

Why Did Charles Dickens Criticize *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in “North American Slavery”?

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Introduction

In the September 18th, 1852 issue of *Household Words*, their weekly magazine, Charles Dickens and Henry Morley published “North American Slavery.” In this article, they referred to and cited “Les Noirs Libres et les Noirs Esclaves aux Antilles, aux États-Unis et à Liberia” by Casimir Leconte (1796–1867), a French traveler who wrote books on Suez, Greece, the Antilles, the United States, and Liberia. Making use of the information, Dickens and Morley wrote their own examination of the problems of slavery in America.

In “North American Slavery,” Dickens used Leconte’s reportage to criticize *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life among the Lowly*, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe and serialized from June 1851 to April 1852 in *The National Era*, an American abolitionist publication. According to the estimates of G. Grant Williams, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was published as a two-volume book in 1852, earned her an immediate payout of \$10,000 along with a yearly income that allowed her to live a comfortable life after her many struggles with ill health and poverty (544). An article from September 3, 1852, in *The Times* stated that copies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could be found at every railway book-stall in England and in every third traveler’s hand (“Uncle Tom’s Cabin” 5). *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was thus a hit not only in America but also in England.

This paper argues that Dickens criticized *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for portraying Liberia positively and encouraging African Americans to move there. Dickens uses Leconte’s article to expose why African Americans should not emigrate to Liberia. Although Dickens, Stowe, and Leconte were all against slavery, their attitudes toward American slavery were different, and that differences were illustrated in their respective works.

First, I will compare “North American Slavery” with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which Dickens referred to extensively in his criticism of Stowe. I will also examine the discussions on Africa, slavery in Cuba, and American slavery as they are discussed in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, “North American Slavery,” and “Les Noirs Libres.” As I will demonstrate, the differences between the abolitionism of these three authors hinge primarily on the question of Liberia.

1. Authorship

As *Household Words* was a jointly owned and written magazine, we must ask whether Dickens or Morley wrote “North American Slavery.” Anne Lohrli finds that the office book of *Household Words* indicates that Dickens and Morley wrote it cooperatively:

September 18, 1852. No. 130, pp. 1–24
 North American Slavery [Casimir Leconte,
 “Les Noirs libres et les noirs esclaves,”
Revue des deux mondes, July 1852], 1–6.
 10 cols. *Morley & C. D.* / **Henry Morley**
& Charles Dickens (Lohrli 100)

Unfortunately, the office book did not reveal the sum allotted to each writer, although the payment was based on the length of the article. However, only outside contributors were recorded as being paid, while Dickens and Morley were the staff and owners of *Household Words*. According to *The Reader’s Encyclopedia of Charles Dickens*, Dickens was the editor-in-chief and had half ownership of the magazine, which later increased to three-fourths (Saijo et al. 488). He was therefore not paid for his manuscripts and only distributed payments to guest authors. As Dickens wrote in December 20, 1852:

Why does the article (of which I wrote no part, but the high and genuine praise of Mrs. Stowe’s book) argue the question so temperately and mildly? I have been in America, and know the Americans very well. I may have been plainer

and bolder among them on this question—at all times steadily refusing, even in the Slave districts, to compromise it or gloss it in the least—than most English travellers *while there*. (*Letters* 826)

Even though Dickens himself explains that he praised Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harry Stone argues that Dickens may also have retouched or added several passages, including the final paragraph of "North American Slavery." Stone insists that "Dickens would not have been listed as a joint author if he had simply added the initial paragraph" (433). The editors of *The Letters of Charles Dickens* make the same argument, noting that "Besides this paragraph, Dickens no doubt wrote the few later passages referring to *Uncle Tom*" (826 n.4). Grace Moore claims that "Dickens was being disingenuous" in his 1852 letter (73). It is difficult to tell what the most likely scenario was. However, as editor-in-chief and magazine co-owner, Dickens at the very least knew the contents and value of the article. It is therefore worthwhile analyzing "North American Slavery" in relation to Dickens' abolitionism.

