

The “Glittering Web of Fiction”: Uncle Tom’s Influence on Josiah Henson

Patrick Kinghan

Uncle Tom, the title character of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and Josiah Henson, a self-emancipated slave and founder of the Dawn Settlement in Ontario, have a distinct and interesting relationship. In Stowe’s *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a work written to explain her novel, she cites Josiah Henson as a main inspiration for Uncle Tom. In the introduction of her *Key*, Stowe refers to the “glittering web of fiction,” which intertwines fiction and reality.¹ She argues that the web of fiction, compiled from multiple real-world inspirations, is what made *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* seem so real. While she uses this phrase to describe the intertwining of real-world influence on her literary work, this paper argues that the opposite also occurred: Uncle Tom became intertwined with Josiah Henson. The Phantoms of the Past Project is about uncovering forgotten slave narratives and seeing how slavery and abolition are remembered. Between the two figures, Uncle Tom is generally more familiar. The greater popularity for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a compelling answer, but fails to recognize Tom and Henson’s intimate connection. Instead of asking why Uncle Tom is better remembered, this paper explores why Josiah Henson is not, arguing that after becoming the inspiration for Uncle Tom, Henson started to shape his personality after the character. Comparing Henson’s first narrative (1849), published before *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and his final narrative (1876), published after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Henson subtly changed the language and stories used. This paper focuses on “faith” as a central theme in Stowe’s book, and how Henson spoke about his faith differently before and after the creation of Uncle Tom.

The following text comparisons and commentary, which focus on faith and Christian language, will show the ways in which a real person is influenced by their fictive counterpart:

Faithful Henson in his First Narrative:

In his childhood, Josiah Henson knew little about faith and Christianity. Henson’s mother taught him the Lord’s Prayer, but he did not have a full understanding of the religion. Eventually, he went and listened to a sermon which helped broaden his understanding. From there, Henson

¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon which the Story is Founded. Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work*, (Boston: J.P. Jewett & co, 1853), 1.

started developing his faith as an important aspect of his identity. These passages show the transformation in his first slave narrative:

“Sometimes, when I have seen them [women slaves] starved, and miserable, and unable to help themselves, I have helped them to some of the comforts which they were denied by him who owned them, and which my companions had not the wit or the daring to procure.”²

This passage is before Henson’s “awakening.” Here, Henson describes a form of Christian morality, where a good Christian helps those who cannot help themselves. While this passage shows that Henson was kind and helpful, he did not always have a good understanding of the religion.

“I hurried off, pleased with the opportunity [to go see a sermon], but without any definite expectations of benefit or amusement.”³

This passage makes his lack of understanding clear: Henson is excited to go see a sermon because he has a basic understanding of Christianity, but he does not know what to expect because he is not devoutly faithful yet.

“[After the sermon], Immediately determined to find out something more about ‘Christ and him crucified;’ and revolving the things which I had heard in my mind as I went home, I became so excited that I turned aside from the road into the woods, and prayed to God for light and for aid with and earnestness, which, however unenlightened, was at least sincere and heartfelt...I date my conversion, and my awakening for a new life...from this day.”⁴

“religion is not so much knowledge, as wisdom; - and observation upon what passes without, and reflection upon what passes within a man’s heart will give him a larger growth in grace than is imagined by the devoted adherents of creeds, or the confident followers of Christ, who call him Lord, Lord, but do not the things which he says.”⁵

The third and fourth passages show his transformation in the slave narrative. The third is directly after the sermon and the fourth is later in his pastoral career. Each passage exemplifies how faith directly impacted Henson’s view of the world, both as a slave and a leader of the Dawn Settlement.

² Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada*, (Canada: Uncle Tom’s Cabin & Museum, 1965), 9.

³ Ibid, 10.

⁴ Ibid, 12.

⁵ Ibid, 58.

While these passages show that Josiah Henson was very religious before *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the narrative purposefully shows Henson's faith as a journey. There was a time when Henson did not understand Christianity (the first two passages), but through belief and devotion, he eventually did (the second two passages).

Faithful Henson in his Final Narrative:

Henson's faith journey is presented differently in his final narrative. *Uncle Tom's Story of his Life* is written as though Henson was always Christian, even before he was a devout believer. While this is implied by the first passage of his first narrative, *Uncle Tom's Story of his Life* uses explicit Christian language to describe how Henson viewed the world before his "awakening":

"The sufferings of the past are now like a dream, and the enduring lessons left behind, make me to praise God that my soul has been tempered by Him in so fiery a furnace and under such heavy blows."⁶

This is a part of Henson's introduction, showing faith's centrality in the following chapters. By blatantly mentioning it at the beginning, Henson establishes his faith as the central part of his story and himself. This is contrasted by his first slave narrative, which did not have an introduction.

