Idealist and materialist approaches to abolition in Uncle Tom's cabin and The daughter of adoption

Jillian Shea

University at Albany, State University of New York, jillianmshea@gmail.com

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IDEALIST AND MATERIALIST APPROACHES
TO ABOLITION IN UNCLE TOM’S CABIN
AND THE DAUGHTER OF ADOPTION

By

Jillian M. Shea

A Thesis
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English
2020
Abstract

Sentimentalism was a popular aesthetic, moral, political, and literary movement in the 18th and 19th centuries in the United States and England, and both Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and John Thelwall’s *The Daughter of Adoption* (1801) use sentimentalism in their attempts to advocate for the abolition of slavery. Scholars such as Lauren Berlant critique sentimentalism, specifically Stowe’s use of sentimentalism, for its potential to make structural problems appear as if they can be assuaged by personal change, and I situate this understanding of sentimentalism within an idealist framework, or a framework that primarily emphasizes subjectivity’s role in abolition. I contrast the idealism of Stowe’s sentimentalism with the materialism of Thelwall’s sentimentalism, which primarily emphasizes the need to dismantle or, at the very least, to reform the structures that produce and maintain the institution of slavery. However, neither novel functions in an exclusively idealist or materialist framework, and, in this thesis, I explore what possibilities each combination of idealism and materialism both opens up and forecloses.
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Introduction

In the preface to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe declares that “the object of these sketches is to awaken sympathy and feeling for the African race, as they exist among us; to show their wrongs and sorrows, under a system so necessarily cruel and unjust as to defeat and do away the good effects of all that can be attempted for them, by their best friends, under it” (45). In other words, before the novel has even formally begun, Stowe already explicitly indicates to her readers that her goal in writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is to solicit “sympathy” from them for the enslaved Africans that have been subject to “a system so necessarily cruel.” By asking her readers to “sympathize” with the plight of those who have been enslaved in the United States, Stowe clearly situates her novel within the sentimental tradition in which readers of the novel and characters within the novel are expected to have a particular emotional and subjective response, which, in this case, is sadness or disgust, to the injustice that they are witnessing.

Similarly, even though John Thelwall’s *The Daughter of Adoption* (1801) does not open with an explicit request to its readers to feel sympathy for any particular group, it is also clearly saturated with the language of “sympathy” right from the beginning of the novel and, consequently, also situates itself in the sentimental tradition. After all, not only is the first item on the list of the first chapter’s sequence of events “Maternal Feelings,” something that is a common point of emphasis in sentimental novels, but the first chapter is also invested in juxtaposing the “blunt sympathies” of Percival Montfort to the “natural disposition to sympathy and compassion” of Amelia Montfort (48, 52). The conflict between these two characters’ dispositions influences pretty much all of the novel’s succeeding events as their conflicting dispositions lead them to educate their son, Henry Montfort, one of the novel’s protagonists, in a
way that sometimes cultivates the compassionate tendencies of his mother and, at other times, cultivates the hedonistic tendencies of his father. It is this complex relationship between sympathy and hedonism in Henry that jumpstarts the novel and, ultimately, leads to Henry’s trip to the French colony of St. Domingue in the West Indies where he meets his love-interest, Seraphina, and to his licentious behavior that will complicate their relationship until the end of the novel. As in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, sympathy is not just a character trait, but, rather, is a political tool, and Henry often attempts to alleviate the injustices he participates in by evoking sympathy. For instance, after Henry and some of his friends from seminary attempt to rob the henroost of a “neighbouring farmer,” Mr. Wilson, Henry attempts to repent for his crime by promising to pay off one of the farmer’s debts and is kept awake at night because of “the sacred obligation of his promise -- honour and sympathy… [which] conspired to torment him” (83, 99).

These novels’ mutual investment in sympathy and the sentimental tradition is my first justification for pairing these two novels together. My second justification for thinking about these novels in conjunction with each other is their mutual investment in abolitionism. While *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a novel about the experience of enslaved people in the United States as they are separated from their families by being traded within the U.S., *The Daughter of Adoption* is a novel that primarily takes place in England and follows the life of Henry Montfort but, for about a quarter of the novel, features Henry’s trip to St. Domingue and portrays the Haitian Revolution, to secure Black independence, that began there in 1791. While *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* portrays slavery in the domestic setting, *The Daughter of Adoption* portrays slavery in the colonial setting. Still, despite these novels’ differences, they both use sentimentalism in their arguments against the moral permissibility of slavery.
In this thesis, I aim to consider how each novel’s use of sentimentalism fits into both an idealist framework and a materialist framework and to think about the advantages and disadvantages of each kind of approach to abolition. I’ll be asking questions such as “Which type of framework does each author emphasize and why? How does emphasizing one framework over another affect what each novel imagines is necessary to achieve abolition, and what components of abolition does each novel’s combination of materialism and idealism allow the novel uncover?” In the first chapter, I lay out some basics of sentimental theory and discuss how sentimental theory is related to the onset of democratic governmental structures. I also discuss how sentimentalism often led to the exclusion of people from democracy despite its promises of inclusion and offer more developed definitions of how I’ll be using the terms idealism and materialism. In the second chapter, I acknowledge *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s adherence to conventional sentimental practice and discuss how the novel seems to argue that the primary evil of slavery is the separation of families and not slavery itself. I explore the limitations of this approach while also thinking about the importance that Stowe appeal to the sensibilities of her readers and the ways in which Stowe does succeed in addressing the legal structures that uphold slavery even in her primarily idealist approach. In the third chapter, I highlight how the education of Henry Montfort demonstrates the centrality of sentimentalism’s relationship to the formation of the liberal subject and how the enslaved Africans on the island of St. Domingue are excluded from being able to possess this kind of subjectivity. I detail how the novel’s materialist lens allows for the potential of those who have been enslaved to resist their material circumstances and, most importantly, analyze how, at times, the novel re-envisions sympathy as the capability to recognize when one can’t identify with the plight of someone who has suffered in ways he hasn’t. By thinking about these two novels together, I intend to demonstrate how
Stowe’s conventional use of sentimentalism plays an important role in the project of abolition by advocating for the humanization of enslaved persons who have typically been dehumanized while also indicating how Thelwall’s more materialist version of sentimentalism opens up the possibility for enslaved persons to be thought of as subjects without appropriating their pain. I want to make it clear that neither of these novels offers a “perfect” approach to achieving abolition and that *The Daughter of Adoption* does, too, often affirm more traditional methods of sentimental identification. Rather, in this thesis, I intend to think about what possibilities each novel’s approach to abolition opens for us and forecloses.
Chapter 1: Sentimental Theory, Democracy, and the Idealist-Materialist Nexus

Both *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Daughter of Adoption* draw upon several important themes that were established in Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which is arguably the most influential work on the development of sentimentalism as an aesthetic, moral, political, and literary movement. In this book, Smith declares

> How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him…. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations…. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them…. that this is the source of our fellow-feeling for the misery of others, that it is by changing places in fancy with the sufferer, that we come either to conceive or to be affected by what he feels. (11-12)

Here, Smith indicates that it is only by imagining the suffering of another as if it were his own that one can come to actually “feel” for his fellow person; it is only by “changing places in fancy with the sufferer” that a person can imagine the kind of pain that another person is experiencing. Sympathy, then, is a means of identification in which people are able to experience the pain of another person (imperfectly, as Smith describes it) even if they themselves have not actually experienced the cause of that pain. This invitation to experience the pain of those who have been enslaved even when one is not nor ever has been enslaved is evident in the quotation from the preface of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* where Stowe highlights that she is awakening sympathy for the enslaved “as they exist among us.” While Stowe maintains the difference between those who have been enslaved and the free-people she is addressing by referring to the enslaved as “they” and her addressees as “us,” the preposition “among” can’t help but to suggest that those who have been enslaved and free-people are both members of one cohesive larger group. Her goal to
“awaken sympathy and feeling for the African race,” then, is to encourage free-people to imagine the suffering of those who have been enslaved as if it were their own so that they will take that suffering seriously. This kind of identification is also seen in *The Daughter of Adoption* just after Mr. Wilson explains his financial troubles to Henry: “Wealth, birth, and distinctions lost, for a while, their lustre in his eyes; and his heart expanded to the family of the human race” (91). In this moment, the distinctions that would have once separated Henry and Mr. Wilson have dissolved, and the two men are now positioned as being part of the same family. Henry is now able to see that the crime he committed against Mr. Wilson was wrong because he identifies with Mr. Wilson’s pain; he decides to make amends for his crime against Mr. Wilson because he is able to imagine Mr. Wilson’s pain as if it were his own. Sentimental identification, then, requires that sympathizers “imagine” a sufferer’s pain and adjust their emotional response accordingly; it requires that people don’t simply act on their initial emotional impulses, but, rather, that they regulate their emotions to ensure an appropriate emotional response.

The importance of regulating one’s emotions to Smith’s sentimental theory speaks to why so many scholars connect sentimentality to the onset of democracy in both the American and British traditions. In “Sentimental Aesthetics,” Elizabeth Maddock Dillon highlights how the 18th century was marked by a “turn from autocratic and monarchical regimes toward liberal and republican ones” and was characterized, specifically by Immanuel Kant, by the conception of a “liberal subject -- the subject who could be capable of self-government and thus able to sustain liberal forms of rule” (498, 502). In other words, Kant theorized a subject who had access to a universal moral law within himself and, therefore, could regulate his own behavior without the need of an “oppressive ruling authority” (501). Similar to Smith, Kant imagines a subject who is able to self-regulate, and this kind of subject obviously lends itself to conceptions of democratic
governments that are governed “by the people” and not by a monarch who imposes laws on people who are incapable of creating order themselves.

The connection between the onset of democracy and sentimentalism, however, is not merely exhibited by the parallels between Kant’s and Smith’s work, but, rather, is actually an explicit argument that Dillon makes in “Sentimental Aesthetics” by describing Friedrich Schiller’s conception of the relationship between aesthetics, sentimentalism, and democracy:

Like Kant, Schiller uses the aesthetic to produce an account of the liberal subject who becomes aware of his or her freedom through the act of aesthetic judgment. Like Kant, Schiller suggests that this free play of the senses enables individuals to be free and also to follow a universal moral law, thus producing freedom and lawfulness at once. Yet unlike Kant, Schiller lodges some of the power of the aesthetic in the aesthetic object itself rather than only in the subjective experience of aesthetic judgment. The aesthetic thus acquires a concrete nature for Schiller that it never has for Kant…. Sentimental poetry, then, defines for Schiller a mode of fusing the ideal with the sensuous, just as the “playdrive” in his aesthetic theory conjoins materiality and ideality. Schiller’s concept of the sentimental, then, emphasizes not simply a felt response to the world but a self-conscious, formalizing response to sensation. As such, it seems markedly heterogeneous. Although it welds form and matter, it also opens a certain distance between the two in the self-reflexive moment of formalization.” (503-505)

Unlike Kant, Schiller does place some aesthetic value in the art object itself, which indicates that, for Schiller, the aesthetic experience is not purely subjective, but, rather, is a subjective experience in response to something material that exists independently of one’s perception. This is a critical point when thinking about Schiller’s aesthetic theory because it speaks to the “temporal distance” between sensation and one’s formalized response to sensation that is necessary for the liberal subject to have in order to exercise his moral reasoning (504). It is the liberal subject’s ability to respond to stimuli that allows him to be capable of self-government, and Schiller believes that sentimental literature is capable of helping people develop this moral reasoning and, therefore, to become liberal subjects who are capable of self-rule and sustaining
democracy, because the differentiation between sensation and formalized response -- which is called sentiment -- is at the heart of sentimentalism.

