

## Neighbor Jackwood : John Townsend Trowbridge's First Anti-Slavery Novel

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# *Neighbor Jackwood: John Townsend Trowbridge's First Anti-Slavery Novel*

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## **Introduction: The Anthony Burns Affair and its Impact on Thoreau and Trowbridge**

Boston. May 26, 1854. Both white and black abolitionists storm the courthouse in a fruitless effort to free Anthony Burns, a runaway slave from Virginia. The next day, with the city full of federal troops, Edward G. Loring, in accordance with the Fugitive Slave Law, rules that Burns must be returned to his master, Charles Suttle. On June 2, with 50,000 people lining the streets, federal troops escort Burns to a ship waiting in harbor, ordered by President Franklin Pierce himself to return Burns to Virginia ("Anthony Burns Captured"; "The Trial' of Anthony Burns"; *My Own Story*, hereafter *MOS* 218-224).<sup>1</sup>

The Burns affair intensified anti-slavery sentiment throughout Massachusetts and was the catalyst for Henry David Thoreau's July 4, 1854 speech, "Slavery in Massachusetts." Thoreau held nothing back. Any law that supported slavery was abhorrent, and any society with such a vast many people—be they judge or common citizen — *not* rebelling against such an evil law, had lost all moral authority. Thoreau argued adamantly that the state of Massachusetts had rendered his life within it meaningless.

I dwelt before, perhaps, in the illusion that my life passed somewhere only *between* heaven and hell, but now I cannot persuade myself that I do not dwell

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<sup>1</sup> Trowbridge, in *My Own Story*, reports, inaccurately, that Burns was returned to slavery on May 27, 1854, but in fact May 27 was the day Burns' trial began. It was not until June 2 that he was put aboard the ship bound for Virginia. Thus, the day on which Trowbridge had his encounter with "Ned" is unclear in his account.

*wholly within* hell. The site of that political organization called Massachusetts is to me morally covered with volcanic scoriae and cinders, such as Milton describes in the infernal regions. If there is any hell more unprincipled than our rulers, and we, the ruled, I feel curious to see it. Life itself being worth less, all things with it, which minister to it, are worth less. Suppose you have a small library, with pictures to adorn the walls — a garden laid out around — and contemplate scientific and literary pursuits.&c., and discover all at once that your villa, with all its contents is located in hell, and that the justice of the peace has a cloven foot and a forked tail — do not these things suddenly lose their value in your eyes? (711-712)

The Burns affair pierced the heart of at least one other writer with lofty literary ambitions: John Townsend Trowbridge. Unlike Thoreau, though, Trowbridge was there in the Boston streets as the abolitionists tried to free Burns, as his trial transpired, and as the federal troops escorted him to the ship that would return him to bondage. When an armed acquaintance in the crowd, wrongly reading Trowbridge's heart, turned to him and said, "At the first sign of an attempt to rescue that damned nigger, we are going in for a bloody flight. I hope there'll be a row, for it's the top-round of my ambition to shoot an abolitionist," the twenty-five-year-old Trowbridge replied, "Well, Ned, you may possibly have an opportunity to shoot me; for if I see a chance to help that 'damned nigger' I'm afraid I shall have to take a hand" (*My Own Story* 221-222). Trowbridge tells us that the Burns affair, and more generally the Fugitive Slave Law, made him an "antislavery fanatic," made him realize what "inflammable antislavery stuff" was inside him, and made him lose interest in his current work in progress — *Martin Merrivale, his X Mark*, the story of a young novelist with lofty ambitions trying to make his way in the literary world — and, instead, "kindled in [him] a desire to write a novel on a wholly different subject," providing him with "the powerful impulse" necessary for "the writing of an antislavery novel" (*My Own Story* 215, 218, 211).

Given his anti-slavery "fanaticism," his sudden desire to help the "damned nigger" however he could, and his new compulsion to record in a novel the horrors facing the runaway slave under the Fugitive Slave Law (suddenly he was having his protagonist in *Merrivale* telling a publisher, "With so much evil in the world to

be overcome with the good,—with so much ignorance, wrong and slavery of every kind to be combated, even in this land of boasted light and liberty,—a writer should not trifle” (*Merrivale* 496)), it comes as a bit of a surprise, at least to us looking back now, with just this limited amount of information, that he chose to write a story in which a black character does not even *seem* to appear until the final quarter of the novel — that is, for the first three-quarters it does not seem to be a novel about slavery at all, but rather, first, a more general moral tale emphasizing the ultimate importance of good heartedness and, second, a more general romantic love story, one which emphasizes the ultimate importance of a true, honest, and unselfish love — a love that can accept a person for who he or she is, no matter what their social background. I write that a black character “seems” not to appear, but of course, the central figure, Charlotte, later revealed to be Camille, who we thought white, who all but one of the supporting characters thought to be white when they first encountered her and for most of the time of their acquaintance, proves to be a woman of mixed heritage.

