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### Portrayals of Abolitionism in 'Fact, Fiction, and Film'

Abolitionism manifests in a variety of ways when considering both the creation of and content in works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*, John Duigan's *The Journey of August King*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Abolitionism existed as a movement to end the institution of slavery itself. Harriet Beecher Stowe as well as *Amistad*'s Lewis Tappan operated primarily in the institutional sphere of abolitionism, whose proponents often arrived at their perspective through their beliefs. Tappan's colleague Theodore Joadson is an example of a more practical abolitionism, operating in the institutional sphere yet motivated by his personal experiences within the institution as a former slave. Personal experience formulated the basis for a more individualized abolitionism, with characters such as George Shelby in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Roger Baldwin in *Amistad*. The personal journeys of Huck Finn and Jim, as well as August King and Annalees, demonstrate individual experiences in the South that contributed to a chance for freedom, and a consideration of the meaning of abolitionism in Huck's and August's personal lives. Stamp Paid in *Beloved* operated as a practical abolitionist in his experiences aiding fugitive slaves, which evolved into a nuanced abolitionist role in the struggle with *Beloved*. Through a comparison of these authors and characters it is evident that abolitionism in these works existed not just as the formal institution which the word often calls to mind, but appeared in many nuanced forms through the experiences and personal interactions of a variety of characters.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* greatly influenced the popular abolitionist movement. Coming from a religious family that focused on abolitionism, Stowe's upbringing, as well as her exposure to fugitive slaves while living along the Ohio River, spurred her great contribution to the growth of the popular abolitionist movement in the North. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* possesses an undeniable abolitionist message, which is clearly rooted in convincing its audience of the immorality and tragedy of slavery as an institution, through the use of a wide variety of characters. The movement centered on the evil nature of the institution, and sought to end it. A notable characteristic of the overall movement was its focus on the power of the institution, perhaps at detriment to the movement's consideration of individual slaves. This is not to say that the overall Northern abolitionist movement had any ill intentions towards the slaves it struggled for. However, considering the historical analysis of even Stowe's tendency towards views that advocated for freedom, although not necessarily equality, for blacks, it is a reality that at times this movement grew distant from the reality of the lives of the individuals burdened by slavery.

A key example of such an individual is the major institutional abolitionist character in *Amistad*, Lewis Tappan. He is clearly portrayed as a leading abolitionist figure in the area when his attention is turned towards the case of the Mende. Throughout the film, Tappan turns his focus not necessarily to the plight of the specific people concerned with this case--Cinque, Yamba, and the others, but with the impact of the case's outcome on the larger abolitionist fight against slavery as an institution. This disconnect clearly illustrates the distance between the focus of the moral abolitionist movement and the reality of the individuals affected by the system. For instance, when Roger Baldwin explains his strategy for winning the Mende's case he fixates on the property question. Tappan is portrayed as almost outraged, and certainly confused, with such

a suggestion, responding by explaining that, from his perspective, “this war must be waged on the battlefield of righteousness.” When explaining the depths to which the movement must go, for the sake of the larger goal, regardless of the reality for the individuals involved, he says:

“It is our destiny, as abolitionists and as Christians, to save these people. These are people, Mr. Baldwin, not livestock. Did Christ hire a lawyer to get him off on technicalities? He went to the cross, nobly.... To make a statement. To make a statement, as must we.”

Such a disconnect is clearly evident when Tappan is explaining that, for his goals as an abolitionist, motivated by faith, the end must always be in sight, and that if individuals such as those captured aboard the *Amistad* need to be used in that fight to help make a statement, their sacrifice would be worthy for its contribution to the greater good of the abolitionist movement. All of this was suggested with no consultation of the Mende themselves, who, one can imagine, would prefer they obtain the freedom owed them, while alive, rather than be sacrificed for the chance to make a statement. Such a sentiment suggests that, however well-meaning such abolitionism might be, the white savior mentality of abolitionists such as Lewis Tappan persisted in the notion that it was up to their determination that the whole was more worthy than the individual, without consulting or considering the specific individuals of a particular case.

Theodore Joadson, a fictional addition to Spielberg’s *Amistad*, presents an interesting perspective when considering the institutional basis of organized Northern abolitionists. While Joadson worked alongside Tappan in the formally organized, morally based side of abolitionism, as a former slave he offers a unique perspective to the abolitionist message of the film. While Joadson works within the institutional system, his strongest motivations for doing so are not solely his belief that slavery is wrong, but his own personal experiences as a slave which attest to that fact. Joadson witnessed firsthand how awful both the institution and the effects of that

institution are in the lives of the individuals entrapped in it. Because of his perspective, Joadson addresses Tappan's contemplation of using a failed Mende case as a statement for the good of the abolitionist movement by saying that sometimes "the only thing abolitionists hate more than slavery are the slaves themselves." Joadson recognizes the depth of the consequences if the movement were to pick and choose who might live or die as a strategy for the movement's success. Such a practice would both reduce the cause of black freedom and elevate the reality of the white savior mentality among the abolitionists.

