

Uncle Tom's Cabin

A Study Guide



Uncle Tom's Cabin

A Study Guide for Classrooms

Introductory Materials — *Why teach Uncle Tom's Cabin?*

Uncle Tom's Cabin is typically used to teach students about American antebellum slavery. But Ontario classrooms are missing an opportunity to use this book as a springboard to teach about Canada's role in the Underground Railroad, the abolition movement, and how slaves were freed in Canada and the British Empire.

The Underground Railroad is part of Ontario's history. Uncle Tom's Cabin can give students a lens into both Ontario and Canada's past, our divergence from the laws and norms of the United States, and creates an opportunity for students to feel affinity with this important chapter of Canadian history.

In particular, the escape of Eliza and George to Amherstburg, Ontario, and historical sites such as the terminus of the Underground Railroad in Buxton, Ontario create opportunities for students in Southwest Ontario to see the importance of their local history.

Uncle Tom's Cabin also opens the door to talk to students about other social issues, including forms of social "othering," racism and sexism, the historic importance of women in social change, modern-day slavery around the world, and the importance of borders for people fleeing tyranny.

Curriculum Connections

- Intermediate/Senior Level English
- Intermediate/Senior Level History
- Senior Level Canadian & International Law
- Senior Level Challenge & Change in Society
- Senior Level Canadian & World Issues

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Reading the Book

A link to an **Introductory video for Uncle Tom's Cabin (PBS)** can be found at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca and used to introduce the book to your students. The video is about five minutes long.

Reading the book:

We suggest exploring this text through discussion based inquiry. A few guidelines:

- Students will read the books and prepare their own questions, or explore the reading beginning with questions introduced for the class.
- Possible points for discussion are outlined in the chapter breakdown below, but students should guide the discussion during Socratic seminars.
- Students should be marked on participation in the discussion, respect for differing opinions, and evidence that they've read the book.
- If using Socratic seminars, periodic journals on class discussions should be kept by students for evaluation.
- Teaching material for the classes leading up to Socratic seminars and in line with the points for discussion outlined below follow the chapter-by-chapter breakdown.
- As the material in this study guide is based on student-led discussion questions, it may be necessary to experiment with different formats for the discussions. Literature Circles can work quite well, for example. Also worth considering: timed debates, Think/Pair/Share, Word Walls or role playing.

Two Different Storylines — Discussion Based Inquiry

Students should pay attention to 1) Uncle Tom (whose experiences are of the American South) and George & Eliza, and 2) Miss Ophelia (whose experiences are influenced or touched by the American North). These groups will form the baselines for in-class collaborative and Socratic discussion.

Different storyline activities:

- If you wish, to facilitate more manageable discussion, break your class into two groups, each reading the whole book but concentrating on one storyline. In discussion, these groups can compare the lessons in the different storylines as they progress.
- Possible points for discussion in each storyline are outlined in the chapter breakdown below.

Discussion Session 1

GROUP ONE

GROUP TWO

Chapters 1 & 2

- *Read, but no discussion questions unless students raise them.*

Chapter 3

- Acting as a father, a husband, and an innovator, what has George been able to accomplish under slavery? Why?

Chapter 4

- Acting as a father, a husband, and a community leader under antebellum slavery, what has Tom been able to accomplish while owned by Mr. Shelby? Why?

Chapter 5 – Both streams

- What do you make of Mr. and Mrs. Shelby's feelings toward their slaves?
- How does the fact that the rights of slaves are determined by their masters affect them?
- What are the differences between Tom and Eliza's reactions to the sale? Why doesn't Tom run away as Eliza has done, if he believes it's her right to do so?

Exercises *Chapter 1–5*

Share and discuss with your class the article **Slave laws across borders: Upper Canada (Ontario) and the United States in 1793** (available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca).

