キリスト教の良い原因:
ハリエット・ビーチャー・ストウの反奴隷制小説

クリストファー ベイン

A Good Christian Cause: Harriet Beecher Stowe and her Anti-slavery Novels

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Throughout the history of fictional literature, certain books have had the power to influence societal change. Whether that is the original intent of the author is not always the case, however. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly was a work of fictional literature that the author fully hoped would make a difference. Published in 1851, it was an immediate success and both that book, her other slavery writings and the author became world-famous. Moreover, Stowe and her works became synonymous with the American abolition movement. This paper will examine the motivations of Stowe in choosing her Christian ‘cause’. It will also describe how her characters represented the evils of slavery. Finally it will outline reactions to her slavery works.

要 旨
フィクションの文学の歴史を通じて、社会の変化に影響を与える力を持つ作品が存在してきた。しかし、社会の変化が著者の本来の意図であるかどうかは必ずしも当てはまるとは限らない。ハリエット・ビーチャー・ストウのUncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life among the Lowlyは、著者がまさに社会に変革をもたらすことを望んでいた創作作品であった。1851年に出
版された、Uncle Tom’s Cabin はすぐに人気を得、その本、奴隷に関わる彼女の他の作品と著者は世界的に有名になった。さらにストウと彼女の作品は、アメリカの奴隷制度廃止運動の代名詞と見なされるようになった。この論文は、ストウが彼女の「大義」を選ぶことになった動機を例示する。また、Uncle Tom’s Cabin の様々な主人公がどのように奴隷制の悪を代表しているかを説明する。最後に、ストウの奴隷関連作品に対する反応について概略を述べる。

Introduction
On March 9, 1851, Harriet Beecher Stowe announced her most determined public foray into the battle of hearts and minds over slavery in a letter to Gamaliel Bailey, editor of the anti-slavery journal, the National Era, with these sentiments:
"Up to this year I have always felt that I had no particular call to meddle with this subject.... But I feel now that the time is come when even a woman or a child who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak." ("Letter")
The slavery issue in America reached a climax during the middle decades of the 19th Century. It was during this tumultuous time that Harriet Beecher Stowe entered her most influential plea for the abolition of slavery in the form of a semi-fictional novel, Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly (hereafter Uncle Tom’s Cabin). It was not Stowe’s first attempt at anti-slavery literature, nor her last, but it was one of, if not the most significant contributions of the period. That Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote such novels was no accident. Her family background almost demanded that she make her name known in pursuit of a ‘good Christian cause’. Stowe certainly did so in the anti-slavery cause, provoking many varying responses to her works.

The purpose of this brief paper will be to examine the background of Stowe and how it relates to two of her anti-slavery novels, her famous Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1851) and in 1856 the lesser-known Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp (hereafter Dred). It will also examine how
Stowe attacks slavery in these two fictional works through the characters she portrays. Finally, it will attempt to give some indication as to why the novels were so effective in arousing sympathy, with particular reference to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Overall, this paper aims to provide some insight into the life and writings of the Christian housewife and mother who became a household name and a prominent figure in the anti-slavery campaign and beyond.

**Early Life of Harriet Beecher**

Born on June 14, 1811, to the Reverend Doctor Lyman Beecher and his wife Roxana Foote, Harriet Elizabeth Beecher entered what was to be one of the most influential religious families of the time in the United States of America (Gerson, 2-3). The Beecher family had an intense religious background, Lyman Beecher being a “fire and brimstone” evangelical preacher (ibid., 3). Rev. Beecher applied his fervour at home as well as in the pulpit, and set about almost terrifying his children into conversion and adherence to Christianity. Harriet’s mother, Roxana Beecher, died when Harriet was three years old and thus the Beecher children were left to the evangelical mercy of Dr. Lyman Beecher. The extent to which religion dominated the Beecher household can be seen in the subsequent careers of the Beecher sons, all of whom become ministers of the Church (Adams, 20). Despite the almost brutal way in which it was applied, the theology that Dr. Beecher passed on to his children stood them in good stead. All the children had a devotion “to the betterment of mankind, to social justice, and to the redress of inequality in the treatment of minority groups” (Gerson, 2). While all the Beecher children added significantly to any cause they chose to support, Harriet Beecher was perhaps the most famous example of the Beecher ‘hereditary goodness’.

