

March 2022

An Analysis of Simon Legree's Dreams in Uncle Tom's Cabin

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Recommended Citation

Windfeld-Hansen, Ellie (2022) "An Analysis of Simon Legree's Dreams in Uncle Tom's Cabin," *Global Tides*: Vol. 16, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol16/iss1/3>

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In Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the character of Simon Legree embodies the stereotype of the cruel and heartless slave owner. However, Legree is not wholly representative of this label; there are many examples of thoughts and actions in the novel that demonstrate his humanity and desire to be a moral person. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory provides numerous insights into Legree's humanity through the analysis of Legree's dreams. Freud's theories demonstrate that Legree's unconscious and conscious are at odds with one another, and that the sinful nature of Legree's conscious ultimately prevails over the desires of his unconscious for moral reform. The theories of Jacques Lacan also yield insights regarding the progression of Legree's character, as Legree's dreams reveal his movement through Lacan's developmental stages. Legree's methods of dealing with his struggles contribute to the way he behaves in that his increasing assumption of a cruel facade steadily erases his humanity and desires for moral atonement, which leads to his ultimate downfall.

Cynthia Wolff, Scott Reznick and Severn Duvall discuss the important role of morals in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, albeit in relation to other characters in the novel rather than in the context of Legree specifically. Wolff explains that the definition of masculinity evolved alongside the development of the abolitionist movement. She argues that Tom is not a passive figure but rather a dynamic one, who acts out of virtuous morals and therefore embodies the purest form of masculinity (614). Reznick asserts that the individual emotions and experiences of Stowe's characters do not detract from the important subject of the abolitionist movement and have a central role in the novel. He focuses on the concepts of liberal sentimentality, morals and liberty in the lives of both moral and immoral characters in the novel. Duvall emphasizes that the authority figures in the novel utilize the issues of slaves' separation from their loved ones and the debate over their humanity to their own personal advantages and grapple with the morality of their decisions. However, while these commentators all provide key insights about various of the characters' moral issues, the moral struggles of Legree, as evidenced in his dreams, are especially revealing and warrant more in-depth analysis.

While the general consensus regarding Legree is that he is simply, as Stephen DeCanio puts it, "satanic" (588), his character is more complex. Legree displays a sense of vulnerability in many parts of the novel, which demonstrates his internal struggle between the "lust for power" (Duvall 599) of his conscious and the yearning for moral atonement of his unconscious. This is well exemplified in his reaction to touching Eva's curl. As soon as Eva's curl touches him, Legree screams "'Damnation!'....in sudden passion.... as if it burned him" (Stowe 379). This response is the first instance in which Legree's facade of a cruel slave master begins to crack. The reason this simple act affects Legree to this degree is because Eva's hair resembles that of his mother's. Legree's mother "cradled [him] with prayers and pious hymns" (Stowe 380), yet he vehemently rejects her and her

teachings by pushing her to the ground in his last interaction with her before her death. As a result, Legree's utterance of the word "damnation" expresses his fear of being damned to Hell for this heartless action. This incident demonstrates R.B. Jenkins's point that "her memory is very much alive in Legree's mind, however desperately he has tried over the years to kill it" (41). The intensity of the words "desperately" and "kill" exhibit that Legree is emotionally distraught by and unable to cope with any notion that his morality is less than perfect. As such, he rejects the moral and religious system that his memory of his mother evokes, and his shame and guilt due to the way he treated her continually eats away at him. This language indicates that his conscious is "oppos[ing] the emergence of...forgotten ideas into consciousness" (Freud 193) or attempting to repress his guilt and regret which hinder him from maintaining his heartless slave holder persona.

Yet, Legree reacting so strongly in this scene signifies that his unconscious successfully plants the seed of hope for moral reform in his conscious mind. Legree's intense fear resulting from touching Eva's hair indicates the extent to which the memory of his mother pervades his mind, which brings the desire to atone for his last heartless act toward his mother to the forefront of his conscious mind. Thus his unconscious prevails over his conscious mind in this instance and urges Legree to value "love and forgiveness over retribution" (Wolff 601). The word retribution connotes punishment for a wrongdoing, which suggests that the reason Legree is unleashing his anger on his slaves and subordinates is to avoid addressing his own moral failure. Hence, Legree is using displacement, or, as Tyson says, "transferring [his] anger with one person onto another person (usually one who won't fight back or can't hurt [him])" (11). Legree's simple experience of touching Eva's curl is enough to destroy the façade of his composed demeanor and communicates that "things sweetest and holiest [turn] to phantoms of horror and affright" (Stowe 381).

