



Treasures of the Library

THE LITERATURE OF UPHEAVAL

Examining how selected classics of nineteenth-century American literature influenced history.



Grade 8

United States History and Geography: Growth and Conflict

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

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I. Introduction

Nineteenth-century American literature often reflected prominent political and social issues of the day. Three authors of the pre-Civil War antebellum era, Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, shared the same views regarding the institution of slavery and were hostile to government policy that condoned what they perceived as America's scourge.

II. Objective

- ◆ Students will be able to give specific examples of how literature reacted to and commented on American political and social issues.

III. History-Social Science Standards Addressed

- 8.6 Students analyze the divergent paths of the American people from 1800 to the mid-1800s and the challenges they faced, with emphasis on the Northeast.
- 7 Identify common themes in American art as well as transcendentalism and individualism (e.g., writings about and by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau).
- 8.9 Students analyze the early and steady attempts to abolish slavery and to realize the ideals of the Declaration of Independence.
- 1 Describe the leaders of the movement (e.g., . . . Frederick Douglass).

IV. Background

The institution of slavery in America had long been condemned as a violation of the very principles upon which this nation was built. Before the Civil War the abolition of slavery became the core of reform movements. Abolitionists published news-papers and books as a rallying call for a change in public policy. The efforts of slaveholding interests in prohibiting the circulation of their works, including public burning of abolitionist tracts and prohibition on sending abolitionist literature through the mail, testifies to the impact of literature in promoting change in society.

Henry David Thoreau, a leading Transcendentalist author, lived in seclusion at Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts, compiling notes for what was to become his classic *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*. He was arrested in 1846 for refusal to pay taxes that supported the Mexican War that he believed was being fought to spread slavery. In this classic of American literature, Thoreau explains his philosophy of life. His essays "Civil Disobedience," published in 1849, and "A Plea for Captain John Brown," read to the citizens of Concord, Massachusetts, shortly before the execution of Brown for his raid on Harpers Ferry, are two of his many works adhering to his philosophy of life expressed in *Walden*.

In 1838, Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery in Maryland and a few years later addressed a meeting of the Massachusetts Abolitionist Society telling his personal experiences. He so impressed the Society that they employed Douglass to give public lectures in soliciting support to abolish slavery. William Lloyd Garrison in the introduction to the first edition of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, published in 1845, wrote that no reader could read the work without

. . . a tearful eye, a heavy breast, an afflicted spirit,—without being filled with an unutterable abhorrence of slavery and all its abettors, and animated with a determination to seek the immediate overthrow of that execrable system,—without trembling for the fate of his country in the hands of a righteous God, who is ever on the side of the oppressed, and whose arm is not shortened that it cannot save,—must have a flinty heart, and be qualified to act the part of a trafficker 'in slaves and the souls of men.'

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass was an extremely popular work and propelled its author to international recognition. Similarly, Harriet Beecher Stowe was thrust in the spotlight with the publication of her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. Stowe is reported to have used Douglass's narrative along with other "slave narratives" while working on her novel. Although not an active Abolitionist as were Thoreau and Douglass, Stowe's description of slavery and the brutality in which persons were held in bondage aroused the conscience of the nation. On the

outbreak of the Civil War, Lincoln was reported to have referred to Stowe as “the little woman who made this big war.” Although the anecdote is probably nothing more than a yarn, historians credit Stowe’s novel with marshaling public opinion throughout the north in opposition to slavery.

This lesson focuses on American literary works from *Seeking Identity and Meaning* and selected documents from *Created Equal: Inventing the American Republic* as a means of illustrating how literary works have made an impact on American history.

