroline Redwood and her father Henry, who originate from the Southern states, experience a challenge to their ways of thinking during a period of time spent in New England. Sedgwick thus exoticizes New England by presenting it from the point of view of Caroline, who has been brought up in Charleston, South Carolina, by her maternal grandmother.⁴ She is described as being, at eighteen, "the idol of the fashionable world, and as completely *au fait* in all its arts and mysteries, as a veteran belle of five and twenty" (I: 79). Caroline's appalled reaction to the New

England way of life is vividly conveyed in a letter in which she expresses her disgust and boredom:

I cannot imagine how papa can feel any interest in this Lenox family: they are common vulgar farmers. There is one oddity among them, who they call an "old girl" [Debby]; a hideous monster – a giantess: I suspect a descendant of the New England witches; and I verily believe, if the truth were known, she has spellbound papa. The wretch is really quite fond of him; for him she wrings the necks of her fattest fowls, and I hear her at this moment bawling to one of the boys, to kill the black-eared pig – for him, no doubt. (I: 123)

In Sedgwick's description of the faithful family servant, Debby, who in many respects exemplifies the Yankee or New England character, we see the traces of a potentially threatening "otherness" which have attached themselves to her character: she is an "oddy," a "hideous monster," a "giantess," and may well be a descendant of the witches of New England. Moreover, in the references to the wringing of the necks of the fowl and the slaughtering of the black-eared pig, we have also, in comic form, the overtones of violence and threat which form part of the representation of what is "other."

Uncle Tom's Cabin, like the work of Sedgwick and Hale, shows distinct traces of the contrastive structure that originated with the Irish Tale. Its reliance on the mutually defining opposition between North and South has, however, been overwhelmed by the novel's reputed role in igniting the hostility between Northern and Southern states. Contemporary criticism of the novel from within the American South repeatedly drew attention to the fact that Stowe, as a Northerner, could not be relied upon for accurate and fair representations of life in the South (Hedrick 219, 230).⁵ However, as Taylor has pointed out, the novel is in fact carefully balanced

so as to emphasise positive as well as negative aspects of Southern life. Moreover, the autobiographical sketch that Augustine St. Clare provides to his cousin Ophelia draws attention to a dualistic pattern which repeats itself across generations:

"My father, you know, came first from New England; and he was just such another man as your father – a regular old Roman, – upright, energetic, noble-minded, with an iron will. Your father settled down in New England, to rule over rocks and stones, and to force an existence out of Nature; and mine settled in Louisiana, to rule over men and women, and force existence out of them." (194-5)

Beneath the contrast, St Clare insists on a likeness between these two apparently opposed types, the Southern, slave-holding plantation owner, and the hard-working, independent New England farmer: "The fact is, though he has fallen on hard times, and embraced a democratic theory, [Ophelia's father] is to the heart an aristocrat, as much as my father, who ruled over five or six hundred slaves" (198). A similar compound of likeness and difference characterises St Clare and his brother:

"My brother and I were twins; and they say, you know, that twins ought to resemble each other; but we were in all points a contrast. He had black, fiery eyes, coal-black hair, a strong, fine, Roman profile, and a rich brown complexion. I had blue eyes, golden hair, a Greek outline, and fair complexion. [...] he was my father's pet, and I my mother's. (195)

St Clare emphasises the extent of the contrasts between himself and his brother and yet the fact remains that they are *twins*, thus bound together in a profound way that cuts across these physical and spiritual contrasts: "a mysterious tie seemed to unite them in a closer friendship than ordinary [...] the very contrariety seemed to unite them, like the attraction between opposite

poles of a magnet" (230). There are here echoes of the foster-brothers in Edgeworth's *Ennui*, one an Earl, brought up to believe himself a peasant, and the other, the peasant child, brought up as a wealthy noble-man. They are, like the St Clare twins, "in all points a contrast," and yet each provides for the other a kind of mirror of alternative possibilities. St Clare's life-story is, in fact, rather like the plot summary of an Edgeworthian novel, interpolated into Stowe's text.

