

The Tragic Hero in Antigone

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Introduction

Antigone, a tragedy by Sophocles, outlines the outcome of a civil war in which Oedipus' sons, Polynices and Eteocles, killed each other in a duel. The war was a result of the latter's failure to relinquish power as instructed by Oedipus. Consequently, Creon—Oedipus' son who became King—ordered that Polynices' body be left for the vultures and dogs to eat as a punishment for disloyalty and disgrace. The refusal to accord Polynices a decent sendoff is the cause of tragedy in the 441 BCE play. This paper determines the tragic hero in the play using Aristotle's criteria which include being elevated and essentially good, falling as a result of *hamartia*, and recognizing and accepting full responsibility for wrongdoing. Sophocles highlights that pride leads to self-destruction.

Tragic Characters

Sophocles' play has two tragic characters who meet Aristotle's criteria. These are Antigone and Creon. Antigone, Oedipus' daughter and half-sister, Creon's niece, Ismene's sister and Haemon's fiancée, is a tragic character in the play as outlined in her position/status in society; she is good and elevated. After her brother, Polynices, died in a duel with Eteocles, Antigone defied Creon's order that no citizen of Thebes should give Polynices a decent burial—his body was to be left to rot on the battlefield. She believed that burial rituals were gods' rules that ought to be obeyed regardless of a leader's political whims.

Antigone boldly defied Creon and highlighted that she was ready to die because of giving her brother a befitting sendoff. She outlines: "I have longer to please the dead than please the living here: in the kingdom down below, I'll lie forever" (Sophocles, 1984, pp. 88-90). In this quote, Antigone announces her plans to give Polynices a decent burial rite despite Creon's warning that any person who attempts to do so will be killed. Ismene is frightened and shocked

by her sister's words and hopes that the dead will forgive her. Antigone replies that life is brief and temporary, whereas death is eternal. Therefore, honoring the dead is more important than the living.

Antigone's utterances highlight the conflict between Ancient Greek's beliefs in the afterlife and the State. While Creon is the King of Thebes, Antigone tells her sister that his [Creon] authority is short-lived compared to the gods' eternal power. Additionally, Antigone's words show that she does not fear death, and this feeling makes her behave courageously in the play. Her defiance meets Aristotle's second condition of a tragic character—Antigone falls due to her pride and defiance, which are her major flaws.

Her insistence on honoring his brother robbed her of the chance to live normally, including marrying Haemon and giving birth to the heir of the throne. She laments that she will never marry. Contrarily, she will “wed the lord of dark waters” (Sophocles, 1984, p. 908). This implied that she would marry Hade, the underworld god. This corroborates Creon's assertion that Antigone's fate would cure her of the love of death, meaning that her defiance and pride will earn her the death she so yearns for.

Antigone's recognition and acceptance of full responsibility are witnessed when she laments her fate and the fact that she will never enjoy marriage. Also, she laments the imminent death. The chorus can be heard warning her that she went too far in her defiance and wonders whether she will continue suffering for Oedipus' sins (Sophocles, 1984, pp. 943-946). The chorus states that her blind will and passion has destroyed her.

Here, Antigone comes to terms with the aftermath of her defiance, and sadness replaces her disobedience, at least for the moment. The chorus sympathizes with her but points that she is the cause of her woes—she kept pushing when she was supposed to give up. Consequently,

Antigone continues to mourn her life and death. She regrets disobeying the laws to bury her brother for a child or husband because one may find another child or husband (Lines 1020).

Antigone went against her initial claim that the dead must be treated equally. This shift suggests that she may be giving his brother an opportunity to be merciful.

Coming to Creon, he was Oedipus' brother-in-law and art patron. As noted initially, Creon ascended to power after Oedipus' sons killed each other in a duel over the control of Thebes City. Creon is a stickler who believes in the rule of law over everything else, as evidenced by his quote, "Anarchy! —show me a greater crime in all the earth!" (Sophocles, 1984, pp. 751-752). In his opinion, bending the rules causes anarchy, which he considers worse than everything. Creon meets Aristotle's first condition by virtue of his social status in Thebes city.

Creon's fall in the play is a result of his pride and stubbornness to honor Antigone's desire to bury his brother and respect the opinion of his son Haemon, Theban people and Tiresias. His decisions led to the death of Haemon, Eurydice and Antigone. Haemon tells Creon that only a foolish man thinks that he possesses intelligence and that the people of Thebes were siding with Antigone (Sophocles, 1984, pp. 791-794). In this scene, Creon is blinded by his knowledge and power as he asks, "Am I to rule this land for others—or myself?" (Sophocles, 1984, p. 823).

Creon later realizes his faults and accepts responsibility after fate had befallen his family. Tiresias had warned him that the repercussions of burying Antigone alive would be the death of his child. Also, the wrath of those whose loved ones were not buried would be on his head. The prophet's words terrified Creon, who was still reluctant to undo his decree. Subsequently, he sought advice from the chorus leader, who told him to free Antigone and allow her to bury her brother—he gave in.

However, it was too late since Haemon had committed suicide in Antigone's tomb. On seeing his son, he called himself his son's killer and that his son was a victim of his stupidity. The grief made him [Creon] realize that he had angered the gods. The news of the death of Eurydice also worsened Creon's remorse. His entire family had committed suicide because of his pride. He realized that it is family that defines a person, not positions.

Conclusion

Antigone and Creon are the tragic characters in Sophocles' play. The duo meets Aristotle's criteria for a tragic character, such as being essentially good and elevated, falling due to the character's simple mistake and recognizing the mistake and accepting responsibility. Antigone was too proud to listen and obey the State's law regarding the burial of perceived traitors leading to her demise. On the other hand, Creon was too proud to allow Antigone to bury his brother and listen to his son Haemon, Theban people and Tiresias. His acts of stubbornness made him lose his entire family through suicide. Indeed, pride leads to self-destruction.

Reference

Sophocles (1984). *The Three Theban Plays*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Classics.



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