A Reaction To Uncle Tom’s Cabin Essay, Research Paper

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A Reaction to Harriet Beecher Stowe?s Uncle Tom?s Cabin

?So this is the little lady who made this big war.? Abraham Lincoln?s legendary comment upon meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe demonstrates the significant place her novel, Uncle Tom?s Cabin, holds in American history. Published in book form in 1852, the novel quickly became a national bestseller and stirred up strong emotions in both the North and South. The context in which Uncle Tom?s Cabin was written, therefore, is just as significant as the actual content. Among other things, Stowe?s publication of her novel was stimulated by the increasing tensions among the nation?s citizens and by her fervent belief that slavery was brutally immoral.

While she was still young, Harriet?s family moved from Hartford, Connecticut to Cincinnati, Ohio. At the time, Cincinnati was a battleground for pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces, as well as being a city of religious revivalism, temperance conflicts, and race riots. Her father was a congregationalist minister and her oldest sister, Catherine, was a writer on social reform questions. It is not surprising, therefore, that because of her environment, Harriet became involved in movements emphasizing the moral injustice of slavery.

Probably the most significant influence on Harriet?s writing Uncle Tom?s Cabin, however, was the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1950. Under the law, people who assisted a runaway slave could receive a fine of $1,000 and six months in prison. Naturally, the statute broadened the slavery debate by involving the northern states in the apprehension of runaway slaves. The North, who had previously adopted a ?not-our-problem? attitude toward slavery, now was forced into a direct role in its propagation.

These influences were directly responsible for Stowe?s creation of Uncle Tom?s Cabin and its characters, which in her final chapter are revealed to have been, in one sense or another, factual representations.

The separate instances that compose the narrative are, to a very great extent, authentic, occurring, many of them, either under (my) own observation or that of (my) personal friends. (Myself or my friends) have observed characters the counterpart of almost all that are here introduced; and many of the sayings are word for word as heard myself. (p. 475)

Her motivation for writing the novel, however, was thoroughly rooted in Christian indignation. In Stowe?s preface to the novel she said that ?under the allurements of fiction, (we) breathe a humanizing and subduing influence, favorable to the development of the great principles of Christian brotherhood. (p. 3)? She sought to correct a cruel practice and to bring ?to the knowledge of the world the lowly, the oppressed, and the forgotten. (p. 3)?

The unexpected success of the novel was partially due to innovations in printing, which made possible the mass production and distribution of inexpensive editions. Also at this time was a wave of educational developments, driving the literacy rate upwards into unprecedented numbers. Because of the availability of the novel and the great increase in the reading population, there was no corner of the United States that was not reached by Stowe?s moral voice.

Uncle Tom?s Cabin was written in a rather empathetic tone, forcing the American public to view the black slaves as human beings, at least for the purpose of reading the novel. A southern slave-owner who read the book would be compelled to slip into the lives of his slaves, perhaps unwillingly, and view the institution from the opposing angle. In this respect was Stowe unfailingly successful. She appealed to the maternal emotions of her readers, and characterized the black population with qualities similar to that of innocent children. This characterization, therefore, made for a powerful argument against slavery.

Stowe?s characters were perhaps too dynamic, but this is a literary technique designed to further arouse the emotions of her readers. For the most part, many of the white women in the novel act as (an exaggerated) moral authority, thus compensating for the abominable ?sins? of their husbands, fathers, brothers, etc. Likewise, the characteristics of the slaves were also exaggerated. They were represented as overwhelmingly loyal, clever, and pious, with Stowe therefore creating an implicit tone of victimization. The novel?s tone was rather significant, because although many people did consider the slaves as inferior, they had never before realized that these plantation hands were actually victims. Such was the effect of Stowe?s characterization of the black protagonists versus the white antagonist institution.

Undoubtedly the timing of Uncle Tom?s Cabin further entrenched the nation into a vicious cold war within it?s own borders. For several years the south?s economy slowly had been shifting away from cotton, causing widespread financial instability. Because the south then blamed the north for this unwelcome shift, trade between the north and the expanding west became considerably more lucrative. The increased interdependence between the north and west was also reflected in the ongoing slave debate. The nation previously had been divided into an equal number of both slave and free states, but with the unexpected western expansion the equilibrium became precariously unstable. Both south and north vied to extend their interests, i.e. slavery or no slavery, into the west, with the south becoming increasingly more unsatisfied with the results. The publication of Stowe?s Uncle Tom?s Cabin, therefore, perhaps helped to shift not only the west, but also the nation?s public opinion against the institution of slavery.