Particularly characteristic is the reference to the failure of his marriage. His first love was "a high-minded and beautiful woman [from] one of the Northern states" (132), but parental opposition and deception prevents their marriage. In his distraught state St. Clare engages himself to a Southern belle and "be[comes] the husband of a fine figure, a pair of bright dark eyes, and a hundred thousand dollars" (132-3). Compare this to *Ennui's* Glenthorn, who chooses his bride "by the numeration table: Units, tens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands" (*Ennui*, 167).

Uncle Tom's Cabin also provides its own version of the auto-exotic cultural encounter, in scenes where the representative Northerner and New Englander, Miss Ophelia, confronts the domestic chaos in the St Clare household. Viewed in one way, the scenes in which Miss Ophelia reacts with horror to Southern ways (which are almost exclusively associated with the behaviour and habits of black slaves) could be regarded as merely an exoticized and patronizing representation of the black household servants from a Northern perspective clouded by convictions of cultural superiority. The famous passage about Dinah's kitchen, for instance, clearly valorizes Miss Ophelia's ideas of system and order over Dinah's adherence to impulse and randomness, as Gillian Brown has pointed out:

Miss Ophelia, after passing on her reformatory tour through all the other parts of the establishment, now entered the kitchen. [...]

When St. Clare had first returned from the North, impressed with the system and order of his uncle's kitchen arrangements, he had largely provided his own with an array of cupboards, drawers, and various apparatus, to induce systematic regulation, under the sanguine illusion that it would be of any possible assistance to Dinah in her arrangements. He might as well have provided them for a squirrel or a magpie. The more drawers and closets there were, the more hiding-holes Dinah could make for the accommodation of old rags, hair-combs, old shoes, ribbons, cast-off artificial flowers, and other articles of *vertu*, wherein her soul delighted. [...]

Miss Ophelia commenced opening a set of drawers.

"What is this drawer for, Dinah?" she said.

"It's handy for most anything, Missis," said Dinah. So it appeared to be. From the variety it contained, Miss Ophelia pulled out first a fine damask table-cloth stained with blood, having evidently been used to envelop some raw meat. (180-1)

Yet it would be a mistake to read the encounter between Miss Ophelia and Dinah as a straightforward vehicle for the authorial or narrative point of view.⁶ Like Owenson's Horatio or Edgeworth's Glenthorn, Miss Ophelia cannot be accepted as a wholly reliable informant on the life that she observes. Her determination to reform Dinah's haphazard approach to housekeeping compares very closely to Glenthorn's ambitious plans to demolish his Irish peasant foster-mother's cottage and replace it with one "fitted up in the most elegant style of English cottages" (199). "Irish ways" prove intractable, but Glenthorn reflects ruefully that the faults are not all on one side: "it would have been difficult for a cool spectator to decide, whether I or my workmen were most at fault; they for their dilatory habits, or I for my impatient temper" (198).

Similarly, as a characteristic New Englander, Miss Ophelia is herself exoticized to a certain extent, as is the Northern way of life she represents and is determined to replicate in New Orleans. At the point at which the narrator announces her intention to introduce the character of Miss Ophelia, she firstly describes a typical New England house and farm, concluding that "on such a farm, in such a house and family, Miss Ophelia had spent a quiet existence of some forty-five years" (136). "Typical" modes of life are described with sympathy but also with a degree of distance, in that the insularity and self-conscious respectability of Miss Ophelia's community form part of the description. The largely ignorant assumptions of the townspeople concerning the South are portrayed, and their speculations on Miss Ophelia's journey are as much concerned with the imagined expense of her new wardrobe as with the prospect of "doing good". The short list of books which, according to the narrator, are to be found in the typical New England farmhouse parlour is limited and suggestive of a Puritan narrow-mindedness (Milton and Bunyan feature prominently) rather than a commitment to intellectual enquiry. Miss Ophelia herself is described as "the absolute bond-slave of the *ought*" (144), and her incessant activity around the house is as provoking as it is admirable: "it really was a labour to see her" (206) concludes the wry narrator.

