



Uncle Tom's Cabin Study Guide

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For the novel by
Harriet Beecher Stoyve



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Synopsis

Uncle Tom is a favored slave on a Kentucky plantation owned by Arthur Shelby, who entrusts him with the day-to-day management of the plantation. He is also loved and respected by the other slaves. Mr. Shelby's debts, however, force him to sell some of his property, and because of Tom's great value, Shelby chooses to sell him and a promising four-year-old boy named Harry.

Harry's mother, Eliza, chooses to risk the dangers of running away with Harry rather than lose her child to the slave market. She is sheltered by a series of kind people who are willing to help runaway slaves. Harry's father, George Harris, separately flees a master who badly mistreats him.

Uncle Tom, meanwhile, bids a sorrowful farewell to his wife and children and leaves with Mr. Haley for the slave market in New Orleans. During the voyage, Tom is befriended by Eva St. Clare, a lovely little girl travelling home to New Orleans with her father, Augustine St. Clare. When Tom rescues Eva from near-drowning, St. Clare buys him from Haley to be Eva's personal companion. Eva's health is fragile, however, and she becomes ill and dies. Not long afterward, St. Clare himself is accidentally killed, and Tom finds himself for sale once again.

This time, however, Tom's fate is terrible. He is bought by Simon Legree, a cruel, degenerate man who owns an isolated and crumbling plantation on the Red River. Legree's ruthless brutality toward his slaves has degraded them to the point of robbing them of their humanity. They live without hope and have forgotten even the smallest kindness. Tom nearly loses his faith in God, but recovers it and determines in his heart to show the love of Jesus to his fellow slaves. George Shelby, the son of Tom's original owner, had been searching for him to buy him back. Because of the several sales and the passage of time, however, he does not find Tom until after Tom has been savagely beaten by Legree and lies dying. George sorrowfully buries Tom, vowing to do whatever lies within his power to end slavery. Upon returning home, George frees his slaves, telling them that they owe their freedom to Uncle Tom.

George and Eliza Harris by this time have been reunited and escape to Canada where they raise their family as free people with opportunities beyond their earlier hopes and dreams.

From the time of its publication to the present, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been controversial. Its earliest critics declared it to be a completely inaccurate picture of slavery, and labeled Mrs. Stowe with a variety of insulting epithets. In the 1960s, critics decried the novel as racist, claiming that Mrs. Stowe presented slaves in a derogatory and stereotypical manner. Modern historians agree that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* gives the reader a fairly reliable portrait of life under slavery in the American South. Harriet Beecher Stowe vividly demonstrates the feelings of American reformers of her day on the question of slavery, and the modern reader will gain an understanding of some of the details of the slavery environment and debate prior to the Civil War.

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11. Why does George initially feel awkward at breakfast?
12. As Simeon Halliday gently reproves his son for unbecoming attitudes, what does the reader learn about the lengths to which he will go to help others?

Analysis:

13. Consider the terms of the handbill in Chapter 11. Why would George's owner have been willing to pay the same price for the return of his slave or for proof that he had been killed?
14. *Juxtaposition* is the placement of things side by side for dramatic effect. In general, an author situates scenes with contrasting elements next to one another to enhance the reader's perception of one or both of them. In Chapter 12, Haley, Tom, and the other slaves in Haley's gang board one of the Ohio boats. Reread the paragraph that begins, "The *La Belle Rivière* . . .," then list specific words and phrases that describe the two scenes that are presented side by side. What effect does the juxtaposition of these scenes create?

Locate another example in Chapter 12 of the author's use of juxtaposition for dramatic effect.

15. *Point of view* is the vantage point from which a writer tells a story. There are three main points of view: first person, third-person limited, and third-person omniscient. Second person also is described, but it is rarely used.
 - In the *first person* point of view, the narrator is a character in the story. Using the pronoun "I," the narrator tells his experiences, thoughts, and feelings, and the reader can only experience

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the actions and thoughts of other characters as the narrator experiences and understands them. For example, "I was sitting on the porch swing the other night reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to my friend Bethany."

- In the *second person* point of view, the author writes directly to the reader, using the word "you." For example, "You were sitting on the porch swing the other night reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to your friend Bethany." The second person is rarely used because it is difficult to convince readers to believe they are doing or thinking things the writer tells them about.
- In *third-person limited*, the narrator is outside the story but tells the story from the vantage point of only one character, or only one character at a time. The narrator can tell the reader the thoughts and feelings of this character but can only tell about other characters by observation. For example, "Mari sat on the porch swing reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to her friend Bethany, but she was afraid Bethany was getting bored."
- In the *third-person omniscient* (all-knowing) point of view, the narrator is outside the story and knows everything that is going on in the story, as well as the thoughts and feelings of all the characters. For example, "Mari sat on the porch swing reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Bethany, but she was afraid Bethany was getting bored. In fact, Bethany was just wondering what she would have been like if she had lived in the mid-1800s."

From what point of view is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* written?

