

# Uncle Tom's Cabin: When the Pen Becomes Mightier than the Sword

## كوخ العم توم: عندما يصبح القلم أحد من السيف

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### Abstract

Although Historians have listed many contributing factors behind the outbreak of the American Civil War such as the political and the economic differences between the north and the south, humanitarian concerns, and anti slavery movements, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin" has enormously influenced public opinion since its publication in 1852 to become indeed a leading factor to the American Civil War. Through "Uncle Tom's Cabin", Stowe sought to personalize slavery for her readers, mainly the northerners who had little information about the life of a slave as slavery prevailed more in the south than in the north. She wanted to expose the brutalities of the institution; hoping that her readers will erupt against slavery if they understand the beatings, the rapes, the torture, and the division of families that had often occurred. This paper is an attempt to spot light on how a piece of literature succeeded to influence public opinion, raise anti-slavery sentiments, and provoke a wild hatred between the northerners and the southerners.

**Keywords:** Abolitionist movements, American Civil War, Harriet Beecher Stowe, northerners, slavery, southerners, Uncle Tom's Cabin .

### ملخص

على الرغم من أن المؤرخين أدرجوا العديد من العوامل المساهمة وراء اندلاع الحرب الأهلية الأمريكية مثل الاختلافات السياسية والاقتصادية بين الشمال والجنوب ، والمخاوف الإنسانية ، وحركات مكافحة العبودية ، إلا أن رواية هاريت بيتشر ستو «كوخ العم توم» أثرت بشكل كبير على الرأي العام منذ نشرها في عام 1852 لتصبح في الواقع عاملاً رئيسياً في الحرب الأهلية الأمريكية. من خلال «كوخ العم توم» ، سعت ستو إلى إضفاء طابع شخصي على العبودية لقراءها ، خاصة الشماليين الذين لديهم معلومات قليلة عن حياة العبد ، حيث أن العبودية سادت أكثر في الجنوب منها في الشمال. حيث أرادت فضح وحشية المؤسسة بأمل أن يثور قراؤها ضد العبودية إن فهموا الضرب والاغتصاب والتعذيب وتقسيم العائلات التي غالباً ما حدثت. هذا المقال محاولة لإلقاء الضوء على الكيفية التي نجح بها جزء من الأدب للتأثير على الرأي العام، ورفع المشاعر المعادية للعبودية ، وإثارة الكراهية العبودية بين الشماليين والجنوبيين.

**الكلمات الدالة:** حركات إلغاء العبودية، الحرب الأهلية الأمريكية، هاريت بيتشر ستو، الشماليون، العبودية، الجنوبيون، كوخ العم توم.

## 1. Introduction

Called the war between states, the war between brothers, the war of southern secession, the American Civil War lasted from 1861 till 1865; and led to over 618000 casualties. Its causes can be traced back to tensions that formed early in the nation's history. The burning issue that led to the disruption of the union was the debate over the future of slavery. That dispute led to secession, and secession brought about a war in which the Northern and Western states territories fought to preserve the Union, and the South fought to establish Southern independence as a new confederation of states under its own constitution.

Writing was very important to the people who fought against slavery. They used many different kinds of writing. The slave narratives were very popular. One the most influential American works of fiction ever published is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by the American author Harriet Beecher Stowe. The anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *Life among the Lowly* succeeded to sell five thousand copies in its first two days, three hundred thousand copies in a year, and over a million copies in its first sixteen months to break the records as the bestseller title than any other previous fiction work. Soon after its publication, it gained an incredible popularity and was translated into many languages. Straightforwardly put, it represented slavery. Many abolitionist writers used their pens to protest against the cause such as William Lloyd Garrison; however Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel «*Uncle Tom's Cabin*» had the greatest impact, as it profoundly and artistically depicted the miserable, painful, and harsh life of the slave. Straightforwardly put, the novel represented slavery.

## 2. Causes of the Civil War Revisited

Establishing a federal government and writing a new constitution for the country, the states were brought under one union. Still there existed two different ideologies and political parties. Some argued for more power to be given to the states and some argued for more power to be given to the government. This had been known as the States' Rights. This refers to the struggle between the federal government and individual states over political power. In the Civil War

era, this struggle focused heavily on the institution of slavery and whether the federal government had the right to regulate or even abolish slavery within an individual state. The sides of this debate were largely drawn between northern and southern states, thus this widened the growing split within the nation.