After the death of her mother, Harriet was sent for some time to the Foote family farm. She was accompanied by her aunt, Harriet Foote. The Foote family and Samuel Foote, in particular, were far more liberal and
of a wider world-view (Hedrick), and in this environment the younger Harriet learned to read by the age of four. This set the child on her life’s path and she became a voracious reader and scholar. By the time she was eight, Lyman Beecher had opened his library to daughter Harriet and had exposed her to his anti-slavery sentiment as well as documents such as the American ‘Declaration of Independence’. At the Litchfield Academy, Harriet displayed some of her writing ability and continued to feed her enormous reading habits. At thirteen she attended a school for teenage girls run by her sister, Catherine. There Harriet’s studies continued and she later assumed a role as a teacher. Her dedication to work, even work she disliked, enabled Harriet to become an excellent student (Gerson, 5-19).

Harriet had an enormous ability in and devotion to reading and writing that enabled her to deeply research her subsequent novels, a talent that proved valuable when it came to the inevitable public defence her famous works. In some respects, Harriet was a radical among a family of radicals. The future novelist contradicted a number of Dr. Beecher’s norms and taboos. In keeping with general evangelist behaviour of the period, the Beecher children were taught to withhold emotions and feelings, but this did not prevent Harriet from mourning at the funeral of the family cat, or from being the most ardent ‘weeper’ at her father’s church sermons (Gerson, 9, 14). She also developed “an ability to see her own faults” and decided that “as long as she did what was right... she shouldn’t care what others thought of her actions” (ibid., 17). While Harriet would have had no inkling of the degree to which she would have to maintain this stance, this was just the type of attitude that she would need if she were to write novels that would help throw the nation into turmoil. Perhaps her self-assessment referred to her open weeping or to her literary habits. Lyman Beecher detested theatre, novels and short stories, branding them as “iniquitous and depraved”, but this did not prevent Harriet from reading and attending Shakespearian plays, or reading and writing poetry (ibid., 31, 25). Harriet’s ability to give
her emotions their rein could possibly account for her ability to instil her novels with such emotive power. Her writing of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was in conflict with the teachings of her childhood. It was an open display of emotion and it was a novel, a combination her father would have regarded as sinful.

A move to Cincinnati, Ohio, with her father at twenty-one exposed Harriet to all manner of society, including ‘free blacks’, as the city was a major trading port on the Ohio River (“Harriet Beecher Stowe”). She also joined a literary group and it was there she met her future husband, Calvin Ellis Stowe (ibid.). Calvin Ellis Stowe was already an outspoken abolitionist and after the two married, the Stowe household actively supported the Underground Railway (the secretive system which aided runaway slaves) (ibid.).

**Anti-Slavery Cause**

Stowe (hereafter all references to Stowe refer to Harriet Beecher Stowe) was primed to do something in the name of a ‘good cause’ by her childhood and we must expect in her marriage. Lyman Beecher and all the other Beecher children with the exception of Mary Beecher, distinguished themselves in various reforming fields: all the boys joined their father in the fight against slavery from the church pulpit; Catherine was a pioneer in the education of women; and Isabella Beecher was a devoted suffragette (Gerson, 2). It would have been improbable if not impossible for Harriet Stowe, with her intelligence, skills, religious and emotional capacities, to remain untouched by the actions of her family: it was quite inevitable that she pursue a ‘good cause’, particularly anti-slavery.

All these factors in Stowe’s upbringing are in some way connected to her anti-slavery literature. The mere existence of slavery and its effects were an affront to her religious values and aroused her strong emotions. Anti-slavery was an evangelical ‘good cause’ and thus a ‘good cause’ of the Beechers. Given that writing was a favourite pastime and passion for
Stowe, what better way to give voice to her protest than through a novel.

The Fugitive Act of 1850 was the spark to the flame. The Act required the people of northern American states to uphold the Constitution by enforcing the slave laws of the South. It put people in the position of choosing to follow their moral, Christian ethics against transgressing their legal, Constitutional duties by helping runaway slaves. Nicknamed the 'Bloodhound Law' due to the method of tracking runaway slaves with dogs ("Fugitive Slave Act of 1850"), the atrocities and suffering caused by the Act were conveyed to Stowe by her sister-in-law, and she urged Stowe to use her pen to arouse people and "make [the] whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is" (C. Stowe, 145). This was the spur Stowe needed and the result was Uncle Tom's Cabin and later Dred. [For detailed descriptions of these long works see Wikipedia under “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” and “Dred, A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp”].