Because it was such a turbulent period in American history, it is reasonable to conclude that the very context in which Uncle Tom?s Cabin was written is just as significant as what was written. While the content of the novel produced strong emotions, the context determined how the reading public would react to them. Stowe deliberately manipulated the content to generate a public reaction, and almost 140 years later, Uncle Tom?s Cabin continues to provide this forum to its readers, including myself.

My initial reaction to Uncle Tom?s Cabin purely as a literary piece was a combination of confusion, embarrassment, and perhaps slight boredom. At several points throughout the novel I became somewhat confused at whether the narrator was nonpartisan. It appeared that Stowe sometimes allowed her own voice to penetrate the actual story, which can cause some confusion as to the credibility of the incidents in the novel. Reading Uncle Tom?s Cabin, I also felt somewhat embarrassed. My embarrassment stems from a more psychological root, which causes me to feel somehow responsible for the injuries caused to another race. Although I of course realize that I was born over 100 years after slavery was abolished, to an extent the novel developed within me feelings of personal accountability. I can therefore understand perhaps why Uncle Tom?s Cabin had a similar effect on the American population before the civil war. The novel bored me however, not because the plot was uninteresting, but because Stowe?s writing style was rigidly formal. For example, it was difficult to recognize the several humorous instances in the book until I had re-read the passages several times. By that time, I was too mentally exhausted to appreciate any comical situation. I do realize, though, that her writing technique was perfectly suitable for a 19th century audience.

Throughout the novel, Stowe consciously creates characters that are either exceedingly virtuous or awfully depraved. It is therefore predictable as to whom readers will elect as their favorite and least favorite individuals. Most likely people immediately admire the hero of the novel, Uncle Tom, as well as the angel-like child, Eva. These characters are intended to be paragons of Christian virtue, and are clearly contrasted with the less agreeable characters of Mr. Haley and Simon Legree. While reading the novel, however, I found additional characters that are equally admirable (or nefarious), particularly because they display more realistic human qualities. I personally favored George Shelby, son of Arthur and Emily Shelby, Mr. Wilson, former employer of slave George Harris, and Cassy, slave of Simon Legree. These characters, although they have flaws, still maintain an element of innate decency, and therefore appear as more authentic representations of the southern population.

When George Shelby still a young boy, his father sold Uncle Tom to the slave trader Mr. Haley. Growing up on a southern plantation, George naturally inherited the slave-owning tradition of his culture. When he found the beaten and dying Uncle Tom, however, his perception immediately changed and he vowed to ?do what one man can to drive out this curse of slavery from my land! (p.455)? It was George who buried Uncle Tom, and he then returned home to free all of his own slaves. George was an admirable character because he demonstrated growth and integrity and illustrated that the inveterate rationalization of slave-owning was one that was not immutable.

I also feel that the character of Mr. Wilson is one that contains a degree of inherent goodness, despite the fact that he too is what we would refer to today as ?racist.? Like George Shelby, Mr. Wilson is a product of his environment, and therefore it is not entirely unusual that, with the exception of George Harris, he considers the slaves to be inferior. Stowe redeems Mr. Wilson, however, by illustrating his honest and objective nature. The bright slave George Harris had been hired out by his master to Mr. Wilson?s bagging factory, and ?his adroitness and ingenuity caused him to be considered the first hand in the place. (p.16)? While employed at the factory, George also invents ?a machine for the cleaning of the hemp, (p.16)? much to the delight and amazement of his employer. George?s owner, upon hearing of this unique invention, felt inferior to his slave?s accomplishments and resolved to remove him from the factory. Mr. Wilson attempts to intervene on George?s behalf and unfortunately is unsuccessful. He parts with George rather unwillingly, and ?the kindly manufacturer touched (George) on the arm, and said, in a low tone, ?Give way, George; go with him for the present. We?ll try to help you, yet. (p.17)?? Thus, although Mr. Wilson condones slavery, he immediately seems to recognize its injustice when it directly affects someone for whom he cares.

Another favorite character of mine was Cassy, a middle-aged slave owned by Simon Legree. After Uncle Tom was reprimanded for helping another slave, it is Cassy who cares for his wounds. Although she herself had been calloused by abuse spanning over her entire lifetime, Cassy nonetheless maintains an air of dignity and compassion for her fellow slaves. I also like Cassy because she was quite clever, and she fooled Simon Legree into believing that she had supernatural powers. Her trickery was in addition a catalyst for several humorous scenes in Uncle Tom?s Cabin, as she frequently engaged in ?haunting? the home of her degenerate master. It was obvious that the astute characters of Cassy and Uncle Tom were intended to contrast the intellectual inadequacy of their masters. Although Cassy was yet another example of Stowe?s exaggeration of the slaves? virtuous qualities, regardless I feel that her strength and courage was a reflection of actual plantation slaves, and therefore a more realistic representation.

