

## [Uncle Tom's Cabin, The Jigsaw Puzzle: Jumbling the Pieces of Stowe's Story](#)



In a recent *Commonplace* [essay](#), Janet Moore Lindman describes a late eighteenth-century jigsaw puzzle featuring an allegorical map used to educate young Quakers about spiritual principles. The puzzle depicted the spiritual cartography of a pious Quaker life: places to avoid and paths to pursue.

By the nineteenth century, jigsaw puzzle content expanded beyond the geographical subjects that puzzles originally featured and began to include, among other subject matter, literature. Given literary narratives' reliance on linear order to produce meaning, the jigsaw puzzle form enacted a fundamental challenge to narrative, by inviting users to disassemble and play with the ordering of a narrative's pieces. Although puzzles might be conceived as exercises in achieving order, nineteenth-century puzzles that functioned as children's toys went through multiple rounds of disassembly, assembly, and all of the chaotic stages in between, and they therefore fostered disorder as well as order. When these puzzles depicted literature, then, they disrupted the process by which stories function, through particular arrangements of narrative events.

A jigsaw puzzle version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel, illustrates both how linear order generates narrative meaning and how the jigsaw puzzle form can subvert that meaning. This fifty-two-piece jigsaw,

probably manufactured in the early 1850s in England and consisting of paper glued to a sheet of wood, features eighteen scenes from the novel. They start (top left) with the slave trader Haley, the enslaver Mr. Shelby, and the enslaved woman Eliza interacting in the Shelby parlor, and end (bottom right) with Eliza, her husband George, and their son arriving in Canada, the “Land of Liberty.” Arranged in four rows, the scenes “read” from left to right and top to bottom, like lines in a book.



Figure 1: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* jigsaw puzzle. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, CT.

But the puzzle reshapes Stowe’s story. When her massively popular novel was translated into other forms, including [theatrical productions](#) as well as a whole slew of [material objects](#), the story was adapted to suit its new forms, audiences, and purposes. The puzzle, aimed primarily at a child audience, gives Stowe’s story a happy ending, weakening the original political message of the story. But the idea of an “ending” relies on linear order, and the jigsaw puzzle form wreaks havoc on the narrative structure by which an ending is made meaningful by virtue of its position. Where does a story “end” when its pieces lie in a jumbled pile?


The puzzle represents Stowe’s story in some detail, capturing famous moments such as Eliza crossing the river ice, Topsy dancing, and little Eva’s death. But the ordering of the puzzle’s scenes does alter Stowe’s story in an important way. Stowe had originally placed the successful escape of Eliza, George, and Harry Harris to Canada before Simon Legree’s assault of Tom and his subsequent death. In a move with significant narrative repercussions, the final two scenes of the puzzle reverse Stowe’s order, positioning the Harrises’ arrival in Canada after Tom’s death. (The final scene of the puzzle seems to show two men and a girl being welcomed to the “Land of Liberty,” but this reflects Eliza and Harry Harris’ cross-gender disguises during their escape.)




Figure 2: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* jigsaw puzzle. Detail of the final two scenes depicted, showing their reversed order. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, CT.

By placing the successful escape after Tom’s murder, the puzzle transforms Stowe’s disquieting and ideally galvanizing tragedy into a narrative ultimately about triumph. The puzzle features Eliza in both the first and last scenes and thereby emphasizes her narrative arc, from enslavement and familial insecurity to freedom and a reconstituted nuclear family. The puzzle omits Stowe’s fraught colonizationist coda to the Harris story, in which the family decamps to Africa. It also brackets Tom’s story—featured in the second and second-to-last scenes, among others—within Eliza’s, subordinating tragedy to triumph.

A happy ending may well have seemed more appropriate in an object aimed at children. Jigsaw puzzles were originally invented as educational playthings. More specifically pinpointing the age of this puzzle's target audience, educator Maria Edgeworth's *Early Lessons* (1801) tells the fictional story of Frank, a six-year-old boy who struggles but ultimately succeeds in assembling a fifty-two-piece map jigsaw puzzle, presumably with a similar level of difficulty to the fifty-two-piece *Uncle Tom's Cabin* puzzle. The puzzle's level of difficulty could theoretically have been increased for older users, particularly by flipping it over and assembling it according to the abstract pattern of wavy red and black lines on its backing paper. But a series of stray pencil marks on the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* side indicate that it usually faced up, capping the puzzle's difficulty and solidifying children as its probable primary users.

 Figure 3: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* jigsaw puzzle. The paper used on the back side. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, CT.

