

Activism through Literature: How Harriet Beecher Stowe Challenged Slavery to Promote Justice for African Americans

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can you fight against injustices in your life?
- **Virtue:** Justice
- **Definition** – Justice is the capacity to determine and preserve our common rights.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about how Harriet Beecher Stowe fought against the injustice of slavery. They will also consider ways in which they can fight injustices in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will examine Harriet Beecher Stowe’s actions in fighting against the injustice of slavery.
 - Students will understand ways in which they can fight injustice in their own lives.
 - Students will apply their knowledge of justice in fair and equal treatment of others.
- **Background**
 - In 1820, the Missouri Compromise created a division of the land acquired by the Louisiana Purchase between slave and free states demarcated by the 36 degree, 30 minute latitude line. However, this division became raised new questions after the Mexican American War and the realization of Manifest Destiny, conquering the land from the Atlantic to Pacific. The Compromise of 1850 was necessary to maintain the balance between slave and free states. The Compromise of 1850 provided that California would become a free state and the slave trade would be abolished in Washington, D.C.; however, slavery was still legal in our nation’s capital. The Utah and New Mexico territories decided on the issue of slavery by popular sovereignty. The objective of popular sovereignty was to lift restrictions against slavery by allowing a vote through the territorial legislature to determine whether the territory would be free or permit slavery. Ultimately, slavery was permitted by the Utah territorial legislature in 1852 and condoned in the New Mexico territory. In 1856, in response to the Fugitive Slave Act, the New Mexico state legislature created a law which limited the number of free blacks allowed to reside in New Mexico. However, by 1862, the United States outlawed slavery in all of the U.S. territories.

The most controversial section of the Compromise was the Fugitive Slave Act, which initiated severe conflict between the North and the South. The first Fugitive Slave Act in 1793 mandated the return of runaway slaves along with a penalty against anyone who harbored a runaway slave. The North responded with widespread resistance, which was addressed with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Since a fugitive was defined as any African American, in many cases, free African Americans were captured and brought to the South as slaves. These fugitives were denied the right to a trial, which contributed to the confusion regarding whether the fugitive was a slave or free. Northern white citizens who intervened, or simply did not support the capture of fugitives, faced severe consequences including fines and imprisonment. The expectation that citizens were to assist in the recovery of slaves intensified the abolition movement and stimulated the increase in the Underground Railroad. Finally, what was considered a southern institution had national implications as citizens in all parts of the country were expected to actively participate in slavery. The Fugitive Slave Act initiated a questioning of values when faced with the choice of helping a human being or obeying a law.

- **Vocabulary**
 - Missouri Compromise
 - Demarcated
 - Manifest Destiny
 - Compromise of 1850
 - Popular sovereignty
 - Sanctioned
 - Fugitive Slave Act
 - Legislature
 - Consequences
 - Penalty

- Harbored
- Abolition
- Initiated
- Evangelical
- Presbyterian
- Exploration
- Literary
- Outlet
- Immortality
- Cholera
- Epidemic
- Compelled
- Catalyst
- Advocate
- Parable
- Institution
- Imagery
- Humanized
- Realist
- Empathy
- Undermined
- Passive
- Marginalized
- Precluded
- Champion
- Sentiment
- Providence
- Infirm
- Confounds
- Refuge
- Reparation
- Defiant
- Zealot
- Insurrections
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
 - Who was Harriet Beecher Stowe?
 - What was Stowe’s purpose in writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*?
 - How did Stowe attempt to fight the injustice of slavery?
 - How did Harriet Beecher Stowe help to promote freedom for others?

- **Discussion Questions**

- Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

- **Additional Resources**

- Foner, Eric. "Eric Foner on the Fugitive Slave Act." *PBS*. Web. 06 June 2015. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4i3094.html>
- Harriet Beecher Stowe Center. Web. 06 June 2015. <https://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/>
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- Kane, Katherine. "Harriet Beecher Stowe & 'Uncle Tom's Cabin': Changing History with a Best-Seller." *Bio*. Web. 19 Mar. 2015. <http://www.biography.com/news/uncle-toms-cabin-harriet-beecher-stowe>
- Luis-Brown, David. *Waves of Decolonization: Discourses of Race and Hemispheric Citizenship in Cuba, Mexico, and the United States*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. "The Freeman's Dream: A Parable." *National Era*, 1850.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Dred; A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*. 1856.
- "The Slave Experience: Freedom and Emancipation." *PBS*, 2004. Web. 06 June 2015. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/freedom/history.html>

Handout A: Activism through Literature: How Harriet Beecher Stowe Challenged Slavery to Promote Justice for African Americans

Background

In 1820, the Missouri Compromise created a division of the land acquired by the Louisiana Purchase between slave and free states demarcated by the 36 degree, 30 minute latitude line. However, this division became raised new questions after the Mexican American War and the realization of Manifest Destiny, conquering the land from the Atlantic to Pacific. The Compromise of 1850 was necessary to maintain the balance between slave and free states. The Compromise of 1850 provided that California would become a free state and the slave trade would be abolished in Washington, D.C.; however, slavery was still legal in our nation's capital. The Utah and New Mexico territories decided on the issue of slavery by popular sovereignty. The objective of popular sovereignty was to lift restrictions against slavery by allowing a vote through the territorial legislature to determine whether the territory would be free or permit slavery. Ultimately, slavery was permitted by the Utah territorial legislature in 1852 and condoned in the New Mexico territory. In 1856, in response to the Fugitive Slave Act, the New Mexico state legislature created a law which limited the number of free blacks allowed to reside in New Mexico. However, by 1862, the United States outlawed slavery in all of the U.S. territories.

