

FROM PEN TO SWORD: *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN, ABOLITION, AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR*

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Arguably the most influential novel ever written by an American author, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe provided readers with a dramatic depiction of the inherent cruelty and inhumanity of slavery in the antebellum South. Though critical evaluations of the novel's literary merits have varied greatly, with some literary scholars dismissing it as little more than sentimental abolitionist propaganda, the novel's historical significance remains more clear cut and profound. Stowe's portrayal of the South's peculiar institution intensified the sectional divisions between the North and the South during the 1850s, inspiring more northerners than ever before to embrace the antislavery movement while provoking southerners to become more spirited in their defense of slavery. The powerful emotional response that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* evoked in both the North and the South was a significant factor in bringing about the Civil War and ultimately emancipation.

Born on June 14, 1811, into a prominent New England family of preachers with strong abolitionist sentiments, Harriet Beecher Stowe was inspired to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by her family's outrage over the Compromise of 1850, particularly its new fugitive slave law. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 legally required northern citizens to assist in the capture and return of escaped slaves from the South. Although Stowe had not previously been as active in the antislavery movement as the rest of her family, she did have a talent for writing and had already published a few short stories. She decided to accept her sister-in-law's challenge to "write something that will make this whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is."¹ First published in serial form in an abolitionist newspaper in 1851, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared as a novel the following year. It quickly became the bestseller of the nineteenth century, selling over 300,000 copies in its first year. Within ten years, over 2 million copies of the novel had been sold, and it had been translated into multiple foreign languages.²

Stowe claimed that God's influence guided her writing, infusing the Christian themes of sin, repentance, and salvation into the novel. The story humanizes the slaves, portraying them as good Christians whose family lives were disrupted and even shattered by the institution of slavery. This is particularly true of the title character, Uncle Tom, a kind slave and devout Christian who is sold away from his family in Kentucky. Stowe sharply contrasts Tom's

1. Ann Douglas, "Introduction: The Art of Controversy," in Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986; first published, 1852), 7-8.

2. Douglas, "Introduction," 8-11; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 88-89.



saintly demeanor with the cruelty and bitter hatred demonstrated by sadistic Louisiana slave owner Simon Legree, who eventually becomes Tom's master. The plight of the slaves makes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a tragic story. Over the course of the novel, one slave commits suicide when her child is sold, another kills her baby to prevent the child from having to endure a life of slavery, and a third (Uncle Tom) is whipped to death. By revealing that the story's main villain, Legree, is a transplanted northerner from Vermont, Stowe intended for the novel to be an indictment of the entire nation for the sin of slavery, not just the South.

The influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on both northerners and southerners was profound. In the North, the novel's immense popularity helped to make the abolitionist movement seem less radical and more respectable, changing the attitude of northerners who had previously been indifferent to slavery or suspicious of the abolitionist cause. In addition to the novel itself, Stowe's story spawned plays, reviews, essays, additional works of antislavery literature (both fiction and nonfiction), and even product tie-ins such as artwork and children's toys. The growing antislavery sentiment in the North, a consequence of northern opposition to the new fugitive slave law as well as the emotional reaction to Stowe's story, made possible the rise to political prominence of the antislavery Republican Party as well as the election of a Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, to the presidency in 1860.³

The novel provoked an equally strong response in the South. Although some states made it illegal to sell or own a copy, the novel was widely read by southerners. It inspired an expanding genre of proslavery literature that put a positive spin on slavery and depicted southern slaves as living better lives than northern industrial workers. Stowe's novel also stirred up fears of a possible slave insurrection and resulted in spirited denunciations of Stowe for what many southerners described as distortions and fabrications concerning plantation life and slavery. In an effort to defend her work, Stowe published a volume entitled *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which provided documentary evidence to prove that the novel, though a work of fiction, was based on fact.⁴

In one of his famous debates with Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln acknowledged that "... public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions."⁵ Harriet Beecher Stowe's story about slavery had a profound impact on public sentiment and helped to direct American politics toward emancipation and greater equality. Often referred to in political speeches, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* helped to shape the national debate concerning slavery and emancipation. In the summer of 1862, while considering emancipation,

3. David S. Reynolds, *Mightier Than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 117, 129-130, 132-149. For a comprehensive study of the novel's cultural influence within the United States and overseas, particularly Great Britain, see Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985).

4. Reynolds, *Mightier Than the Sword*, 150-158; McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 90; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, [1968]; first published, 1853).

5. "First Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Ottawa, Illinois," August 21, 1858, in *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Library of America, 1989), 524-525.



Lincoln borrowed a copy of Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* from the Library of Congress. Lord Palmerston, who served as Great Britain's prime minister during the Civil War and ultimately decided not to intervene on behalf of the slaveholding Confederacy, reportedly read the novel three times. Perhaps the greatest statement of the enduring power of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came from Abraham Lincoln, who upon meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe in late 1862 commented, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war."⁶

6. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 89-90.



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