

INTRODUCTION



Harriet Beecher Stowe

(1811-1896)

Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852), the most influential American novel, an attack on slavery that persuaded northerners to become abolitionists and provoked southerners to intense hatred. It is likely that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold more copies around the world than any work of fiction ever written. It became the chief American folk drama and established the term Uncle Tom in common usage. The adaptations for the stage increasingly departed from the novel and devolved into a grotesque minstrel show. Stowe idealized Uncle Tom, who was modeled on a real escaped slave, but in black culture he became a negative stereotype of servility. When she visited the White House, President Abraham Lincoln half-seriously called her book the cause of the Civil War: "So this is the little lady who made this big war." Stowe maintained that "God wrote it. I merely took His dictation."

BIOGRAPHY

She was born into the intellectual aristocracy of New England. Her father was Reverend Lyman Beecher, a militant evangelist who followed Jonathan Edwards in upholding Calvinist orthodoxy. Six of his sons became clergymen. Harriet Beecher absorbed Calvinist doctrines from an early age and devoted much of her writing to analyzing and criticizing them from a Christian feminist perspective. She was so repelled by the harshness of Calvinism she eventually became an Episcopalian. Her Puritan upbringing helped make her introspective, pious, didactic, socially elitist and a conventional Victorian, yet also an inspired rebel dedicated to reform. In her autobiographical notes she wrote: "The heroic element was strong in me, having come from a long line of Puritan ancestry, and just now it made me long to do something, I knew not what: to fight for my country, or to make some declaration on my own account."

When she was 13 years old, Harriet entered her sister Kate's school for girls. The next year she was teaching moral philosophy there. At age 23 she won a short story contest in which Edgar Allan Poe was a contestant. She published *An Elementary Geography* in 1835 while teaching in frontier Ohio and in 1836 she married a theology professor at an Ohio seminary, Calvin Stowe, who appreciated her talents and urged her to keep writing. She began writing regional tales of New England life for the religious press and published a collection of them in 1843. Meanwhile, she had six children and kept house under frontier conditions.

Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852)

Her husband was appointed to the faculty of Bowdoin College in Maine in 1850. While sitting in church one Sunday, Harriet had a vision of a ragged whitehaired slave getting brutally flogged. That afternoon she began writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It was first serialized in 1851-52, then published as a book. In a preface to a later edition she explained how people at the time avoided the topic of slavery:

“It was a general saying among conservative and sagacious people that this subject was a dangerous one to investigate, and that nobody could begin to read and think upon it without becoming practically insane; moreover, that it was a subject of such delicacy that no discussion of it could be held in the free states without impinging upon the sensibilities of the slave states, to whom alone the management of the matter belonged.”

Uncle Tom's Cabin was first adapted for the stage in 1853. Early versions were roughly faithful to the novel. Although she agreed with her father that the theater is an instrument of Satan, when a stage production of her book came to Boston, Harriet concealed her identity, watched it from the manager's box and is reported to have been enraptured by the experience. She sometimes transcends her Puritanism in her fiction as well, as with her surprising sense of humor.

OTHER FICTION

Uncle Tom is one of the most inspired works of American literature, transcending its aesthetic limitations. Unfortunately, Stowe was not able to transcend these limitations in most of her subsequent fiction. Her second anti-slavery novel *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), a melodrama that focuses on the effects of slavery on the slaveholders, lacks unity and plausibility. *Dred* is a defiant black revolutionary who lurks in the swamps and helps runaway slaves. Among her many later works, three about New England village life stand out: *The Minister's Wooing* (1859), *The Pearl of Orr's Island* (1862) and *Oldtown Folks* (1869). They render local color and the psychological effects of traditional Puritanism such as the repression and accommodations of women--examples of the regionalism that contributed to late 19th century Realism.

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