

# An era of inhumanity essay



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Writers differ in the purpose for which they write. Some aim to entertain, but the more serious and skilled writers usually have the goal of expressing a serious idea. Writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Alex Haley are writers who write for more than mere entertainment. Uncle Tom's Cabin, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, had a political purpose. Stowe intended to help America realize the inhumanity of slavery and the pain it brought upon African-Americans by writing a melodramatic novel. She despised the South for practicing slavery and the North as well for their prejudice against blacks. Roots was written by Alex Haley in search of his origin. His hunger for knowledge of who he was and who his ancestors were inspired him to carry out numerous years of research and countless interviews in order to finish his book. Although Alex Haley wrote Roots in search of his origin and Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin for a political purpose, both authors lead readers to sympathize with the predicaments of African-Americans by putting a human face, as well as a racial one on the tragedy of slavery, thus involving all readers in the inhumanity of the institution.

In Uncle Tom's Cabin we are cordially introduced to Uncle Tom. He is a "large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man, of a full glossy black, and a face whose truly African feature are characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindness and benevolence"(Stowe 24). By her description of Tom, Stowe contradicts the common stereotype that blacks are savages and inhumane by giving Uncle Tom the characteristics of an ideal, honest man. He is described as being "kind" and "benevolent" as well as having an "expression of good sense". Stowe also portrays Uncle Tom as a perfect being. It seems as if his personality is

without a flaw and seems too good to be true. By giving Uncle Tom this flawless characteristic, Stowe is able to show that he too is human although his difference in skin color. As one is introduced to the setting of Uncle Tom's cabin, one feels at home and very relaxed. Aunt Chloe's cooking of various tasty dishes adds to the serene environment of the cabin and as we see Uncle Tom learning how to read and write from his young "Mas'r George," it seems as though there are no worries, hardships are unknown, and an utopia exists within the walls of the cabin. Stowe creates this peaceful scene in order to intensify the reader's disgust when tragedy strikes. It seems as if all is well and nothing can go wrong in Uncle Tom's life. Stowe also momentarily hides the heinousness of slavery by creating this carefree setting in Uncle Tom's cabin. Dramatic irony occurs as Uncle Tom has no clue of the tragedy that lies ahead while the reader senses a disruptive change close by (Stowe 25).

Around the world one is greeted with the good news of a manchild being born to Omoro and Binta Kinte in a village called Juffure which is located north of the coast of the Gambia, West Africa (Haley 1). His name is Kunta Kinte and with the progress of time, we learn that he is bright, tenacious, bold, confident, and honest. Haley, like Stowe, portrays Kunta in a positive manner in order for the reader to realize that African-Americans had a long line of history before they were kidnapped into slavery. They too had forefathers who accomplished great achievements and benefited the next generation in many different ways. They were not savages or inhumane in their homeland but instead, educated and civilized as well. Kunta shows great respect and admiration for his father and dreams of becoming just like

Omororo when he becomes a man. Life in Juffure is very peaceful. The young, naked children play throughout the day by having wrestling matches and eagerly listening to the moral stories told by the village grandmothers, who loved the children as if they were their own. Older children attend school and learn the history of their forefathers as well as verses from the Koran. After classes are over, they tend the goats, which they do with extreme alertness for they are fully responsible for their fathers' goats. The women in Juffure pass the day by cooking breakfast, working in the rice fields during the day, and finally cooking dinner for their husbands and children. Although they are very busy all the time, they manage to find the time to relax by the town well and gossip amongst themselves. Finally, the men set off for their day's work of preparing the land for farming of the primary crops. After dinner they gather around the village bonfire along with Juffure's Council of Elders and discuss the many problems that occurred within the village. Unlike Stowe, Haley does not intend to intensify the mood of the reader when tragedy strikes. Instead, he is merely portraying the life of Kunta in an African village of the 1700s. By depicting Juffure, he is able to show that the Africans indeed had their own way of life in Africa. They were not savages that whites thought them to be as but rather civilized human beings with system and order established in their villages as well as a very humane family structure. In fact, Haley shows that these people showed great respect to their elders and to their ancestors with strongly established morals. He also introduces the reader to a different culture in a different time period so that he may compare it with their own ways of life. Furthermore, the reader gains knowledge of Haley's ancestors and their unique culture thus partially understanding the origin of African-Americans in our society today.

