

On Racial Discrimination in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”

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ABSTRACT

“Uncle Tom’s Cabin” was written by Mrs. Stowe (1811-1896) relating her own experiences, is a brilliant classic of realism. At first, it was published in installments on Nation Time in 1852. Immediately, this novel evoked a tremendous repercussion. Firstly, due to the author’s ingenious and meticulous depiction of then events and characters, this novel revealed the tragic fate of the American Negro slaves. There is no exaggeration to say that, to some extent, this novel pushed forward the development of the Civil War indirectly. Secondly, in the 1850s of America, the publication of this novel proceeded profoundly to transform the then mainstream of literature from Romanticism to Realism. Thirdly, by analyzing this novel, readers can not only recognize the real situation of the discrimination and race persecution from which the Black suffered, but also get a panoramic revelation of the society before the Civil War. In addition, it merits great attentions of readers to learn and appreciate the realistic style of Mrs. Stowe.

Keywords: Racial discrimination, Slaves, The Civil War, Realism.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF “UNCLE TOM’S CABIN”

1.1 The Author's Life Experiences

To understand the novel's context, there is a must to first examine Harriet Beecher Stowe's biography. Stowe was born into a prominent religious family — her father, Lyman Beecher, was a renowned Calvinist preacher whose doctrines deeply influenced her early worldview. During her youth, however, exposure to her uncle's liberal theology led her to embrace progressive religious beliefs. Her literary style was shaped by Sir Walter Scott's Romantic novels, which she avidly read, as evident in her later works (Feng Xuesong, trans., “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”, Nanjing University Press, 2009, pp. 230–345)¹.

In 1832, Stowe relocated with her family to Cincinnati, Ohio, where she taught at a girls’ school and wrote essays documenting New England life. In 1836, she married Calvin Ellis Stowe, a professor at her father's seminary. During this

period, her travels across the United States exposed her to the brutal realities of slavery, particularly in Southern states. These observations became the foundation for her antislavery novel. Simultaneously, her pedagogical experiences and engagement with reformist movements solidified her role as a pivotal figure in the abolitionist cause (Li Haihong & Xu Xiaohong, “On the Divergent Fates of Uncle Tom and George,” Journal of Minjiang University, 2008, pp. 14–16)².

“These experiences not only provided a solid foundation in lived experience for her literary work but also shaped her pedagogical philosophy, which later propelled her to prominence in the abolitionist movement. As scholars Li Haihong and Xu Xiaohong (2008) noted in their analysis of the divergent fates of Uncle Tom and George in the novel, Stowe's dual engagement with grassroots social realities and intellectual discourse uniquely positioned her to critique systemic oppression (Journal of Minjiang University, pp. 14–16).”

1. Feng Xuesong (Trans.). (2009). Uncle Tom's Cabin. Nanjing University Press. pp. 230–345.

2. Li Haihong, Xu Xiaohong. On the Different Fates of Uncle Tom and George. Journal of Minjiang University, 2008, pp. 14-16.

1.2 *The Origins and Evolution of Chattel Slavery*

The transatlantic slave trade emerged in the early 17th century as European colonists, desperate for labor, began forcibly transporting Africans to the Americas. In 1619, Dutch traders delivered the first 20 enslaved Africans to Jamestown, Virginia, selling them to British settlers. Initially, the Black population remained small—fewer than 300 by the mid-17th century—with ambiguous legal status. By the late 1600s, however, colonial legislatures codified racialized chattel slavery through laws that irrevocably bound Africans and their descendants to lifelong servitude (Norman Davies, *Europe: A History*, World Knowledge Press, 2007, pp. 378–457).

This system inherited the brutality of ancient slave traditions, reducing Black individuals to “talking tools” and “living property” under Anglo-American law³. The institutionalization of slavery accelerated with the 1709 establishment of large-scale slave auctions on Wall Street in New York. By the eve of the American Revolution, nearly 500,000 enslaved Africans populated the Thirteen Colonies, constituting one-seventh of the colonial population. While slavery existed across British North America, its economic epicenter lay in the Southern plantations, where enslaved laborers produced cotton, tobacco, rice, and indigo for global markets. Historians George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi emphasize that this exploited labor force not only formed the bedrock of the Southern economy but also fueled America's primitive capital accumulation (*A History of the Americas*, Guangdong Nanfang Daily Press, 2012, pp. 79–109)⁴. Paradoxically, the North's maritime and commercial sectors—particularly in New England—profited from the very slave trade they later condemned.

