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Is Uncle Tom's Cabin Historically Correct?

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By

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Harriet Beecher Stowe's Background

Harriet Elizabeth Beecher was born on June 14, 1811 in Litchfield, Connecticut to Reverend Lyman and Roxana Foote Beecher. She was the seventh of what would be known as "Beecher's Dozen."¹ During Harriet Beecher's years in Litchfield she lost her Aunt Mary Foote, her mother, and her sister's fiancé. Despite being surrounded by death Harriet's life was molded by her father's sermons. Her father was a much respected preacher throughout the country and also a leader in the abolitionist movement.²

Despite the fact that the Beecher household had servants, Harriet was still blind to the issues of slavery. However, they were soon to be provided by her Aunt Mary. In 1803 Mary married a Jamaican merchant, who later hired her brother as a clerk in his business. From visits to her aunts home Harriet was able to see the slavery system firsthand. Later when Mary found out that her husband was the father of many of his slaves, Harriet was introduced to sexual abuse of slaves.³ Mary left her husband and moved back with her brother only to die at the young age of twenty-eight. This was Harriet's first encounter with slaves on plantations.

Later in her life Harriet benefited from her father's reading seminary books and also the books that he allowed into the house. The lessons in many of these

¹E. Bruce Kirkham, The Building of Uncle Tom's Cabin. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 6.

² Ibid, 4.

³ Ibid, 8.

books were moral lessons mixed with ethics. She was able to see real life examples of the lessons she would later employ in Uncle Tom's Cabin, Dred, and some of her other books.⁴

Although her father was against slavery, he would not take a stand and demand “the immediate abolition of slavery” as requested by William Lloyd Garrison.⁵ Lyman realized that slavery could not be completely abolished at once and did not want to lose support in the abolitionist movement. However, Garrison and others saw it differently. They thought that Lyman was picking and choosing the battles that he would fight and only preaching about the others. Garrison still followed Lyman Beecher's career and frequently quoted segments from his speeches in the *Liberator*.⁶ Despite public opinion Lyman still contributed to the abolitionist movement, and his work influenced Harriet's views on slavery.

Lyman's abolitionist teachings were put to the test between 1832 and 1849 when Harriet lived in Cincinnati, which was considered the center of antislavery and proslavery conflicts. Many of Harriet's opinions and attitudes about slavery were formed during these years. To many during this era, the solution to the “Negro question” was to end slavery immediately and send blacks back to their “native home” (Africa).⁷ This idea called “colonization” was advocated by many

⁴ Ibid, 9.

⁵ Ibid, 13.

⁶ Ibid, 13.

⁷ Ibid, 20.

white abolitionists. This idea is also shared in the final chapters of Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Also during Harriet's years in Cincinnati, Garrison published his first edition of the *Liberator*, and Nat Turner led his revolt in Southampton Virginia. Although Garrison's *Liberator* had a huge impact on the abolitionist movement, Turner's revolt immediately affected the antislavery movement. Before his revolt in August, the Virginia delegates were debating legislation abolishing slavery in the state. However, after the revolt they felt as if they were fighting for their lives against slaves.⁸ Never again would the south enjoy the large number of antislavery advocates it had before Turner's revolt.

Lyman Beecher also held many antislavery debates, which Harriet attended during her years in Cincinnati.⁹ Through these debates we learn how Harriet's ideas were molded and persuaded prior to the writing of Uncle Tom's Cabin. It was also during this time that Harriet accompanied one of her students, Mary Dutton, to her home in Kentucky.¹⁰ Ms. Dutton's family owned slaves and Harriet was in the presence of the slaves quite frequently. Throughout the visit Ms. Dutton thought Harriet was not paying much attention to her surroundings. However, when she read Uncle Tom's Cabin years later she realized that Harriet had paid attention to the slaves' every action.

⁸ Ibid, 21.

⁹ Ibid, 23.

¹⁰ Ibid, 28.

It was also during these years that Harriet Beecher's life takes a huge change. Eliza Tyler Stowe, a long time friend of Harriet and the Beecher family, also the first wife of Calvin Stowe dies of cholera.¹¹ Because of their close relationship Calvin and Harriet spend more time together and become more closely involved. One year and five months after Eliza's death they were married, and in less than ten months after marriage Harriet Beecher Stowe gave birth to twin girls.¹²

It was during Stowe's years in Brunswick that she wrote the installments for the *National Era* that later are compiled into Uncle Tom's Cabin.¹³ The first time America was introduced to Uncle Tom it was in weekly installments. After the publications had success in the *National Era* the decision was made to make the installments into a novel.¹⁴ This novel became a best seller, and still has not been outsold by any novel in American history.

