

Publishers' Bindings Online, 1815-1930: The Art of Books
bindings.lib.ua.edu

Sample Lesson Plan: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
Grades 9-12

*This lesson will take two, 50-60-minute class sessions.

Objectives:

Using *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an example, students will learn that book bindings vary according to the social, economic, and political atmosphere in which the book was made. Students will achieve this objective by participating in a critical thinking exercise, with the aid of the PBO Decades gallery and the database of bindings.

Materials:

- 1) A computer with an Internet connection and a large screen or other capability to display the teacher's actions to the entire class.
- 2) Several computer stations with Internet connection where students can work in small groups. ***Alternatively, the exercise could be conducted as an out-of-class (homework) assignment.***
- 3) Hand-outs instructing students on the use of the PBO Decades gallery and Guided Search feature, and listing the questions students should answer.
- 4) A chalk board or dry-erase board and appropriate writing implement.

Lesson

Day 1

Introduction

Written in 1850 and first published as a magazine serial in 1851, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin or, Life Among the Lowly* reached book form in 1852. The abolitionist novel sold 10,000 copies its first week and 300,000 copies in its first year, on its way to becoming the best-selling American novel of the 1850s. The book was so influential that when Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe, he was rumored to have said to her, "So this is the little lady who made this big war."

Considered a classic, the book has continued publishing in various forms to this day. Although they have basically the same content inside, the numerous editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* look quite different on the outside. One major reason for the different appearances is the impact of America's changing social, political, and economic climate on the art of bookbinding.

In the early 1800s, publishers typically issued books in temporary paper wrappers, with the expectation that the individual consumer would have the book custom-bound in

leather. As more people began to buy books, publishers began issuing them in decorative cloth bindings—a practice that was more convenient and economical for the book-buying masses. This practice continued through the 1920s, at which time paper jackets or paper covers became the norm.

As each decade progressed from the first publishing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through the end of the publishers' binding era, the events and trends of the day affected the appearance of book covers. During this lesson, we will discover some of the many different forms the cover of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has taken and determine the reasons for the book's appearance at various points in time.

1850s: A Demonstration of the Critical Thinking Exercise

Distribute the hand-out. Tell students that you are about to demonstrate an exercise that they later will execute in small groups.

Go to the visual timeline at bindings.lib.ua.edu/gallery/decades.html Note that each decade has a representative book pictured. Click on the link for 1850-1859. *Be sure to demonstrate to students how you accessed the timeline and the individual decade.*

Either read aloud or select a student to read the essay. Some key points to emphasize:

- The debate over slavery reached fever pitch.
- Gold drew droves of settlers to Colorado and Nevada. (You may want to point out that these gold rushes continued the mass westward movement that began with the great California gold rush and the opening of the Oregon Trail the previous decade.)
- Several important books that students will recognize were published this decade.
- Trends in bookbinding included: colorful cloth, a lot of ornamentation, large center pictures, frequent use of gold stamping, the same picture that was gold-stamped on the front often was stamped on the back in a blind impression.

Ask students how the general trends in bookbinding related to the events of the time. Allow them approximately five minutes for discussion. (Make a note of all good discussion points throughout the session on the chalk board or dry-erase board, and transcribe them onto a sheet of paper after class for use at the next class session.)

In a separate browser window, leaving the 1850s essay available for quick reference, go to <http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/sitesearch.html>, select the “Search by Keyword” link, and click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. In the top search box, type in or copy from this lesson plan: “1850 or 1851 or 1852 or 1853 or 1854 or 1855 or 1856 or 1857 or 1858 or 1859”; select “any of these” from the first drop-down menu, and “date” in the second drop-down menu. In the second search box, type “Uncle Tom's Cabin,” select “as a phrase” from the first-drop down menu, and “title” in the second drop-down menu. At the bottom of the search page, designate 50 records to be “displayed in gallery.” Click “search.” *Be sure to explain to students what you are doing as you execute the search so that they may duplicate it with other decades.* Scroll slowly so that students can see all of the thumbnails.

