



The Persuader: What Hath Harriet Beecher Stowe Wrought

ANNETTE GORDON-REED

Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a huge commercial success upon its publication in 1852, selling 300,000 copies in its first year and ultimately being translated into 63 languages. Stowe (1811–1896) was inspired to write the novel by the inclusion of the Fugitive Slave Act in the Compromise of 1850. This law required Northerners to participate in the capture and return of runaway slaves, thereby extending slavery's reach well beyond the fifteen states where it was legal. Abolitionists like Stowe were understandably outraged by this concession to Southern slaveholding interests. Stowe's novel, in its dramatic episodes and unforgettable characters, was expressly designed to arouse the reader's conscience and move Americans to confront that era's central controversy. Sales figures alone testify to the novel's timeliness and appeal.

George Orwell, the great English writer, in a 1945 essay on "good bad books," defined works that fell short in terms of literary excellence and yet retained enduring readability and value. He termed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the "supreme example" of a good bad book as it was "unintentionally ludicrous, full of preposterous melodramatic incidents . . . [yet] also deeply moving and essentially true." The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy held the book in similar regard, including it with Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* as "examples of the highest art, flowing from love of God and man." As you read the following review essay of a recent biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe, consider why writers as accomplished as Orwell and Tolstoy viewed her work so positively and why *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has endured as an American literary classic. The author of this article, Annette Gordon-Reed, is a prominent scholar with dual appointments at Harvard University in the Law School and the History Department. Her 2008 book *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* won the Pulitzer Prize in history and the National Book Award for nonfiction.

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What does it take to persuade—to move people from one position to another, or to get them to care about an issue that has never stirred their interest? How do you get a critical mass of people to believe that a dispute affects their visions of themselves as individuals and the world in which they live? We're often told that American society is polarized as never before, with civility in shreds and partisanship so corrosive that government has become nearly inoperable. But this year marks the sesquicentennial of a moment when politics truly failed and the American government splintered. Between 1861 and 1865, Americans did more than hurl verbal brickbats across the political divide; they fired cannons and rifles, killing one another in astonishing numbers. And they did so, in part, because a large number of Americans had been persuaded that they could not live in a country that countenanced slavery.

Slavery had been a contentious issue in the United States from at least the time of its founding. The soaring words of the Declaration of Independence caused many people to pause over the spectacle of humankind being treated like property in the ostensible land of liberty. The Constitution, ratified in 1788, seemed to settle the issue, with compromises written into its text that protected slavery and made Union possible. Some of the most prominent members of the founding generation believed that slavery was a dying institution. Yet the debate after the Louisiana Purchase, in 1803, and the three-year struggle over the admission of Missouri to the Union as a slave state, between 1819 and 1821, discredited such hopes: not only was slavery growing entrenched but the South intended to extend its dominion by carrying it west.

By the eighteen-thirties, Southerners were offering the country a new vision of slavery, as a positive good ordained by God and sanctioned by Scripture. Naturally, abolitionists in the North believed that the Bible told them the opposite: slavery offended the basic tenets of Christianity. Each claimed moral authority, hoping to win over the vast majority of citizens who were not activists on either side. Nothing would change in either direction without the support of these uncommitted and wavering citizens. They had to be persuaded that slavery, one way or another, had moral implications for everyone who lived on American soil.

This was the country that Harriet Beecher Stowe addressed in 1852 when she published *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life Among the Lowly*, one of the most successful feats of persuasion in American history. Stowe's novel shifted public opinion about slavery so dramatically that it has often been credited with fuelling the war that destroyed the peculiar institution. Nearly every consideration of Stowe mentions what Abraham Lincoln supposedly said when he met the diminutive New Englander: "Is this the little woman who made this great war?" The historian David S. Reynolds, in his passionate *Mightier Than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America*, answers resoundingly in the affirmative. But the most fascinating part of his lively and perceptive cultural history is the account of how she did it.

Stowe, a deeply religious woman, claimed that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came to her "in visions," that she did not so much write it as receive it from God. But even before the novel was written God helped the process along by having her reared in a family that was the perfect incubator for her talent. Stowe, born on June 14, 1811, in Litchfield, Connecticut, was the seventh of the nine children of Lyman and Roxana Beecher. Her brother Henry Ward Beecher was born two years later. Harriet was five years old when her mother died of tuberculosis; Beecher, a prominent New England minister, remarried and had four more children.