The novel's panoramic depiction of enslaved suffering and slaveholder brutality lays bare how America's rise was built on what W.E.B. Du Bois termed “the wages of whiteness”—a system of racial capitalism drenched in Black blood and tears.

3. Davies, N. (2007). *A History of Europe*. World Affairs Press, pp. 378-457.

4. Tindall, G. B. (George Brown), & Lindberg, D. E. (David Emory). (2012). *A History of the Americas*. Guangdong Southern Daily Press, pp. 79-109.

2. THE LIVING CONDITIONS AND MORAL LANDSCAPE OF WHITE SOCIETY IN “UNCLE TOM’S CABIN”

2.1 *Social Hierarchies and Psychological Complexes*

The novel starkly delineates the racialized social order of antebellum America, where whites operated as an oppressive ruling class, their dominance entrenched through systemic dehumanization of Black individuals. Enslaved people were reduced to mere property — “living tools” devoid of personhood, existing solely to enrich white slaveowners. Stowe's vivid portrayal reveals the grotesque luxury of slaveholding elites, who exercised absolute control over Black lives: inflicting casual violence, trafficking human beings, and even sanctioning murder with impunity⁵. The character of Haley, the slave trader, epitomizes this moral decay. His greed, selfishness, and profit-driven brutality — symbolized by his infamous declaration, “speculating in live merchandise is my business” — embody the normalized inhumanity of the slave economy (He Fangchuan & Ning Sao, *A General History of Africa*, East China Normal University Press, 1995, pp. 235–371). Similarly, Marie St. Clare represents the toxic arrogance of white privilege, her willful ignorance and racial condescension mirroring the broader “herrenvolk democracy” mentality that equated whiteness with inherent superiority.

2.2 *Divergent White Attitudes Toward Racial Discrimination*

To comprehend white Americans' attitudes toward Black people, it is necessary to examine the structural divide between the industrialized North and the agrarian South. The North's economy, driven by manufacturing and commerce, fostered more progressive social values and greater (though still limited) racial egalitarianism, which laid the groundwork for the abolitionist movement⁶. In contrast, the South's plantation economy—dependent on enslaved labor for cash crops like cotton and tobacco—entrenched a dehumanizing view of Black people as mere instruments of production (Li Meihua, trans., *Gone with the Wind*,

5. He Fangchuan & Ning Sao. *A General History of Africa*. East China Normal University Press, 1995, pp. 235-371.

6. Li Meihua (Trans.). *Gone with the Wind*. Yilin Press, 2000, pp. 129–261.

Yilin Press, 2000, pp. 129–261). This economic dichotomy directly shaped racial ideologies: Northern industrialists increasingly condemned slavery as antithetical to free labor principles, while Southern planters vehemently defended it as a "positive good," thus prompting the Civil War. The novel *Gone with the Wind* prophetically encapsulates this conflict through Rhett Butler's assertion: "The North's factories and railroads will crush us. They've got the money, the ships, and the masses—even the slaves secretly cheer them." His analysis underscores the inevitability of industrialized modernity overpowering the South's archaic slaveocracy—a historical trajectory affirming that civilization ultimately triumphs over barbarism.

