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### Slavery in Harriet Beecher Stow's Uncle Tom's Cabin: One of the Causes of The American Civil War, 1861 – 1865

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#### Abstract

The History of the Civil War has been told and told again, but sometimes people are always forgetting this bad memory. This article, however, tries to trace back the American Civil War's description in 1861-1865; its purpose is to remind us about its historical importance. Unlike George Washington, Abraham Lincoln also became a super-hero as a result of that war. What have they accomplished? Furthermore, this article also discusses their major accomplishments through one of the American literary works, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe as one of the causes of that Great War.

Key words; American Civil War, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

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#### I. Introduction

Most historians believe that slavery had been introduced into America by 1500 (J. G. Randal; 1973, p. 53). If this is so, slavery had begun eight years after the discovery of America in 1492 by Christopher Columbus and 276 years before the Declaration of American Independence.

The first Blacks to be inserted into America in the 1500s were not regarded as "slave" but as "servant" (Randal, p. 57). They were brought to America to supply the labor force for the plantations. Thus the first Negroes in the colonies were regarded as human beings, and were not subjected to the cruelty and sadism of actual slavery; neither law nor custom had established slavery as an institution in the colonies.

After some decades, people in the American colonies began to enslave Blacks arbitrarily, because there was no effective central government. Laws concerning slave were actually established as the result of social practice. This system allowed each colony to make its own laws according to its need, especially regarding slavery. Drumond (1961) has stated:

The institution of slavery was considered distinctly American, and was believed to have survived only because the system of government in the United States made it possible for one geographical section to have different laws from another (p. 372).

Geographically America was a unit, but when slavery was the main issue, America was divided; the South as an agricultural area needed the slaves for the plantations and the North as an industrial region wished to see slavery abolished from all the states. Both had realistic arguments and these contrast developed into the conflict known as the American Civil War. The war was one of the bitterest tragedies in American history and it swallowed more than 600,000 people during 1861-1865.

## **II. Analysis**

Most people agree that novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, was one of the things that sped up the process that led to the American Civil War. The sixteenth American president, Abraham Lincoln, also believed it. He called the author of this novel "the person who made this Great War".

The author of this unique novel was Harriet Beecher Stow (1811-1896), an unknown and house-bound spinster who was born in Connecticut. As a result of this book she became a famous American writer. This novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, was actually written in 1851, inspired by the moral outrage that greeted the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 that allowed owners to pursue and recover their "property" in free states (Norton Anthology of American Literature; Volume 1, 1989, p. 1532). This novel is a kind of social protest, opposing slavery and promoting human rights. It depicts the cruel system of slave labor on Southern plantations. Generally, this novel describes how a slave named Uncle Tom, a black, was tortured by a land-owner, Simon Legree.

The novel began serially in the National Era on Jun 5, 1851, and the last installment appeared on April 1, 1852. Following its publication, this novel provoked angry reactions among the Southerners who overwhelmingly opposed such stories as Uncle Tom's Cabin and who called it Northern antislavery propaganda; the story was "a criminal prostitution of the high functions of imagination". Thousands of angry and abusive letters came to Stowe; they called her an ugly and long tongued woman (Barratry; 1981, p. 231).

On the other hand, the effects of Stowe's book were far-reaching. It opened the eyes of many northerners to the fact of slavery in the South. The story of Uncle Tom aroused the emotions of many readers, especially northern abolitionists. They naturally applauded Mrs. Stowe's powerful tale; the poet Whittier no tanked God for the Fugitive Slave Act which and inspired the book (Bailey; 1973, Volume 1, p. 394). The story inspired many people to spread the ideas of antislavery.

Uncle Tom's Cabin consists of 45 chapters and has two plots. These two plots run parallel to each other, but there seems to be no relationship between them until the end of the story. First, it is the story about a slave named Tom, a naive Negro who is owned by Mr. Shelby, a plantation owner in Kentucky. Uncle Tom has been with the family since his master, Mr. Shelby, was a child. One day, Mr. Shelby gets into financial trouble and needs money. He is persuaded by a slave trader, Mr. Haley, to sell some of his slaves. Mr. Shelby plans to sell two of his slaves, Tom and little Harry. Tom submits to the decision without any protest even though he has to be separated from his family.

Tom and Mr. Haley, Tom's new master, take a trip to New Orleans, Louisiana. On the voyage down the Mississippi River Tom rescues little Evangeline, Mr. Augustine St. Clare's daughter, from drowning when she falls from the deck of the steamboat. Mr. St. Clare shows his gratitude by buying Tom from Mr. Harley.

Mr. Augustine St. Clare is a kind master and Eva is a very nice girl; Tom is quite happy to stay with St. Claire's family in New Orleans. However, Tom's happiness last only for two years, for Eva dies and St. Claire is accidentally killed. After the death of little Eva and St. Clare, Marrie St. Claire, Augustine's wife and Eva's mother, sells Tom to Simon Legree, a land-owner of a plantation in a remote section of the state on the Red River who is

cruel and often drunk. Here, Tom tries to work harder and behaves better to please his new master, but he is frequently beaten. At the end of Tom's story he has died, tortured by Legree.