My least favorite characters, however, were the clear villains of Uncle Tom?s Cabin. Of course, I strongly disliked Mr. Haley and Simon Legree because of their obvious ignorance toward the African population, but I also disliked the characters of Henrique and Mrs. St. Clare.

Very early in Uncle Tom?s Cabin, I think it becomes evident to the reader which characters will manifest into the novel?s antagonists. On the very first page of the novel Mr. Haley was introduced, and he was described as less than a gentleman, ?gaudy,? and ?profane.? Clearly Mr. Haley was not going to be a friendly character. When Simon Legree appears, the contrast between he and Uncle Tom?s previous owners is intensified because Legree?s cruel practices are unlike those ever experienced by Uncle Tom. I also disliked the character of Henrique, the son of Alfred St. Clare. In literature, the characters of children are usually portrayed as models of innocence, but Stowe uses Henrique to demonstrate that even children can be corrupted by the institution of slavery. The pampered child behaves as a prince, and his beating of ?Dodo? is clearly a display of dominance, rather than an actual reprimand.

Uncle Tom?s Cabin had a tremendous impact on those who recognized Stowe?s controversial message. The readers who had been formerly impartial to the abolitionist campaign now had convincing evidence of its validity. The novel also helped to transform the slavery debate from the more political issue of states? rights into a humanitarian cause to free the oppressed. In addition, Stowe?s approach to the subject was far more adapted to the nation?s views of slavery than was abolitionist literature. Abolitionists had received a negative connotation because of their radical dispositions, but Stowe?s novel was entertaining, yet solemn, and did not seek to achieve racial equality. It simply emphasized the injustice of enslavement, and therefore gained a much more attentive audience.

Of course, the southern states were outraged at the novel?s depiction of plantation life, and perhaps rightly so. To southerners, Stowe?s characters were clearly erroneous portrayals, and represented only extreme and unusual circumstances. The northerners, however, having nothing with which to judge the accuracy of such representations, perhaps viewed the southern reaction as a simply defensive measure.

Classic literary works often share certain qualities that elevate them above the average text; one such quality is transcendentalism. Usually, if a novel?s message has significance many years after it was written, it is considered to have transcendental value. In the case of Uncle Tom?s Cabin, however, its value appears limited to the context in which it was created. It would be difficult to comprehend the gravity of the conflict without first understanding the pre-existing friction between the northern and southern states. I do think, however, that current racial issues are indeed reflected in the novel, being that present racial tension is thoroughly rooted in the enslavement of an entire population.

Stowe?s purpose in writing Uncle Tom?s Cabin, ?(to develop) the great principles of Christian brotherhood,(p.3)? was one that clearly aimed to answer contemporary moral questions. I believe that at the time the novel was written it did have moral significance, not only for ?Christians,? but for members of all faiths as well. I also believe, however, that because of considerable humanitarian efforts over the past century, the moral issues presented in the novel no longer have any vital consequence. The morality of Uncle Tom?s Cabin addresses a particular and precarious era, and although slavery does still exist today in equally severe forms, it is under entirely different circumstances, with entirely different characteristics. The novel does, however, have tremendous historical value, if not factual, then at least psychological. Representing the emotional sentiments of northern Americans of the period, Uncle Tom?s Cabin can relate far more about the state of the union than can an accurate historical document. History is created not only by what happened, but also why it happened, and the novel therefore achieves significant historical value in determining the condition of the United States prior to the civil war.

I do not feel necessarily that Uncle Tom?s Cabin has any significant practical value in my own life. Perhaps I now am more aware of landmarks such as the Civil Rights Movement and the development of programs like Affirmative Action. Being more aware, I feel that I can form more educated opinions on racial issues, and consequently counteract, at least personally, any injurious stereotypes. Oddly enough, I think that my reaction is exactly what Stowe intended, so maybe the novel does possess notable transcendental value after all. Although it was written over 140 years ago, apparently Uncle Tom?s Cabin still is able to invoke a personal reflection on the state of fellow men (and women!).

Generally, I would say that reading the novel was a valuable (though time-consuming) experience. I had read it once before, but never really understanding the importance of the context in which it was written. The surrounding events of the period bore heavy consequences on both the creation and reaction to the novel, and I now can appreciate the value of such a ?document? in the scheme of American history. The ?little lady who made the big war,? then, surely did not realize that her novel, Uncle Tom?s Cabin, would heavily reverberate into the dawn of the 21st century.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. Uncle Tom?s Cabin. 1852. Introduction by Darryl Pinckney. New York: Penguin Group, 1998.