Despite sentimentalism’s suggestion that the ability to self-govern and to attain liberal subjectivity is universal and, therefore, achievable by all people, many scholars note how sentimentalism is actually used to exclude people from participating in and being recognized as subjects within a democracy. Elizabeth Barnes, for example, in her book *States of Sympathy*, describes how the language Thomas Jefferson used in the Declaration of Independence is a “strategy of identification” that depicts “the people” as equivalent to himself” (1, 2). In this way, Jefferson uses sentimental language in order to suggest that all men will have equal rights under the law and that all men will have the ability to participate in the United States government. However, as Barnes continues her analysis, she notes that “the act of imagining oneself in another’s position -- is contingent upon familiarity,” and, in the sentimental tradition, familiarity gets established among one’s family within the domestic sphere, which gives sympathy a “dangerous capacity to undermine the democratic principles it ostensibly means to reinforce. By displacing a democratic model that values diversity with a familial model that seeks to elide it, sentimental literature subordinates democratic politics to a politics of affinity” (2, 4). So, although sentimentalism’s use of the language of identification appears to be an ideal foundation for American democracy as it seems to position all people on equal footing, it also actually provides the grounds for exclusion from American democracy because there will be “unfamiliar” people who the founding fathers are unable to identify with; it provides the grounds for exclusion from being considered a liberal subject who is capable of self-rule and from having the same legal rights that were granted to those who had the privilege of writing the Declaration of Independence. Despite the fact that the Declaration of Independence declares that “All men are
created equal,” the United States’ maintenance of the institution of slavery for the next 90 years or so after the writing of this document clearly demonstrates the falsity of this declaration.

The use of sentimentalism in excluding people from supposedly inclusive structures is, however, not a phenomenon that is unique to the American domestic setting. In Sentimental Figures of Empire, Lynn M. Festa highlights how “sympathetic identification creates difference rather than similitude” and how sentimentalism helped facilitate the characterization of the natives in the British and French colonies as an “other” against which the British and French defined themselves: “Colonial expansion means that readers must find ways of recognizing human likeness while maintaining other forms of difference. The sentimental community upholds a common identity, not by forging bonds directly between seemingly like individuals, but by creating a shared relationship to a common but excluded object about which the community has feelings” (4). Similar to how Barnes analyzes the Declaration of Independence, here, Festa highlights how despite using language that supposedly demonstrates the interconnectedness of humanity, the lack of familiarity between the colonizers and the colonized prevents identification and, in fact, actually helps to solidify the national identity of the colonizers by providing them with the representation of what they are not.

As I’ve already noted, however, both Stowe and Thelwall use sentimentalism as one of their methods to argue against the moral permissibility of slavery and to advocate for dismantling it as an institution. So, now, the question becomes to what degree can sentimentalism be an effective tool for removing inequalities in American democracy and the British colonies when sentiment itself seems to be capable of perpetuating these inequalities? For this reason, many scholars do not view sentimentalism as being able to create actual political change. Lauren Berlant, for instance, in her article “Poor Eliza” states that “When sentimentality meets politics,
it uses personal stories to tell of structural effects, but in so doing it risks thwarting its very attempt to perform rhetorically a scene of pain that must be soothed politically… the ethical imperative toward social transformation becomes replaced by a world of private thoughts, leanings, and gestures” (641). In other words, Berlant believes that sentimentalism makes things about “feeling right” and, consequently, makes the solution to structural problems seem like an issue of personal change and not of systematic change; she’s concerned that making things about “feeling right” actually leads to complacency and a lack of political action. Berlant’s critique of sentimentalism ultimately boils down to the fact that it risks making things a purely subjective issue rather than one that requires the resistance to circumstances and structures that are external to the subject.

This critique is one that is often made about *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s use of sentimentalism. After all, the novel’s title character does not actively resist any of his oppressive circumstances. When Uncle Tom is informed that Mr. Shelby has sold him to Mr. Haley, Uncle Tom comforts his wife Chloe by telling her that he’s “in the Lord’s hands” and then leaves willingly without even expressing a little bit of anger or sadness that he is being forced to leave his family (139). Even after witnessing the horrors that occur on Simon Legree’s plantation, Uncle Tom simply notes that “he saw enough of abuse of misery to make him sick and weary; but he determined to toil on, with religious patience” (390). Even while being beaten by Legree, a moment that will eventually result in his death, Uncle Tom tells Legree that “if taking every drop of blood in the poor old body would save you precious soul, I’d give ‘em freely” (449). Even Jane Tompkins, who reminds readers not to take a presentist approach to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and views the novel as doing important cultural work for the time period in which it was written, highlights the novel’s emphasis on subjective change: “The choice is not between action and inaction,
programs and feelings; the choice is between actions that spring from the ‘sophistries of worldly policy’ and those inspired by the ‘sympathies of Christ.’ Reality, in Stowe's view, cannot be changed by manipulating the physical environment; it can only be changed by conversion in the spirit because it is the spirit alone that is finally real” (135). Here, Tompkins underscores the fact that acting in a Christ-like manner is of the ultimate importance to Stowe and her readers because that is the means of their salvation. While Tompkins highlights this point to remind readers that Stowe’s work depicted Uncle Tom as achieving the highest form of heroism possible in her historical moment even if Stowe’s methods seem problematic to present readers, this point nonetheless emphasizes that a shift in the subjectivity of her readers is Stowe’s primary goal.

The limitations of sentimentalism’s political efficacy is also on display in Thelwall’s novel. In “Politico-Sentimentality,” Andrew McCann first quotes Thelwall’s own words describing sentimentalism’s emphasis on subjectivity and then goes on to analyze how Thelwall’s declaration indicates that he is concerned that sentimentalism allows one to take pleasure in someone else’s pain without actually taking action to change it:

“Remove but the real causes of complaint; nay, keep them but at such a distance, that they may goad the bosoms of those who have the capacity to act, and whatever may be the transient influence of poets and orators on the heated fancies of a few, everyone will quickly find... some personal feeling, some individual interest to overpower the sympathies of imagination, and restore the momentary wanderer to himself.”.... The self to which the wanderer returns is not an authentic origin, but the isolated, monadic subjectivity of property ownership, incapable of thinking in terms of communal interests and solidarity, yet prepared to experience and indulge apparent sympathy for pleasure and sensation. The Peripatetic [one of Thelwall’s other books] begins to raise questions concerning the political efficacy of sentimental textual production. (38)

Similar to Berlant, Thelwall critiques sentimentalism’s potential to become a purely subjective experience, and, while Thelwall’s work does incorporate sentimentalism, many scholars highlight how Thelwall’s work is also very intentional about acknowledging the external structures that lead to oppression and contemplating ways that people can respond to their
material circumstances. In *The Origins of the Rights of Labor*, for instance, Gregory Claeys discusses how Thelwall did a lot of political work condemning capitalism as an unjust economic system and advocating for a redistribution of wealth in which “the laboring classes ought to be ensured a *proportionate* right to increases in society’s wealth generally” (256). While Claeys is not specifically talking about *The Daughter of Adoption*, this critique of capitalism as a cause for injustice does permeate the novel. After contemplating the beauty of the island of St. Domingue, for instance, Henry expresses that its beauty has been corrupted by the greed of capitalists: “But what is there… of fair and beautiful in this magnificent structure of the universe that commercial rapacity will not deform?” (137). Henry, then, acknowledges that the presence of slavery in St. Domingue is not just the result of people not having sympathy for those who have been enslaved, but, rather, is the result of a corrupt economic system. *The Daughter of Adoption* does not, however, merely acknowledge that there are oppressive structures, but also draws attention to the ways in which these structures can be resisted. As Peter J. Kitson notes in his article “John Thelwall in St. Domingue,” the novel wrestles with the question of whether or not violent revolution is a legitimate response to oppression. The novel doesn’t provide a clear answer to this question, but the fact that it’s even asking the question indicates that the novel is not suggesting that the enslaved should simply accept their lot.

I will situate *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* within an idealist framework because it depicts abolitionism in terms of subjective, personal changes while situating *The Daughter of Adoption* within a materialist framework because it approaches abolitionism in terms of structural changes. Here, I’m mostly drawing my definitions from Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*: "Materialism is the recognition of 'objects in themselves,' or outside the mind; ideas and sensations are copies or images of those objects. The opposite doctrine (idealism) claims that
objects do not exist 'without the mind'; objects are 'combinations of sensations’” (17). Here, Lenin is basing his conception of idealism on the philosophical work of George Berkeley who proclaimed that “‘ideas’ cannot exist outside of the mind that perceives them” (15). In other words, idealism indicates that to be is to be perceived; in other words, idealism is a philosophy that posits pure subjectivity and that believes that one cannot verify that anything exists independently of his perception. Berlant’s claim that Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s emphasis on “feeling right” prevents the novel from advocating for actual structural reform because it, instead, makes personal change seem sufficient, then, critiques the novel for having idealist tendencies. By attempting to alleviate the evils of slavery by “feeling right,” Stowe, according to Berlant, is ignoring that there are factors outside of one’s subjectivity that contribute to oppression and effectively effaces the possibility of resisting or revolting against these outside factors and, consequently, continues to subject enslaved people to the same oppression that they were facing beforehand. Materialism as a philosophy, on the other hand, acknowledges that things do, in fact, exist independently of our perception and approaching abolition through a materialist perspective makes it possible for one to actually resist these oppressive structures. As I’ve already noted, many scholars note the materialist qualities of Thelwall’s work as he acknowledges that the capitalist economic system needs, at the very least, to be reformed and, in The Daughter of Adoption specifically critiques capitalism for its role in perpetuating the slave trade. The Daughter of Adoption also grapples with the possibility of violent resistance to one’s enslavement, and, while the novel highlights arguments that both condone and condemn violent resistance, it still portrays a possibility of active resistance to being enslaved that isn’t necessarily offered in Uncle Tom’s Cabin.
Of course, neither of these novels exists in an exclusively materialist or exclusively idealist framework. Rather, both *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Daughter of Adoption* are concerned with the roles of external systems of oppression and with subjectivity at least to some extent. For instance, toward the end of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the narrator expresses sorrow over the laws that allow for the continuation of slavery in the United States: “Scenes of blood and cruelty are shocking to our ear and heart. What man has nerve to do, man has not nerve to hear. What brother-man and brother-Christian must suffer, cannot be told us, even in our secret chamber, it so harrows up the soul! And yet, oh my country! these things are done under the shadow of thy laws!” (450). Stowe’s proclamation that “scenes of blood and cruelty are shocking to our ear and heart” demonstrates that she is still highlighting the importance of one’s subjective response to slavery, but, here, she also specifically draws a reader’s attention to how the injustices that occur to those who have been enslaved continue to occur because they are upheld by the law; here, Stowe does, in fact, draw a reader’s attention to the reality that external structures do play a role in the oppression of those who have been enslaved and that simply changing one’s perspective won’t actually end their oppression. Similarly, in *The Daughter of Adoption*, Henry contemplates how “systems of oppression” cause one to lose his ability to sympathize with his fellow man: “And such… are the secondary consequences of the systems of oppression! … Thus is all sympathy exterminated by the excess of sufferance! Man ceases to feel for man, and brother for brother; and human nature is degraded below the brute!” (131). While Henry continues to indicate that slavery is maintained because of “systems of oppression,” here, he suggests that one of the many consequences of these systems of oppression is the loss of one’s ability to sympathize with his fellow man; one of the negative consequences of these systems is that it cultivates subjective experiences in which people are unable to understand
another person’s pain and view their own gain, whether it be a gain of money or of power, as more important than protecting the lives and freedoms of others.

