

"If it were *your* Harry, mother,"  
Mothers, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and U.S. culture.

Maureen Elizabeth Riedy  
Croton-on-Hudson, NY

B.A., Binghamton University, 1993

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Virginia  
August 1997

Aug 13 1997  
J. R. Riedy

---

---

---

ALD  
Masters  
English  
1997  
.R535

## ABSTRACT

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a novel with a profoundly reformist message. Behind the obvious abolitionist story line is a call for the reformation of American society along maternal lines. As Jane P. Tompkins notes in her essay "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Literary History," "The novel's deepest political aspirations are expressed only secondarily in its devastating attack on the slave system; the true goal of Stowe's rhetorical undertaking is nothing less than the institution of the kingdom of heaven on earth."<sup>1</sup> And the kingdom of heaven, as Stowe and Catharine Beecher would write in *The American Woman's Home*, had as its "aptest earthly illustration" the family state, with woman as "its chief minister." *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is indeed a crusade to reform American society - the reform it urges does not stop at abolition but goes beyond to the upending of the patriarchal social system and the placement of a matrifocal Christian framework.

The contemporary American reader of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was part of a culture which had a particular fascination with the idea and the ideal of Mother. This web site, housed at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/MA97/UTC/tpage.html>, is an effort to reconstruct, in part, how that ideal was understood. Using texts and illustrations published in popular literature of the day, I have tried to recreate for the twentieth-century reader a sampling of the image of "Mother" which informed the nineteenth-century reader of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jane P. Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History." *Glyph 2* (1978). In the Norton Critical *UTC*.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.  
New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994.