

# Abolitionism in American Novels: A Study of Representative Works

GAO Jian-kun

Heze University, Heze, China

Abolitionism, as an important trend in history of American literature, reflected in various forms. Among them, the novel is one of the most important forms. This paper mainly studies the two most significant and representative anti-slavery novels: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976). In this paper, the author mainly discusses the two novels in their theme, the historical background, social impact, and literary values. Though they are quite different in some aspects, especially the historical background, they share the same theme and both of them bring about great impact to the society and have remarkable literary values. They are indeed the most representative works in the history of black literature.

*Keywords:* abolitionism, slavery, novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*

## Introduction

The first half of the 19th century witnessed the vigorous development of abolitionist literature ideological trend, which originated in the 1830s of the 19th century and reached the peak in the 1850s. The abolitionist literature occupies a position in the history of American literature. From the historical view, we can safely say the abolitionist movement was born in the magnificent anti-slavery movement, which in turn promotes the growth and development of the movement (QIN, 2007). The unfavorable situation of the American blacks inspired sympathy of many progressive intellectuals and writers, and they joined the abolitionist movement. Thus the abolitionist theme gradually slipped into novelists' perspective and provided the raw material for their novels. Decades before and after the Civil War, some representative works include: (1) American historian, editor, and writer Richard Hildreth's *White Slavery* (1852); (2) the Black Movement leader Frederick Douglas's autobiographical novel *Frederick Douglas, a Black American Slave Readme* (1845); and (3) black novelist William Brown's *Clotel* (1853). The novels depict the miserable and tragic fate of blacks slaves, sharply exposed the greed and cruelty of the slave owners, their barbarous and inhuman nature. These novels proposed devastating indictment of slavery and greatly promoted the development of the abolitionist movement.

If we select the most representative novels considering from social influence and literature value, it should be white writer Mrs. Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and black writer Alex Harry's family history novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976). The former was completed 10 years before the American Civil War and was widely accepted as the most representative anti-slavery novel; while the latter was finished

around the 1960s and 1970s of the 20th century, which inherited the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* abolitionist literature tradition, and occupied a certain position in the history of American literature.

### *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

As mentioned before, Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is considered as the most representative novel that reflected the anti-slavery theme, which exposed and criticized the cruelty of slavery in the southern states. This novel reached the broadest audience and was less threatening to white audiences than black ex-slaves. This book focused on the cruelties of slavery—particularly the separation of family members—and brought instant acclaim to Stowe. After its publication, Stowe traveled throughout the United States and Europe speaking against slavery. She reported that upon meeting President Lincoln, he remarked, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this Great War" (O Hua-en, 2006, pp. 103-104).

Stowe, though not an active abolitionist herself, had strong anti-slavery feelings. She was grown up in an abolitionist household and had harbored fugitive slaves to escape from the slave owners. She had also spent time observing and collecting first-hand material about slavery on her visits to Kentucky, across the river from her Cincinnati home. In the year 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act was published, as part of the compromise between southern slave-holding interests and northern free soilers. This at once became the most controversial acts and heightened northern fears of a "slave power conspiracy". Moderate abolitionists were now faced with the immediate choice of defying what they believed to be an unjust law or breaking with their own consciences and beliefs (Hedrick, 2011). With the passage of the act, Stowe decided to make a strong statement which protested the institution of slavery. She had been working as a freelance journalist to supplement her husband's income and help support their six children. In June 1851, Stowe began publishing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in serialized form in the National Era.