V. Materials needed

Document 1: Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*

Document 2: Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*

Document 3: Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly* and the title page of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Document 4: *A Slave Auction at the South*, 1861

VI. Lesson Activities

1. Begin by asking students to list major issues confronting contemporary American society. After recording student responses, ask if they can think of any way in which an author might be able to draw attention to the issue. Are there any books that have recently been written to call attention to problems in society and how these problems might be solved? Discuss how literature helps us better understand the development of thoughts and beliefs and how books can make a change in the way we view our society.
2. Divide the class into three groups. Assign **Documents 1–3**, having each group read and discuss a different document. Questions are provided following each reading to guide student discussion. After allowing time for discussion, reassemble the class and have each group present a synopsis of their respective reading.
3. As a class discuss how the three authors, Thoreau, Douglass, and Stowe, influenced history. To what extent did their works promote change in society? Inform students that each of their works aroused consternation in some segments of society. Explain that *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* was not an immediate success and sold only two thousand copies in the first five years after publication. Douglass’s narrative was criticized as being too articulate to have been written by a slave and was therefore assumed, by some critics, to have been an invention of the Abolitionists to discredit slavery. Likewise, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was maligned as a fabrication written by a woman who had no knowledge of slavery. Despite initial criticism, all three works are considered classics in nineteenth-century American literature.

4. Make a transparency of **Document 4**, *A Slave Auction at the South*, 1861, and have students carefully examine the illustration. Have students assume the role of one of the three authors—Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, or Harriet Beecher Stowe—and write an article to accompany the picture for an Abolitionist newspaper from their chosen author’s perspective.
5. Conclude the lesson by reexamining the power of words to sway public opinion and promote change in political and/or social policy.

V. Extension Activities

1. Research Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Civil Disobedience,” published in 1849. For a summary of Thoreau’s life and work see “The Life and Times of Henry D. Thoreau” by Elizabeth Hall Witherell and Elizabeth Dubrulle, (<http://libws66.lib.niu.edu/Thoreau/bexhibit.htm>).
 - ◆ What was Thoreau’s purpose in writing the essay?
 - ◆ How did Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., use Thoreau’s philosophy of civil disobedience in their respective movements for Indian independence and against laws promoting segregation in the United States in the mid-twentieth century?
 - ◆ How does the essay “Civil Disobedience” illustrate the importance of literature as a way to influence political and social action?
2. In *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, Thoreau reacted to the press’s condemnation of the raid on Harpers Ferry by expressing criticism of those who condemned Brown’s attempt to incite insurrection. Read accounts of Harpers Ferry in history textbooks and contrast it with Thoreau’s appraisal of Brown expressed in the following excerpts from his *In A Plea for Captain John Brown*.

No man in America has ever stood so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he was the most American of us all. He needed no babbling lawyer, making false issues, to defend him. He was more than a match for all the judges that American voters, or office-holders of whatever grade, can create. He could not have been tried by a jury of his peers, because his peers did not exist. . . .

The only government that I recognized . . . is that power that establishes justice in the land, never that which establishes injustice. What shall we think of a government to which all the truly brave and just men in the land are enemies, standing between it and those whom it oppresses? A government that pretends to be Christian and crucifies a million Christs every day!¹

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1890), 66, 71.

Write a response to Thoreau's *A Plea for Captain John Brown*.

- ◆ Do you support or reject his views?
 - ◆ Does his praise of John Brown contradict the philosophy he expressed in *Walden* or his essay "Civil Disobedience"?
3. Read Frederick Douglass's Independence Day speech at Rochester, New York, July 5, 1852, "What to the Slaves is the Fourth of July." An excerpt is included in Diane Ravitch's *The American Reader*.² Assume the role of a reporter covering the Rochester speech and write a news or feature story either accepting or rejecting Douglass's appraisal of the nation in 1852.
- ◆ How do you think political leaders such as President Millard Fillmore or Secretary of State Daniel Webster would have responded to the speech?
 - ◆ How would Henry David Thoreau or Harriet Beecher Stowe have responded?
4. Use a U.S. history textbook, document book, or the National Archives and Record Administration On-line Exhibit Hall (<http://www.nara.gov/exhall/featured-document/eman/emantrns.html>) and carefully examine the provisions of the Emancipation Proclamation. Write a letter to President Lincoln from the perspective of Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, or Harriet Beecher Stowe, expressing your sentiments regarding the document.

² Diane Ravitch, ed., *The American Reader: Words That Moved a Nation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 114-18.