Regardless, though, of how the novel attempted to avoid its own subject — runaway slaves and the Fugitive Slave Law — *Neighbor Jackwood* proved immensely popular and was soon adapted for the stage. As Trowbridge self-reported, accurately, “The success of the novel led to its dramatization [. . .] for the Boston Museum stage,” where it “had a long and prosperous run” (*MOS* 229, 231). Yes, he could admire a book like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (*MOS* 224), with a “full glossy black man” (*UTC* 19) working his way into the sympathies of readers, but he could not bring himself to write anything like it.<sup>2</sup> As a work, then, that enjoyed great popularity while remaining coy with its content, *Neighbor Jackwood*, sheds tremendous light on the literary atmosphere of the times, at least in Boston—perhaps throwing a greater light on, among other things, just how daring a work *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was.

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<sup>2</sup> Trowbridge was more than aware that Phillips, Sampson & Company, the publisher of his first two novels, *Father Brighthopes* and *Martin Merrivale: His X Mark*, had passed on the *Uncle Tom* manuscript because of how they perceived it likely to offend a large number of regular customers.

## Trowbridge's Anti-Slavery Sentiment — and His Drive to Succeed in the Literary Marketplace

The two factors which best explain the type of book *Neighbor Jackwood* became are, one, Trowbridge's lifelong reluctance to voice vehement anti-slavery sentiments, though he held them from his youth, and two, his desire to succeed in a literary marketplace he felt required not ruffling the feathers of a wide variety of readers breasting a wide variety of political and religious points-of-view.

At an early age, Trowbridge tells us, he “imbibed a prejudice against any agitation of the slavery question” (*MOS* 212). His boyhood minister, one Mr. Sedgwick, often used the pulpit to beat the abolition drum, and for Trowbridge's father, it was just too much to bear.

“Another of his everlasting abolition harangues!” exclaimed my father, as he got down from the wagon at the door. “I wish I had some sort of patent, long-action, quick-pressure gag to spring on him the instant he speaks the word ‘slavery.’ ”

And yet he was a hater of all kinds of oppression, and one of the scrupulously just men I ever knew.

“Wrong?” he would say. “Of course it's wrong; nothing under heaven can make it right for one human being to own another. But what's the use of fighting it here at the North? Leave it where it is, and it will die of itself. Any serious attempt to abolish it will bring on civil war and break up the Union.”

From this early time, then, “the subject of abolition became a disagreeable one” to Trowbridge (*MOS* 213-214).

At seventeen, he moved to Lockport to enroll in a classical school, and there he spent time studying with Amaziah Jenkins, a distant relative—and “an ardent abolitionist.” Though Jenkins chatted about many topics that interested the young Trowbridge, he often touched on one subject, Trowbridge himself tells us in *My Own Story*, that interested him “but little”—slavery.

... for although I had a natural abhorrence of slavery, I had heard it preached

against so much in our Ogden pulpit *that I had grown indifferent to discussions of it.* (MOS 69, emphasis added)

Soon after the Lockport school closed, Trowbridge “reluctantly consented” to a job canvassing for an anti-slavery periodical, but not, he insisted, “to help the cause,” but rather, merely, to earn money for his education (MOS 70).

This proclivity for both opposing slavery and feeling unenthusiased about northern efforts to end it accompanied him to Boston, where he moved in 1848, as he was entering his twenties. In Boston, of course, it was nearly impossible to avoid the abolitionists — and indeed, there, especially at The Melodeon (MOS 168), Trowbridge heard them speak. Garrison he called “uncompromising,” and he was critical of his aim, which he felt “was solely to convince, and not to charm” (MOS 168). His first impression of Theodore Parker was also negative.

I was at first repelled by the occasional mercilessness of his judgments and the force of his invective; for he could out-Garrison Garrison in his denunciations of slaveholding and its political and clerical supporters; and even while he voiced my own early convictions regarding the theological dogmas in the gloom of which I had been reared, I was often made to wince by the harshness of metaphor he applied to them. (MOS 170)

Trowbridge’s attitude toward the abolitionists would soften, however, and he’d begin to feel the need to write something on the subject himself, but on at least two occasions, he felt firsthand how expression of such sentiment could hinder one attempting to establish himself in the literary marketplace.

The first incident occurred in 1851. He was temporarily editing the *Sentinel* for Ben Purley Poore, the publisher, who was off in Washington—and decided to print a piece on slavery, one he thought “dispassionate and judicial,” inoffensive to any discerning reader. He was dead wrong, and Poore let him know it—though Poore, too, thought the article was fair and truthful.

“Good heavens, Trowbridge! What were you thinking of, to turn the Sentinel into an abolition paper?”

"Is that the way you look at it?" asked the cherub [Trowbridge].

"That's the way the subscribers will look at it," he replied.

A good deal nettled, I said, "Then perhaps you would like me to leave the paper?"

"Leave the paper?" he echoed, with about the bitterest laugh I ever heard from his lips. "Print another such article, and the paper will leave us!"

Indeed, the paper did leave them.