In "Uncle Tom's Cabin", white attitudes toward enslaved Black people can be categorized into three distinct archetypes:

- In "Uncle Tom's Cabin", slave traders like Haley epitomize the most virulent form of racial exploitation. These individuals commodified human lives with ruthless efficiency, viewing enslaved Black people as disposable instruments for accumulating wealth, gratifying carnal desires, and consolidating power. Their moral depravity is starkly illustrated through acts of psychological terror and physical brutality—whippings, family separations, and sexual exploitation—all designed to crush resistance and assert dominance. Haley's infamous declaration, "Human flesh is just another cargo to me," lays bare the dehumanizing logic of chattel slavery. Yet beneath this veneer of control lurked profound insecurity: slaveholders' lavish lifestyles depended entirely on suppressing those they feared most. The more violently they oppressed, the more paranoid they grew, trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of dehumanizing cruelty. Stowe's narrative exposes this contradiction—their supposed racial "supremacy" rested on systemic terror, not moral or intellectual superiority.
- These slaveholding elites epitomize the moral contradictions of "benevolent" oppression. While exploiting enslaved labor for economic gain—Shelby's financial woes force Tom's sale; St. Clare's aristocratic indolence depends on Black servitude—they cloak their complicity in paternalistic rhetoric, claiming to treat enslaved people "like family."⁷ St. Clare's

self-aware hypocrisy crystallizes this duality: "We Southerners sentimentalize slavery as a sacred institution, all while its machinery grinds human souls to dust."

- Represented by figures like Miss Ophelia, Mrs. Bird, Mrs. Shelby, and George Shelby, these white individuals sympathized with and actively supported Black liberation. Miss Ophelia, hailing from the North and deeply influenced by abolitionist ideals, not only provided spiritual encouragement but also took concrete actions to aid enslaved people. She courageously fought for Black rights, even defying societal norms. George Shelby, who had harbored empathy for enslaved individuals since childhood—particularly his fondness for Uncle Tom—later freed all enslaved people on his estate. These characters exemplified white allies who respected, understood, and championed the abolitionist movement. Their involvement underscores that the fight for Black liberation garnered support from morally conscious whites, a critical factor in explaining the North's victory over the ostensibly advantaged South during the Civil War.

3. RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST BLACK PEOPLE IN "UNCLE TOM'S CABIN"

3.1 *Concrete Manifestations of Racial Oppression*

Outwardly, the enslaved individuals appeared well-maintained—adequately clothed, fed, and groomed. The auction houses provided this superficial care not out of compassion, but to enhance their market value on sale days, ensuring they looked vigorous and presentable. In New Orleans, the slave auction houses resembled ordinary buildings, immaculately maintained. Outside, rows of Black men and women stood beneath a canopy, displayed as "living specimens" of the human merchandise available inside. Prospective buyers were ushered into the auction hall with practiced courtesy, where they could inspect masses of human beings—husbands, wives, siblings, parents, and children—advertised with the chilling commercial pitch: "Available for individual purchase or wholesale lots⁸!"

7. Jiang Nan. "On the Historical Status of Uncle Tom's Cabin." *Journal of Tibet University*, 2005, pp. 12-14.

8. Human Rights Record of the United States in 2004 [J]. *Xinhua News Agency*, 2004, pp.13-17

Though enslaved people were superficially provided with food and shelter, their lack of agency bred despair. To suppress unrest, slaveholders orchestrated grotesque spectacles—forcing musically skilled captives to play instruments and compelling others to dance for entertainment, all to mask the soul-crushing reality of their existence. Yet some, consumed by grief for lost families and homelands, sank into visible melancholy. Their sorrow enraged overseers, who branded them "morose" and unleashed brutal slave traders to "correct" their spirits with whips and chains. Thus, enslaved individuals learned to perform artificial cheerfulness—grinning, singing, and feigning vitality—especially before potential buyers. This charade served dual purposes: to attract "kind" masters and to avoid punishment⁹. Yet even these tormented souls were considered "fortunate" compared to those who perished during capture and transport. Historical records from African and world history reveal the Atlantic slave trade's "corridor of death" in horrific detail: Enslaved Africans endured six to ten weeks of hellish transit from West Africa. Slave ships were systematically overloaded—historical accounts describe captives "stacked like books on a shelf," each allotted less space than a coffin. Shackled limb-to-limb (right leg to left leg, right wrist to left wrist), they writhed in putrid air as epidemics raged below deck. Malnutrition from putrid food and scarce freshwater compounded the suffering. The ocean became a mass grave: countless enslaved individuals—deemed too ill to be profitable—were thrown overboard, their bodies devoured by sharks. As historian Marcus Rediker notes, "The Middle Passage was a floating charnel house, its wake trailing the blood of millions." This genocide-by-neglect exposes slavery's economic calculus: human lives were disposable inputs, their mortality factored into profit margins¹⁰.

