

Uncle Tom's Cabin: Its History, Its Issues, and Its Consequences

Abstract: This research paper analyzes Harriet Beecher Stowe's most influential and successful work, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* began as a simple novel written by a woman who was both a wife and mother, it grew to be one of the strongest antislavery books and was even credited with giving the impetus to initiate the Civil War. Stowe incorporated several strongly debated issues of her time in the novel, including slavery, alcohol temperance, and gender roles. However, she was careful to work within the accepted social boundaries and was thus able to appeal to many groups through her novel. Nevertheless, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was highly controversial and sparked a storm of discussion and action from the entire world. This paper explores Stowe's life, the issues contained within the novel and their presentation, and the reactions of the American public and the world.

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When she wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe had no idea that she was unleashing a literary giant on the world. Stowe herself was a good wife and mother, and her accomplishment is astonishing for both its near-radical ideas and for its traditional presentation,. Some of the strength of the novel is drawn from Stowe's own life experiences and struggles, further intensifying the message of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In fact, Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying, "so this is little woman who caused the great war!" (in reference to the Civil War, qtd. in Seiler 136). It is true that the novel sparked outrage and sympathy on behalf of the slaves for the sensitive treatment of the slave families and hardships, and the entire world was moved to react against or for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Thus, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one of the greatest literary works of the 19th century, is the outcome of Stowe's own life and the struggles of the time period regarding slave laws and societal roles, and the novel's worldwide success and its outcomes have served to immortalize Stowe and her writing forever.

Stowe herself was an extraordinary woman from an extraordinary family. According to a biographical article by Grace Seiler, Stowe was a native of New England and her father, Lyman Beecher, was a Puritan minister who brought his children up in strong faith. Stowe was one of eight children born to Lyman Beecher and his wife, Roxana Foote. Among those children, Stowe was the only girl—and thus the only child who could not go into the ministry. Stowe seemed well-suited for the ministry, but she wrote works to replace the might-have-been career. One of these was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When Stowe was only five years old, her beloved mother died, leaving the family bereft (Seiler 128). When her father remarried, Stowe's new stepmother could never replace Roxana in the hearts of the children.

According to Seiler, Stowe learned almost everything from her father—theology, philosophy, writing, an appreciation for the dramatic (her father was an exuberant, vivid man), and much more. While she idolized her father, she struggled throughout her life with the Puritan religion that her father preached. He eschewed “natural religion,” the idea that faith could come only from the heart; in truth, he believed that faith could only come through teaching. Stowe continuously searched for a loving God as she struggled with the stern doctrine of predestination, and her relationship with God changed frequently. For instance, as a child, she first converted when her father preached on Jesus’ love for man (a theological aberration for him), but when her siblings plagued her for succumbing to ‘natural religion,’ she was soon overcome by doubts about her faith—a condition that lasted for years (Seiler 130). Later on, Stowe rebelled against the coldness of some aspects of Puritanism and incorporated her passion against such doctrines in her writings, and by 1832, she had worked out her own theology. She determined to forget all of her own ambitions so that she could work entirely for others (Seiler 131). In this way, she was able to overcome most of her fears about the nature of God. Her theology of a loving God later came out clearly in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Seiler also records that, in 1834, Harriet Beecher married Calvin Stowe after her father introduced her to him. The couple was unevenly matched in temperament, as she was passionate, vivacious, loving, and imaginative while he was somber and stubborn. She also provided most of the family’s income through her writing (Seiler 133). According to an article by Elizabeth Ammons, the two had seven children together, one of whom died in a cholera epidemic in Cincinnati. This event actually provided some of the emotional basis for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, particularly for her poignant creation of family bonds such as Eliza’s with her son, Harry. In fact, Stowe later came to believe that she was the one chosen by God to write *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

because she was a mother (Ammons 161). She began to write the novel when she was 41 years old and published it in 1851.

When writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe faced numerous challenges because of the variety in her audience and the ideas she hoped to dispel. The novel primarily focuses on the need to eradicate slavery, but Stowe also presents her beliefs about the roles of men and women, alcohol temperance, and moral reform (particularly in regard to the sexual exploitation of slaves). However, the novel does not attack these issues head-on, as David Reynolds notes in his biographical book. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* filters “the most subversive, sensational, or raucous cultural energies of the time through the cult of domesticity, which put the home and the family at the center of life” (Reynolds 43). In other words, Stowe focuses on her area of expertise—the home and family—so that she can effectively communicate her ideas without being rejected as a radical feminist. Her achievements stem from her acceptable presentation of the material.

Although many ideas in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are important, the most enduring and significant is that of the evil of slavery. Stowe's focus on the need to eradicate slavery comes primarily from her own past and from the experiences of her family; throughout her life, she heard multiple stories of the sexual exploitation of slaves, and she fought against this in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In fact, as Reynolds notes, Stowe's aunt, Mary Foote, once married a Jamaican planter, but when she discovered that he had “sired several of his slaves,” she left him and returned to America (Reynolds 59). Stowe also had a Black housekeeper, Eliza Buck, who had been the mistress of her former Kentucky owner (Reynolds 59). These events and stories in themselves provided Stowe with adequate motivation to fight slavery, and she thus combated it by directly and indirectly criticizing the injustice of the slave laws of her times.

Religion and law are inextricably connected in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and, according to Alfred Brophy's analysis of Stowe's use of slave law, "Stowe develops the links between law and slavery by indicating that the law makes it impossible for even 'kind' masters to make slavery humane, and that the law releases the worst impulses of unkind masters" (Brophy 468-469). The most pervasive evil that Stowe fought was a widespread belief that slavery was moral and that evil masters were rare. However, the laws made it *possible* for evil masters (defined by religious morality) to commit injustices without punishment. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* itself, this is demonstrated when George Shelby is forced to sell Tom and Harry to pay his debts, and the law permits—and even urges—him to ignore the basic human rights of his slaves in favor of maintaining his lavish lifestyle. In other words, his obligation to pay his debts of honor, according to the law, trumps his obligation to his human dependents. Thus, Tom is sold to the callous Mr. Haley, who cares only for profits (Stowe 8). In addition, not only did the laws enable cruelty to slaves, but the slave laws actually made it illegal for masters to act kindly toward their slaves. This is shown by the fact that, as Brophy states, "to shut off the humanity [of the slaves], the slave-code prohibits masters from teaching their slaves to read and write, limits the slaves' access to education, and prohibits them from acquiring property, raising their own animals, or hiring themselves out for their own benefit" (Brophy 472-473). Furthermore, slave-owners were urged not to free their slaves. Slave-owners were actually extremely limited in their ability to simultaneously comply with the laws and to treat their slaves as human beings.

Slaves were often left to despair because they had no governmental protection whatsoever. Many such cases exist in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. For instance, George is legally taken from his profitable and fulfilling employment to a life of hard labor and misery because of his master's jealousy over his slave's success. In addition, Prue's master kills her because of her

constant drunkenness, which is brought on because most of her children are sold and her one remaining child dies of neglect and hunger when Prue is not permitted to care for it (Stowe 198-199). In addition, Legree cruelly punishes and eventually kills Tom for his faithfulness and refusal to reveal fugitive slaves. These examples are all illustrations of what was legal in Stowe's time. In fact, the Fugitive Slave Law even forced Northerners to be complicit with slavery by requiring them to return fugitive slaves to their owners or by making them criminals if they helped the runaway slaves (Brophy 476).

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, then, Stowe comes to the conclusion that, if laws are unjust, men and women must obey their consciences and do the right thing, even if it is against the law. This attitude can be seen when George, Eliza, and Harry find the Birds, who help them to escape even though Senator Bird has voted for a law forbidding people even to feed or shelter runaway slaves (Stowe 78). Furthermore, the fugitive family is taken in and sheltered by a Quaker community. However, according to Brophy, the idea of defiance to unjust laws is actually summed up in the climax of the novel when Tom refuses to tell Legree the whereabouts of Cassie and Emmeline, where Stowe most clearly challenges slave law and encourages disobedience to the unjust and immoral laws (Brophy 478). Nevertheless, Stowe makes it abundantly clear that such rebellion should not be violent; on the contrary, Tom peacefully resists his master. Through *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, then, Stowe is able to point out the injustices and the depravity of the slave laws and the widespread need to rise up against the laws that afforded the slaves no protection and forced people to act against their consciences to comply with slavery.