2. Criticisms of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

The opening paragraph of "North American Slavery" begins with the evaluation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a copy of which had been published and sent to Dickens by Stowe in 1852:

INTEREST in the subject of slavery has during the present year been re-awakened by an admirable book, in which its main features—as they exist in North America—are painted in the *fresh*est colours. UNCLE TOM'S CABIN with all its faults (and it is not free from the fault of overstrained conclusions and violent extremes) is a noble work; full of high power, lofty humanity; the *gentlest*, *sweetest*, and yet *boldest*, writing. Its authoress, HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, is an honour to the time that has produced her, and will take her place among the *best* writers of fiction, inspired by the *best* and *noblest* purpose. (1; my emphasis)

Dickens refers to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from the start using the superlative adjectives “freshest,” “gentlest,” “sweetest,” and “boldest” to bestow his praise. This was no doubt to draw his readers’ favorable attention to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Furthermore, readers would also have seen the superlative adjectives “best” and “noblest” and been moved to value the book. Dickens’ appreciation for the novel will naturally raise readers’ interest in it and prompt them to recall Stowe’s condemnation of American slavery. After these praises, Dickens points out that “Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe, George Harris, and the other negroes with whom Mrs. Stowe has by this time made most of us acquainted, are, no doubt, *rare specimens of slaves...*” (1; my emphasis). This praise seems to acknowledge Stowe’s ability to analyze and discuss difficult subjects through her nuanced characters.

However, in the final sentence of this paragraph, Dickens begins to change his tone:

The subject thus reintroduced is one that it becomes all men to discuss, since the extinction of slavery in America by any other than the old process that has held good since the world began, can take place only by the infection of slaveholders with the epidemic of *a very prevalent opinion*. (1; my emphasis)

Dickens here declares that everybody should discuss the reintroduced subject of slavery, as its extinction in America will only be realized through the spread of “a very prevalent opinion,” which is a reference to the abolitionism in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Here, we must ask why Dickens uses the word “epidemic” to describe abolitionism. One possible answer is that abolitionism is equal to an “epidemic” from the perspective of the slaveholders. Another answer is that Dickens himself regards the abolitionist enthusiasm caused by the best-selling *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to be an “epidemic.” His mention of “the old process” is a reference to the “rational” British way of abolishing slavery through legislation, while the American method will be the enormous popularity of abolitionism aroused through the excited sympathies of readers. Dickens’ negative opinions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are thus already shown by the figurative use of “epidemic.” The earlier superlative praises for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will soon be reversed and changed into a reproach against the intense enthusiasm caused by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which he feared would produce only transient success.

Dickens' critiques of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can also be seen in his remarks on Stowe's depiction of slaves. The phrase "rare specimens" appears twice (1, 3) including in the first paragraph. A similar phrase, "the exception, not the rule" (4), is also used. In the first paragraph, the phrase "rare specimens" is used in a positive sense. Even though Uncle Tom, Aunt Chloe, George Harris, and the other slaves are "rare," Dickens judges that "they may be generally accepted as remarkable pictures of the every day truth" (1). However, the same phrase is used in a negative sense later, when Dickens repeats that "Uncle Tom, Aunt Chloe, and their friends are rare specimens of negro character" (3). In fact, here they are appraised as unbelievable characters, as Dickens believes that typical slaves have been depressed by their status, which has destroyed their hearts and brains. He severely criticizes slavery for having this effect, writing that "it is the greatest horror of the slave system to our minds, when men can live contented under so complete an abnegation of their manhood" (3).

The similar phrase, "the exception, not the rule," which describes Uncle Tom and George Harris, is added after writing that "the slave population, thus pressed down below the level of humanity, has its spirit broken by the pressure" (4). The slaves of America, Dickens concludes, "have, by a long course of depressing treatment, been made slavish in their spirit" (4). As a result, they do not seek freedom by fleeing.

"North American Slavery" thus sees Uncle Tom as "a rare specimen" in a negative sense. He is, according to this article, far from reality. For example, when Tom is ordered to flog a female slave by his third and cruel master, Legree, he refuses to obey, saying, "my soul an't yours, Mas'r! You haven't bought it" (Stowe 335). He thus implies his belief in God and demonstrates his nobility. Dickens was apparently skeptical about this depiction.

3. Africa and George Harris

Dickens' third reproach against *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is based on the role of Africa. One passage in the book contains a letter written by the freed slave George Harris to his friend. In that letter, George, having studied in France for four years, relates his decision about his future: "It is with the oppressed, enslaved African race that I cast in my lot. . . . The desire and yearning of my soul is for an African *nationality*" (403). He chooses to

travel to Africa and live with “picked men who by energy and self-educating force have raised themselves above a condition of slavery” (403). He dreams that his chosen nation will become a mighty, civilized, and Christian republic. However, George’s dream was impossible, betraying Stowe’s lack of knowledge about Africa.