One of the defining examples of Legree exposing his humanity is the first dream he has of his mother. Stowe writes:

a veiled form stood beside him, and laid a cold, soft hand upon him. He...shuddered, with creeping horror, though the face was veiled. Then he thought he felt *that hair* twining round his fingers; and then, that it slid smoothly round his neck, and tightened and tightened, and he could not draw his breath; and then he thought voices *whispered* to him,—whispers that chilled him with horror. Then it seemed to him he was on the edge of a frightful abyss, holding on and struggling in mortal fear, while dark hands stretched up, and were pulling him over; and Cassy came behind him laughing, and pushed him. And then rose up that solemn veiled figure, and drew aside the veil. It was his mother; and she turned away from him, and

he fell down, down, down, amid a confused noise of shrieks, and groans, and shouts of demon laughter (385-386)

This lengthy and vivid description indicates that Stowe invites interpretations of Legree's dream and mental state; psychoanalytic theory, most notably Freud's dream symbolism, provides the methods and tools to do so. Talcott Parsons notes that Freud never tired of developing and perfecting theories on dream symbolism on both himself and other patients, which led to a plethora of discoveries (91), many of which are reflected in Legree's complex dream.

Legree's dream reflects three distinct elements of Freud's dream symbolism: the acceptable barriers of the unconscious and conscious, wish-fulfillment, and death. One important element of Legree's dream is that he believes he feels Eva's hair twining around his fingers. This is the only part of the dream that is based on an actual event that occurs in his conscious, waking hours, which serves as another instance of Legree's conflict between his unconscious and conscious minds. Parsons emphasizes Freud's teaching that the operations of the unconscious and conscious should be kept separate during sleep because an intermingling of the two without the person's consent is a breach of the person's freedoms and personal boundaries (94). Legree's unconscious desires springing up after his encounter with Eva's curl do not violate this teaching because his conscious is active during this incident. Yet, because this traumatic experience is an important part of Legree's dream, his censors, or "prevented boundary crossings from the unconscious to the conscious" (Parsons 94) have been breached. This event results in "the truth hidden by repression com[ing] out before [Legree]" (Tyson 21), or a turmoil known as crisis or trauma.

A second key factor in Legree's dream is that his mother is the dominant figure. This point exhibits that his mother's forgiveness, as well as his own desire to reconcile with her, provide the dream's latent content, as Freud himself says, "[its] presence in the unconscious we must assume" (200). Legree's focus on his mother's forgiveness also demonstrates Lacanian theory in that he is in the Symbolic Order, or a state in which he "seek[s] fulfillment, Completeness, plenitude and Union with [his] mother" (Tyson 27). The fact that Legree is seeking his mother's forgiveness is ironic as she already affirms that he has her forgiveness. However, Legree's conscience is still fraught with guilt, which reflects his fear that he has gone too far down his sinful path to be worthy of forgiveness. While numerous events and people appear and occur in Legree's dream, his mother, or the veiled figure, is present at both the beginning and the end of the dream, which further exhibits her central position and importance in Legree's unconscious. Legree's mother's influence on his unconscious and conscience signifies that his dream is motivated by his own desires for wish fulfillment, which, according to Freud and Parsons, "is present in every dream" (93). Parsons also explains that wish

fulfillment is “unidirectional, tending always toward the achievement of states of gratification” (93). Therefore, even though Legree’s dream appears to cause him nothing but mental unrest, his unconscious endures it for the end goal of wish fulfillment through atoning for his violent treatment of his mother.

A third component of Legree’s dream, and arguably the most important, is that nearly every element of it illustrates his fear of death. This aligns with Tyson’s point because, according to her, death is the “principal organizer of our psychological experience” and functions as “the ultimate abandonment” (21). The first circumstance that communicates this fear in Legree’s dream is the cold hand that is laid upon him. It is significant that the hand does not simply touch him but lingers. Because Legree’s dream addresses his fear of not being worthy of his mother’s forgiveness as well as his fear of death, Legree’s dream is an example of the Freudian concept of condensation: “a single dream image or event [is] [used] to represent more than one unconscious wound or conflict” (Tyson 18). Freud also notes that condensation is one of “many psychic processes that exist in between both the unconscious and the conscious” (202) and is therefore not uncommonly found in dreams. Legree’s fear of death is also demonstrated by the hair tightening around his neck to the point of strangling him. The fact that the word “tightened” is used twice indicates a sense of panic about his death, which highlights that he is not simply scared of death, but terrified of it.

A third aspect of Legree’s dream that displays the intensity of his fear of death is that he stands at the edge of a cavernous abyss. However, the abyss is not literal but figurative and harkens back to Legree’s internal struggle. Standing at the edge of the abyss forces Legree to make the ultimate choice: will he walk away and pursue the path of moral atonement or will he continue to hide behind the facade of a cruel slaveholder? The abyss symbolizing Legree’s contemplation of this choice suggests that the dark hands that pull Legree down into the abyss are representative of the slaves’ hands. Because he terrorizes and brutalizes the slaves, the dark hands are now retaliating against him, which reveals his deep fear of the slaves escaping their bondage and then using their freedom to turn on him.

