

Women characters in uncle tom's cabin



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Abstract

An aim of this study is to analyze the white women characters in Uncle Tom's Cabin, and reveal the evil and immorality of slavery at that time. At first, it briefly introduces the historical background of this book and the author. Then it gives the summary and the themes about this novel. It uses the method of contrast and comparison to figure out the similar quality of those women, and the unique feature of them. This paper discusses the characters of four white women in this novel and the relationship between their images and the social background.

Furthermore, this study reveals the power of women's morality and Christianity. This paper may contribute to the study of American history in 19th century about the slavery and the conflict between northern and southern.

Key words: slavery, Uncle Tom's Cabin, white women, morality, Christianity

1. Introduction

1. 1 The historical background of Uncle Tom's Cabin

During the nineteenth century in western country, women were considered inferior and expected to be submissive to men.

Their place at that time was staying at home raising children, running the household and managing the house servants. The creation of Uncle Tom's Cabin was in the background of feminist movement and the enacted of the Fugitive Slave Law. (" The Renewal", 2008).

1. 2 An introduction to the author

The author of this novel is Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was born in America. The Stowes' family was not rich, and therefore, Harriet's life was sometimes conflicted between the necessities of motherhood and writing, or, between vocation and avocation. She eventually bore six children, with whom her writing competed. Stowe chose to write Uncle Tom's Cabin because her sister-in-law urged her to use her skills to aid the cause of abolition. (Amons, 2003)

1. 3 Summary of this novel

Uncle Tom is a slave living in Kentucky. His owner Mr. Shelby has failed in speculation. In order to pay his debt, he sells Tom to a slaver Haley. Along with Tom, Harry (another slave Eliza's son) is also planned to sell to him. Eliza is not a slave who can be shoved around, so she carries Harry escaping to Canada. Finally, this family successfully arrives in Canada. However Tom's destiny is another way, he is sold to New Orleans. During the shipping, Tom saves Eva (the slaveholder St. Clare's daughter) from the river, after that he is bought by St. Clare and becomes a groom in Clare's family. Before St. Clare decides to liberate his slaves, he has been killed. Then Tom is bought by a ruthless slaver Simon Legree, who always maltreats him. When Mr. Shelby's son George comes to redeem Tom, he is about to die. After George buries Tom, he liberates all his slaves and says, " Think of your freedom, every time you see Uncle Tom's cabin."

1. 4 The themes of this novel

The major theme of this novel is the evil and immorality of slavery. Besides, the moral power of women and the redeeming possibilities offered by Christianity are also reflected in this book. Upon meeting Harriet Beecher
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Stowe for the first time, Abraham Lincoln reportedly said, " So this is the little lady who made this big war." Big war here means the Civil War in America in 1851. The novel had a profound effect on the attitudes toward African Americans and slavery in the United States that it is believed to have intensified the conflict leading to the civil war. To some extent, the criticism of slavery in this book stimulates the resistance of those lowly people and evokes the sympathy of those kind Christians.

1. 4. 1 The evil and immorality of slavery

Slavery will always be found, in proportion to the extent and severity with which it prevails, to injure the morals of a people. That it tends to produce haughtiness, a spirit of domination, cruelty, and lewdness, among the whites, appears probable, upon the slightest consideration of the subject, and is abundantly proved by experience (Gellman, 2003). The tragedy of Uncle Tom and the ending of Eliza can both reflect the immorality of slavery. The notion that human can be traded is ingrained in people's mind. From the atrocity of Simon Legree and other slave owners, we can feel the pain of those slaves.

1. 4. 2 Moral power of women and the impact of Christianity

Another major theme of Uncle Tom's Cabin is the moral power and sanctity of women. In this novel Mrs. Stowe describes many kindhearted white women. For example, after Mrs. Shelby knows that Eliza has escaped, she says, " The Lord be thanked! I trust she is."(48). It is evidently that she is so happy that Eliza could no longer suffer the pain of being a slave.

2. Analysis of Emily Shelby's Image

2.1 Her kindness to slaves

The first woman is Emily Shelby, the hostess of the manor. She was a woman of high class, both intellectually and morally. To that natural magnanimity and generosity of mind which one often marks as characteristic of the women of Kentucky. Although Mr. Shelby does not be religious, he is respect of her belief. Despite Emily's position at home is lower than her husband, she often shows a lofty conscience. She treats her slaves very well and regards them as her family (Christine,). When her husband sells Tom, she feels shamed for him. And when she hears that Eliza escapes to Canada she feels released. From her mind we can see that she is a kind hearted woman, and her life is full of love. She tries to shape the morals and values of her husband.

2.2 Her obedience in front of her husband

The fact she failed in protecting her slaves from being sold was not due to any weakness on her part, but was a sign of her husband's incompetence in managing his estate (Canieni, 2010). When she told her husband about her willingness of helping him with the financial affair, Mr. Shelby accused her of not knowing anything of business, and he said: " O, ridiculous, Emily! You are the finest woman in Kentucky; but still you haven't sense to know that you don't understand business;—women never do, and never can."(UTC, 169).

