

Abolitionist Literature: A Study of the Underground Railroad by William Still

Dr. K. Sareen Raj

Associate Professor of English, Vidya Jyothi Institute of Technology

Abstract: Abolitionist literature has long served as a powerful tool for educating and mobilizing individuals against the horrors of slavery. Abolitionist literature not only served as a vehicle for advocating political change but also as a tool for empowering enslaved individuals. It also helped in fostering solidarity among diverse social movements. Through its potent combination of personal narrative, moral conviction, and political critique, abolitionist literature remains a significant force in the historical fight for human rights and equality, continuing to inspire modern movements for justice and freedom.

William Still's compilation, "The Underground Railroad" illustrates poignant narratives that illuminate the bravery and resilience of enslaved individuals striving for freedom. William Still, a prominent African American abolitionist and conductor on the Underground Railroad, compiled and published "The Underground Railroad" in 1872. It documents the stories of numerous individuals who escaped from slavery, often at great personal risk, and found refuge and assistance through the clandestine network of routes and safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. The present article titled, "Abolitionist Literature: A Study of *The Underground Railroad* by William Still" critically analyses the significant aspects of abolitionist literature - anti-slavery movement, search for freedom, escape from oppression, sense of disillusionment, race and identity.

Children and Abolitionist Literature: A Study of *The Underground Railroad* by William Still

"There is no shadow of a power on earth that can give you an honest heart and a good mind"

- *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (109)

Slavery was a deeply disturbing chapter in human history, marked by the exploitation and dehumanization of millions of individuals. It spans civilizations and epochs, revealing the darkest facets of humanity's capacity for cruelty and greed. Throughout history, slavery has taken various forms, from ancient civilizations using forced labor to build empires, to the transatlantic slave trade that forcibly

transported millions of Africans to the Americas. The impact of slavery extends far beyond the physical and economic exploitation. It has inflicted profound psychological and cultural wounds that persist to this day. The abolitionist movements of the 18th and 19th centuries marked significant strides towards recognizing the inherent dignity and rights of all individuals regardless of race or background. However, the legacy of slavery continues to shape social, economic, and political structures, contributing to persistent inequalities and injustices.

Confronting the history of slavery requires acknowledging its enduring impact and committing to justice, reconciliation, and reparations where possible. It demands ongoing efforts to combat racism, discrimination, and systemic inequities that have roots in centuries of exploitation. Ultimately, reflecting on slavery serves as a stark reminder of the importance of human rights, dignity, and the moral imperative to confront and learn from the darkest chapters of our shared history. Speaking about freedom, Douglass emphasizes on the importance of nurturing the next generation in the fight for freedom, knowing that the scars of slavery can never be truly erased but can be avoided by educating children in a way that empowers them. He says, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men" (Douglas, 45).

The abolitionist movement was a social and political campaign to end the institution of slavery, which gained momentum primarily in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was driven by individuals and organizations advocating for the emancipation and equal rights of enslaved people, challenging the economic, social, and moral foundations that supported slavery. Abolitionists argued against slavery on moral and religious grounds, asserting that it violated fundamental human rights and dignity. Many drew upon principles of Christianity and Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality. Abolitionists engaged in political activism to influence legislation and public policy. They formed

societies, wrote pamphlets, and circulated petitions calling for the abolition of slavery. They also worked to elect sympathetic politicians and lobbied for anti-slavery laws.

Abolitionist literature, such as Frederick Douglass's narratives and Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin," played a crucial role in raising awareness about the brutal realities of slavery and galvanizing public opinion against it. Some abolitionists supported more radical methods, including aiding enslaved individuals in escaping to Free states or Canada via the Underground Railroad. Others participated in civil disobedience and protests. The abolitionist movement had global implications, influencing debates on slavery in other countries and contributing to the decline of the transatlantic slave trade. The culmination of the abolitionist movement in the United States came with the passage of the 13th Amendment in 1865, which formally abolished slavery. While legal abolition marked a significant victory, achieving full civil rights and equality for formerly enslaved individuals remained an ongoing struggle.

Abolitionist literature played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and advancing the cause of abolishing slavery. It encompassed a variety of genres and forms, each serving to expose the brutal realities of slavery, challenge its moral justifications, and advocate for emancipation. Perhaps the most powerful abolitionist literature came directly from formerly enslaved individuals who penned their own narratives. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (1852) is one of the most famous works of abolitionist literature. It vividly depicted the harsh realities of slavery through its portrayal of Uncle Tom, an enslaved man, and other characters like Eliza, evoking strong emotional responses and galvanizing anti-slavery sentiments across the Northern United States and beyond. The novel had a profound impact on public opinion and is credited with fueling abolitionist fervor in the years leading up to the American Civil War.

