

Uncle Tom's Cabin Lesson Plan

BY THE CIVIL WAR TRUST

Grades: 6-8

Approximate Length of Time: 3-4 class days (without the time it takes to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*)

Goals:

1. To understand public attitudes towards African Americans and towards slavery at the time of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
2. To understand how abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe used *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to sway public opinion.
3. To understand why the Fugitive Slave Act became one of the turning points in the relations between the North and the South that ultimately led to war.

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to read a historical novel or excerpt and answer 4 related questions with 80% accuracy.
2. Using a news article or website, students will make a 3-5 minute oral presentation to their peers about a current issue and how this issue relates to the historical issue being discussed.
3. Students will write a single paragraph in which they take on the perspective of a historical figure and develop any argument this person might have made regarding the issue being discussed.
4. Students will analyze a historical image and answer 3-5 related questions.
5. Students will participate in a readers' theater from a historical novel and answer 3-5 related questions.

Materials Used:

1. *Uncle Tom's Cabin Book Version*
2. *Uncle Tom's Cabin Audio Version*
3. Illustration A Slave Auction at the South

Anticipatory Set/Hook:

Uncle Tom's Cabin was first published March 20, 1852. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote the novel in response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which required the citizens in Northern states to return escaped slaves to the South. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was not the first antislavery novel, but it was by far the most successful. The novel sold 10,000 copies in the first week and 300,000 by the end of the first year. Within two years it had sold 2,000,000 copies worldwide. Stowe's main argument had little to do with racial equality. Her arguments centered on religion and the sanctity of motherhood and family. These, she felt, were the arguments most likely to affect public opinion in the North

Procedure:

Read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or discuss the plot with your students.

Activity 1

Read the following information to your students and discuss the questions that follow:

Harriet Beecher Stowe explains in the last chapter why she wrote the book (she calls herself "the author").

"For many years of her life, the author avoided all reading upon or allusion to the subject of slavery, considering it as too painful to be inquired into, and one which advancing light and civilization would certainly live down. But, since the legislative act of 1850, when she heard, with perfect surprise and consternation, Christian and humane people actually recommending the remanding escaped fugitives into slavery, as a duty binding on good citizens,--when she heard, on all hands, from kind, compassionate and estimable people, in the free states of the North, deliberations and discussions as to what Christian duty could be on this head,--she could only think, These men and Christians cannot know what slavery is; if they did, such a question could never be open for discussion. And from this arose a desire to exhibit it in a living dramatic reality."

Why does Stowe say she wrote the book? What was she trying to accomplish?

Why did she choose to write a novel instead of publishing newspaper articles, making speeches, or performing some other action?

The legislative act of 1850 was also called "the Fugitive Slave Act". From this paragraph, what do you think "the Fugitive Slave Act" did?

Activity 2

Remind your students that Stowe said she ignored slavery because it was too painful to think about and she thought it would go away by itself. Because slavery was illegal in the Northern states, many Northerners ignored it until the Fugitive Slave Act made it their business to become involved.

Discuss other examples in history, such as the rise of Nazi Germany, in which Americans ignored painful issues because "it's not any of our business."

Ask your students to bring in headlines from current newspapers of issues worldwide that Americans are ignoring.

Have the students present their headlines to the class and demonstrate how these issues compare to slavery. Ask the class to decide what would make us take action on these issues.

Activity 3

Have the students pretend to be Stowe and write a paragraph about the evils of slavery. Then have them read the following excerpt from the conclusion to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in which Stowe is doing the same thing:

Excerpt from Harriet Beecher Stowe's concluding words:

"The writer has given only a faint shadow, a dim picture, of the anguish and despair that are, at this very moment, riving thousands of hearts, shattering thousands of families, and driving a helpless and sensitive race to frenzy and despair. There are those living who know the mothers whom this accursed traffic has driven to the murder of their children; and themselves seeking in death a shelter from woes more dreaded than death ... "And you, mothers of America ... I beseech you, pity the mother who has all your affections, and not one legal right to protect, guide, or educate, the child of her bosom! ... I beseech you, pity those mothers that are constantly made childless by the American slave-trade! And say, mothers of America, is this a thing to be defended, sympathized with, passed over in silence? Do you say that the people of the free state have nothing to do with it, and can do nothing? Would to God this were true! But it is not true. The people of the free states have defended, encouraged, and participated; and are more guilty for it, before God, than the South, in that they have not the apology of education or custom. "If the mothers of the free states had all felt as they should, in times past, the sons of the free states would not have been the holders, and, proverbially, the hardest masters of slaves ... " ... You pray for the

heathen abroad; pray also for the heathen at home. And pray for those distressed Christians whose whole chance of religious improvement is an accident of trade and sale; from whom any adherence to the morals of Christianity is, in many cases, an impossibility, unless they have given them, from above, the courage and grace of martyrdom."

Discuss the following questions with the class:

- What arguments did Stowe put forth against slavery?
- Did she use the same arguments you used?
- What audience was she trying to reach with her message?
- Women in the nineteenth century could not vote, so why did Stowe make a point of addressing mothers?

Activity 4

Have the students look at the illustration of a slave auction.