Characterization in Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Dred

Uncle Tom’s Cabin was first serialized from June 1851 in the abolitionist magazine, the National Era, but due to its initial popularity, Stowe expanded the narrative during its 40-week run. It was published in book form in 1852 ("Uncle Tom's"). Dred was published in 1856 ("Dred").

In these two major anti-slavery works Stowe delivers serious indictments against the institution of slavery at almost every turn of a page. She particularly does so by having her characters portray and represent various sections of the American society, not only the slaves and the slave-owning community of the South. By allowing the actions of characters to speak for a segment of society in a representative sense as well as themselves in a literary sense, Stowe shows the sinfulness and moral bankruptcy of slavery while highlighting the righteousness and purity of those who oppose it. Quite distinctive groups can be seen in her novels. Indeed, every character falls in some category in relation to
slavery. They represent a cross-section of society. In this section I will
describe the main categories of ‘the good’, ‘the bad’, and those affected
and twisted by slavery.

*The Righteous and Good*

On the side of the righteous there are both slaves and ‘masters’. In
this group we see, from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, ‘Uncle’ Tom (middle aged
slave), Evangeline ‘Eva’ St. Clair (very young daughter of Augustine),
and Augustine St. Claire (plantation/slave owner) to some extent, and,
from *Dred*, ‘Old’ Tiff (slave to a poor white family), Milly (devoted slave
to Nina’s aunt), Nina Gordon (heiress to a fading slave plantation), the
Claytons (slave owning abolitionists), and Father Dickson (vocal anti-
slavery clergyman). All these characters are the heroes and heroines of
the novels.

Tom, Tiff and Milly represent the faithful, devoted Christian slave,
who, despite injustice and the prospect of perpetual bondage, treat most
people with kindness. It is a kindness that comes from Christianity. Tom,
while now regarded as racially and behaviourally stereotyped, is the
stand-out example of the Christian, evangelical slave and is almost a
Christ-like figure, with several references to this in Chapter 11 of *Uncle
Tom’s Cabin*. Although Tiff and Milly do not reach Tom’s level of
righteousness, they are of a similar mould.

Eva St. Claire, and Nina Gordon were such pure, angelic figures, it
could be said they represent something so beautiful and innocent that
they could not exist in a society that condones slavery, therefore they
must die before their time.

The Claytons and Augustine St. Claire are representative of the
compassionate slave owners even though this is somewhat of an
oxymoron, it was a fact at the time. Although there is a great deal of
difference between the Claytons, as abolitionists, and St. Claire, a
‘humanitarian’ slave owner, they are figures to be somewhat admired
and have similar redeeming elements of goodness. They, too, however,
could not exist in the slave society of The South: St. Claire was killed
before he could release his slaves from bondage, and the Claytons are
forced out of the state by their neighbours (H. B. Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s
Cabin*, 316; H. B. Stowe, *Dred*, 192-193). Though minor characters from
the story’s beginnings, the Shelbys, who sold Tom despite a long
servitude under them, also show similar traits to St. Claire and the
Claytons, especially Mrs. Shelby (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*).

Finally, there is Father Dickson who, because of his outspokenness
against slavery, is physically attacked and practically ostracised by his
fellow Churchmen (H. B. Stowe, *Dred*, 127-128, 63-64). Father Dickson
represented those churchmen that were attacked and snubbed because
they were prepared to speak out without fear of reprisals or of losing
popularity or position. He also represents the correct stance of the
church on slavery.

*The Desperate and Affected*

On the side of what might also be called ‘the desperate’ there are
escaped slaves and husband and wife, Eliza and George Harris (*Uncle
Tom’s Cabin*), and Harry Gordon (*Dred*). They represent slaves that
were driven to desperate measures to escape from bondage for
themselves or their children. Both Harry and George are willing to
physically fight for their freedom while Eliza risks her life and that of
her son in order to escape (H. B. Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 116, 66-67; H.
B. Stowe, *Dred*, 245-246). Harry Gordon’s sister, Cora, is perhaps the most
tragic example as she resorts to suffocating her children rather than
having them sold as slaves (H. B. Stowe, *Dred*, 70-71).