Like the puzzle, book adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for child audiences altered Stowe's narrative. For example, *Pictures and Stories from Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) also ends on a reassuring note. It concludes with Tom's death but casts it as a spiritual success story: "His Lord knows where he [Tom] lies, and will raise him up immortal, to appear with Him when He shall appear in his glory." Then, following the conclusion of the narrative proper, the book reproduces the "Little Eva Song," inspired by Stowe's novel. This song, which contains lines like "All is light and peace with Eva" and "Weep no more for happy Eva," presents Eva as "Uncle Tom's Guardian Angel." Thus the book ends with the image of a beneficent white girl enjoying her heavenly rest rather than a black man's unjust death.

 Figure 4: *Pictures and Stories from Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The final page of the book, which frames "THE END" of the story with John Greenleaf Whittier's reassuring lyrics. [Boston]: John P. Jewett & Co., [1853?]. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

*Pictures and Stories* thereby reflects a trend in nineteenth-century books for children. As Barbara Hochman observes about a turn-of-the-century children's version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "the new finale, which brings Tom back to Kentucky alive, participates in the growing tendency to end children's books on the upbeat." The puzzle also conforms to this tendency, and in fact, other *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [puzzles](#) make the same [change](#) to Stowe's story. These adaptations feed children a happy ending, arguably undercutting the original narrative's point.

However, Hochman also discusses "how easily children discount narrative endings, features often taken (by literary scholars) as important arbiters of

meaning.” She cites evidence showing that children can fixate on elements from the beginning and middle of stories, in some cases forgetting about happy endings while remembering more engagingly conflictual story elements. We might therefore question whether child users would necessarily have been significantly impacted by the puzzle’s reshaping of Stowe’s narrative arc to culminate in triumphant freedom. As with much material created for children, this puzzle may reveal more about what adults in the 1850s believed about (white) children than about children’s actual experiences.

Furthermore, an interpretive emphasis on endings assumes a linear consumption of narrative, with a book’s ending possessing particular reverberation due to its status as the final element consumed by the reader. But as Hochman points out, “linearity does not always govern reading.” And linearity definitely does not govern jigsaw puzzles, which represent a fundamental challenge to linear order, epitomized by a jumbled pile of puzzle pieces.



Figure 5: A reproduction of the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* jigsaw puzzle, with its pieces detached and jumbled. Archival settings inhibit the kinds of interaction with puzzles and other playthings that they would have elicited in the nineteenth century. This modern reproduction uses an image of the original puzzle, cut once again into pieces. Author’s collection.

Understanding puzzles as agents of disorder runs counter to a common interpretation that associates puzzles with the quest for and ultimate affirmation of order. Megan A. Norcia writes with regard to map puzzles that “the activity of puzzling grew out of . . . an eighteenth-century desire to tabulate, catalog, classify, and order the world into meaningful hierarchies.” To solve a puzzle successfully, one must connect the scattered pieces into a perfectly ordered whole, with all of the sense of control and chaos overcome that this process affords.

But the project of achieving order presupposes states of disorder. William Cowper, writing to the Reverend William Unwin in 1780, described a young boy who had “been accustomed to amuse himself with those maps which are cut into several compartments, so as to be thrown into a heap of confusion, that they may be put together again with an exact coincidence of all their angles and bearings, so as to form a perfect whole.” The satisfaction of forming the “perfect whole” depends on the prior action of throwing the pieces into “a heap of confusion.” For the puzzle to remain fun—an object to play with, rather than one just to look at—it demands disassembly, and the word “thrown” suggests a playful vigor and abandon to the act of disassembly. Destruction can be exciting, especially for children. If a jumble of disconnected puzzle pieces urges a player to assemble them into an orderly whole, the assembled puzzle, with its still eminently visible cuts, begs to be taken apart and jumbled up again.

A hint at the dynamic history of the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* puzzle can be found in

one of its center pieces. Given matching marks on its front and back sides, this piece may well have been chewed on: a different way to digest Stowe's story. The lack of similar damage to surrounding pieces indicates that this piece's misadventure occurred when it was separated from its neighbors. This reveals the formative portion of the puzzle's life spent in disassembly, with the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* story lying in detached pieces, untethered from Stowe's sequencing. Whereas a book's binding secures narrative cohesion and therefore a prescribed order, a puzzle allows the parts of a narrative to break apart and function independently, in a variety of potential configurations.



Figures 6 and 7: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* jigsaw puzzle. The front and back of the damaged puzzle piece. Note the small gouge marks, particularly visible on the bulbous portion of the lower edge of the piece. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, CT.

