

ESSAY: UNCLE TOM'S CABIN by Harriet Beecher Stowe

In presenting the evils of slavery in Uncle Tom's Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe's appeal is to the emotions. However, she doesn't rely on this ploy alone. Part of Stowe's brilliance was to understand that when presenting an argument, one of the most effective ways is not to just present your case, but to diffuse objections before they are raised. She presents a picture of slavery in its mildest conditions all the way to the most heinous and cruel. In doing so, she both brings up and answers objections one might have had against the abolition of this system. But she also shows how each situation, even the seemingly kindest situations, can easily lead to disaster because the slaves never have control over their own lives.

Stowe begins her story with the type of family that is kind and thoughtful to their slaves. They are never mistreated by the Shelbys. Many people believed this kind of situation was good for the negroes. However, from the opening pages, Stowe shows how easily a slave's life is put in peril. Regardless of how kindly Mr. Shelby may feel towards his slaves, he finds himself in a compromising situation and is consequently forced to sell his best slave, Tom. In addition, he must do the unthinkable: To take away a small boy from his wife's favorite slave, and then sell him to a slave trader.

Shelby is deeply in debt to a slave trader. The reader can easily identify with the problems of financial difficulties since most adults have experienced financial difficulties at one time or another. Like the slave owner, people in financial hardships must sell off valuable assets to settle debts or to survive. But, unlike non-slave owners, Shelby is forced to sell human beings to cover his debts.

Many readers might think that if an owner is forced to sell any of his slaves that he would naturally sell the least productive ones first. But Stowe correctly shows that the opposite is often the case. Slaves are like any other kind of asset. The most virtuous and productive slaves are the most valuable, thereby yielding the largest sums. So, paradoxically, the slave Shelby wants least to sell, he is forced to sell. A further paradox is that if a slave possesses such qualities as gentleness, trustworthiness, and reliability, such as Uncle Tom, these positive traits provide no protection for the slave. In fact, as we learn, these same qualities become a liability.

As a further result of Shelby's situation, he is also forced to include in the sale the boy, Harry. Here again, virtues are a liability. Harry is an uncommonly handsome young boy, who has a gifted imagination and beguiling charms. These qualities draw the attention of the trader, who demands that Shelby include him in the sale. The cruelty is double-edged because not only is the child's life and future at risk, but he is also taken away from his mother, and in all probability, will never see her again. Stowe shows how helpless the mother, Eliza, is to keep her child, even though she is a pampered and favored slave. Shelby's financial situation has irreparably and cruelly changed the lives of three slaves and their families, who all were actually favored by the Shelbys. But being favored in this case didn't prevent the fate of being sold and torn apart from their families. All of these individuals are defenseless against such a fate and are completely at the mercy of the owner. They have no say one way or the other in what happens to them or their children.

Lest the reader feel that these are isolated incidents, Stowe then introduces George Harris. It is Harris' misfortune to be highly intelligent, industrious, articulate, and handsome. Although all of these qualities are extremely positive and sought after in white society, if the possessor of them is a slave, these traits represent value only to the slave's owner. Harris' owner receives the royalties for Harris' invention, and Harris' life is no better for it. In fact, as the narrator says:

His master began to feel an uneasy consciousness of inferiority... As this young man was in the eye of the law not a man, but a thing, all these superior qualifications were subject to the control of a vulgar, narrow-minded, tyrannical master. (55)

Harris' owner develops a jealous hatred towards him and Harris' life is made even more miserable. "And so fell George's last hope—nothing before him but a life of toil and drudgery, rendered more bitter by every little smarting vexation and indignity which tyrannical ingenuity could devise" (57). This is George's reward for being intelligent, articulate, and industrious. He is not the owner of his own God-given talents.

To strip an individual from being the possessor of his own intelligence and industriousness, is to dehumanize that person. Dehumanization is the monster lurking in the shadows of slavery and usurps the control that every living thing needs for survival. The slave is deprived of that very basic ingredient of life.