There is a group of slaves that represent the products of slavery.
Owen’s theory that “man is the creature of circumstance” was certainly
applicable to this group of characters, although it is doubtful Stowe
would agree with Owen (in Grison, p. 381). Topsy, a young slave girl, is
constantly told she is wicked and thus acts in that way (H. B. Stowe,
*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 253-254). Tomtit (*Dred*) similarly is expected to be a
scamp and lives up to these expectations (H. B. Stowe, *Dred*, 51-52). Once
these children are exposed to love, kindness and freedom they lose these
wild, flighty and sterotypical traits and become, eventually, responsible citizens. Slaves who work as overseers for Simon Legree, Sambo and Quimbo, are similar cases (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*). Born and raised in a state of fear and violence, they understand no other governing emotion or behaviour. When Tom, dying from their beating, forgives them and Legree, they respond and show glimpses of goodness (H. B. Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 409-410).

An off-shoot to this group are the slaves that have been so affected by the brutality of the system that they are permanently lost to society and future hope. Old Pru (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) is an example as she does not respond to Tom’s compassionate advances (ibid., 219-220). But Dred (*Dred*) is the overall representative of this group. So affected was Dred that he chose to live an isolated and primitive life in the swamp than exist in a society that viewed certain human beings as chattels, based solely on the colour of their skin. Dred holds no hope for the future: as Eva is an Angel of Hope in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Dred is the Prophet of Doom.

**The Authorities**

Several characters in the novels represent various stances on slavery taken by real-life public figures and holders of office. From *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* there is Senator Bird, and from *Dred* there are Judge Clayton and the Churchmen. Both Bird and Clayton are representatives of ‘the lawmakers’ but are caused to be involved directly with the plight of Eliza (who escapes) and Milly respectively. Also, both men are representatives of the law who were previously remote from the realities of slavery, but are confronted with the problem at their doorstep, resulting in their humanist hearts ruling their legalist heads. Senator Bird cannot abide by the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, of which he voted in favour, when he is called on to actually do so. The desperation of Eliza, backed by Mrs. Bird’s ‘Grimké-like’ argument against it, is enough to make Senator Bird follow his heart (H. B. Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 83-99). Angelina Grimké expressed her attitude to slavery in her 1836 ‘An
Appeal to the Christian Women of the Slave States of America’ in that, “if a law commands a sin, I will break it” for one should “[obey] God, rather than man”. Judge Clayton faced a similar decision when bound to uphold a law he disagreed with (H. B. Stowe, *Dred*, 443-451). That these two men of high standing in the legal system denounced laws they were duty-bound to uphold, shows the twisted state slavery created.

The opinions of the Christian Church elders, however, voiced at the Clerical Conference, shows the hypocrisy of the Church in most cases. Most were too concerned and worried about stirring up resentment and feared for their positions and that of the Church. Thus they remained inactive on the slavery issue whilst others openly supported it (ibid., 40-64). These men represent the legal and religious officers of the nation and Stowe, by depicting them as she did, presents the picture of a society that was confused, misguided and at odds with itself.

*The Villainous*

Finally, there are the villains of the novels, Simon Legree (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) and Tom Gordon (*Dred*). There are others such as Haley, Loker and Marks (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), and the generic thugs who accompanied Tom Gordon in *Dred*, but Gordon and Legree embody that which is most detestable and base. As well as being the representatives of the evil and cruel slave-owner, they are the perpetrators of the evils of the slavery. It is through the system of slavery that this occurs, both having every chance of being other than what they were. Poignantly for Stowe’s anti-slavery campaign, Legree was raised in The North by a religious mother, but he shunned his devout upbringing, becoming a sailor and finally a vicious plantation and slave owner (H. B. Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 369-370). Tom Gordon had received a good education but chose to contradict all lessons of behaviour he had been taught (H. B. Stowe, *Dred*, 42-44). The desire for profit from the human slave trade led these men, who may have otherwise become fine citizens, along the path to corruption, so in effect they were also products of the system. Unlike the slaves who were brutalized by the system, the Owen Theory could
not really be applied to Legree and Gordon. Their original environment had taught them kindness and piety, but they chose the contrary. Whereas Nina Gordon (Dred) and Evan St. Claire (Uncle Tom’s Cabin) were flowers that could not survive in the wilderness that was slavery, Tom Gordon and Legree were the weeds that thrived.