Film: *Amazing Grace* (2007) on the fight to abolish slavery in Britain

Discussion Session 2

GROUP ONE	GROUP TWO
	<p>Chapter 6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Acting as a father, a husband, and an innovator, what has George been able to accomplish under slavery? Why?■ When Eliza’s escape is discovered, Mr. Haley blames Mr. Shelby, about which Mr. Shelby is indignant. What are the different attitudes of the two men to Eliza?■ What does Mr. Shelby’s attitude about Eliza say about his willingness to sell her son?■ What does Mrs. Shelby’s conspiracy to aid Eliza say?
	<p>Chapter 7</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Why does Stowe spend time describing Eliza’s love for and desire to protect Harry?■ Discuss Stowe’s direct appeal to readers who are mothers on page 43.
	<p>Chapter 8</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ How does the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 affect Eliza’s escape?
	<p>Chapter 9</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Discuss how the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 has influenced this chapter, and how Ohio, which became a free state in 1802, was affected.■ What is the difference between Mr. Bird when he is a politician in the legislature and when he is confronted by Eliza?■ Why does Stowe appeal to mothers to compare the loss of a child through death vs. loss of a child through slavery?■ Why does Eliza believe she had “A kind master” if he sold her son away?■ Discuss “Honest John” who could not wear the “bonds” of slavery any longer. (He was an owner, not a slave.)

Chapter 10

■ Discuss Stowe's appeal to the reader. How does Stowe think of African Americans? Does she seem to believe that they need protecting, or that they are as capable of directing their own lives as white men?

Exercises — Chapter 6–10

Othering:

“Othering” is a term for defining people as members of groups, rather than individuals, and allowing group membership to determine how we feel about them. This has to do with something called “in-group bias” or “in-group favouritism”. You may share this example with your class for discussion or to inform their exercises:

- Jane Elliott is a school teacher who became famous for introducing the “Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes” experiment to show children how racism affects how people treat each other. On the first day, she told the students with blue eyes that they were better, creating a fictional reason for this when faced with initial pushback from the students. Blue eyed children became bossy and arrogant and performed better on tests and assignments. A week later, she reversed the experiment and told the children that brown-eyed students were better. The brown eyed children taunted the blue-eyed children, but less harshly than they had been taunted. (There is speculation that even this short experiment in increasing tolerance may have had psychologically damaging effects.)

Discussion Session 3

GROUP ONE	GROUP TWO
	<p>Chapter 11</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does George have a duty to obey the law, as Mr. Wilson seems to believe?
	<p>Chapter 12</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Following the discussion from Chapter 11, note the title of this chapter – select incidents of lawful trade. ■ What is Stowe trying to accomplish by describing the separation of a mother from her son at the auction block and the secret sale of a baby when his mother went to look for her husband? ■ Discuss the deception that the traders use to sell both the mother and her son. What does this say about their beliefs about slaves' feelings?
<p>Chapter 14</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How does Miss Evangeline treat free labourers and slaves? ■ Tom can read, but not write. What does this allow him to do? What doesn't it? ■ What is Tom's Bible to him? ■ What does St. Clare say about educated slaves? ■ Is Tom's experience, religion, and education a danger to him? ■ Think back to George Harris – was he better or worse off for his ingenuity and cleverness? 	
	<p>Chapter 15</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Discuss how important a slave's owner is to the slave's well-being? ■ Does Miss Ophelia have the same attitude towards slaves that Stowe does? Why do you think so, or why don't you?

Exercises — Chapter 11–15

Is there a duty to obey bad laws?

Share Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s **Letter from a Birmingham Jail** (available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) with your students for discussion.

- How do you think this piece by Dr. King relates to the chapters we just read?

Quakers and the Underground Railroad:

One of the most prominent groups of non-violent civil disobedience was the Quakers. Share the article **The Quakers and the Underground Railroad** (available at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) with your students. The Quakers played a prominent role in the Underground Railroad, both by providing safe communities for escaped slaves to live in and by assisting fugitive slaves as they made their way to Canada. Some Quakers were charged for their role and even had to move west to avoid prosecution.

- Do you think the Underground Railroad could have operated without people like the Quakers?
- Are there any groups like the Quakers in the world today?
- Can you think of any other examples of people helping in the way the Quakers helped the slaves?

