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2019-07-02

# Harriet Beecher Stowe: She's Not What You Think

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## BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Logan, Margaret (Maggie) E., "Harriet Beecher Stowe: She's Not What You Think" (2019). *All Student Publications*. 274.  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub/274>

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## Harriet Beecher Stowe: She's Not What You Think

Harriet Beecher Stowe was an author who revolutionized her time period. She was perceived to be a civil rights warrior who used literature as her weapon. She strove to attain legal rights for all. At the time that Stowe wrote her novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she was covering new ground and using arguments against slavery that many had been too afraid to use or even think of. That novel became the best-selling book in America, apart from the Bible, for the entire nineteenth century. Several other civil rights activists believed like she did, but no one was able to achieve the following that she gathered. When President Abraham Lincoln met her during the Civil War, he said, "So you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this Great War" ("Harriet Beecher Stowe Meets"). Not only was Stowe famous for her literary work on civil rights issues, but she was also notable because she was a famous *woman* pioneering change. The reason this book is said to have started the Civil War is that it shed light onto what was really happening in the South—much of which had been hidden; it changed many uncommitted northerners into fervent abolitionists. Stowe pressed on and, even in her later years, bought a Florida plantation and hired former slaves who had trouble finding work elsewhere in the Jim Crow South.

The common perception has always been that when it comes to matters of race relations, Stowe is as close to perfect as a person can get. Americans' opinion of her are usually very high. She is known for being a canonical figure when it comes to civil rights, a pioneer. When people hear the name "Harriet Beecher Stowe," they usually think positive things. They think about the books she has written and how she helped start the Civil War to free the slaves. Attached to Stowe's name is the idea that she was someone who looked out for the rights and equality of black people.

The evidence in the novel itself, though, paints a very different picture of Harriet Beecher Stowe. She spends the majority of her novel committing racial offenses. Her black characters are written in a degrading and racist manner. In her book, it becomes clear that she does not believe in *full* equality. It also grows apparent that her foremost motive for writing this book was not to end racism or gain equality; it was to stop the owning of another person in order to save white souls. While some may think *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a book advocating for equality, it is actually promoting racism, as well as going against the American desire, expressed in the Declaration of Independence, to achieve equality. She does this in three ways throughout the novel: she portrays black people as weak and childlike; she implores black people to colonize anywhere but in America; and lastly, she portrays white souls as being more important than black souls. It is because of these flaws that, despite its sterling reputation, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* argues directly against the always laudable but always imperfect American goal of equality.

People can do good things without having the proper motivations and desires. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because she was an abolitionist; that being said, just because she was an abolitionist did not mean that she was against racism and oppression, and paradoxes like this apply to other early Americans, as well. One man who accomplished something good without having the proper convictions or desires was one of the nation's most beloved presidents, Thomas Jefferson. He wrote most of the Declaration of Independence, including the very important portion: "All men are created equal [...] with certain unalienable rights and among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Yet, he had a sex slave of his own, Sally Hemings. Furthermore, the North began to fully oppose slavery only after the importation of slaves became illegal in 1807 ("Congress Abolishes"). The North's shipping companies were making more money from the slave trade than most plantation owners, and only

when they were not allowed to make their substantial profits did most of them come to oppose the institution of slavery. All this goes to show that not all righteous acts are indications of righteous people. Furthermore, Harriet Beecher Stowe was an abolitionist primarily because she was very religious. Slavery, in essence, denied that slaves had souls, and this went against the beliefs of many contemporaneous Christians (Singh). Moreover, she believed that owning slaves destroyed the souls of the “masters” and their families. Stowe does her best to put an end to the owning slaves mostly because she believed it destroys the soul of the slaver owner.

In America, slavery started in 1619; it didn't officially end until June 15, 1865; by 1865, 12.5 million slaves had been shipped to America (Gates). It doesn't take a history major to know about the lethal and revolting practices and mistreatment of slaves. Slaves were treated as animals, something that the narrator and many characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* mention. There wasn't even a legal process for slaves to marry. If a couple fell in love or wanted to marry, their “owner” could make them separate, regardless even of whether or not they had children together. Eventually, many slaves tried to escape to free regions of the U.S. In fact, Harriet Beecher Stowe's family had helped slaves escape captivity through what is known as the Underground Railroad (“Harriet Beecher Stowe”). The Underground Railroad was a string of houses and safe places that led escaping slaves toward potential freedom in the North. It was extremely dangerous, and many died in the process of escaping. However, a new law passed in 1850, called the “Fugitive Slave Act,” tried to put an end to the Underground Railroad; Abolitionists nicknamed it the “Bloodhound Law” (“Slavery in America”). Two years after helping fugitive slaves escape through the Underground Railroad had become illegal, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in direct response to the Fugitive Slave Act (“Harriet Beecher Stowe”).

