

**A MORE PERFECT UNION:  
THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT  
OF THE U.S. CONSTITUTION  
Year Two**

North Shore Educational Collaborative

**Final Project: Book Review**

**“Mightier Than the Sword”**

**By: David S. Reynolds**



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“So you’re the little lady who started the war,” Abraham Lincoln said to Harriet Beecher Stowe when he met her for the first time at the White House. She moved a Nation with what became the most sensational, bestselling influential books of its day: Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

In Mightier Than the Sword: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Battle for America, David S. Reynolds, a professor of English and American Studies at the City University of New York, makes a very strong argument that the novel “was central to redefining American democracy.” He believes that the book helped write social injustice by putting forth fairness and empowerment for those groups who were oppressed here in the United States as well as abroad. He credits the book for helping influence the end of serfdom in Russia.

Reynolds begins by talking about the influences in Stowe’s life from birth until she wrote the book. He tells the reader that the first inklings of ideas for it started in Stowe’s mind while she was living in Cincinnati in the 1830s and 1840s, where she met fugitive slaves who escaped through or from Kentucky, and where, as Reynolds states, “she loved spending time in the kitchen with servants like the African-American Zillah.” In the spring of 1850, she moved to Maine, where she followed the Congressional debates over a proposed new law that would deny fugitive slaves basic rights while putting in place new penalties on anyone who helped a fugitive slave in any way. She then wrote to a magazine editor that “the time is come when even a woman or a child who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak.”

Her letter to the editor inspired a series of fictional sketches about slaves under physical or psychological assault. One was Eliza, who escapes from bounty hunters after

being abused. According to the author, when the magazine pieces were put together and published in 1852 as Uncle Tom's Cabin, the first run was 5,000 copies. When the book came out in the North, Fredrick Douglass rejoiced that Stowe had, "baptized with holy fire myriads who before cared nothing for the bleeding slave." In the South, her indictment of slavery through the figure of Legree was likened to a "malignant" attack on the institution of marriage, "as if she had chosen a wife-beater to represent the normal condition of the relation between loving spouses."

Reynolds believes that without Stowes's book, Uncle Tom's Cabin, "the last 150 years of American History might have played out very differently." He firmly believes that Uncle Tom's Cabin fueled the flames leading to the American Civil War.

This book is, neither a biography of Stowe nor an exploration of her role in the struggle over slavery and abolition. It is almost a biography of the novel itself, and the transformation thinking that it drove for two centuries, from Stowe's birth in 1811 to the present.

According to Reynolds, the novel's unprecedented popularity can be explained by the fact that it incorporated images from virtually every part of the culture, including religion, reform, temperance, antislavery writings, pulp fiction and popular performances. These contemporary props helped bring the messages all together in very inspiring characters and vivid plots. According to the author, "Stowe's immersion in popular culture set the stage for her affecting novel." He feels that her book, "channeled popular tropes and images into realistic human narrative with a crystal-clear social point: slavery was evil and so were the political and economic institution that supported it."

The big question is how did the novel start the war? Reynolds argues in his book that without the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, there would have been no Civil War.

The author firmly believes that Uncle Tom's Cabin helped put Lincoln in the White House by uniting all the different antislavery groups, and igniting the passions of the regular citizens and inflaming the feelings of Southerners.

Stowe's book first appeared in a newspaper as a series. Finally then published in 1852, her novel was a best seller, and one month later, the presses were, "running twenty-four hours a day, three paper mills supplying paper, and a hundred booksellers selling work." Within a year, it had sold over 300,000 copies in the United States, three times more than any other American book, including the Bible.

In the book, Reynolds tells the reader that reading Uncle Tom's Cabin aloud became a favorite family pastime, and abroad, it was widely translated. According to Reynolds, in England the British bought more than 1 million copies, more than triple the rate in the United States. He also mentions that Stowe did not get rich from the book and sales because she signed a poor contract and without international copyright laws, she received nothing for books sold overseas.

Reynolds indicates that just as important as the novel were the different spinoffs, which included, engravings of the black characters, "Topsy dolls," Uncle Tom's Unadulterated Coffee and licorice from Paris called Uncle Tom's Candy. The most influential, according to the author, was the play based on the novel. Some Southern states outlawed the book and the theater version. Reynolds states that before the end of the century, over 500 traveling companies were staging the play in the United States.

In the book, Reynolds looks at dozens of imitative novels, plays and minstrel shows, some for and some against, others for slavery or segregation. According to Reynolds, Stowe's book also carries its influences into modern times, through films

such as D.W. Griffith's silent film, "Birth of a Nation," which portrayed the Ku Klux Klan as a heroic group, "the most powerful "anti-Tom" work in history. He calls "Gone with the Wind" a pro-Southern response to Stowe's novel. He further tells us in the book that the television series "Roots," was the American entertainment industry's too-late apology for the anti-Tom "pablum it had been serving the American public for decades."

In writing this book, Reynolds, as mentioned earlier, saw Uncle Tom's Cabin as sparking the Civil War. But truly, he feels it "was central to redefining American democracy, and had major influences in the revolutions of Russia, China, Brazil, Cuba, and elsewhere." He goes even farther by saying in the final paragraph, that Stowe's work "ushered into the world the spirit of interracial sympathy and true democratic justice" that he feels culminated in the Civil Rights era of the 1960s.

To be very candid, I would not recommend Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America to anybody who is reading it for pleasure or for moderate research. I found at times the book to be repetitive and somewhat disorganized, jumping around and going back and forth on many points.

The significant amount of interesting facts would be better communicated if his information were more organized. The book provides a tremendous amount of specific detail about who Harriet Beecher Stowe was, and what influenced her, but sometimes it is hard to connect this information sequentially. Most importantly though, Reynolds achieves his ultimate goal: to demonstrate how much impact the book had on the world.

## Pedagogical Approach

When I visited the “Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework,” (August 2003), I discovered under U.S. History I Learning Standards, page 69, standard *USI.36* (E.) “the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (1851 -1852) should be taught in the high school history curriculum.

Our United States History book, *America Pathways to the Present*, by Prentice Hall, has almost an entire page about Stowe. A group project format would be very effective for teaching *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and using Reynolds’ book. I would introduce Stowe and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* using Reynold’s book for background information in Worksheets and handouts.

I have previously highlighted sections for use in class. For the group work, I would divide the class into four. One group would use Reynold’s book to research and report on Stowe’s background. Group two would research *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and what the story was about. Group three would list all the characters found in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and explain the various situations each character dealt with. Group four would research the impact of Stowe’s book on the Civil War and the world in general. If we have a group five, the class would compile the information in a Power-point presentation.

This entire project would take several weeks combining class time and outside homework. The essential learning objective would be to understand why Stowe’s novel had such a far-reaching and influential impact on American Civil War and the entire world for a very long time. In the end, I would hope that this project would be used by the History and Social Studies Department at Lynn Classical High School.