"When I was driving a pig or a sheep a mile or two into the woods, to slaughter for the good of those whom Riley was starving, I felt good, moral, heroic."⁷

This is an extended description of the story referenced in the previous section's first passage. The descriptive words have a strong religious tone. Any similar tone from his first narrative was sub-textual, while here, it is clearly stated. This Christian imagery correlates Henson to his "Uncle Tom" persona.

"An incident occurred which produced so powerful an influence on my intellectual development, my character, condition, my religious culture, and in short, on my whole nature, body and soul, that it deserves especial notice and commemoration."⁸

This is how Henson sets up the "awakening" experience. The passage is more descriptive than in Henson's first narrative, which did not describe the experience as developing his character, condition, religious culture, nature, body and soul. It emphasizes how Henson presented his belief system differently in later narratives.

⁶ Josiah Henson, *Uncle Tom's Story of His Life: An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson from 1789-1876*, DocSouth Books ed., (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 22.

⁷ Ibid, 30.

⁸ Ibid, 31.

“He has by orgainsation, as well as by grace, a strong feeling of devotion, worship. And sense of dependence. As a Christian, some of his strongest religious feelings are his love of prayer and thankfulness, and his disposition to seek aid and consolation from a higher source than man in the hour of trouble⁹...I have been much gratified in making the acquaintance of ‘Uncle Tom.’”¹⁰

This is a description of Josiah Henson, given by Professor Fowler. He describes Henson as Uncle Tom, showing how Henson was publicly perceived. This description also shows how Henson wanted to publicly present himself. As a public forum, Henson made faith and the “real Uncle Tom” central aspects to his public perception.

Henson’s final narrative uses Christianity differently. Most inclusions of Christianity are used to show the level of devotion Henson *always* had, even before his deep understanding of the religion. This hyper-Christian language further synonymizes Josiah Henson to his fictional counterpart.

Faithful Tom in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*:

Faith is Uncle Tom’s main characteristic, influencing his beliefs, attitudes, and actions. In her *Key*, Stowe cites Henson’s devotion to Christianity as a main reason for why she used him as inspiration for Uncle Tom.¹¹ The following passages show the number of times faith is used when Tom makes important decisions in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*:

“There’ll be the same God there, Chloe, that there is here.’... ‘I’m in the Lord’s hands,’ said Tom; ‘nothin’ can go no furdur than he lets it’”¹²

[Tom] “Not while Mas’r is in trouble...“not while I’m in trouble, Tom?” Said St. Clare, looking sadly out of the window. “And when will *my* trouble be over?” “When Mas’r St. Clare’s a Christian,” said Tom.”¹³

“No, ye poor, lost soul, that ye mustn’t do [kill the slave owner]. The dear, blessed Lord never shed no blood but his own, and that he poured out for us when we was enemies. Lord, help us to follow his steps, and love our enemies.”¹⁴

Each passage presents Tom with a difficult situation. The first passage is when Tom is sold to a new slave owner and must go south. When leaving his family, he suggests that God will protect

⁹ Ibid, 154.

¹⁰ Ibid, 155.

¹¹ Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 52.

¹² Harriet Beecher Stowe and Christopher G. Diller, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Or, Life among the Lowly*, (Canada: Broadview Press, 2009), 139.

¹³ Ibid, 346-7.

¹⁴ Ibid, 434.

him from his new owners. The second passage is when Tom advocates for his slave owner, suggesting that he should be a Christian. The third passage is when Tom is encouraged by another slave named Cassy to kill his slave owner. He chooses to not, using faith to justify his decision.

Stowe presents Tom in a similar way to how Henson presents himself in the narratives after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: always faithful and driven by either Christianity or Christian values. While Henson uses his faith to make decisions in his first narrative too, it is not involved in *every decision*.

Faithful Henson and Faithful Tom Across Narratives, History, and Fiction:

The moments in the above section were influenced by similar situations which happened in Henson's life. For Henson, though, only one of these moments focused on his faith:

Uncle Tom's Cabin:

“No, ye poor, lost soul, that ye mustn't do [kill the slave owner]. The dear, blessed Lord never shed no blood but his own, and that he poured out for us when we was enemies. Lord, help us to follow his steps, and love our enemies.”

Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave:

“I raised it to strike the fatal blow, - when suddenly the thought came to me, “what! Commit Murder! And you a Christian!”¹⁵

Both Tom and Henson contemplate murder but use their faith to justify not doing it.