In addition to confronting slavery, Stowe fights other moral battles in the book, some more indirectly than others. One cause that she addresses subtly is that of alcohol temperance. For instance, in the opening scene of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Mr. Shelby and Mr. Haley are drinking

while discussing the fates of Eliza Harris and her son Harry. Later on, the men hunting the Harris family (Eliza, George, and Harry) are in drunken rages. Furthermore, it is enlightening to note, as Reynolds states in his article, that “Augustine St. Clare is killed when he tries to break up a brawl between drunken men in a café. The enslaved woman Prue, after years of sexual exploitation, becomes a wretched alcoholic ... another sex slave, Cassy drinks to drown her despair ... [and] the nefarious Simon Legree overindulges in drink” (Reynolds 57). All of these instances, and more, demonstrate the pervasive evil of alcohol use in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In accordance with this, Stowe’s best characters, including the Birds, the Quakers, and Tom himself, all abstain from alcohol entirely. Thus, Stowe tries to send a subtle message to her readers about the evil of alcohol abuse.

However, despite the strong opinions expressed in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* about reform topics, Stowe is careful to work within the accepted social boundaries, thus making her book more acceptable to her readers. After all, as Reynolds points out, if Stowe had not tempered her ideas with conventional presentation, she would likely have been dismissed as a radical feminist—very much like her half-sister Isabella (Reynolds 53). It is notable that Stowe primarily focuses *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* on the home and family, which are her own areas of expertise (as she was both a wife and mother). This gives a credible basis to the conflicting opinions about the novel. For instance, pro-slavery critics condemned Stowe as a dangerous reformer and a woman who disguised her reforming ideas as virtuous and pure Christian notions, citing the tragic and violent scenes as well as the strongly opinionated characters of the novel as indications of Stowe’s disquieting messages; on the other hand, the novel was heralded as a conservative and feminine novel. These radically opposing viewpoints served to place Stowe on middle ground regarding feminism and a number of other issues (Reynolds 45). However, it is

true that in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, many women are strong characters, even within their traditional positions as wives and mothers. Stowe does not suggest that women *should* occupy other positions, but believes that women can be important and influential even inside the home (Reynolds 47). Eliza is a perfect example of this, given that she does her utmost to protect her family by being strong when needed, such as when she runs across the frozen Ohio.

Furthermore, as Elizabeth Ammons emphasizes in her article, Stowe actually feminizes her most amenable characters and, as a mother, invokes motherly images and feelings in order to demonstrate the destitution that slavery imposed upon slave families. Throughout *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe linked Tom, Eva, and most mothers—excepting Eva's mother, Marie St. Clare—through feminine qualities. All of these qualities are shared with most of the women in the novel, including Mrs. Bird, Aunt Chloe, Eva, and the virtuous Quaker women. These characters were also all linked to the anti-slavery movement, particularly the slave mothers, as “Stowe places particular emphasis on the horrors suffered by the system's maternal victims” (Ammons 167). However, many of these women are notable for remaining within their spheres (the home and family) even when combating slavery. For instance, Eliza Harris never rebels against the conventional views of wives and mothers; the only time that she actually revolts is when her son and her family are threatened. It is here that Stowe, through Eliza, shows that family values and responsibilities can indeed trump law. Through connections such as that between virtuous womanhood and the evils of slavery, Stowe creates parental sympathy for the atrocities heaped upon slave families, to show that black people are humans with human emotions, and, as Ammons remarks in her article, “that women suffer horrible tortures in the midst of a society boastful about its chivalry toward the ‘gentle sex’” (Ammons 167).