The next plot in Uncle Tom's Cabin involves Eliza. This woman and her child, Harry, like Uncle Tom, belonged to Mr. Shelby. Her husband George Harris was a mulatto slave who was owned by Mr. Harris, another slave-owner in Kentucky.

The second of the two slaves that Mr. Shelby wanted to sell to the slave trader, Mr. Haley, was Eliza's son, little Harry. Nevertheless, Eliza did not want to give up her child and both of them escaped from their master's house. They tried to cross the frozen Ohio River to get to Ohio, a free state. Mr. Harries, the owner of George Harris, Eliza's husband, often gave George the most menial tasks and he decided to run away too, following his wife and his son.

After many adventures, including being chased by slave-catchers and being aided by some Northern Quakers and sympathetic Whites along their way they reached Canada, a place of freedom. At the end of the novel they are making a plan to go back to Africa, their motherland.

The theme of this novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, was anti slavery or abolitionism; it was also the main problem and most of the chapters principally deal with antislavery. In the preface of the 1876 edition of her book, Stowe made the comment that her novel was addressed to abolitionists.

Some characters in the novel who arranged many readers, especially northern abolitionists, were Simon Legree and Mr. Haley, a slave trader. Simon Legree was hated by most readers because of his torturing of his slaves. His physical treatment of them resulted in many of them dying, and one of them was Uncle Tom. Another of Legree's faults, one which was as unacceptable to Southerners, was his setting himself up as a God.

"Well, old boy, Tom," he said.

"I bought you... you see the Lord an't going to help you; If he had been, He wouldn't have let me get you!" This yer religion is all a mess of lying trumpery, Tom...

Ye'd better hold to me; I'm somebody, I'm ye God, and can do something!

(Uncle Tom's Cabin, p. 38).

Simon Legree's declaring himself a God angered many people. Most of them crused this character and accused the author, Stowe, of being apostate. Many churches, even some in the North, sent petitions asking that this novel be withdrawn from publication.

Another evil practiced by most slave-owners was that they often "married" their slaves illegally. For example, Legree forced Cassy, one of his women slaves, to be his wife. From this couple there would be born a mulatto, that is, a person born from mixed parents, Black and White. Usually, this mulatto man would be scarcer than other slaves, but this mulatto was still that of a slave. He did not fit in Blacks, but the Whites treated him as a slave. His ambivalent position often caused him to rebel; he often killed his master because of his being treated as a slave.

The next character who was hated by most readers was Mr. Haley. He was a slave trader whose job was to find and buy a number of slaves in a town and sell them in the slave's market. The situation in thee Negroes Market Place was incredible. Many families of Blacks were broken up because of the practice of slave treading. Topsy, for instance, a character in the novel, was a nobody black child. She has been separated from her parents and does not know where they are. She does not know about her father, mother or brother and sister, and she is also unsure about her age.

"How old are you, Topsy?"

"Dun no, Mississ..."

"Who was your mother?"

"Never had none..."

“Never any mother? What do you mean?”  
Where were you born?  
“Never was born...  
Never was born! Persisted Topsy,...  
You mustn't answer me in that way, child...  
Tell me where you were born, and who your father and mother were...  
“Never was born,...  
(Uncle Tom's Cabin, p. 239-240).

From the conversation above, one can see how dangerous the evils of the slave trading system were.

On the other hand, the author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, through her characters, make some good points. Through the characters of Eva, for example, Stowe implicitly taught her readers how the business of slavery might be conducted. First, Eva suggested the creation of a close relationship between slave-holders and their slaves as property, but see them as labor; the word labor would give them some status.

If one wanted to have good results from this labor system, one had to educate their workers, because the skilled and educated worker would produce a better quality product. Here, Stowe taught the lesson by showing how little Eva tried to teach Uncle Tom to write and to read. As a result, Tom now could send a letter to his family, comprehend the Bible more deeply and explain it to other slaves. Because of the Bible, many slaves were reconciled to their fate; they could do their jobs better and think about the afterlife.

Through the character of Miss Ophelia, Stowe also asks us to be responsible to our labor forces. Miss Ophelia was Augustine's cousin. She opposed the institution of slavery very strictly, as can be seen in the conversation with Marie, her cousin St. Clare's wife.

I think you slave-holders have an awful responsibility upon you, said Miss. Ophelia. I would not have it, for a thousand worlds. You ought reasonable creature,...  
(Uncle Tom's Cabin, p. 174-175).

Another worthwhile thing to be noted in the novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, is Stowe's tripartite structure. In explaining the situation in America during the slave period she dealt with three different points of view. This method, what I call “three dimensional comparisons”, gives us a clear portrait of the actual slave in America.

