

# Curious and Curiouser: Uncle Tom's Cabin, Anna Leonowens, and The King and I



From the moment *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared in single-volume form in 1852 the figures of Uncle Tom, Eva, and Eliza became cultural curiosities with endless adaptive potential on both sides of the Atlantic. Perhaps the novel's strangest reincarnation was as the centerpiece in Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's 1951 musical and subsequent 1956 Cinemascope movie hit *The King and I*. The play-within-a-play version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* takes up a crucial place in the film version of the musical. Yet why this curious adaptation is there, and what it might mean, has never been closely examined. Uncle Tom travels in book form to England, then east to Siam (present-day Thailand), then via a series of unpredictable textual translations he returns to England, then back over to America, where he emerges a Siamese Tom in a Hollywood Siam. The evolution of this bizarre, circuitous, pseudo-Diasporic, pseudo-Siamese vignette emerges out of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel as well as its extended and often distorted interpretive history in text, performance, and film. This series of metamorphoses that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* underwent almost from the instant that it appeared in book form was perhaps best characterized by Henry James: "Uncle Tom, instead of making even one of the cheap short cuts through the medium in which books breathe, even as fishes in water, went gaily round about it altogether, as if a fish, a wonderful leaping fish, had simply flown through

the air. This feat accomplished the surprising creature could naturally fly anywhere, and one of the first things it did was thus to flutter down on every stage, literally without exception, in America and Europe. If the amount of life represented in such a work is measurable by the ease with which representation is taken up and carried further, even violently to the furthest, the fate of Mrs. Stowe's picture was conclusive."

For James the novel emerges as a surprising literary freak or curiosity, a fish out of water, but shockingly still in its element. James's disturbing metaphor of the flying fish is a stark warning that when it comes to questions of textual translation and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the normal rules do not apply. The manifestation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in *The King and I* is perhaps the most extreme example of the adaptive extremes Stowe's text is capable of generating. As the central love story reaches its height in the musical, it suddenly breaks into a strange new interpretive space. Singers and dancers wearing a Hollywood version of late-nineteenth-century Siamese royal costume perform a full-fledged parody of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the benefit of a fictional English ambassador and his flunkys. Only one figure in the vastly stylized production wears a black mask; the rest of the cast stare through porcelain-white makeup or bone-white masks. The novel's slave catcher, Hayley, has been replaced by "King Simon of Legree" who has been moved up from his plantation in the deep South and now pursues Topsy, Eliza, Uncle Tom, and little Harry. They flee across a magically frozen Ohio River—represented by an undulating swathe of white silk—which soon melts and engulfs the evil hunters. This finale is of course a thinly disguised retelling of the story of the parting of the Red Sea. How did this ultimate Tomistic curiosity evolve, and what does it mean?



Fig. 1. Image taken from the title page of *Pictures and Stories from Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1853). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

One way to solve the puzzle is to look back at the source of *The King and I*, Margaret Landon's 1945 novel *Anna and the King of Siam*. This in its turn was adapted from two texts published by Anna Leonowens, the actual governess who taught the royal children and concubines in the king's harem in Siam. Leonowens did not give *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the centrality in either of her books that it was to gain in the American adaptations. Yet she did introduce Stowe's novel, and its impact, in ways that planted the seeds for what was to happen. The original references to the book and to Siamese slavery and abolition occur mainly in Leonowens's follow up to her 1870 *The English Governess at the Siamese Court*, which came out in 1873 and was entitled *Siamese Harem Life*. Typical of British texts about slavery after Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and colonial slavery in 1833, Leonowens's second book is, among other things, a triumphalist, morally superior late-Victorian abolition tract with a constant focus on the operations of slave systems in Siam and on the working of sexual slavery in the court in particular. In the first account of the noble woman called "Hidden Perfume" (who became, as we shall see, the somewhat strangely named "Harriet Beecher Stowe Son Klin") her essential civilization is construed through her reaction to the antislavery novel: "Her favourite book, however, was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* . . . she knew all the characters by heart, and spoke of them as if she had known them all her life . . . 'I am wishful to be good like Harriet Beecher Stowe"—or Stowa, as my friend persisted in pronouncing that name—"and never to buy human bodies again, but only to let go free once more, and so I have now no more slaves, but hired servants. I have given freedom to all of my slaves' . . . Thenceforth . . . she always signed herself Harriet Beecher Stowe."

