

Harriet Beecher Stowe and Influencing Public Opinion

Discussion

- What are ways that people influence public opinion – today? In the 1800s?
- What happens when large numbers of people change their mind? (Whether it is indifference to believing in something or changing from believing one thing to believing something fundamentally different)
- Have you ever influenced another's opinion? How did you do it?

Quotes

1. He, [Mr. Bird, a government official in Ohio] laid down his paper, and went into the kitchen, and started, quite amazed at the sight that presented itself: - A young and slender woman, with garments torn and frozen, with one shoe gone, and the stocking torn away from the cut and bleeding foot, was laid back in a deadly swoon [laying down – almost unconscious] upon two chairs. (HBS - UTC 101)

Who do you think she is? What do you think happened to her? Why do you think she suddenly showed up in his kitchen? What is a word you would use to describe what the author is trying to make Mr. Bird (and you) feel?

2. The first desire of the emancipated [freed] slave, generally, is for *education*. There is nothing that they are not willing to give or do to have their children instructed; and, so far as the writer has observed herself, or taken the testimony of teachers among them, they are remarkably intelligent and quick to learn. The results of schools, founded for them by benevolent [kind] individuals in Cincinnati, fully establish this. (HBS - UTC 545)

Why would freed slaves want education? How would education help them? How do you feel about education after reading this? How did HBS feel about education based on what you have learned today?

3. Mr. Legree [a slave owner], put handcuffs on Tom, then deliberately investigated the contents of Tom's pockets. He drew out a silk handkerchief, and put it into his own pocket. There were several little items, which Tom had treasured, mostly because they had amused his friend Eva. Mr. Legree looked at them, grunted, and tossed them over his shoulder into the river . . . He took Tom's trunk [suitcase], which contained a very neat set of clothes, to the forecastle [front part of a boat], where it was soon surrounded by various boatworkers. With much laughing . . . the articles were sold off, and the empty trunk finally put up at auction. (HBS – UTC 412 - slight paraphrasing)

What happened to Tom? What happened to all his stuff? How does that make you feel? Why would Mr. Legree do that? What is a word you would use to describe what the author is trying to make Tom (and you) feel? If you lived in the North and read this passage, how would you react?

4. Uncle Tom's Cabin has indeed been one of the great publishing successes in American history. To ignore its romantic, yet realistic, language would be to deny the fact that many of its most avid readers were women, and that Stowe inherently knew that one path toward political and social power was through women's hearts and emotions. (Annotated UTC, Henry Louis Gates, ed. xliii)

What makes a book a publishing success? What are ways that women could show influence over others in a social setting? What do you think women did after reading Uncle Tom's Cabin?

Concluding Discussion

- How effective do you think Harriet was in influencing public opinion? What evidence do you see?
- Based on what you know about her and her personality, do you think she liked being an "influencer"? Why or why not?