The Underground Railroad reimagines the historical Underground Railroad as a literal railroad system. It is a historical account which presents the railroad not just as a metaphor, but as an actual underground train system that transports escaped slaves to safety. The railroad was a network of secret routes, safe houses, and individuals that helped enslaved African Americans escape from the southern United States to

freedom in the North or Canada during the 19th century, especially before the Civil War. The term "railroad" is metaphorical, with "stations" being safe houses and "conductors" being people who guided the escapees. The Underground Railroad included Harriet Tubman, who personally led many escapes, and William Still, an important figure who documented the escapes. The network's operations were clandestine, with participants risking severe punishment or death if caught. The railroad reached its peak in the 1850s and 1860s, with thousands of enslaved individuals reaching freedom. Though it was not a formal institution, the Underground Railroad played a crucial role in undermining slavery and contributed to the abolitionist movement. Its success was due to the bravery of both the escaped individuals and those who supported them, and it remains a symbol of resistance to oppression.

The book begins with Cora, a young enslaved woman, who attempts to escape from a plantation in Georgia. The story begins on a plantation in Georgia where Cora lives and works. She is an outcast among the enslaved because her mother, Mabel, abandoned her when she was young. Cora's life is harsh, but she has a fierce will to survive. She experiences a sense of entrapment and dehumanization as she navigates a world that constantly threatens her autonomy and existence: "She was nothing but a body, moving through time, tethered to the earth by the smallest of chains" (Still, 275). Cora meets Caesar, a new arrival on the plantation, and he tells her about the Underground Railroad which can be a road to their freedom. After some hesitation, Cora decides to escape with Caesar. Cora and Caesar escape the plantation and begin their journey to freedom. But as they try to escape they are pursued by a ruthless slave catcher named Ridgeway symbolizing the scars of the slavery that keep haunting them wherever they go.

Cora and Caesar travel to the town of South Carolina, where they find a relatively welcoming place for free Black people, including a hospital and a school: "The air was thick with the murmur of trains, the sound of far-off engines. She had never heard such a sound before" (Still, 278). However, the state's progressive front masks a darker agenda. Cora discovers that the authorities are using a form of eugenics to sterilize Black people, especially women, in order to control the population. Ridgeway, the relentless slave catcher, follows Cora and Caesar. As they move on, they reach a state of constant fear, always being hunted. The tension of being caught is palpable as the

story explores the emotional and physical toll of escaping slavery: “It was the history of her people: moved, displaced, scattered, buried, lost. She could not stay, but she could not leave” (Still, 360). The passage encapsulates the emotional burden of slavery's legacy, showing how generations of enslaved people were constantly uprooted, unable to fully escape or find peace, even when they sought freedom.

Cora and Caesar's journey continues, but the railroad is no longer an easy path. They reach North Carolina, where they find a different kind of oppression: racial segregation and systemic violence, rather than outright enslavement. Here, Cora learns about the horrors of institutionalized racism that exist even in Free states, as Black people face brutality and control in every direction. This reminds us of Malcolm X's argument on institutional oppression in America stating that true peace cannot exist without freedom from systems that oppress and control marginalized groups: “You can't separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom” (X, 211). As the couple's journey begins to encounter even more obstacles and betrayal Caesar becomes disillusioned with the promise of freedom. Here, we come to know more about the Cora's family and their past, especially her mother's abandonment, providing deeper insight into her motivations.

Ridgeway finally catches up with Cora in a dramatic confrontation. However, Cora's determination and resilience keeps her from giving up on the dream of freedom: “She had crossed the Rubicon, and there was no turning back” (Still, 420). This dramatic moment in Cora's journey signifies the point of no return. Her decision to escape appears to be irreversible, and she has to face the full consequences of her actions. Here, the book focuses on the psychological and physical toll of being hunted, as well as Cora's drive to escape her past and create a new future. Cora is once again on the run after Ridgeway's capture, but she finds herself alone in a hostile environment. As she comes to terms with her isolation, Cora grows in strength and determination. The narrative expands on the theme of freedom, showing that even once escaped, the idea of true liberty remains elusive for Cora and other Black people in a society that dehumanizes them.

Cora arrives at Indiana, where she encounters a different kind of community. It is a society where people are actively working to protect escaped slaves

and help them build a life in the North. The novel explores Cora's growth and her understanding of what freedom means in a world so shaped by violence and racism. The final chapter brings closure to Cora's journey. She comes to terms with her own past, her mother's abandonment, and the complex relationships she has formed along the way. Ultimately, Cora finds a place where she can begin again, though the novel ends with a sense of ambiguity about the nature of true freedom in a world still ravaged by slavery's legacy.

Throughout her journey, Cora encounters different forms of freedom—none of them perfect, all of them fraught with challenges. Whitehead explores how systemic oppression continues even after escaping slavery. *The Underground Railroad* blends historical fiction with magical realism, making a poignant statement about the brutality of slavery, the complexity of freedom, and the unbreakable will of those who fought for it. The novel continues to resonate with readers today, including children and young adults studying American history. Its portrayal of the Underground Railroad as a network of solidarity and resistance has inspired subsequent generations to advocate for social justice and human rights.

Thus, Abolitionist literature serves as a testament to the power of storytelling in confronting historical injustices and inspiring future generations to continue the fight for a more just and equitable world. Abolitionist literature serves not only to educate and persuade, but also to mobilize public sentiment against slavery. It highlights the moral, economic, and social injustices of the institution, and has contributed significantly to the eventual abolition of slavery in the United States and other parts of the world. Its legacy continues to resonate in discussions of human rights and social justice today.

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