¹¹ Ibid, 30.

¹² Ibid, 30.

¹³ Ibid, 65.

¹⁴ Ibid, 80.

Why Stowe Wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin

Why did Harriet Beecher Stowe write this book that would eventually sell more copies than any other novel in history? When she met with Abraham Lincoln he called her “the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war.”¹⁵ Surely a book of such magnitude was not written out of sheer boredom! Harriet Beecher Stowe began writing Uncle Tom's Cabin as installments for the *National Era* newspaper in 1851. It wasn't until after she had written all the installments that they were collected and put together into a novel.

Stowe started writing the installments in response to the Fugitive Slave Law passed in 1850.¹⁶ This law made it a crime for anyone in a free or slave state to help a fugitive slave in escaping from his owner. For northerners in free states this brought them closer to slavery than they had ever been. They had nothing to do with the slave states in the south, but now laws were being passed by the slave states governing the activities of citizens in free states. Since the Fugitive Slave Act was passed Stowe's sister-in-law Isabella wrote her several times urging her to write a piece about the evils of slavery.¹⁷ Finally in December of 1850 Stowe decided “I shall write that thing if I live...” meaning something exposing slavery

¹⁵ Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin. (New York: First Vintage Books, 1991), xi.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Ammons, Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe. (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co. 1980), 61.

¹⁷ Kirkham, 64.

to the world.¹⁸ Through Stowe's book northerners were able to see the institution of slavery in a way they had never before been shown. They could see themselves falling victim to its vices despite the fact that they owned no slaves. This is exactly what Stowe wanted to do in order to draw sympathy for anti-slavery sentiment.

Despite the fact that Stowe did not know that the installments would be published as a book, she knew exactly where she wanted to go with her writings. This is because the death of Uncle Tom was the first scene that she wrote.¹⁹ Uncle Tom dies at the hands of his owner Simon Legree, a northerner who owns slaves in the South. Legree tells Uncle Tom to whip another slave, which he knows compromises his Christian beliefs. In return for his disobedience, Legree beats Uncle Tom within inches of his life only to die later.²⁰ By writing Uncle Tom's death scene first, Stowe was able to maintain her focus and keep the installments from becoming merely a short section that would continue without end. Stowe also knew that she wanted her writings to be an accurate account of slavery while still serving as an anti-slavery piece.²¹ Had Stowe solely expressed the most horrid acts of slavery, her book would not have been taken as seriously as it was. Instead she told both the best and worst of slavery, while keeping her novel in the realm of reality.

¹⁸ Ibid, 64.

¹⁹ John R. Adams, Harriet Beecher Stowe. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 9.

²⁰ Stowe, 61.

²¹ Ibid, 36.

During Stowe's life she had the pleasure of meeting many former slaves such as Rev. Josiah Henson and Theodore Weld, people who were in contact with former slaves and slave owners. From her contact with people such as these she acquired ideas and stories for the characters in her novel.²² Although Stowe wanted to help the abolitionist effort, she did not want to simply write another book to be used as propaganda. She wanted her writings to expose the true evils of slavery and call for an all out end to slavery.²³ By using her contacts with former slaves she was able to get accurate accounts of things that occurred on plantations, and in slave life.

Finally the most influential motivating drive for Stowe to write Uncle Tom's Cabin was her Christian faith. Being a devout Quaker, the institution of slavery contradicted almost all of Stowe's beliefs. The idea of owning someone as property, breaking up families, and treating people as animals greatly upset Stowe. These principles were also strong in the Christian community, and by highlighting these ideas in her novel Stowe was able to get the attention of many people. Also evident in her novel is that she makes Uncle Tom a devout Christian, and a Christ-like martyr.²⁴ Uncle Tom consistently uses his faith to make decisions throughout the novel and never compromises, even in the face of death.

²² Rev. Josiah Henson, Uncle Tom's Story of His Life. (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1971), 14.

²³ Adams, 24.

²⁴ Ibid, 32.