### 2.1. Economic Differences

Time went by and the states focused on building their future. The Industrial Revolution flourished in G.B and spread to other countries like the USA. However, when it reached the USA, it was not welcome in the same way by all the states. The Northern and Southern sections of the United States developed along different lines. The South remained a predominantly agrarian economy while the North became more and more industrialized. Different social cultures and political beliefs developed. All of this led to disagreements on issues such as taxes, tariffs and internal improvements as well as states rights versus federal rights. The Northerners were willing to switch over from agriculture to industry, whereas the Southerners refused and preferred to stick to their plantations and slaves.

In fact between the north and the south of the USA there were deep economic, social, and political differences. Those differences led to bloody civil war between the states. Economically speaking, large plantations existed in the south. Landowners depended on slaves to cultivate their plantations of tobacco and cotton. In the north, farms were smaller and there was not a big need of slaves. To tell the truth, the north was ready for industry rather than agriculture. When Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793, cotton became very profitable. This machine was able to reduce the time it took to separate seeds from cotton. This pushed many landowners to swap from other crops to cotton, which needed more slaves to gather and collect the latter.

The southern economy became a one crop economy, dependent on cotton and therefore on slaves. On the other hand, the northern economy became more based on industry than on agriculture. The northerners used to buy raw cotton and turn it into industrialized goods. While the southern economy was based on the plantation system, the northern one was founded on

city life. It was reported that when the Northerners were identified with development, the Northerners were described as backward and antiquated.

Moreover, the Northerners wanted to a high tariff (tax paid on goods coming into or out of a country). The high tariff was meant to protect the northern manufacturers. This was not welcomed by the Southerners as it made the export of their main production i.e. cotton very expensive.

Furthermore, the north wanted a good banking and currency system and internal improvements such as more roads, railways, and canals, sponsored by the federal government. The south, on the other hand, did not want those projects and felt that the government was in favor of the Northerners commercial interests.

## **2.2. Political Differences**

Politically speaking, there existed two ideologies concerning the division of power. The north favored to grant the federal government more power to rule and take decisions, whereas the south wanted to reserve all undefined powers to the individual states. It is true that the states got united under one central federal government; however they still had feeling that the states should have the right to decide if they were willing to accept certain federal acts. This resulted in the idea of nullification i.e. the right of the states to declare federal acts unconstitutional. When the federal government denied the states that right, they started to plan for the secession and becoming free and independent.

## **2.3. The Missouri Compromise**

In 1819, there were eleven slave states. There were also eleven free states. That year, Missouri applied to become a state. They wanted to be a slave state. Immediately there was a problem. If Missouri became a state, there would be more slave states than free states. This meant the South would have control in the Senate. Northern states did not want Missouri to become a state.

A Congressman from New York wanted a new amendment. It would prevent slavery from growing anymore in Missouri. It would also free the children of slaves. The bill passed in the House but it did not

pass in the Senate.

The congressional arguments went on for months. Henry Clay finally came up with a plan. The plan had two parts that would hopefully make everyone happy. When the District of Maine, originally part of Massachusetts, sought statehood, Henry Clay of Kentucky, the speaker of the House, maintained that if Maine were to be admitted, then Missouri should be, too. From this came the notion that states be admitted in pairs, one slave and one free. Senator Jesse B. Thomas of Illinois proposed an amendment allowing slavery below the parallel 36 degrees, 30 minutes in the vast Louisiana Purchase territory, but prohibiting it above that line. That parallel was chosen because it ran approximately along the southern border of Missouri.

## **2.4. Dred Scott Case**

Dred Scott was a slave. He lived with his owner in a free state, and then they moved to Missouri, a slave state. When his owner died, Scott sued for his freedom and won, basing his arguments that he lived in a free state with his owner before. The Missouri Supreme Court overturned the lower court decision keeping Scott a slave. In *Dred Scott Vs Sanford* 1857, the court ruled that “a slave who had escaped to a free state enjoyed no citizenship rights and that the Congress had no authority to ban slavery in the territories.” The Dred Scott court case rose sympathy not only for Scott but all the Slaves.