Stowe takes every opportunity to show the dehumanizing process of slavery. For example, she clearly shows that slave trading takes place in the cold, impersonal world of business. The reader sees this at the beginning when Shelby and Haley are negotiating the sale of Tom and Harry; then again in negotiations between St. Clare and Haley. During a conversation with Shelby, Haley talks about the profit he made on a slave recently, as if talking about stocks and bonds:

I had a fellow, now, in this yer last lot I took to Orleans—'t was as good as a meetin, now, really, to hear that critter pray; and he was quite gentle and quiet like. He fitched me a good sum, too, for I bought him cheap of a man that was 'bliged to sell out; so I realized six hundred on him. (42)

Haley's remarks during the negotiations with St. Clare for Tom are of a similar cold, business-like nature:

Wal, now, just think on 't... just look at them limbs—broad-chested, strong as a horse. Look at his head; them high forrads allays shows calculatin niggers, that'll do any kind o' thing . . . Now, a nigger of that ar heft and build is worth considerable, just as you may say, for his body. . . (etc). . . (235)

Slaves to Haley, and other slave traders, represent only a source of income. That they are human beings is incidental, so he necessarily detaches himself emotionally from them. If he became involved emotionally, he wouldn't survive in the business. So, it is essential to view the slave strictly as property—as an asset. We see the blood-chilling effects of this attitude when we see his reactions to the suicide of Lucy. For him, Lucy and her baby represent nothing more than another form of money. When she commits suicide, he sees it merely as a financial loss. The speaker says of Haley:

The trader was not shocked nor amazed. . . Even the awful presence of Death struck no solemn chill upon him. . . if things went on in this way, he should not make a cent on the trip. . . The trader, therefore, sat discontentedly down, with his little account-book, and put down the missing body and soul under the head of *losses!* (212)

The entire scene of the two men conspiring to snatch away Lucy's baby and sell him is chilling. These two are bartering for pennies over a 10-month old baby like they would a pair of old shoes at a flea market. Lucy and her baby, like Tom and Harry, have no more value beyond what they can be sold for. Lucy may be the mother of her baby, but if her worth is thought of only as property, she has no control over the life of that child, not to mention of her own life. It doesn't matter how loving and nurturing a mother she is, she is never considered to be a mother with a baby in the same way a white woman would be considered—or even as an animal would be seen. This baby and mother are seen and talked about only as investments.

Tom was fortunate to be sold to St. Clare, who did not view his slaves as property or investments. Although he owned them, he treated them more like employees, or even like spoiled children. In fact, he even considers that he rescued them by giving them a good life. Tom seems now to have a very nice situation, as well as all the other slaves. But tragically, we again see how even this apparently positive situation can eventually turn viciously against the slave. Stowe shows how tolerance (or, in the case of St. Clare, excessive tolerance), is really not a blessing for a slave. The reader will see later what a detriment it is to be a pampered slave, for ultimately these slaves will be sold at a slave auction after St. Clare's untimely death. Because slaves cannot arrange for their own well-being after the death of an owner (or at

any other time), they are at the mercy of such people as Haley, or worse. St. Clare's slaves will be quite unprepared for the abuses that are in store for them. Haley states the reality when he says:

"you Kentucky folks spile your niggers. You mean well by 'em, but 'tan't no real kindness, arter all. . . 'tan't no kindness to be givin' on him notions and expectations, and bringin' on him up too well, for the rough and tumble comes all the harder on him . . . your niggers would be quite chop-fallen in a place where some of your plantation niggers would be singing" (49)

The reader can't escape the irony of this situation.

So far Stowe has shown the slave in the best possible situations. Life seems to be good for slaves at the Shelby's and at the St. Clare's; however, the reader learns that it's no guarantee that they won't ever be sold, torn forever from their families, or bought by cruel, heartless masters. No matter how good the intentions of the master, there is no protection from things like the death of the master or financial disasters. The reader also sees how being intelligent and industrious is not a blessing or protection against a master's jealousy and the resulting abuses.

Later, at a slave warehouse, the questionable sexual perversion of "buying women" is thrown into the readers face. Again, qualities that would normally be highly revered in white society, such as feminine beauty, grace, and sensuality, are horrible curses to many negro females. Women with exceptional beauty are bought specifically to be used for sexual gratification. This practice has no Biblical justification so most people tend to ignore that it happens, or they look the other way. Since slaves are humans owned by someone else, this includes their entire physical body. Thus, a woman's body belongs to whoever buys her. She has no control over what happens to it. The consequences are often tragic for exceptionally attractive slaves, unlike attractive women in white society.