This deep-seeded fear reflects that Legree has entered Lacan’s Imaginary Order, or “the world in which [he] ha[s] the illusion of fulfillment and control” (Tyson 27). Cassy pushing Legree into the abyss in addition to the hands already pushing him symbolizes the climax of his inner struggle: while his unconscious wants him to repent (he is still fighting the dark hands), his conscious tells him he cannot and overrides his unconscious by making his ultimate choice for him. Cassy, in this instance, is representative of Legree’s conscious mind, which tells him that he will never be able to repent. As a result, Legree’s conscious breaches his unconscious again and destroys the hopes of his unconscious for moral reform by pushing Legree into the abyss of moral depravity. Yet, it is specifically Cassy that performs this action because Legree views her as a double of his mother. Legree

perceives himself to be unworthy of his mother's forgiveness, and he also has a "superstitious horror" (Stowe 378) of Cassy and her unpredictable behaviors. Because both women have something that Legree wants, they are the only two people who can influence the course of his thoughts and actions and therefore show that Legree can also be controlled by others. Thus Cassy's pushing him reflects his conscious beliefs that tell him that his mother has not accepted his forgiveness and that he will never have a chance to atone no matter how much his unconscious yearns to do so. Cassy being a living stand-in for Legree's mother in this instance reveals that Legree is employing projection, by "ascribing [his] fear, problem, or guilty desire to someone else and then condemning...her for it, in order to deny that we ha[s] it [himself]" (Tyson 11). Therefore, Cassy is pushing Legree down into the abyss because she is a figure who is present in his conscious life yet represents his feelings of inferiority and lack of control.

Lastly, the word "down" being used three times in the dream highlights Legree's fear of death. The number three is representative of Christianity, which "is the real object of Legree's hatred" (Jenkins 41), and therefore shows that Legree has rejected every chance of redemption offered to him. As a result, in his dream he falls into the abyss of Hell with "shouts of demon laughter" and his fear of damnation by hellfire comes to pass. The convoluted workings of Legree's unconscious mind that are exposed during his dream reveal the full extent of his humanity and personality behind the mask of the cruel slave holder and challenge him to change his attitudes toward others going forward.

However, instead of choosing to embrace his humanity and atone for his treatment of his mother, Legree decides to repress these emotions and continue to avoid any and all signs of his mother in order to "guard.. against the breaking through of the unconscious complex" (Freud 206). This is best exemplified in his interactions with Tom. Tom's strong faith makes him, as Charles Nichols says, the "archetype of [a] Christian" (333) and "reminds Legree of a past and a person he wants to forget" (Jenkins 41). The latter quote conveys that Tom's Christianity brings to mind Legree's feelings of being unworthy of forgiveness and his subsequent feelings of moral failure associated with his treatment of his mother. As a result, his slaveholder persona becomes increasingly evident and his commitment to vanquishing the Christian faith in Tom is multiplied. One example of Legree abusing Tom in order to rid him of Christianity is when Cassy intervenes after Tom is punched by Legree. In their discussion leading up to the punch, Tom addresses Legree by the title of "Master Legree" and restates his adamancy to "never... do a cruel thing" (Stowe 388) toward the other slaves. Legree, in turn says "'ye don't know what may come, Master Tom'" (Stowe 388). Tom calls Legree his master due to the natural hierarchy of authority in place, but also because he "displays kindness toward all" (DeCanio 588), especially toward those who wrong him.

Legree refers to Tom as “Master Tom” sarcastically, yet the fact that he chooses to use the word master is significant.

After his dream, Legree knows that his position as slaveholder does not carry with it the degree of authority it once had, as Tom views God as the authority figure whom he respects. Therefore, Legree calling Tom “Master Tom” acknowledges that Tom has authority over Legree through his superior moral virtue. This point demonstrates Reznick’s observation that positive emotions, such as those that Tom exhibits, are “intelligent responses to the perception of value” (605). This quote also suggests that Legree’s unconscious is attempting once more to persuade his conscious to start on the path to moral reform and therefore acquire moral value and respect. Yet, Legree’s conscious mind wins out again, as he is always irate and explosive in his conversations with Tom. This behavior shows that Legree is projecting his anger onto others in his conscious life as well as in his dreams. Therefore, the resolve of Legree’s conscious to put away his humanity and “destroy... Uncle Tom in brutal anger” (Duvall 5) is heightened in each interaction he has with Tom and, as a result, any remnant of morally virtuous behavior in Legree is diminished.