The American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States was, according to George M. Fredrickson, founded in 1817 by the Reverend Robert Finley and other clergymen. By the 1820s “it became customary for many Northern ministers to give special Independence Day sermons endorsing the cause of African colonization and seeking support for the society’s Liberian colony” (7). In 1822, the first settlers landed in Liberia with the apparent goal of “the conversion and redemption of Africa” (Fredrickson 7).

Why did African Americans and freed slaves have to go to Liberia, even though they were not pleased with the destination of their journey? One reason is illustrated in the behavior of Miss Ophelia toward slaves in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Miss Ophelia, who has never had servants or slaves, moves from the Northern state of Vermont to the Southern state of Louisiana to help her cousin, Augustine St. Clare, with his sickly wife Marie and daughter Eva. Miss Ophelia is depicted as having lofty ideals about abolitionism, telling Marie that “the Lord made them [the slaves] of one blood with us” and adds that “they’ve got immortal souls” (Stowe 168). Miss Ophelia also persuades St. Clare that “slaveholders have an awful responsibility” (Stowe 171) and they ought to “treat them [slaves] like reasonable creatures,—like immortal creatures” (Stowe 171). However, when she sees Eva hang a wreath of roses around Uncle Tom’s neck and sit down on his knee, Ophelia finds it dreadful (Stowe 172). St. Clare thus criticizes abolitionist Northerners, including Ophelia:

“I know the feeling among some of you northerners well enough. . . . You loathe them as you would a snake or a toad, yet you are indignant at their wrongs. You would not have them abused; but you don’t want to have anything to do with them yourselves. You would send them to Africa, out of your sight and smell, and then send a missionary or two to do up all the self-denial of elevating them compendiously. Isn’t that it?” (172)

Neither St. Clare nor Miss Ophelia is a thus sincere abolitionist, for St. Clare argues for abolition without liberating his own slaves, while Miss Ophelia cannot bear to touch slaves such as Uncle Tom or Topsy. They are both pseudo-abolitionists. As Teruyuki Okamoto suggests, the cause of Miss Ophelia's abhorrence for Topsy stems from the racism that underlies colonization (8). Dickens also tells his readers that Liberia is not an ideal nation for freed slaves, referring to Leconte's "Les Noirs Libres." When researching his article, Leconte had stayed in slave countries including Liberia. Dickens was much indebted to Leconte for his research and relied heavily on his work.

Leconte begins his article by explaining the history of abolitionism starting with William Wilberforce's 1791 motion to repeal the slave trade in the British Parliament. Leconte's interest in slavery was so far-reaching that he attempted to cover the contemporary situation of slaves not only in England but also in Cuba and the American South. His goal was to determine what should be done for freed slaves and the nations that accomplished emancipation (72–73).

Dickens, meanwhile, relates the history of slavery worldwide in the second paragraph of "North American Slavery." In it, he theorized that across history, prisoners of war and citizens of conquered nations have been brought to other countries as laborers. Then, as the native population in those countries grows, they do not want to keep foreigners in their lands, and slavery thus becomes extinct. He uses this pattern to argue that the more the population of white Americans increased in certain states, the more slavery decreased, even though there is no significant abolitionist movement at the time (1). Though he calls for the end of slavery in the English-speaking world, the question remains of how to abolish it properly, protecting the interests of both slaves and slaveholders. Slaves should not be made wretched, nor should slaveholders be ruined (1).

4. Slavery in Cuba and the United States

Leconte and Dickens both began their articles with a similar orientation toward abolitionism. Additionally, they both use Cuba as a point of comparison to evaluate slavery in the United States. Leconte criticizes the Cuban system as rigid and praises that of North America as having intelligence and humanity. On the one hand, he portrays the

slaveholders of Cuba as being the essence of the cruelty itself when they impose rigorous and inhumane discipline on slaves. Leconte had himself stayed at a Cuban sugar factory for eight to ten days and had warned the proprietor that he would lose capital when slaves died, collapsed, or escaped (73). He also condemns the way slaveholders neglected their government's orders by maintaining an insufficient workforce compared to the demands of the industry (78). However, he praises the United States, where the Black population had boomed under good management and circumstances. In several states, for example, number of the slaves had increased by 583,619 between 1840 and 1850. Free states, meanwhile, hired immigrant workers from countries like Germany and Ireland (76–77). Unlike the United States, Cuba thus needed to continue the slave trade because of their abuses and poor management.

As a result of his research, Leconte praises the United States and declares that their form of slavery is the most humane and profitable. As evidence, he relates his experience when staying at several plantations in Louisiana. He dined with the slaves, assisted in their work, and entered their houses. Additionally, he went to a slave auction in New Orleans and concluded that it was impossible to treat slaves better than the people of the United States did (78).