Though Stowe and her family were committed abolitionists, she still promoted racism in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. One way she did this was by portraying the black characters as weak, submissive, and childlike people in her novel. This can be seen most vividly in Uncle Tom and Topsy; however, many of the other slaves in this book also fit this description. For example, when Uncle Tom is told that he is going to be sold from the beloved Shelby farm and Eliza tries to get him to escape with her, he responds with: "No, no—I ain't going... let us think on our mercies" (34). He later tells the sympathetic young master George not to speak ill of his father, who had just sold Tom, or about Haley, the slave trader who had just bought him (86). He never desires to flee like Eliza or any other normal human would. He is also described as being happy and having a domestic heart, unlike "his unhappy race" (80). Stowe even goes as far as to describe the entire black race as "The African, naturally patient, timid and unenterprising" (82). Though Stowe severely criticizes individual white characters, she generally avoids casting aspersions on the whole white race.

Furthermore, when Tom undergoes severe abuse from his third master, Simon Legree, he takes it all with his head bowed down, presenting himself as both extraordinarily docile and lacking in basic human dignity. Just after Legree calls Tom a dog and hits him, Tom says "Mas'r Legree, as ye brought me, I'll be a true and faithful servant to ye. I'll give ye all the work of my hands, all my time, all my strength" (322 ). Again, Legree beats Tom, this time for being happy, and Tom "stood perfectly submissive" (333). Tom also tells all three of his masters, at some point, that he'll remain a slave and not run away (34, 259, 335). Yet another example of Uncle Tom's submissive attitude is when, on the brink of death, he tells Legree: "Mas'r, if you was sick, in trouble or dying, I'd save you" (349). It is this attitude and character of Uncle Tom that is

later incorporated into American English as an insult. Black people who change their attitudes and appearance for the approval of white people are now called “Uncle Toms.”

Topsy is another character who is continually portrayed in a racist manner. She is a black child who is bought for Ophelia to educate. However, she is depicted as an unruly, wild, and uncontrollable child who steals and lies. Augustine St. Clare even describes her as a “funny specimen” and whistles at her the way “a man would to call the attention of a dog” (205). Stowe usually presents St. Clare as kind and open-minded, so the author isn’t condemning the words that come out of his mouth, as she often does with Legree. Topsy also seems unable to be educated—an idea that—according to one scholar—is attributed to all black people during the era of slavery (Singh). Ophelia, who can be seen as a “stand-in” for Stowe herself—the proper New England Calvinist woman who is transplanted to slave country to transform both black and white people—attempts to civilize Topsy. This illustrates the white supremacist attitude of the “white man’s burden,” under which white people felt it was their God-given task to help civilize and educate all “savages” in the ways of Christian life, one of the justifications for instituting slavery in the first place. Topsy is eventually “tamed,” and this change is attributed largely to the determination and strong spirit of Ophelia. This insinuates that black people *need* white people in order to fully transition into society. Because of this, Stowe portrays not only Tom in a racist manner but also the helpless Topsy.

Stowe characterizes African Americans in her preface as “An exotic race, whose ancestors, born beneath the tropic sun, brought with them, and perpetuated to their descendants, a character so essentially unlike the hard and dominant Anglo-Saxon” (1). This passage furthers the idea that while she believes the black race to be human, she does not view them as equals to herself or to other white people. In fact, she describes her race as being “dominant,” which is to

say, superior. Stowe continues to contradict herself throughout the rest of her novel; she says she is arguing for equality, yet she does not seem to believe in equality herself. This is just one aspect of the novel that strongly suggests that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* goes against the American dream of achieving equality.

The only slaves Stowe presents as erudite and intelligent are George and Eliza; more interestingly, she seems to present them this way because each is three-quarters white. In fact, George is able to successfully pass off as a white Spanish man (90). Eliza is also presented as a beautiful woman, simply because of her light skin: "White and handsome" (58). In addition, further dialogue stresses that her appearance and demeanor are better than those of most slaves because she is only one-fourth black. Mr. Shelby says, "[She] has a particular gift of being quadroon" (11). Both George and Eliza either grew up on the Shelby farm, or near it, with the other slaves, yet Uncle Tom, Aunt Chloe, Sam, and all the other slaves talk in a way that makes them seem uneducated. All of the slaves on the Shelby farm should talk relatively the same. However, all of the light-skinned slaves talk in a manner not easily distinguishable from educated white characters, and all of the dark-skinned slaves speak with a dialect that is both historically inaccurate and, in places, comical. This discrepancy may seem reasonable at first, at least in the case of Eliza, who as Mrs. Shelby's maidservant is exposed daily to the elevated speech of educated whites. However, some darker slaves have similar exposure, but their speech does not follow the same pattern as Eliza's. Uncle Tom, for example, is only portrayed as using informal and ill-informed speech, yet he can read fluently as well as practice mathematics, because he is eventually trusted with, and successfully manages, Augustine St. Clare's complicated finances (172). This indicates that he is an educated man. However, his speech, as Stowe presents it, does not reflect that logical pattern. There is no obvious cause for this

discrepancy other than the fact that he has darker skin. This racist stereotype of portraying black people, specifically darker black people, as naturally inferior goes strongly against the argument for equality that Stowe is ostensibly making throughout the novel. Not only does Stowe continually commit this offense throughout her book, but she does so brazenly, which further hints that Stowe does not believe in complete racial equality.