A second incident occurred in the fall of 1852. His admiration for Parker growing, Trowbridge penned a sonnet, beginning with these lines, in praise of him.

Parker! Who wields a might moral sledge  
With his strong arm of intellect; who shakes  
The dungeon-walls of error; grinds and breaks  
Its chains on reason's adamantine ledge [.]

Trowbridge submitted his poem to an editor at a popular Boston evening paper—and seemed more than understanding of the editor's reason for refusing to publish it.

[He] handed it back to me with the remark: "I suppose you are aware that these sentiments are contrary to those entertained by nine out of ten of our readers?"—instancing Parker's offensive radicalism in politics and religion. I said I was pleased to know that that was his reason for not printing the lines. "It is a very good editorial reason," he replied; and we parted amicably. (*MOS* 170-171).

Of course, his decision to move to Boston in the first place had been for a single "purpose": "securing new vehicles for [his] tales and sketches, in the periodical press outside of New York" (*MOS* 132). In New York, he'd been advised to stop writing poetry if he intended to live by his pen (*MOS* 97), and now, finding Boston "so hospitable" to his "light literary ventures," he seemed fully aware of the kind of writing that could secure him a large readership—and ultimately, financial suc-

cess (MOS 132).

Zbray and Zbray, in their study *Literary Dollars and Social Sense*, sum up Trowbridge's career (along with the careers of Charlotte Forten's and Lucy Larcom's) like this:

All three aimed, if not always successfully for the largest, well-paying periodicals and fell back upon smaller ones when necessary. Their drive to publish sprang from moneymaking and not, primarily, from ideology, though it played a role. [ . . . ] As the three also tried to address a national market, they compromised their artistic or other values, when expedient. (84)

Zbray and Zbray's assessment of Trowbridge is more than consistent with what he speaks of himself, having just witnessed a shackled Anthony Burns marched to the ship that would deliver him back into slavery.

I felt a burning desire to pour out in some channel the feelings which, long suppressed, had been roused to a high pitch of excitement by this last outrage. Still, something of the old repugnance to the subject of slavery remained; I shrank from the thought of making a black man my hero; the enormous popularity of Uncle Tom, instead of inciting me to try my hand at an anti-slavery novel, served rather to deter me from entering the field which Mrs. Stowe had occupied with such splendid courage and success. (MOS 224)

He would write his anti-slavery novel, yes, but he himself would know all too well, the degree to which he'd put a damper on his anti-slavery fire. Although *Neighbor Jackwood* "was written 'with a purpose,' that purpose was enclosed, as far as possible, in the larger aim of telling a strong and interesting story" (MOS 228-229). Some readers of *Neighbor Jackwood* may be tempted to translate "a strong and interesting story" into "a safe and marketable one."

If, then, we imagine Trowbridge at a fork in the road, with dedication to abolition up one way and wide popularity and financial success up the other, one last anecdote might give us a clue as to which way he'd be most likely to take. He had had the privilege of meeting Mrs. Stowe, at "the dazzling dawn of her success and



fame.” She spoke with him kindly, complimenting something he’d written, and extended to him an open-ended invitation to visit her in Andover. “I want you to make our house one of your homes,” he recalled her saying. He never went. Long afterwards, when he spoke to her of his “ungracious treatment” of her invitation, she replied—he wrote—“Foolish boy! Why didn’t you come?” It was an incident he would recall with shame, as yet another instance of his “unfortunate faint-heartedness” in those days . . . in those days he penned his *Neighbor Jackwood* (MOS 173-174).

### ***Neighbor Jackwood*’s Disguised Heroine**

Essentially, *Neighbor Jackwood* is a tale of a runaway slave, Charlotte Woods (later revealed to be Camille), whom the vast majority of characters recognize not as a black woman escaping bondage, but as a mysterious white woman running from a mysterious past. She encounters goodhearted people who help her—help her *now*, regardless of what’s in her past — and not-so-Good Samaritans as well. She will have two suitors, one, Robert, who knows her true background and is more than willing to use it against her if she denies his “love,” and another, Hector, who, midway through the narrative, learns her secret and struggles to accept it, but who finally realizes both how pure his love for her is, and how willing he is to accept whatever social consequences such a forbidden love might entail. In the end, Hector will marry her, and then, in the nick of time, just before the slave catchers can bring down the force of the Fugitive Slave Law upon her, buy her her freedom. Although readers are aware, by the middle of the novel, that both Hector and Robert know what’s in Charlotte’s past, the reader himself is kept in the dark. The heroine’s disguise, then, is a key feature in the novel, and Trowbridge uses it both to create suspense and to develop theme in the manner he best saw fit.

The story begins when the simple-thinking, but benevolent farmer, Mr. Jackwood, and his son Bim, discover, while fishing, an injured and exhausted Charlotte hiding among some trees and vines near the river. She seems to recognize immediately his goodness and to believe him when he says to her, “I an’t a man to pass by on t’other side when there’s suffering in the way” (NJ 17). As she decides to

accept his help, she also decides to let him see her without her disguise.