After Stowe had completed her depiction of slave society through these books, the sinfulness and sordidness of it was obvious. Although the conclusions of her novels were in some ways ‘happy’ due to some almost unrealistic coincidences, evil seemed to overcome good. The characters of merit and virtue either died or were forced away (Father Dickson being the exception). If one wanted release from slavery and its environment, one had to die or escape. Stowe presented slave society as it was through her eyes, and lets the readers decide for themselves if slavery is wrong. She obviously tried to leave them as little choice as possible, of course. She presented a society in which angelic figures like Nina Gordon, Evan St. Clair, and Uncle Tom could not continue to exist; one that forced and attempted to force people who would improve or emancipate slaves to flee; one that brutalized and warped people on both sides; one that provided the means for people to own, abuse and kill other humans whilst remaining within the law; and one that was governed legally and spiritually by men who were either confused or hypocritical. The depiction was carefully researched, skilfully written, and charged with emotion, and in the latter case, so, too, was the reaction to it.

**Reaction to Uncle Tom’s Cabin**

Harriet Beecher Stowe was not the first to use fictional literature as a vehicle for anti-slavery protest. That claim may rest with Richard Hildreth’s *The Slave; or Memoirs of Archy Moore* published in 1836 (Brandstadter). Indeed there is very convincing speculation that, without publically recognising its affect or that she had even read it, Stowe was greatly influenced by *The Slave* in the writing of both of her anti-slavery
novels, both in the composition of the characters and different physical milieu (Nichols). Hildreth’s books (after the success of Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, he wrote a sequel to The Slave entitled The White Slave) approached neither the acclaim nor readership of Stowe, however. So why did Stowe’s novels, particularly Uncle Tom’s Cabin, arouse and affect as they did, and on a global scale?

To the general public, two facts that aided the popularity of Uncle Tom’s Cabin were that Stowe was a woman and that she was a Beecher. It was a powerful combination. Although women were discouraged from publicly voicing their opinions in person, those who did drew large audiences. This was because women were regarded as the moral and religious guardians of the nation and thus their opinions on such matters carried weight. As a woman, Stowe was writing in the name of purity, morality and Christianity. Women may have felt duty-bound to read Uncle Tom’s Cabin because it concerned an issue that should have concerned them. Men may have been encouraged to read it because it was the opinion of one of societies ‘models of goodness’ on a controversial, moral and very public issue. Furthermore, the initial popularity of the book may also have been powered by the name on the cover, Harriet Beecher Stowe (author’s emphasis). Lyman Beecher and his seven minister sons were very active in the anti-slavery movement already. A novel by another Beecher, and a woman, no less, would promise a work of power, consequence and interest.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin also fulfilled the requirements for many evangelicals: anti-slavery was a ‘good cause’. Particularly in Britain this fact partially accounted for its popularity. The British people and nation (somewhat dubiously) were so-called ‘friends of the oppressed’ and American slaves were certainly that. British Evangelicals, already aroused by speakers from the United States and local evangelists, would eagerly read a book and take up a cause that would further lead to the betterment of their souls. Apart from the novel’s charismatic qualities that attracted the philanthropists and ‘do-gooders’, Uncle Tom’s Cabin
stood without aid as a highly charged, well-written and moving novel. It found a ready place in the social commentary literature of 1840s Britain and it was all the more effective because it of the claims by Stowe that much was based on factual evidence (H. B. Stowe, A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin).

Not all reactions to Stowe’s works were favourable, and for all the high praise and acclaim she received, she, of course, came under ferocious attack from ‘The South’ and supporters of slavery. Yet, despite many attempts to discredit or refute her work, no effective or lasting reply from her detractors was forthcoming. Part of the reason for this was Stowe’s meticulous research and she further challenged those who claimed she had fabricated her examples with the publication of the book, A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

Conclusion

Considering her family background, one might have naturally expected great things from Harriet Beecher Stowe. Uncle Tom’s Cabin has, and will, despite criticism of its stereotypical portrayal of African-Americans, stand the test of time and rank as one of the most influential and emotional novels ever written. It could be said that with Dred, Stowe failed in her attempt to match the power and emotion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. It would have been a hard act to follow. Still, it cannot be denied that these two works contributed greatly to the anti-slavery and very Christian cause.

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