At the end of the novel, George, Eliza, and their baby migrate to Canada and then, eventually, to Liberia. Through this, and in her preface, Stowe makes the argument that black people should return to Africa or live somewhere besides America. In her preface she says,

When an enlightened and Christianized country shall have, on the shores of Africa, laws, language and literature, drawn among us, ay then the scenes of the house of bondage be to the like the remembrance of Egypt to the Israelite, a motive of thankfulness to Him who hath redeemed them. (2)

This quote was problematic even in Stowe's time. It is recorded that Frederick Douglass talked with Stowe about the fact that most black people did not want to move back to Africa. Douglass was an escaped slave and an active abolitionist. He fought for equality and human rights for all until his death in 1895 ("Frederick Douglass"). He said to Stowe, "The truth is, dear madam, we are here, and we are likely to remain. Individuals migrate—nations, never" (qtd. in Levine 82).

Stowe also says at the end of her book, "The providence of God has provided a refuge in Africa" (376). In this aspect, she is again being racist—at least by the twenty-first century standard.

George's speeches about America not being his country are prime examples of how Stowe feels. George says, "My country! Mr. Wilson, you have a country; but what country have I, or anyone like me, born of slave mothers?" (94) and "I don't want anything of your country, except to be let alone till I get to Canada" (96). Black individuals have just as much right to America and its

lands, laws, and protection as any other American. However, Stowe presents the motivations of the slave characters whom she portrays as most admirable, the natural leaders, as wanting to migrate to Canada and Africa. If the leaders return to Africa, it is a short logical leap to assume that their followers will eventually join them. This idea that black people should migrate elsewhere is the third reason why *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is not about equality, and that is why it does not measure up to the standard that America tries to uphold.

One of Stowe's most consistent arguments for ending slavery is that it corrupts the souls of white people. Though the mistreatment of black people is certainly a prominent element of the novel, it is repeatedly eclipsed by the message that the institution of slavery will condemn the souls of the white people who permit it to exist. Her argument is that abolishing slavery is the only way to make sure that the white race remains "on top," both spiritually and physically. She has several white characters, specifically women, advocating for the abolition of slavery. Mrs. Bird and Mrs. Shelby are two women who are against slavery, but with motives other than strictly pure. Upon hearing that her husband has sold Tom and Eliza, Mrs. Shelby says, "This is God's curse on slavery—a bitter, bitter, most accursed thing—a curse to the master...it is a sin to hold a slave" (30). Mrs. Shelby is insinuating that the most grievous wrong in slavery is the curse it brings to white slave owners. It can be said that Mrs. Shelby did love Eliza, but not as an equal and certainly not enough to free her. Another example is when Mrs. Bird says that she doesn't believe any Christian legislature would pass the Fugitive Slave Act (67). She also continues to argue with her husband, Senator Bird, about how it is their Christian duty not to turn away anyone in need. Every time she says slavery is wrong, though, it is only in the context of her wanting to be a good Christian—an argument very similar to that of Stowe herself.

Uncle Tom is a committed and seemingly admirable Christian, but Stowe presents him as certainly doomed and maybe foolish. Eliza expresses Christian principles at the start when she tries to talk George out of running away, but once her child is in danger, she stops using Christian rhetoric, and she becomes a lot more like George. George, who is probably the most admirable black character, comes right out and says that he gave Christianity a try but that he never had the faith. He tells Eliza when she asks him to trust God (before their child is sold),

I ain't a Christian like you, Eliza; my heart's full of bitterness; I can't trust in God. Why does he let things be so? [...] That's easy to say for people that are sitting on their sofas and riding in their carriages; but let 'em be where I am, I guess it would come some harder. I wish I could be good; but my heart burns, and can't be reconciled, anyhow. You couldn't in my place, – you can't now, if I tell you all I've got to say. You don't know the whole yet. (30)

In the end, Stowe sends this family, which no longer preaches Christianity, to Africa, presumably to take up the “heathen” ways of their ancestors. Stowe, the committed Calvinist author, has no problem allowing these characters go to hell (according to her Christian beliefs), as long as their influence is no longer in America.