16. The final paragraphs of Chapter 12 are an *aside* from the author. Asides usually are used in plays when a sentence or two is spoken in an undertone by one character to the audience or to another character. Asides help the audience know a character better by allowing that character to privately express feelings, opinions, and reactions, which is how the aside is used in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Keep in mind that Stowe wrote in a writing style popular in 1851. In literature the aside generally entails a change in point of view, also. Which point of view best describes Stowe's asides? Do you think the asides are effective? Do you find them distracting? Do you think they date the novel, making it less appealing to the modern reader, or do they help today's reader understand the weight of sentiment surrounding the slavery issue at that time?
17. Another common figure of speech is *anthropomorphism*. Anthropomorphism (sometimes used interchangeably with *personification*) attributes human qualities, characteristics, or abilities to nonhuman objects (for example, leaves *dancing* in the breeze). Read the description of the large

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rocking chair in the first paragraph of Chapter 13. What human attributes are ascribed to the chair? What is the effect of the comparison?

What other example of anthropomorphism can you find in Chapter 13?

Dig Deeper:

18. Mr. Wilson tells George that it is wrong to run away from his lawful master, even though the man is cruel. Mr. Wilson bases this admonition on the Bible, giving three examples: Hagar, Onesimus, and an exhortation from Paul in 1 Corinthians. However, in Chapter 9, Mrs. Bird believes that the Bible commands her to give shelter and aid to runaway slaves, and in Chapter 13 Simeon Halliday is willing to risk imprisonment for helping fugitive slaves and does so for the sake of God and man. Christians believe the Bible is a book of unity and not contradiction. Therefore, when we read scripture, and particularly verses that seem paradoxical, we should ask ourselves three questions:

1. What does the passage mean?
2. How does it fit in the context of the surrounding verses and chapters?
3. Is my understanding of this passage in accord with the Bible as a whole? (In other words, are there other passages that address the issue? What do they say, and how do they fit with the first passage? What is the clearest meaning of all the passages together?)

Carefully read the following passages of Scripture. After reading each passage, write in your own words the main point and the most important details.

Genesis 16:1–11:

Philemon 8–21:

1 Corinthians 7:17–24:

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1 Corinthians 12:13, 25–26:

Galatians 3:26–29:

20. As several characters have already mentioned in the story, many people used the Bible to defend the institution of slavery. After reading the verses above, do you think that slavery as presented in the Bible was the same as the system in the American South? Were slaves in the South being treated as the Bible commanded in the Old Testament? Do you think someone who used the Bible to justify the institution of slavery should also follow the biblical instructions for treatment of slaves? Why?
21. So far, we have seen Eliza and George helped by the man on the river bank, Senator and Mrs. Bird, John Von Trompe, and Mr. Wilson. How are the Halliday's different from the others who helped Eliza and George?

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3. Ophelia asks St. Clare if he has made provision for his servants in case of his death. 4. Ophelia tells St. Clare that his procrastination could prove to be cruel to his servants, because he could die before he follows through his intentions and they could be sold to a hard master. 5. Ophelia comments to St. Clare that “in the midst of life we are in death.” 6. St. Clare ponders the strangeness of both the word and the concept of death. 7. St. Clare plays Mozart’s *Requiem* on the piano; the piece was Mozart’s requiem for his own death. 8. St. Clare states that only God knows the future. 9. St. Clare says he has been thinking a great deal of his mother, and he has a strange feeling that she is near him. These examples cause the reader to think that St. Clare’s death must be impending and that Tom may not be freed.

Dig Deeper:

14. Tom says he feels Christ in his soul. He says that when he was sold away from his wife and children, he was brokenhearted and alone, but Jesus brought comfort, peace, and joy to his soul, along with confidence that Jesus was always with him. Uncle Tom says that this peace and joy could not have come from within himself, because he is not that good; the light in his soul comes from the Lord.

15. Tom may have hoped that St. Clare would recognize something of his own feelings in the grief of Mary and Martha over the death of their brother. Also, verses 25–26 say, “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.’” These two are powerful, straight-forward verses that clearly state that salvation comes through Jesus and that there is hope and life after death.

16. The man in the passage wants Jesus to cast a demon from his son. When he asks Jesus, he says “if you can,” and Jesus challenges him on that, saying “Everything is possible for him who believes.” The father immediately responds as the question states. Answers will vary. The father clearly thinks that Jesus can heal and cast out demons, or he would not have come to him. But the father seems to be acknowledging a doubt that remains; perhaps a small doubt about whether Jesus can, perhaps a doubt about whether Jesus will. Note that he recognizes that Jesus can help him with this, also, however. Jesus does cast out the demon. Taking the scripture as a guide, Jesus can and would help St. Clare in his unbelief. Personal answers will vary.

17. Rosa was particularly shamed and Ophelia outraged that Rosa would be stripped to be whipped by a man. The full ramifications of the procedure and its implications had not occurred to Ophelia until Rosa stood before her about to be taken away to be handled brutally, and probably obscenely, by coarse, cruel men whose job it is to shame and punish. Susan knows that her daughter is beautiful, and her beauty will attract men who are interested in her only for her looks and sexuality. Lagree seems to be exactly that kind of man, as he handles her and touches her in a crude and demeaning manner.

Chapters 31–36

Vocabulary:

1. boisterous; 2. paillasse; 3. tremulous; 4. disenthral; 5. potentate; 6. reprobate; 7. prudential; 8. antipathy (aversion is acceptable); 9. commiseration; 10. aversion (antipathy is acceptable); 11. necromancy

Questions:

1. Legree makes Tom take off the good clothes and boots he had worn for the auction and has him dress in the oldest and most worn-out shirt and pants he can find in Tom’s trunk. He then sells all of Tom’s clothes and belongings to members of the boat’s crew.