In brief, both *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Daughter of Adoption* incorporate sentimentalism into their arguments for abolition. Lauren Berlant critiques sentimentalism, and specifically *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s use of sentimentalism, for the way in which it can make structural problems appear as if they can be alleviated by personal change, and Thelwall, despite his use of sentimentalism, expresses similar concerns and actually places a considerable amount of emphasis on material concerns within his sentimental novel. While *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* takes a primarily idealist approach to achieving abolition and *The Daughter of Adoption* takes a primarily materialist approach to achieving abolition, both novels incorporate aspects of each framework into their arguments. In the following chapters, I will explore how the varying points of emphasis on idealism and materialism in each novel impact what each novel imagines is necessary to actually achieve abolition.
Chapter 2: Conventional Sentimentalism in Uncle Tom’s Cabin

In *States of Sympathy*, Elizabeth Barnes notes how “The conversion of the political into the personal, or the public into the private, is a distinctive trait of sentimentalism; its influence is made plain in the postrevolutionary and antebellum eras where family stands as the model for social and political affiliations…. For American authors, a democratic state is a sympathetic state, and a sympathetic state is one that resembles a family” (2). In other words, Barnes indicates that sentimentalism is very much concerned with the family unit because the family unit serves as a model for identifying with one’s fellow man and, consequently, also serves as a model for democracy. The domestic sphere, then, is of the utmost importance to sentimental writers because they believe it to be the site of both personal and political formation, and, in this chapter, I am going to primarily analyze how, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe critiques slavery for the way in which it destroys the family unit and also for the way in which the destruction of the family unit serves as a reflection of people’s inability to relate sympathetically to their fellow man.

The emphasis on the family unit and the domestic sphere, then, is one of the mechanisms of sentimentalism that Berlant claims makes structural problems appear as if they can be resolved by personal change; it is one of the mechanisms of sentimentalism that Berlant claims places things in the realm of pure subjectivity and not in the realm of one’s actual material circumstances. While I agree that Berlant is right to cautious us against the way in which sentimentalism can make “feeling right” seem like enough to achieve political reform, here, I also want to consider the strengths of Stowe’s primarily idealist approach to abolition while also accounting for how Stowe does, in fact, acknowledge and even resist some of the material structures that maintained slavery. In doing so, I hope to provide a nuanced account of *Uncle
*Tom’s Cabin* that both recognizes how appealing to people’s sense of morality may, in fact, be necessary in prompting them to consider the legitimacy of a country’s laws and in prompting them to act against them while also emphasizing how the novel’s investment in subjectivity reproduces the conception of a liberal subject whose inability to truly identify with the plight of enslaved persons often does result in his failure to see a need for legal and political reform.

To begin, I first want to highlight Stowe’s appeal to the affections of mothers in order to suggest that slavery is morally impermissible because it separates families:

I beseech you, pity the mother who has all your affections, and not one legal right to protect, guide, or educate, the child of her bosom!... I beseech you, pity those mothers that are constantly made childless by the American slave-trade! And say, mothers of America, is this a thing to be defended, sympathized with, passed over in silence?.... If the mothers of the free states had all felt as they should, in times past, the sons of the free states would not have been the holders, and proverbially, the hardest masters of slaves.... But, what can any individual do? Of that, every individual can judge. There is one thing that every individual can do, -- they can see to it that they feel right. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; The man or woman who feels strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. (480)

While Stowe’s declaration that enslaved mothers did not have “one legal right to protect” their children acknowledges that there are structures in place that maintain slavery, this passage indicates that the primary change that needs to take place in order to dismantle slavery is subjective. She credits the persistence of slavery to the fact that the “mothers of the free states” had not “felt as they should” and invites her readers, specifically her readers that are mothers, to “feel right” and to create an “atmosphere of sympathetic influence.” In other words, slavery and the separation of families have persisted because people have not maintained the correct interior disposition and, by changing their interior disposition, they will be able to fix this evil. By specifically addressing the “mothers of America” to pity the enslaved mother, Stowe, in classic sentimental fashion, is evoking the common identity of these women as mothers to instruct
northern mothers to sympathize with the plight of enslaved mothers who get separated from their children as a result of the slave trade.

While the passage I cited in the paragraph above demonstrates how sentimentalism is used to suggest that the legal system needs to be more inclusive about who it considers persons and whose rights it protects, many scholars, as I’ve already noted in the first chapter, actually note how it is the language of sentimentalism itself that provides the basis for this kind of legal exclusion. In *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, for instance, Kyla Schuller notes how sentimentalism was posited as having a biological basis in one’s senses and one’s “impressibility,” or the “capacity of a substance to receive impressions from external objects that thereby change its characteristics” (7). Impressibility, then, as Schuller describes it, requires two components: being able to both react to sensory impressions and to reflect on them and to modify one’s behavior accordingly. As Schuller goes on to note, however, not all people were thought of as being able to properly respond to external stimuli and were, therefore, excluded from being considered legal persons:

The racialized were assigned the condition of unimpressibility….At best, unimpressible bodies merely react to sensory impressions, rather than absorbing them, reflecting on them, and incorporating their effects. The uncivilized races were consigned to the immediacy of childlike sensation and instinctive response, captive to whatever stimulations crossed their paths. Positioned as the worn-out antecedents of the civilized, people of color were accused of torpidity, sluggishness, impulsiveness, and mimicry, evaluations of nerve force that denounced the racialized body as unable to move forward through time. (13)

Instead of suggesting that the fact that people share emotions creates a legal basis for recognizing one’s personhood as Stowe suggests in the previous paragraph, here, Schuller notes that the exclusion of Black people from being legal persons is based on the fact that Black people were thought incapable of experiencing emotion in the same way as white people do.
In fact, the argument that Schuller outlines in her book is made by several characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. When Mr. Shelby expresses regret over separating Eliza from her son by selling her son to Mr. Haley, Mr. Haley tries to comfort him by assuring him that Black mothers don’t experience the same kind of devastation white mothers experience when they lose a child: “These critters an’t like white folks, you know; they get over things, only manage right” (52). By referring to Black people as “critters,” Mr. Haley immediately excludes Black people from personhood before he’s even declared that they “an’t like white folks” as the use of the term “critters” suggests that Black people are more like animals than people. Furthermore, he explicitly connects their lack of personhood to the fact that they “get over things” -- to the fact that they don’t experience grief in the same way that white mothers do. Similarly, after one mother at a slave auction states that “the most dreadful part of slavery… [is] the separating of families” and then asks another mother how she would feel if her children were taken from her, the other mother proclaims that “We can’t reason from our feelings to those of this class of persons” (166). Similar to Mr. Haley, the second mother suggests that Black people -- a “class of persons” that is completely different from her own -- do not feel in the same way that white people do; similar to Mr. Haley, she differentiates Black people from white people on the basis of feeling. While these characters make arguments similar to the one that Schuller describes, one can easily make the argument that these characters are not representative of Stowe’s own opinions and that these characters are exactly the people that Stowe is trying to refute. There is merit to this argument as the first quotation I pulled from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* demonstrates Stowe trying to convince readers that enslaved, Black mothers do, in fact, experience pain when they are separated from their children even if this pain has generally been overlooked. However, even Stowe’s narrator sometimes makes problematic categorizations of Black people based on
the way they feel things. After a scene that portrays Aunt Chloe being upset about the fact that her husband has been sold to Mr. Haley, Stowe’s narrator declares that “In order to appreciate the sufferings of the negroes sold south, it must be remembered that all the instinctive affections of that race are particularly strong” (140). Here, like the two previous examples, Stowe suggests that white people and Black people feel differently as Black people’s affections are “particularly strong.” Additionally, her use of the word “instinctive” implies that Black people’s emotions are animal-like and do not include reflection; in other words, her use of the word “instinctive” implies that Black people aren’t impressible -- that their “sensations pass right through the body, failing to stick” (Schuller 44).

It is true that there are problematic aspects of Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s portrayal of Black people and their ability to feel, but, as several scholars remind us, Stowe’s novel did important work for the time period it was written in, and we have to be careful about approaching the text through a presentist lens. Jane Tompkins declares that “The system of beliefs that undergirds the patterns of sentimental fiction…[were] the very bedrock of reality [for Stowe’s readers]” and even goes so far as to declare that the “The political and economic measures that constitute effective action for us, she regards as superficial, mere extensions of the worldly policies that produced the slave system in the first place”¹ (127, 132). While Berlant indicates that Stowe’s work is not politically effective because it doesn’t push people hard enough to make structural reform, Tompkins reminds readers that, for Stowe, it is the political reform that is superficial; for Stowe, the political evils of slavery have only persisted because the “mothers of the free states” had not felt right, and political reform can only be successful if people’s “hearts” are changed.

¹ Philip Fisher makes a similar point in the introduction to his book Hard Facts: “The simple argument of this book is that within the 19th-century American novel, cultural work of this fundamental kind was often done by exactly those popular forms that from a later perspective, that of 20th-century modernism, have seemed the weakest features of 19th-century cultural life” (5).
first (Stowe 480). As Tompkins highlights throughout Chapter 5 of her book, the main system through which Stowe’s readers were expected to become sympathetic was Christianity, and this fact is easily demonstrable within *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In fact, just after the part of Stowe’s invitation to free mothers to pity enslaved mothers that I cited, Stowe goes on to ask these mothers if they are “in harmony with the sympathies of Christ” (480). In this question, Stowe brings sentimentalism and Christianity together by suggesting that it is Christ that makes one sympathetic -- that it is Christ that causes us to care about other human beings and to recognize our shared identity in him.