Social reform was the Beecher family business. They produced progressive ministers, educators, writers, and a feminist agitator. Lyman Beecher recognized early on that his daughter Harriet was special, proclaiming her "a great genius" when she was just eight years old. Realizing that her talents might go to waste because of her gender, he wrote that he "would give a hundred dollars if she was a boy & Henry a girl—She is as odd—as she is intelligent & studious." Reynolds describes young Henry as "tongue-tied" and "seemingly slow," but Lyman Beecher need not have worried about either child. Stowe went on to become hugely influential in one of the few mediums available to women at the time, writing, and Henry Ward Beecher, the tongue-tied boy, became one of the century's most accomplished and celebrated preachers.

Reading and storytelling captivated Stowe from childhood. She read whatever books were available—even old theological tracts, though she found them somewhat tedious. *The Arabian Nights* provided more thrilling fare, as did Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, a series of stories about the development of Puritan New England. She wrote that they "made me feel the very ground I trod on to be consecrated by some special dealing of God's providence."

This Puritan background was essential to Stowe's personality. It wasn't the anti-sex Puritanism of popular legend that gripped her, it was the levelling tradition that, as Reynolds writes, lent support to "radical independence and rebellion against authority." Puritanism in the North, he notes, helped spur "progressive movements against slavery, intemperance, and other social ills"—which is precisely what proslavery Southerners found so irritating about it. They thought of New Englanders as "law defying Puritans who endorsed all kinds of disruptive 'isms'—most dangerously, abolitionism."

Stowe's early life was as conventional as that of a member of the Beecher family could be. She was educated at female academies, including the Hartford Female Seminary, which her older sister Catharine had founded and ran. Stowe herself started teaching there in 1827, but in 1832, when her father became president of Lane Theological Seminary, in Cincinnati, she went along. It was a fateful decision, personally and professionally. Cincinnati was in the Upper South, close to the culture of slavery, and she began to hear stories that would provide templates for her most influential work. In Cincinnati, too, she met Calvin Stowe, whom Lyman Beecher had recruited to the faculty at Lane. Stowe and his wife,

Eliza, became great friends with the Beechers. Eliza died in 1834, and two years later Calvin and Harriet married.

The couple had seven children, and Harriet wrote stories to supplement her husband's small income, lamenting, "I am but a mere drudge with few ideas beyond babies and housekeeping." When the couple's son Charley died, in 1849, at eighteen months, Stowe began, as Reynolds writes, her "fixation on Jesus Christ as the humble sufferer, the grand symbol of the burdens borne by the lowliest members of society." She explored this theme in a number of short stories and, of course, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, when she portrayed the title character, an enslaved man, as a Christ figure. She said that losing Charley made her understand "what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her."

Stowe's religious fervor, combined with what she learned about slavery, produced her "visions." Visions and spiritualism were accepted parts of life in nineteenth-century America. Calvin Stowe himself spoke about having had visions of "aerial forms that passed through walls" from the time he was a child. At one point, the couple believed that Calvin's first wife, for whom Harriet had great affection, was communicating with them from beyond the grave. (Both welcomed the intrusions.) The first vision that led to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came in February of 1851. While taking Communion, Reynolds writes, Stowe "saw four figures: an old slave being whipped to death by two fellow slaves, who were goaded on by a brutal white man." The man being whipped would become Uncle Tom. The "brutal white man" would become Simon Legree. The novel that resulted appeared in forty-one weekly installments in a Washington-based anti-slavery newspaper from June, 1851, to March, 1852, when it was published as a book in two volumes.

Stowe said of the book that she had a "vocation to preach on paper," just as the men in her family preached in pulpits. It's a crucial point, because the Beecher men, especially Henry, had helped to modernize the art of preaching. They moved away from sermons that followed a strict trajectory and that discussed doctrine in a routine way. Instead, they relied on narrative. Telling stories from the pulpit made the message of the Gospels more accessible to congregations by using drawn-from-life vignettes, a staple of church services today. Stowe, too, understood how influential narrative could be, and with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* she achieved what endless speeches in the halls of Congress, political tracts, harangues, and newspaper articles failed to do: she made the reality of slavery palpable to the American public. As one Southern commentator noted, "Thousands will peruse an interesting story, and thus gradually imbibe the author's views, that would not read ten lines of a mere argumentative volume on the same theme."