Another example of Legree’s mistreatment of Tom is when he brutally beats Tom, ultimately causing Tom’s death. Legree abandons his previous desires for moral atonement and reform, and does not hold back in attempting to destroy Tom’s unbreakable faith. Legree’s conscious completely vanquishes his unconscious desires for moral atonement and exhibits that “the disguise [is]...the more complete, the greater [his] resistance to the emergence” of unwanted thoughts (Freud 197). Legree choosing to fully embody a heartless slave master demonstrates the “the right of the strongest” (Reznick 624) and the “poisonous effects of slavery on the master” as well as the slave (Duvall 12). Yet, Tom still attempts to convert Legree as he is being beaten, stating “if ye don’t repent, yours won’t *never* end” (Stowe 421). This quote functions as Legree’s final warning to stop “desperate[ly] [trying] to kill off the old woman and all she stands for” (Jenkins 42). Legree rejects this final offer of redemption and “development of that benevolence which springs from moral goodness” (Wolff 614), which signals his imminent downfall. This point is further exhibited through Tom’s last words to Legree: “I forgive ye, with all my soul” (Stowe 422). These words carry the same sentiment and emotion that Legree’s mother expressed to him in her last words. Legree’s refusal to listen to Tom establishes that Legree’s mother will forever be remembered by him in a way that invokes terror as opposed to a happy memory and conveys that moral reform for Legree is no longer possible.

Legree’s numerous choices driven by his desire to rid himself of reminders of his mother result in him only being further haunted by his memory of her. Just as Legree’s first dream forces him to choose which path of morality he will take going forward, his decision to allow himself to be thrown into the abyss leads him

to be punished through equally painful and recurring dreams, as well as waking experiences. Stowe states that these ordeals entail:

a shadow, a horror, an apprehension of something dreadful hanging over him. It was his mother's shroud, he thought; but Cassy had it, holding it up, and showing it to him. He heard a confused noise of screams and groanings; and, with it all, he knew he was asleep, and he struggled to wake himself. He was half awake. He was sure something was coming into his room. He knew the door was opening, but he could not stir hand or foot. At last he turned, with a start; the door *was* open, and he saw a hand putting out his light. It was a cloudy, misty moonlight, and there he saw it!—something white, gliding in! He heard the still rustle of its ghostly garments. It stood still by his bed;—a cold hand touched his; a voice said, three times, in a low, fearful whisper, “Come! come! Come! (Stowe 431)

Freudian dream analysis is applicable to this dream as well, as many elements of this dream are continuations of his prior dream. The fact that Legree hears “screams and groanings” right before he forces himself “half-awake” suggests that these noises are coming from the abyss of his prior dream, and that this experience serves as a resolution to the ending of his first dream. Legree being able only to force himself half-awake reflects the concept of censors previously discussed. However, in this instance, Legree allows the hauntings to continue and pass through his unconscious into his conscious life. Therefore, the censor that Legree had in his previous dream has been destroyed.

This dream also features many symbols that reflect Legree's fear of death, yet they are much more clear and foreboding than those of Legree's prior dream. One example is that the words “hanging” and “shroud” are used to describe the figure in this dream as opposed to the words “veiled figure”. The phrase “veiled figure” is ambiguous in that it could either have a positive or negative connotation, yet the words “hanging” and “shroud” are definitively ominous. Another element that signals Legree's intensified fear of death is the “hand putting out his light.” This imagery explicitly illustrates that the veiled figure has come for the purpose of extinguishing his light, or his life. Additionally, the cold hand mentioned in this dream appears at the end of the description and belongs to a separate entity than that of the hanging figure. This, coupled with the use of the word “come” three times, indicates that the figure functions as the grim reaper, explicitly beckoning Legree to join him in death. The fact that words are used three times in both dreams illustrates that Legree's memory of his mother continues to intensify his guilt. As a result, his fear of being sentenced to Hell is strengthened. In this dream, Legree experiences Lacan's “Trauma of the Real” (Tyson 31) and his mental state reduces

him to a shell of his former self. The comparison of Legree's dreams and resulting growth of his fears emphasizes that the longer one chooses to ignore one's personal struggles, the more those issues will manifest in ugly ways in the unconscious until they spill over into and affect the daily activities of one's waking and conscious life.

Legree's moral deterioration in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is driven by his desire to avoid Christianity and the memories it represents. His conscious mind drives him increasingly to depend on embodying the persona of a heartless Southern slave holder while his unconscious wants him to embrace reform of his morals and character. While both Legree's dreams reflect, as Lacan states, "the bond among the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real" (15), Legree's first dream serves as an incentive for him to atone for his past cruel actions, whereas the second functions as his punishment for rejecting every chance for redemption he is offered. Legree exemplifies more dynamic traits and emotions than a typical, tyrannical Southern slave owner, but he makes the choice at the end of the novel to relinquish his humanity and hopes for salvation. His unconscious desires are therefore manifested only in his dreams, which torment him and drive him to the brink of insanity.

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