The use of contrastive patterns and the significance of the auto-exotic scene of encounter in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* clearly place it in the transatlantic tradition of Owenson, Edgeworth, Sedgwick, and, indeed, Hale, and suggest that one of Stowe's aims was simultaneously to highlight the gulf that divided North and South and to suggest the possibility of overcoming it. What distinguishes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from these earlier texts, however, is that Stowe's vision was not simply of a unified nation, but of a (unified) "anti-slavery nation" (Pryse 134). Like those of her predecessors, Stowe's novel has a clear educative function, and its intent to educate

or change the minds of its readers is mirrored in the text in a variety of scenes of education, but the education of readers towards membership and participation in an "anti-slavery nation" requires a type of education radically different from that which we find in the works of Sedgwick and Edgeworth. Miss Ophelia's Northern virtues, on their own, are clearly insufficient as the foundation for such a nation, a failure signalled in her unsuccessful efforts to educate and "civilize" Topsy. It is of course Eva who reveals Miss Ophelia's shortcomings to her: observing the way in which Eva touches the source of Topsy's misery and comforts her, Miss Ophelia exclaims "I wish I were like her. She might teach me a lesson" (246). Augustine's response articulates the seemingly paradoxical nature of this education : "It wouldn't be the first time a little child had been used to instruct an old disciple" (246).

The Irish national tale, particularly as practised by Maria Edgeworth, was deeply enmeshed in an Enlightenment discourse of education. Edgeworth was well-known in her time as an educational writer as well as a writer of fiction for both children and adults, and her activity in this area reflected her deeply-rooted conviction that education was the medium whereby society would advance and improve. The theme of a young woman's education and entry into the world is of course one of the archetypal plots of women's fiction, but Edgeworth did not endorse the rigid separation of female and male, private and public concerns.⁷ Government was for Edgeworth like domestic education on a large scale: laws and economic policies could either "teach" people to be lazy and dishonest, if those laws were unfair and opaque, or productive and content, if the laws allowed them to prosper and encouraged effort. This belief underlay her insistence on treating of "public" as well as private issues in her novels.

Edgeworth's emphasis on education as a matter of national, public importance also enabled her to position women as central to national life. A number of her young male heroes

owe their eventual achievement of morally legitimate leadership to the intervention of intelligent and powerful women. In the case of *Ennui*'s Lord Glenthorn it is his attraction to Lady Geraldine that prompts his first efforts at self-improvement, and ultimately his love for Cecilia Delamere that inspires him to engage in a long and arduous process that amounts to self-creation, and culminates in his return to his Irish estates. *Ormond*'s Harry Ormond receives no moral guidance from his guardian, Sir Ulick O'Shane, and is certainly the moral superior of his beloved Uncle Corny, but is deeply influenced by the moral influence of Lady Annaly and the distant prospect of being considered as a suitor for her daughter, Florence.

Edgeworth's belief in the contribution that educated women could make to society and its improvement underlies these highly artificial plots, and they provide an example of how a novel could challenge the limits of women's perceived competence, whilst avoiding overtly radical sympathies. This clearly provided inspiration for other women writers, not least Sedgwick. In Sedgwick's *The Linwoods; or, "Sixty Years Since" in America* (1835), Isabella Linwood begins the novel as a monarchist but finds that her allegiance gradually shifts: "'I am beginning to think that if I had been a man, I should not have forgotten that I was an American'" (II: 10). In much the same way that Lady Geraldine, Cecilia Delamere and Lady Annaly recall Edgeworth's heroes to their duties as Irish men by being instrumental in their decisions to remain in Ireland and work for its improvement, Isabella Linwood succeeds in winning over her monarchist father to the cause of the American nation.

Sedgwick clearly wishes to explore the possibilities of female power without overtly challenging the status quo: Nina Baym's description of the novel as "offering a liberal [...] understanding of women's place in the Revolution" (*American Women Writers* 170) thus seems accurate. The basic plot common to those novels designated by Baym as "liberal" is as follows:

The protagonist first detaches herself from allegiance to the Tory side as it is personified in her father, in favour of the rebel cause as it is personified in a patriot suitor. [...] this story of a daughter who reconciles a monarchical father to a republican husband [...] should be thought of as the basic narrative through which the female national identity was conveyed.