VI. Vocabulary

<i>audacious</i>	shameless; arrogant; bold
<i>dregs</i>	the most worthless part
<i>driver</i>	a person who makes others work hard
<i>fiendish exultation</i>	delighting in evil; taking pleasure in being brutal or cruel
<i>impulse</i>	urge or desire
<i>insensibly</i>	without realizing; unaware
<i>languish</i>	suffer; lose energy or strength

<i>Lyceum</i>	a public lecture hall
<i>marrow</i>	essence, center or core
<i>railery</i>	teasing; mockery; ridicule
<i>Spartan-like</i>	characteristic of the ancient Spartans, living a simple existence without luxuries
<i>Transcendentalism</i>	a philosophy popularized by New England writers that stressed the relationship between people and nature; a belief in the importance of individual conscience
<i>unapt personification</i>	not fitting or suitable image or characterization

Document 1

Walden, or, Life in the Woods

Henry David Thoreau

Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau was born in Concord, Massachusetts in 1817. After graduating from Harvard College he entered into a business venture with his brother. Although the business was successful, Thoreau became disillusioned with material things and sought a higher meaning in life. He was influenced by Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson and moved to a crude cabin on Emerson's land at Walden Pond, two miles from Concord, where he pondered nature and the meaning of life. During his stay at Walden, Thoreau was arrested and jailed for refusing to pay a poll tax. An anonymous person paid the tax and he was released after a night in jail. Thoreau objected to paying taxes to a government that permitted slavery and viewed the Mexican-American War (1846-48) as a conflict waged to extend slavery. Upon his arrest, Emerson visited him in jail and is reported to have asked, "Why are you here?" to which Thoreau replied, "Why are you not here?"

When we consider what . . . is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessities and means of life, it appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think there is no choice left. But alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear. It is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of thinking of doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. What everybody echoes or in silence passes by as true to-day may turn out to be falsehood to-morrow, mere smoke of opinion. . . . What old people say you cannot do, you try and find that you can. . . . Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost. One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned anything of absolute value by living. . . .

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it has to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise [sic.] resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, . . . to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience. . . .

- ◆ What is Thoreau's philosophy of life? How does he reflect the ideals of the Transcendentalist movement?
- ◆ How does Thoreau regard tradition? What is his advice regarding the way one should live?
- ◆ How did Thoreau reveal his hostility to slavery? To what extent did he put into practice his philosophy of life when he was arrested and jailed?

Document 2

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave
Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was born a slave in Maryland. Although not sure of his birth date, Douglass believed it to be either 1817 or 1818. At age eight he was sent to work as a house slave in Baltimore where he was taught to read and write by the mistress of the house even though laws forbade teaching slaves to read. A few years later he was returned to the plantation to work as a field hand. He planned an escape with other field hands when he was eighteen but the plot was uncovered and Douglass was jailed for a short time. In 1838 he escaped and went to New York City where he became a leading voice for abolition and made speeches throughout the North and in Britain. In 1845 he wrote the story of his life, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*.

Bad as all slaveholders are, we seldom meet one destitute of every element of character commanding respect. My master³ was one of this rare sort. I do not know of one single noble act ever performed by him. The leading trait in his character was meanness; and if there were any other element in his nature, it was made subject to this. He was mean; and, like most other mean men, he lacked the ability to conceal his meanness. . . .

In August, 1832, my master attended a Methodist camp-meeting . . . and there experienced religion. I indulged a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane. I was disappointed in both these respects. It neither made him to be humane to his slaves, nor to emancipate them. If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. . . . [A]fter his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty. . . .

In 1833 Douglass was turned over to a Mr. Covey who had a reputation for “breaking” slaves. Here he worked as a field hand.

If at any one time of my life more than another, I was made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery, that time was during the first six months of my stay with Mr. Covey. We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work,

³ Douglass is referring to Captain Auld.

work, was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him. I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute! . . .

Douglass was hired out to several slave owners including a minister of the Reformed Methodist Church. Recalling his experience, Douglass remarked, "Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me."

At the close of the year 1834, Mr. Freeland⁴ again hired me . . . for the year 1835. But, by this time, I began to want to live upon free land; and I was no longer content, therefore, to live with him or any other slaveholder. . . . I was fast approaching manhood, and year after year had passed, and I was still a slave. These thoughts roused me—I must do something. I therefore resolved that 1835 should not pass without witnessing an attempt, on my part, to secure my liberty. But I was not willing to cherish this determination alone. My fellow-slaves were dear to me. I was anxious to have them participate with me in this, my life-giving determination. . . .