Stowe also uses a feminized Tom in presenting her values and observations about the conflicts within the slave-based system. Throughout *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe focuses on men's roles and behaviors in her society and questions the validity of the popular perceptions of men. During Stowe's time period, traditional masculinity tended to lean toward tactics of aggression; as Cynthia Wolff states in her article, "By [the] mid-nineteenth century, a formulaic image of a ruthless, power-hungry American manhood had developed Traits such as self-sacrifice and sensitivity to the needs of others were anathema to this crude masculine stereotype" (Wolff 599). To combat this attitude, Stowe used feminine heroes such as Tom. After all, if her society defined masculinity based on principles of competition and conquest, Stowe decided that masculinity needed a new definition if slavery were to be combated (Wolff 600). It is thus interesting that Tom, the main character of the novel, is, as Elizabeth Ammons mentions, "gentle, pious, chaste, domestic, long-suffering and self-sacrificing" (Ammons 162). Therefore, Tom is characterized by meekness, servility, faith, devotion to his family, and a protective, loving nature. Furthermore, he is entirely nonviolent; there is not a single instance in the novel in which he engages in violent behavior to protect himself. Even when protecting others, as in his final confrontation with Legree, Tom simply refuses to tell Legree where Cassy and Emmeline are and meekly bears Legree's fury, even accepting death for the protection of others (Stowe 376). In stark contrast to Tom's feminine virtue, those who demonstrate traditional masculinity actually become villains. Among these, Legree is the most degraded man in the novel, but he is also the man who is most "masculine," according to Stowe's society's definition. By presenting Tom the way she does, Stowe manages to create sympathy for the black race *and* illustrate her idea of perfect masculinity.

When it was published, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had far-reaching ramifications. The novel instantly became a smash hit around the globe—popular international icons praised it, and abolitionists and pro-slavery parties both reacted strongly to it; it became a household book, and it had dramatic consequences regarding slavery. When Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1851, it earned her \$10,000 in the first four months. In fact, Grace Seiler observes in her article that Stowe's novel had such a powerful effect in America that “for a time, at least, the power of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was so great as to make the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law impossible” (Seiler 135). Stephen Hirsch also points out in his article that famous individuals such as the Pope, a Russian diplomat, and George Sand reacted favorably to the book. Furthermore, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became so famous that one of the most popular names for infant girls was Eva. Stowe later said that God wrote the novel through her; surely nothing that a mere human wrote could have such an impact on the world (Hirsch 303).

One of the most significant reactions to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an outbreak of literary efforts imitating and exalting Stowe's work. Newspapers and magazines were especially important to this eruption of reviews and literature, as they ran articles about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and noted its growing popularity:

The *Liberator* [the Boston abolitionist paper] also joyously reported that the novel had been adopted as a Sunday school text in both Peoria and Pittsburgh, and *Frederick Douglass' Paper* approvingly noted its use in several high schools. The *Pennsylvania Freeman* reported that the Delaware Anti-Slavery society had donated a copy of *Uncle Tom* to every library in the state, and Douglass' organ boasted that the New York Mercantile Library alone had no fewer than forty-six copies in circulation. (Hirsch 304)

Through book sales alone, it is clear that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had drastic effects throughout America and the entire world. However, the reaction to the novel was even more apparent through the massive literary output that responded to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Newspaper articles, letters, essays, poems, songs, plays, and merchandise burst from America in honor of—or in reaction to—Stowe's novel. To demonstrate this, Stephen Hirsch cites poetical efforts in his article such as Francis E. Watkins's "Eva's Farewell" and "Eliza's Flight," as well as Mrs. R.S. Nichols's "Gentle Eva." Anti-Tom poems also exist, but they are few. These include William Grayson's "The Hireling and the Slave" and a New York lady's "The Patent Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin" (Hirsch 308-309). However, many of the anti-Tom poems and other writings "reveal a hidden tone of fear and helplessness" (Hirsch 308). Perhaps this indicates that the authors themselves had reservations about the rightness of slavery and feared that they would be overcome by the abolitionist cause.