The ultimate tragedy of slavery, however, is represented through the character of Topsy. Topsy is the product of being bred and raised purely for "speculation" in the slave market. She was taken from her mother nearly from birth, to be raised by speculators, along with many other children as if they were a herd of cattle. These children never had mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, or uncles in their lives. They never experienced love in any form nor words of kindness. From birth on, they were degraded as human beings. Topsy is so dehumanized that she actually doesn't have a concept of having been born, or of time passing, or the concept of age. Worse yet, Topsy fully believes she is evil because she has been told so consistently since birth. She accepts the idea as reality. She lies simply because it is expected of her, or rather, of negroes in general. Topsy has known only harsh abuse, and it is such second nature to her that no amount of whippings, regardless of how brutal, have much effect on her. As St. Clare says,

"What is to be done with a human being that can be governed only with the lash—*that fails*—it's a very common state of things down here! . . . Such children are very common among us, and such men and women, too. How are they to be governed? . . . The horrid cruelties and outrages that once and a while find their way into the papers. . . what do they come from? In many cases, it is a gradual hardening process on both sides—the owner growing more and more cruel, as the servant more and more callous. Whipping and abuse are life laudanum; you have to double the dose as the sensibilities decline" (363).

Topsy was "rescued" by St. Clare from a life of constant beatings and abuse. Because St. Clare gave her to Ophelia, she was even delivered out of slavery altogether. However, this is a rare exception, even among St. Clare's slaves for he never freed the others before he died. He bought Topsy knowing she was the ultimate degraded human being. He gave her to Ophelia more or less as an experiment—to see if she could be changed, if there was any hope for all the others like her, should they ever be freed.

Stowe had the wisdom to realize the consequences of raising a human infant in a life void of love, dignity, compassion, or kindness. Topsy is probably the most tragic figure in the book, even more so than Cassy. Cassy's personality was distorted by years of hopelessness and abuse. But she initially had loving interpersonal experiences from family, as well as owners. However, when her owner died she was sent to market, then bought by an extremely cruel master and used for sex. She survives this horror by seeking

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ways to gain control over a life that others have ultimate control over. Topsy, however, submits to slavery because the idea of hope or having control over her own destiny is completely foreign to her. She learns to manipulate others to a certain degree, but she seems to lack identity with humanity in general. To her, a slave is a separate category, like a dog or cat. Topsy *is* the ultimate degraded human being; and, thus, even lacks the concept of individual control and freedom.

Stowe's examples span the full range of the slavery experience. Rising above it all, one condition emerges that eventually makes even the best possible situations turn disastrous. Over and over again, Stowe pulls back the veil to expose this truth. It makes no difference if a slave is given an education, material comforts, or a kind environment. The slaves' existence, no matter how seemingly good, is still missing one crucial ingredient: Control. Slaves are completely dependent upon the master and have utterly no control over their own lives. There are no laws to help them. Slaves don't even have access to one of the most important public institutions—the US mail. When slaves are torn from friends or family, they no longer have the option of ever communicating with those people again. Stowe says, "In such a case you write to your wife and send messages to your children; but Tom could not write—the mail for him had no existence, and the gulf of separation was unabridged by even a friendly word or signal" (228). Such a basic freedom as the mail service was denied to them. On several occasions, Stowe demonstrated through the events of Tom's life, how extremely important it is to have this right; but of course, he did not have it.

Every slave's life is dependent upon the intentions of the owner, whether they be good or bad, and is affected by whatever destiny befalls that owner. They are at the mercy of the circumstances of others because they have no control over any circumstance, whether it is in their own lives or another's. Framers of the Constitution called control over one's life by another name: Freedom, for freedom is control.

The paradox for the slave owner is that even good owners are trapped by the system. Because they assume control over the lives of other human beings who are considered possessions, should fate turn against them, they are responsible for the misery they cause to the slaves. Slave owners can never be absolved from this responsibility. The only way to be free of it is to not own slaves. Whatever affects the slave, also must affect the owner.

This is the insidious truth that Stowe so valiantly shows in this novel. And, by her masterly diffusion of objections, she shows that ultimately there are NO positive situations in slavery. Her success in this effort is seen from the history that follows the publication of this solitary, monumental effort to eradicate slavery from the United States.