

Antigone



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The most dramatic scene in *Antigone*, a play modernised in 1944 by French playwright Jean Anouilh from Sophocles' ancient, classical Grecian play, is the scene has been selected to analyse in this essay. The scene takes place between the eponymous heroine Antigone and her antagonistic uncle Creon, the authoritarian King of Thebes, when Creon discovers that Antigone, his niece, has been going against his decree in which was stated that no person may try to bury the body of Polynices, which lay outside Thebes' gates; Antigone's brother and the declared enemy of Thebes.

The scene is riddled with tension from the beginning. The fact that it is predominantly the interrogation of Antigone by Creon instantly sets a dark, tense mood. Symbolism plays an important role throughout the scene; Anouilh makes it clear immediately that this is a battle in which only one side can triumph; the Parisian audience in 1944 would have seen it as a battle of good versus evil, the protagonist versus the antagonist, the latter of which they would have believed to be Creon, the side of good being championed in the unlikely form of Antigone.

Unlikely, because she is in fact the antithesis of what is considered to be archetypal heroine; both physically and emotionally. She has not yet reached womanhood, still having a fairly flat, unremarkable physique, in comparison to her sister Ismene. Ismene is described by the Chorus to be 'beautiful' and 'radiant', surrounded by men in the opening scene, 'smiling and chatting' with them, showing her natural charisma and confidence. Ismene embodies a typical heroine; bright, beautiful, optimistic; characteristics Antigone does not possess.

Indeed, she is described by the Chorus as 'tense, sallow and wilful': hardly a complimentary portrayal. Her image is then further damaged by the description of her to be 'a thin little creature'; a very unattractive, almost inhuman description; the word creature immediately sets her out as different. Creatures do not have the same desires as normal human beings, and her quiet acceptance throughout much of the scene with Creon suggests she accepts this, which adds a cold, almost chilling edge to the scene; a young woman, or creature, running willingly to it's death.

Her desires and reasoning are not understandable to nearly every member of the entire human race, her insistence on having her will obeyed eventually resulting in her own death. 'Yes, it's absurd', she agrees with Creon when talking about her actions; there is no logical reason for them, another suggestion towards the label of 'creature'. In this way, the scene can also be interpreted as a battle of the sexes. Though, as King, Creon is in the position of authority, this is accentuated by the fact that Antigone is a woman.

The instance in which he physically grabs her would not have occurred if Antigone had been a man; the fact that she is a woman, and because of that, not as strong as Creon is an excuse for Creon to physically abuse her, an unhappy aspect of the play. 'You're hurting my arm,' she moans, but even then he does not relent, prolonging her pain intentionally after changing tack from trying to hurt her emotionally by trying to destroy her loving image of her father and brother.

Antigone is the daughter of the infamous Oedipus, the brother and preceding King of Thebes to Creon, and she is a child of incest. This is a large

contributor to the tension between the eponymous heroine and Creon. Antigone understands her father's actions when he took his own life, whereas Creon holds his brother in contempt, dismissing him in a long monologue as a self - obsessed, self - indulgent worthless human being, telling his niece that, 'Mere human misery was not enough to satisfy his passion for torment' in an attempt to diminish Oedipus in her eyes.

Thebes has a right to a king without a past', Creon states, referring Oedipus, who put his personal life before his social responsibility and obligations; another jibe about the people Antigone has loved and respected all her life, inevitably heightening her dislike of Creon, and therefore the dislike between the two characters. He tells her how 'greedily' he 'drunk in' the tale of his true ancestry; powerful, dramatic words, which Creon uses to strengthen his speech against Oedipus. The set of the play is designed to produce the optimum amount of enhancement to the scene between Antigone and Creon.

There are very few props; a table, a chair and one stool. There is a long, sweeping staircase towards the back of the stage, and apart from the backdrops that is it. In all the stage design is very simplistic, which is highly effective as it draws attention to what is important in the play; the characters, not their surroundings, emphasizing the characters themselves when they are performing their dialogues, leaving them to engage their audience visually through their acting. The relationship between the eponymous heroine and her uncle is an odd one.

There is evidence that in the past, there may have been affection between the two. 'Don't forget that the first doll you ever had came from me', Creon

tells Antigone, though this is possibly an attempt at emotional blackmail. Creon would have lowered his voice and tried to make it sweet at that point, trying to ensnare and manipulate Antigone into an emotional trap. It is possible, of course, that this could simply have been a reference to a happier past in which Antigone and Creon exchanged mutual fondness for one another, but it is more likely that was not the case.