Unfortunately, back around the world Uncle Tom's cabin's transient utopia is shattered as we learn of the unfortunate fate of Uncle Tom. Although he is Mr. Shelby's best hand, he is to be sold to a slave trader because of the debt that Mr. Shelby has accumulated. He will be sold "down south" to work on a plantation and sadly end his life from exhaustion and emaciation. As he exchanges his last good-byes and leaves his home and family not knowing if he will ever return, one is amazed at his willingness to obey his master and not let him down no matter what the consequences may be. He is a man of sacrifice who is willing to give up everything important in his life to satisfy his master and save him from debt. His honesty and submissive attitude touches one's heart and also adds to the effect to the melancholic mood at the same time. Yet, this scene seems unrealistic. One is amazed at Uncle Tom's willingness not to disappoint his master and sacrifice his own life and everything he has. Once again his attitude toward this predicament seems too good to be true and absolutely heartbreaking to the reader. One begins to question how Uncle Tom can be so pious and honest in such a world he lives in. It is over-dramatized by Stowe in order to lead the southern plantation owners to feel the grief of their slaves. One begins to wonder if there is any justice in the world. What has Uncle Tom done to deserve this anguish? He has done absolutely nothing but helplessly becomes a victim of the inhumane institution of slavery.

Tragedy also strikes in Juffure. In the midst of Kunta's peaceful life, he is captured by white slave traders at the age of sixteen and thus his life is forever destroyed just as he is entering the first stage of manhood. During his journey to America, he suffers from diseases, filth, brutality, heat

exhaustion, and hunger. “ Kunta wondered if he had gone mad. Naked, chained, shackled, he awoke on his back between two other men in a pitch darkness full of steamy heat and sickening stink and nightmarish bedlam of shrieking, praying, and vomiting”(Haley 150). Furthermore, the men were chained to each other in very confined spaces, allowing no movement at all. They had no choice but to relieve their bowels where they lay and remain shackled surrounded by their own filth. This unsanitary environment enabled diseases, lice, and fleas to spread like wildfire within the hold.

The stinging bites, then the itching of the body lice, steadily grew worse. In the filth, the lice as well as the fleas had multiplied by the thousands until they swarmed all over the hold. They were worst wherever the body crevices held any hair. Kunta’s armpits and around his foto, felt as if they were on fire, and his free hand scratched steadily wherever his shackled hand couldn’t reach. (Haley 159)

Finally, the constant rubbing of their backs against the rough wooden boards gradually wear the skin and muscles of Kunta and the other unfortunate souls so that the bone is visible.

Kunta’s screams were joined by others’ as each movement up and down, or from side to side, sent the chained men’s naked shoulder, elbows, and buttocks already festered and bleeding grinding down even harder against the rough boards beneath them, grating away still more of the soft, infected skin until the muscles underneath began rubbing against the boards. (Haley 179)

In the hold where these men lie, there is constant moaning and screaming from the physical anguish as well as mental anguish. Haley portrays the

inhumane journey from Africa to America so that the reader may realize that African-Americans suffered great difficulties during their reluctant voyage. They were not brought here in a peaceful manner but rather experienced great physical as well as emotional pain. He also reminds the reader that their lives were disrupted by slavery. They lost their homes and family, they lost their ways of life, and most importantly they forgot who they were and where they came from due to the change in culture in America. Haley creates this very clear picture of the physical and emotional destruction for readers who have never imagined it. Even after the long, tortuous journey across the ocean, Kunta continues to face many difficulties. He has no way of communication with other blacks, his African future and ways are shunned, and most importantly, he feels as if these blacks are of another race. He is unable to understand their ways and their culture, just as they are not able to understand his ways and his culture. He feels that they are pagans and are a disgrace to the black race. Unlike him, they eat the meat of swine and smoke tobacco which is absolutely forbidden in his African village. Although Haley also depicts the wickedness of slavery and the destruction it causes on the individual, he does so in a much more realistic fashion than Stowe. The tortuous journey is accurate and can be backed up with evidence. Furthermore, while reading through these passages that describes the voyage, the reader can feel the physical, as well as mental anguish of these men and can also hear the screams and moans in their minds. The reader sympathizes with these unfortunate souls in this horrid scene and begins to understand what they have been through. They begin to realize that these people are humans as well and can feel just as any other person of any skin color.

Stowe also focuses on the slave's hunger for freedom. By creating a story of a family's struggle for freedom with much difficulties and dangers, she is able to depict the determinations of those who escaped from slavery. Throughout the entire novel, Uncle Tom never struggles for his freedom. However, we are introduced to Eliza, Harry, and George; a family whose only wish is to become free together. When Eliza eavesdrops on her master and learns that her little boy Harry is to be sold along with Uncle Tom, she decides to run away to Canada. She is aware of the consequences of being caught and the dangers that lie ahead, but she is willing to risk everything in order to remain with her only son. With the help of Quakers and abolitionists, she is able to reunite with her husband and successfully escape to Canada where they become free human beings for the first time in their lives. Once again, the reader is mystified as he or she pictures Eliza jumping across the icy river with Harry in her arms. It seems extremely unrealistic and makes one wonder if there had been a divine intervention or supernatural force involved. By creating such a fictional scene, Stowe is able to aid the reader realize how desperate Eliza is to obtain freedom; an inborn right given to all human beings.