Ask them to compare the ways that Caucasians and African Americans are portrayed. What are they wearing? Are they standing or sitting? What expressions are on their faces?

Ask the students if this illustration shows what a real slave auction was like. Ask them to pick one of the people in the illustration and write a paragraph about why he or she is at the auction sale, what his or her feelings are, and what it is like to be there.

Activity 5

Have the students read the following scene aloud with one student as Eliza, one student as Mr. Symmes, and one as the narrator. Then discuss the questions that follow.

Narrator: Eliza, a slave, has run away from her master with her son Harry. Her master had sold Harry away from her, but Eliza fled before they could be separated. After a long journey, Eliza finally managed to cross the Ohio River by leaping across the floating blocks of ice. At the far bank of the river, a man helps her to shore:

Mr. Symmes: "Yer a brave gal, now, whoever ye ar!"

Narrator: Eliza recognized the voice and face of a man who owned a farm not far from her old home.

Eliza: "O, Mr. Symmes!--save me--do save me--do hide me!"

Mr. Symmes: "Why, what's this? Why, if 'tan't Shelby's gal!"

Eliza: "My child!--this boy!--he'd sold him! O, Mr. Symmes, you've got a little boy!" Mr. Symmes: "So I have. Besides, you're a right brave gal. I like grit, wherever I see it. I'd be glad to do something for ye but then there's nowhar I could take ye. The best I can do is to tell ye to go thar."

Narrator: Mr. Symmes pointed to a large white house which stood by itself, off the main street of the village.

Mr. Symmes: "Go thar; they're kind folks. Thar's no kind o' danger but they'll help you,--they're up to all that sort o' thing."

Eliza: "The Lord bless you!"

Mr. Symmes: "No 'casion, no 'casion in the world. What I've done's of no 'count."

Eliza: "And, oh, surely, sir, you won't tell any one!"

Mr. Symmes: "Go to thunder, gal! What do you take a feller for? Of course not. Come, now, go along like a likely, sensible gal, as you are. You've arnt your liberty, and you shall have it, for all of me."

Narrator: The woman folded her child to her bosom, and walked firmly and swiftly away. The man stood and looked after her.

Mr. Symmes: "Shelby, now, mebbe won't think this yer the most neighborly thing in the world; but what's a feller to do? If he catches one of my gals in the same fix, he's welcome to pay back. Somehow I never could see no kind o' critter a strivin' and pantin', and trying to clar theirselves, with the dogs arter 'em and go agin 'em. Besides, I don't see no kind of 'casion for me to be hunter and catcher for other folks, neither."

Narrator: So spoke this poor, heathenish Kentuckian, who had not been instructed in his constitutional relations, and consequently was betrayed into acting in a sort of Christianized manner, which, if he had been better situated and more enlightened, he would not have been left to do.

What reasons does Mr. Symmes give for not returning Eliza and Harry to their masters? What is the narrator saying about the Fugitive Slave Act in the last sentence? How does this narrative compare with Stowe's arguments against slavery in the book's conclusion? Is it more convincing? Is it more compelling? Why or why not? Have the students read the following excerpt from the novel and answer the discussion questions at the end:

Two slaves, Cassy and Emmeline, are hiding from their cruel master, Simon Legree. Simon threatens to beat Tom if he will not tell where Cassy and Emmeline are hiding. Tom, a Christian who has always been a loyal, hard-working slave, refuses and Simon swears that he'll conquer Tom or kill him:

"Tom looked up to his master, and answered, "Mas'r, if you was sick, or in trouble, or dying, and I could save ye, I'd give ye my heart's blood; and, if taking every drop of blood in this poor old body would save your precious soul, I'd give 'em freely, as the Lord gave his for me. O, Mas'r! don't bring this great sin on your soul! It will hurt you more than 't will me! Do the worst you can, my troubles'll be over soon; but, if ye don't repent, yours won't never end!"

"Like a strange snatch of heavenly music, heard in the lull of a tempest, this burst of feeling made a moment's blank pause. Legree stood aghast, and looked at Tom; and there was such a silence, that the tick of the old clock could be heard, measuring, with silent touch, the last moments of mercy and probation to that hardened heart. It was but a moment. There was one hesitating pause,--one irresolute, relenting thrill,--and the spirit of evil came back, with seven-fold vehemence; and Legree, foaming with rage, smote his victim to the ground."

"Scenes of blood and cruelty are shocking to our ear and heart. What man has nerve to do, man has not nerve to hear. What brother-man and brother-Christian must suffer, cannot be told us, even in our secret chamber, it so harrows the soul! And yet, oh my country! these things are done under the shadow of thy laws! O, Christ! thy church sees them, almost in silence!"

- How does Stowe portray slaveholders in this scene?
- How does she portray slaves?
- How do you think white Southerners felt when they read of Simon Legree's cruelty in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?

Optional Activity:

Watch the clip from the musical, *The King and I*, in which the King of Siam's wives and children act out the scene of Eliza and Harry crossing the Ohio River. Discuss why this scene appears in the musical and what meaning the play might have had to the king's wives.

Closure:

Use the following questions for discussion or for journaling:

Are there any social issues today that you think need correcting?

What could you do to change these issues?

Assessment:

Return to the objectives of this lesson and make sure that they have been met by each of your students.