Before the daughter carries out the traditional womanly role of peacemaker, she carries out acts of untraditional resistance to paternal authority. The explanation for this behaviour is her nascent nationality. [...] The plot unites the private with the public story: the truly important achievement of the republican daughter is securing her father's allegiance to the nation [...]. (170)

Both Edgeworth and Sedgwick portray women as active agents in the creation of enlightened authority and leadership. Female agency is, thus, for both writers, implicated in an Enlightenment position which assumes the achievement of intellectual maturity via an educative process.

The narrative structures and strategies developed in the early nineteenth century in the Irish Tale thus have a transatlantic reach, but the limitations of this model for Stowe's anti-slavery, abolitionist purposes becomes evident when we consider how slavery is positioned in the American novels which are a part of this tradition. Sedgwick's *Redwood* has been identified as the earliest novel to treat of slavery in the U.S. (Karcher 205), but in both *Redwood* and *The Linwoods*, slaves and slave-owners appear either as peripheral characters or marginal references, or characters whose function is ultimately to underline the moral chasm between North and South. Caroline Redwood, for instance, is accompanied to New England by her slave, Lily, and her unthinking endorsement of slavery is one of the many moral defects which stand in the way

of her marriage to the idealized Charles Westall. Westall is, like Hale's Sidney Romilly, the son of a Southern plantation owner who has been educated in the Northern states. Significantly, however, his inheritance is considerably reduced because of his father's decision to free all his slaves. Caroline responds to this information with disbelief: "there is no living without slaves [...] everybody allows, that all our danger is from freed slaves." (I: 183).

The idealized national community that the novel constructs has no place for Caroline, and thus no place for her indifference to the injustice of slavery. At the novel's conclusion she repents of and is forgiven for her malicious behaviour towards her half-sister, Ellen Bruce, the secret of whose identity she has tried to conceal in order to advance her own marriage designs, but her moral flaws are apparently beyond redemption. In the scene in which Ellen forgives Caroline, the latter is described as kneeling and stretching out her arms "with an almost oriental abjectness" (II: 269). The use of the word "oriental" signals very clearly that Caroline's character is out of place in the imagined nation. The further reference to her premature death and her consignment of her child to Ellen's care firmly underline her position outside the novel's moral community.

The contrastive pattern whereby Sedgwick identifies "national" female virtues thus involves the exclusion of a particular female type, that of the Southern woman of fashion, as represented by Caroline Redwood. But more troublingly, the slaves upon whom this fashionable lifestyle depends are also, implicitly, banished from the national community.⁸ The novel's conclusion upholds what are presented as Northern values, but it emerges that there is no place within this nation for the freed slave, who is implicated by the narrator in the moral bankruptcy of the South, and of fashionable Southern femininity in particular. The narrator informs us of Lily's escape from slavery, a consequence of the "intimate [...] acquaintance with 'the mountain

nymph, sweet liberty" formed during her "northern summer" (II: 270). This escape is, however, represented in a curiously unsympathetic way, as being prompted as much by "a snug love affair of her own," carried on "in imitation of her mistress," (II: 270) as by Lily's acquaintance with the "spirit of liberty."

Thus in spite of its continuities with an earlier transatlantic strand of women's writing, Stowe's vision of a truly unified anti-slavery nation required some radical revision of both the principles and the narrative structures she inherited from novelists such as Edgeworth and Sedgwick. Several of the characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, most notably those of Miss Ophelia, Augustine St Clare and Marie St Clare are recognisable from earlier works by both Irish and American women authors (Marie is for instance a recognizable type in the tradition of Caroline Redwood). The novel's two most significant characters, Eva and Tom, however, are without precedent in earlier works. They form the novel's moral and spiritual core and provide the novel with its originality, emotional impact and its political charge, but they have also been the focus of a good deal of the controversy and criticism the novel has received, in the twentieth century in particular.

Eva's saintliness is insisted upon by the narrator, in what for some critics is a particularly overblown (in Ann Douglas's phrase, "camp") example of the Victorian sentimentalization of the child, a being untainted by worldly corruption and self-interest (4). The fact that she dies while still a child could be interpreted as an evasion: her message of Christian love is safely contained, never associated with adult agency and thus tested against the compromises of the "real world."