Haley also focuses on the slave's determination for freedom by portraying several of Kunta's escapes. Although Kunta is never successful, he never gives up his hope of returning to his village and reuniting with his family. He always looks around his surroundings with keenness in order to learn the landscapes and the different ways of the people in this new country so that he will have a better chance of escaping and regaining his freedom. Although



his moments of freedom are transitory, he is unable to contain the joy of being free once again.

Springing up, fearing above all another barking dog, Kunta slipped away like a shadow from the fallen driver and the overturned flame. He ran bent low, legs crashing through frosted stalks of cotton. His muscles, so long unused, screamed with pain, but the cold, rushing air felt good upon his skin, and he had to stop himself from whooping out loud with the pleasure of feeling so wildly free. (Haley 207)

One may take freedom for granted but as one sees Kunta's joy of being free so intense, one begins to understand that for the slaves, it was their only wish. Unlike us, they had to earn their freedom by buying themselves free or escaping from the chains of slavery despite the many dangers and unthinkable consequences. Unfortunately, Kunta's dream of regaining freedom and seeing his family is shattered when he is caught by slave trackers who cut off the front portion of his right foot. The flame of freedom, which he has so desperately kept alive, burns out as he reluctantly realizes that he will never again be a free man while he remains in a place called America.

One pushed the trunk under Kunta's right foot as the other tied the foot to the trunk so tightly that all of Kunta's raging couldn't free it. The bleeding slave tracker picked up the ax. Kunta was screaming and thrashing as the ax flashed up, then down so fast severing skin, tendons, muscles, bone that Kunta heard the ax thud into the trunk as the shock of it sent the agony deep into his brain. As the explosion of pain bolted through him, Kunta's upper

body spasmed forward and his hands went flailing downward as if to save the front half of his foot, which was falling forward, as bright red blood jetted from the stump as he plunged into blackness. (Haley 244)

During this turning point, the reader is deeply saddened and begins to feel the disappointment of Kunta. His only wish of being a free individual is destroyed and he is to remain a slave for the rest of his life in a distant land. Although Kunta's effort to regain freedom may be fictional, it is much more realistic than that of Eliza. He is not able to escape miraculously like Eliza, but instead is caught repeatedly. His numerous efforts show his determination and tenacity, which he has obtained from his experiences back in Africa. However, similarly to Stowe, Haley is able to help the reader sympathize with Kunta's unfortunate fate.

In his commentary Edmund Wilson states the following.

We may even be surprised to discover that the novel is by no means an indictment drawn up by New England against the South. Mrs. Stowe has, on the contrary, been careful to contrive her story in such a way that the Southern states and New England shall be shown as involved to an equal degree in kidnapping into slavery of the Negroes and the subsequent maltreatment of them, and that the emphasis shall all be laid on the impracticability of slavery as a permanent institution. The author, if anything, leans over backwards in trying to make it plain that the New Englanders are as much to blame as the South and to exhibit the Southerners in a favorable light." (Wilson 564)

Wilson implies that Stowe did not write against the South but instead wrote against both the North and the South. She wrote against the South by portraying the predicaments of African-Americans and by introducing the readers to a notorious slave owner named Simon Legree. She also wrote against the North by introducing us readers to Miss Ophelia. Although her attitude toward blacks gradually changes, at first she displays prejudice toward the slaves. She is surprised by the fact that Little Eva hugs and kisses Mammy the slave housekeeper and also thinks that blacks are too stupid to be educated.

Kenneth S. Lynn wrote in his commentary of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that " Stowe centered her novel on the helpless instability of the Negro's home life"(Lynn 563). One must clearly understand Stowe's intention of trying to help both the North and South realize the pain caused by slavery. By depicting the dramatic scene when Uncle Tom reluctantly shares his last good-byes with his family, she provides a chance for the reader to imagine himself or herself in Uncle Tom's or Aunt Chloe's shoes. Thus the reader might feel the anguish of losing a loved one for someone else's debt and understand how it feels to be property rather than an individual. Lynn also states that " for the most part, the dramatic personae of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* black and white, Northern and Southern are shockingly believable, no matter how factitious and dramatic situations may be in which they are placed"(Lynn 563). Although all of Stowe's characters are fictional, they symbolize the people of America during the era of slavery. For example, in the South there were Simon Legree masters who treated their slaves with brutality and hatred; who treated their dogs better than they did their slaves; and who took advantage

of their female slaves by using them for their own pleasure. Nevertheless, Evils also existed in the South. These were people who did not judge the African-Americans for their skin color but rather for their personalities; people who treated their slaves as human beings and loved them with all their hearts; and people who emancipated their slaves from the morbid grasp of slavery. Finally, in the north there existed Miss Ophelia northerners who despised the South for their practice of slavery but yet held prejudice toward blacks.