## **2.5. Abolitionist Movements**

As slavery grew in the South, the number of people who didn't want slavery grew in the North. Abolitionists were people who wanted to end slavery completely in the United States. Some wanted slavery to end slowly. They thought it would end if it wasn't allowed in the new states in the West. Others demanded that slavery end right away. Some of these movements were led by free blacks such as Frederick Douglass and white supporters such as William Lloyd Garrison, founder of the radical newspaper *The Liberator*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, who published the bestselling antislavery novel “*Uncle Tom's Cabin*” (1852). Many abolitionists based their activism on religion “«Fear not, friend George; it is not for

thee, but for God and man, we do it,» said Simeon” (Stowe 101). They believed that holding a slave was a sin. Others were more inclined to the non-religious “free-labor” argument, which held that slaveholding was regressive, inefficient and made little economic sense.

Free blacks and other antislavery northerners began helping fugitive slaves escape from southern masters to reach the North via a network of safe houses. This practice was called the Underground Railroad. The success of the Underground Railroad not only allowed the spread of abolitionist feelings in the North but also convinced pro-slavery southerners of their northern countrymen's intention to defeat the institution and abolish slavery in the whole country. The most famous antislavery groups were The Pennsylvania Abolition Society and American Anti-Slavery Society

#### 2.5.1. Pennsylvania Abolition Society

The society took its first step in 1775; its primary mission was rendering aid to free people of color who had been wrongly enslaved. (*Richard S. Newman, The PAS and American Abolitionism*) The group's abolitionist strategy rested on the twin pillars of petitioning and legal work. For decades, the group's pestering petitions asked state and national governments to protect free blacks, curtail the domestic trade, ban overseas slave trading and strike at slavery in the District of Columbia. PAS pleas prompted the federal government to adopt the first structures on the overseas slave trade (a 1794 law prohibiting Americans from slave trading, under foreign flags) while at the state level they secured laws prohibiting the kidnapping of free blacks (1788).

#### 2.5.2. American Anti-Slavery Society

Founded in Philadelphia in December 1832 by a group of abolitionists including Theodore Weld, Arthur Tappan and Lewis Tappan, the society represented one of the most prominent abolitionist movements in the USA. “*The American Anti-slavery Society hoped to convince both white northerners and southerners of the inhumanity of slavery.*” (*Ohio History Center, American Anti Slavery Society*) Describing slavery as immoral, they asked for its immediate end. “Lecturers were sent across the states to convince people about

the brutality of slavery” (ibid). The aim was to raise sympathy of a large average of people.

#### 2.6. The Election of Abraham Lincoln

In the presidential elections of 1860, the Republicans mainly in the north chose Abraham Lincoln as their candidate. As a reaction the Southerners threatened that the south would secede and break away if Lincoln became a president. They believed that Lincoln was an abolitionist and in favor of the northern interests. Although the Southerners voted against Abraham Lincoln, the latter won the elections. A few weeks later in December 1860, South Carolina seceded from the US. Soon, it was followed by ten more southern states: Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee. These states became free and independent from the Union. They named themselves the Confederate States of America or the Confederacy. They elected Jefferson Davis as a president of the Confederacy. The United States of America became no longer united.

When Lincoln took office on March 4, 1861, he talked and explained to his people that a house divided against itself cannot stand. His primary aim was to reserve the Union and bring the states under control. However the confederate states opened fire and marked the beginning of the American Civil War.

#### 2.7. Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin

A white woman wrote the book that would get the most attention. Her name was Elisabeth Harriet Beecher Stowe. Influenced by the Puritanism of New England which made her education, and family dramas, Stowe became a devoted abolitionist author. Stowe, being white, was thought to be less threatening than an ex-slave. Her writing was a novel. It was called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It depicted the evils of slavery; it offered a vision of slavery that few in the nation had seen before. The book succeeded at its goal, which was to start a wave of anti-slavery sentiment across the nation. The impact of the novel was such profound that the president Abraham Lincoln attributed some responsibilities to Stowe of causing the Civil War. Upon meeting Stowe, Lincoln



remarked, «*So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this Great War.*» (*Portraits of American Women Writers*)

The novel revolved around the character of Uncle Tom, a patient and tolerant black slave around whom the stories of other characters, both slaves and whites, took place. It portrayed the reality of slavery while asserting that Christian and Human kind love could overcome such a destructive institution of the slavery of human beings. It inspired and contributed to the creation of many stereotypes about blacks, many of which persisted even after the abolition of slavery. Indeed, one of the most harmful sides of slavery is its impact on black families and the dissolution it caused. Slaves were considered as properties so (white) owners could sell and buy what suits their needs, regardless the families they broke. This situation can be well illustrated when Eliza told Uncle Tom and aunt Chloe that her son the young Harry was sold; "I'm running away carrying off my child Master sold him!" (Stowe 32).