While Dickens agrees with Leconte on Cuba, he disagrees on his opinion of the United States. He tells his readers of the many wrong and inhumane practices among the Spaniards in Cuba, which are worse than those of North America. Slaves under Spanish masters are treated cruelly, like “tools which it is good economy to wear out rapidly” (1). Although all the slaves are ill-treated, there are two different classes among them. One is the house slaves, who wear fine linen and eat well. The other is the field slaves, who are underdressed and underfed. Dickens' aggravation at the wrongs done by the Spanish masters is clear in his selection of many cruel details to illuminate the truth to his readers.

Still drawing on Leconte, Dickens also notes that the Spanish colonists required the continuous importation of fresh slaves. However, while the Spanish government had promised to suppress the African slave trade, minor officials in Spanish colonies like Cuba assisted in illegal trafficking to supply the continued demand. He thus uses the circumstances in Cuba to prove the difficulty of abolishing slavery completely and instruct Americans on the lessons to be learned when they implement abolition in their

own country.

From here, Dickens moves on to American slavery. He argues that if slaves were considered livestock rather than men, they are kept in good physical condition: “They are, on the whole, fed as amply and are as well treated as the upper class of European horses” (2). However, as we shall see, this is merely laying the groundwork for Dickens’ harsh criticism of American slavery, which will differ significantly from Leconte’s praise.

5. Liberia: “Dumping-Ground” or Paradise?

To return to Leconte, he gives multiple examples of American slaves who wanted to remain enslaved. On a plantation in Missouri, for example, he met ten or fifteen slaves who had saved up enough money to purchase their freedom, but refused to do so. In another example, a slave woman had the chance to be freed and go to France, but she chose to return to New Orleans as a slave. Finally, an enslaved coachman had met “abolitionists” and left his master, but returned and asked to have his old position again (78). These seem to be the only concrete evidence that Leconte had to prove the “good treatment” of slaves in the United States. Leconte thus takes the side of American slaveowners.

On the contrary, Dickens writes that the reason American slaves are so attached to their masters is because they have been given no other choice:

Degraded as they are, the negroes are still tender-hearted; they identify themselves with a master’s interest; it is wonderful that they should not have fallen lower than they have fallen; —fallen they are, however; we know what we express in England by the word servility, we know how our hearts burn at the imputation of a slavish submission even to the highest power on earth. The slaves of America . . . have, by a long course of depressing treatment, been made slavish in their spirit. We have already seen how few of them seek freedom in flight. (4)

Dickens contrasts the desperate situation of slaves in America to Liberia, where all free

Black people can have citizenship, an allotment of land, and support from a republic of their own race (4). They may leave America, where “[they meet] with daily insult, and establish a true home in Liberia” (4). However, as he observes, many do not take the opportunity.

Leconte contributes data on the population of freed Black people in both America and Liberia. According to the census of 1850, there were 428,637 free Black people in the United States, while the Black American population of Liberia had not reached ten thousand (4–5). Dickens cites Leconte for further contemporary statistics on Liberia:

The eight or ten thousand civilised negroes from America exert their influence upon three hundred thousand natives who are living on Liberian soil, consenting to the laws and customs of their civilised society. Fifty thousand have learned English, schools abound, and the number of Christians is increasing every month. The Liberians grow coffee and cacao, export palm-oil, camwood, ivory, rice, gold-dust, and other things; their port of Monrovia being tolerably familiar with ships. (5)

It seems that African Americans and natives lived in relative peace. However, there was still room for growth. Their farms were “little more than country gardens, and . . . under the disadvantage of not yet having succeeded in the attempt to maintain horses or oxen . . .” (5). Thus, even if the fictional George Harris of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* went to Liberia, there was little hope of success. Stowe thus seems overly idealistic concerning Liberia, while Dickens relied on Leconte, whom he considered a reliable source.

Having said that, there were also criticisms of Liberia from the Black population (Ammons 234). In *Liberian Dreams: Back-to-Africa Narratives from the 1850s*, the editor, William Jeremiah Moses, reminds us that to some African Americans, colonization was an opportunity to start new lives in a free country, while to others, it was a deceptive scheme by the white man. However, in 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act put the freedom of every freed slave in danger, and some began to see emigration as the only option (xxii–xxiii). Moses has collected the narratives of four Black men who, in 1853, traveled to the new Black nation of Liberia, a situation that he uses to illuminate the debate on emigration.