Many of Stowe's readers, as well as slave owners, were also Christian. When writing her novel Stowe wanted to evoke the Christian morals in her readers and also make them base their decisions of slavery on these morals. Another thing Stowe did with her the characters in her book was to have them be representative of the real world in respect to the Christian faith. Slave owners and slaves were both Christian and non-Christian. By doing this Stowe was able to show that the system of slavery corrupted everyone.²⁵ This was another evident theme throughout the novel. Had Stowe made all slave owners hell-raising sinners, she would have inappropriately classified them and made all aspects of slave owners appear evil. This would have weakened her novels' credibility. Also by showing that slavery corrupted everyone, even Christians, Stowe was able to argue that the entire system should be abolished.

A couple of years after Stowe wrote her most famous novel, she responded to criticism about the novel's reliability by writing A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin. In this response she told her readers that Uncle Tom's Cabin was not a novel about a single person's life, or a group of people.²⁶ Rather, it was a compilation of true events that happened in the lives of African American slaves. Stowe's response included newspaper articles about incidents that she included in her novel. It also included segments of slave narratives that Stowe had been introduced to from

²⁵ Kirkham, 53.

²⁶ Ibid, 80.

former slaves and their writings. A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin did not come close to sharing the success that its predecessor enjoyed, but nevertheless it proved that her best selling novel was not a malicious lie.

Background of the System of Slavery

Slavery has existed in the world since the beginning of recorded history. In biblical times the Israelites were slaves to the Pharaoh of Egypt. When one nation defeated another in battle it would often take captives to be used as slave labor. In these situations the slaves were used as labor and could eventually be assimilated into the nation they were working for or earn their freedom. These slaves also held prestigious jobs. In the Roman Empire slaves were used as clerks, secretaries, and tax agents.²⁷

The institution of slavery in the United States began not long after European settlement on the continent and lasted for a period of over three hundred years. The type of slavery in the United States was not like the slavery that existed in other countries or times. In the European form of slavery one became a slave by owing someone money, it was formally known as indentured servitude. The slaves could eventually earn their freedom by paying off their debt to their debtor. Even in this form of slavery neither the slave nor their children were considered property of their debtor. There were also enforced laws protecting the enslaved. In other countries one could be forced into slavery as a type of punishment. After one had worked off their sentence or punishment they were allowed to return back to normal life.

²⁷ *A Brief History of Slavery*. New Internationalist, Aug 2001, Issue 337, 22.

In the type of slavery that became prevalent in the United States one became a slave by purchase. The slave trade had become a thriving industry in the United States. In its early stages, Africans would trade war captives or criminals to Europeans traveling to the United States. In return the Africans would receive liquor, trinkets, firearms, or other items.²⁸ The number of war captives or criminals very quickly diminished, but the European demand for slaves did not. Merchant ships leaving Europe began travel to West Africa and raid villages for slaves to transport to the United States.²⁹ Slaves were now taken from their homes by force, transported across the Atlantic Ocean, and sold into an institution for the remainder of their lives. If their children accompanied them to the United States they were often separated and never reunited again.

The only sure way to end this form of slavery was death, and this belief was frequently practiced among slaves during the “middle passage” (the trip from Africa to America).³⁰ Captain Phillips of the ship *Hannibal* recalls twelve slaves who “did willfully drown themselves...”.³¹ There are many other accounts of slaves refusing to eat and starving to death, or hanging themselves. Often slaves cut their wrists or throats in an attempt to bleed to death. In one instance a slave unsuccessfully attempted to slit his throat on two separate instances with his

²⁸ Ibid, 23.

²⁹ Irwin Unger and David Reimers, The Slavery Experience in the United States (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970) 15.

³⁰ Ibid, 29.

³¹ Ibid, 29.

fingernails. After his hands were tied the slave resisted food and died ten days later.³² When slaves were determined to end the misery that lay ahead, they committed suicide any way possible. Slaves with no desire to live usually fell victim of “fixed melancholy”.³³ This was when well-fed, healthy slaves died suddenly without any cause.

The main reason slavery became as large as it did was economic factors.³⁴ As the territory Europeans controlled in the United States began to grow and cash crops emerged, a labor force was needed to work the large fields commonly known as plantations. With slave labor, once you purchased the slave you did not have to pay him anything, while they provided a lifetime of free labor. By cutting the cost of production a maximum profit was gained on the cash crops such as rice, indigo, and tobacco.³⁵ This became a model for all slave owners in the South’s agricultural industry, using slave labor to increase profits.