Discussion Session 4

GROUP ONE	GROUP TWO
	<p>Chapter 16</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Discuss attitudes toward slaves and the importance of owners to a slave's life. ■ How does Miss Ophelia react to Marie?
	<p>Chapter 17</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How has the first experience of being treated as though they were free affected George and Eliza? Have they changed? ■ George says, "I know very well that you've got the law on your side, and the power..." How are law and power connected? ■ What new thoughts do you have on the duty to obey the law?
	<p>Chapter 18</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Is Miss Ophelia discourteous or rude to Dinah when she cleans the kitchen? ■ What does this say about Miss Ophelia's respect for the slaves? How about Augustine's defence of Dinah? ■ Does Dinah deserve the respect she's asking for? ■ Is the way that St. Clare treats his slaves kind or cruel?
<p>Chapter 19</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Keeping in mind discussion of Tom's reading and writing, what is the significance of Eva helping Tom to write a letter to Chloe? 	<p>Chapter 19</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Is St. Clare right that much opposition to slavery in the North was a matter of circumstance rather than principle? What would he have to say about Canada? ■ What are the differences between an English labourer and a Southern slave? Is Miss Ophelia right? What would George and Eliza have to say?
	<p>Chapter 20</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What is St. Clare trying to accomplish by giving Topsy as a "gift" to Miss Ophelia? What are the differences between his attitude toward Topsy and Miss Ophelia's? ■ Why is Topsy as rough as she is? What does it say that she learns to read so quickly? What do you think of the fact that she is not taught to write?

Exercises — *Chapter 16–20*

Share the article on the **Indiana Religious Freedom and Restoration Act** (available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) with your students for use with page three of the exercise sheets available at LiberalStudies.ca.

Discussion Session 5

GROUP ONE	GROUP TWO
<p>Chapter 21</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How do Mrs. Shelby and Aunt Chloe believe they can help Tom? ■ What do you make of the fact that Aunt Chloe is allowed to earn money to help Tom, but Mrs. Shelby is not? ■ Do you think the understanding is that Tom will be bought back or be freed? Do you think Mrs. Shelby and Chloe would agree? 	
<p>Chapter 22</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How has Tom's letter empowered him? What does his empowerment depend on? How does this affect Eva? ■ Why do you think Uncle Tom's most equal friendships are with children – Master George and Eva? 	
<p>Chapter 23</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What are the differences between Henrique and Eva? Why do you think they're different? ■ What do you think of St. Clare's discussion with Alfred about whether all men are created free and equal? Who is right? ■ Alfred talks about the role of denying education in keeping slaves down. Given Tom and Topsy's education, what do you make of this? ■ What do you think of Alfred's plans to send Henrique to the North for his education? 	
<p>Chapters 24 & 26</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Read, but no discussion questions unless students raise them.</i> 	
	<p>Chapter 25</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What has been holding back Topsy from reforming? What does Eva offer that Miss Ophelia can't? ■ Can Miss Ophelia love Topsy if she doesn't believe they are equal?
	<p>Chapter 27</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What has changed with Miss Ophelia and Topsy?

Exercises — Chapter 21–27

Slavery in the world today:

Review and discuss the findings of the **Global Slavery Index** (available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) with your students.

Education and power:

The full text of *A Narrative on the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* is linked on the LiberalStudiesGuides.ca website. Share the handout: **Excerpt on learning to read and education** (available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) to accompany the worksheets for chapters 21 – 27.

Essay assignment or in-class discussion:

- In the book, who has the most power? Who has the least? Who is in between?

Legally, slaves have the least legal power, free women have less power than free men, but more power than slaves, and free men have the most power. But it's more complicated than that — different slaves have different levels of power over their lives.

Discussion Session 6

GROUP ONE	GROUP TWO
<p>Chapter 28</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Discuss Tom’s reaction to the news that he is to be freed, in spite of his conditions. What has been the difference of Tom’s experience compared to other slaves in the book? ■ Discuss St. Clare’s reaction to Tom’s excitement. Do you think he has been naive about slave ownership? ■ What does St. Clare’s death mean for the slaves other than Topsy? 	<p>Chapter 28</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Why does Miss Ophelia insist that St. Clare legally transfer Topsy’s ownership to her? Does she understand something St. Clare doesn’t?
	<p>Chapter 29</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ After all that she’s learned, why doesn’t Miss Ophelia engage with Marie as she did with St. Clare?
<p>Chapter 30</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What do you think of the description of Mr. Skeggs as “kind” given his motivations for keeping such a cheery warehouse? How does this compare to Eliza’s characterization of Mr. Shelby as a kind master? ■ Why do the slaves treat each other as they do, even though they are, in the eyes of the law, equal? ■ How is the behaviour of the man who buys Susan similar to Miss Ophelia’s? 	

