

Before the issue of
slavery. harriet
beecher stowe's



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Before the Civil War, national tensions heightened until ultimately leading to violence, largely over the issue of slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe's controversial novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* contributed to the uneasy relationship between the North and the South by exposing the harshness of slavery to the public. The novel was banned in the South, but not before becoming what is regarded as the first American bestseller, its copies amounting only second to the Bible ("Uncle"). Stowe presented slavery in a way that aggravated existing strains between pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces. Despite never having traveled far enough south to witness slavery herself, she gathered information from legal documents, articles, and other materials to allow for the most realistic presentation in her writing. A number of figures, including President Abraham Lincoln, recognized Stowe's novel as a catalyst for war ("Uncle").

With the theme of human rights, Stowe targeted an anticipated audience of white women—particularly mothers. She maneuvered the typical devotion of this group to family and home by emphasizing the destructive effects of slavery on families ("Uncle"). Her writing style and use of rhetoric served as a source of appeal for her novel's varying audiences (Bracher). The themes present in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were meant to be debatable and to spark discussion over the issue of slavery.

More specifically, they asked the prominent question of whether human slavery is right or wrong. Stowe provides multiple varying perspectives on this from different characters in her novel, making her novel more realistic, as real people during the time period often did not have black and white opinions over the issue of slavery ("Uncle"). Religion also played a primary

role in the appeal of the novel. Stowe shows black characters seeking religious salvation just as most whites do. Uncle Tom, as a religious man, is secure in the belief of heaven when he tells his owner ““ Ye may whip me, starve me, burn me,- it’s only send me sooner to where I want to go,” (Beecher Stowe 375). Some of the novel’s controversy was triggered by the incorporation of religious feeling and furthermore, the portrayal of pious slaves and irreverent owners (“ Uncle”).

A character’s relation to Christianity is part of their definition as a person most of the time, though this is not applicable to all characters. Some characters are virtuous in spite of their faith, while most are virtuous because of it. Ties to religion, while receiving a share of disapproval among the novel’s Christian audience, helped readers further relate to black characters, who, at the time, were seen as inhuman creatures, incapable of feeling the same emotions as whites (Ammons). The humanization of slaves played a prominent role in emotional as well as political appeal in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Contrasting with southerners who called Stowe’s writing unladylike, Donovan describes Uncle Tom’s Cabin as “ a work of movement; its organizing design is dialectical; its pattern a powerful process of transformations” (30). Donovan believes a quilt analogy, for example, does not adequately represent the careful organization and use of rhetoric to increase influence on potential readers. Stowe’s choice of style and diction, specifically, was referred to as unpolished and made the novel more accessible for the common reader and more open to its purpose: persuasion (Donovan).

Additionally, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* experiences occasional shifts to second person, which are not without reason. The author's intrusive commentary bridges the fictional world with that of the reader and allows for the audience to engage and relate more (Harvard). Heavily opinionated remarks accompanying harsh truths, such as the clear questioning of the meaning of liberty, may be seen as condescending, but Stowe acknowledges that " Facts too shocking to be contemplated occasionally force their way to the public ear" (Beecher Stowe 434).

People of this time period were truly unaware of slave practices and the brutality of them, so she aimed to bring that to the public eye, even if some of the information was indeed almost too hard to swallow. New knowledge birthed outrage in the North. However, logic played a minimal part in the evocation of sympathy (Bracher). Stowe's use of rhetoric took a large role in the promotion of sympathy, and therefore, further action for change.

Cognitive science states that sympathy encourages people to act for change more than reasoning and logic (Bracher). Warren praises *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Harriet Beecher Stowe as genius, majorly due to the powerful emotions the novel conveys and evokes. The emotions are especially emphasized through presentation of slaves as humans rather than creatures lacking sentiment. This helped make her bestselling not distinct and noticeable, as it placed readers in the shoes of slaves, as opposed to simply speaking about them.

According to Bracher, this is the key to social justice. As part of the appeal towards her audience of white women, Stowe emphasizes family ties among slaves. As she and other women of this time period have, Stowe lost her own

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child at one point; her personal relation to the subject led her to believe her audience would also resonate with the narrative of children separated from their families. Stowe dramatizes the displacement of maternal values to stir emotion in parents and to show the tortures to black women in particular in a society so boastful about its chivalry (Ammons). The separation of families through deaths, or members being sold away, points to the fact that slavery was more than just physical suffering.

Eva, a saintly character who is described as wise beyond her years, told Uncle Tom "... when I saw those poor creatures on the boat, you know, when you came up and I,- some had lost their mothers, and some their husbands, and some mothers cry for their little children... I would die for them, Tom, if I could'" (Beecher Stowe 272). The strong emotional appeal of Eva's statement draws attention to how common the occurrence of separated families truly was. Throughout the novel, Stowe exemplifies the fact that blacks do love and care for their families, contrary to popular belief of the time. Many abolitionists hailed Stowe's novel as excellence. Even President Lincoln recognized Uncle Tom's Cabin as fueling the conflict over slavery.

Frederick Douglass is also included with notable figures who commended the novel ("Uncle"). Overall, it helped strengthen anti-slavery forces in the North and received generally positive feedback there. However, others criticized the novel for idealizing disobedience of the law, which Stowe proved her position on with later works and actions. In addition to this, northerners disliked the novel due to generalizations that were made about the black race. Nonetheless, these responses made up just a few reactions to the

novel, which were altogether quite assured (Moss, Wilson, " Uncle").

Notwithstanding the many positive reactions to Stowe's novel, many southerners wrote countless written responses and pro-slavery literature (" Uncle").

They criticized the way in which they believed each black character was automatically glorified as a human being, while many whites were villainized. Stowe's writing was described as unladylike by opposers (Moss, Wilson, " Uncle"). The pro-slavery South, in fact, went as far as to deem the novel as anti-slavery propaganda and proceeded to ban it in southern states (" Uncle"). Similar to that of anti-slavery, pro-slavery forces actually gained strength as well from the union given to them by opposing this novel and taking a firm stance on slavery (Moss, Wilson, " Life"). Multitudinous amounts of mixed responses contributed to further divides within the nation.

A major source of controversy for the novel was the commentary Stowe included, such as the questioning of freedom and liberty when she writes " What is freedom to a nation, but freedom to the individuals in it? What is freedom to that young man, who sits there, with his arms folded over his broad chest, the tint of African blood in his cheek, its dark fires in his eyes,— what is freedom to George Harris? To your fathers, freedom was the right of a nation to be a nation. To him, it is the right of a man to be a man, and not a brute; the right to call the wife of his bosom his wife, and to protect her from lawless violence; the right to protect and educate his child; the right to have a home of his own, a religion of his own, a character of his own, unsubject to the will of another" (Beecher Stowe 378). Uncle Tom's Cabin is a novel of contemplation and prompted discussion, which Stowe presents

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often. Modern critics, such as Warren, speak of Harriet Beecher Stowe highly and consider the novel to be her best work. President Lincoln commented upon meeting Stowe ““ So this is the little lady who brought the big war” (“ Uncle”). Lincoln himself recognized Stowe, who, through this novel, became a national figure for the case of social change.

Indeed, Stowe played a part in deepening divides between the North and the South. Her most successful novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin proved to be one of great change for the nation, and especially for the issue of slavery.