We also see this combined appeal to one’s status as a Christian and as a mother when Mrs. Shelby chastises Mr. Shelby for having agreed to sell Uncle Tom and Harry to Mr. Haley:

> I have taught them the duties of the family, of parent and child, and husband and wife; and how can I bear to have this open acknowledgement that we care for no tie, no duty, no relation, however sacred, compared with money? I have talked with Eliza about her boy -- her duty to him as a Christian mother, to watch over him, pray for him, and bring him up in a Christian way; and now what can I say, if you tear him away, and sell him, soul and body, to a profane, unprincipled man, just to save a little money? I have told her that one soul is worth more than all the money in the world; and how will she believe me when she sees us turn round and sell her child? (79)

Many modern critics think about Mrs. Shelby’s attempt to teach those whom she enslaves Christianity as being colonizing and as imposing a belief system onto them that forces them to complaisantly accept their lot of being enslaved. In “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” for instance, James Baldwin claims that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* portrays “the African, exile, pagan, hurried off the auction block and into the fields, [who] fell on his knees before that God in Whom he must now believe; who had made him, but not in His image” (21). In many ways, Baldwin is right to point out that enslaved Africans in America were forced into believing a religion that they most likely wouldn’t have belonged to if they hadn’t been forced into slavery; he’s also right to point out the way that many slavery apologists weaponized Christianity to suggest that the enslaved
had souls but that it was still legitimate to enslave them. I don’t intend to suggest that there is nothing problematic about this passage or *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s positioning of enslaved persons’ access to subjectivity, but I do want to emphasize Tompkins’ reminder that, for Stowe, the Christian faith was objectively true and not simply a matter of opinion. For Stowe, then, Mrs. Shelby’s declaration that Eliza and the rest of the enslaved persons have souls is the epitome of acknowledging them as subjects and as having personhood. Similarly, Mrs. Shelby’s positioning of Eliza as a “Christian mother” suggests that Eliza shares a common identity with herself and her pointing out of the discrepancy between her ability to fulfill her duties to her children and Eliza’s ability to do the same actually ends up underscoring the problem that their equal personhood is not recognized by the law.

Now, scholars such as Stephen Yarbrough actually accuse *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s evocation of Christianity as being the thing that leads to the novel’s passive approach to abolition rather than its use of sentimentalism. In his article “Misdirected Sentiment,” Yarbrough argues that sympathy demands action because it causes people to identify with individuals, but, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, sympathy gets misdirected by Stowe’s piety which causes people to identify with the religious system of Evangelical Christianity (202). For Yarbrough, it is the novel’s appeal to Christianity that leads to its passive approach to abolition and Stowe’s hope that the south would voluntarily emancipate the persons whom they enslaved rather than be forced to emancipate through violence (193). Throughout the novel, however, St. Clare indicates that the problem isn’t simply that Christianity encourages passive responses to oppression, but, rather, that the problem is that people are too cowardly to be active in living out their faith; he indicates that the problem is a gap between what people believe and how they act, and he is completely aware that this gap applies to himself. For instance, when Miss Ophelia expresses shock upon hearing that St. Clare
doesn’t defend the system of slavery given the fact that he participates in the enslavement of Black people, St. Clare replies by asking “Are you such a sweet innocent as to suppose nobody in this world ever does what they don’t think is right?” Similarly, in an earlier argument between Miss Ophelia and St. Clare regarding slavery and the treatment of Black people more generally, Miss Ophelia states that St. Clare is a “professor of religion” to which St. Clare responds that he is “not a professor, as your town-folks have it; and what is worse, I’m afraid, not a practiser, either” (221). In both of these examples, St. Clare directly acknowledges that he doesn’t act in accordance with the values he proclaims to hold. Although St. Clare by no means gives a scathing critique of himself in these quotations, his proclamation that what he is doing isn’t right suggests that he is aware that what he is doing is wrong.

While the previous example I provided mostly highlights St. Clare’s awareness of his hypocrisy and only gently critiques it, these scenes culminate in St. Clare’s condemnation of those not doing “positive good” and his declaration that he is going to free those whom he has enslaved:

I was reading to Tom, this afternoon, that chapter in Matthew that gives an account of [the last judgment]... One should have expected some terrible enormities charged to those excluded from heaven as the reason; but no, -- they are condemned for not doing positive good, as if that included every possible harm… My view of Christianity is such… that I think no man can consistently profess it without throwing the whole weight of his being against this monstrous system of injustice that lies at the foundation of all our society. (353, 354).

In this quotation, St. Clare’s analysis of Matthew’s rendition of the last judgment demonstrates that one does not have to participate in terrible evils in order to be excluded from heaven, but, rather, that one can be excluded from heaven for simply not doing “positive good”; in other words, while one can and probably will go to hell for enslaving people, men like St. Clare can also go to hell for not actively trying to dismantle the system. Unlike Yarbrough, then, who
accuses Christianity of encouraging a passive approach to abolition, St. Clare, in many ways, suggests that Americans are not Christian enough -- that they are not truly living out the faith they proclaim to hold. A reader may proclaim that St. Clare does not have a realistic view of the world as St. Clare dies before he is able to emancipate the people he has enslaved and as Uncle Tom dies as a result of his Christian piety, but it is still important to note that this scene explicitly addresses the fact there is the need for structural reform in addition to “feeling right.”

Reader’s may still be skeptical of St. Clare’s declaration that fully living out one’s Christian faith will result in the emancipation of enslaved persons as there are many instances in the novel in which Scripture verses are actively used to construct an argument for slavery’s moral legitimacy. In *The Fugitive Slave Law in the Life of Frederick Douglass*, however, Del Guercio highlights how religious leaders may have been incentivized to provide faulty interpretations of Scripture by the money they stood to make from the institution of slavery:

William Lloyd Garrison defended the Christian faith by separating it from preachers who ‘put in its treasury the price of blood.’ In Garrison’s view, it was the ministers who were the "man stealers" and skewers of Christian scripture. Augustine St. Clare took the same position in the passage: ‘suppose that something should bring down the price of cotton once and for all, and make the whole slave property a drug in the market, don't you think we should soon have another version of the Scripture doctrine?’ St. Clare's declaration implied that the slave system was allowed to continue due to the economic benefits it bestowed on both the American North and South. (103)

In other words, even religious institutions are not immune to being corrupted by capitalism.

While St. Clare has not yet had his conversion when he makes the declaration that Del Guercio references, his later declaration that actively living out the Christian faith requires emancipating the people whom he has enslaved gives credence to Del Guercio’s interpretation. According to St. Clare, only a Christian faith that has been corrupted by “planters, who have money to make” by enslaving people and “clergymen who have planters to please” permits the institution of
slavery to continue. This quotation from Del Guercio, then, has some interesting implications for Berlant’s argument. While Berlant suggests that sentimentalism prevents people from resisting their material circumstances, Del Guercio’s point here suggests that it is an awareness of material circumstances that may lead to their exploitation in the first place. It is when people are more focused on the money that they are able to make from the institution of slavery than truly adhering to Christian teachings on the value and dignity of the human person that slavery is able to be legally upheld. St. Clare’s declaration that living out the Christian faith means actively fighting against injustice, then, indicates that people, when left to their own devices, will act selfishly and exploit people in order to pursue monetary gain. His declaration indicates that getting people to do the right thing actually requires calling people to submit to a law that is higher than themselves; it requires, as Gregg Crane also highlights in his argument, calling people to submit to God’s law rather than to American Law or to a system of economics.

Similar to the way in which St. Clare suggests that religion should not remain a purely subjective experience, the novel also highlights how the “womanly” feelings of sympathy are expected to be coupled with action. For instance, in *The Fugitive Slave Law*, Del Guercio highlights how women were important to Stowe because “they were the ones who controlled the private sphere, and ultimately, through their husbands, the public sphere” (107). In other words, Del Guercio suggests that the sentimental woman that Berlant believes risks making political reform too much about personal change to be effective does have sway over the thoughts of her husband and can, therefore, actually play a significant role in political change; he provides evidence for this claim by analyzing the chapter “In Which it Appears that a Senator is but a Man” in which Mrs. Bird convinces her husband to help Eliza and her son escape slavery despite the fact that Mr. Bird voted in favor of the Fugitive Slave Law. While I wouldn’t necessarily go
so far as to say that Mrs. Bird induces political reform as she doesn’t actually change any governmental policy, I would emphasize that Mrs. Bird does convince her husband to do more than simply “feel” for Eliza as she does provoke him to break the law and to actively assist Eliza in fleeing the country (Stowe 132).

This scene also seems to highlight the concept of self-governance that was so important to Kant’s conception of the liberal subject, and, in this chapter of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, self-governance is inherently tied to sentimental values. For instance, before Eliza arrives at the Birds’ doorstep, Mr. and Mrs. Bird argue about the legitimacy of the Fugitive Slave Law. When Senator Bird tries to denounce Mrs. Bird’s condemnation of the Fugitive Slave Act, he tells her that “we mustn’t suffer our feelings to run away with our judgment; you must consider it’s not a matter of private feeling” (125). Mrs. Bird later replies, however, that she “hates reasoning” and that “political folks [have a way of] coming round and round such a plain thing” (126). While Mr. Bird insists that “feelings” hinder one’s ability to make rational judgments and indicates that they shouldn’t play a role in politics, Mrs. Bird proclaims that feelings are indicative of a “plain thing” and that supposed rationality makes matters more complicated than they actually are. Mrs. Bird indicates that feelings are, in fact, a more sound way to judge what actions are moral than rationale is, and the legitimacy of this point of view is manifested in the fact that Mr. Bird does, in fact, help Eliza in spite of the Fugitive Slave Law. Many scholars note how the “subject who could be capable of self-government and thus able to sustain liberal forms of rule” is simply a subject who has internalized “disciplinary control,” but, perhaps, this interpretation is also a bit presentist and there may be a more revolutionary way of viewing the liberal subject (Dillon 502, 504). Afterall, the liberal subject is positioned against monarchical and tyrannical forms of rule; the liberal subject is positioned against oppressive forms of government. The capability for
self-governance, then, is not simply about controlling your own behavior so that the government doesn’t have to, but, rather, is also about being able to critique and resist the government’s power when the government has overreached or instituted something that is immoral. Even if Mrs. Bird’s declarations here don’t dismantle immoral laws, they do demonstrate a defiance of external authority in favor of what “moral law” tells Mr. and Mrs. Bird. Subjective experiences, then, can prompt people to act according to their own consciences and do not necessarily remain purely subjective experiences. In fact, as Del Guercio notes in *Fugitive Slave Law*, the recognition of one’s conscience or of a moral code is necessary to overthrow the external structures that allow for the dehumanization of people. As he details throughout the book, it is the recognition of economic opportunity and the prioritization of man’s law over God’s law that leads to events like the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law. In this way, the appeal to one’s subjectivity is necessary if one wants the efforts to dismantle oppressive systems to be effective.