Musical efforts also resulted from the publication and popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. However, the songs often romanticized events or characters and sometimes completely bypassed actual events in the novel. For instance, Eva is a popular character in many such songs, but instead of portraying her as Stowe described her (a cheerful, Christ-like child), most songwriters choose instead to focus on Eva's death and her sanctity. An example of this is in "Uncle Tom's Lament for Eva," where the author mourns,

"For 'twas in the night they laid you
Dear Eva, in thy grave,
E'en now my heart is breaking
O, God, in pity save" (Hirsch 314).

This clearly demonstrates the sentimentality and morose tones of many of the songs and poems that were written in the wake of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Furthermore, for the most part, such tributes to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* fall far short of the mark. Many are artistically deficient, with authors of the poems and songs basically looking to prosper from Stowe's monumental success.

Uncle Tom's Cabin merchandise was also distributed almost everywhere. The book itself was printed in numerous forms for different audiences. For instance, according to Stephen Hirsch, the publisher Jewett published a "lavish, gorgeously bound, profusely illustrated Christmas gift edition at the overwhelming price of five dollars" (Hirsch 316). This edition followed several other printings, including the original three-dollar printing and a later "thirty-seven-and-a-half cent paperbound 'edition for the millions'" (Hirsch 316). Jewett also printed an edition for children titled *Pictures and Stories from Uncle Tom's Cabin*—severely expurgated, of course. Clothing trends even imitated the fashions in the book, including "St. Clare hats," "Uncle Tom Tippetts," and Eliza dresses (Hirsch 316-318). Figurines, collectible dishware, paintings, scarves, card games and other toys, and the like were also among the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* merchandise sold (Hirsch 316, 318-319, 322). *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was clearly a hit—and the sales of such products proved it.

However, the most significant reaction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been through theatrical productions. Such theatricals have been long-lasting and have shaped American culture considerably; for instance, George Aiken's dramatization of the novel may have been the most influential and successful of the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* theatricals. In fact, Hirsch maintains that when the Troy *Daily Times* of New York State predicted that Aiken would succeed, "the *Times* had made the biggest understatement in American theater history" (Hirsch 321). It was so successful that, by the time Aiken completed his dramatization of the novel's second volume, the

resulting drama played “a total of one hundred performances, a record unbroken in Troy to this day” (Hirsch 323).

Furthermore, when Aiken’s play traveled to New York City, other playwrights caught onto the fact that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was a fantastic moneymaker, and several plays about the novel soon traveled throughout the United States to Europe within three years, further contributing to the massive popularity of Stowe’s novel (Hirsch 325). In fact, such theatrical influences can be seen even today, as in the Rodgers & Hammerstein production of *The King and I*, in which a Siamese rendition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—“The Small House of Uncle Thomas”—is portrayed.

Although the most fantastic theatrical performances seem to have come from the pro-Tom side, the South also produced proslavery works to try to counteract the monumental effect of the antislavery productions. For instance, pro-slavery/anti-Tom theatricals include Joseph M. Fields’ *Uncle Tom’s Cabin: or, Life at the South as it Is*, Dr. William T. Leonard’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Louisiana*, George Jamison’s *The Old Plantation; or, Uncle Tom as he Is* Check capitalization, Marco Mingle’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin in England*, and many more (Hirsch 326). Some of these proslavery theatricals did have strong influences, but the majority fell short of their mark.

In truth, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has had a remarkable effect throughout the world; its creation began with events in Stowe’s life that add credibility and relevance to the story, Stowe builds on this foundation with her own interpretations and purposes (such as redefining masculinity and eliminating alcohol abuse in order to abolish slavery), and this combination has resulted in the novel’s enormous popularity and reach throughout the world. The key to her success, however, is that she utilizes traditional formats and presentations to

frame her ideas, thus making her position on slavery acceptable and relatable worldwide.

Stowe's accomplishment is phenomenal, and perhaps it is indeed true that God wrote *Uncle*

Tom's Cabin through this little woman, providing the momentum needed for America to hurtle

into the Civil War and to outlaw slavery.

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