

Chapter 165 – *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* Arouses More Sympathy For Slaves And Runaways

Time: June 5, 1851

***Uncle Tom’s Cabin* Becomes A Best Seller**

Eight weeks after Thomas Sims is shipped back to slavery in Savannah, the abolitionist weekly newspaper, *National Era*, publishes the first of forty installments of a new novel written by Harriet Beecher Stowe and titled *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Life Among The Lowly*.

The storyline connects with the growing controversy over the Fugitive Slave Act and public interest in the plight of runaways. Readership of the serial is modest at first, but expands rapidly as the drama unfolds around the lives of the central characters, both black and white.

One avid reader is the wife of the Boston book publisher, John J. Jewett, who convinces her husband to negotiate with the author to make the serial into a traditional novel. When other houses express concerns over the subject matter, Jewett’s record as an anti-slavery man works in his favor. Stowe, who is paid a total of \$400 for the entire serialized version, agrees to receive 10 cents for every copy sold by Jewett – a deal which will make her wealthy.

The first edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* comes out on March 20, 1852. It immediately becomes a best seller, with some 300,000 copies sold in the U.S. in the first year and another one million sold in Britain. Later claims christen it the “top selling novel of the nineteenth century” and second only to the Bible in copies purchased.

When queried about the inspiration for the novel, the author says that it came to her “in a series of visions.”

Time: 1811-1896

Harriet Beecher Stowe's Journey To Fame



Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896)

It comes as no surprise that Harriet Beecher Stowe's writings should have such a profound impact on awakening more Americans to the evils of slavery – or that she says her pen is guided by sudden epiphanies.

She is, after all, the sixth offspring of the famous Puritan clergyman, Reverend Lyman Beecher, and his wife, Roxana, granddaughter of Revolutionary War General Andrew Ward and an intellectual in her own right.

To be a Beecher is to be a social reformer.

All seven of her surviving brothers become ministers, engaged in shaping the beliefs and values of their congregations and the nation. Included here is Henry Ward Beecher, two years younger than Harriet, but soon to align himself with the wing of Abolitionists who are ready to resort to violence to end slavery.

Two of her four surviving sisters also enter the public arena. The family's first-born, Catharine Beecher, is an educational reformer, who founds the Hartford Female Seminary, where Harriet receives her formal education. Isabella Beecher, the last born girl (1822), becomes the founder of the National Woman's Suffrage Association.

Harriet is born in Hartford, Connecticut, on June 14, 1811, and grows up in an intensely religious environment. She teaches briefly at the Female Seminary before accompanying her family in 1832 to Cincinnati, when her father is named president of the Lane Theological Seminary, whose mission is to prepare Presbyterian ministers for service in the west. Among the faculty is a biblical scholar and recent widower, Calvin Stowe. A romance with Harriet ensues and the two are married in 1836.

In July of 1836, Cincinnati is the scene of a race riot, as white citizens ransack the office of the abolitionist journalist, James Birney, and then turn their fury on the black community. Harriet records her fright at seeing "negroes being hunted like wild beasts," and from then on begins to engage in learning about the lives of the freedmen in her midst.

Her daily life over the next fifteen years is subdued, devoted to having a family – she gives birth to six children between 1836 and 1850 – and caring for them. But as she notes, this hardly seems sufficient for a Beecher child:

I am but a mere drudge with few ideas beyond babies and housekeeping.

To supplement the family income, Harriet writes stories and articles, some published by Gamaliel Bailey an associate of James Birney, in his *National Era* periodical. Bailey's advance to Stowe of \$100 for more content supposedly sparks the *Uncle Tom* serial.

In hindsight she declares that her "vocation is to preach on paper" and that her novel comes to her through talking with blacks in Cincinnati, reading the 1849 autobiography of the runaway Josiah Henson, and in a series of visions, presumably from God.

The first such vision occurs in February 1851 when she sees a black man named Uncle Tom, being whipped to death by two fellow slaves, directed by an overseer, one Simon Legree.

Time: June 1851 forward

The Narrative Of The Novel

The structure of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* actually revolves around two storylines, one set in the North, the other in the South.

The former dramatizes the perilous escape of a slave named Eliza and her son Harry to safety in the North.

Eliza is a house slave, owned by the Shelby family, with a young son and a husband who is on another plantation. When she learns of her indebted master's intent to sell her boy to a slave trader (Mr. Haley), she declares her trust in God and decides to flee. Her escape culminates in a mad, bare-footed dash with Harry across ice floes on the Ohio River, just ahead of her pursuers.

Once there, she seeks shelter at the home of a Mrs. Bird and her husband John, a Senator, who has helped pass the Fugitive Slave Act. Confronted, however, with the heartbreaking reality of Eliza and her son, Mrs. Bird convinces him to put the teachings of the Bible ahead of the legal statutes and take them in:



A Former Slave

Now, John, I don't know anything about politics, but I can read my Bible; and there I see that I must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the desolate; and that Bible I mean to follow.

The two runaways then move on, sheltered by anti-slavery Quakers, until Eliza is happily reunited with her husband, who has also escaped. Together the entire family winds its way across Lake Erie to final safety in Canada, a happy ending.

In recounting Eliza's story, Stowe registers two themes in the minds of her predominantly Northern white audience:

- The first being intense sympathy for the plight of a black slave mother fighting for the well-being of her son against the rapaciousness of a Southern slave-holder; and
- Second, the notion that Christians should stand up in opposition to slavery based on the "higher law" taught in the Bible.

Stowe's Southern narrative ends with tragedy.

It traces the fate of a second slave, "Uncle" Tom, also owned by the Shelby's and sold to Mr. Haley to pay down his debts. On the way south to the auction block, Tom saves a small child, Eva St. Clare, from drowning and her good-willed father, Augustine, buys Tom from Haley.