Because of the inferior status at home, she never argued with her husband. What is more, when she wanted to earn money by teaching music lessons, her husband accused her of degrading herself. Mr, Shelby, to some extent, had the prejudice against women. Whereas, Mrs. Shelby was always

obedient to her husband, and in rare cases would she persuade and fight for her rights. Although Mrs. Shelby failed to influence her husband, she succeeded at last by influencing her son.

3. Analysis of Mrs. Bird's virtuousness and bravery

Mrs. Bird was another example of virtuous woman. She is gentle and cultivated, and also a devout Christian the same as Mrs. Emily. What impresses reader most is the fierce argument with her husband about whether they should help the slaves. When she knows her husband votes for the Fugitive Slave Act she says: " You ought to be shamed John! Poor homeless houseless creatures! It's a shameful, wicked, abominable law, and I'll break it, for one, the first time I get chance." (UTC, p. 96) She felt very sympathetic for the slaves, and thought they should not suffer thus pains. When her husband vote the law which forbids giving aid to fugitive slaves, she says, she would never turn away from her door a poor, fleeing slave, and she told to her husband that he would either. It sounds more like an order.

From this kind of behaviour, we can fully feel about her protest of those laws which prejudice against slaves, also the bravery to argue with her husband and express her own idea. Mrs. Bird was as good as her words. She had successfully persuaded her husband to save the poor Eliza and her son, and finally Mr. Bird made plans to transport the fugitive to a remote place seven mile up creek. Mrs. Bird's influential over in the anti-slavery movement was great (Canieni, 2010). To a great extent, the love and commiserative feeling is because of her strong belief in Christianity. Compared with Mrs. Shelby, Mrs. Bird is slightly better than her as she has the courage to debate with her husband and finally evokes his conscience.

4. Analysis of Miss Ophelia's prejudice on black slaves

Miss Ophelia is totally different from the two women mentioned above. She is St. Clare's cousin from the north who comes to help him manage the household. She is a stouthearted and straightforward northern woman. At first, she found slaves somewhat distasteful and harbors considerable prejudice against them. That is why she felt uncomfortable when St. Clare pulled along a negro girl and asked her to educate the black slave he asked whether she could refuse to teach this black slave, however St. Clare declared again and again: I bought her here for you to educate. Then Miss Ophelia began to teach Topsy but without conveying the spirit of it. Without love, the words are simply meaningless. Because Ophelia has seldom spent time in the presence of slaves, she finds they are very weird.

Once St. Clare asked her to teach a black girl, she begins to have increased contact with slaves. At first, she merely regarded this as a part of her duty. But Stowe suggests that duty alone will not eliminate slavery, abolitionists must act out of love. Actually, she has a strong feeling of moral obligation, and dare to confess the evil of slavery. After educating Topsy, she realized her prejudice on slaves and even could not bear Topsy to touch her. But Eva's death impacted her a lot and then evoked the moral sense of her. Despite the fact that used to have a subconscious contempt about those black slaves, she is finally aware of the responsibility on her.

5. Analysis of Marie St. Clare's Characteristics

5.1 A victim under patriarchy

Marie, wife of Augustine St. Clare and mother of the angelic Eva, is a selfish, vain and hard-hearted woman. She is totally a negative image but also the

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victim of patriarchy. Patriarchy means the rights of male heads of family to control property and family members. Although Marie did not agree the way her husband manages the servants, she had no right to prevent him from doing this. Her perception about slavery is contrary to the tendency of history, however it is exactly the bigotry of slaveholding.

She stayed at home all the time which could not let her to know some advance knowledge, let alone to think independently. Therefore, she began to become more ignorant and superficial. Despite the fact that this woman is somewhat disgusting, it should mainly blame on patriarchy. St. Clare could guarantee the material life of her, but often ignored the spirit life of Marie. So, she could not dispatch her anguish and loneliness and finally became icy and empty

5. 2 Her attitudes towards people around her

Marie is completely incapable of human sympathy, especially toward black slaves. When Augustine dies, Marie shows her utter indifference toward the fate of her slaves. She sells them all at the public auction block, despite the fact that it was her daughter's dying wish and her husband's intention to free Tom. When Ophelia tries to remind Marie of these obligations, she has a convenient fit of illness (Unknown, 2009). Besides, she injected little care and love into her daughter. She barely notices her daughter's fatal illness. She's also reluctant to think hard about anything if it might cause her the slightest inconvenience to do so.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, some white women in the mid-nineteenth century are deeply affected by the Christianity. So they often show the sympathy and love to those miserable things or people. From this research, we can find that some white women at that time have already sprouted the consciousness of equality of men and women, therefore they are to ask their husband to allow them to help with the plantation finance. Because of their cognition, they not only influenced the people around them but the world by their kindness. In this novel those white women play a vital role in shaping their child's and husband's personality, values and beliefs. In Uncle Tom's Cabin, mothers are the agents of power. It is worth pointing out that the analysis of the white women in this novel is meaningful for the consummation of s humanism and motherly love and the moral values.

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