³² Ibid, 30.

³³ Ibid, 31.

³⁴ Ibid, 3.

³⁵ Ibid, 3.

Aspects of Slavery Stowe Highlights

In her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe captures the aspects of slavery by following a few slaves from their original master's home in Kentucky. Although the slaves were not related by blood they all shared a sense of family. The father figure of the group was Uncle Tom and the mother figure was Aunt Chloe. Throughout the entire novel there are certain aspects of slavery that Stowe focuses on, giving them more attention than others. These aspects were the separation of families, treatment of slaves as property, and physical abuse of slaves.

Separation of Family's

Stowe's Portrayal of Family Separation

Family ties were very important to the population in the United States at the time, even more so than today. Stowe herself was one of twelve children born to her parents. Most other families also had a large number of children. In the beginning of the novel we are introduced to the separation of families.³⁶ Because Mr. Shelby (the slave master) is in debt, he is forced to sell some of his slaves. This act is something he sincerely regrets doing because he is forced to sell Uncle Tom, his most faithful slave, to a trader who he knows is evil. He is also forced to sell Harry, the son of Eliza (one of his slaves). If he sells Harry he would be

³⁶ Adams, 35.

selling Eliza's only surviving son and breaking up their family. Despite constant pleading from his wife, Mr. Shelby agrees to sell Uncle Tom and Harry.

In the conversations between Mr. Shelby and his wife, Stowe alerts the reader to the fact that options of debt repayment existed other than separating these slaves.³⁷ The option Mr. Shelby chose was the only option that would allow him to lose a minimum number of slaves or assets. Mrs. Shelby pleads that breaking up the family is wrong according to the "Christian values" that she had been teaching to the slaves.³⁸ While Mr. Shelby agrees that it is morally wrong, he will not change his mind.

Eliza's reaction to the news that her son Harry was to be sold was to take him and run away to Canada, where they could truly be free.³⁹ Eliza and Harry's flight to Canada was not an easy one. Not only did they have to run from pursuers, but they also depended on the benevolence of others whom they did not know. One particular hardship they faced was the crossing of the Ohio River. Eliza's decision to forge across the treacherous ice with her son around her neck was a sign that she would rather face death than see her child enslaved.

The reader is again alerted to the harshness of breaking up families later in Stowe's novel. When Mr. Haley, the trader who acquired Uncle Tom from Mr.

³⁷ Stowe, 47.

³⁸ Ibid, 47.

³⁹ Stowe, 55.

Shelby is at an auction, he purchases a young boy.⁴⁰ The elderly mother of the child begs Haley to purchase her along with her son. Despite her pleading, Haley does not purchase her; thus the family is split. In the scene when Uncle Tom is placed on an auction and eventually purchased by Simon Legree, the reader is introduced to the mother-daughter combination of Susan and Emmeline. When Susan is purchased, she begs her new master to also purchase her daughter.⁴¹ Because Susan's new master was out-bid, she and her daughter were purchased separately.

The South's Portrayal of Family Separation

On this aspect of slavery Stowe's critics could only put forth one type of evidence to cast any doubt on this aspect of slavery. This evidence was a state law from Louisiana that "prohibited the selling of slave children or the mother of slave children who had not yet reached the age of ten."⁴² Even though this law existed, the reasoning behind it was not in the interest of the preserving the slave family. This law was created to keep the child near its mother during infancy so it could be nurtured properly. After the child could survive on its own, it was ready to be sold. This Louisiana law was the only law provided, but even if the law was "on the books" enforcement was a different subject. One reason is birth records for

⁴⁰ Ibid, 146.

⁴¹ Ibid, 389.

⁴² Ammons, 22.

slaves during the slavery era were non-existent. Slavery advocates also put forth the argument that they tried to sell families together. But, there still was no guarantee that slaves would be purchased with their family.