Finally, Leslie A. Fiedler writes the following in her commentary of Uncle Tom's Cabin.

How oddly they undercut the scenes of separated families, of baffled mother-love, at which Mrs. Stowe worked so hard feeling perhaps that to her bourgeois readers slavery would stand condemned only if it were proved an offense against the sacred family and the suffering mother. (Fiedler 565)

Like Lynn, Fiedler recognizes Stowe's attempt to help the readers feel the agony of the slaves by creating sorrow within a family something that is common to everyone. When Eliza learns that her only child is to be sold, one transcends beyond racism and begins to feel Eliza's pain as a mother. One then realizes that these poor souls are indeed humans as well and their pains are as heartbreaking as any other person's pain. They are not ignorant savages who can only survive under the white man's command. Instead, they are individuals who deserve the right of freedom like anyone else.

In his commentary of Roots, James Baldwin states the following:

The world of "Roots" begins in Gambia West Africa in 1750 with the birth of one of Haley's ancestors, Kunta Kinte. In the re-creation of this time and place, Haley succeeds beautifully where many have failed. He must have studied and sweated hard to achieve such ease and grace, for he would appear to have been born in his ancestral village and to be personally acquainted with everybody there. (Baldwin 259)

Baldwin clearly understands Haley's intention of finding his true origin in Africa. However, in order to do so, Haley had to carry out numerous years of research both in America and Africa. Haley's extensive research paid off. Just as Baldwin stated, Haley does an excellent job of portraying life in Juffure. It seems as if he was there watching the life of Kunta as he grew up in his native village. Furthermore, it seems as if he actually lived the life of Kunta Kinte and merely wrote his own autobiography. One is truly amazed at how Haley combined his research with his imagination and created such a realistic world that existed more than two hundred years ago.

Like James Baldwin, Arnold Rampersad also realizes Haley's intention for writing *Roots*. In his commentary he states that "Haley's search for his ancestors is not conducted to discover unvarnished truth but rather, from one perspective, to justify the history of blacks in America" (Rampersad 247). African-Americans were torn away from their homeland and families by slave traders and Haley wants everyone to understand this. He wants people to realize how African-Americans got here and also the hardships they have been through. Furthermore, he states that African-Americans were people with a history rather than uncivilized savages who roamed the jungles like wild animals. They too had order in their societies and were civilized in their

own different way. By writing *Roots*, Haley was also able to give an idea to those who are unfortunate of not knowing their origin by helping them understand where they came from and how their ancestors' lifestyles were back in Africa. Just as Rampersad stated, he was not searching for an “unvarnished truth” but instead, he was “justifying the history of blacks in America.”

On the other hand, however, Russell Warren Howe thinks otherwise. In his commentary he states the following:

Yet for all Haley's undeniable achievement and painstaking research, implying a claim to authenticity, the key historical portions are marred by serious factual errors. The Juffure of the 1750s is portrayed almost as it appears today. For instance, the village's main crop is rice, which was not introduced until this century and only became Gambia's staple diet after World War II. Kinte is weaned at 13 months—conceivable now, when every Mauritanian storekeeper in Gambia sells powdered milk and formula, but unthinkable in traditional West Africa before the age of three or later. Adults in the village know their ages in an unlikely situation even today. There are other minor incongruities. (Howe 248)

One can see clearly that Howe does not understand Haley's intentions for writing *Roots*. Howe seems to think Haley was writing a history book and thus picks at the minor historical errors in Haley's book. Although *Roots* might have a few minor flaws in the historical point of view, one must understand that Haley was not writing a history book; he was writing a saga of his own family in order to discover his true origin and let the history of his

people be known to the world. Instead of focusing on the minor historical errors, one should focus on the predicaments of families and individuals as well as the maltreatment that some blacks received from their white masters.

Each book aims at the reader's conscience. Stowe is blatant, Haley more subtle. However, these two authors were inspired by different reasons for writing their books. Stowe intended to criticize the North for permitting slavery to proceed and the South for practicing slavery. Thus she wrote in a general manner and over-dramatized her novel in order for the reader to sympathize with the African-American race. On the other hand, Haley intended to find his origin and thus help other African-Americans realize their origins as well even though it might not be traceable. Thus his purpose was mainly personal and his book fairly realistic. However, both authors lead the reader to understand that these people are just as human as whites or any other race. They are not stupid or ignorant and the fact that they have a different skin color does not make them savages. Most importantly, both Stowe and Haley states the importance of freedom and helps the reader realize how he or she takes it for granted while the slaves merely dreamed about it during the era of slavery.