Exercises — Chapter 28–30

The experience of slavery:

Share with your class and discuss the poem, *I Am Selling My Daughter for 100 Won (10¢)* by Jang Jin-Sung (available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca).

- What are some similarities you see with the slave auction in the book?
- What are some differences?

Codes of conduct in slave states:

In class or in groups, design a code of conduct for slaves under antebellum (American) slavery.

- Why do you believe it would give slaves the most advantages under slavery?
- What are the weaknesses of your code of conduct?

Discussion Session 7

GROUP ONE	GROUP TWO
<p>Chapter 31</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Why does Simon Legree take the slaves' clothing? Why is he hostile to their practicing religion? ■ What do you think of the conversation between the stranger and the Southern gentleman? Do you think that kind slave owners were responsible for the abuses of the system? 	
<p>Chapter 32</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How does Legree use songs to break down the slaves? 	
<p>Chapter 33</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What do you make of Tom's defiance? ■ It seems that Cassy is educated and refined, but still a slave. She, along with Tom, seem to anger Legree the most. Why do you think this is? 	
<p>Chapter 34</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Has Cassy taken her own advice, if she is tending to Tom? ■ Cassy was also raised kindly and in relative luxury. What has allowed her to turn mean? Do you think Tom would be capable? If not, why? 	
<p>Chapter 35</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Why does Cassy hold power over Legree? Could other slaves do the same? ■ Recall "Honest John" from Chapter 9. Do you think that owning slaves has been too great a burden for Legree, or is he inherently flawed? 	
<p>Chapter 36</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How do Emmeline and Tom affect Cassy? Is it necessary that they all be educated for this to occur? 	

Exercises — Chapter 31–36

On slave songs:

These slave songs that you can share with your class – referenced in exercise sheets – are linked on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca:

- **Nobody Knows the Troubles I've Had**
- **River Jordan (Roll, Jordan, Roll)** (adapted and changed for 12 Years a Slave) – originally used to try to encourage Christianity among slaves, it was repurposed by slaves as a coded message for escape, possibly referencing the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, which slaves had to cross to reach freedom.

Exploring slave songs:

Share with your students and have them review the book **Slave Songs of the United States** (full text PDF available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca).

- In groups or as individuals, choose a slave song.
- What do you believe the purpose of the song may have originally been?
- What do you think slaves could have changed about the song so that it's more meaningful for them?

Discussion Session 8

GROUP ONE	GROUP TWO
	<p>Chapter 37</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Why is it possible for George and Eliza to escape to Canada? Would it be possible today? ■ What are the different ways that slaves could achieve liberty?
<p>Chapter 38</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does Tom come close to breaking and becoming like the other slaves? Is Legree the one who, unwittingly, stops that from happening? ■ What are the different paths to liberty for slaves? How does Cassy seek to free them? Would it work? 	
<p>Chapter 39</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Read but no discussion questions unless the students raise them.</i> 	
<p>Chapters 40-41</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Recall Tom's reaction to Eliza's escape, and compare that to his reaction to Cassy and Emmeline's. How does this fit with his obedience in other matters? ■ How is Tom rewarded, in the end, for his loyalty and honesty? How do you think this is related to the way slaves on the plantation acted more generally? ■ Why does Master George believe he can have Legree charged with murder? ■ What is the difference between George Shelby's vow and Miss Ophelia's resignation? 	
<p>Chapter 42</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Read but no discussion questions unless the students raise them.</i> 	

<p>Chapter 43</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What are the differences between Harry’s life and his father’s? ■ What changes does Cassy experience? Why do you think they happen? ■ What do you think of George’s wish to leave not only America, but Canada? Do you think that he is right to believe that only a country could give slaves a voice, or do you sympathise with George Shelby? 	
<p>Chapter 44</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How has her ability to earn wages affected Chloe? How does news of Tom’s death change that? Why? ■ Did George Shelby’s freeing of his family’s slaves make a difference? 	