“Let me appear to you as I am, then.” And the stranger [Charlotte] removed a pair of spectacles that concealed her eyes: took off the bonnet that almost covered her face; put back from her forehead the old-woman’s cap, with its wig of gray hair attached, and discovered thick masses of dark hair loosened and falling down her neck. (NJ 18)

Both Mr. Jackwood and readers alike get a very good, close-up look at her. She seems to have revealed herself completely. Yet, though Mr. Jackwood is standing over her, scrutinizing her, he recognizes her not as woman of mixed heritage—and readers have no reason to suspect that he has missed anything. Thus, it is in showing herself so completely that she manages to conceal her racial identity—both to Mr. Jackwood and readers — and to quell any suspicion that she is concealing it. Readers cannot imagine that race will become the key plot element.

Furthermore, comments by Mr. and Mrs. Jackwood, throughout the first couple of chapters, suggest that Charlotte clearly appears to the eye to be a “white” woman. Mr. Jackwood asks her if her parents live nearby, suggesting that she doesn’t look much different from the others in the neighborhood (NJ 21). It’s a bit dark when he first takes her home, but still, Mrs. Jackwood mistakes her for a neighbor, Matilda Fosdick, a white woman (NJ 23). A bit later, Mr. Jackwood asks Charlotte if she’s related to a Woods family that lives nearby, surely a white family (NJ 24). And nothing in Charlotte’s speech or behavior brings suspicion upon her, either. Mrs. Jackwood senses that she is most suited for “some lady-like occupation” (NJ 40).

Eventually, Hector, her loyal-and-loving-husband-to-be, will be shocked by her secret—and will feel intensely, for a brief time, that any relationship between them would be abhorrent. That being the case, it’s pretty clear that when they first meet and he is overwhelmed by the “subdued passion and spiritual beauty of her face,” he has not the slightest suspicion that she is, from a legal point-of-view, a black woman. The narrator tells us that the “*intuitive* Hector felt a strange influence steal over him; and all her sorrows, the depth, the sweetness of her spirit, seemed revealed to him” (NJ 83, my emphasis). We sense that Hector’s *intuition*

is guiding him well, that he sees her essential being clearly (and he *does*), and thus, again, *revealing* becomes a means for *concealing*.

Of course, Charlotte's past is essential to the plot, for she is often fretting over it, and from the time Hector first confesses special feelings for her, she is insistent that her past will prevent the both of them from acting on whatever feelings they may have. Wondering what exactly this past is creates suspense for readers (at least, for readers who feel the novel succeeds). Wondering when and how and to whom the secret will be revealed, and with what consequences, keeps them reading.

Trowbridge refuses to give up the secret — some may say, he is toying with the reader — until late in the novel. When Hector first talks of his special regard for her, Charlotte replies that she is not worthy of him. She insists merely that were he to know of her past, he would agree with her. His response indicates little suspicion of the truth. If anything, it suggests that she, like him, may have behaved dishonorably in love.

“[Your past] has been dark, I know. Although you have never told me of it, I see something of what you have suffered. But think of my past, Charlotte! 'Tis I who am not worthy! Oh, the rank weeds of passion I have trampled through! They lie rotting behind me now, and memory is the wind that brings their pestilent exhalations to my nostrils. It is this which makes me sick of life. (NJ 106)

Soon after, the overbearing and unkind Mrs. Rigglesly takes Hector aside and tells him “a” story of Charlotte's past, claiming that she has known her for “more than twelve years.” Her story, outlining the behavior that had “led to the disgrace of her family,” was one, Hector concludes, “that the old lady could not have invented” (NJ 115). It was, obviously, not a story that mentioned race, and it throws both Hector and the reader farther off track. The story proves, in the end, however, whatever the details (the reader gets them not), a mere fabrication born of Mrs. Rigglesly's essential nastiness.

When Hector's mother appeals to Charlotte to love her son back, Charlotte responds, cryptically, “You know not whom you take to your heart!” — and offers

no further explanation. Then we learn that the evil Robert knows of her past — and thus that she is in his power—but still there is no hint of the exact knowledge he holds. Finally, in Chapter 15, “The Lifting of the Veil,” we hear Hector make a passionate plea to Charlotte to reveal all—so he may prove that knowledge of any “disgrace” she has experienced cannot diminish his love.

“Speak boldly!” said he, in quivering tones. “If I am true, no misfortune, no fault, no dark spot in the past, can stain you in my sight. Your soul is what I love. It matters little what garments it has worn, if it be clothed in white to-day. The true man looks through every external circumstance, to the spiritual substance under all. Only the weak and ignorant regard birth, fortune, family, reputation—” (*NJ* 156).

Then Trowbridge allows Charlotte to confess all to Hector, but he has her do so offstage: Chapter 15 ends with her getting ready to speak, and Chapter 16 begins with her having told all—and with Hector reeling from the shock, in disbelief that indeed there had been something in her past that could make their love impossible. One could call this the most crucial moment of the novel — but Trowbridge, in order to sustain the mystery and keep the runaway slave theme hidden, chooses to omit the scene.