As illustrations there are the characters of Aunt Chloe Mammy who are hardworking servants, and Uncle Tom, a devoted and enduring servant, faithful to his white master and mistress. Some criticize the novel, however, for being racist because of its sentimental and stereotypical characterizations of slaves. The triumph of the novel is not that it shows the widespread experience of slavery in the South, but rather that it portrays the personal tragedies the system caused. "Uncle Tom" implicitly calls for the abolition of the evil institution of slavery through the demonstration of how slaves suffer.

Stowe wrote "Uncle Tom's Cabin" from a slave perspective to show others how painful the institution of slavery can be. Throughout her novel she portrays the daily life of slaves under the domination of not only cruel masters but also kind ones. Stowe's strength was her ability of deeply relating readers to her characters, making at the same time the concern of slavery a kind of personal matter. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" became the starting point and a kind of motivation for many northerners to initiate actions against slavery, impacting the break out of the Civil War.

### 3. Impact of Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Society

Uncle Tom's Cabin was originally published in the anti-slavery newspaper *National Era*, in weekly installments. In its original form, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" too did not attract much attention outside of anti-slavery circles. This all changed when it was published in 1852. The impact of the novel on the northerners was different from that on the southerners. The content of the book reached millions of people as a novel and a play, and became influential in the United States. It energized anti-slavery forces especially in the Northern side of the country, while provoking wide spread anger in the South.

The adoption of the Fugitive Slave Act<sup>(1)</sup> (1850) and its offensive and invasive nature associated with the publication of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (1852) changed northerners that they could no longer view slavery with a disconnected view. Slavery was no longer a Southern issue that had no impact on the life of those in the north. Northerners then had to choose either to remain passive and conform to the Fugitive Slave Act and its implications or to support the abolitionist cause so as to finish slavery. The public opinion opted for the second option and opposed southerners' practices. Their choice was strengthened by the election of abolitionist Abraham Lincoln as president of the United States.

However in the south, the vast majority of southerners did not approve the book. In some areas of the American South, it was strictly censored and outlawed. In one instance, a free black from Maryland named Samuel Green was sentenced to ten years of imprisonment and hard labor simply for owning a copy of the book (*Ohio State Journal* 3). Proponents of slavery denounced Stowe's work as abolitionist propaganda, an outrageous exaggeration, and a blatant misrepresentation. In response to the book, many Southerners attempted to defend slavery by drawing attention to racism in the North and the oppressive treatment of free blacks. They also insisted that the living conditions of Southern slaves were far better than the misery experienced by working-class blacks and whites in the North. These strategies were used most heavily in anti-Tom novels, a literary genre

focused on defending the institution of slavery and discrediting Stowe and the abolitionist movement. Anti-Tom writers in the Southern United States produced a number of books to rebut Stowe's novel. This so-called Anti-Tom literature generally took a pro-slavery viewpoint, arguing that the issues of slavery as depicted in Stowe's book were exaggerated and incorrect. The two most famous anti-Tom books are "The Sword and the Distaff" by William Gilmore Simms and "The Planter's Northern Bride" by Caroline Lee Hentz, trying to show that black people lacked the ability to function well without being supervised by whites

#### 4. Conclusion

Through its abolitionist message, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was welcomed in the North; whereas it provoked fury in the South. It increased sectional tensions, convincing pro-slavery southerners of their northern brothers' determination to defeat the institution that sustained them. Its impact on the American Society was that strong that no other abolitionist movement could have. The book fueled the abolitionist cause in the North and aroused the South. By affecting national opinion it helped abolitionist Abraham Lincoln get the presidency, indirectly causing the Civil War.

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Fugitive Slave Acts, in U.S. history, statutes passed by retrieved Congress in 1793 and 1850 (and repealed in 1864) that provided for the seizure and return of runaway slaves who escaped from one state into another or into a federal territory. The 1793 law enforced Article IV, Section 2, of the U.S. Constitution in authorizing any federal district judge or circuit court judge, or any state magistrate, to decide finally and without a jury trial the status of an alleged fugitive slave. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Fugitive-Slave-Acts>, retrieved on September 09, 2018.