Exercises — Chapter 37–44

Paths to freedom:

Share with your students the **Posting for a runaway slave in Canada** (available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) to get them thinking about escape from slavery.

There are several different ways that slaves can get liberty:

- Purchasing their freedom
- Emancipation by their owners
- Death
- Escape
- What kind of choice do you think this is for slaves?
- What do you think some problems are with slaves purchasing their freedom?
- What do you think Stowe believes will happen to slaves when they arrive in Canada as a sort of “refugee” from the United States? How does what happens with Stowe’s characters support your theory?

Escape across borders:

Share with your students the article **Child migrants flood the U.S. Border** (available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) about the U.S. Immigration Crisis of 2014.

- What are some similarities in this story and what was happening in the Underground Railroad?

- What are some differences?
- Do you think that, overall, the situation facing people fleeing from war or poverty is more similar or different from fleeing slavery? Why do you think that?

Slavery in the world today:

Share the article **North Koreans working as “state-sponsored slaves” in Qatar** (available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca) with your students.

- How is the slavery described in this article different from the slavery in the book?
- How is it the same?
- How do you believe the Canadian government should be responding to slavery? Do you think your response is the same or different than what we’ve done in the past?

Discussion Session 9	
GROUP ONE	GROUP TWO
Chapter 45 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How effective do you think Stowe’s appeal to the reader is? ■ What lessons from your discussions do you see here? Does Stowe add to them with her appeal? How? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Final thoughts on the novel – overall effectiveness, etc. 	

Exercises — Chapter 45

Use the time before the last discussion as an opportunity to cover any lessons that students are still struggling with.

Fight for the abolition of slavery:

Create “pamphlets” (one page, two sides) arguing for the abolition of slavery using the arguments that resonate most strongly with you from the book.

Have students share their pamphlets first and then present them.

Why did you choose the arguments you did? What story from the book inspired you?

What kinds of pamphlets are the most effective? Why do you think they are effective?

Cumulative Exercises

Topics for final presentations for groups or individual essay topics:

- Exploring slavery in the world today: What does it look like? Where does it survive? And why?
- Exploring the role of women in abolitionism: What was the role of women in the abolitionist movement? How did the abolitionist movement become tied in with women's suffrage and women's rights? Why do you believe these causes were tied together, and should they have been?
- Exploring the rule of law: Without equality under the law, people need to depend on each other. What effect do you believe that equal protection from the law has on how we treat each other? Where are people treated differently under the law today?
- Exploring "Othering" in society: What are contemporary examples of people being treated differently based on groups that they're in? Do you believe that this is a problem? If so, is it always a problem?
- Exploring The Underground Railroad in a contemporary context: Has it happened since? Could it happen today? What would it look like? What are some examples in current events of similar refugee movements?

You may wish to share the following resources, available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca, with your students for their final assignments.

- Findings: Global Slavery Index, 2014
- HBO: Slave Narratives (full video on YouTube, link on website)

A list of Ontario black history sites is also available through LiberalStudiesGuides.ca for students to use in their research or to visit for more information.

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Liberal Studies Guides help teachers engage their students when discussing literature through study guides and cross-curricular resources made freely available for classroom use. We also offer free workshops on using the Socratic method with secondary students of all levels.

Our study guides break down novels into lessons with ideas for discussion, exercises, and assignments. We tie our guides together with additional resources on our website, LiberalStudiesGuides.ca, including ready-to-use worksheets, to encourage the discussion of current events, history, music, philosophy, and economics to help tie the lessons to the real world.

Although our guides are aimed at English classrooms, the supplementary resources may be useful for history, music, drama, communications studies, economics, philosophy, and social studies.

Liberal Studies Guides is a project of the Institute for Liberal Studies, a non-partisan educational charity. We believe that encouraging discussion in the classroom helps to better equip students to discuss the problems facing Canadian society.



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