Among the four documents, some attack Liberia and its sponsors and others defend the Black republic or give a balanced critique of both sides of the issue. There are several opinions for and against Liberia, but at least we can see that Liberia was not a paradise for any of them.

Dickens did not believe in the promise of Liberia, but he nevertheless applauded the Americans for the idea. He believed that the Americans deserved credit for having established Liberia for their free slave population, and the righteousness of the cause that is reflected in their character. Dickens, as a British abolitionist, instead believed that most slaveholders in the American slave states would eventually give up slavery if they could be assured of the livelihoods of both themselves and their slaves (5).

6. Dickens' Argument Against Slavery

In the conclusion to "North American Slavery," Dickens repeats what he most wants to emphasize to people of the United States. Here, he uses imperative sentences to deeply impress his views on his readers. Whether they are Americans or British, he here works to persuade them to become abolitionists:

Set him [the slave] to work for the hope of distinction, instead of for the fear of blows. No doubt it has been true that negroes, set to work by any motive which called out their higher feelings as men, would become ambitious and acquire a thirst for freedom in the end. So it is, so let it be. . . . the slave who acquires education and religious principle must desire to be free: let it be so. Cultivate the slave's best feelings, teach him, awaken him to manhood. . . . When you have taught him to desire his proper place among his fellows, let him take it; let him work for you as a free man. . . .(5)

Dickens here emphasizes the possibility that slaves will ask for freedom after they receive education and religion. His answer, "so let it be," is a direct message to slaveholders and their supporters from an abolitionist. He continues by hypothesizing that "a race of free efficient laborers will arise from the present slaves, if the degraded race is raised"

(5). Dickens seems to be making a moderate argument here, but his words are severe. He even urges them to accept insurrection as a result of emancipation. To moderate his language, Dickens, as a last appeal, encourages the Americans:

Our cousins are capable of great works, and a great work lies at their door. Heartily glad shall we be when they shall begin to leave off whipping their negroes, and shall set steadily to work to whip the Britishers in the results to be obtained out of enlightened efforts to give to the slave freedom both of mind and body. (6)

“North American Slavery” is thus direct message to slaveholders and citizens of the United States, including Stowe and the American abolitionists.

Conclusion

As we have seen above, Dickens criticized *Uncle Tom's Cabin* severely in “North American Slavery.” However, many readers, including both Americans and the British, were still deeply moved by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Why has this book fascinated so many readers despite others critiquing it for its apparent lack of realism?

As Elizabeth Ammons explains, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* achieved sensational sales and was quickly translated into many languages. Congressman Horace Greeley (1811–1872) is reported to have wept so copiously on the train as he read it that he had to pause his journey (Stowe viii). Abolitionists praised it fervently, although some decried its “endorsement of African American emigration to Liberia” (Stowe ix).

Dickens offered a challenge to the popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe idealized Liberia, but Dickens knew it was not the Garden of Eden. He seems to have believed that Stowe should have shown the reality that George Harris faced after he tried to emigrate from Canada to Liberia with his family. By this point, Dickens had already read and reviewed *A Narrative of the Expedition Sent by Her Majesty's Government to the River Niger in 1841*, and he knew of the stern climate of Africa and realized Stowe's mistake. This is likely the reason he included details about Liberia to the readers of his *Household Words*.

While Dickens was mistaken about the future of American abolitionism, he astutely wondered what would become of the freed slaves. In his “North American Slavery” Dickens highlighted this defect in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which reflected a lack of foresight about the future of freed slaves. George Harris wrote, “the whole splendid continent of Africa opens before us and our children” (Stowe 404). Unfortunately, his hope was groundless; Liberia, the place George Harris dreamed of, was not the ultimate destination of Black America.

After “North American Slavery,” Dickens would continue his campaign against American slavery in *Household Words*. He channeled his enthusiasm into publishing articles like “Freedom, or Slavery” by Harriet Martineau (22 July 1854), “Slaves and their Masters” by Elisa Lynn Linton and William Henry Wills (23 August 1856), and “Sketches at a Slave Auction” by Eyre Evans Crowe (14 February 1857). “North American Slavery” was merely the beginning of his antislavery work. The article is of special consideration as it not only called for emancipation, but explored the right way to achieve it. For that purpose, Dickens criticized both Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Leconte’s “Les Noir Libres,” which idealized the situation in different ways. Although “North American Slavery” is not canon, it proves that Dickens directed his abolitionist vision not only toward his own country but also abroad.

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