
Antigone and Stowe: The Problem of Tragedy in Uncle Tom's Cabin

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Abstract

Starting in the nineteenth century, Sophocles' *Antigone* has often been read as showing the conflict of two goods: loyalty to the gods, as represented by Oedipus' daughter Antigone, and loyalty to the state, as represented by her uncle Creon, the new king of Thebes. Antigone disobeys Creon's command and insists on burying the brother who led an attack against the city of Thebes. Burial is the unyielding law of the gods, she claims. For this act she is walled up in a tomb, where she kills herself. Antigone and Creon are paired: opposing figures, opposing principles. But if one uses Aristotle's classic definition of tragedy, Antigone is not the tragic hero in the play; only Creon is (note 1). Antigone strikes readers as heroic, but she is not a king. She is instead a princess without power. Moreover, her fall, or reversal of fortune, does not occur because of what is called a tragic error or flaw. Antigone is self-centered and stubborn in her defiance of Creon (she acts as a warrior would in her culture), but she falls because of her integrity. She makes a clear choice that she sees as morally right and necessary. Yet her fall does not lead to either rescue or redemption. The gods of the underworld intervene to punish Creon for his defiance but do not bother to save the girl. Her death is a kind of martyrdom, but it is outside a Christian framework, and involves a very different sort of gods. I will use Antigone's story—which I will call "Antigonal tragedy"—to analyze Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851-52). Tragedy proves to be a real problem for this American evangelical author when she is dealing with slavery. Her publications, beginning with *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (1854), indicate her familiarity with Greek tragedy (note 2). But she does not mention tragedy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* until the final chapter, which was added after serial publication of the novel, in response to readers' comments. And here "tragic(al)" is not used with precise literary meaning, but just as a synonym of "horrific" or "agonizing." Stowe avoids references to tragedy primarily because it is the antithesis of the redemptive framework she uses in the novel. Redemption is a liminal plot (van Gennepe, Turner). It begins with a descent, or fall, into sin, misery, and fear of death and hell. And then, after a time of uncertainty and turmoil, there is an ascent, through repentance and grace, into the hope of salvation (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Questions 13-20). Redemption is thus tragedy followed by the reversal of tragedy. Yet versions of Antigone's story do occur in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Two slave mothers drown themselves when their children are taken from them. A third, Cassie, kills her child to prevent its being sold away, as the two older ones were (note 3). Antigone-like, these violent mothers defy the slave-power and insist that family bonds and freedom are more important than life itself. But the world of slavery comes to resemble the world of Greek tragedy. God does not intervene; God does not save and rescue. Only death, it seems, enables slaves to become free from their masters, who have become God (note 4). This analysis of Sophocles' *Antigone* and

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Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* fits the theme of the conference because it shows the complex limits of transatlanticism. The American evangelical writer, even as she is deeply moved by the despair of slavery's Antigones, resists violence. And she resists tragedy, which is part of the European literary heritage, because of what she sees as its pagan worldview (*Sunny Memories* [London: Sampson Low, 1854], 359-60). She instead utilizes the liminal plots of Christianity-redemption and also martyrdom-with problematic results. One can see why Stowe, in later writings, turns to apocalyptic, which is violence, authorized by God, against the great evil of slavery.