History's Portrayal of Family Separation

This is one aspect of slavery that cannot be denied. One essential element of the slave trade is that slaves are sold. When slaves mated and reproduced, the children became property of the mother's owner.⁴³ If the master did not need anymore slave children he could sell the children and make a profit. Also if slaves were no longer necessary or able to perform the jobs they were purchased for, the easy solution was to sell them to cut costs. When one analyzes all aspects of the institution of slavery and take out the special circumstances, most decisions were made on an economic basis. This is proven not only in the incident of Haley refusing to purchase the "old rack o'bones" mother of his newly acquired slave, but also when another plantation owner has to sell his slaves to avoid bankruptcy.⁴⁴ In some rare occasions family members were purchased together, but the possibility of separation was omnipresent.⁴⁵

Real life incidents of the hardships of losing family members can be found in the example of Reverend Josiah Henson's account of being separated

⁴³ Unger, 8.

⁴⁴ Josephine Donovan, Uncle Tom's Cabin: Evil, Affliction, and Redemptive Love. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 41.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 45.

from his mother. “I remember being torn from a dear and affectionate mother; I saw her tears and heard her groans; I remember all the particulars” he recalls in his autobiography.⁴⁶ Another example quoted when William Dunlap tells the story of a slave woman whose crying could be heard throughout the town of Amboy, New Jersey for two hours after her son was sold.⁴⁷

Another true example of breaking up families can be found in an 1857 Georgia auction. In this auction Pierce Butler sold 429 of his inherited slaves to clear his debt. This was “the largest sale of human beings in the history of the United States.”⁴⁸ Sidney George Fisher, an acquaintance of Butler wrote

“... Families will not be separated, that is to say, husbands and wives, parents and young children. But brothers and sisters of mature age, parents and children of mature age, all other relations and the ties of home and long association will be violently severed.”⁴⁹

During this two-day sale of 429 slaves it was not recorded how many families were broken up.

Why Did Stowe Highlight Family Separation?

The family unit is something that is important to all people regardless of race, age, or era. Large families were a common occurrence during Stowe’s

⁴⁶ Henson, 28.

⁴⁷ Unger, 44.

⁴⁸ Bell, Malcolm Jr. Major Butler’s Legacy: Five Generations of a Slaveholding Family. (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1987.) 291

⁴⁹ Ibid, 292

lifetime, and the families usually remained in the same area. Other than the obvious fact that you live with your family for a large portion of your life, you also share a common bond with them that can never be broken. The memories of joy, pain, and fun, that are created with family members strengthens that common bond.

Since slaves were considered property the only thing they possessed as distinctly theirs was their family bond. When stripped of this and transported to an unknown place, they felt as if they had nothing. This is evident in Uncle Tom's Cabin by the fact that when Uncle Tom was sold to the estate of Augustine St. Claire and had a relatively easy life, he was still unhappy because he was away from his family.⁵⁰ Because it had not been previously accomplished, when Stowe applied the idea of forced family separation to whites it was as if they had been suddenly enlightened.

Despite the prevailing thought that "These critters an't like white folks..." when whites imagined their children forcibly taken, they were deeply saddened.⁵¹ It was obvious that slaves were different from whites by their skin pigmentation. Whites also thought that slaves were different in other ways. Because they came from simpler societies whites perceived slaves were ignorant or inhumane. It was also thought that slaves did not have the same capacity for

⁵⁰ Kirkham, 78.

⁵¹ Stowe, 15.

emotion that whites possessed. An example they used was that slaves eventually continued to work after losing family members. In actuality the slave had very few options and the only one that ensured living was to continue to work. By whites continuing to hold on to stereotypes about slaves they were able to distance themselves from the slaves. Stowe wanted to bridge that gap, and bring whites closer to issues of slavery. Even though slaves were not considered equal to whites, the fact that slaves had ties to their family could not be denied.

Slaves Treated as Property

Stowe's Portrayal of Slaves Being Treated as Property

Another hardship of slavery was the cruel fact that the slaves were considered property. This is a theme that runs through Stowe's novel. This is important because if slaves are considered property they do not have the same rights that whites are entitled to as human beings. By not considering slaves humans it was easy to deny them rights, without personal conviction. Since this was the way the institution of slavery was run slave owners were able to lose themselves in the system.

One example of slaves being treated as property is when Eliza flees with Harry, Haley hires two people to help him regain his property.⁵² Stowe provides another example of this when George Harris is talking to Eliza before she fled. "...My master! And who made him my master?...-What right has he to me? I'm a man as much as he is."⁵³ Despite George's feelings the law treated him as property of his master. This fact was also brought to life in the way that slaves were sold and treated. The simple act of selling slaves in the markets, using them as collateral or to gamble and also using them as inheritance were typical ways they were viewed as property.⁵⁴ When people are treated as property their self

⁵² Stowe, 86.