After that, Hector will tell his mother that he must leave home and that he’ll never be able to marry Charlotte, but he does not explain the reason to her. Then, when he returns home, in Chapter 23, his mind has changed, but still, as he pleads passionately to Charlotte for another chance, neither he or she mention, specifically, the issue of race and slavery. Then, in Chapter 24, Robert is just about to reveal the truth of Charlotte’s past to Hector — when Hector punches in him the mouth. Charlotte’s “history” remains a mystery. When Hector and Charlotte “discuss” the racial issue, they do so without speaking of it directly—not allowing the reader to understand that indeed it *is* a racial issue.

“I believe in one only great and overmastering love!” said Hector. “[. . .] If in my wanderings from you I have not felt your spirit following me, and drawing me back,—if when furthest from you I have not been with you, and

you with me, continually,—then there is no wisdom or virtue in me!”

“O, but when I told you my history, your love was not proof against that! You said it placed life and death between us. [. . .]”

“I am not here,” responded Hector’s deep and earnest tones, “to make weak excuses for weak conduct. I acted then only as he whom you knew as Hector could act. Trial and absence were necessary to self-knowledge. The moment you were shut from my sight, I saw the stupendous folly, the guilt, of sacrificing all that could make true happiness for me on earth, to the paltry considerations of expediency. [. . .]” (*NJ* 215-216)

In ensuing chapters, the roundabout talk between Hector and his mother will continue, and as late Chapter 32, Hector’s father, appalled that his son has actually married someone who had worked as a servant in their home, can still imagine that Charlotte’s dark secret might involve “the anger of an outraged parent” or “the vengeance of a dishonored husband” (*NJ* 272). When he exclaims of his son, “Had he chosen a negress or a squaw, he might have married in spite of me,” he is demonstrating how far the truth is, for both him and for us, from what he thinks lies within the realm of possibility.

In such a manner, Trowbridge brings us to page 272 of his 414-page novel without letting the reader know that this is a novel about a black slave on the run. There may have been a few hints along the way (Robert jokingly calls his little sister a “fugitive” in front of Charlotte (*NJ* 134), and Hector tells Charlotte that Robert is a “slave to passion” (*NJ* 248), but of course, that Charlotte is in fact a slave cannot be induced at all from those remarks.

In Chapter 33, we learn that “the LAW” is in pursuit of Charlotte (*NJ* 279), and then, finally, in Chapter 35, as Hector enters Mobile hoping to buy his wife’s freedom her true history is revealed.

### **At the Heart of the Novel: Good Samaritans and Noble Hearts**

Trowbridge sensed that a great many readers might grow defensive were they to feel they had suddenly been immersed in an anti-slavery tract posing as a novel. Thus, he disguised the social problem at the heart of his novel — runaway

slaves and the Fugitive Slave Law—hoping he could better focus his readers’ minds on the essential moral thinking he thought necessary for solving it (and hoping, as well, that the reader would develop sympathy for his heroine *before* realizing she was of mixed heritage). One might imagine a parent not scolding a child for stealing a friend’s toy, but rather telling a more general moral tale, in which the immorality of stealing was made clear, allowing the child himself to make the connection with his own sin. This strategy was similar to the one Trowbridge had employed in an earlier novel, *Father Brighthopes*, in which he avoided involvement in doctrinal debate, especially in regard to Calvinism, by having his protagonist promote a practical Christianity, one that could appeal to a variety of readers. It was a form of Christianity which focused on “the sublime beauty of Christ’s character” (*Father Brighthopes* 116) — a character he thought could be emulated by people adhering to a variety of religious beliefs. In *Neighbor Jackwood*, the key moral ideas are two: being a Good Samaritan is always good, and respect for a noble heart is more justly deserved than respect for an individual’s social background and social status, no matter what it may entail. Were readers to feel keenly the essential truth in these two ideas, Trowbridge thought, they would be much less likely to support the Fugitive Slave Law, whether he paid much direction to it or not.

The importance of the Good Samaritan theme is established in the novel’s epigraph, on the title page, a slightly altered quotation from the Gospel of Luke.

“A CERTAIN WOMAN WENT DOWN FROM JERUSALEM TO JERICHO,  
AND FELL AMONG THIEVES.”

In the Gospel of Luke, of course, it is a man, not a woman that Jesus speaks of, a man left on the side of the road, beaten and half-dead, by thieves. A priest and a Levite cross the road to avoid coming near him, but the Samaritan feels compassion and aids him. Jesus tells this story to answer the question, Who is my neighbor? And obviously, the answer is, not the person who shares with you a particular ethnicity or heritage or hometown, but rather the person who shows you compassion no matter what differences in ethnicity or heritage or living place the two of you may have.

In the novel, there are a number of characters who act or act not as Good

Samatarians, but the two most key characters in this regard are surely Mr. Abimelech Jackwood and his crotchety, overbearing mother-in-law, Mrs. Rigglesly.