In some ways, the pieces of the puzzle resemble the piecemeal character of the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* story when it was first serialized in the *National Era* newspaper, broken up into weekly installments. But serialization's leveraging of suspense, in which readers eagerly awaited the revelation of what would happen next, relied on a particular narrative order. And whereas puzzle users had significant agency over the ordering and disordering of the puzzle's pieces, Stowe and the newspaper publisher controlled the order of the serialized novel's parts. Readers could have shuffled the newspaper issues featuring the story, but the ordinal logic of the chapter numbers and of each masthead's date and issue number would have discouraged such behavior.



Figure 8: *The National Era*, like many other newspapers, included volume and issue numbers in its masthead, which together with an issue's date facilitated the orderly binding of individual issues into annual volumes. *The National Era*, June 5, 1851 (detail). The National Era, Washington D.C., Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Serialization particularly constrained children, through the additional control exercised by their families. Stowe, in a note included with the final newspaper installment, lauded the "pleasant family circles" who had been consuming the story. She modeled the pedagogical thrust that she expected of these gatherings as she urged her child readers to "learn from this story always to remember and pity the poor and the oppressed." Even if a family failed to embody the pedagogical ideal, adults likely mediated children's engagement with the serialized story, given children's reading levels and the multiple household demands on a newspaper with content not limited solely to the story. The puzzle, in contrast, put children in charge of the story, no longer bound to the pedagogical and productive, and empowered them to seek the pleasures of

disorder as well as order.

Beyond the energies that children might therefore have unleashed on the puzzle, the puzzle itself has a kinetic and centrifugal quality. Like many British-made puzzles of its era, only its edge pieces interlock. The inner pieces have a “push-fit” design that provides no stable coupling, making them highly prone to being jarred away from each other. In puzzle form, Stowe’s story tends to come apart at the seams.



Figure 9: Uncle Tom’s Cabin jigsaw puzzle. Detail showing the tendency of non-interlocking pieces to be jarred away from one another, exacerbated here by the damage to the interlock between the two edge pieces. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, CT.

Given this design of cuts, users could help themselves by assembling the edges of the puzzle first, which would then act as a frame to corral the unruly inner pieces. However, if a user took this approach, strange deformations of Stowe’s story would occur. The content depicted on the edge pieces—the sides mostly blank, the title “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” blazoned across the top, and the lower half of the lowest row of scenes stretched along the bottom—means that “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” would for a time be primarily associated with strangely mutilated human forms, cut off at the waist, as well as Tom’s dead body splayed on the ground (see previous figure). This mode of assembly would thus entail a sustained contemplation of Tom’s corpse, potentially mitigating any reassuring effect of placing the Harrises’ happy ending in the final spot of the assembled puzzle image, as the story’s culmination. A user might or might not spend significant time studying the fully assembled image, given that the compulsion to solve the puzzle would at that point have been satisfied. So the greatest intensity and duration of engagement for many puzzle users might well have been with the contingent, unsettled, and sometimes unsettling configurations that the story took in its various stages of disassembly.

Narratives do significant cultural work in how they communicate stories and to whom, including their ways of managing narrative closure and its potential for reassurance. But ideological interventions made within a narrative—such as rearranging Stowe’s story to give it a happy ending—have to contend with the potentially more radical interventions that the jigsaw puzzle form visits upon that narrative. Whatever logics of tragedy or triumph might structure a narrative when consumed in its prescribed order, the materiality of the puzzle form gleefully destabilizes them.

## Acknowledgements

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## Further Reading

On the history of jigsaw puzzles, see Megan A. Norcia, "Puzzling Empire: Early Puzzles and Dissected Maps as Imperial Heuristics," *Children's Literature* 37 (2009): 1-32; Anne D. Williams, *The Jigsaw Puzzle: Piecing Together a History* (New York: Berkeley Books, 2004); and Linda Hanna, *The English Jigsaw Puzzle* (London: Wayland Publishers, 1972), where the William Cowper quote can be found. On the relationship between games—including puzzles—and nineteenth-century U.S. literature and culture, see Douglas A. Guerra, *Slantwise Moves: Games, Literature, and Social Invention in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

Many aspects of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* reception history are covered in Barbara Hochman, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*" and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction, 1851-1911 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011). For more on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the nineteenth-century construction of childhood, see Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

On narrative, including the function of endings, see Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984); and, more recently, Brian Richardson, *A Poetics of Plot for the Twenty-First Century: Theorizing Unruly Narratives* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019). For an analogue to jigsaw puzzles' disruption of linear narrative, in the phenomenon of so-called "puzzle films," see Warren Buckland, ed., *Hollywood Puzzle Films* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

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