The lack of agency that characterizes Eva's position as a child is reflected in the powerlessness of Tom's position as a slave. This powerlessness is magnified by Tom's submission to his fate, a submission that shocks some readers and enrages others. He is

intelligent, responsible, honest, loyal, generous – "all the moral and Christian values bound in black morocco, complete," as Augustine St Clare flippantly remarks of the man who has saved his daughter's life (129). And yet, he appears to accept his inferior and oppressed status, and never asserts a sense of equality or a right to even the most basic freedom. Ultimately, Tom dies a horrific death, utterly alone, apparently abandoned by all those who professed attachment to him and who possessed the power to save him. Stowe's investment in Christianity and the repeated comparisons between Tom's suffering and Christ's (Steele 87-9) could be regarded as a quiescent position, which focuses on the moral superiority of the passively suffering character rather than on the condemnation of the social, legal and political institutions which are the cause of the suffering, misery and death.

Jane Tompkins has defended these aspects of the novel in terms of "sentimental power," and they are of a piece with the novel's general attribution of spiritual strength and a superior moral sense to the marginalized and "the lowly," in Stowe's own phrase. The essence of "sentimentality," I suggest, lies in the stark contrast between virtue and agency or power, with the highest form of virtue thus displayed (perversely and disturbingly for some readers) in the submissive, passive suffering and death of a guiltless person. It is my contention here that, given the continuities between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Enlightenment tradition of earlier women writers, Stowe was fully conscious of the challenge that her novel offered to Enlightenment thought on the individual and society, and that she actively sought to expose as a delusion the Enlightenment construction of the adult individual as an autonomous agent.⁹ Within the institution of slavery it is not only slaves who are deprived of agency: Stowe's novel reveals the extent to which apparently omnipotent slaveholders themselves sacrifice real autonomy for the tainted privileges of institutionalized superiority. A central feature of Enlightenment thought, the

idea that there is a standard of intellectual and moral maturity towards which an individual progresses via a process of education is therefore repeatedly undermined in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in scenes in which the authority of adult males is called into question. Stowe's awareness that culturally and socially endorsed notions of "civilization" and progress were used as rationalizations of injustice also leads her to portray the educational process as effectively co-opted by the ideology of slavery. The answer, according to the text, is not to abandon education as a means of social progress and reform, but to envision a radical education which does not reinforce oppressive hierarchies.

The novel features a number of male figures who in theory exercise considerable power, including the landowners and slave owners Mr Shelby and Augustine St Clare, and the governmental representative Senator Bird. These men are not portrayed primarily as abusing power, or exercising it unjustly: their power and authority is represented as limited and circumscribed. Having decided to sell Tom and Harry, Mr Shelby repeatedly represents himself as powerless: "I can't help myself" (28), he protests, Haley "had it in his power to ruin us all" (30); he finds it so difficult to confront his own decision that he arranges to be absent when the salver-trader ultimately takes possession of Tom. The set-piece conversation between Senator Bird and his wife on the subject of the Fugitive Slave Act revolves, interestingly, on the issue of action versus inaction. The Senator, the representative of national, public authority, defends the justness of literally doing nothing, while his wife insists on *doing* what is manifestly right: "I can read my Bible; and there I see that I must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the desolate" (69). When Mrs Bird utters what appears to be one of the classic statements of sentimental philosophy – "I hate reasoning, John" – it is easy to conclude that the novel advocates an analytically impoverished, impossibly simplified alternative, a depoliticized (and

feminized) philosophy of individual feeling and "Christian love." The statement, however, could also be read as reflecting the real failure of an Enlightenment-based culture to address profound injustice.

