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Stowe and Douglass: The Authors That Started a War

The Civil War was a violent uproarious fight between the Union and Confederacy over the issue of slavery that lasted for years; the conversation of splitting the United States started when Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as president. Yet, years before this historical war there were two authors who spoke out against slavery which caused multitudes of contention. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote the infamous *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which told the story of a slave nicknamed Uncle Tom by the other characters in the book, who lived through various slaveholders and how his Christian faith helped him to get through the atrocities his life obtained because of slavery. Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery and wrote an entire narrative about his life up until the moment he left. The differences between these two authors show in their writings, but both of them created a true face for the movement because of their retellings and characters. Stowe and Douglass are poignant examples of the effect writing had on the abolitionist movement and how their work made waves in the discussion towards ending slavery. The similarities between these great authors are immense, and literally changed every way that society functioned through their words.

To discuss the differences between Stowe's and Douglass' writing, one must look at the authors themselves. Harriet Beecher Stowe was a white woman from the North and born to a minister and homemaker; she had several siblings who were a part of the abolitionist movement and were heavily involved in the Evangelical church (Levine 760). Frederick Douglass was born

into slavery in Maryland where he was separated from his mother, and taught himself how to read and write through his own volition after his slaveholder's wife was told to stop teaching him herself (Levine 1065). This is reflected in their writing because Douglass was a slave and escaped from it in his youth; he wrote his narrative based on people who actually existed and about events that happened to him. Stowe wrote her novel in a persuasive way that was meant for Northerners to read and end the book with differing views on slavery. All of the characters in her novel were tools to help the reader come to terms with the disgusting nature of slavery. An example of this persuasive writing in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was how her character Ophelia was written, and why she was created to reach the Northern audience. Ophelia was an older white woman from the North who believed that slavery was inhumane because of her religious beliefs but still recoiled when she was close to a black person. It was not until Ophelia was given a slave named Topsy by Mr. St. Clare that she truly understood that gravity and effects that slavery have on people; having met Topsy and learning that she didn't know her exact age, or who her parents were (Levine 823). In this sense, Ophelia's character was not created to move the story along but rather someone meant to give a voice to the reader who would be disagreeing with the abolitionist views in the novel.

Frederick Douglass had written his narrative in full detail, including names of people he interacted with, and described the events that led him to where he ended up writing his book. His reasoning for putting pen to paper was similar to that of Stowe's, but his was based in the trauma he experienced as a child and adolescent which is a much more of a genuine motivator. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* focused less of the themes it could carry but rather let the violent memories Douglass shared speak for themselves; Douglass recants a story about his wife's cousin who was murdered by her master when she was only a teenager.

“She had been set that night to mind Mrs. Hick’s baby, and during the night she fell asleep, and the baby cried. She, having lost her rest for several nights previous, did not hear the crying. They were both in the room with Mrs. Hicks. Mrs. Hicks, finding the girl slow to move, jumped from her bed, seized an oak stick of wood by the fireplace, and with it broke the girl’s nose and breastbone, and thus ended her life(Levine 1086-1087)”. Douglass’s retelling of these stories were not because of sporadic thought; he methodically chose them because he knew it was dark and telling of the cruelties of slavery. The people reading this narrative would have a skewed favor towards slavery, and he wanted to make sure that if they felt justified in their judgement that they would have an actual understanding of the horrors people went through. Douglass played right into their consciousness and truly made them feel as if they were in the room with him reliving it (Blight, David). The main differences between how Stowe wrote her novel versus how Douglass wrote his was that Stowe was writing to potentially sway readers towards ending slavery. Douglass wrote about the unabashed tormenters who defined his formative years and shared a slew of unapologetic notions about the illusion granted to white Northerners by ignoring slavery. In essence, one could argue that Douglass’ incentive to write about his experiences goes beyond just persuading his audience, he wanted his record to leave a lasting impression for generations.

There are notable similarities between Stowe and Douglass’ literature; they both used Christianity as a means to get their point across. As mentioned previously, Stowe’s father was a Christian minister and so her life was directed by the teachings of God; it’s no wonder why Christian themes were so saturated in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In the end of the novel, Tom dies a martyr’s death when he refuses to give up the location of Emmaline and Cassy to Legree, to which he has Tom beaten to death. Despite this event and the cruelties that Legree wrought on

Tom, he still forgave him and took it a step further by saying that he forgave the men who beat him. This held Tom in an almost Christ-like figure for the other characters in the novel, and showed that in spite of all that he went through he uses his Christian values to forgive the brutality of his overseers (Monitor, Gregory). Douglass didn't use Christian themes often as a main point in his narrative, but in his appendix he included something that would single out Christian people who still tolerated slavery: "I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land (Levine 1129-1130)."

Douglass' point in bringing up slaveholder's religious beliefs was to explain that most of their rhetoric is invalid and hypocritical; he insinuates that someone cannot be a firm and good believer in Christ if they also believe in slavery (Peyser, Thomas). Most churches had money funneled in through slave labor, and were likely built by slaves as well; so through this many people who sought their religion as their mainstay were not morally good people because if God saw his people be used as slaves for decades, what would make it okay centuries later?

In conclusion, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass were two of the most influential authors of the abolitionist movement; while there were other people writing similar topics on slavery, they were the most notorious throughout history. Despite modern connotations and controversies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it was one of the first novels that actually opened white people's eyes to the suffering and trauma that black people suffered during slavery. Frederick Douglass' narrative gave white people a perspective into a fraction of what he dealt with as a child; it also gave him an outlet to let out his anger over the revolting events that took place for him growing up. The abolitionist movement ended hundreds of years ago, but the legacy of these

historical works of literature carried its influence into other social reform movements and served as inspiration for future generations.

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