Click on the first thumbnail on the 11th line (pbw00754), then enlarge the picture by clicking on the large box under it. Click on the back and spine to allow students to see them as well.

This edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* best represents the trends in bookbinding during the 1850s. Allow the students to discuss how this book fits those trends.

Click "Results" to return to the thumbnails.

Ask students to compare the other thumbnails on the page to each other (you can click on various covers to show details when appropriate). Then ask students how *Uncle Tom's Cabin* covers from the 1850s as a group differ from the general trends of the decade, and how they are similar. Ask them why they think some of the differences occur. (HINT: What about the topic of the book and/or the events of the time might have had an impact on the design of the bindings?)

Critical Thinking Exercise

Divide students into seven groups, or ask them to form groups on their own, specifying the number of students each group would have to have in order to form seven groups. Example: If there are 21 students in the class, ask them to form groups of 3.

Assign one of the following decades to each group: 1860s, 1870s, 1880s, 1890s, 1900s, 1910s, 1920s.

Using the hand-out as an instruction guide, tell students that they will be using the PBO Decades gallery and Guided Search feature to discuss the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* covers of their assigned decades as they relate to the historical events and bookbinding trends of the time. Emphasize that students must write down their answers and be prepared to present them in class. Each group will have five minutes to discuss its decade at a future class meeting.

STUDENTS MAY NOW WORK ON THE EXERCISE IN CLASS (ALLOW AT LEAST 20 MINUTES) OR AS A HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT.

Day 2

*Before class, draw a timeline on the chalk board or dry-erase board, leaving plenty of room to make notes for each decade. For 1850, write up some of the pertinent discussion notes from the previous class session.

Presentations

Groups will present their discussion findings in chronological order (starting with the 1860s and ending with the 1920s). It would be helpful for the instructor to bring up the

gallery of thumbnails for each decade (using the Guided Search instructions) so that students may have a visual aid for their discussion of specific book covers.

During each presentation, make notes (or have a student in the presenting group make notes) of the most important points covered under the appropriate decade on the timeline you drew before class.

Each 5-minute presentation should include a discussion of:

- how the events of the decade impacted the general bookbinding trends;
- an *Uncle Tom's Cabin* cover that is most representative of the trends;
- differences and similarities among the other covers;
- a comparison of the covers as a group with the general trends;
- an explanation of why the covers as a group either do or do not represent the trends.

Discussion

Now that the students have had an opportunity to learn about the events, bookbinding trends, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* covers of every decade in the publisher's binding era, allow 10-15 minutes for discussion as a class. Students can use the timeline you've created as a guide.

Facilitate the discussion using the following questions:

- 1) What major differences and similarities do you see among the general trends of each decade?
- 2) What major differences and similarities do you see among the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* covers of each decade?
- 3) In general, how have historical events impacted the appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* bindings?
- 4) In general, how have the general trends impacted the appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* bindings?
- 5) As a whole, do you believe *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has followed the general trends? Why or why not?
- 6) What are your opinions of the book bindings you saw? What did you particularly like or dislike?
- 7) Considering the current economic, political, and social climate, what do you think a cover of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would look like today?

Summary

Harriett Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a fictional argument against slavery in 1850. Since its first publication as a book in 1852, it has worn many different covers. During each decade of American history from the book's emergence through the end of the publishers' binding era, the political, social, and economic climate has impacted the appearance of bindings. For this reason, although the content of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has essentially remained the same, its cover has changed with the times.

For additional teaching resources on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see:

American Writers, Teacher Resources:

http://www.americanwriters.org/classroom/resources/tr_stowe.asp

Harriett Beecher Stowe Center, Teacher & Student Resources:

http://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/teacher_student/

Learning Page, American Memory, Library of Congress:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/collections/slavery/langarts.html>

“On an Underground Railroad,” History Happens, Stories from American History on Music Video:

<http://www.ushistory.com/railr.htm>

Uncle Tom's Cabin Teacher Guide, University of Virginia:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA02/harris/utc/index.html>

“Uncle Tom's Cabin: The Most Important American Novel?”, St. Louis University:

<http://pages.slu.edu/faculty/reitzc/utc.html>