

## UC research brings focus to portrayals of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' on the silver screen

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"Uncle Tom's Cabin" by Harriet Beecher Stowe was the best-selling novel of the 19th century, and almost immediately upon its publication in 1852, it made its way to stage, vaudeville, music and minstrel shows. In fact, it gave birth to an entire genre of minstrel shows called "Tom Shows."

And, appropriately enough, it was the subject of one of the earliest films, a 12-minute [motion picture](#) made in 1903 by mechanic-turned-movie director Edwin S. Porter, which introduced the first black character – though played by a white actor in blackface – ever depicted in American cinema.

University of Cincinnati researcher Sharon Dean, associate professor of English and women's studies, has studied the impact of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in film and popular culture for decades and points out that while more than 100 films, plays and musicals have recreated and reinterpreted the novel, many more reference its characters, plot and themes in some way.

According to Dean, "The 1915 silent movie 'The Birth of a Nation' borrows characters and the slave-cabin setting from Stowe's novel. Bugs Bunny cartoons from the 1930s and '40s reference the novel. The musical 'The King and I' also contains a subplot from Stowe's book. And even the 2002 film 'Gangs of New York' contains a scene where characters are at a stage play of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'"

She will present on her research during a Sept. 30-Oct. 2 conference, the Stowe Bicentennial Commemorative Conference, held in Cincinnati, Ohio, one-time home of Harriet Beecher Stowe.

## **FILM VERSIONS OF "UNCLE TOM'S CABIN" PROVIDE FOCUS ON ATTITUDES ON RACE AND HISTORY OF SLAVERY**

"Uncle Tom's Cabin" in film or as popular culture objects – like advertisements, comics, Sambo coin banks and Topsy Turvy dolls – reflects the arc of racial attitudes and equality over the decades, explained Dean.

She added that in the early part of the 20th century and even well into the 1930s and '40s, Hollywood films were actively demeaning of and toward African Americans, largely because Hollywood tapped into the already popular formula of the Tom Shows. There was a brief respite from these characterizations, provided by the 1920s and '30s race films. Race films were movies produced by, directed by and starred in by African Americans for an African American audience.

In the 1950s, Hollywood began to react to the growing civil rights movement and to attract more diverse audiences. Thus, films took more care, generally, in depicting diversity and with characterizations of diverse groups. Stated Dean, "The 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' scene in 'The King and I' would exemplify this much more sympathetic treatment of African American characters, with a harsher judgment delivered regarding the practice of slavery."

In the 1960s and 1970s, films of and entertainment industry references to "Uncle Tom's Cabin" largely disappeared due to the civil rights movement. Interpretations of and references to the book's narrative did

not return until a 1987 television movie depicting the book. The more modern versions and references to the work generally employ it as a vehicle to explore and depict racial and economic injustice.

"The story, its characters, stereotypes and themes continue to be the lens through which we define America's history of slavery and our interpretation of the struggle for equal rights. And while interpretations and reference to the book have certainly evolved, some elements have remained both consistent and intriguing," said Dean.

For instance, two girl characters in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" are Eva and Topsy. Eva, a white child, is intelligent and angelic, while Topsy, a black child, is the opposite. (The current focus of Dean's research is the history and representation of Topsy.)

"Yet," according to Dean, "from the earliest film versions, these characters were consistently played by twins. This brought in a subtext to these movies that didn't exist in the book. The films were bringing a new dimension, looking at our duality as human beings, the multifaceted sides one individual can have."

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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