The duality of Joadson's abolitionist perspective reflects in the experiences of the Mende's case. On one hand, the case of the Mende is crucial purely for the devastating effect the events which led to their false slavery had upon their lives--it is a personal issue, of importance in their individual lives. On the other hand, their case was important for advancing the legality of freedom for Africans in the US, in terms of recognizing and confirming the illegality of the slave trade in 1839. The combination of these realities had important implications in recognizing the Mende's inherent freedom, as victims who were kidnapped and forced into slavery illegally. As John Quincy Adams argues before the Supreme Court, the relatively simple issue of the Mende's freedom was tied to America's greatest challenge of the time,

"How is that a simple... property issue should now find itself ... argued before the Supreme Court? ... it would have us disregard truth, even as it stands before us tall & proud as a man... truth ... has been driven from this case like a slave from court to court, wretched & destitute. This is the most important case ever to come before this court because it in fact concerns the very nature of man..."

to the point of allowing for the inherent freedom of the Mende people and others in Africa. The case played an important role in the what Joadson referred to as the "one task undone" which "the Founding Father's left to their sons... before their thirteen colonies could precisely be called

United States,” the task being “crushing slavery.” For Northern abolitionists, this case demonstrated the possibility of Africans claiming their legal right to freedom in America.

Roger Baldwin demonstrates an interesting twist on the typical Northern abolitionist. As an attorney who specializes in property it is of great surprise to Tappan when Baldwin offers his services to the Mende. Baldwin’s dedication to the case comes not from his larger work to help end the institution of slavery, but through a combination of his personal feelings against the institution and his experiences with Cinque and the other Mende, as well as largely his practical recognition of the issue as a property one. This basis guarantees far greater a statement with a successful case, while also being the most logical legal argument for the time. Baldwin’s unique position to help the abolitionist cause is confirmed by Theodore Joadson, who agrees with Baldwin’s strategy to

“Forget mutiny, forget piracy, forget murder and all the rest. Those are subsequent irrelevant occurrences. Ignore everything but the pre-eminent issue at hand. The wrongful transfer of stolen goods. Either way, we win.”

Baldwin says that with this strategy, he “is talking about the heart of the matter,” despite Tappan’s protests against letting “this deteriorate into an exercise in legal minutia.” In this exchange it is clear that those with a personal connection to the abolitionist cause recognize that they should do what is necessary for each case, whether or not the means of success, such as the property argument, allow for the moral high ground of the institutional abolitionists. In the interactions between Tappan, Joadson, and Baldwin, it is evident that such institutional abolitionism was built on the backs of the freed slaves who participated in the struggle even as their white colleagues operated from the white savior position, defending the moral high ground above all else. Those freed slaves, and others such as Baldwin who became personally invested

in the cause, recognize the necessity of acting beyond the moral high ground to do what is necessary for the freedom of even one enslaved human.

George Shelby would be considered an unlikely abolitionist, but of the Southern characters within Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it is evident that his actions freeing his slaves are distinct. As the child of slaveholders, George was raised with the full expectation of becoming a slaveholder. He was undeniably a full participant in the evil institution of slavery, regardless of whatever kindnesses his family may have demonstrated to their slaves. Following George's experiences at Legree's plantation, and upon finding Uncle Tom to have not survived those cruelties, George recognizes the dangerously impervious reality that will always exist for a person owned by another. The system has the final say in the fate of enslaved people, not their masters, and regardless of the treatment they receive they are at the mercy of others, not of their own free will. Shelby transitions from being a slaveholder, ignoring any kindness his family showed their slaves, to recognizing that the evil principles of the institution itself, as George said that

"I resolved... that I would never own another slave, while it was possible to free him; that nobody, through me, should ever run the risk of being parted from home and friends..." (Stowe, 927).

Ultimately, George and his mother realize that the only way to truly acknowledge not only the affection they felt for their slaves, but their humanity as well, was to grant them their freedom. While it is unrealistic that such an act would prompt every slave to stay put, working for wages as the Shelby's freed slaves chose to do, the act of freeing his slaves in this manner suggests that Shelby was, to some degree, an abolitionist for those slaves he himself knew and cared for, as the result of his personal experiences with slaves and slavery. In this case Shelby was not an abolitionist in terms of the widespread moral movement, but as a person who freed slaves, he

was certainly one at the individual level. Furthermore, Shelby's personal transformation to this variation of abolitionism represents the hopes Stowe had for the impact of her abolitionist work on the hearts of slaveholders such as young George Shelby--personal change at the individual level alongside a recognition of the inherent evil of the institution itself.

