



HOW TO START A WAR (FEAT. HARRIET BEECHER STOWE)

FE LORRAINE REYES
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Today we celebrate the life and work of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Born on June 14th, 1811, in Litchfield, Connecticut, Stowe's legacy as an author, abolitionist, and leader in the women's rights movement continues to pervade the American consciousness to this day. She is perhaps best known for her mid-nineteenth-century magnum opus, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which is widely considered a seminal work of progressive fiction. It depicts the moral and circumstantial wretchedness of slavery, which especially affected Northern readers, who sympathized with the novel's enslaved characters. Stowe's novel thus contributed to the intense polarization between the North and South, which in the decade following the novel's publication would eventually erupt into the Civil War. The book's impact was so great that a popular anecdote alleges that when Abraham Lincoln and Harriet Beecher Stowe met in 1862, the president called her "the little woman who started the Great War." (Vollaro 2009, 18). While the story itself remains apocryphal, the social upheaval precipitated by her novel was no fiction, and the myth testifies to how important *Uncle Tom's Cabin* continues to be in our understanding of both antebellum America and attitudes towards the book today. Perhaps the legend of Lincoln and Stowe's introduction is survived by historical and literary scholarship as a way to keep literature as a proprietor of socio-political change. Nonetheless, Stowe's devotion to combating slavery throughout her lifetime proves her ability to understand very real human tragedy, and challenges us to confront America's labyrinthine past and, ultimately, understand our current strides towards social justice.

The candidness of Stowe's depiction of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was controversial, to say the least. The novel's story – which portrayed enslaved people as being treated as subhuman – encouraged Northerners to participate in the conversation about the heinous institution. The plot illustrates the life of a man named



Uncle Tom and the brutalization he endures as a slave. Pre-existing tensions between the North and the South over the question of slavery were further heightened following the popularization of this book. The two regions responded to the novel differently. Northern abolitionists used the horrors depicted in the novel to emphasize their opposition to slavery; some of them even believed the novel was holding back in its depiction of slavery's brutalities. Meanwhile, the novel sparked outrage in the South, with the most polemical of its Southern critics complaining about its "false" depiction of slave owners and the novel's suggestion that Black people were as human as white people. (Gossett 1985, 192). Although the Southern vitriol and anti-Stowe rhetoric subsided a few years after its publication, two things are clear. First, that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will be remembered as influential in sparking a necessary conflict over slavery, and second, that Stowe's work was instrumental in politicizing literature. As Daniel R. Vollaro notes, "Stowe's novel seems like the ultimate example of a literary work exerting revolutionary influence on American society. Like Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be cited to affirm the role of literature as an agent of social change" (Vollaro 2009, 33).

Stowe was also an activist beyond abolition; her work extended to women's rights as well. She became a central part of the discussion about how a nineteenth-century woman ought to exist. Stowe's other articles in the *Christian Union* journal suggest that although she did not directly endorse suffrage, she did, as Amy Easton-Flake explains, "elevate the status of wives and mothers, [encouraging] the teaching of domestic economy, establish the dignity of household labor, and promise women's progress through education and employment" (Easton-Flake 2013, 39). What Easton-Flake's examination infers is that Stowe's activism around women's rights was not around the issue of suffrage. Rather, Stowe highlighted neglected social truths pertaining to women. To Stowe and her followers, women do indeed have the right to be free and unpunished social agents with rights to property, work, and body.

Further examination of Stowe's legacy in literary discourse should include the shortsightedness of reading nineteenth-century activism. As a nineteenth-century white woman herself, Stowe's activist vision could only consider the Black community as it was: enslaved. Although her writings acknowledge the ways in which the institution of slavery played a role in creating an American identity, what it lacks is recognition of the violence inflicted upon Black identity and culture specifically. While Stowe recognized the immoral constitution of slavery and its regressive impact on American values and democracy, she was still unable to consider the very particular impact that slavery would have on Black community. Nonetheless, Stowe's abolitionist work retains a cultural legacy and curricular mainstay. Today, as red-state politicians and legislatures launch an assault on Critical Race Theory, the novel helps us to remain critical and politically engaged in our understanding of race. In that sense,



understanding the history that undergirds the plot of Stowe's famous novel is still relevant today. Then and now, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the anti-slavery work of Harriet Beecher Stowe necessitates discourse on slavery and racism, and thereby remains an exemplar of the politicized literature necessary to expose systematic oppression.

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SUGGESTED CITATION: Lorraine Reyes, Fe. 2021. "How to Start a War (feat. Harriet Beecher Stowe)." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published June 14.