⁵³ Adams, 27.

⁵⁴ Unger, 66.

worth is taken from them. Stowe notes that George Harris "...held up his head, speaking and acting like a different man as soon as he regarded himself "free"."⁵⁵

South's Portrayal of Slaves Being Treated as Property

Stowe's critics were relatively quiet on this aspect of slavery also. They did not deny the fact that slave-owners or the law considered slaves property. Instead, they argued that since slaves were such valuable commodities that a reward would not be offered for proof that the slave was dead, as in the case of George Harris.⁵⁶ However, as in the case of Eliza and Harry a sizeable reward may be offered for the return of a captured slave.

Another way they attempted to refute the idea that rewards were offered for proof that the run-away slaves were dead was citing state laws.⁵⁷ A South Carolina judge quoted the 1740 statute that outlawed the killing of a fugitive slave. However, the statute did allow for the owner to moderately correct his slave, and if the slave assaulted the white person it was allowable to kill him.

Stowe's critics also presented the same argument that Mr. St. Claire gave his cousin Mrs. Ophelia. This argument was that slavery benefited the slaves because they could not take care of themselves.⁵⁸ Serious fault lies in this

⁵⁵ Adams, 32.

⁵⁶ Ammons, 20.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 24.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 23.

argument because the slaves led complete lives before they were taken to the United States, and many were able to lead good lives in Canada after they escaped for their freedom. This argument was also made by Sidney George Fisher in his writing about the Butler auction, “The Negroes of the South must be slaves or the South will be Africanized. Slavery is better for them and for us than such a result.”⁵⁹ Other than losing money and a lifestyle, the fear of the South being Africanized was most likely the cause of not wanting to free slaves.

History’s Account of Slaves Being Treated as Property

History’s account of slaves being treated as property agrees that Stowe’s account was true. Many other aspects of slavery prove this was also true. In order for someone to sell someone or something it must “belong to, or be the property” of the seller. Therefore just the simple act of selling slaves treated them as property. As Rev. Josiah recalls “I was property, not a man, not a father, not a husband.”⁶⁰ Another way slaves were treated as property was that they were often inherited along with furniture and land when parents died. The Butler auction is evidence of the inheritance and selling of slaves as property.

One real life example is in the life of Harriet Jacobs. She recalls being told by her master “I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all

⁵⁹ Bell, 291

⁶⁰ Henson, 73.

things.”⁶¹ The idea of slaves being considered property is also prevalent in “Wanted” posters and advertisements requesting the return of slave property for a cash reward. One New Jersey slave owner perfectly portrayed this theme when he advertised for “the return of his nine year-old Negro girl who “Was Stolen by Her Mother.””⁶² There were many other posters flying during the period of slavery advertising a reward for the capture of run-away slaves.

Why does Stowe Highlight Slaves Being Treated as Property?

The idea of slaves being treated as property was another thing that contradicted with Stowe’s Christian beliefs. Simply being a slave was enough to be considered property, despite how they were treated by their owner. Considering someone as property is to devalue human life. When slaves were used as collateral, gambled away, or sold it was as if they were worthless. Their existence was no more important than a game of cards, or could be determined simple by chance.

The idea of someone else being in complete control of another human beings life was also something that whites would not tolerate themselves. However, until Stowe’s novel brought the issue into their homes they did not consider this issue seriously. Slaves were by law and stereotype inferior to whites.

⁶¹ Harriet A. Jacobs, Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 27.

⁶² Unger, 44.

Many whites considered slavery a form of protection for slaves, because it was thought they would not be able to function in a normal society. By Stowe highlighting this issue she hoped to change white's perception of slaves. She hoped that whites would consider the fact that slaves were human beings just as whites were. She knew that whites would never consider slaves as equals, but hoped that she could elicit some type of sympathy.

Physical Abuse of Slaves

Stowe's Portrayal of Slave Abuse

The next aspect of slavery that Stowe heavily accents is the physical treatment of the slaves. Stowe was aware of the fact that a slave's treatment greatly depended on who their master was. When Mr. Shelby owned the slaves they had no desires and were treated very well. Mr. Haley also noted this and told Mr. Shelby that people from Kentucky were often guilty of spoiling their slaves.⁶³ When they were sold to another master, they would only encounter heartache from being misinformed about slavery. When Uncle Tom was under the care of Mr. St. Claire he was also treated kindly.