The response was enthusiastic, and people clamored for Stowe to publish the work in book form. It was risky business to write or publish an anti-slavery novel in those days, but after a great deal of effort she found a reluctant publisher. Only 5,000 copies of the first edition were printed and quickly sold out in several days. In the year 1852, its book form was published and was reprinted more than 100 versions in the first year and 300,000 copies were sold in the United States; 1,000,000 copies were sold in Great Britain (Wheatcroft, 2011). In 1855, three years after it was published, it was called "the most popular novel of our day" (Everon, 1855, p. 67). The book was translated into numerous languages, and was adapted into movies and plays for the theater in many different versions.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* had a tremendous impact. This novel portrayed many vivid characters, including Uncle Tom, other black slaves and some selfish, indifferent slave owners. According to the novel, Uncle Tom was a home slave of Selby—a slave owner lived in Kentucky. Tom served the farmer whole-heartedly and was loved by everyone and he was a typical Christian. But when Shelby was facing the loss of farm because the debt, he decided to sell Tom and another slave. In a drowning accident, Tom saved a slave owner's daughter Eva's life, and this little child persuaded her father to buy Uncle Tom. The owner was killed shortly after an accident. Later, Tom fell into the cruel plantation owner Legree's hands. Legree was very cruel and whipped slaves frequently. Tom suffered, because he refused to listen to Legree's words time again. Finally, in order to help two slaves to escape, Tom was beaten badly bruised from flogging, but he refused to betray his fellows and did not say anything. Legree was enraged and whipped Tom crazily. When at his last gasp, his former owner's son George arrived to buy Tom, but Tom eventually passed away with cuts and bruises all over.

In writing the story, Mrs. Stowe convinced readers that the institution of slavery itself was definitely evil, because it supported people like Legree and enslaved people like Uncle Tom. Because of her work, thousands rallied to the anti-slavery cause.

Southerners were outraged, and declared the work to be criminal, slanderous, and utterly false. A bookseller in Mobile, Alabama, was forced out of town for selling copies. Southerners also reacted by writing their own novels. These depicted the happy lives of slaves, and often contrasted them with the miserable existences of Northern white workers. In order to make affirmative response, Harriet Beecher Stowe published another non-fiction book *On the Uncle Tom's Cabin Reply* in 1853, with large amounts of legal provisions, the court records, newspapers, and private letters, which in fact proved the authenticity of the content in her work. The works evoked enormous repercussions in the country and gained support from all conscience, and upright Americans. *Uncle Tom's cabin* played the largest role in progressive literature can play in a critical moment of national political changes.

Most black Americans responded enthusiastically to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Frederick Douglass was a friend of Stowe's; she had consulted him on some sections of the book, and he praised the book in his writings. Most black abolitionists saw it as a tremendous help to their cause.

Despite positive reaction from readers, some literary critics dismissed the style in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and viewed it as merely sentimental novels, because these books were written by women and so prominently featured "women's sloppy emotions" (Rosenthal, 2003, p. 42). One literary critic said that had the novel not been about slavery, "It would be just another sentimental novel" (Gossett, 1978, pp. 123-124). In *The Literary History of the US* (1945), George F. Whicher called *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "Sunday-school fiction", full of "broadly conceived melodrama, humor, and pathos" (as cited in Tompkins, 1985, pp. 122-146).

However, in 1985, Tompkins expressed a different view of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with her book in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction*. Tompkins praised the style so many other critics had dismissed, writing that sentimental novels showed how women's emotions had the power to change the world for the better. She also said that the popular domestic novels of the 19th century, including *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, were remarkable for their "intellectual complexity, ambition, and resourcefulness"; and that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offers a "critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville" (Tompkins, 1985).

Of course, like most white writers of her day, Stowe could not escape the racism of the time. Because of this, her work has some serious flaws, which in turn have helped perpetuate damaging images of African Americans. However, the book, within its genre of romance, was enormously complex in character and in its plots.

### ***Roots: The Saga of an American Family***

After the Second World War, the situation of U.S. political, economic, and social situation both in abroad and in domestic has undergone great changes. However, black as an important member of the United States of America, could neither own full political rights, nor did they enjoy with whites equal employment and education opportunity.

The outbreak of the Second World War is an important turning point in the civil rights movement in the history of their struggle. It "sowed seed for the protest movement in 1950s-1960s" (Gatell, 1970, p. 235). On the one hand, the African American people who got rid of the shackles of slavery actively participating in the social

economy, and they made continual efforts to improve their situation. Among those years, a black middle class grew stronger which provides the material foundation for the new civil rights movement. On the other hand, the improvement of economic conditions enabled black people to pay more attention to their ethnic status. Their race consciousness was rising unprecedentedly, and they were eager to get social recognition and acceptance of the white society. The improvement of the status of the black economy also brought about political power requirements. They realized their unremitting struggle with domestic racism not only met the requirement of the development of their own race, but also met the needs of anti-fascists and the needs of all colored people in their fighting for independence, freedom, and equality all through the world.

