



Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896)

"I wrote what I did because as a woman, as a mother, I was oppressed and broken-hearted with the sorrows and injustice I saw, because as a Christian I felt the dishonor to Christianity, because as a lover of my country, I trembled at the coming day of wrath."

Harriet Beecher Stowe's book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, not only raised a nation's consciousness about the wrongs and harms of slavery, but it actually helped evoke the necessary change. President Lincoln was so impressed with the power of her words that he asked to meet her. Upon greeting her, he exclaimed, "So this is the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war!" She may not have literally started the war, but her book, wildly popular upon publication, certainly opened eyes on both sides of the issue.

Born in Litchfield, Ct, on June 14, 1811, Harriet was the seventh of eleven children, all of whom were expected to make something of their lives and, while they were at it, change the world in some way. Harriet's seven brothers all became ministers, one being the famous Henry Ward Beecher. Catharine, the oldest girl, pioneered education for women. Isabella, the youngest girl, was the founder of the National Women's Suffrage Association. Harriet, under the encouragement of her sister, believed she needed to write. And write she did, exposing



one of the greatest injustices of her time in the process.

Harriet Beecher got her education from a variety of sources. Her family often had boarders from the local law school, and family meals were lively with conversation and debate. The first school she attended, Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Female Academy, was one of the first in the country to provide girls with academic studies as well as homemaking and entertaining arts. When she

was 13, she attended Hartford Female Seminary, a school founded by her sister Catharine. She later taught there as well.



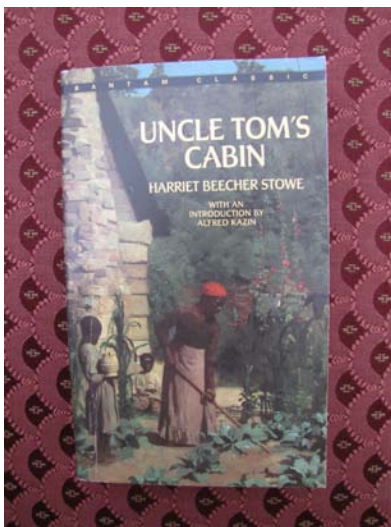


The family moved to Cincinnati, OH for her father to become president of Lane Theological Seminary. There, Harriet met Calvin Stowe who was a professor at the seminary. They married in 1836. They had seven children. While in Cincinnati, Harriet joined the Semi-Colon Club and began publishing stories and magazine articles. She wrote for such prestigious literary journals as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Independent*. She also co-authored *Primary Geography for Children* with her sister Catharine (it was published under her name, not Harriet's). All this writing helped support the growing family. In fact, over the course of her life, she wrote at least ten adult novels, poems, travel books, children's books and biographical sketches as well as magazine and newspaper articles. She was friendly with a number of literary figures—including Lady Byron, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and George Eliot—and is still read and studied in classrooms today. She was highly respected by other reformers and influenced other New England regionalist writers like Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman (both discussed in the Introductory Power Point for this unit).



After 14 years of marriage, the Stowes moved to Brunswick, ME so

Calvin could return to his alma mater, Bowdoin College, to teach. That same year, 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act was passed. This upset Harriet greatly, and she began to think how she could express her dismay and cause others to consider the implications of the act. She began to write a story and published it episode by episode in the Washington anti-slavery weekly, *The National Era*, over the course of two years, 1851-1852. She then published it in a two-volume book that ultimately became a bestseller in the U.S., England, Europe and Asia. It was translated into more than 60 languages. It has never been out of print.



From the beginning, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was both lauded and criticized. Those who supported reform and abolition were thrilled with the attention their cause received because of the book. They praised the sympathetic way she presented her slave characters. But critics felt that she had exaggerated the plight of the slaves and had



created an unrealistic picture of slavery. Indignant, Harriet wrote what she called the "key" to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* giving the background, inspiration and sources for her work. She then wrote another book, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), that recounted the details of a slave rebellion.



Uncle Tom's Cabin accomplished what nothing else was able to do at the time: it provided a compelling story of the effects slavery has on individuals and on families. President Lincoln, when she met him in 1862, said she "made" the war. It brought slavery down to the most basic human level and forced readers to identify with its characters as human beings rather than slaves. Eliza, the main character, was particularly endearing. Having lost a child herself (Charley died at 18 months in a cholera epidemic in 1849), Harriet could identify with the loss the slave mother felt and was able to express it eloquently in her writing.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, the first African American to gain national critical acclaim as a poet, wrote a sonnet about Stowe and the influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

She told the story, and the whole world wept
 At wrongs and cruelties it had not known
 But for this fearless woman's voice alone.
 She spoke to consciences that long had slept:
 Her message, Freedom's clear reveille, swept
 From heedless hovel to complacent throne.
 Command and prophecy were in the tone
 And from its sheath the sword of justice leapt.
 Around two peoples swelled a fiery wave,
 But both came forth transfigured from the flame.
 Blest be the hand that dared be strong to save,
 And blest be she who in our weakness came—
 Prophet and priestess! At one stroke she gave
 A race to freedom and herself to fame.

Harriet's interest in abolition never wavered. For the rest of her life, she spoke out against slavery. In 1853 the Stowe family moved to Andover, MA for 11 years while her husband taught at the Andover Theological Seminary. They then moved to Hartford,



CT where Harriet lived until she died in 1896. During this time, she traveled to Great Britain and Europe a number of times to great acclaim. She maintained a column in *The Independent*, a newspaper in New York City. She gave lectures, went on speaking tours, and wrote letters urging women especially to speak out against slavery. But she was also writing other things that on their own merit would have solidified her place in American literature.

Stowe was an early realist, describing her scenes with accuracy and great detail. She brought even her minor characters to life with care, showing them in their native setting and culture in such a way that we understand their time better. She was among the first to use native dialect, doing so some 30 years before her more famous Hartford neighbor, Mark Twain. Harriet had interests in art as well, helping to bring the art museum at the Wadsworth Atheneum back to life and helping to establish the Hartford Art School (now part of the University of Hartford).



Information drawn from the following websites:

<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/stowe/StoweHB.html>

<http://www.greatwomen.org/women.php?action=viewone&id=154>

<http://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/>

<http://www.lkwdpl.org/wihohio/stow-har.htm>

<http://www.une.edu/mwwc/research/featuredwriters/stoweh.cfm>