This is an example of how Henson presented himself as faithful and pious before *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published. After contextualizing how Henson and Stowe used faith in their writing, this paper will now compare Henson's first and final narratives, to show his different uses of Christian language.

Faithful Henson? The Difference in his Narratives:

Two pivotal moments in Henson's life were when he trusted his master, and when he escaped to Canada. Comparing how the two narratives describe these situations, reveals the way faith was used differently before and after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published:

Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave:

“I had promised that man to take his property to Kentucky, and deposit it with his brother...the perception of my own strength of character, the feeling of integrity, the sentiment of high honor...these advantages I do know, and prize.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Henson, *Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave*, 39-40.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

Uncle Tom's Story of his Life:

“the duties of the slave to his master as appointed over him in the Lord, I had ever heard urged by ministers and religious men...Pride, too came in to confirm me. I had undertaken a great thing’ my vanity had been flattered all along the road by hearing myself praised.”¹⁷

In the first narrative, Henson justifies trusting Mr. Riley because of honour and loyalty rather than his Christian faith. These are certainly Christian values, but he did not directly speak of God. In the final narrative, Henson uses Christian rhetoric. Even when he uses words like pride, which are not directly Christian, they have a blatant Christian meaning.¹⁸

Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave:

Pages 47 – 56.

Uncle Tom's Story of his Life:

“if discovered, we should be seized and lodged in jail. In God was our only hope. Ferently did I pray to Him as we trudged on cautiously and stealthily, as fast as the darkness and the feebleness of my wife and boys would allow.”¹⁹

This passage comparison is different than the others. The point of this comparison is that Henson added an entirely new part to his “escape from slavery” story in his later narratives. Both narratives hit the same beats: Henson and his family hide from slave catchers, cross the Ohio river, and arrive in Canada. The difference is that Henson’s post-*Uncle Tom's Cabin* narratives include this passage about faith.

These passage comparisons and analyses raise important questions: what did Henson really do? Which is true? Which do we believe? These questions are difficult to answer. Perhaps Henson prayed on his way to Canada but did not think it was important to include in the first narrative. He later changed his mind and included it in other works. Perhaps he forgot when dictating his first narrative and remembered later. Perhaps he put it in later narratives, because he wanted to look more pious. While these questions are difficult to answer, it is clear that Henson’s later narratives were influenced by Stowe’s novel.

Josiah Henson used more Christian language in his later narratives, and his historical memory has been synonymous with Uncle Tom’s. While these facts are clear, historians *do not* know why Henson used the religious language, or if Henson wanted to be defined as the “real Uncle Tom.” Regardless, Uncle Tom’s piety was attributed to Josiah Henson. It can be inferred that the religious language influenced the public’s perception of him.

Thus, Henson had an active hand in his somewhat troubled synthesis with Tom. By putting “Uncle Tom” in the title to Henson’s final narrative, his later works integrated Tom into

¹⁷ Henson, *Uncle Tom's Story of his Life*, 45.

¹⁸ Pride is also one of the seven deadly sins and evokes Christian imagery.

¹⁹ Henson, *Uncle Tom's Story of his Life*, 70.

his public image. Henson ends the narrative with the list of his England lecture venues, titling it “SUMMARY OF ‘UNCLE TOM’S’ PUBLIC SERVICES.”²⁰ He gives Tom the last word. This alone synthesizes Henson with Uncle Tom, but his new Christian rhetoric solidifies the synthesis in a more subtle way. Because both the title and the end of the narrative act as a framework for Tom and Henson’s synthesis, it is more likely for the reader to associate the religious language with Uncle Tom than with Josiah Henson.

The Memory of Uncle Tom and Josiah Henson:

Indeed, Tom is better remembered than Henson. Stowe’s novel was far more popular than Henson’s narratives, but Henson also used Uncle Tom as a public persona, which complicates Henson’s memory. Instead of one’s popularity simply outweighing the other, Henson’s presentation as Uncle Tom left no Josiah Henson to remember.