In coming to a fixed determination to run away, we did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death. With us it was a doubtful liberty at most, and almost certain death to hopeless bondage. . . .

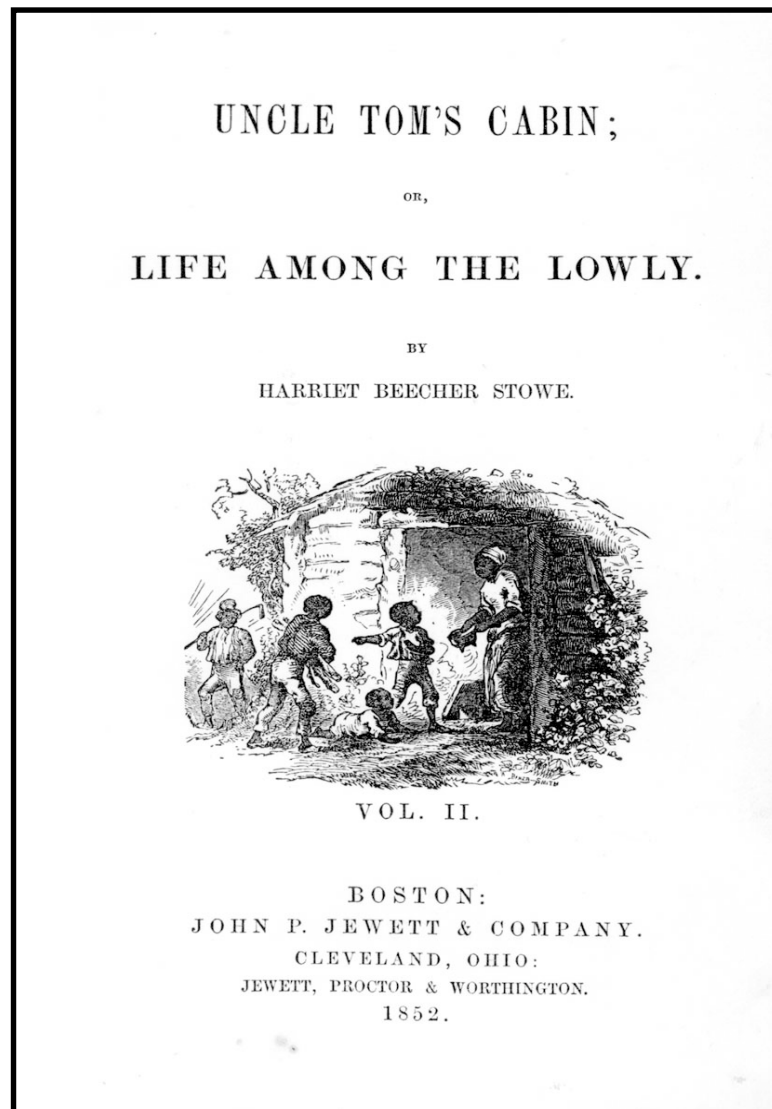
⁴ Douglass described Mr. Freeland as "the best master I ever had, til I became my own master."

- ◆ How did Frederick Douglass describe slave owners?
- ◆ Why do you think Douglass determined to escape from Mr. Freeland whom he described as the "best master I ever had?"
- ◆ What role did Douglass play in the Abolitionist movement?
- ◆ How important were slave narratives in promoting the Abolitionist movement?
- ◆ What effect did the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* have?
- ◆ How did Douglass contrast his determination to escape to Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty, or give me death" speech?

Document 3

Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly
Harriet Beecher Stowe

Harriet Beecher Stowe was born in 1811 in Cincinnati, Ohio to a prominent religious family. Her book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* first appeared in 1851 as a serial in *National Era*, an Abolitionist journal. The following year it was published in book form and sold some 300,000 copies during the first year of publication. The novel was so popular that it was made into a traveling melodrama and played to audiences throughout the North. Southern journals denounced the novel declaring that its portrayal of slavery was pure fabrication, an invention of the author's imagination.



Long after dusk, the whole weary train, with their baskets on their heads, defiled up to the building appropriated to the storing and weighing the cotton. Legree was there, busily conversing with the two drivers.

“Dat ar Tom’s gwine to make a powerful deal o’ trouble; keep a puttin’ into Lucy’s basket. . . .