The first time the reader is introduced to a slave being treated harshly is when George Harris visits Eliza in the night to tell her that he cannot take any more of his master's abuse.⁶⁴ The result was George running away to Canada around the same time Eliza fled. Another incident of brutal force being used on slaves was the account of old Prue. This slave was beaten for stealing from her master and getting drunk. According to her she drank to take away the pain of the beating and reality of her life as a slave. When her master got fed up with her ways Prue was eventually locked in the cellar for punishment and died.⁶⁵

⁶³ Stowe, 17.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 26.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 257.

The most brutal treatment of slaves comes at the hands of Simon Legree, Uncle Tom's last owner. At the hands of Legree, Uncle Tom is constantly beaten because he refuses to obey his master. The things that Uncle Tom refuses to do are things that Legree knows are contradictory to Uncle Tom's Christian morals. Legree tells Uncle Tom to whip another slave, and Uncle Tom refused to do so. The final beating that Uncle Tom receives is more than he can handle and he dies a couple of days later.⁶⁶

One important thing that Stowe does in her novel is that she does not assign the character of Simon Legree to a Southerner. Instead Legree is a Northerner from Vermont, living under the South's slavery run economy. By doing this Stowe does not entirely blame the South for its stand on slavery. She again points to her theme that the system of slavery is evil and corrupts everyone. It was often rumored that slave owners from the North were harder on their slaves than slave owners from the South. The factuality of this is not known, but it is true that slavery corrupts everyone.

In her novel Stowe does not make all slave owners entirely evil or entirely good. She attempts to fulfill one of her goals of her novel, which was to show some of the nicest and some of the harshest examples of slavery.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid, 479.

⁶⁷ Ammons, 35.

The South's Portrayal of Slave Abuse

Stowe's critics were quick to make the claim that she incorrectly portrayed slavery by the abuse the slaves were given. They cited several laws, which were designed to protect the slaves. With these laws if the owner of a slave abused the slave they could be fined, imprisoned or both.⁶⁸

Along with the explanation of laws governing the treatment of slaves Stowe's critics cite examples of abuse and their results. In two specific incidents, *Fields v. the State of Tennessee* and *Souther v. The Commonwealth* Stowe's critics cited examples of slaves killed by abusive masters and that the masters were found guilty according to the law.⁶⁹ Stowe's critics also use reason to attempt to persuade the reader that slaves were not beaten. They argue that since slaves were needed to make money, no slave owner in his right mind would beat a slave to or near death. Slaves were worth more money working in the field, not nursing wounds they argued.

Another thing the critics point out is that Legree is not a true Southerner. Legree is from Vermont, one critic has gone so far as to say that it was general knowledge that Northern overseers and owners are crueller than Southern overseers

⁶⁸ Ammons, 16.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 17.

and owners.⁷⁰ By doing this, the critic was attempting to pass the buck and blame the extreme conditions of slave abuse on the Northerners.

History's Portrayal of Slave Abuse

In history there is evidence to prove that slave abuse really existed. Some slaves were beaten to death, while others were left crippled, or maimed for life. Other slaves either witnessed these incidents, or they saw the results the actions. Despite this there are examples of slaves that were treated well. In Stowe's novel there are examples of both sides. There are also plenty of examples to support both sides of this story in real life.

In Rev. Henson's autobiography he tells the story of how he was beaten and crippled for life. Although it was not by his master, it was at the hands of an overseer, and his Negroes.⁷¹ Although this type of treatment was illegal the overseer got away with his crimes. When Henson's master had the case tried in court the overseer accused Henson of attacking him first. Since the testimony of Negroes was not permissible in court Henson could not testify on his behalf. Henson's master lost the case and was ordered to pay the costs of court.

In another case Harriet Jacobs recalled witnessing a fellow slave being hung over the floor and a piece of pork fat being cooked over his body, with the

⁷⁰ John Spencer Bassett, The Southern Plantation Overseer: As Revealed in his Letters. (Northampton: Smith College, 1925), 34

⁷¹ Henson, 38.

scalding grease running over him.⁷² Henry Bibb provides another example when he tells about incidents in his life as a slave. He recalls being beaten very intensely once for attending a prayer meeting.⁷³

Another piece of evidence that proves slaves were beaten is a contract between the plantation owner and his overseer. In this contract it specifies that “No punishment is to exceed fifteen lashes: in cases where the overseer supposes a severer punishment is necessary, he must apply to the Proprietor....”⁷⁴ While this does prove that slaves were beaten, it also proves that some restraint was also used.