For an extended period he lives happily with the St. Clares, and dotes in particular on the angelic, golden-haired Eva. But then she dies suddenly of consumption and Augustine is killed in a barroom fight. When his wife, the unscrupulous Marie St. Clare, sells Tom to a new master, Simon Legree, Stowe is ready to reveal the Christ-like suffering endured by many a slave.

Stowe paints Legree as the symbol of all that is depraved about slavery. He uses his female slaves as prostitutes and tries to "break" Tom through constant humiliation and abuse. But Tom remains stoic and obedient throughout his ordeal. In an attempt to protect two girls, Cassie and Emmaline, from further sexual assaults, Tom aids in their escape.

Despite repeated whippings, he refuses to reveal their hiding place. He is also unwavering in his forgiveness of Legree throughout his ordeal.

I'd give ye my heart's blood; and, if taking every drop of blood in this poor old body would save your precious soul, I'd give 'em freely, as the Lord gave his for me.

After lingering for several days, Tom finally dies – ironically upon the arrival of a well-motivated Shelby heir (George) who plans to buy him from Legree and set him free.

Stowe weaves many other characters and incidents into this narrative, but the spotlight remains on Tom and Legree.

- With Tom revealing the capacity for unshakeable goodness and ultimate salvation among the blacks; and
- Legree exhibiting the absolute moral decadence residing at the core of human bondage.

Time: 1850's

Impact Of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* On The American Public

The most dramatic claim as to the effect of Stowe's novel comes from one of her sons who reports that, upon meeting his mother at the White House in November 1862, President Lincoln says:

So you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war.

Apocryphal or not, there is no doubt that the central characters in the novel – Eliza, Eva, Uncle Tom and Simon Legree – capture the imaginations of Stowe's readers, and force them to ponder their own prior views about the black race in general and about Southern slavery.

Perhaps the Africans are not so different from whites in caring for their families, trying to obey the scriptures, even seeking eternal salvation – and perhaps the South deserves to be damned for enslaving and abusing them.

Thus Stowe's allegory plays out across the North, with Uncle Tom, the Christ-like black slave as hero, and the malign Southern master, Simon Legree, as the villain.

As expected, the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* narrative is immediately attacked in the South.

Time: 1852

The South Responds Initially With Its “Anti-Tom” Novels

Southerners are outraged by how they are portrayed in Stowe's novel.

The *Southern Press Review* calls the work “a caricature of slavery” which highlights only its “most odious features.”

“Uncle Tom’s Cabin” is...a caricature of slavery. It selects for description the most odious features of slavery—the escape and pursuit of fugitive slaves, the sale and separation of domestic slaves, the separation of husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters. It portrays the slaves of the story as more moral, intelligent, courageous, elegant and beautiful than their masters and mistresses; and where it concedes any of these qualities to the whites, it is to such only as are, even though slaveholders, opposed to slavery. Those in favor of slavery are slave-traders, slave-catchers, and the most weak, depraved, cruel and malignant of beings and demons.

Mrs. Stowe (also) complains that slavery gives to one man the power over another to do these things. Well...cannot the landlord of Cincinnati turn out a family from his dwelling if unable to pay the rent? Cannot those who have food and raiment refuse them to such as are unable to buy? And does not Mrs. Stowe herself virtually do these very things?

In his diary, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, the former President’s grandson, calls it “garbage,” filled with titillating sex, common to the brothels of New York and designed to ratchet up “sectional hate.”

Mrs. Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s log cabin is a foul and atrocious Libel upon the slave holders of the Southern States, and was a garbage suited to the appetite of sectional hate. 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.

The literary response to Stowe comes in the form of “Anti-Tom” novels penned by Southerners which feature idyllic plantations, run by kindly masters and mistresses, who watch over their invariably childlike slaves, while also offering them Christian instruction and the chance for eternal salvation.

First in this genre is *The Sword and the Distaff*, written by William Gilmore Simms, a prolific Southern author and historian. The story is set in 1780, toward the end of the Revolutionary War, and it follows the efforts of one Captain Porgy to save his rice plantation in South Carolina, which has been ravaged by the British. He does so, but only with the help of his slave, named “Tom,” who returns the respect shown by his master with unerring affection and loyalty. In developing this relationship between Captain Porgy and Tom, Simm’s attempts to debunk Stowe’s stereotype of the typical Southern slave-holder as Simon Legree.

A second rebuttal to Stowe comes from Caroline Lee Hentz in her 1854 novel, *The Planter’s Northern Bride*. Ironically Hentz’s background mirrors Stowe’s, from her birthplace in Massachusetts, her marriage to an underpaid scholar, and her 1832 move to Cincinnati, where she begins her writing career. But from there, Hentz moves first to North Carolina, and then on to Kentucky, Alabama and Florida, immersing herself in the life and culture of the South.

The heroine of *The Planter's Northern Bride*, Eulalia Moreland, is indoctrinated in the evils of slavery by her New England abolitionist father, before she moves south to become mistress on her new husband's plantation. Once there, the abusive treatment of the slaves she anticipates fails to materialize. Instead, harmony prevails, with the master providing the kind of guaranteed food, shelter and care for his "servants" that is missing among Northern whites, condemned to factories and sweatshops, and discarded at will by ruthless capitalists.

In addition to this theme of the "protected Southern black servants" versus the "vulnerable white Northern wage slaves," Hentz turns her enmity on the radical abolitionists who attempt, in the course of her narrative, to provoke an uprising on the tranquil plantation aimed at murdering Eulalia and her husband.

In the 1850's, a host of other Southern authors join the parade of "Anti-Tom" novels, which eventually number between twenty and thirty in total.