Mr. Jackwood is the consummate Good Samaritan. Of course, he's not just *Mr.* Jackwood, but *Neighbor* Jackwood—he's the reincarnation of the "neighbor" in Jesus's parable. He's a simple man, a calm, quiet man, one whose even-keeled manner and firm sense of right and wrong allows him to maintain moral authority in a noisy household that includes a bickering son and daughter. His sense of right and wrong — and compassion — make helping Charlotte, in the opening chapter, an easy decision.

His goodness shines all the more for remaining civil and patient in the presence of Mrs. Rigglesly, while the two children, Phoebe and Bim, complain about her mightily, with just reason. Mrs. Rigglesly is always complaining and finding fault—and then has the nerve to moan and groan about no one showing her any sympathy. She's beside herself knowing that everyone in the household finds Charlotte to be a warm, gentle, considerate young woman, one with a constant shine—and all she knows to do is to express her disdain for and distrust of Charlotte with great fervor. Always feeling sorry for herself, Miss Rigglesly is constantly dabbing the tears away from her eyes with her handkerchief—a handkerchief on which Trowbridge has "painted" a picture of the Good Samaritan, and with a rather heavy-handed brush. But even if Trowbridge's irony is overwrought, Mrs. Rigglesly's role in the novel is still clear. The reader is positioned to see very clearly that it would take a pretty nasty person indeed not to see that a woman in Charlotte's position — especially a woman of Charlotte's virtue — is deserving of compassion and assistance. In this way, compassion for Charlotte, or lack of compassion for her, remains a primary focus—without the issue of race being raised.

In the last quarter of the novel, though, once it's clear that the Fugitive Slave Law is in play, we're provided with a rather melodramatic scene in which Jackwood's Good-Samaritanism, born of "natural" human emotions, wins out even in a charged racial environment. He has just saved Charlotte from the flood, and though she is half drowned and "nigh-about dead" (*NJ* 331), he manages to bring her to Mr. Rukely's house. Mr. Rukely is just putting the finishing touches on a sermon entitled "Duties of Christian Citizens in the Present Crisis"—the present crisis being what to do with fugitive slaves. When his wife asks, "Do I understand that we are

not to protect a fugitive?" his response is clear.

"Is it not just?" cried the minister. "Have we a right to peril the welfare and happiness of a nation, by espousing the cause of one man, against the laws made to protect and regulate all?" (*NJ* 327)

Just then, though, Jackwood knocks at the back door — and with "no time for words" carries Charlotte into the Rukely home. That there is "no time for words" is appropriate, for Jackwood knows — and the novel has tried to shown — that a good person will always help another, no matter what, that it's not a matter requiring debate. Still, Jackwood explains, as best he can, about Charlotte being a fugitive and "kidnabbers" being after her; he prefaces his explanation, though, by saying that the Fugitive Slave Law and the kidnappers it has encouraged are "suthin 't I can't realize nor believe" (*NJ* 329). The "law" is, for him, irrelevant. At first, Rukely expresses uncertainty as to whether helping Charlotte is a wise idea, but he proves no match for Jackwood's passion, sincerity, and plain talk.

Mr. Jackwood smote the palm of his hand with his fist with an energy that made the other start. "I—I tell ye what!" cried he, in a determined tone. "I respect the laws, an' I don't think I'm a bad citizen, gen'ly speaking! I don't go in for mobs an' lynchin', nuther! But, come case in hand, a human critter s 'f more account to me than all the laws in Christendom! 'As ye do it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye do it unto me;' that's my doctrine. Christ never stopped to ask whuther 't was lawful to do a good deed, but went and done it! But, excuse me, — you're a minister, an' you know better about them things 'n I do."

Mr. Rukely grasped the farmer's hand. His eyes glistened, and there was a noble emotion in his face. "You can depend upon me," said he, fervently.

"God bless you sir! I knowed it!" cried Mr. Jackwood, the tears coursing down his weather-stained cheek. "When there 's a duty to be done to a feller-mortal, you an't the man to stop an' look arter the consequences."

"Not in such a case," said Mr. Rukely. "I find" — wringing the farmer's hand again — "That there's a difference between reasoning from the intellect



and acting from the heart.” (NJ 333)

Although it’s certainly feasible that seeing Charlotte in such distress and Jackwood expressing so much fervor and conviction could make Rukely waver in his own thinking, the ease with which he abandons his all-important sermon seems a bit far-fetched. Here, as elsewhere, Trowbridge seems content with a cardboard figure.

That, however, does not diminish the rightness of Jackwood’s position. And he’s been steadfast in his considerate behavior from the beginning. The existence or non-existence of the Fugitive Slave Law cannot make less of a Good Samaritan.