Mrs Bird's hatred of "reasoning" echoes an essay written by the seventeen-year-old Harriet Beecher, described by Hedrick as an "incisive critique of obscurantist language and the posturing of 'great men'" ("Modern Uses" 23). In it, Stowe refers to Locke, Berkeley, Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart, all important figures in the British and Irish Enlightenment, complaining of the tendency of philosophers to remain trapped in a circular discussion of one another's ideas and asking her readers, "have you never experienced this power of a great mind to utterly puzzle and confound you?" ("Modern Uses" 25). By the time she had come to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, this suspicion of philosophic obscurantism was reinforced by the fact that slavery and cruelty were routinely defended and given intellectual justification using apparently sophisticated arguments. With "proper effort and cultivation," as the narrator remarks, one could overcome "every humane weakness and prejudice" (112). It is in this context that the characters of both Tom and Eva emerge as an alternative to the bankruptcy of a society that uses education as a means to defend the indefensible. Tom is repeatedly described as "unlearned" and "ignorant" in an ironic tone which suggests the self-delusion of many educated people. The narrator pours scorn on "the enlightened, cultivated, educated man" who imagines that he is morally distinct from the loathsome slave-trader (115). The injection of such bitter irony into the words "enlightened, cultivated, educated" suggests that Stowe was fully conscious of the nature of the critique that she offered through the moral elevation of the "pre-Enlightened," the child and the barely-literate slave.

The inability of the Enlightenment nation to recognize and confront the injustice of slavery is underlined by the repeated representation of the failure of the conventional educational process. Augustine St Clare's life, by his own account, is a story of the wastage of talent and the betrayal of principle. Observing his nephew Henrique irrationally abusing a young slave, Augustine, "with his usual sarcastic carelessness" (232), remarks to his twin brother, "I suppose that's what we may call republican education, Alfred?" (233). The "casual sarcasm" with which St Clare refers to the concept of republican education represents a significant challenge to contemporary faith in the power of universal education to help create a united and successful nation. Alfred is, if possible, even less concerned than Augustine with the education of the young: "there's no doubt that our system is a difficult one to train children under. It gives too free scope to the passions altogether" (235). His proposed solution is to send Henrique to the North "where obedience is more fashionable" (235). Augustine remarks, with an echo of apparently worn-out philosophy, "since training children is the staple work of the human race [...] I should think it something of a consideration that our system does not work well there" (235). The conversation concludes very shortly afterwards with a friendly game of backgammon and Augustine's defensive claim that "one man can do nothing, against the whole action of a community" (235).

Scenes such as these make it clear that what she saw as the failure of the educative process was a matter of deep concern for Stowe. The portrayal of Eva and Tom as the educators of their community thus assumes tremendous significance. Aside from her function as a Christ-like exemplar, Eva is an educator in a literal sense, and her determination to teach is in contrast to the failure of adults and guardians who have squandered their resources and advantages. She is acutely aware of the deprivation of slaves who are not taught to read and write, and finding

that her mother is utterly indifferent to this, she determines to teach Mammy to read. Eva's questions about the education of slaves reveal that the "sentimental power" that she embodies is accompanied by a desire for agency and the power to enact her ideals. Fingering her mother's diamond earrings, she asks whether they are very expensive. When Marie replies that they are "worth a small fortune" (230), she declares that she wished they were hers, to do with as she pleased: "I'd sell them, and buy a place in the free states, and take all our people there and teach them to read and write" (230). In the face of her mother's ridicule, she maintains that slaves should be able to read the Bible, "and write their own letters, and read letters that are written to them [...] I know mamma, it does come very hard on them, that they can't do these things" (230).

Eva's translation of the value of the earrings contrasts starkly with Maria Edgeworth's portrayal of the unworldly innocent, Virginia, in her novel *Belinda*. Virginia has been brought up in total seclusion from the world, in order to protect her from the designs of men. For this reason also she has been forbidden to read and write. When the novel's hero, Clarence Hervey, comes upon her by chance, he decides that she offers him the opportunity of "creating" a wife who will not be corrupted by the usual feminine vices of worldliness and vanity. Needless to say, he soon realises that in attempting to shape a being free of the faults of the world, he has ended up with a young woman so ignorant as to be utterly unsuitable as a wife. Whilst still in the throes of experimental enthusiasm, he presents Virginia with a pair of diamond earrings and a rosebud, in order to see which she prefers. He is enraptured when she chooses the flower and dismisses the precious stones. He soon comes to realise, however, that this choice does not indicate uncorrupted tastes, but an ignorance of social values which is to be deplored rather than celebrated. Eva, by contrast, may be not of this world in terms of her boundless love and goodness, but her consideration of the value of the earrings and her estimation of how this value

can be converted to practical projects (what she describes is, after all, not a fantasy) shows a firm grasp on the fundamentals of the society in which she lives.