Hidden Perfume is made to mimic the personal gesture of emancipation with which George Shelby, the principled Kentucky slaveholder, concludes *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, transforming her slaves into efficient hired servants. Yet in Leonowens's text things are not quite this simple, and her account of Hidden Perfume, the Siamese Harriet Beecher Stowe, then leads directly into the chapter called "The Siamese System of Slavery." This is an objective account of the labyrinthine rules and relationships governing slave systems within wider Siamese culture. It is on this dark note that the volume concludes, bringing Stowe's straightforward emancipation fantasy into collision with the implications of the myriad social and psychological subtleties of Siamese bondage systems.

Leonowens's books were themselves complex: they drew upon, but did not exclusively follow, any single form. They were loosely memoirs, but they also combined accounts of local religion and mythology. The key scenes relating to the young concubine Tuptim's escape and subsequent punishments, as with the majority of Leonowens's sexual vignettes, are set out from the rest of her account as chapter-length mininarratives. It is out of this material that the American adapter Margaret Landon was to form the novel, which served as the more direct source for the musical. Landon had a complicated agenda of her own that again directly relates to the legacy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Landon's adaptation focused squarely upon Leonowens's activities as an abolitionist

missionary in the court of Siam. In this version, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appears but does not yet hold center stage. The key passage in the novel presents Son Klin, one of the young ladies of the harem, and the fictional extension of Hidden Perfume, as fixated with Stowe's book. Traumatized by the experiences of the characters and the death of Eva in particular, she decides to translate the book, and even changes her name to Harriet Beecher Stowe Son Klin. The translation is alluded to only once but this is the detail that inspired the idea for the musical adaptation.

In Landon's novel, slavery and abolition within Siam are the central moral focus. The tragic fate of Tuptim, who later became the central figure in the "young love" secondary narrative of *The King and I*, constituted an illustrative aside in Leonowens's *Siamese Harem Life*. Tuptim's story is much bleaker than in its later musical incarnation, and in the earlier version she becomes the ultimate victim of Siamese slavery and the king's concubinal despotism. In the novel and its source, Tuptim is devoted to a Buddhist monk, disguises herself as a man, and becomes one of his disciples. There is no romantic involvement, just discipleship, on her part. Tuptim is however recognized and both she and the monk are publicly burned after a gory and protracted public torture. The torture is deliberately carried out, by order of the king, in full view of Anna Leonowens's window; she faints watching the torture and revives after the executions have been performed. The musical version omitted all of these scenes. And yet, while the musical avoided any discussion about the details of Siamese slavery, it did develop the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* theme far more fully.

In fact, the entire adaptation of *The King and I* could be seen as a parody-like dialogue with Stowe's novel. This relationship is explicit at the start, during the king's first audience with the young English widow who has arrived as a schoolteacher at the court of Siam. As Anna awaits her introduction she sees the beautiful young Burmese slave-girl Tuptim presented to the king as a gift from the subjugated king of Burma. Anna's outrage at this exchange of female slaves defines both the moral barbarity, and the depravity, of the king: he is immediately the equivalent of Simon Legree. The rest of the musical revolves around Anna's missionary calling to educate the king away from an unquestioning belief in female sexual slavery, indeed all slavery. In dramatic terms this involves a bizarre merging of two of the novel's characters, whereby the king eventually embodies both Simon Legree and Topsy. He is Simon Legree in his dictatorial slave-holding role; he is Topsy in his subservient role of the savage innocent eager to learn. Desiring to absorb the mysteries of Western culture from Anna he also exhibits the self-sufficient and mischievous qualities of Topsy. In this aspect of the relationship, the Anna character appears as Stowe's plantation visitor from the North, Miss Ophelia: she lectures and catechizes the king, while he in turn plays tricks on her, frolics about, and contradicts her with his petulant childlike rationality and hilarious misuse of English. The king is presented throughout the film via a ruthless metaphoric of infantilism.

In the relations between the barbarian king and his female educator, *Uncle*

*Tom's Cabin* is set out as the central paradigm for the discussion of slavery and freedom. The plot's crucial narrative tension over master-slave relationships comes to a head when the lovelorn Tuptim manages to get her stage adaptation of the book performed before the British ambassador. The performance of the play in the musical has two functions. First, it constitutes the central cultural offering used by the king to persuade visiting diplomats that Siam is not a barbarian country. The king is thrown into despair by the threat that the French will attempt to make Siam a protectorate. He seeks Anna's advice, and is told that his only chance is to convince the visiting British ambassador that his country is civilized. Anna decides that the ultimate proof of the king's civilization will be to put on a play for the ambassadorial delegation: the version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* translated by Tuptim. For the king the very fact that a play can be staged in English is a testament to his civilization: "We shall give them theatricals! We shall show them who is Barbarian." The king does not realize that in Tuptim's adaptive hands the play now constitutes a radical critique of Siamese sexual slavery via a crudely allegorized reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in which the character of the spirited slave Eliza in Stowe's novel now holds center stage.

