

## Internal Roots of Tragedy: An Interpretation of Tom's Blind Loyalty and Submissiveness in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

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### Abstract

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a reputed anti-slavery novel in American literary history. Tom, an unusually loyal and submissive slave, was sold to different slave masters again and again until he was tortured to death. Tom's tragic fate had multi-faceted roots. This paper tends to give an objective interpretation of Tom's personality so as to promote a better comprehension of this character and the intention of this novel. It's found that his blind loyalty and submissiveness are the defects in his personality leading to his tragic fate.

**Keywords:** *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, blind loyalty, submissiveness, personality, tragic fate

### 1. Introduction

Harriet Beecher Stowe was born in a family of orthodox Calvin clergyman in Connecticut, and she began to receive Christian education when she was a little girl. She spent her teenage years with all kinds of religious books and literary works written by Scott, Byron, Dickens, Cooper and other famous writers. When she was young, she worked as a middle school teacher, then married a faculty of the seminary. When she was 20, her family moved to Cincinnati and lived there for 18 years. Her home was only a river away from the slave villages, so she had a chance to get in touch with some escaped slaves. Her elder brothers both had contributed to the abolition of slavery. In 1850, she came to a plantation in Kentucky and learned about the miserable life of the black slaves. Then she decided to write down the facts that she saw and heard. "I wrote [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*] 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 (Kevin, 2009)."

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* was first published in 1852, which immediately aroused strong repercussions and received an unrivalled welcome by people. Harriet Beecher Stowe focuses on the tragic fate of Tom, a loyal and submissive slave. After failing in the stock market, Shelby, Tom's first slaveowner, decided to sell Tom and Eliza's son in order to pay off the debts. Tom was forced to transfer in different slave owners one after another, and subject to all kinds of insults and torments. However, in any case, Tom was reluctant to betray his master and refused to escape from selling-out, and eventually he was whipped to death by his final master.

### 2. Literature Review

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* has an extraordinary social and literary value. It is the first American work with a distinct democratic tendency. Abraham Lincoln commented that this was a novel triggering the American Civil War. It is the representative work of the abolitionist literature, an important literary genre in the history of American literature, and has laid the first solid foundation of the coming Realism Age in American literature.

This novel has drawn wide attention in academic circle since its publication. In China, some scholars discuss *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from the angle of religion and Christianity. Ke (2013) analyzes the inevitability of Tom's tragedies and she thought that religious power and moral principles could not bring liberty to American black people. The awakening of their consciousness and indomitable struggle were the crucial factor for the fundamental change of their fate. Wang (2006) concludes that Jesus is the biblical archetype of Tom because They have very similar qualities and experience. Li (2012) highlights the limitations of novels in the shadow of religious culture, so as to expose the distorted American social ideology at that time through the analysis of

religious culture. Some scholars make some researches on this novel from the point of feminism. Liu (2008) studies the black man's sexism and prejudice against feminist literature. Some place this novel as a representation of abolition literature. Jiang (2003) believes that *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as the representative work of the abolition literature, is not only of high historical status, but also of great value on the stage of American literature. Zhang (2015) discusses the similarities and differences between the abolition in this novel and the more radical idea of abolition in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Internationally, many scholars also give much attention to the research of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Through an analysis of Mr. Stowe's growing-up experience, Molly (2010) thinks that Christian taste plays a significant place in the novel since its writer was a pious Christian and this greatly affected the creation of this novel. Gary (1984) studies this novel as a sort of Bible for the Abolitionists. Claire (2007) traces the unrest publishing history of the anti-slavery novels that are most celebrated. He links the cultural position of this controversial novel with the publication history, and recorded the changes in national sentiment and moral values in the past century and a half years. Saranne (2005) tries to understand the novel's aesthetics within the specific context of southern male responses and criticisms of the novel. In his paper "Racial Profiling: Visualizing Racial Science on the Covers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*", Mandy (2008) took new historicism criticism theory to analyze the racial features in this novel, and further probed into the history as well as its cultural relations with the United States. Reid believes that this novel was a reflection of the dynamic racial attitudes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century of the United States, and its racial science had permeated into American culture.