To those of us in the modern era who pride ourselves on enlightened progress, these accounts may seem like unthinkable atrocities—grotesque legends too barbaric to reconcile with our civilized self-image. Yet this systematized dehumanization and industrialized slaughter were not mere myths, but historical realities meticulously documented in ledgers of slave ships and plantation records. As archival evidence from UNESCO's Slave Route Project confirms, the commodification of human

suffering was a calculated enterprise, its brutality normalized through legal frameworks and economic imperatives.

When people confront this darkness in humanity's so-called "march toward progress," they inherit more than historical memory—people bear an intergenerational mandate. Philosopher Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" finds its prototype here: not in sudden eruptions of violence, but in the cold calculus that reduced living souls to cargo manifests. This chapter of people's shared past stands as both eternal indictment and urgent moral compass, screaming through the ages: Civilization built on racialized suffering is no civilization at all.

3.2 Attitudes of Different Black Individuals Towards Racial Discrimination as Depicted in "Uncle Tom's Cabin"

Through "Uncle Tom's Cabin", people can categorize enslaved Black people facing oppression into two groups. One is represented by figures like Uncle Tom—kind, diligent, and loyal to their enslavers. The other is exemplified by Eliza and her husband, who resist their fate and courageously fight for freedom. Both groups suffer persecution. Those like Uncle Tom, though virtuous and hardworking, place their fate in the hands of God and their enslavers. While they yearn for a better life, their lack of courage to resist often leads to tragic outcomes, as seen in Uncle Tom's demise. In contrast, enslaved people like Eliza and her husband dare to resist and pursue freedom and dignity. Though resistance invites brutal suppression and risks death, they choose this path bravely¹¹. Their eventual triumph proves the righteousness of their choice: they not only liberate themselves but also inspire others enduring racial persecution.

3.3 The Ultimate Fates of Black Individuals Who Adopted Different Attitudes

Regarding the destinies of enslaved Black characters in the novel, people again examine the contrasting outcomes of Uncle Tom and Eliza's family. Uncle Tom, fatally injured while rescuing

9. *Gone with the Wind* by Mitchell [M]. Yanbian People's Publishing House, November 1, 2010, pp. 156-203

10. Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [M]. 2009-7-1.35-78

11. Whipple, Charles K. *The Non-Resistance Principle: [M]. With Particular Application to the Help of Slaves by Abolitionists*. Boston: The Modern Library, 1860.23-31

Cassy—a Black woman enslaved by Legree who refused to be his plaything—realizes in his dying moments the truth that only resistance can secure freedom. In contrast, Eliza and her husband successfully escape the clutches of their enslavers and claim the freedom they deserve. While people cannot assert that all who refrain from resistance will meet Tom's tragic fate, it is undeniable that freedom cannot be attained without defiance. Even Uncle Tom, in his final moments, awakens to this truth, urging others to rise up, resist oppression, and courageously pursue liberation.

4. THE REAL-WORLD SIGNIFICANCE OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION REVEALED IN "UNCLE TOM'S CABIN"

This work profoundly influenced societal transformation in the United States, particularly in advancing the emancipation of enslaved Black people. At the time of its publication, though many sympathized with Black suffering and anti-slavery writers emerged, none matched the impact of "Uncle Tom's Cabin". The novel directly and indirectly fueled the abolitionist movement in America. Some even credit its release with accelerating the outbreak of the American Civil War, playing a pivotal role in the nation's struggle for liberation. Through its narrative, readers viscerally confront the brutality of slavery.

Though modern society claims progress, racial discrimination persists, opposed by people of conscience yet never fully eradicated. In many regions across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, racism shows signs of resurgence, claiming countless lives annually. Even in the self-proclaimed "land of the free," the United States, racial scandals surface yearly. In 1999, the killing of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed Black man, by four white New York City police officers ignited nationwide protests. In 1995, the Million Man March in Washington, D.C., rallied for Black unity and against systemic racism. The 1992 beating of Rodney King, a Black motorist, by white officers triggered large-scale racial riots in Los Angeles. Such incidents underscore how racial discrimination remains the darkest stain on America's human rights record.