The portrayal of Tom as an educator is particularly powerful and poignant, given the fact that the scene in which he is introduced to the reader centres on his attempts to learn to write, tutored rather inexpertly by George Shelby. It is notable that here, as in the St Clare household, children become the means of instruction, in the apparent absence of adult will.¹⁰ Unlike Eva, however, George embraces the role of teacher partly because he enjoys the superiority it confers on him. He "appear[s] fully to realise the dignity of his position of instructor" (18). He corrects Tom's mistakes "briskly" and somewhat over emphatically, "flourishingly scrawl[ing] q's and g's innumerable for his edification." Tom regards this "with a respectful and admiring air" (18). Aunt Chloe's reaction, "How easy white folks al'us does things!" (18) is uncomfortably double-edged. The target audience of the novel, sympathetic white readers, would be aware that the ease with which George Shelby could read and write did not reflect an extraordinary, racially-determined intelligence, and that his position as tutor to an adult reflects the abuses of the system of slavery.

This system, under which a child perceives themselves as more powerful than an adult, leads George Shelby to imagine that he is more powerful than he really is. "I'll knock that old fellow down!" (86) he exclaims of Haley. George imagines, falsely, that all that prevents him from having the power of life and death over Tom is his position as a child: "if I was a man, they shouldn't do it" (86). He later adds "I'll build your house all over, and you shall have a room for a parlour with a carpet on it, when I'm a man" (88). At the same time, he refers to Tom's situation in terms of childish pranks: "I'll come down after you, and bring you back. [...] I'll see to it, and I'll tease father's life out, if he don't do it" (87). As we have seen, there is no guarantee

that "when he is a man" George will have the kind of autonomy and power he confidently envisages. Tom's response to George is, effectively, to remind him that he is a child. He tells him that it is wrong to speak disrespectfully of his parents, and expresses the hope that he will grow up to be "a great, learned, good man" (87). The text does not therefore construct virtue and vice in terms of simple oppositions between children and adults, innocence and experience. Tom's faith in the possibility of a child becoming "a great, learned, good man" signals continuing belief in education as an ideal, but it is clear that education in actuality has become intricately implicated in the institution of slavery. Tragically, therefore, George's promises to Tom remain unfulfilled. He reappears at the end of the novel, now an adult man, but the only service he can offer Tom is to bury him. George returns to Kentucky to free all the slaves on the Shelby estate, an act which he represents as a tribute to the sufferings of Uncle Tom. Like that of Christ, Tom's death redeems his people.

The text directs us towards this reading, but what I wish to emphasise is that Tom's role is not limited to that of a passively suffering example of Christ-like virtue. Like Eva, he too is a teacher – a far more effective teacher than George Shelby, for instance – and he teaches not only through his flawless example. His literacy is limited: "Having learned late in life, Tom was but a slow reader, and passed on laboriously from verse to verse," but this does not prevent him from being an inspiring preacher and "Christian teacher" (84). At the weekly meetings which are held at his house, he preaches and leads the congregation in prayer. This ability is presented as having little to do with formally-acquired knowledge:

It was in prayer that he especially excelled. Nothing could exceed the touching simplicity, the child-like earnestness, of his prayer, enriched with the language of

Scripture, which seemed so entirely to have wrought itself into his being, as to have become a part of himself, and to drop from his lips unconsciously. (26)

There are a number of ways in which one could read this description. The narrator's suggestion that Tom's use of scripture is "unconscious" might suggest a diminution of his agency, an attempt to undermine the intellectual gifts that he has just been credited with. Additionally, this could be read as another instance of the narrator's identification of Tom with Christ: the words of the Bible "have wrought [themselves] into his being." I would also like to suggest that the description attempts to convey the idea of a power that does not derive solely from formal knowledge. This is crucial to Stowe's project, because it reinforces the limitations of formal knowledge and it allows that those in an "unenlightened" state can have access to insight and power. Opponents of the sentimental may read this characterization of African-Americans as simply a patronising imposition of otherness, but its radical challenge to the definition of knowledge suggests that the alternative is to insist that the standards of a racist and oppressive society are the standards to which the oppressed should themselves aspire.