“Hey-dey! The black cuss!” sid Legree. “He’ll have to get a breakin’ in, won’t he, boys?”

Both Negroes grinned a horrid grin at this intimation. . . .

“Wal, boys, the best way is to give him the flogging to do, till he gets over his notions. Break him in!”

“Lord, Mas’r’ll have a hard work to get dat out o’ him!”

“It’ll have to come out of him, though!” said Legree, as he rolled his tobacco in his mouth. . . .

Simon Legree and the two Negro drivers weighed the cotton as the baskets were presented. Although some were full weight, Legree indicated that they were light and ordered flogging as a punishment.

“And now,” said Legree, “come here, you Tom. You see I telled ye I didn’t buy ye jest for the common work; I mean to promote ye and make a driver of ye; and tonight ye may jest as well begin to get yer hand in. Now, ye jest take this yer gal and flog her; ye’ve seen enough on’t to know how.”

“I beg Mas’r’s pardon,” said Tom, “hopes Mas’r won’t set me at that. It’s what I an’t used to—never did—and can’t do, no way possible.”

“Ye’ll larn a pretty smart chance of things ye never did know before I’ve done with ye!” said Legree, taking up a cowhide and striking Tom a heavy blow across the cheek, and following up the infliction by a shower of blows.

“There!” he said, as he stopped to rest, “now will ye tell me ye can’t do it?”

“Yes, Mas’r,” said Tom, putting up his hand to wipe the blood that trickled down his face. “I’m willin’ to work night and day, and work while there’s life and breath in me; but this year thing I can’t feel it right to do; and, Mas’r, I *never* shall do it—*never!*”

. . . Legree looked stupefied and confounded; but at last burst forth—

“What! Ye blasted black beast! Tell *me* ye don’t think it *right* to do what I tell ye! What have any of you cussed cattle to do with thinking what’s right? I’ll put a stop to it! Why, what do ye thik ye are? May be ye think ye’re a gentleman, master Tom, to be telling your master what’s right and what an’t! So you pretend it’s wrong to flog the gal!”

“I think so, Mas’r,” said Tom, “the poor crittur’s sick and feeble; ‘t would be

downright cruel, and it's what I never will do, not begin to. Mas'r, if you mean to kill me, kill me; but as to my raising my hand agin anyone here, I never shall—I'll die first!"

Tom spoke in a mild voice but with a decision that could not be mistaken. Legree shook with anger; his greenish eyes glared fiercely and his very whiskers seemed to curl with passion; but, like some ferocious beast that plays with its victim before he devours it, he kept back his strong impulse to proceed to immediate violence and broke out into bitter raillery.

"Well, here's a pious dog, at least, let down among us sinners!—a saint, a gentleman, and no less, to talk to us sinners about our sins! Powerful, holy crittur, he must be! Here, you rascal, you make believe to be so pious—didn't you never hear out of yer Bible, 'Servants, obey yer masters'? An't I yer master? Didn't I pay down \$1,200 cash for all there is inside yer old cussed black shell? An't yer mine, now, body and soul?" he said, giving Tom a violent kick with his heavy boot. "Tell me!"

In the very depth of physical suffering, bowed by brutal oppression, this question shot a gleam of joy and triumph through Tom's soul. He suddenly stretched himself up, and, looking earnestly to heaven, while the tears and blood that flowed down his face mingled, he exclaimed—

"No! no! no! my soul an't yours, Mas'r! You haven't bought it—ye can't buy it! It's been bought and paid for by one that is able to keep it—no matter, no matter, you can't harm me!"

"I can't!" said Legree, with a sneer, "we'll see—we'll see! Here, Sambo, Quimbo, give this dog such a breakin' in as he won't get over his month!"