In “Dangerous Sentiments,” Gregg D. Crane offers a similar interpretation of the scene where George entreats Mr. Wilson, his former employer at the factory, to break the Fugitive Slave Law and to assist him in his fleeing the United States to pursue freedom in Canada:

> Stowe considered sentiment the medium of human conscience. One feels the conflict between the law of slavery and the higher law principles of the natural rights tradition. The eruption of sympathetic feeling in someone presented with a graphic example of the legal cruelties of slavery was, for Stowe, a sure signal of the moral invalidity of the law of slavery and the legal entitlement of the enslaved to fundamental human rights. Thus in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, when George Harris describes for Mr. Wilson the sale of his mother, the whipping of his sister, the theft of his labor, and the obstruction of his marriage—all done with the sanction of law—Mr. Wilson's natural rights sentiments are enflamed, and his tearful sympathy and righteous indignation lead him, in contravention of the Fugitive Slave Act that he had been urging George to obey, to aid George's escape. (178)

As Crane highlights, what finally convinces Mr. Wilson to assist George in fleeing the country is George’s declaration that “The laws of our country allow them to sell the child out of its
mother’s bosom to pay its master’s debts” (157). While this declaration does point to structural problems by identifying the law as what permits the separation of Black families, George’s move, here, is to appeal to Mr. Wilson’s sentiments and to cause him, as Crane argues, to “feel” the contradiction between what is morally right and what is legal, and it is this feeling that prompts him to act. Crane’s argument here very much ties into Jane Tompkins’ point that Christianity is what is real for Stowe and her readers as the morality they derive from it is viewed as higher than the law, and they can break U.S. law in order to obey God’s law. The novel never portrays the Fugitive Slave Act being overturned, so it’s definitely limited in its capacity to advocate for political reform, but it would be remiss to suggest that breaking the law is not active resistance to a corrupt political system; it would be remiss to suggest that breaking the law doesn’t demonstrate the importance of acting on one’s feelings rather than simply being content with having made a personal change. In this scene, then, sentiment does, in fact, prompt characters to acknowledge the governmental structure that maintains slavery and to act in defiance of it.

Still, I don’t want to overlook the way in which this scene also reinforces sentimentalism’s role in maintaining a government that claims to be inclusive for all persons while also systematically preventing Black people from being treated equally under the law. When George initially entreats Mr. Wilson for help, Mr. Wilson declares he’s sorry to see George “setting [him]self in opposition to the laws of [his] country” (153). By declaring that the United States is, in fact, George’s country, Mr. Wilson is actually already functioning within a sentimental system. Elizabeth Barnes describes how the Declaration of Independence uses sentimental identification as a means of suggesting that all people will be recognized as equal under the law while actually denying the personhood of those with whom the writers cannot
identify: “By depicting ‘the people’ as equivalent to himself, Jefferson projects onto the body politic the thoughts, feelings, and privileges with which he himself is invested. His claim that ‘all men are created equal’ epitomizes the power of sentimental representation -- a power to reinvent others in one’s own image” (2). Essentially, for Barnes, the problem with using sentimentality as the basis for democracy is that it leads to the solidification of power for white men by seemingly declaring the recognition of all people as equal under the law but actually only declaring the recognition of people with whom they can identify as equal under the law. This dynamic is very much at play in Mr. Wilson’s conviction that George is defying the laws of his own country; Mr. Wilson seemingly grants George U.S. citizenship while actually declaring that there is a different set of laws for George than there is for himself.

George highlights the hypocrisy in Mr. Wilson’s statements by declaring that he has no country:

MY country again! Mr. Wilson, you have a country; but what country have I, or any like me, born of slave mothers? What laws are there for us? We don’t make them, -- we don’t consent to them, -- we have nothing to do with them; all they do for us is to crush us, and keep us down. Haven’t I heard your Fourth-of-July speeches? Don’t you tell us all, once a year, that governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed? Can’t a fellow think, that hears such things? Can’t he put this and that together, and see what it comes to? (155)

George highlights his exclusion from American democracy several times throughout this quotation. Most notably, his reference to the “Fourth-of-July speeches” that he hears each year explicitly indicates that he is in conversation with the Declaration of Independence. His constant repetition of how Mr. Wilson has a country and he does not appears not only in the quoted passage above, but throughout the whole chapter, and this repetition demonstrates how the Declaration of Independence does not actually extend rights to “all men [who] are created equal,” but, rather, only extends them to the white men who had written the document. Of
course, Stowe uses George’s words here to critique the American legal system for the way in which it “crush[es]” the Black community and “keep[s] [them] down,” so it can be read as a critique of how sentimental identification leads to the inequity of American law. Stowe’s consistent use of sentimentalism to advocate for the abolition of slavery, however, demonstrates that she thinks sentimentalism is key to creating an equitable society, so, even if, in this instance, the novel can be seen challenging sentimental norms, it would be inaccurate to argue that the novel as a whole highlights sentimentalism’s shortcomings.

Stowe’s positive portrayal of St. Clare, perhaps, most obviously highlights the novel’s hopeful portrayal of sentimentalism while also revealing the naivete of thinking sentimentalism can achieve an equitable democracy. For instance, St. Clare highlights his “democratic” nature and his brother Alfred’s “aristocratic” nature:

Alfred, who is as determined a despot as ever walked, does not pretend to this kind of defence; --no, he stands, high and haughty, on that good old respectable ground, the right of the strongest; and he says, and I think quite sensibly, that the American planter is ‘only doing, in another form, what the English aristocracy and capitalists are doing by the lower classes;’ that is, I take it, appropriating them, body and bone, soul and spirit, to their use and convenience. He defends both, -- and I think, at least, consistently. He says that there can be no high civilization without enslavement of the masses, either nominal or real. There must, he says, be a lower class, given up to physical toil and confined to an animal nature; and a higher one thereby acquires leisure and wealth for a more expanded intelligence and improvement, and becomes the directing soul of the lower. So he reasons, because, as I said, he is born an aristocrat; -- so I don’t believe, because I was born a democrat…. He [the factory worker] is as much at the will of his employer as if he were sold to him. The slave-owner can whip his refractory slave to death, -- the capitalist can starve him to death. (272)

Here, St. Clare suggests that it is the aristocrat who supports the subjugation of the masses in order to make a profit and that it is the democrat who rejects the exploitation of people’s labor because he recognizes the humanity of the worker. Similar to Barnes’ suggestion, St. Clare’s investment in democracy is very much linked to sentimentalism as he is often accused of having
“too much fellow feeling” and of being “a womanish sentimentalist” due to his mother’s influence on him (267, 273). Unlike Barnes, however, St. Clare doesn’t suggest that it is precisely America’s investment in sentimentalism that leads to the exclusion of Black people from democracy, but, rather, suggests that America’s exclusion of Black people from democracy is a result of the fact that Americans are not sentimental enough.

St. Clare’s declaration, here, however, seems to portray an extremely idealistic (the word being used here to mean a hopeful, yet naïve world outlook) portrayal of what democracy could potentially look like. St. Clare can call people like Alfred “aristocrats” all he wants, but it doesn’t change the reality that Alfred lives in the United States -- a supposed democracy; it doesn’t change the reality that Mr. Bird, a senator in the United States, voted (a process that in itself demonstrates the democratic process at work) for the Fugitive Slave Act, and it also doesn’t change the reality that St. Clare, a self-proclaimed democrat, is an enslaver himself. While St. Clare suggests that a true democracy would not endorse or require the “enslavement of the masses,” St. Clare can not escape the fact that the United States, a supposed democracy, has condoned slavery from its very onset. While Stowe uses St. Clare’s declaration that he is a democrat to suggest that American democracy is not sentimental enough, his declaration actually very much highlights how his sentimental vision for democracy is more of a fantasy than a reality. In this way, his sentimental vision for democracy, at least at this point in this novel, can be viewed as idealistic in both senses of the word: overly hopeful and contained within his subjective experience and not in material circumstance.

So, while Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s primarily idealistic approach to abolition does, at times, confirm Berlant’s concern about making the political seem personal, it is important to acknowledge and account for how appealing to subjectivity does facilitate political change as
well. Even if sentimentalism’s suggestion that free white people can “identify” with the plight of enslaved Black people is problematic by today’s standards, it is important to situate *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* within its proper historical context and to acknowledge the important “cultural work,” as Tompkins would put it, that it did. While it may be uncomfortable that Stowe’s positive portrayal of Uncle Tom and Eliza is related to the fact that they are good Christians, a reader must remember that, for Stowe, the recognition of Black people as Christian subjects is more significant than their recognition as legal subjects. It is also important to note Del Guercio’s and Crane’s argument about how sentiment allows the characters to feel a disconnection between what is legal and what is just and how this prompts them to rebel against unjust laws such as the Fugitive Slave Act. The appeal to subjectivity comes at a cost, particularly as sentimentalism often became the grounds for exclusion from legal personhood rather than inclusion, but let us remember that, even if the legal and economic systems are what allow for the maintenance of the institution of slavery, these systems are able to do so because they effectively de-humanize Black people. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s attempt to humanize and “grant” subjectivity to Black people is not unproblematic, but, in its own way, it does help to challenge the external structures that perpetuate inequalities.
Chapter 3: Materialist Sentimentalism in The Daughter of Adoption

