

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

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BASIC BIOGRAPHY

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896) was born in Litchfield, Connecticut, the daughter of Lyman and Roxanna Beecher. Harriet grew up in a household that held equality and service to others in the highest regard. Her father and all seven of her brothers became ministers, while her sisters, Catherine and Isabella, were champions of women’s education and, for Isabella, suffrage. Harriet received a formal education at Sarah Pierce’s Academy, one of the first institutions focused on educating young women. There she discovered her talent for writing. Harriet became a teacher and author, proving to be an outspoken woman in a time when female voices often went unheard. Following in her family’s tradition of service, she became a passionate abolitionist. She published more than 30 works in her lifetime, the most famous of which was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a novel that exposed the evils of slavery. Through her writings and speaking engagements, Harriet Beecher Stowe effectively helped to open the eyes of the world to the urgent problem of slavery in the United States.

KEY EVENTS

Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Election of 1856, Election of 1860, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851)

KEY PEOPLE

William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Henry Clay, Millard Fillmore, Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Tubman

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the nineteenth century, the abolitionist movement, which argued slavery was morally wrong, grew. Led by William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, the movement sought to fight politically for the immediate emancipation of enslaved peoples. During a time when the territory of the United States was expanding, the tumultuous question of whether states would be added as “free” or “slave” sparked contentious, and even sometimes violent, debate. These political and ideological differences contributed to the fracture of the Union and ultimately ignited the Civil War.

FUN FACT

Stowe wrote several early abolitionist articles for the anti-slavery paper *The National Era*. Following the popularity of her article “The Freeman’s Dream: A Parable,” the editor sent her \$100 and encouraged her to write more pieces for his publication. Around the same time, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Stowe, seeking to write more for *The National Era*, found fuel in the heated sectional debate that



Harriet Beecher Stowe, c. 1880, Library of Congress (2004672776), <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004672776/>

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Print or project one copy of the *New York Times* article for each student.
- Ask students to divide a piece of scratch paper down the center, labeling one side as “thoughts” and the other side as “questions.”
- Give students time to read the article.
- Arrange students in a large circle so that they can make eye contact when engaging in discussion.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

- Engage students in a Socratic Seminar focused on the primary document.
- Encourage students to respond using evidence from the primary source as well as their background knowledge of the abolitionist movement, slavery, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.
- Remind students to respond and then finish their statement by posing the next question to the group.
- Allow for a variety of questions to grow organically and encourage students to answer any question that they feel they have a thoughtful response.
- Encourage students to reference textual material, dates, or events they have knowledge of to support their responses.

Teacher Tip: One possible opening question, How does the author believe Mrs. Stowe had misrepresented the institution of slavery in the South?



Author and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, c. 1840–1860, *Liljenquist Family Collection of Civil War Photographs*, Library of Congress (LC-DIG-ppmsca-49807), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2016652288/>

ultimately led to her writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Learn more about her life and the impact of her writings at: <https://www.biography.com/people/harriet-beecher-stowe-9496479>.

LOCAL CONNECTION

You can visit the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, featuring her home and a dedicated museum, in Hartford, Connecticut, to learn more about this fascinating woman and the tumultuous era in which she lived. To learn more, go to: <https://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/>.

LEARN MORE

PRIMARY SOURCES

Harriet Beecher Stowe at Project Gutenberg
Project Gutenberg Literary Archive
<http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/s#a115>

Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture, A Multimedia Archive
University of Virginia
<http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/reviews/rere05ct.html>

SOUTHERN SLAVERY. A GLANCE AT UNCLE TOM'S CABIN.

SECOND PAPER.

BY A SOUTHERNER.

"...The success of the sketches of 'Life among the Lowly,' satisfies us, too, that the world can be moved by a tale of wrong and oppression; and we will not complain of the world, or of Mrs. STOWE,—although we see that there is a misunderstanding on both sides; the world being in tears over a work of the imagination, and Mrs. STOWE glowing with the thought that she is accomplishing a great moral revolution.

"We have said that we think the book must produce great results, and we certainly hope so.

"Its aim is to exhibit the evils of Slavery; and the two great pictures which it presents are, the slave sold to a trader and placed under his unchecked and mercenary will, and the slave toiling for a harsh, avaricious and merciless master, upon a Southern plantation. Let us look at these pictures,—they deserve to be studied; and above all men, the people of the South should study them. For whatever is to be done for the slave, must be done by his master; the abolitionist can do nothing for him—his misguided efforts only retard the amelioration of the condition of the enslaved race, by making it necessary to observe a stricter police system in the plantation States, and by putting it out of the power of the enlightened and humane men in the South to undertake any modification of the system. We have seen the shadow actually go back upon the dial under a Southern sun. It is again advancing. Since the adjustment of the great controversy by the passage of the Compromise measures, a much better sentiment has been manifested in regard to the slave question, in the Southern States, than existed for some years previous to that time.

"Mrs. Stowe undertakes the expose the abuses of Slavery, and her first object is to show how the internal slave traffic works. She selects some incidents to illustrate this. In every case the same exaggerated style prevails; and every case appeals to our sensibilities in the most painful way. We are not in the least degree disposed to find fault with this; for no one can exceed us in that detestation of the Slave traffic which is so powerfully exhibited both at the North and the South. It is often attended with the most revolting circumstances. It is proper that its abuses should be exposed; and it is to be hoped that the vivid sketches of the results of this inhuman traffic which are found in Uncle Tom's Cabin, will contribute a powerful momentum to Southern opinion in regard to it. That opinion is already advancing, and we hope to see it reach a point of such high and commanding power, as will enable it to control and shape Legislation, until a thorough reformation can be effected, and the true principles of Christian statesmanship find a place in the code of every Southern State. Slavery is one thing, the Slave trade is quite another thing. To regard the slave as a mere chattel, to overlook or treat with contempt his moral nature, to trifle with his sensibility or do violence to his affections, to regard him mainly as a being who is to be bought or sold whenever the state of the market will make the speculation pay, without any reference to his volition, without consulting his relations to his home, his wife, his children, is so utterly and eternally at war with the spirit of Christianity, that we look with indignation upon every such instance which meets the eye. Fetters and the slave-pen we loathe...

“The chains, the fetters, and all the instruments of cruelty have disappeared. Such scenes as Mrs. STOWE describes: the putting irons on Uncle Tom, the sale of an infant from its mother’s arms, the cruel disregard of the entreaties of a mother, not to be separated from her daughter in the one instance, and her boy in the other; the whole Mississippi steamboat picture, the slave mart in New-Orleans, we do not believe are to be witnessed. They are powerful sketches, but we do not think them truthful. Yet we hope that they will result in good. Let the imagination have fair play in describing the slave trade; dip the pencil which traces the forms of the victims in the darkest colors; spread the canvas before the eyes of the whole world; bring down upon the traffic the thunders of human indignation, and you will yet not offend the sentiment of the Southern people. Scorn and loathing would nowhere in all the world look out from human countenances more witheringly upon such men as Haly, Tom Loker and Marks, than in the Southern States of the Union. Nor would a prompt sympathy be excited in behalf of the slave suffering from cruel treatment, from hunger, disease or nakedness, or from the disruption of natural ties, anywhere so soon as under the skies where the cotton-plant grows, and where the songs of cheerful labor greet the ear of the traveler, as he pursues his journey amid the almost tropical verdure of Southern plantations.”

WALPOLE.

Walpole, "Southern Slavery: A Glance at Uncle Tom's Cabin," New York Times, June 28, 1853 (excerpt), Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture, A Multimedia Archive, University of Virginia, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/reviews/rere05ct.html>