There's no denying that there has been much research involved with this novel and some of scholars stress Tom's capability and firm belief of Christianity as a slave. However, seldom explored the internal roots of Tom's tragic fate from his personality. Some academicians uphold that it is the cruel slave system that pushed Tom to the disastrous abyss. To a great extent, it's true that a man's fate cannot be isolated from the social context of the age, but such a view is questionable while we compare the different fates between Tom and Eliza's family. Before being sold out by their common slave-owner, Tom chose to be submissive while Eliza determined to escape out in case of the separation between her son and herself. In fact, Tom had opportunity to run away but he didn't. In the author's view, the blind loyalty and unbelievable submissiveness are the major causes for his tragedy.

### 3. Tom: A Good Man With Great Virtues

Tom is a loyal, capable and gentle slave. His first master is Shelby-a manor owner in Kentucky. Because of Tom's honesty and ability, Tom's master and other slaves all like him, especially Shelby's son, George, who liked him very much, and called him uncle Tom. As Shelby's farm manager, Tom helps his master to deal with a lot of things on the farm. Uncle Tom's cabin is a wooden house with several biblical illustrations in the house. Tom's wife, Aunt Chloe, is the manor's cook, and they have three children. They have been living in an orderly life with the Shelby family before he was sold out because of the debt of his owner.

Besides, Tom is very kind and friendly to other people. He helped Eliza and her son who were sold with him to escape, but he himself chose to stay. Eventually, Eliza and her son broke away from the bitter sea and got rid of their identity of slaves and achieved freedom. On the way to new plantation in New Orleans, Tom rescued Eva, a little girl on the boat. Out of appreciation Eva's father bought Tom as his own car driver. Tom and Eva gradually became friends. Unfortunately, Eva suddenly died two years later and in not a long time her father also passed away in an accident. Once again Tom was sold out and his new master is a very cruel cotton plantation owner. Tom endured inhuman torment, but he still kept his goodness. He helped two women slaves escape while he remained with other poor black slaves. The new owner was so furious that he bound Tom up and flogged him to death.

Beyond the above-mentioned, we cannot neglect another fact that Tom is a devoted Christian. His many deeds and every choice are so wrenching to readers. He firmly adheres to the principle of being an upright man and dedicates his life to the eternal God. He always believes that God would help him and take him from trouble to a new life. That's why he decided to stay and adhered to his duties even though many times there were chances to escape. Uncle Tom is polite, virtuous and respected by other people as a priest. When the prayer meeting began, uncle Tom's cabin was crowded with black slaves, and everyone loved to hear him pray. In this way, everyone has forgotten their annoyance and unhappiness for a while and immersed themselves in the yearning for heaven. Uncle Tom's family was full of peace and tranquility every time he prayed. Everyone enjoys such an atmosphere and was moved by his pious faith.

### 4. Blind Loyalty and Submissiveness in Tom's Personality

It is undeniable that Tom is a very righteous figure. His hardworking, kindness and capability are the virtues that the Christianity advocates. In the common sense, such a man should never deserve that tragic fate. Actually,

except for the inhuman slavery system, it is his seemingly perfect personality that finalizes his fate. By nature, his blind loyalty and submissiveness are the central defects in his personality.

Tom is loyal to his masters. In his mind, it is an infrangible obligation for him to follow his master's orders and decisions. Such loyalty gradually evolves into blind loyalty: a shocking obstinacy. Though a black slave, he is a pious Christian and he firmly believes that God will rescue him from the suffering. His faith does not allow him to do anything against his master. For Tom, he had at least two chances to run away like Eliza, but he refused for he thought escape is a betrayal to his master. He said,

No, no- I an't going. Let Eliza go- it is her right! If I must be sold, or all the people on the place and everything go to rack, why, let me be sold...mas'r always found me on the spot- he always will. I never have broke trust, nor used my pass no ways contrary to my word, and I never will. It's better for me alone to go, than to break up the place and sell all. Mas'r an't to blame, Chloe, and he'll take care of you and the poor (Stowe, 2001).

