
Transatlantic Cuteness in Harriet Beecher Stowe

Angela Sorby*¹

¹Marquette University – United States

Abstract

The critic W. T. Lahmon suggests that Stowe's publics would have seen Topsy as "terminally cute," as if the meaning of "cute" is self-evident. Of course, roly-poly little children have always been capable of captivating (some) adults. However, in the mid-nineteenth century, the practice of using cuteness to attract consumers was new. Mass-market cuteness was spurred, inter alia, by the enormous popularity of British and American child actors and by the novels of Charles Dickens. As Lauren Byler has argued, Dickens's novels teem with characters made cute by their "distinguishing quirks, thingly quality, and generally misshapen quaintness." In this paper I will discuss the ways that transatlantic "cuteness" was circulating in mid-century American mass culture; I will examine how Stowe stages cute scenes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; and I will explore whether the commercial aesthetic of cuteness complicates the novel's implicit claims about what makes people materially and spiritually valuable.

*Speaker