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Antigone: The Tragic Hero

Sophocles' *Antigone* follows *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus* in the classic trilogy of tragedies. The story of a young woman defying the laws of men and paying for it with her life remains relevant to this day. This is not unusual for classical Greek tragedies, since they are almost universally relatable due to their ability to elicit strong emotions of fear and pity in the audience. Still, the tragedy of Antigone's rebellion and its consequences is remarkably topical for the modern public. Antigone embodies the passions and fears of the modern young generation by openly defying authority, putting herself in danger in the name of others, and suffering for her ideals.

Antigone's character is largely defined by her opposition to and conflict with Creon, the ruler whose laws she must defy to uphold her moral values. Segal highlights, how the two characters give the play "a double focus" (138) and "coexist as complementary parts of a whole" (139). This duality allows exploration of multiple aspects of the conflict at the center of the play: individual against authority, religion against the secular rule, moral values against official laws, and others. However, many adaptations tend to simplify the story and rewrite Antigone as a political or religious activist, focusing on the sociopolitical conflict and bringing the spotlight to her cause (Hunt 102). This reveals Antigone's rebellion against authority as seemingly the most relatable feature of her story to the modern audience.

Antigone is a classic hero according to many different definitions. In an attempt to define the concept of "heroism", Martens had examined Antigone and compared her to Medea based on different criteria for heroes (431). The author proposes, that Antigone fits

our understanding of “heroism” because she acts against what she perceives as injustice and faces the consequences, instead of trying to avoid them (Martens 440). The fact that Antigone can serve as an example in a modern psychological critique of heroism is evidence of her tragic character maintaining relevance beyond the historical and mythological setting.

Antigone’s suffering is an integral part of her story. It is the ultimate tool that classic tragedies utilize to provoke fear and pity in their audiences, building up to the catharsis. Furthermore, Sophocles depicts other characters expressing sympathy and sorrow for Antigone (Sommerstein 28). While such compassion is expected of her sister Ismene and her betrothed Haemon, the sympathy of an unnamed guard who must bring the young woman to justice is striking. The Chorus and the Theban elders seem to be opposed to Antigone, yet there is evidence that “this attitude is only a mask”, according to Sommerstein (28). Commiseration from different parties highlights how Antigone’s suffering inevitably elicits pity from all onlookers.

Three traits at the core of Antigone’s character underlie her popularity and relatability through the ages. She is a rebel who opposes the law and the authority to uphold her moral values. As long as people, particularly the youth, have reasons to defy authority, Antigone will be a meaningful symbol. She is a hero who sacrifices her safety and ultimately life to save her brother. While what exactly defines a hero may depend on the context, protecting others at the cost of personal wellbeing is an integral part of heroism. Finally, she suffers, and her suffering inevitably evokes pity and fear in the audience. Rebellion, heroism, and suffering are the three key elements of Antigone as a tragic hero, universally relatable, yet particularly relevant to a young audience in a time of political and social turmoil.

Works Cited

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