Similar to the American sentimental tradition, the British sentimental tradition also emphasizes the family unit and the domestic sphere as Geoffrey Sill notes how 18th century sentimental novels often contained “female protagonists” and that the “testing of virtue is usually conducted in a domestic space”; he also notes that the investment in cultivating virtue and morality was inherent to the sentimental form (431, 426). While Sill does not directly discuss how sentimentalism’s emphasis on the family unit relates to the formation of democracy, his emphasis on the moral cultivation and moral testing of the characters within sentimental novels does seem to be connected to the idea of a liberal subject that is capable of self-government and of sustaining democracy. In this chapter, I am going to analyze how the family unit serves as the site of formation of the liberal subject in John Thelwall’s The Daughter of Adoption while also accounting for how Thelwall’s materialism may challenge the traditional understanding of liberal subjectivity and the traditional method of sentimental identification. In this analysis, I am also going to consider particularly the question of liberal subjectivity in relation to the production and maintenance of slavery and the processes through which enslaved persons are “permitted” to resist their enslavement. While Thelwall’s combined use of idealism and materialism does not provide a clear answer as to what the “proper” method of pursuing abolition is and does, at times, reinforce the power dynamics that allow for slavery in the first place, his more materialist approach to thinking about abolition does, at the very least, begin to hint at the possibility of creating an equitable society that is based on acknowledging the particular experiences faced by different groups of people rather than on trying to understand other people’s pain as if it were your own.
In some ways, it may seem odd to focus on Henry’s time in the Caribbean as it only comprises about one quarter of the novel, but the Caribbean setting is actually extremely important as many events that occur there (whether during Henry’s time in Jamaica or before the novel has even began) actually drive the plot of the novel forward. For instance, the novel begins by describing Montfort’s fleeing to Jamaica in order to avoid murder charges for killing his friend in a duel, and all succeeding events in the novel are informed by the fraught relationship that Monfort has with his son due to his absence in the early years of Henry’s life. Similarly, it is in the Caribbean where Montfort has an affair with Morton that results in her pregnancy with Seraphina, and it is the revelation of this piece of information to Henry and Seraphina that causes them to believe that they have engaged in an incestuous relationship until it is later revealed that Henry is not Montfort’s biological son. So, what function does Jamaica serve in the novel? I am arguing that the colonial presence in the Caribbean demonstrates the height of prodigality and that it serves as the physical manifestation of an interior disposition that prioritizes monetary gain over acting in a moral manner; I would argue that, at least in part, the Caribbean serves to highlight the novel’s investment in the subjective experiences of its characters. For instance, when telling Nerissa about the early days of her marriage to Montfort, Amelia claims that Montfort’s heart was a “mere brothel of prodigal licenciousness” (55). While Amelia is, in part, referring to Montfort’s literal inability to remain faithful to her, it is important to note that she doesn’t use this phrase to describe his actions, but, rather, to describe his heart; her critique of Montfort, then, is primarily directed at what Stowe might describe as his inability to “feel right,” and, in this small phrase, Amelia emphasizes Montfort’s greed three times. By describing Montfort’s heart as being “prodigal,” Amelia emphasizes Montfort’s excessive desires -- his desires for much more than what is necessary for him to survive and his desires for what is
wastefully extravagant. Similarly, the word “licentiousness” has connotations of excessively indulging one’s sexual desires and the description of his heart as a “brothel” emphasizes how he views everything, including people, as commodities to be consumed. Montfort’s prodigal disposition is only exacerbated after he flees to Jamaica:

The passions and vices of the climate, or, to speak more correctly, the habits of the order, or disorder, of society there established, had seized with irresistible violence, on a mind already predisposed to their influence. He had his amours, his intrigues, his sensual revelries; he had also his avaricious projects, his rapacious pursuits, and usurious speculations. In short, while on the one hand he became voluptuous beyond the measure of European habitue, on the other, inordinate rapacity entwined the propensities of excessive indulgence, and more than kept pace with his growing profusion. (72)

Once again, words such as “rapacious,” “avaricious,” “excessive indulgence,” and “profusion” highlight Montfort’s prodigal, greedy disposition. This excerpt, however, specifically attributes his growing prodigality to the “passions and vices of the climate” and to the “society” that has been established there. While one could read this as a critique of Jamaican natives as these excessive inclinations are defined in opposition to the “measure of European habitue,” it is also important to note that this passage is followed by a description of Montfort’s path to becoming a planter. This passage, then, also seems to identify the colonial project of owning plantations to procure resources, specifically sugar, for trade as being the source of growing one’s excessive desires.

As is evidenced by the discussion of sugar plantations and the “rapid accumulation” of capital just after the description of Montfort’s growing avarice, a lot of the novel’s critique of prodigality is coupled with a critique of capitalism. The novel’s critique of an improper interior disposition, then, is inherently connected with the novel’s critique of the external structures that reinforce oppression and even seems to credit these structures as curating this improper disposition. In “The Origins of the Rights of Labor,” Gregory Claeys notes this quality in
Thelwall’s political work: “Thus, without neglecting the effects of luxury on manners, Thelwall saw its chief threat as lying less in a tendency to engender moral and political corruption than to exacerbate social inequality” (264). I will discuss the role of these external structures and how all of these issues relate to the question of abolition more later in this chapter, but, for now, I think that it is important to note that Thelwall is very much concerned with the subjective experiences of his characters even if they can not be isolated from capitalism. By virtue of placing his novel within the sentimental tradition, Thelwall highlights that he is concerned with people’s ability to relate to each other as subjects, and, as I’ve been discussing, Thelwall continuously details and critiques Montfort’s greed.

Now, I do not simply point to Montfort’s greed as an end in itself, but, rather, to discuss how it is positioned against Henry’s formation as a liberal subject. Instead of thinking of Henry as a subject himself who has thinking capabilities, Montfort’s selfishness actually causes him to think of Henry as an object which he possesses: “Everything to which the pronoun my could be attached has considerable importance in his eyes…. The vanity of the father seemed almost to swallow up every other passion, and ‘my clever little Henry! My fine boy! And my brave lad!’ were the constant themes of arrogant exultation” (62-63). By italicizing the possessive pronoun “my,” the narrator highlights that the pleasure Montfort takes in Henry isn’t that his son is clever, fine, or brave, but, rather, that he gets to claim ownership of his son and the qualities that his son exhibits. By using the term “arrogant exultation,” the narrator highlights that the pleasure Montfort takes in his son is a self-gratifying kind of pleasure in which he is happy about what the qualities of his son indicate about himself because his son is his (which is ironic because he was absent for the first several years of his son’s life and can not really take credit for the kind of person his son is). Montfort’s desire to control his son is further demonstrated by his opposition
to “the rational system of education” that Amelia has been implementing in her teaching of Henry (64). Instead of attempting to “nerve the intellect and ameliorate the heart” of his son, Montfort proclaims that “the reason and duty of a child is to obey his father” (64, 66). Rather than teaching Henry to think for himself and to be concerned for the welfare of others as Amelia does, Montfort wants Henry to simply obey his commands; he wants Henry to simply comply with his orders.

I want to take a moment to flag the bodily language (nerve, heart) that Amelia uses to describe the goals that she has for Henry’s education. As Yasmin Solomonescu notes in her book *John Thelwall and the Materialist Imagination*, Thelwall was not only interested in materialism in the economic sense but also in the vitalist sense: “Rejecting the two dominant theories of the day, which regarded vitality as the result of a particular organization of matter or the action of an immaterial external principle, Thelwall argued instead that it arose from the conjunction of suitably organized matter and a material stimulus” (3). In other words, Thelwall viewed vitality as organized matter that was capable of being affected by stimuli. Later in the book, Solomonescu connects Thelwall’s vitalism to his political beliefs by indicating that “the theory of self-moving matter could also justify a more populist, egalitarian politics of self-rule” (21). Thelwall’s vitalist beliefs, then, provide a basis for liberal subjectivity and the possibility of self-governance. When viewed in this light, Amelia’s use of the word “nerve” to describe her attempt to foster Henry’s intellect very much seems like an attempt to foster Henry’s ability to think for himself rather than to simply submit to the will of his parents.

The difference in parenting styles between Amelia and Montfort is further connected to the possibility of self-governance when Dr. Pengarron critiques Montfort for his authoritarian parenting style:
You did not go the way to be obeyed. You commanded when you ought to have reasoned. You ordered like a tyrant, when you ought to have reasoned like a friend. You spoke to him as if you were more jealous of your own power than his welfare. Does the Father of all speak to his children in this manner? No. He would gather his children together as a hen gathers her chickens under her wing. You would beat and cuff them into obedience, as vultures and carrion crows cuff the prey they are about to devour. (423)

Dr. Pengarron’s comparison of God to a hen who “gathers her chickens under her wing” dissociates the biblical portrayal of fatherhood from the commanding, authoritarian characterization that Montfort proposes and actually associates it with the nurturing characterization of motherhood and, consequently, with sentiment. Similarly, by calling Montfort a “tyrant,” Dr. Pengarron critiques Montfort’s expectation that Henry mindlessly follow all of his commands without any resistance, and, although Dr. Pengarron doesn’t mention Amelia by name, he suggests that her method of using “reason” to educate and parent Henry is the correct method of child-rearing. The use of the word “tyrant” also positions the family unit as a microcosm for governmental forms, and it is Amelia’s willingness to give Henry “what some would consider as a sort of savage liberty” that “strengthened [Henry’s] limbs, expanded his lungs, and gave vigour and independency to his mind” that distances her method of parenting from Montfort’s tyranny and associates her with more democratic forms of government (64). In fact, Amelia’s fostering the independence of Henry’s mind is similar to the goals of the Jacobins in governmental reform. In Seditious Allegories, Michael Scrivener describes the opinions of different political groups on whether to completely reform or simply replace Parliament in the 1790s:

The difference between the Wordsworth of 1815 and Jacobins like Thelwall who want an expanded public sphere is that Wordsworth insists that an unthinking Public, synonymous with the mass reader, can never achieve a level of understanding equal to that of the transcendental People, but Jacobins believed that popularization, if unfettered by repression and assisted by restructured leisure and labor, could indeed make the reading public truly discriminating and critical. Jacobins too acknowledged the problem of a
differentiated reading public, but they aimed at an egalitarian solution, whereas their opponents sought permanently hierarchical distinctions. (91-2)

In other words, Jacobins believed in the capability of the general public to become critical thinkers given the right conditions and did not think that they needed hierarchical structures to mediate the relationship between the government and the general public; they believed that the general public should compose the government themselves. Similarly, Amelia’s parenting style didn’t exert force over Henry but allowed him the opportunity to explore things for himself. Amelia’s parenting style, then, seems the most conducive for producing the self-governing liberal subject that Kant discusses.

Despite the hope that the novel places in the ability of Amelia’s sentimental model of education to produce a self-governing liberal subject even until the novel’s conclusion, the novel also very much calls into question the very possibility of producing such a subject. In the portion of her book where she specifically writes about *The Daughter of Adoption*, Solomonescu frames her argument for the chapter by discussing how Thelwall’s essay “On Human Automatonism” demonstrates his doubts about people having free will: “Although Thelwall is acknowledging only an ‘occasional suspicion’ that free will is meaningless, the essay nonetheless points to a fundamental shift in his thought, from an enthusiastic belief in the possibility of rational self-guidance, individual and collective, to a heightened awareness of the limitations imposed by ‘exterior agency’ or material circumstance” (73). “On Human Automatonism” was written approximately 20 years after *The Daughter of Adoption*’s publication, but, like Solomonescu, I do think it provides a useful lens with which to approach *The Daughter of Adoption*. While the novel’s emphasis on the positive possibilities of Amelia’s education system indicates that a rational, self-governing subject is possible, there are several other moments within the novel that
highlight the way in which people are formed and limited by their material circumstances, so, at
the very least, the novel grapples with to what extent people can actually be considered “free.”
For the purposes of my analysis, I am going to discuss how the novel critiques how the enslaved
Black people on the island of Jamaica are systematically prevented from exercising their
“free-will” with regard to both their exclusion from being considered legal persons in the first
place and the ways in which they are prevented from resisting the material constraints that
perpetuate their subjugation; I am also going to discuss the ways in which the novel critiques
Henry’s sentimental education for ultimately causing him to reinforce the oppression of the
enslaved people on the Island rather than advocating for their equal recognition under the law
even though it is this component of his education that is associated with more equitable forms of
government.