The novel offers portraits of slavery in the South, in the North and in the border between South and North. The first is the worst, Simon Legree's plantation in the southern Louisiana. Here, Stowe describes in detail Legree's cruel treatment of his slaves. She emotionally depicts how the Southern slave trader treated slaves not as human beings but as things.

The second was slavery in the North. In Vermont Stowe gives us the example of a kind master, Mr. Augustine St. Clare, who believed in a place of freedom and a home where slaves could run to and find refuge. In the North, most people want to abolish slavery, and they usually try to help slaves who want to escape by the “under-ground railroad”. That was why the worst evils did not take place in this section of the country ( Pizer; 1982, p. 431).

In the border between South and North we are given Mr. Shelby's plantation in Kentucky. Even though Mr. Shelby owned many slaves, he principally opposed slavery. However, although Shelby's family loved their slaves, they could still sell their slaves without considering them as human beings.

To let readers know the various kinds of masters in slave-holding, Stowe describes Uncle Tom's experiences with three different masters. First, one might find the very kind masters, Mr. Augustine St. Clare, but the readers could see the evil master, Simon Legree. Mr. Shelby represented the middle position. He actually was a kind master, but he could still separate Black families such as Tom's when he was confronted with a shortage of money.

The next comparison in Stowe's tripartite was the comparing of three women, Miss Ophelia, Mrs. Marie St. Clare and Mrs. Shelby. Each of them has very different ideas about how to deal with slavery. On one hand we find the very kind mistress, Miss Ophelia, and on the other we see the worst mistress, Mrs. Marie St. Clare. Mrs. Shelby is meant stand between these two.

Something that is interesting to note about the attitudes of these three women toward their slaves is that they could be changed by their husband. Mrs. Marie St. Clare, for example, was a woman who treated her slaves as things rather than as human beings. She thought Negroes were born into the world to be servants and slaves and that Whites could treat them any way they wanted to without risk of sin. However, this treatment could be modified by her husband, Mr. St. Clare. He often gave Marie advice concerning the slaves, and while her husband stayed with her at home, she tried to be on her good behavior in communicating with the slaves.

It was different from Mrs. Shelby. She loved her slave very much, especially Uncle Tom and little Harry, son of Eliza, but she could not do anything when her husband made plans to sell Tom and Harry. She regretted this inability and at the end of Uncle Tom's Cabin she asks her son, George Shelby, to buy Tom back.

From this story one may assume that women's position at that time, during the middle of the nineteenth century, was less important than her husband's. The husband was dominant in every aspect of life, as Stowe clearly shows in her novel.

In respect to women, Stowe in her novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, seems to be a "feminist". She shows us what she considers to be a good woman, one who stays with her child and protects it and who, as a good wife, stands side by side with her husband as well. These characteristics can be found in the character of Eliza. When she heard that her child, little Harry, would be bought by a slave trader, she acted quickly and saved her son. They escaped toward the North, to find a free state, to find freedom, especially freedom for her son. They tried to cross the frozen Ohio River by facing the great risks involved in leaping from ice flow to ice flow.

Furthermore, in reaching her dream to become free, Eliza patiently follows her husband; on their flight to freedom they face the troubles together; they save their child and they live hand-in-hand.

### **III. Conclusion**

When this book, Uncle Tom's Cabin, did appear, it was sold more than 350.000 copies during the first year, and within two years had been published in some fourteen languages and of course had been read by millions people around the world.

Actually, the effects of Stowe's book were dangerous. Some Northern abolitionists soon made plan to destroy the institution of slavery in the South. Some Northern people tried to attack the South openly; one of them was John Brown. He was a fanatical northern abolitionist; he plotted a larger slave insurrection at Harper's Ferry in western Virginia. He and a group of slave and two of his sons tried to attack the weapon's warehouse, but they failed. Movements like John Brown's would continue and become even more dangerous; their climax would be the Civil War that began on April 12, 1861.

Readers, especially Indonesian readers, may learn some lessons from this novel. Indonesia should avoid the mistakes that have been made by America, as pictured by Harriet Beecher Stowe in her novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin. Because the issue of slavery and discrimination that was depicted in her novel had a very negative impact on the unity of America, there was a war. War actually brings pain. It destroys people, the economy, and the culture. In war, there are no winners; all those involved are damaged in some way.

Indonesia and the United States both have the potential for massive discrimination, such as that found in the novels. Both are big nations, and both have large populations that consist of many races, many different cultures, colors of skin, religions and backgrounds. These can all lead to chaos, riots and even war. These all, of course, violate the principle of human rights.

Indonesia, as a young and developing country, has to learn from other countries, especially from the United States of America. America at the beginning was a raw frontier country; now America is a modern super-power. As the younger generation we must work harder to develop our country. We should also learn from the history of America; we can benefit from its good points and try to avoid its mistakes.

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