The most controversial section of the Compromise was the Fugitive Slave Act, which initiated severe conflict between the North and the South. The first Fugitive Slave Act in 1793 mandated the return of runaway slaves along with a penalty against anyone who harbored a runaway slave. The North responded with widespread resistance, which was addressed with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Since a fugitive was defined as any African American, in many cases, free African Americans were captured and brought to the South as slaves. These fugitives were denied the right to a trial, which contributed to the confusion regarding whether the fugitive was a slave or free. Northern white citizens who intervened, or simply did not support the capture of fugitives, faced severe consequences including fines and imprisonment. The expectation that citizens were to assist in the recovery of slaves intensified the abolition movement and stimulated the increase in the Underground Railroad. Finally, what was considered a southern institution had national implications as citizens in all parts of the country were expected to actively participate in slavery. The Fugitive Slave Act initiated a questioning of values when faced with the choice of helping a human being or obeying a law.

Narrative

Edmund Burke said, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." This idea was firmly established in the Bible, which was a vital part of Harriet Beecher Stowe's upbringing. Her father, Lyman Beecher, was an evangelical Presbyterian minister in Litchfield, Connecticut. Harriet was raised in an environment which provided many educational opportunities for women and supported the exploration of literature. Lyman Beecher often hosted literary discussions in their home. However, Harriet Beecher Stowe's mother, Roxana Foote, was reserved with her focus on family and homemaking, which maintained the role of the nineteenth century woman. Harriet pursued writing as an intellectual outlet that was acceptable for women since it was valued as a skill necessary to maintain family ties. Writing was encouraged throughout her childhood while being educated at Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Female Academy. At the age of thirteen, her essay "Can the immortality of the Soul be proved by the light of nature?" was featured in a school production. Her father and sister acknowledged her intellect and supported her continued education, which extended beyond sixteen years, the age which normally marked the end of female education. At the age of twenty-one, Harriet moved with her family to Ohio where her first book, *Geography*, would reflect her appreciation for diversity reflected in the Ohio Valley.

In 1836, Harriet married Calvin Stowe who continued to support her literary talent. Their life in Cincinnati, Ohio, provided a first-hand experience of the conflict between free and slave states because Ohio bordered the slave state of Kentucky. However, it was the loss of Harriet and Calvin's eighteen-month-old son to a cholera epidemic that compelled her to find new purpose in her life. Stowe related the loss of her son to what a slave woman endured when her child was ripped from her at the slave auction. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was passed a year after her son's death and acted as a catalyst for Stowe to be an advocate for the abolitionist movement. Though Harriet Beecher Stowe was a white woman, her contact with enslaved people and fugitive slaves motivated her to apply her literary prowess to convince people of the injustice of slavery. In 1850, with the expectation that all

American citizens would enforce the Fugitive Slave Act, Stowe wrote an article called “The Freeman’s Dream: A Parable” highlighting the idea that a person who is in a position to help must do what they can to initiate change. Stowe appealed to white northerners: “Shall any doubt if he may help the toil-worn, escaping fugitive, sick in heart, weary in limb, hungry and heartsore—let him rather ask, shall he dare refuse him?” While women throughout the country did not have the right to vote and were not considered of equal status to men, Stowe was supported by her husband and father to take an active role in abolition.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was a gifted writer who used her own experiences, those of her friends and family, along with slave narratives and anti-slavery newspaper articles to generate content for her stories. Stowe was asked by her publisher to “paint a word picture of slavery” and her work highlights the injustices of the institution. The first segment of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* appeared June 5, 1851 in the anti-slavery newspaper *The National Era* and continued for a total of 45 segments.

In 1852, the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became an overnight global bestseller. Its success can be attributed to the powerful imagery that humanized slaves and provided an identity to a people that were denied one. Stowe’s realist novel instilled empathy that undermined the former passive acceptance of the institution of slavery. Stowe assembled a number of her slave narratives into a compelling single story that represented many marginalized perspectives regarding the institution of slavery. It was perhaps Stowe’s gender, which precluded her right to vote, that made Stowe able to identify to some extent with the injustices of slavery. Ultimately, Stowe’s belief in Christianity and the principles of a government based on the idea that “all men are created equal” pushed her to champion justice for a people who were denied these rights. Ms. Stowe demanded action and urged people to assist escaped slaves and view them with compassion. An example of this sentiment is an excerpt taken from the final chapter of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*:

“On the shores of our free states are emerging the poor, shattered, broken remnants of families...men and women, escaped, by miraculous providences, from the surges of slavery...feeble in knowledge, and, in many cases, infirm in moral constitution, from a system which confounds and confuses every principle of Christianity and morality. They come to seek a refuge among you; they come to seek education, knowledge, Christianity. What do you owe to these poor, unfortunates, O Christians? Does not every American Christian owe to the African race some effort at reparation for the wrongs that the American nation has brought upon them?”

After *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published, many pro-slavery critics attempted to argue the accuracy of her novel. In response, Stowe wrote *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1853, which documented the basis for the story and applied a more defiant and critical tone towards the South. Despite these critics, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was so influential that when she met President Lincoln in 1862, he was said to have stated, “So you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war!”

Harriet Beecher Stowe expressed a deep desire for justice: “I would write something that would make this whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is.” What Stowe set out to accomplish would become a reality. As a follow-up to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe continued writing to promote justice in the novel *Dred; A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), which focused on an escaped slave and a religious zealot drawing on Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner who both plotted insurrections.

While Stowe advocated for the abolition of slavery and justice for slaves, her work is sometimes criticized as playing to a white savior model by focusing on freedom and not equality. However, given the time period, Stowe’s immediate goal was to combat slavery and evoke sympathy by utilizing the responsibility of Christians as a catalyst to end an institution, which was entrenched in the South for over 200 years. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote to initiate justice. Her vision of a country which lived up to its ideals of “all men are created equal” is still present today.