Revisiting *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: A source of debate within a secondary classroom

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 19th century novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is inarguably one of the most discussed and debated books from its time. Regardless of the books’ polarizing popularity, the utilization of the book within the secondary classrooms of the United States has been almost nonexistent. Downs’ 1970 novel, *Books that changed America*, summarizes the most significant topics as the “slave market, the forced separation of families, the contrast of plantation life in the slave’s cabin and the master’s mansion, immoral sexual behavior, and the problem of miscegenation.” (P. 91) Downs goes on to briefly note “Critics have held that it is carelessly written, loosely constructed, and faulty in its English, and uses types for characters rather than actual personalities. The Negro dialect, they say, is more Yankee than Southern. (P. 98) It is the criticized points of the novel in which I believe allow for a more critical discussion of race and race relations to exist within a secondary education classroom.

The motivation for my final project stems from the desire to incorporate a historical novel into a high school American History course. While I believe the utilization of Stowe’s novel should be more readily included within the high school history classroom, I argue that while being read, the concepts, portrayals, issues, and images should be revisited with a more critical eye involving a more analytical
and expansive discussion regarding the topics such as colonization, presence of evil among all those turning their backs on the immoralities of slavery, Stowe’s use of dialect, the negative societal application of the term “uncle tom” and Stowe’s overall beliefs pertaining to what she felt were innate differences among the races.

Ammons and Belasco (2000) remind teachers that we should ask questions such as: How should we judge Uncle Tom’s Cabin in relation to today’s standards? How can we read the novel and keep in mind the current race issues and trends of our present time? Most notably, “How can we make the text part of our present?” (P. 2)

**Colonization**

Donovan’s (1995) article aims to provide an explanation for Stowe’s decision to inevitably support of what was termed, colonization, or the “returning of African Americans to African as a solution to the race/slavery problem.” (P. 24) It was the belief of many white Americans that African Americans should be freed and given the opportunity to reach their full potential, as long as they did so within their own confines of the continent of Africa. In concluding her novel by sending the majority of surviving black characters to Africa, Stowe reinforces a popular, racist notion of returning freed African Americans back to Africa. In essentially upholding the argument for colonization Stowe opens the door for 21st century classrooms to debate the issue of “what should be done with freed African Americans?” Students can discuss the reasoning behind those white abolitionists (and others) who felt that although the slaves should be freed, they still would be unable to uphold the standards enforced by whites.
**Stowe’s Use of Dialect**

A major criticism of Stowe’s novel is her interpretation of Southern African American dialect. Many argue that she was familiar enough with such language, or more specifically that her motivation behind writing in a dialect was “ideological and dialectological.” (Florey, 1986) Tremaine McDowell in Ammons (1980) explained

The chief weakness in Mrs. Stowe’s recording of these peculiarities in the speech of both races is her persistent inconsistency: verbs agree with their nouns on one page and disagree on the next... Due to this constant resemblance between the speech of whites and that of her blacks, Mrs. Stowe is often unable to make adequate distinction between the two. (P. 88-89)

Undoubtedly, Stowe should be criticized for her lack of knowledge regarding southern African American dialect but yet still utilizing what she deemed to be appropriate, regardless of her level of accuracy.

Just as Stowe was unmistakably ignorant in relation to the language and verbiage of African American language, I would argue that many white teachers teaching diverse groups of students are just as ignorant of their students’ language and slang terms. As teachers, we are constantly reminding students to speak and write with intelligence, and the language that is recognized as intelligence is that of “standard academic English” as opposed to African American Vernacular English. I struggle between finding a balance between encouraging my students to “speak intelligently” and incorporating the language of their culture and heritage. The issue of dialect within Stowe’s novel could be easily connected to the misconceptions of African American Vernacular English (and other languages) being inferior and how
white teachers lack of understanding of the language has contributed to the cultural
divide existing among white teachers and diverse student populations.

**The Evolution of Uncle Tom**

The character of Uncle Tom has evolved over the years from what Stowe had meant to be the picture of unselfishness, the willingness to sacrifice one's own happiness for the sake of others, and above all else a devoted Christian into a term used to describe an African American who does anything and everything to please the whites and keep the peace. An anonymous review in Ammons (1980) work explains Tom as a man who “presents his left cheek to smitten after his first has been slapped. The more you “larrup” Uncle Tom the more he blesses you; the greater his bodily again the more intense becomes his spiritual delight. The more he ought to complain, the more he doesn’t…” (P. 27) It is this description of Uncle Tom in which Stowe had intended him to be received. Within Ammons same 1980 work, J.C. Furnas explained how the term Uncle Tom shifted into a more negative, subservient meaning,

Uncle Tom” as epithet has expanded from its earliest connotation...a boot-licking, servile type of Negro in...his relationship with whites, also a yes-man to anything proposed by whites which did not seem to favor Negroes. (P. 105)

Although Stowe intends for the unselfishness of Tom, his refusal to run away from his situation in fear for his family, and his overall relationships with those who had enslaved him to be part of the many examples of his greatness, his subordinate nature allowed for a more negative connotation to emerge. Throughout my short experience within the classroom setting, I have heard students equate “being a good
student” to that of “acting white” and those minority students who enact or take part in activities similar to those of their white peers are referred to as modern day “Uncle Toms.” I would love for students to research, discuss, and expand on Stowe’s intention and basis behind the character of Uncle Tom, and how his character has evolved into a negative stereotype perpetuated by society.

Conclusion

While the utilization of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin can provide teachers with a challenging opportunity to discuss the basis for the novel itself, Stowe’s personal beliefs which help to shape the plot within the book, its contribution to the issues between races, the significance of the novel within our nation’s time and history, and finally how the stereotype of Uncle Tom still exists today, one should be diligent to ensure that all areas of the novel are reviewed, discusses and expanded upon, not only those which have been deemed positive by a Eurocentric society. Sarah Smith Ducksworth’s article in Lowance, Westbrook, and DeProspo (1994) reminds us that Uncle Tom’s Cabin

Viewed as a cultural product, may be useful as a cautionary tale to help students recognize not only how truly self-deceiving the concept of a “degraded other” can be, but also, on a larger scale, how collective self-images enhanced beyond reason and laws of nature perpetuate social injustice against those with the least power to protect themselves. (P.234)
Harriet Beecher Stowe and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* Resources


American Reviews of Uncle Tom’s Cabin:
http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/reviews/rehp.html


Harriet Beecher Stowe Center:
http://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/
