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"*Uncle Tom's Cabin*"

1,219 words

*Uncle Tom's Cabin:*

When Pen Strokes Shaped the World

*Uncle Tom's Cabin:* When Pen Strokes Shaped the World

Ten years before the Civil War, a little woman infused the flames of justice into a fictional story. Inflamed by her society's callousness toward the African-American people, Harriet Beecher Stowe sat at her desk—pen and paper in her power—and wrote the most influential anti-slavery novel in history. As American society indulged in its racial heartlessness, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* set a cold-hearted nation ablaze with renewed compassion.
Of the hundreds of thousands that sold, one such copy landed on the shelves of the Dunham Bible Museum, inviting the world to listen to the whispers of the past and recall the heavy impact of one woman's words on the 19th-century world.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* follows the tale of two central characters, Eliza and Tom, who traverse separate but similar paths on Kentucky's Shelby plantation. The plantation sells two slaves: Tom, a man working there with his wife and three children, and Harry, the son of a woman named Eliza. To avoid separation from her son, Eliza flees the Shelby plantation, endures a dangerous trek across the Ohio River, joins her escapee husband, and finds safety for her family in Canada. On the other side of the story, Uncle Tom is sold and separated from his family. Once purchased by a slaveowner, Tom meets several characters who provide companionship: Eva, her father, and Topsy. Unfortunately, Tom is not freed. An abusive slave owner, Simon Legree, attempts to crush Tom's faith and punish him for protecting two slave women. Simon Legree whips Tom to death, but Tom clings to the everlasting anchor of his faith in Christ. (*Harriet Beecher Stowe Center*).

The first major influence on Stowe's imagination was her years of memory. Stowe grew up with African-American women in her home, who likely became maternal figures after her

mother died in 1816. At a young age, she visited a plantation in Ohio that eventually inspired Shelby's plantation in her book. One of her greatest spurs for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the death of her baby son, Samuel. Such a tragedy softened her heart to the separation of enslaved mothers from their children. Thus, she incorporated the struggles of split families and death into the novel. Stowe's second major spur for writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which demanded that every United States citizen help capture runaway slaves. This enactment from the government enraged Stowe. Eager to reveal the suffering of real people, Stowe gathered the stories of others around the country to include in her novel (*Harriet Beecher Stowe Center*). Once published, the horrific reality of slavery broke the hearts of the American multitude.

After Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe and her masterpiece soared to popularity. Her writings continued to split the nation apart into opposing sides, pouring fuel on the fire that became the Civil War in 1861 (*Harriet Beecher Stowe Center*). Her work awakened the North to the reality of slavery, which removed any excuse for passivity. However, the South reacted with fury and scorned the themes in the novel (*U.S. History*). Nevertheless, as the best-selling book in the nation after the Bible, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold ten thousand copies within a week of its publishment. Soon after, it became "the first American novel ever to sell over a million copies" (Tompkins 124). Throughout the war, the book was made into a play and performed in theaters numerous times (*Harriet Beecher Stowe Center*). Once her impactful story flooded the nation, her fame eventually struck the White House. Upon meeting Stowe at the White House in 1862, Abraham Lincoln commented, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war" (*U.S. History*). Stowe's evocative and emotionally gripping story had a rippling effect long after the Civil War. In 1893, her book was showcased at the Chicago

World Fair. In 1903, the first film version of the book was created (Kuhl). Today, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be considered "the most important book of" its "century" (Tompkins 124).

By publishing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, Stowe most essentially sought to display the evils of slavery and those who instituted it (*Harriet Beecher Stowe Center*). At the time of the Fugitive Slave Act, Stowe was active in the abolitionist movement. She defied the law and hid a runaway slave named John Andrew Jackson in her home (*Harriet Beecher Stowe Center*). As the political environment became more polarized, the threat of persecution increased for anyone who defied slavery. In the middle of the complex political sphere, "one of the necessary undertakings" for the abolitionists "was to visually represent through the written word the character and suffering of African slaves" (Evans 502). As "antislavery and abolitionist material" burst from the press, the South gave a "violent response" by "burnings" and "prohibited speech" (502). However, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a unique contribution to the abolitionist movement in that it was fiction. Unlike much of the political propaganda, which often provoked the backfire effect, Stowe's story contained a new power to soften and inflame hearts toward sympathy and compassion.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's work changed the political scope of the nation through the individual heart. Stowe understood that "reality…cannot be changed by manipulating the physical environment," but only through "conversion in the spirit" (133). Fiction re-awakens the soul to truth by asking the reader to gaze through a different lens. Stowe's clear "aim is to create sympathy for slaves so that readers might identify with their sufferings" (Evans 499). Injustice was not struck down by political noise, persuasive speeches, and limitless laws, but by Eliza's passion for her family and Uncle Tom's resolute faith unto death. There is no greater path to empathy than to watch Eliza, despite the "fearful danger" of venturing into the wilderness, press

on in “maternal love” for her son, all the while crying out, “‘Lord, help! Lord, save me!’” (Stowe 54-55). There is no greater call to conviction than to watch little Eva tell enslaved Topsy, “‘Jesus…is just as willing to love you, as me. You can go to heaven…and be an angel forever, just as much as if you were white!’” (290). There is no stronger invitation to love than to see Uncle Tom’s determination to be “strong in God to meet death, rather than betray the helpless,” be whipped to death by Legree, and forgive the oppressor before dying (419). Stowe destroys the arguments of institutions and slaveowners by turning the eyes of the nation toward the deepest, rawest suffering of the dehumanized.

Placing the historical copy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the Dunham Bible Museum calls viewers to reflect on how Scripture was incorporated into a broken world. Stowe paints a picture of the “kingdom of heaven on earth,” which “bears no resemblance to the current order” of her American society steeped in division and human enslavement (141). Instead, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* changed the course of a nation by granting it a vision of “Christian love” (141). As it rests on the shelves of the Dunham Bible Museum, Stowe’s novel continues to invite individuals to combat harsh injustice with the Christlike weapons of empathy, courage, and sacrifice. The novel suggests that one should be proud to be an Uncle Tom, a fictional character who resurrected the world into a new pursuit of righteousness by paying the ultimate sacrifice.

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