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The East Window

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THE EAST WINDOW CRAIG ERICKSON

Characters as Archetypes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

THOMAS JACKSON

IT IS REPORTED THAT IN 1862, when Harriet Beecher Stowe met President Lincoln in the White House, he remarked, "So you are the little lady that wrote the book that started this Great War." (Reynolds) Whether this exchange actually happened or not is irrelevant; what is true is the anti-slavery, bestselling book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did indeed have a place in the list of causes of the American Civil War. It was immediately embraced by the abolitionist north and reviled by the pro-slavery south. As this timeless book is translated to a twenty-first century audience, it is obvious that Stowe has created characters that have taken on different or even iconic connotations, others that miss the mark as archetypes in their didactic nature, and scenes that have become the standard image for particular stereotypes throughout American history .

Today when someone is called an "Uncle Tom," it is a hateful comment generally from one black person to another, insinuating that the person is somehow complacent, suppliant toward the white race. Though Tom was a genial, obedient slave in Stowe's book, his was the strongest moral character in the story:

No, I mean, really, Tom is a good, steady, sensible, pious fellow. He got religion. At a camp meeting, four years ago; and I believe he really did get it. I've trusted him, since then, with everything I have, - money, house, horses, - and let him come and go round the country; and I have always found him true and square in everything. (Stowe 1701-1702)

This was Haley, Tom's current owner from Kentucky, describing Tom to Mr. Shelby, a slave trader. Haley really believed in the goodness of his slave Tom, a fact accepted by Mr. Shelby, as long as the qualifier that Tom was honest - for a slave - was added. Tom's passivity was not due to an acceptance of being inferior, but instead to his profound faith in the Christian religion. He believed in the goodness of God and that all things were by His will. He believed that he must love all and endure life's trials, and that God would see him through.