What was needed was a story with characters, fully realized, in whom readers would develop a stake. The novel's two plotlines, Northern and Southern, emphasize slavery's national reach. An enslaved woman, Eliza Harris, escapes north with her young son and joins her husband, George. Though out of the South, the Har-

risers must contend with the Fugitive Slave Law, which required Northerners to help return escaped slaves to their masters. Along the way, they meet friend and foe, in scenes meant to show the human capacity for empathy and for evil. The Southern plot centers on Uncle Tom, who, when his owners fall on hard times, is sold "down the river," away from his beloved wife and children. On the trip down, he saves the life of young Eva, prompting her father, Augustine St. Clare, to buy him. Tom and Eva, another of Stowe's Christ figures, become friends. While Eva is dying, St. Clare promises to free Tom but is killed before he can, and Tom falls into the hands of the villainous Simon Legree, with fatal consequences.

Stowe took pains not to demonize all Southerners, or beatify all Northerners. In her view, no one was corrupt by nature; the system of slavery spoiled everything and everyone it touched. But her story was effective because it directly assaulted Southern pretensions. Pro-slavery Southerners had been propagating a narrative of their own: slavery was a benevolent institution in which mentally inferior slaves were watched over by owners who treated them as part of their family. The Romans had had slaves, they argued, and the South was a new Rome. (Never mind the absence of the ancient civilization's great architectural, artistic, engineering, legal, and literary achievements.)

Stowe's novel exploded this myth of the South as a land of paternalistic slaveholders. Her description of Tom's sale down the river to the Deep South was an expression of slavery's core reality. The historian Steven Deyle has estimated that more than a million slaves were shipped from the Upper South to the Lower South between 1790 and 1860. "During this period, slave sales occurred in every southern city and village, and 'coffles' of slaves (gangs held together in chains) could be found on every southern highway, waterway, and railroad," Deyle writes. Without this domestic trade, the institution of slavery would have collapsed. More slaves were sold south than arrived on the North American continent via the infamous Middle Passage. They did not suffer the horrors of a transatlantic ocean voyage packed tight in a ship. But they did suffer the anguish of lost mothers, fathers, children, siblings, husbands, and wives. In what "family," Stowe's book asked, were members treated this way, sold off like cattle by their supposed "kin"?

The sexual mistreatment of enslaved women was a staple of abolitionist literature, and Stowe depicted it with particular force. The modesty of the age, however, allowed slavery's apologists to cast any who raised the subject as tasteless and crude. Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Jefferson's eldest grandson, wrote with bitterness about Stowe in his late-in-life unpublished memoirs, and explicitly sought to equate the entire work with sordid sex:

Mrs. Stowe's Uncle Tom's log cabin is a fool and atrocious Libel upon the slave holders of the Southern States, and was a garbage suited to the appetite of sectional hare. As true as if the description of the morals of New York, had been drawn from the five points or of Boston from its brothels.

Stowe's narrative was persuasive, however, because it fit with what many Americans were able to glean from their travels and knew from their experience of human nature. (What was the likely result of giving males control over the bodies of women who cannot say no to them?) Meanwhile, the Fugitive Slave Law made Northerners—by requiring them to return escaped slaves—an active part of slavery. It was harder to avoid the moral consequences of a system that all Americans were now being asked to allow to spread into the western part of the continent. In effect, Stowe raised with fellow-citizens the question she had asked herself: "This horror, this nightmare abomination! Can it be in my country?" In the decade following the novel's publication, a growing segment of the population decided that it could not, even if it meant going to war.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was the pinnacle of Stowe's literary career, but it was not the end of it. In addition to publishing, in 1853, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, essentially a reply to white Southerners' charge that she had misrepresented the facts of slavery, she wrote Biblical stories, children's books, and travelogues. She died of a stroke in 1896, still a much honored figure. But *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had long since developed a life beyond the novel. Reynolds details the explosion of tie-ins, including "a host of merchandise known as Tomitudes" (everything from biscuit tins and earthenware plates to card games and snuffboxes), and the rise of wildly popular "Tom shows," stage adaptations of the book. Versions of the play which appeared in the eighteen-fifties remained largely true to Stowe's original, and were hugely influential in turning many working-class whites—historically hostile to blacks, with whom they felt in competition as laborers—against slavery. Not surprisingly, however, there were major changes in the plays during and after Reconstruction. Reynolds tells us that during the eighteen-eighties as many as fifty Tom troupes were touring the states, and that by the eighteen-nineties there were as many as five hundred. As the troupes grew in number, they began to display the American tendency toward excess, what Reynolds calls the "'est' factor, a fascination with the biggest, smallest, thinnest, oldest, and most outrageous, which reflected the bumptious confidence of the rapidly expanding nation."

