

Analysis of Uncle Tom's "Perfect" Character in "Uncle Tom's Cabin"

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Abstract

The paper analyzes uncle Tom's flawless character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin". Both uncle Tom's loyalty and sacrificial spirit and his seeming "over-obedience" are analyzed in detail. By presenting such a "perfect" character, Stowe achieves her purpose of evoking sympathy and provoking thought in her readers.

Keywords

Uncle Tom, Perfect character, Over-obedience, Rebelliousness, "Uncle Tom's Cabin".

1. Introduction

Uncle Tom is the protagonist in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" by abolitionist and novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe. As a slave and devoted Christian, uncle Tom has left a deep impression on his readers for his kindness, piety, loyalty to his masters and administrative abilities. However, despite all the merits in his character, uncle Tom is criticized by many for his over-obedience which in their eyes has resulted in uncle Tom's final tragedy.[1] In my opinion, uncle Tom is theoretically a perfect character under Stowe who intends to appeal to her readers from the North to take action against slavery. By contrasting Tom's seeming over-obedience and universal love for all humanity with some other characters' rebelliousness, especially with that of George Harris family, Stowe succeeds in advocating her racial theory of "meeting hate with love and meeting violence with nonviolence".

2. Body

2.1 Uncle Tom's Uncontested Merits in Character

Uncle Tom shows his absolute loyalty to his masters. Unfortunately, his first master Mr. Shelby who has run into debts has to sell Tom and Harry, the son of Eliza and George Harris, to a slave trader called Haley. While Eliza makes up her mind to escape with his son Harry and meet her husband George in Canada where Negroes are not discriminated against, Tom decides to stay. Tom who is willing to follow his master's arrangements has never even thought of betraying his master. And his loyalty to Mr. Shelby is from the beginning to the very end. From the above facts, we can get that Tom's loyalty comes from his sense of responsibility as a servant on the one hand and his slave owner's attitudes towards slaves on the other. The kindness and friendliness of the Shelby family towards slaves have strengthened Tom's loyalty, enabling Tom and the other slaves to build and maintain a harmonious and comfortable relationship with their masters. Actually, the loyalty is mutual. That is, the Shelby family also shows their "loyalty" in that Mr. Shelby's son George has a strong liking for Tom and Mrs. Shelby promises to save money to buy Tom back. Upon Tom's dying, George does buy Tom back with a large sum of money and buries him. Obviously, George considers Tom one of his family members and shows his "loyalty" to Tom in a peculiar manner. By offering the intimacy between Tom and young George, the author Stowe seems to indicate that loyalty is a mutual thing that can even be exchanged between slave owners and slaves.

Another striking merit in Tom's character is his sacrificial spirit. Upon getting aware of Mr. Shelby's intention to sell him out, Tom chooses to stay instead of running away. By accepting such an order from his owner, he actually runs the risk of embracing an uncertain future and sacrifices his own interests by living away from his wife and children. Also, on his way to New Orleans, Tom saves Little Eva. To show his gratitude, Eva's father Augustine St. Clare purchases Tom. Tom and Eva soon become intimate friends for their common faith in Christianity. The highly religious angel Eva dies of tuberculosis two years later. Eva's Christian faith has left an ever-lasting impact on Tom who

dreams of Jesus and Eva when he is abused physically and mentally by his third master Simon Legree. On the verge of giving up his faith, uncle Tom remembers Eva and thus determines to keep his sacrificial spirit. Tom's sacrificial spirit is most vividly shown when he serves Legree. When Legree orders Tom to whip a fellow slave, Tom bluntly turns down his proposal. As a result, Legree has Tom beaten severely. And when Legree orders Tom to tell Cassy and Emmeline's whereabouts, Tom refuses again. This time Legree has Tom beaten to death. In essence, Tom endures all the sufferings and pain for his fellows and helps others to escape from the third cruel master at the cost of his own life. Tom's sacrificial spirit comes from his belief in Christianity. Like Jesus, he sacrifices all to help people around him, including strangers like Eva.