Perhaps the most obvious way that Stowe shows that she values white souls over black souls is in her depiction of Eva. Despite the fuss she makes about Tom’s martyrdom, Stowe makes an even bigger fuss about the death of Eva, who seems to die for the collective American sin of slavery. This can be seen in a conversation between Uncle Tom and Eva:

“Uncle Tom,” she said, “I can understand why Jesus *wanted* to die for us.”

“Why, Miss Eva?”

“Because I’ve felt so, too.”

“What is it, Miss Eva? I don’t understand.”

“I can’t tell you; but when I saw those poor creatures on the boat...some had lost their mothers, and some their husbands, and some mothers cried for their little children...and a great many other times I’ve felt that I would be glad to die if my dying could stop all this misery.” (259)

She also gives her father a command right before her death that is very similar to the command Jesus gave his followers. Eva says:

I feel sad for our poor people...I wish, papa, they were all free. If anything should happen to you what would become of them? There are very few men like you, papa. When I am dead, papa, then you will think of me, and [persuade people to do right about this] for my sake. I would do it, if I could. (285)

Eva is described as being “beautiful, fair-haired, blue-eyed child, dressed always in white, like an angel” (250). Even though Tom sacrifices himself in the beginning of the novel—remains loyal and Christ-like—he is never described with the reverence accorded to Eva. In fact, Eva is so revered that she becomes the reason Topsy changes for the better. The narrator explains, “Topsy did not become at once a saint; but the life and death of Eva did work a marked change in her. The callous indifference was gone; there was now sensibility, hope, desire, and the striving for good” (290). Tom seems to be the novel’s holiest Christ-like figure, the sacrificial lamb, until Eva appears; she quickly replaces him as being the most holy character in the novel, which furthers Stowe’s idea that white people are, and should be, better than black people. It also shows that Eva’s life, soul, and mission are more important than Tom’s.

Though Tom is consistently presented as a victim, the most moral people in the novel are characters who are most like Stowe herself: northern, white, abolitionist women. These women

include Mrs. Bird, Mrs. Shelby, the Quaker woman in Ohio, and Eva's aunt Ophelia. While Stowe's inspiration may have been to extend empathy to people who are the least like her, what she ends up doing is something close to bragging: presenting people like herself as more ethical than anyone else. This continues to uplift the souls of white people as being superior to those of the black people in the novel.

One ideal that the American people and the culture have claimed to uphold is the idea of equality. This can be seen in the Declaration of Independence, in the National Anthem, in American literature, and in Presidential speeches. However, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* directly goes against this way of belief. Stowe portrays most black people as weak, uneducated, submissive, and in need of white guidance; she portrays white souls as being more important than black souls; and lastly, she believes that black people—especially those who are not weak and in need of guidance—should migrate somewhere else. Because of these three elements, Stowe's book goes directly against its ostensible thesis concerning a desire for equality among all Americans.

While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was revolutionary for the time period in which it was published, it still has many themes of racism and inequality in it that even Frederick Douglass, an avid supporter of Stowe, disagreed with vigorously. Furthermore, despite its reputation, much of the novel impeded racial equality and instilled troubling assumptions about black Americans into the minds of the scores of thousands of Americans who read it. The first of these assumptions, and perhaps most pernicious assumption underlying the novel, is that black Americans are weak, child-like people in need of guidance from charitable white mentors. The second assumption is that black Americans should migrate to where their ancestors came from, regardless of whether or not they were born in the United States. The last assumption is that while black souls are worth saving, they are somehow less valuable than white souls. All three of these assumptions

limited and hindered social progression throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and America is just now beginning to overcome them. This is not to discredit all of who Stowe was as a person but to prove that no one is perfect or without bias. Judging Harriet Beecher Stowe's actions and opinions by the nineteenth century standards, she was a civil rights radical. However, judging her by modern standards, she was not without severe faults on racial matters. While Stowe was advocating for improvement in the lives of slaves and black people, she did not seem to believe in equal rights for all, nor did she believe that black people were fully equal to white people or entitled to a share of "The American Dream." Because of her own faulty thinking that continually seeped into the novel, Stowe should not be looked at as the mother of the civil rights movement that she might have been in the absence of these flaws.

However, it is the responsibility of thinkers to put their ideas out into the world. If those ideas are challenged—even if they are crushed—they are contributing to a conversation that leads humanity in its pursuit of noble and morally upstanding ideals. It is this constant effort to challenge humanity, to change each new generation into a better one that allows society to continue growing and prospering. Society is either progressing or digressing. If authors, philosophers, scientists, etc. spent all of their time questioning whether or not society—or the future generations—would approve of their works, they may never have written or composed them. It is each generation's job to refine the past works and add new ones for the future.

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