Stowe intended to show the best and worst sides of slavery, and in this instance she was also successful. Real life examples of slaves who were treated well by their masters do exist. Ben Solomon, a slave in the early 1700s remembers being treated fairly and never harmed during his life as a slave.⁷⁵ There are also many other slaves who remember being treated very well by their masters such as Charity Anderson, Joseph Holmes, and Tempe Herndon Durham.⁷⁶

One way that slavery advocates helped Stowe’s argument that slaves were abused was by the laws that they used to argue that slaves were not abused.

⁷² Jacobs, 13.

⁷³ Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr., The Slaves Narrative. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 29.

⁷⁴ Bassett, 29.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

If there was no problem with theft in countries, there would be no need for laws regulating it? Applying this to slavery, if there was no problem with slaves being beaten by their masters why would there be a law against it? Laws are created to deter behavior that society deems deviant. These laws are created because people feel there is a need to stop a certain type of behavior.

Also Stowe's critics cite court cases that show slave owners were convicted in court of beating their slaves to death, in an attempt to show that they were punished. They were punished for the behavior that Stowe portrayed them as doing in her novel. This evidence that they produce only further proves her theme.

Why Did Stowe Highlight Slave Abuse

This is important because abuse was one of the main outcries of anti-slavery advocates. Because slaves were considered property and less than whites their treatment was left at the benevolence of their master. In some cases the slaves were abused, but in others they were not. However, the abuse that many slaves received was unjustly deserved, and often fatal. Physically abusing someone, slave or not, was something that Christian values were against. The Bible speaks on chastising children, and tells its readers how to do it correctly. Also when you chastise children you moderately correct their behavior. Slave owners were not chastising their slaves, rather beating them because they did not

as they were commanded. Chastising leaves no permanent marks or defamed limbs, contrarily beating does.

By showing abuse of slaves through the martyrdom of Uncle Tom, Christians were forced to feel sympathetic to slaves. When Stowe wrote Uncle Tom's death scene she was trying to evoke memories of Jesus Christ's death at the hands of his accusers. Before being crucified Jesus was severely beaten, Uncle Tom was beaten so severely that he died. Also harsh accusers beat both unjustly. Stowe's Christian readers all knew about Jesus' death, and should have been reminded about it when they read her novel.

Conclusion

When you approach slavery as if it were simply a business you can understand it better. The basic ideology of slavery was that slaves were the cheapest form of labor available in the United States. By proper management of your slaves you could maximize your profit and minimize your expenses. Some people believed that the only way to keep your slaves working was to constantly pressure them, or make them fear you. Others believed that the slaves could be trusted with some responsibility and not watched like an infant. Ultimately when the truth was told the slaves were property, and could be sold, gambled, inherited, or used as collateral. The slaves had no rights except those granted by their master and afforded them by law. Because slaves were considered property with few rights, their treatment as well as the length of time their family stayed together depended on the graces of their master.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's critics attempt to deny the possibility that her novel Uncle Tom's Cabin is historically accurate. Because they cannot deny the fact that slave families were broken up, they claim that many times the owners tried to keep them together. They also cannot deny the fact that slaves were considered property, and treated as such. However, they are able to cite different laws that were intended to protect slaves. The dates that some of these laws were established are from the beginning of the slavery era before the institution of slavery became what it is known as today. Nevertheless the laws did at one time

exist. To refute the claim that slaves were abused Stowe's critics are again able to cite several cases where masters were tried and found guilty of breaking the law by killing their slave.

In Uncle Tom's Cabin Harriet Beecher Stowe was able to create a novel that portrayed the institution of slavery accurately. Her goal of telling the nicest and harshest side of slavery was also achieved. In her following book Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin, Stowe was able to cite numerous examples of incidents that occurred in real life and also in her earlier novel. Her intentional goal was not to tell the true story of a family of slaves, rather to tell an accurate account of slave life. Also while she claims that the novel was a "revelation from God" or that the idea came to her in a vision may not be determinable, the fact still remains that the novel accurately portrayed slavery in the United States.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Stowe, xiii.