

The Effect of Literature on Politics A Close Look into “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” By: Harriet Beecher Stowe

Sherifa Al-Sarheed

English language Instructor

The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training

Abstract: It is clear to many of us that literature has effects on many aspects of our daily lives. Literature affects us morally, intellectually, religiously, and even politically. Harriet Beecher Stowe, portrays a great human issue in her best seller, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” the evil and insensitive acts of slavery. It was no wonder that sixteenth American president Abraham Lincoln recognized the Novel by saying, “this is the book that started the “Great War”, the Civil War.”

Keywords: Literature affects, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” “Great War”, the Civil War.”

1. INTRODUCTION

Harriet Beecher Stowe is the author of this great piece of literary work which made her famous until this day. She was born in Connecticut, where she was the granddaughter of a revolutionary general, from the mother’s side. And from her father’s side, she was the granddaughter of a congregational minister.

As Harriet grew older got married, she later moved to Brunswick, Maine, with her husband and children. She began writing again after a dry period, and the result was, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the book that led her to popularity. Her novel was said to actually influence the antislavery sentiment all over the world, not just in the United States.

Harriet’s family and friends took part in so many antislavery protests as well as the movement. The dispute in Cincinnati was so aggressive and intense between pro- and antislavery activists, that there were some reports of violence. At first, the main aim of the Civil War was to free the slaves and send them on their way to the African Colonies they originally came from, and at first, Harriet seemed to agree with that approach. But, after losing her child, Harriet became more serious or absolute and changed her view on the matter, which she obviously translated in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Separating parents from their children in an inhuman system was a major point that Harriet kept reminding us of throughout the story of Uncle Tom.

When Congress passed a certain law at the time, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” which insisted on the return of the people who escaped slavery to the Northern free states back to captivity, Harriet connected with them immediately, especially after the loss of her son, This was what triggered her to start writing and sending her installments of Uncle Tom’s Cabin to a journal which published the work then as single installments not as a novel.

The idea of the novel, forced readers, who were of white color, to sympathize with Africans and African Americans who were actually slaves in the Southern States of America. This feeling of sympathy was uncommon at the time.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin, actually caused a great mental and social gap between people in the Northern and Southern States. Even Britain’s sympathy for the Southern cause was weakened, as readers became strongly addicted to the story. Discrimination played the main role in both the novel as well as the war that it caused.

Although Uncle Tom's Cabin, (the anti-slavery novel) was actually published nine years before the Civil War broke out in the United States, its sales records rose up very high for its time. It actually became the second, bestselling book at the time, since the Bible.

The Novel was written in the mid-nineteenth century, and it was written mostly in protest against the infamous Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. Uncle Tom's Cabin had a strong theme, evil and immortality of slavery. The author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, pointed out in her writing, her strong views against the cruelty of slavery in the country.

When Harriet published her novel in 1852, the events deeply affected people all over the world. They began to open their eyes and see the inhumanity of slavery and how people treated African Americans. This was clear in most of the Southern states as they were pro-slavery. People began to see and realize how slavery broke up families, as it separated the father from his wife and children, or the mother from her babies. Humans were sold to each other and forced to work as they are owned, just because of their skin color. Black people were treated as merchandise. As readers went further and deeper in the novel, their sympathy grew stronger. These feelings played a great part in the start of the Civil War.

2. UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

A Deeper Look

As we keep going further into Uncle Tom's Cabin, we begin to see the effects of this great literary work on politics at that time. It caught so much attention at that time, that within a year, more than 300,000 copies were sold in America, and more than 1.5 million copies were sold in Britain, alone. People all over the globe were intrigued by Uncle Tom's Cabin and the morals it represented. The story that exposed the injustice and inhumanity of slavery was translated into more than 15 European languages. It was even translated into Arabic.

What made the novel so popular and real? What were some of the factors that helped spread the novel all over the world? What made readers want to keep reading and feel the suffering of the slaves? The answer to all these questions is Harriet Beecher Stowe. Harriet put many personal and cultural factors in Uncle Tom's Cabin. She wrote from the many different angles of life; she used her writing skills to bring together religion, pulp fiction, and entertainment throughout her main characters, whether they were from the Northern or Southern plot. Of course through the Northern plot, we witnessed the escape of the fugitive slaves Eliza and George Harris with Harry, their son. Where as the Southern plot, we got involved with the awful separation of Uncle Tom from his family, when he was sold to move from Kentucky to a place deeper in the South.

Here is where we can notice the emotional motivation of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Harriet was deeply affected at the untimely death of one of her seven children. While she was at his deathbed, Harriet wrote to one of her friend's, "and at his grave, that I learnt what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her." So, her feelings when she lost her son Charley, were actually put in writing with so much skill, that we can see them in the scenes of little Eva's death.