Throughout his speech to convince Antigone to give up her seemingly senseless actions, Creon hides behind the guise of a considerate and affectionate uncle, only wanting the best for his orphaned niece. At first Creon entreats to the point of begging Antigone to make her listen to him, though he finds that this approach has no effect. Antigone refuses, resolute in her decision. 'Don't stay alone. Go and find Haemon. Get married quickly,' Creon tells her when at a very brief instant Antigone appears to relent.

The body language between the two characters would have been very effective; Creon is manipulating her at this point, talking softly, almost in her ear, while Antigone would have stood still, faltering in her beliefs, and, like her father at that point, 'drinking' in Creon's words. His true motives are revealed in that instant, and in many others. Creon turns extremely vicious and graphic in his efforts to terrorise his niece at one point, giving away his true feelings for her; 'You would be lying in a ditch this minute with your tongue pulled out and your body drawn and quartered.'

The real truth behind the character's relationship can perhaps be summarised in this quotation; 'I may be your uncle-but we are not a particularly affectionate family. ' He cares nothing for her as a relation, only

for what she can give him. These quotations would have hung between the two characters, darkening the atmosphere greatly, casting an even greater shadow over the mood, something the audience would have felt when listening to the manner in which Creon delivered those lines.

The physicality of Antigone and Creon is very important in adding to the scene's atmosphere. Antigone is a tiny young woman, whereas Creon is described as a 'grey - haired, powerfully built man'. This would have a great impact upon the audience, and would be extremely effective visually; the contrast between the two characters and the different principles they represented, and the image of the 'thin little creature' standing up to the authoritative, powerful King.

This is further stressed by the fact that they are the only two people on stage, which is highly dramatic. Language is one of the, if not possibly the most leading contributor to making the scene dramatic. Speech proportion is an important aspect in this scene; the sheer amount of dialogue allocated to Creon and Antigone. The contrast is very noticeable; Creon has a much greater proportion of speech, often slipping into long monologues, whereas Antigone is given, for the main part, two or three lines, initially, between these great speeches made by Creon.

This is to Antigone's benefit; the few times she does speak, the audience listen more intently, and when she does speak, another contrast becomes visible; the tone of their voices. Creon talks in a loud, melodramatic tone, putting force behind his words, whereas Antigone speaks quietly, with no particular conviction. This also shows a greater level of maturity in

comparison to Creon; Antigone is wise enough to realise that merely shouting will not get her very far, whereas Creon does not seem to have reached that understanding.

Punctuation shows this as well; Creon's speech is littered with exclamation marks, whereas in Antigone's dialogue, no evidence of those can be shown for quite some time into the scene. Antigone does progress, towards the end of the scene, to slip out of her quiet, acceptant state to attack Creon, and here she does grow more dramatic, raising her voice. Antigone's own contempt for Creon is unmasked at several points.

It becomes evident that she despises him for what he has done to her brother Polynices; denied him the right to a proper burial and thus an improper afterlife. 'You will never stop paying', she says, condemning him. She then mocks Creon, attempting to goad him into a reaction, telling him that he was unfit to be in the position of head of state; 'What a King you could be if only men were animals! ' 'My nails are broken, my fingers are bleeding, my arms are covered with the welts left by the paws of your guards-but I am a queen'.

Despite all her faults, from her inane beliefs to her unseemly appearance, she is still above him, that she is the daughter of Oedipus, a title that she wears proudly, despite Creon's efforts to shatter her illusion of her father. The sight of this young woman, little more than a child, speaking in such a way to a king of a great city of men is one that would have a strong, dramatic impact upon the audience. In conclusion, Jean Anouilh uses a combination of symbolism, language, physicality and stage directions to

produce the effect he had intended to create for this scene; one of dark, straining dramatic tension.

Anouilh also uses fictional family history, past events and relationships involving the main characters, the eponymous heroine Antigone and her authoritarian uncle Creon, to strengthen the emotion in the scene, and thus, once again, to add to the drama of the situation. The statement 'A high proportion of the most dramatic scenes in plays from all eras are scenes written precisely for two characters' directly applies to Antigone; the scene analysed above is the most dramatic scene in the entire play.