2.2 Uncle Tom's Seeming Defects in Character

The only seeming defect of uncle Tom is his over-obedience. Not a rebellious person himself, uncle Tom does not even think about struggling for independence and freedom. Uncle Tom's over-obedience seems to have been highlighted when compared to Eliza and George's fighting for independence and freedom by escaping to Canada.[1] As a matter of fact, we may see uncle Tom's uprightness if we take a closer look at the details of the novel, as uncle Tom presents his rebelliousness in his own peculiar manner. When serving for his first two masters, uncle Tom is well treated by both of them, so there is no reason for uncle Tom to rebel against his benevolent masters. Uncle Tom accepts the reality as it is, trying his best to fulfill his role as a "slave". Relatively speaking, as there is no oppression of uncle Tom by the first two masters, there is no urgency and need for uncle Tom to fight fiercely back. Therefore, uncle Tom's "over-obedience" is a natural response as a home servant. When asked why he does not escape, Tom responds that "master trusted me, and I couldn't".[2] Uncle Tom is aware of his identity as a slave and his low position as a butler and naturally shows his humbleness and obedience. Instead of cultivating a rebellious attitude towards his first two masters, uncle Tom in the depth of his heart shows his very gratitude to them.

When getting along with his third master, the evil Simon Legree, on the one hand, Tom shows his commitment to his role and job as a home servant, but on the other, he is showing his rebellious spirit in a peculiar manner. Good-natured uncle Tom fails to get along well with evil Legree unless he transforms himself to be an obedient person. Obviously, uncle Tom refuses to transform his character and morality. When Legree orders uncle Tom to do things that are against his will and morality, he unhesitatingly refuses his master even at the cost of his life, which is the most rebellious act for a slave. Tom says the following lines to show his objection, "I'm willin to work, night and day---and, Mast'r, I never shall do it,---never!"[2] Uncle Tom's rebellious refusal comes from his reluctance to yield to and shift to his master's inhumanity and immorality. To some extent, uncle Tom is a most rebellious person in that instead of adopting the escaping policy to solve problems, he is courageously facing the cruel reality in an attempt to infect people around him and he does partly succeed in doing so.

From the above analysis, we can see that uncle Tom is an almost flawless figure. His over-obedience on one occasion and disobedience on the other indicate his universal love for all humanity. Uncle Tom loves the white and the black, men and women, the familiar and the unknown, the oppressors and the oppressed. And he tries his very best to influence people around him. For uncle Tom, everyone is in nature good-hearted, and an evil person has a chance to be changed into a good person. Uncle Tom is expecting a society in which people love each other. The writer Stowe may purposefully create such a "perfect" character so that uncle Tom inevitably ends up in his tragic death, which will in turn lead to the public's indignation and rebel against slavery. Taking into consideration that Stowe herself is deeply influenced by Christianity and becomes a pious Christian, she creates the flawless uncle Tom in order to praise him and Christian belief on the one hand and to provoke thought and sympathy in her readers, especially her readers in the North on the other.

3. Conclusion

The paper is an analysis of uncle Tom's perfect character in Stowe's novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin". Uncle Tom's uncontested merits in character are his loyalty to his masters and his sacrificial spirit to help all. Uncle Tom's loyalty originates from the harmonious relationship that he builds and develops with his first two masters. Uncle Tom's sacrificial spirit comes from his Christian belief which enables him to make sacrifices for his owners, fellow slaves, and even strangers. Uncle Tom's seeming defect---his over-obedience does not hold water. Tom is obedient with his first two masters who treat him well, but he shows his very rebelliousness when confronting his third master by disobeying his orders. The writer Stowe, a Christian herself, creates the flawless figure uncle Tom for the purpose of provoking thought and sympathy in her readers. From the title, we can get that the novel is devoted to uncle Tom rather than Eliza and George Harris who outwardly rebel against slavery and fight for independence and freedom. Uncle Tom's cabin is perhaps the writer Stowe's ideal picture that through Christianity practiced by all, black slaves like uncle Tom will return to his original state with his first master---having a cabin of his own for his family and living happily with his master's family and other fellow slaves.

References

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