We can also feel Harriet's feelings when we read about Mary Bird, when she went through her dead son's clothes. It's clear that throughout the novel, a strong emotional bond came to surface between white and black readers as the deaths of children, or their separation from their families increased. At that time, this was a very unusual thing. It was not usual for a white mother to feel for the black slave mother when her child is torn away from her, or when her baby dies. After all, white and black readers portray the North and the South, who at that time went to war against each other.

In the United States, the Civil War originally started because of the status of slavery. It was fought between states of the North and states of the South, where slavery existed. The war aimed to abolish slavery in America. All of the country's ethnic groups took part in the war, Germans, Irish, Jews, American Indians and even African American soldiers and sailors in the U.S. service. The Civil War was called many different names, one of which "war to make men free." It was even called "Mr. Lincoln's war." President Abraham Lincoln was an antislavery republican, and after he was elected president, seven southern states formed their own union: they did not agree on Lincoln's position on slavery.

It was President Abraham Lincoln who recognized Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin as "the book that started this war." So, it's no doubt that Literature does have its effect on politics when it is presented skillfully in the correct way. After all it's not a question of avoiding an issue, but of being smart and skillful in portraying it.

When writing, Harriet Stowe based the Northern plot of Uncle Tom's Cabin on the slaves' flight to Canada on the Underground Railroad by the runaways George and Eliza Harris, with their baby Harry. She then cleverly based the Southern plot of the novel through the calm character, Uncle Tom, who is sold away from his wife, Chloe, and their children.

Politically, both the Northern and Southern plots present what was known then as a higher law. This was a popular phrase related to Senator William Henry Seward at the time. He referred to this phrase in a clause in the Constitution that demanded the return of fugitives from labor. He said "there is a higher law than the Constitution" the law of justice and morality that was holier than society's laws, which supported chattel slavery. Uncle Tom's Cabin was known as a higher law novel.

Uncle Tom's Cabin, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, affected millions of readers years before the Civil War broke out in the United States, and it had its effect on them after the Civil War began. The characters and incidents in the novel, made readers open their eyes to the cruelty that they were living in. They woke up and saw the inhuman treatment of the people who were slaves.

For the first time in history, many readers from the North realized and felt the horrid truths of slavery. Harriet's novel, aside from being truthful and bold, was so touching that it captured the hearts and emotions of those who were basically emotionless, unmoved and unconcerned about what was going on in the world. At the beginning, the antislavery movement was not as big as it should have been. It was divided into small groups that were mostly unknown. Uncle Tom's Cabin, was the strength and power behind the unity for these groups. The book actually caused slave rebellions around the country, as well as racial disruption.

Women at that time, were forbidden to challenge many things, among them, slavery. But Harriet Stowe was a clever woman and as she published Uncle Tom's Cabin, she made sure that many of her acquaintances who were politicians, received a copy of her novel. Thomas Dixon, the author of pro-Southern bestsellers, wrote once, "without Uncle Tom's Cabin, there would be no John Brown (an antislavery warrior who attempted to start a slave uprising in 1859), and eventually no Civil War."

A great part in the rise of the antislavery Republican Party was played by Uncle Tom's Cabin. It allowed the North to be more open to the antislavery reform than it had been before. Harriet Beecher Stowe was mentioned many times in political speeches. A Congressman referred to her by saying "A lady with her pen has done more for the cause of freedom, during the last year, than any savant, statesman, or politician of our land."

Uncle Tom's Cabin was dominated by a major theme; the evil and cruelty of slavery, especially since it separated families from each other. At the end of the Civil War, slavery was abolished, under the thirteenth amendment. Four million enslaved black people were freed. A few days after the Civil War ended, Abraham Lincoln, the man who led America through the Civil War, the country's greatest moral, cultural, constitutional and political crisis, succeeded in abolishing slavery, but was assassinated while attending a play, which of course, is literary work. In short, Uncle Tom's Cabin contributed in the Civil War by creating a great gap between the North and the South. It also triggered the abolitionism in the Northern states and made it stronger. Uncle Tom's Cabin was considered one of the most influential novel to ever be written by an American woman, Harriet Beecher Stowe.

REFERENCES

Novels

- [1] Uncle Tom's Cabin Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852)
- [2] North and South, John Jakes (1982)
- [3] The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government, Jefferson Davis (1881)

Film

- [4] Uncle Tom's Cabin Directed by Stan Lathan (1987)

Internet

- [5] American Civil War Wikipedia