The 2004 Human Rights Record of the United States, published by China's State Council Information Office in 2004, highlighted that racial discrimination remains deeply entrenched in

American society, permeating all aspects of daily life. The report noted that people of color in the U.S. disproportionately endure poverty and systemic inequality compared to their white counterparts. According to The Guardian on October 9, 2004, the median net worth of white households in 2002 was \$88,000—11 times that of Latino families and nearly 15 times that of African American families. Recent nationwide protests triggered by police shootings of Black individuals further expose the lingering specter of racism. While overt racial discrimination may now be suppressed, its roots persist in American society, with some clinging stubbornly to prejudiced ideologies. This underscores that the fight against racism remains long and arduous, demanding collective efforts to realize a world grounded in equality, compassion, and fraternity. Only through such resolve can humanity consign this tragic chapter of history to the past. Thus, revisiting "Uncle Tom's Cabin" today retains its cautionary relevance. To forget history is to betray oneself. China is a multi-ethnic nation, where ethnic issues remain a critical concern that cannot be overlooked. With a long history of ethnic integration and a high degree of cultural amalgamation, coupled with the implementation of more equitable ethnic policies since the founding of the People's Republic, the Chinese government has significantly strengthened support for minority groups. These measures have fostered harmonious coexistence among all ethnicities, ensuring that ethnic tensions remain minimal.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" stands as a monumental work of profound historical significance. Its publication is widely credited with hastening the outbreak of the American Civil War (1861–1865), also known as the second bourgeois revolution in U.S. history. This large-scale conflict pitted the United States of America (the Union) against the secessionist Confederate States of America (the Confederacy). The war erupted after eleven Southern states, citing opposition to Abraham Lincoln's 1861 presidential inauguration, withdrew from the Union and established their own government under Jefferson Davis as "president," expelling federal forces from the South. Lincoln responded by declaring war on the "rebellious" states.

The Civil War preserved national unity, abolished slavery, and dismantled further obstacles

to capitalist development, paving the way for the U.S. capitalist economy's takeoff. While the war did not eradicate racial discrimination, it significantly reduced systemic inequality against Black Americans. Beyond reshaping the nation's political and economic landscape, the conflict led to the formal abolition of slavery across the Southern states. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" thus remains a timeless testament to the power of literature in driving social change and challenging entrenched injustices.

Yet it is also necessary to confront an uncomfortable truth: Can the tragedy of slavery be blamed solely on white people? The transatlantic slave trade 450 years ago was not orchestrated by Europeans alone - how could a handful of white traders have captured millions from Africa's interior without local complicity? Many enslaved Africans were first captured and sold by their own kin and neighboring tribes before reaching European hands.

This unsettling logic applies even to modern triumphs. Consider Usain Bolt's dazzling Olympic performances - how did his gifted ancestors arrive in Jamaica? While British slavers and the Middle Passage come to mind, the full story involves African collaborators and a global network of profiteers. Slavery was less a white crime than a human conspiracy, fueled by universal greed.

The path to preventing such atrocities lies not in assigning unilateral blame, but in elevating our collective morality. Only through universal moral progress can humanity ensure such tragedies never recur. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" thus challenges us to confront uncomfortable complexities in our shared history.

Through this novel, humanity must never forget the blood-soaked era it depicts. People mourn the tragic suffering of enslaved Africans and express our deepest contempt for the inhumane slaveholders. Yet more importantly, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" continues to serve as a profound warning - a stark reminder of history's darkest chapters of racial oppression and the tragic consequences of discrimination.

May this literary beacon illuminate humanity's path toward true civilization. May such history never repeat itself. May all oppressed peoples rise to claim their freedom and liberation. As people study this seminal work, there is a must to absorb its humanistic spirit and revolutionary significance, embracing the author's courageous example of giving voice to injustice. Let us honor Stowe's

legacy by becoming modern witnesses who dare to cry out against inequality wherever it persists.

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