In his article “John Thelwall in Saint Domingue,” Peter Kitson explicitly declares that
Thelwall thoroughly addresses and condemns the roles of both colonial empire and a capitalist
economic system in upholding the institution of slavery: “The Daughter of Adoption contains a
substantial discussion of the institutions of slavery and colonialism. Thelwall is unsparing in his
condemnation of both…. Thelwall repeatedly affirms in an argument that anticipates later
Marxist notions of alienation that the systems of colonialism and slavery dehumanise those who
participate within them” (126). In other words, in addition to accounting for the production of a
sympathetic subject, The Daughter of Adoption is very much interested in critiquing the systems
that produce slavery and thinking about how the logic of capital gets so engrained in people’s
thinking that people begin to appear as commodities. The Daughter of Adoption, however, does
not simply critique capitalism for the general way in which it makes people appear as things, but,
rather, also specifically critiques capitalism for the way in which it naturally leads to the
institution of slavery. At this point, I’m going to expand upon the quotation I included in the first chapter in which Henry describes how the presence of slavery on the island of St. Domingue tarnishes the beautiful landscape that extends before him and his servant, Edmunds:

But what is there… of fair and beautiful in this magnificent structure of the universe that commercial rapacity will not deform? Where is the elysian scene that vice and misery will not pervade, when oppression bears sway in the land? When impious man, trampling the sacred rights of nature in the dust, erects the arbitrary distinctions of races and of colours; and makes the vulgar accidents of climate -- the tints and traits of feature imparted by a too fervent sun, the shallow pretexts for trafficking in human gore, and bending the necks of a large proportion of the human race under the iron yoke of slavery? (137)

Here, Henry specifically indicates that the deformation of the “elysian scene” before him is the “trafficking in human gore” that occurs as a direct result of the greed that fuels a capitalist economic system. By describing differences in skin tone as a “shallow pretext” for justifying the enslavement of the Black population on the island, Henry specifically draws a reader’s attention to the fact that any of the biological arguments that were made to suggest that Black people were “naturally” inferior and, therefore, “naturally” suited to being enslaved were unfounded rationalizations that people used to indulge their prodigal desires without having to admit that they were exploiting human persons; by describing differences in skin tone as a “shallow pretext” for justifying the enslavement of the Black population on the island, Henry specifically indicates that any reasoning used to justify the enslavement of Black people is ultimately always secondary to people’s commercial goals.

As Henry and Edmund’s conversation continues, Edmunds comments that the beautiful landscapes can make “one forget that treason were ever necessary in the world” to which Henry replies

True… if the facts of history could be forgotten also. But alas! If I mistake not the hand of Tyranny has engraved even here the indelible memorials of her cruelties and
oppressions…. Could time tread back its steps again, Edmunds, and could you and I become Indians, possessing the souls and faculties we do, and did we meet, by design or accident, on this spot, I suspect our minds would be occupied by other ideas than those of the picturesque and the romantic -- that these rocks, these pendant forests -- this deep solitude… might only embolden us, by a sense of security, to question the authority of our oppressors, and to demonstrate that against the ravages of foreign usurpation, at least, it is at all times lawful both to conspire and to act. (142)

While the beautiful scenery prompts Edmunds to suggest that one can forget the necessity of treason, it prompts Henry to declare that “it is at all times lawful both to conspire and act.” By picturing himself as an Indian that is responding to “foreign usurpation,” he specifically indicates that it is justifiable for the colonized to act against the colonizers. By using the word “act,” Henry emphasizes the active nature of the treason he speaks of. He is not suggesting, as Uncle Tom does, that the enslaved and the colonized wait for God to make things right; he is not hoping, as Stowe does, that the enslaver will voluntarily emancipate those whom they enslave before things get to the point of violent revolution (Yarbrough 193). Henry, here, is suggesting that it is perfectly acceptable to enact a material response to a material problem -- that it is perfectly acceptable to rebel against oppressive and tyrannical forces.

It is less than twenty pages later in the novel when a slave insurrection begins on the island and the novel begins to more closely interrogate the legitimacy of violent revolution as a method of resisting the structures that maintain the institution of slavery. As Peter Kitson notes several times throughout his article, Thelwall’s presentation of the slave insurrection is definitely not unproblematic. By portraying the “rape of a white woman at the hands of black slaves” as one of the consequential events of a slave insurrection, Kitson highlights how Thelwall positions the “white body… as the subject of violation” in place of the Black body (128, 133). In doing so, Thelwall takes the emphasis off of the suffering of those who are enslaved and actually positions them as a threat to white bodies and potentially legitimizes their subjugation once the rebellion
has been quelled. By characterizing Mozambo’s revolt as justified specifically because he fits the caricature of the “grateful negro,” the novel also risks suggesting that revolution is only justified when an enslaved person is willing to rescue the person who has enslaved him (129). While these facets of Thelwall’s portrayal of the slave insurrection are not negligible and do complicate the novel’s ability to portray the slave insurrection as an attempt to resist the material circumstances of enslaved persons, it is still important to note that the solution to the problem of slavery is not simply about getting people to “feel right”; it is important to note that the fact that the novel contemplates the legitimacy of violent revolution at all suggests that abolition will require either the reform or dismantlement of different structures that produce and maintain slavery as they currently exist.

The scene that primarily demonstrates the novel’s interrogation of the validity of insurrection as a means of pursuing abolition is when Parkinson, Seraphina’s adoptive father, Edmunds, and Henry discuss with each other their differing views on insurrection’s political efficacy. Parkinson, for instance, declares that revolution will only delay the enslaved person’s goal of emancipation:

> The sympathy of mankind has long been flowing strongly in their favour; and the operation of feeling, though slow, is ultimately certain. You shall see how quickly the excesses of their cruelty will give a contrary direction…. It is the hard condition of wretchedness that the deeper we have sunk in misery, the less capable we are of emerging from it; or even of keeping ourselves afloat when the agitations of tumultuous waves may chance to have brought us upon the surface. How few are there who know how to redress the wrongs of mankind, but those who have little to redress! … Their sympathy is indeed somewhat too tardy for our enthusiasm; but after all, Edmunds, it is the only resource of the oppressed. (160-61)

Although Parkinson often indicates his distaste for the institution of slavery and his hope that enslaved persons will soon be emancipated, here, he repeatedly evokes the language of sympathy to suggest that the violent revolution incited by the enslaved persons is not necessary because he
expects white people’s sensibilities to ultimately cause them to emancipate those whom they have enslaved on their own. In this way, Parkinson’s use of sentimentalism seems to be the perfect example of Berlant’s expectation that sentimentalism will result in people feeling justified simply for “feeling right” and not actually taking any action to dismantle systems that actively exploit people’s labor and dehumanize people. By stating that the sympathy of those with racial privilege and governmental power “is the only resource of the oppressed,” Parkinson suggests that enslaved persons have no ability to advocate for themselves and makes them completely dependent on white people’s feelings toward them in order for them to no longer be treated as property. This suggestion is problematic in several ways. First, it reinforces the misconceptions about Black people that were used to legitimize slavery in the first place by portraying them as non-agents and as subordinate to white people. Similarly, by indicating that the proper method of emancipation is waiting for enslavers to free enslaved persons, Parkinson again seems to legitimize the authority that white people had over Black people; he seems to suggest that it is actually up to the white enslavers as to whether or not Black people were viewed as property or as persons.

The use of sentimental language in this portion of the novel also seems to deflect attention from the suffering of enslaved persons to the suffering of the enslavers that has been created by the insurrection. As Henry and Edmunds prepare to leave the island of St. Domingue, despite his earlier suggestion that revolution would be a valid method of addressing one’s oppression, Henry proclaims how he can no longer condone violent resistance:

As for what you say about my friends the blacks, if friendship and commiseration are synonimous terms, know that I shall never be ashamed to confess myself the friend of the whole human race: of blacks, as well as whites; of the oppressor, as well as the oppressed. But you know nothing of my principles, if you suppose they would lead me into scenes such as these… when the slave I compassionate becomes the tyrant I condemn, I am his champion and his advocate no more. (168)
Once again, Henry’s use of phrases such as “friend of the whole human race” and “commiseration” position him within a sentimental framework and as trying to identify with the sorrows of enslaved people. Toward the end of this quotation, however, Henry indicates that during the insurrection, the enslaved and the enslavers have swapped roles. While enslaved persons have typically been presented as being oppressed by tyrants, here, their participation in committing violence against others has now led to their categorization as being the oppressive tyrants. While Henry is not necessarily wrong to point to the moral questionability of killing people as a means of obtaining freedom, I would argue he most definitely takes it a step too far when he suggests that the enslavers and the enslaved have simply swapped roles as it omits the fact that the insurrection was a reactionary move; it fails to acknowledge the difference between forcing people to work for you without compensating them for their labor and responding to being forced to work without being compensated for your labor. By doing so, Henry invites readers to sympathize with the enslavers rather than those who have been enslaved as if they have experienced the same oppression even when, in reality, they have not.

In response to Parkinson’s appeal to sentimentalism, Edmunds indicates that sympathy’s ability to change the legality of slavery is actually rather limited:

And [the white people who have the power to redress the wrong of slavery], sir, are too selfish to be active in the abolition of abuses of which themselves or their connections reap the profit….the history of Europe, I believe, is six thousand years old; and slavery still maintains its ground in Poland, in Turkey, and in Russia. When Sympathy shall have visited every corner of those countries, she will still have three quarters of the globe to traverse with the same snail-like expedition. In the mean time, sir, we reason, but the poor negro feels. (161)

When Parkinson suggests that evoking sympathy is enough to abolish slavery, Edmunds indicates that people’s selfishness prevents them from acting on any sympathetic inclinations they may have, and, while selfishness is a term that applies to one’s subjective feelings,
Edmunds ultimately addresses selfishness to point back to the corrupt economic system that is capitalism; he ultimately addresses selfishness to remind Parkinson of the fact that enslavers stand to make quite a bit of money by maintaining the institution of slavery. Similar to Del Guercio’s analysis of how an awareness of material things can actually lead to the exploitation of people instead of their emancipation, here, Edmunds highlights how the enslavers’ awareness of the monetary benefits of enslaving people outweighs any sympathy they may have for the plight of those same people. Consequently, as Edmunds points out, even if sympathy does eventually result in abolition, abolition will be achieved extremely slowly, and this gradual process of emancipation is not acceptable to Edmunds because while he and Parkinson reason, “the poor negro feels.”