The second time is when Cassy asked Tom to escape with her together, but he rejected to do so again for the same reason. Tom would never betray the master even though the new slave-owner is so wicked. This considerateness was confusing and hard to comprehend. According to Bible, all the people are created equal. Though he is a slave with so shiny virtues, his master never gives any consideration to Tom's interests and sold him out without hesitation. His master's selfishness and indifference are in sharp contrast with Tom's unselfishness and tolerance. However, such masters deserve his loyalty? His sacrifice exchanges nothing for himself. Therefore, blind loyalty is a crucial factor bringing to his tragedy.

Owing to his submissiveness, Tom was sold again and again. Tom never thinks of maintaining his faith on the premise of freedom. After all, freedom is the basic right of man. He never rebelled and had a faint idea to struggle for liberty. He puts the obedience as the slave's top priority and takes for granted that submissiveness and tolerance will help him out of trouble. Such an idea actually pushes him to the brink of the cliff and he loses the opportunities of escape one after another. Eventually, he was transferred to a cotton plantation owner and his misfortune came to a peak. Here he was subject to all kinds of insults and torments. After having helped two women slaves to run away, Tom tried to accompany the rest victims until the last moment for he thought as a Jesus Christ it was his obligation to relieve their pain and suffering. Tom resolutely believed that he could help the fellow black slaves to grasp the last glimmer of hope from Jesus via preaching the Bible and praying before God. Tom told Cassy: "but the lord's given me a work among these yer poor souls, and I'll stay with' em and bear my cross with'em till the end (Stowe, 2001)." His submissiveness deprived the last chance of his survival. Ironically, his faith in Christianity didn't help him out of tragedy and no wonder came to him.

Tom's blind loyalty and submissiveness should greatly account for his tragic destiny while compared with Eliza's life. Like uncle Tom, Eliza is also the black slave of Shelby's family. She made a completely different choice from Tom. When Tom was obedient, Eliza resolutely resisted the fate of being a black slave: running out and fighting a way of freedom. Breaking off the frightening chase and going through countless hardships, Eliza and her family achieved freedom under their unremitting efforts.

Different choices make their different fates. Undoubtedly, their difference in personalities plays a vital role in their choices. Loyalty and submissiveness perhaps are the positive qualities in some context. However, if a person like Tom follows loyalty and submissiveness as the prime principle of his life, we have to keep caution to such a principle. No account of the context, unconditional loyalty and unrestrained submissiveness are by nature blind loyalty and denial of self. Such sacrifice is meaningless and futile and in conflict with the American individualism and self-reliance.

In the meantime, Tom's interpretation of Christianity is also arguable. He is a pious Christian and believes that the black slave can get a favor and be saved by god. His unselfishness, helpfulness, loyalty and submissiveness are the high qualities of a good Christian. He trusts the power of god but he ends up a Jesus-like man. To some extent, it is the faith that has enslaved him, not just slave owners. If he can be slightly less stubborn and make a different choice, his fate may be very different. One hopeful possibility is that if he chose to leave, he would really be free to start a new life.

## 5. Conclusion

Generally and comprehensively, Tom is indeed a good guy with many excellent virtues. Under the pen of Harriet Beecher Stowe, he is out of question a "model slave", a "noble black hero". However, his blind loyalty and submissiveness direct him to a tragic end. Since such a noble slave was shockingly deserted by god and never got any redemption, his tragic fate clearly reveals that active resistance against slavery system is the only way to liberty for numerous American enslaved black people in that age: to stand up and fight for their freedom and

happiness like Eliza, otherwise, like Tom only tragedy awaits them. And this is the key point why the novel can arouse wide attention and motivate so many people, whatever black slaves and even many white people, to actively fight against the slavery system until its abolition.

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