Another variation on the individual level of abolitionism can be seen in those characters whose abolitionist tendencies occurred not just as a result of their interactions or experiences with slaves, but as the culmination of a transformative personal journey they experienced alongside an enslaved person. These unlikely abolitionists, such as August King and Huckleberry Finn, demonstrate another variety of subtle abolitionism at the culmination of their personal journeys. Although August King was not a slave owner in his rural North Carolina community, until his interactions with Annalees he made no outward indications of his feelings towards slavery as anything other than something that was tolerated as an institution of wealth. It was unavailable to those of his own economic status, reflected in interactions such as the comment made to Olaf at the market, "if you want slaves, you can tend to them." At the start of his journey he gave no reflection to the morality or immorality of the institution, or any consideration of the inherent worth and agency of slaves as individual humans. Through August's interactions with and journey alongside Annalees, it is evident that at least in his understanding of her own personal experiences of slavery, he began to question the legitimacy of the institution. This questioning formed the basis for his assistance in her escape, in addition to his personal motivations for doing so in connection with his wife's death. In a way, Annalees saved August by providing him with an opportunity to reconnect with his personal beliefs and take a definitive stance about the manifestations of the institution of slavery in Annalees' life. It is important to

clarify here that even by putting Annalees on the Appalachian Trail, a direct path to the North, August's form of abolitionism was singular. Furthermore, the actions that led him to do so were motivated by his own character development and his internal struggles. As Olaf burned down his home, August commented that "All in a day or two, I've lost everything. But I've never been so proud." While we are never privy to August's views on the broad institution of slavery, it is evident that at the personal level August's journey alongside Annalees led to some transformation as he took advantage of this opportunity for individual abolitionism.

Although Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was published after the Civil War, Twain was considered an abnormal abolitionist through his critique of the old values system of the South. Huck and Jim's journey into the deep South provides an opportunity for Twain to demonstrate the insidious nature of the institution of slavery, and critique southern society and values from a post-war perspective. Twain's unique perspective following his upbringing provided one interesting criticism, made evident through characters such as Miss Watson, who defended slavery with Christianity. The religious element used here is in some ways reminiscent of Stowe's and Tappan's arguments for Christianity as the motivating factor of the abolitionist movement. An examination of the use of Christianity in the arguments both for and against slavery suggests that for many of the white leaders at the helm of both sides of the movement, there was a higher justification through religion for their goals. Twain's argument against this, on the side of Christianity as a defense of slavery, suggests that problems arise on both sides when an argument is made beyond the reality that enslaved blacks are human beings and should be treated with dignity, including freedom and equality. Huck's personal evolution alongside Jim, who we later find out was free the whole time, nevertheless led to his recognition

of Jim's inherent humanity and allowed the boy to exhibit abolitionism. Despite the disconcerting ending, it is clear that the journey itself has led to Huck's recognition that "the journey will have been a failure unless it takes Jim to freedom" (Marx, *Norton Critical Edition*, 292). This is most clearly reflected in Huck's determination that "All right then, I'll go to hell," a moment of decision when Huck realizes that the only course of action is to help Jim reach freedom (Twain, 201).

Both Huck and August display individual abolitionist actions in their goals to help Jim and Annalees to freedom. Both also reach their determination of the necessity of such actions through their personal development as they journeyed alongside Jim and Annalees. It is important to recognize that in both cases, Huck and August benefitted from the journeys as well and neither set out to act as an abolitionist-figure for their counterpart. Furthermore, while it is evident both were deeply affected by the experiences, displayed in their obvious personal transformations, the depth to which these experiences in abolitionism altered their perspectives on the goals of the institutional abolitionism of the North is unclear.

Like Theodore Joadson, Stamp Paid of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a former slave serving the abolitionist cause in Ohio by acting as an agent of the Underground Railroad. As a representative of 'practical' abolitionism, he is clearly a participant in the institutional abolitionist system advocated by the likes of Stowe, while he also offers his reality as a former slave as motivation for his dedication to the work. Stamp Paid's story goes beyond Joadson's clear example when considering his abolitionism beyond the Underground Railroad. Stamp Paid and Ella played a crucial role in Sethe's freedom. First, Stamp Paid aided her journey across the Ohio River to freedom. When *Beloved* returned to haunt Sethe, Stamp Paid began to recognize,

alongside the women, that Beloved was pulling Sethe back into the punishing control of her memories of slavery, and that Sethe was not truly free yet. Morrison writes that

“Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present... the past [was] something to leave behind. And if it didn’t stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out” (127).

Through Stamp Paid, Ella, Janey, and the other women’s recognition that Sethe had never truly been free of Beloved, their actions to get rid of the ghost can be considered a kind of abolitionism, freeing Sethe, as best they could, from the invisible shackles with which slavery had continued to bind her.

Individuals such as Stowe and Tappan played an important role in the growth and success of the institutionally-oriented abolitionist movement. It is important to acknowledge that such activism was truly successful only through those freed slaves, such as Joadson and Frederick Douglass, whose reality made them uniquely situated to contribute to the movement. Both Roger Baldwin and George Shelby are examples of white men who, through their own unusual personal circumstances and experiences with enslaved people they cared for, became relatively unlikely abolitionists. Huck Finn and August King, through transformative personal journeys alongside escaping slaves Jim and Annalees, aided in the abolition of their partners at the culmination of mutually beneficial relationships. Finally, Stamp Paid’s example in *Beloved* suggests that the implications of abolitionism in the black community following the end of slavery did not stop, as many of their white counterparts did, given the invisible shackles with which slavery still threatened many of those who survived such evil. Exploring the abolitionist examples of these characters makes it clear that abolitionism is a broad term for a efforts to combat slavery that have manifested in fact and fiction in a variety of contexts, experiences, and implications.