The importance of respecting and loving a noble heart, more than social background, is also one established and fairly well played out—*before* the Fugitive Slave Law comes into play. We mainly see it developed in the love story. From the very first time Hector lays eyes upon Charlotte, while she is recuperating at Bertha Wing’s house, he is aware of her “spiritual beauty.” Once she comes to his own home, to help with his mother’s care, he realizes that her heart is one to which he can “open all doors” (NJ 106). When he learns the nature of her secret, he will question the strength of his love for her noble heart (in scenes I’ve discussed previously), but finally his love for her will win out—and he will verbalize all this in Chapter 26, when he tells his mother how Charlotte’s “dear, sweet flower” presence has led to his complete disregard for social background. When his mother comments, “We must not forget that Christ was born in a manger,” he knows that she is on his side.

“Glorious thought! Dear mother, when you speak that sacred name, my whole being is infused with ineffable emotion! One night, in my absence from you and Charlotte, one strange, memorable night, when I lay thinking of the world, of life, a great power came upon me; an overshadowing, an agony, and a light; then to my inner sense a universe was opened, in the midst of which I saw humanity transfigured, — the image of the Father shining through the Son, and the dove of the Spirit flying to mankind from his bosom of love. In the light that dawned upon me then, I have seen all the circumstances of birth, of wealth, of station, as utterly insignificant to the true being and majesty of the soul. [. . .]”

.....  
“Mother, for one born and bred in English society, where the prejudice of clan and caste is as potent as in India, you talk marvelously! [. . .] Imagine, now, that I have a dear, sweet, flower; I bring it to you; shall we stop to consider in what soil it sprung, before enjoying its fragrance and beauty?”

“Oh, no; but love it for its own sake, for what it is!”

.....  
“But, if the possession of this flower brings upon me the shame of the world, and the hatred and persecution of those who broke its stalk and bruised its leaves,—tell me, what then?”

“Oh, my son, I tremble!—but be you brave, and noble, and strong!” (*NJ* 237-238)

As with the Jackwood/Rukely scene, there is a bit of melodrama here. 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers are likely to find Hector’s heroic and idealistic rhetoric a bit high in the clouds. But if something is unconvincing for the contemporary reader, it is the *way* in which the central idea is presented, and not the idea itself. Also, I think it is fair to say that Trowbridge displays a certain skill and delicacy in crafting Hector’s speech, even if now it does “smell” a bit of early-19<sup>th</sup>-century, popular romance writing.

### **The Weakness of *Neighbor Jackwood* as an Anti-Slavery Novel**

That Trowbridge was thinking of many of the same issues as Harriet Beecher Stowe was when she composed *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is made clear in Chapter 41, “Confessions,” in which Charlotte, now revealed as Camille, recalls the major events in her slave past for her friend Bertha. Charlotte’s story sounds a lot like Cassy’s story in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Both Charlotte and Cassy were born of doting fathers, white men, who were also their owners. Both had happy, somewhat luxurious childhoods, with educational opportunities not available to the vast majority of slaves. The young Cassy learned music and French—and expected to move into sophisticated social circles in the future. The young Camille expected that her French father would one day take her to France, where she would live “in grand

style" (NJ 356). The deaths of their fathers, however, leave them in the merciless hands of unkind relatives, who do not hesitate to sell them to the worst of slave owners — slave owners who will force them to live in the most degrading conditions. That the slave's life could only be as "pleasant" as his or her master's heart was good — and that such a slave's "luck" could last only as long as his master lived—or his finances remained in good shape—becomes a point that permeates the whole of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, solidifying its structure, from an artistic point-of-view, and giving it thematic heft, from a moral point-of-view.

Unfortunately, Trowbridge, while having the same understanding of the matter as Stowe, chose to do nothing with this portion of his material. If he had been inclined to present Charlotte's history in a more powerful manner, he certainly could have. For example, he could have placed flashbacks describing it throughout the novel. He could have focused a fine lens on at least a couple of those traumatic days from her past, making us feel we were there witnessing them up close. Instead, he chooses, merely, to have Charlotte summarize them quickly for Bertha—as if all he needs to do is tie up loose ends. What Trowbridge throws away, I think, is an opportunity to heighten sympathy for his heroine. The information he supplies seems, at best, too little too late, and at worst, an admittance that he's intentionally misled his readers.

By disguising his heroine's true identity for so long he throws away other opportunities as well. What intriguing and revealing conversations we may have heard under the Jackwood roof had the whole family realized they were sheltering a runaway slave. How more dramatic and engaging the novel could have been had we actually been allowed to *see* Charlotte "lift her veil" for Hector, if we had been allowed to see for ourselves his initial disgust with her. How more dramatic and engaging it might have been had we heard Mr. Dunbury ranting about the horrors of miscegenation, if we'd heard, with language that humiliated, the bad guy, Robert, playing the race card in a vicious attempt to "own" her.

## Concluding Thoughts

In *Walden*, Thoreau tells us of "a strolling Indian" who was very adept at weaving baskets but who had the greatest of difficulties of finding enough local

white people to buy them. From this he learned, he says a lesson of great value.