Real bloodhounds, with what Reynolds describes as their "droopy ears and soft expressions," did not provide enough drama for the chase scenes, so fiercer dogs were brought in. Some shows featured alligators and at least one elephant. P. T. Barnum got into the act and, when he merged with J. A. Bailey's circus, added the most bizarre twist: duplicate characters for each role, from Little Eva to Simon Legree. "Everything double but the prices!" one poster declared. That, as it turned out, was not enough for audiences, and some shows soon advertised three or four of each. Then there were productions with boxing matches interspersed: Uncle Tom would step out of character and go three rounds with another actor before returning to the play. The iconic characters Stowe created kept a powerful hold on

the public consciousness, but they also became caricatures, their original proportions distorted.

Reynolds describes, with somewhat less power than in the early chapters, how the novel and its protagonists continued to transfix the public well into the twentieth century. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* influenced revolutionary movements around the globe, even as effective counter-narratives arose. D. W. Griffith, a consummate storyteller, began Hollywood's love affair with the romantic version of the white South in his groundbreaking film *The Birth of a Nation*; *Gone with the Wind* continued the tradition, portraying the South as a gracious land of happy slaves—with no hint of the endemic cruelty of American slavery.

Changing sensibilities about race also took a toll on the novel's prestige. James Baldwin excoriated Stowe in his 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," not least for her depiction of Uncle Tom as a Christ figure, suffering and dying at the hands of Simon Legree. Baldwin objected to the suggestion that blacks be passive in the face of white violence. In the coming decade, of course, black civil-rights leaders would decide to do just that as they sought to destroy Jim Crow in the South, and Baldwin would later write protest novels of his own.

In the past two decades, historians and literary critics have started to look at *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from the perspective of gender, keeping in mind how difficult it has been, and still is, for women's writing to be taken as seriously as men's. Jane Smiley, in a controversial essay, asked why Stowe's novel has been more harshly treated than works written by men which are just as dated and offensive in their treatment of race, notably *Huckleberry Finn*. Reynolds himself takes on those who would minimize Stowe's influence because she was, as they suppose, a cultural rather than a political figure. Politics narrowly defined—who got voted into office, who wrote and voted on the bill, who belonged to this or that political club—leaves out an enormous amount. For one thing, it leaves out half the population, since for most of American history women were excluded from the direct exercise of political power.

That cultural life matters isn't merely an insight from the new social history. Lincoln explained it as well as anyone: "He who molds public sentiment is greater than he who makes statutes." As a woman, Stowe had no hope of making a statute. But, like Lincoln, she understood how change is effected in society, and she used what tools she had, offering a new narrative—she might say a new "vision"—that was explicitly moral and, in that sense, extra-legal: beyond the calculus of power and interest, and firmly in the realm of right and wrong. The novel's overtly religious appeal to the reader, sometimes cringe-inducing portrayal of blacks, and unabashed sentimentality may grate upon modern sensibilities. But Stowe knew things—heard things, saw things—that we, thanks in part to her, will never be forced to confront: American slavery as it was. Arguments will continue about the novel's literary value and about her handling of race. For all that, it's still possible

to see *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for what its author intended it to be: a *cri de coeur*¹ to the American people, one that forced them to ask what kind of country they wanted their nation to be. Fortunately, Stowe's answer to the question was persuasive.

Study Questions

1. Why did President Lincoln supposedly ask Harriet Beecher Stowe if she was "the little woman who made this great war"? What if any truth is there in the suggestion that she helped start the Civil War? What did Stowe's influence reveal about the political power of women in the nineteenth century?
2. How was Puritanism an essential part of Harriet Beecher Stowe's outlook and background? How did her religious perspective shape the contents of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?
3. What was the "reality of slavery" that Stowe's novel conveyed to the American public? What would slaveholders have thought of her portrayal?
4. What makes it possible for a book to change or shape the course of history? Is it more or less likely for this to happen in the current day than it was in the 1850s? Explain fully.
5. For more than a century, American historians have debated the causes of the Civil War and whether or not the conflict was inevitable. Based upon your reading of this piece, where does Annette Gordon-Reed stand on these matters: What was the fundamental cause of the conflict? Was the war at all avoidable?