Eliza constitutes the fragile, female, maternal, fearless, and mythic liberationist icon at the heart of Stowe's original. The scene of Eliza bounding over the frozen Ohio River with her son, Harry, dominated American, European, and (according to the historian C. L. R. James) even Caribbean adaptations of the novel. But Rodgers and Hammerstein's rendition of this famous vignette challenges even Henry James's assertion regarding the novel's transformational potential. In the musical, Eliza comes to the raging river's edge and is saved by an angel sent by Buddha who creates the apparently unknown Siamese phenomenon of a snowstorm. Eliza, hidden by this "veil of lace," crosses the river. Legree and his bloodhounds follow, but Buddha then brings out the sun, melts the snow and ice, and the pursuing party is drowned in a deluge. Here we move from allegory to an inverted biblical typology, whereby Eliza becomes Moses and the Legree/Haley hybrid "King Simon of Legree" turns into Pharaoh, with his army drowned in an Ohio River that, via Buddha's intervention, is transformed into the Red Sea. The most fascinating thing about this bizarre cultural gallimaufry is its reference, at this climactic stage, to an Old Testament story that slaves all across the Atlantic Diaspora had made their own within spirituals and plantation song. The traces of slave culture as a culture of radical dissent seem capable of appearing anywhere, even in Hollywood.

It is at this point that Topsy suddenly appears in the playlet as she is shown on the bank celebrating Eliza's escape:

Topsy glad that Simon die. Topsy dance for joy. I tell you what Harriet Beecher Stowe say that Topsy say. I 'spect I'ze wickedest critture in world.' But I don't believe that Topsy wicked critture for I too am glad for death of King—of any King who pursue a slave who is

unhappy and who tried to escape . . . Your Majesty and honourable guests. I will tell you end of story. Is very sad end with sacrifice. Is Buddha's wish that Eva come to him and thank him personally for saving of Eliza and baby. And so she die and go to arms of Buddha.



Fig. 2. Performance of Uncle Tom's Cabin in the 1956 film version of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I*. Click on the image to view an excerpt from the film on the Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture Web site. Scroll down to the bottom of the linked page to see the film.

Little Eva, the Evangelista *par excellence*, finally moves from the hands of Stowe's Christian God to the arms of a Hollywood Buddha. Topsy's self-confessed wickedness in the face of petty theft now becomes the crime of wishing Legree dead. This version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one of the most minimal and distorted reinventions of the narrative on stage or film, is the climax in a series of curious moves that a number of texts, supposedly all dealing with a Siamese harem, make around Stowe's novel over the course of nearly a century. Stowe's book is taken out to Siam, forms the basis for Leonowens's work as an abolitionist critic, converts a Siamese concubine (herself a slave holder) to the abolition cause, then in increasingly elaborate ways infiltrates American popular musical culture until it finally re-emerges as the play within the musical in *The King and I*. Henry James was right: this novel is a miraculous creature that seems capable of adapting to any cultural environment where slavery is an issue. If slavery can be construed as a comparative experience, is there a visual or verbal language that can be used to encompass its complex variations and differences? This short digressive history considering how Stowe's book operated on Anglo-American interpretations of Siamese sexual slavery for a century suggests that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will continue to undergo its Jamesian metamorphoses, and that it will consequently go on to inflect debates over global slavery in ever more curious reincarnations.

### Further Reading:

For more on the history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London, 1853); Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit* (New York, 1947); Sarah Smith Duckworth, "Stowe's Construction of an African Persona and the Creation of White Identity for a New World Order" in *The Stowe Debate*, eds., Lowance Westbrook and De Prospro (Amherst, 1994); Margaret Holbrook Hildreth, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Bibliography* (Hamden, 1976); Marcus Wood, "Beyond the Cover: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Slavery as Global Entertainment" in *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America*

1780-1865 (Manchester, 2000), 143-214; and the rich online resource, [Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture: A Multi-Media Archive](#).

This article originally appeared in issue 4.2 (January, 2004).

---

Marcus Wood is a reader in English studies, University of Sussex; he is also a painter, performance artist, and film maker.