While the language of “feeling” initially seems to evoke sentimentalism, Edmunds evocation of feeling doesn’t uphold sentimental identification, but, rather, accounts for how sentimental identification fails to grasp the fact that white enslavers can not truly identify with the suffering of those who have been enslaved. Therefore, Edmunds indicates that one can not rely on sympathy to abolish slavery and, in doing so, seeks to legitimize insurrection as a completely justifiable method of rebelling against oppression. His tone even seems to celebrate the insurrection when he declares that the enslaved are “breaking their chains on the heads of their oppressors” (160).

Peter Kitson claims that Edmunds is “obviously based on Thelwall’s own character” and that “Thelwall put his own words in the mouth of Edmunds” in the very scene that I discussed above (124, 130). Knowing that Thelwall’s political views are echoed in Edmunds’, it seems to me that The Daughter of Adoption is attempting to carve out a very particular kind of sentimentalism and a very particular account of subjectivity’s role in abolition. The novel’s use
of phrases such as “family of the human race” and “sympathizing relatively” do firmly place the novel within the sentimental tradition and do often suggest that there is something essentially human that transcends any individual differences in experience. Still, the inability of people to identify with the plight of people who have experienced hardships that they have not is also reiterated at other points in the novel. When Henry steals from Mr. Wilson, for example, Mr. Wilson declares that “the rich do not think; but the poor are obliged to feel!” (89). The novel, then, does seem to be invested in recognizing when emotional identifications can not be made. Perhaps, in some instances, the novel is insisting on caring for other people precisely because you can not identify with their life experiences and suggests that Adam Smith is wrong to indicate that we can only care about others when we can imagine ourselves in similar circumstances.

Essentially, similar to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Daughter of Adoption* is invested in subjectivity and, by emphasizing the contradictory educational philosophies of Amelia and Montfort, the novel both demonstrates the kind of subjectivity that celebrates the subjugation of others in favor of one’s personal gain and the kind of subjectivity that celebrates the potential for rational and sympathetic self-guidance in the hopes of fostering a more equitable society. As I discussed in the previous chapter, sentimental methods of identification do have the potential to overlook systemic issues that contribute to the oppression of marginalized groups as it suggests, in this case specifically, that white people can understand the pain of enslaved Africans even though they haven’t experienced it. In some ways, Thelwall’s use of phrases such as “family of the human race” does seem to contribute to the possibility of overlooking the specificity of the experience of those who have been enslaved, and characters, such as Parkinson, do discuss the sympathy of white people toward enslaved Black people in a Stowe-like manner that suggests
that slavery is purely the product of a misdirected interior disposition. *The Daughter of Adoption*, however, does not limit its discussion of slavery to the subjective experience, but, rather, identifies and critiques the material structures, namely capitalism, that maintain the institution of slavery, and, consequently, opens up the possibility of re-thinking what the liberal subject looks like. While Thelwall does not necessarily declare a “winner” of the debate surrounding the legitimacy of the slave insurrection, his inclusion of Edmund’s thoughts regarding the limitations of sympathy in abolishing slavery indicates that the type of subject that is capable of sustaining a truly equitable self-guided government would actually need to recognize his inability to identify with the plight of enslaved persons.
Conclusion

Primarily, I think what this thesis has accomplished is providing a new way with which to approach our reading and analysis of sentimental literature as scholars. In this thesis, I have discussed how Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and John Thelwall’s *The Daughter of Adoption* incorporate aspects of both idealist and materialist frameworks in their quest for abolition and can not be categorized as adhering strictly to one or the other. Berlant’s situating of sentimental novels in the realm of the personal and the private-- in the realm of idealism-- then, risks oversimplifying the perspective of sentimentalism’s approach to abolition. As Solomonescu states, “materialism and idealism (including vitalism) were neither interchangeable nor mutually exclusive traditions,” and my thesis has demonstrated how presenting them as such produces a false dichotomy in which sentimentalism exists in a purely idealist framework and is completely void of any material concerns (6). Even *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which does place its primary emphasis on the need for subjective change in achieving abolition, highlights how “feeling right” is expected to translate into political reform as is demonstrated by Mrs. Bird’s attribution of Mr. Bird’s voting in favor of the Fugitive Slave Act to his prioritization of rationality over feeling.

Because the sentimental novel of the first-half of the 19th century is constantly negotiating the materialist-idealist nexus, it is worth thinking about how the varying combinations of idealism and materialism in the sentimental novel function as a response to each novelist’s particular historical moment and positionality within that historical moment rather than thinking about how differing degrees of stress on one framework or another function as an inherent political failing or success. Stowe, for instance, as a woman, was relegated to the domestic sphere, and her rhetorical methods, in many ways, were influenced by the kinds of knowledge that she had access to as an American woman in the 19th century. While emphasis on
the family unit and projecting familial relationships onto non-family members to facilitate identification are inherent to the sentimental form, Stowe’s discussion of these matters is also indicative of the fact that these are the matters that women were permitted to speak about. Her emphasis on personal experience and domestic life, then, is a product of her historical positionality and, though this positionality is indicative of the limitations placed on women, the centrality of “feminine” kinds of knowledge to her novel can also be viewed as a “monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman’s point of view” (Tompkins 124). Stowe’s emphasis on subjectivity in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is also a result of the prevalence of Evangelical Christianity and the moral framework derived from it. Stowe’s appeal to her own and to her readers’ religious convictions is a complex move as many people appealed to Christianity in defense of slavery, but, in doing so, Stowe is able to communicate the moral impermissibility of slavery to her readers in concepts and language that they can understand.

*The Daughter of Adoption* was also very much written in response to Thelwall’s particular historical moment, and the classification of Thelwall as a Jacobin speaks to Thelwall’s materialist leanings in several ways. First, the term “Jacobin” is an inherently political label, and it’s important to note how Thelwall’s ability to actively take part in politics in a way in which Stowe was not may account for the stronger emphasis on structural change in his work. Stowe was primarily able to advocate for change in the domestic realm, so she did; Thelwall was able to acquire access to more explicitly political settings and to advocate for change there, so he did. Secondly, the label “Jacobin” also aligns Thelwall with an anti-establishment politics that fights against the structures that produce and maintain inequalities (Scrivener 26). *The Daughter of Adoption* was written roughly ten years after the beginning of both the French and Haitian revolutions, and Thelwall’s contemplation of the legitimacy of revolution as a response to
oppression was clearly influenced by his witnessing material resistance against oppressive government forces across the globe. Outside of revolution, the economic inequality that incited the French Revolution and the swift economic growth in England that augmented “the social and economic power of the commercial and manufacturing middle classes” prompted political thinkers such as Thelwall to re-imagine what an equitable economic system might look like; these events prompted Thelwall to think critically about what structural changes may be necessary to actually achieve economic equality (Claeys 249). All of these historical factors contributed to Thelwall’s primarily materialist approach to abolition in *The Daughter of Adoption*. By thinking about how Thelwall’s and Stowe’s approaches to abolition were influenced by their historical moments, we are better able to see how the varying degrees of emphasis on materialism and idealism within their work do not inherently constitute a success or a failure, but, rather are calculated responses to the conditions in which they were living.

Thelwall’s particular historical moment also prompted him to consider a more global context than Stowe considers in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. At the time of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s publication, the United States was very much focused on domestic politics and negotiating the power of its own government in legislating slavery. At the time of *The Daughter of Adoption*’s publication, on the other hand, England maintained power in several colonies and, as I noted in the previous paragraph, the Haitian Revolution brought the relationship of colonizers and those whom they had colonized to the forefront of Thelwall’s thought. Thelwall’s investment in the colonial setting also contributes to his materialist leanings and creates a different emphasis on what may be necessary to imagine the abolition of slavery than what is emphasized in *Uncle

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2 I recognize that 19th century America was characterized by western expansion. My goal here is not to overlook the colonizing tendencies of Manifest Destiny, but, rather, is to articulate the difference between the conceptual territory of 19th century American politics and of 18th/19th century British colonialism, namely that, for the United States, legislation surrounding slavery was viewed as an internal problem while, for England, it had more global implications in which England had to consider its relationship to its colonies.
*Tom’s Cabin. The Daughter of Adoption* traces Henry’s early life in England, follows him to the island of St. Domingue, and then follows him back to England. This narrative structure allows the novel to take a broader look at slavery in regard to both the overarching structures that allow for its production and maintenance and how its effects reverberate back to England. As I discussed in “Materialist Sentimentalism,” Henry attributes the maintenance of slavery on the island of St. Domingue to “commercial rapacity” (137). The novel’s critique of capitalism, however, is not limited to critiquing how profit motivates enslavers to maintain slavery, but, rather is extended to all forms of dehumanization that exist as an expense of capitalism. For instance, the novel critiques the capitalist system for how “the oppression of landlords and tax-gatherers” exploit Mr. Wilson and critiques the capitalist system for how it can make Seraphina’s sexuality appear as “a commodity in which [Morton] would have trafficked” (230). By depicting all of these negative effects of capitalism, the novel presents slavery as a symptom of a larger structural issue; consequently, the novel has to grapple with what structural changes need to be made in order to remedy the evil of slavery.

Although not as thoroughly or consistently as *The Daughter of Adoption*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* also acknowledges how capitalism contributes to the maintenance of slavery as can be seen in St. Clare’s criticism of Alfred’s aristocratic tendencies. The questions become, then, what makes *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s consideration of capitalism different from *The Daughter of Adoption*’s consideration and how does this materialist critique function within Stowe’s primarily idealist approach to abolition? I am arguing that this difference is, at least in part, a result of the novel’s negotiation of a specifically American national identity. Even in a moment when St. Clare is thinking about slavery in the United States in relationship to the working environment of factory workers in England, he is proclaiming his identity as a democrat and
suggesting that American democracy would be more equitable if its citizens became more sentimental. Similarly, when George explains to Mr. Wilson how the American legal system is responsible for the oppression of the Black population, he does so in a way that stresses the question of what it means to be an American subject: “Don’t you tell us all, once a year, that governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed? Can’t a fellow think, that hears such things?” (150). In this way, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s focus on domestic politics and negotiating what it means to be an American subject contributes to its heavier emphasis on the necessity of subjective change in imagining what is necessary to achieve abolition than *The Daughter of Adoption*, whose investment in colonialism contributes to its heavier emphasis on the necessity of structural change in imagining what is necessary to achieve abolition.

In summary, my thesis has demonstrated the way in which presenting sentimentalism as adhering to purely idealist norms oversimplifies the work of the sentimental novel as even the most idealist sentimental novels do sustain some elements of material concern. Consequently, as scholars, we should think about how each novelist’s particular combination of idealism and materialism function as a response to his or her particular historical moment and, with specific regard to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Daughter of Adoption*, how each varying combination of materialism and idealism impacts what each novelist is able to imagine is necessary to achieve abolition; as scholars, our job is to think about how different points of emphasis in these combinations complement and resist each other. In doing so, we are able to think about what possibilities each combination both opens up and forecloses and to parse through the complexity of sentimentalism without simply reducing its work to being a political failure.
Works Cited