I too had woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture, but I had not made it worth any one's while to buy them. Yet not the less is my case, did I think it worth my while to weave them, *and instead of studying how to make it worth men's while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them.* (18, emphasis added)

This is quite telling of the huge difference between Trowbridge and Thoreau. The latter was searching out ways to avoid having to sell himself in a marketplace contrived by others, while the former was taking great care to succeed in it. No wonder then that they took such different tacts in expressing their disgust with the state of Massachusetts sending Anthony Burns back into bondage. Thoreau felt that the press was unforgivably irresponsible in not expressing outrage at the Burns decision, and after comparing newspapers to the Bible (as he felt them the written word that molded people's lives) he let the local newspapers have it in his "Slavery in Massachusetts" address, not caring whom he offended.

I repeat the testimony of many an intelligent foreigner, as well as my own convictions, when I say, that probably no country was ever ruled by so mean a class of tyrants as, with a few noble exceptions, are the editors of the periodical press in *this* country. And as they live and rule only by their servility, and appealing to the worse, and not the better, nature of man, the people who read them are in the condition of the dog that returns to his vomit. (705)

Trowbridge could *never* have written anything like this. At least, he couldn't have written it and *shown* it to anyone. His livelihood depended on the popular press—and as his livelihood, probably his *life*, too.

If we were to make an assessment of Trowbridge's skill as a novelist, I think the lists of both positives and negatives would be substantial. In the negative column might be his tendency to *tell* when he needs to show. We hear, for example, many of the people Charlotte meets say what a wonderful person she is, but we don't really see her do all that much herself—and it becomes a bit difficult to feel,

viscerally, that she is the “spiritual beauty” so many characters tell us she is (*NJ* 83). We are left, more or less, feeling we have to take the other characters’ word for her virtue being so peerless. Trowbridge also has a habit of simplifying complicated emotion, as I’ve already pointed out he does in the scene in which Mr. Rukely abandons so quickly, and without any reservation, all he has ever thought about a Christian’s duty to support the Fugitive Slave Law. The worst case of simplified emotion may be Hector’s. Sure, it might have been a struggle for him to accept Charlotte’s “black” identity, but whatever the degree of it, it’s a struggle that happens offstage—with Hector knowing, as he leaves home, that her “blackness” makes any relationship between them impossible, and with him knowing, when he comes back, that his love for her can overcome anything, including her racial identity. Hector’s struggle, it could be argued, *is* the crux of the novel, but we are allowed to witness very little of it.

But indeed there is a positive side of the ledger. Trowbridge is quite adept at writing dialogue in brief, self-contained scenes of domestic life, especially in comic scenes. Scenes in which the children, Bim and Phoebe, give each other grief, and the scenes in which Mrs. Rigglesby’s nastiness is revealed, are very well done. So are his lyrical descriptions of nature. Some readers, from a 21<sup>st</sup>-century perspective, may find the passionate speeches characters make at pivotal moments a bit overwrought, but if you accept that a bit of melodrama is exactly what his readers enjoyed most, those speeches are not poorly composed. Consider one we hear from the villain, Robert, near the end of the novel. He is confronting his domineering father with the role he played in turning him into the monster he’s more than ready to admit he’s become. His father has just told him to remember that it is his father to whom he’s talking—and that he must respect “the paternal head.”

“Remember! — would I could forget! Respect! — how have I learned to hate! I cannot recall a single kind or loving word that ever you spoke to me. You were the tyrant — always! You ruled with a rod of iron. My most trivial faults were punished with cruelty. If there was any goodness in me, you crushed it out; while every evil trait I inherited—*from you*—was kept alive *by you*—provoked and strengthened by your despotism! Revenge became a part of me. Because I dared not vent it against you, I poured it upon others. That passion

fired the rest. Now you behold me here! And I tell you I have you to thank! Take that, my parting gift, and hug it to your breast when I am gone!" (NJ 400)

Melodramatic? Perhaps. But nicely written just the same.

Despite any judgments, good or bad, regarding Trowbridge's artistic skill as a novelist, comparing how *he* attacked the Fugitive Slave Law with how Thoreau did is of the greatest interest, for while Thoreau was content to "succeed" as a social outsider, Trowbridge clearly desired to "succeed" as a respected and money-making member of society. Actually, Trowbridge believed that that was the *only* way he could "succeed." And among well-informed, concerned thinkers throughout New England whose public image was important to the well-being of their professional lives, there were probably a lot more *we've-got-to-make-a-living* Trowbridges than there were *I'll-get-by-just-fine-without-you* Thoreaus. Considering this, *Neighbor Jackwood*, with its disguised heroine, with its own subject matter hidden for three-quarters of its length, is quite revealing of what seems to have been a not so uncommon type of thinking. Indeed, it was possible to be staunchly anti-slavery, while also being resistant to discussing the horrors of slavery publicly. And in the end, the logic that *Neighbor Jackwood* employs is not all that bizarre. Certainly, if the moral of the Good Samaritan parable trumps all others, then a convincing presentation of it, even one that doesn't seem to be about slavery, could become a moral compass for those might just discover a runaway slave on their "doorsteps"—a person from a faraway, "foreign" land—like the man from Jericho—in desperate need of a good neighbor.

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