The representation of otherness is one of the key features of these nineteenth-century fictions of the nation in both Ireland and America. As suggested above, the tendency to associate otherness and the Gothic is evident in Edgeworth, Owenson and Sedgwick. In all three cases, references to the Gothic are, broadly speaking, comic in tone. The emotional climax of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, the death of Tom on Simon Legree's plantation, indicates once again that Stowe's work is a response to this trope, and at the same time a powerful revision of many of its received assumptions. Legree's plantation is a location of pure horror: an undeniably Gothic site, characterised by darkness and danger. The Gothic castle is no longer merely a fanciful idea, or a

bad dream from which the sleeper wakes: it is real. The road to the plantation is described as follows:

It was a wild, forsaken road, now winding through dreary pine barrens, where the wind whispered mournfully, and now over log causeways, through long cypress swamps, the doleful trees rising out of the slimy, spongy ground, hung with long wreaths of funereal black moss, while ever and anon the loathsome form of the moccasin snake might be seen sliding among broken stumps and shattered branches that lay here and there, rotting in the water. (296)

It is here, however, in this horror-story made real, that Tom achieves a kind of immortality. Whereas the fictions of Edgeworth, Owenson, and Sedgwick raise the idea of the Gothic only to debunk it, Stowe affirms the existence of such darkness within the society and culture she describes. Her reference to "One whose suffering changed an instrument of torture, degradation and shame, into a symbol of glory, honor, and immortal life" (358) is one of a series of asides which liken Tom to Christ, but it also reflects the paradox of her own novel, which locates virtue and greatness "among the lowly."

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that Stowe's techniques, aims, and strategies are inflected by an older, Enlightenment tradition of women's writing, even as they mark the radical new ethos of the sentimental. What Owenson, Edgeworth and Sedgwick had in common, aside from their gender, was an endorsement of the philosophy of the Enlightenment nation, and a conviction that women had an important role to play in such a political community. Stowe's work differs from theirs, I argue, most importantly in terms of its rejection of the certainties of the Enlightenment, certainties upon which the American nation itself had been founded.

¹ I would like to thank Sarah Meer, whose interest in this topic encouraged me to pursue it, and whose advice has been invaluable. I would also like to acknowledge the Faculty of Arts at University College Cork, whose award of a research grant enabled me to carry out the initial research for this paper in the libraries of Harvard University. Thanks also to Leah Price for her hospitality and friendship.

² For recent discussions of Edgeworth and Owenson in the context of the National Tale see Connolly, Ferris and Trumpener.

³ See also Lee Jenkins, who draws attention to the existence of a "common vocabulary between the abolitionist rhetoric of [Frederick] Douglass and the liberation rhetoric of mid-nineteenth century Ireland" (82).

⁴ Carolyn Karcher has noted Sedgwick's development of "sophisticated narrative strategies. By allowing her characters to narrate parts of the story through interpolated letters, she opened her novels to multiple voices and points of view" (212). Karcher identifies this as an important influence on Stowe.

⁵ For an example of the hostile Southern response see George F. Holmes's review of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which he positions himself explicitly as a Southerner and accuses Stowe of "misrepresentations." Ammons, ed., *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 469.

⁶ In this I differ from Brown, who identifies Ophelia's values with those of Catharine Beecher's *Treatise of Domestic Economy* and by extension with the narrative point of view: "Getting in the Kitchen with Dinah: Domestic Politics in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."

⁷ See Cliona Ó Gallchoir, "'The whole fabric must be perfect': Maria Edgeworth's *Literary Ladies* and the Representation of Ireland", and Ó Gallchoir, *Maria Edgeworth*, chapter 1.

⁸ In *The Linwoods* slave characters function peripherally as part of fashionable New York life, which is unfavourably contrasted with rural New England.

⁹ Jane Tompkins initiated the critical revision of the sentimental novel, and I agree with her claim that "the sentimental novel [is] a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time" (84-5). My own aim in this article is more specific and more modest: to place *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in relation to an earlier women's tradition and thereby to emphasise Stowe's place in and departure from that tradition.

¹⁰ It is implied that Mrs Shelby has taught Eliza to read, but this is not referred to directly.