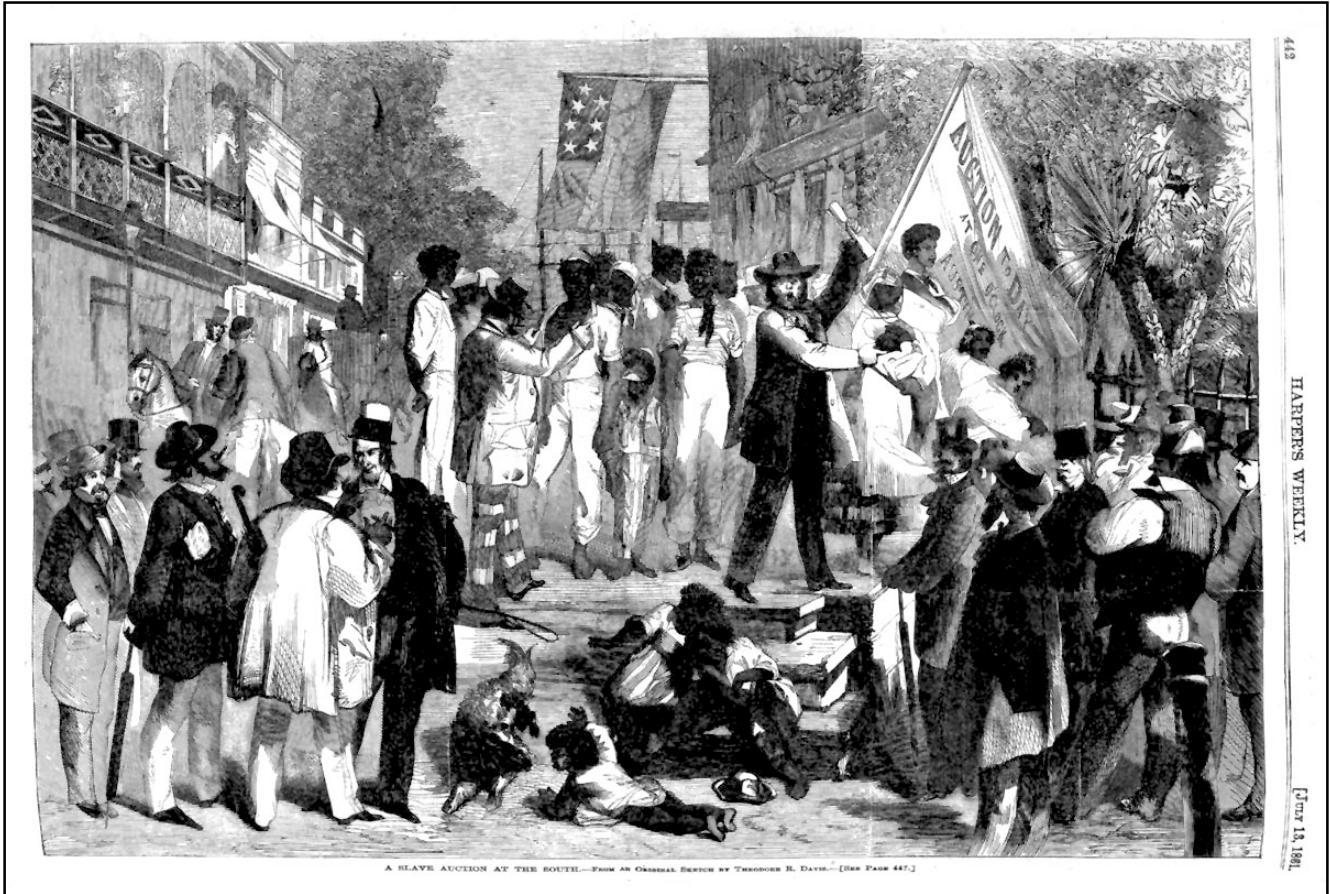
The two gigantic Negroes that now laid hold of Tom, with fiendish exultation in their faces, might have formed no unapt personification of the powers of darkness. The poor woman screamed with apprehension and all arose as by a general impulse while they dragged him unresisting from the place.



- ◆ How does Stowe describe slavery?
- ◆ What emotions was she trying to appeal to in her readers?
- ◆ Why did Southern slave owners object to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?
- ◆ How might Abolitionists use the novel to support their position that slavery must be eliminated?
- ◆ Why do you think the novel was so popular?
- ◆ Why is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* considered a classic in American literature?

Document 4

A Slave Auction at the South, 1861



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HARRIS WEEKLY

JAN 18, 1861

A SLAVE AUCTION AT THE SOUTH.—FROM AN ORIGINAL SKETCH BY THOMAS H. DAVIS.—[SEE PAGE 447.]