In this case, the United States of America black literary creation also to have the theme and direction of its own. In 1964, the black literary movement is a new renaissance of African American history, American black rights movement (Black Power Movement) is embodied. The movement aimed to change the situation and status of blacks in the United States, and many black writers and artists intended to change the traditional art image of American Negroes in literature, which was reflected by the new spirit of 1960's black writers. Because the black writers of the readers are mainly black, so they paid special attention to traditional culture, history, and ethnic groups in their works.

In 1976, Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* was published. That groundbreaking novel popularized the idea that African Americans, like descendents of the Mayflower, could trace their genealogy and preserve family stories despite almost insurmountable odds, starting with slavery. In the spirit of "Roots", the recent picture books look at African American family histories from our 21st century vantage point.

Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* is the monumental two-century drama of Kunta Kinte and the six generations who came after him. By tracing back his roots, Haley tells the story of 39 million Americans of African descent. He has rediscovered for an entire people a rich cultural heritage that ultimately speaks to all races everywhere, for the story it tells is one of the most eloquent testimonials ever written to the incommutability of the human spirit.

Kunta Kinte is abducted from his African village, sold into slavery, and taken to America. He makes several escape attempts until he is finally caught and maimed. He marries Bell, his plantation's cook, and they have a daughter, Kizzy, who is eventually sold away from them. Kizzy has a son by her new master, and the boy grows up to become Chicken George, a legendary cock fighter who leads his family into freedom. Throughout the series, the family observes notable events in U.S. history, such as the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, slave uprisings, and emancipation.

As a literature work which the whole story is around black people's life, roots have its distinguish significance, especially its narrative style. The author applied an ingenious structure in writing this novel and narrated the story of a black family from its "root". The author wrote a family history pattern and he arranged the story mainly according to a chronological sequence. The narration of the story represents a simply and fluent style which impress the reader deeply. In addition, it is filled with rich feelings and passions, marvelous imagination and the tone is beautiful and delicate. All these always make readers think perfect reading experience.

Artistically speaking, the success of *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* is obvious and remarkable. The heroes have their own characteristics, even if the status was similar, the personality was never identical. Two most memorable figures are Kunta Kint and Chicken George. The former bore strong determination while the

latter was featured with cleverness, smartness, and frivolousness. These images were revealed vividly on the paper and became classical ones in modern American literature. Some white masters were also depicted vividly, which does not conform to traditional pattern. Especially the secondary master, he was well educated, kind, tolerant, as a doctor he healed the wounded and rescued the dying; but once he felt the rules were violated he immediately changed to a cruel owner. The white image is very representative.

Compared with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* pays much attention to the spiritual suffering of black people, the suffering because of lost honor. The book intends to tell us the most precious is know that who they are, where are they comes; but the most serious crime is that Africans brought to America were stripped of their languages, religious practices, and families, they do not know where is their root, therefore, the black people would not have real freedom. Just as the word in the book: "*Even work for white 1000 years, you are still a slave*" (Haley, 1976, p. 506). No derivation, no ascription. Although the slavery has been abolished, they are still wanderer.

The background and theme of *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* is more complex, on one hand, it involved the argument of slavery in hundreds of years; on the another hand, it connects the current situation and prospect of the black people. Therefore, the research about *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* is not only the story itself, but also some problems of American society.

### Conclusions

From the analysis of the themes, the background of creation, social and historical significance of the two novels, we can get a better understanding about the life of American blacks, the nationwide abolitionism, and the final occurrence of the Civil War. From the analysis above, the following four points can be concluded: (1) Both the novels represent the same theme of abolitionism; (2) They are produced under different background; the former accelerated the breakout of the civil war while the latter meet the black people's requirements of equal rights and social engagement; (3) Both the novels are well accepted by readers and became great works; and (4) Both the novels have specific literary values in the same aspects.

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