Beyond the broad public eye, Henson was also remembered as Uncle Tom in the southern Ontario African community. The Reverend Jennie Johnson, who was an African Canadian minister from the late-19th and early-20th centuries, was a part of the Dawn community (ASK) and knew Henson from her childhood.²¹ While living in Flint, Michigan during the summer of 1948, Johnson learned that as the Henson estate was divided, one of Henson’s watches was lost.²² Hoping to find the watch, she was interviewed for an article in the *Flint News-Advisor*, titled “Uncle Tom’s timepiece.”²³ Even Johnson, who knew Henson from her childhood and attended his funeral, referred to him as “Uncle Tom.” Whether she personally referred to him this way or thought that the story would get more public attention with “Uncle Tom” attached, she exemplifies how Henson was remembered in a personal and community context.²⁴

A contemporary example of how Henson is remembered as Uncle Tom is the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin Historic Site*. It is significant that Josiah Henson’s Canadian site of memory has “Uncle Tom” in the title. While the site’s name reaffirms how he is *still* seen by the public, the site itself focuses on Henson.²⁵ Other than a display case with different copies and editions of Stowe’s novel, Tom is not mentioned. The introductory text-block even discusses Henson’s international achievement rather than mentioning the international success of Stowe’s novel: “recognized internationally for his contribution to the abolition movement, Josiah Henson was an important community leader, author, preacher and a conductor on the Underground Railroad.”²⁶ The site is also discussing a name change to better represent Henson in the title of the museum. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin Historic Site* contends with how Henson is remembered during the past, while trying to change his place in Canada’s present historical memory.

Conclusion:

²⁰ Henson, *Uncle Tom’s Story of his Life*, 156-8.

²¹ Nina Reid-Maroney, *The Reverend Jennie Johnson and African Canadian History, 1868-1967*, (New Jersey: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 126.

²² *Ibid*, 126-7.

²³ *Ibid*, 127.

²⁴ Within a few weeks, she got the watch from a pawnbroker in Flint.

²⁵ The name was helpful when attracting US tourists, who would most likely not know Josiah Henson, regardless of his synthesis with Uncle Tom.

²⁶ Text of interpretive display, Uncle Tom’s Cabin Historic Site, Dresden Ontario. March 18, 2019.

Josiah Henson is not remembered as the self-emancipated leader of the Dawn Settlement; he is remembered as his fictional counterpart Uncle Tom.²⁷ Henson extensively referred to himself as Uncle Tom, titling his final narrative *Uncle Tom's Story of his Life*. In that narrative, Henson also gives “Uncle Tom” the last word when logging his England lecture circuit. From his death in 1883 through the 20th century, people like Reverend Jennie Johnson have referred to Henson as “Uncle Tom” in the public sphere. While the contemporary *Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site* focuses on Josiah Henson's history, the name still references his connection to Stowe. He is still remembered as Uncle Tom, not Josiah Henson. Uncle Tom was Henson's public persona from the late 1800s, through the 20th century, and into the present. Henson had a direct hand in his remembrance as the “real Uncle Tom.” After Stowe's novel, Henson added religious language and a sense that he was always Christian, even before understanding the religion. This thematically changed Christianity's role in his narratives and made him seem more like the always pious Uncle Tom.

The Phantoms of the Past Project is about how slavery and abolition are remembered, uncovering forgotten slave narratives, and sharing the uncovered stories to expand slavery and abolition's historical memory. Whether Henson wanted to be remembered as Uncle Tom or not, he had a direct hand in that historical memory. So, with the themes of Phantoms of the Past in mind, how do historians and the wider public correct this? How do we remember Josiah Henson? While their name suggests otherwise, *Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site* is an excellent example of how Henson's story is still preserved. Like the historic site, this paper argues that Josiah Henson should be remembered. While it demonstrates Henson's active involvement in being remembered as Uncle Tom, this paper does not intend to keep it that way. By showing how historical figures are influenced by literary ones, the paper argues that Josiah Henson should be remembered in his own right.²⁸ Given this, my phantoms project puts forward the following map, which digitizes the English lecture circuit log described by Henson at the end of his final narrative. To remember Josiah Henson as a significant intellectual and lecturer, I name the digitized log, “Josiah Henson's England Lecture Circuit: “A Summary of ‘Uncle Tom's’ Public Services””:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=174okE0DBPaQtLx6IswxQiiLRekKA933M&ll=51.598410042431816%2C-0.28367628140449597&z=11>

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²⁷ It is important to note that, while recent and relatively small, there is a growing historiography on Henson: Jared Brock, *The Road to Dawn: Josiah Henson and the story that sparked the Civil War*, (New York: PublicAffairs, Hachette Book Group, 2018). Rona Arato, *Working for Freedom: the story of Josiah Henson*, (Canada: Napoleon Pub., 2008). Edna M. Trojano, *Uncle Tom's Journey from Maryland to Canada: the life of Josiah Henson*, (United States: The History Press, 2019).

²⁸ He has been a phantom of the past for too long.

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