

The representation of the gods or god in antigone english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



' In classic Greek literature, the deities of the period were often represented in various different manners, from insignificant to much more substantial. Minor roles might simply have consisted of a character or Chorus mentioning a particular god in speech, possibly by impulse, or insinuations throughout a play that the gods were actively involved in current events or the potential consequences thereof.'[1]Certainly one should question when discussing Antigone, ' how substantial a role, when compared to important events in the tragedy, was attributed to the divine?'[2]This question has led to many different interpretations and thoughtful discussions. The Greek drama in its origin and growth, was part of the worship of Dionysus (Bacchus). Performed during religious festivals, one could infer that the god was always imagined to be present in the mystic symbols-where the god would take delight in the honours thus offered to him. " The drama was always deemed an essential requisite of the public service of that divinity, and contributed largely to the splendour of his festivals. The drama attained its most perfect form in the hands of Sophocles at Athens, where the City had long since become the chief seat of the Dionysian cultus. The national theatre there-that in which, at the three principle festivals of the Dionysia, provided for at the expense of the state, was where all the masterpieces of the great dramatists were first brought out. It was built on the grounds of the Temple of Bacchus".[3]It seems, all the externals of the Attic drama prove conclusively its religious purpose and its identity with the ancient Bacchus worship. The immediate conflict in Antigone arises from what funeral rites, if any, should be given to Polyneices, Antigone's brother; a traitor to the state. The play presents a political and religious crisis in which oikos and religious values, as

represented by Antigone, clash with polis values, as proclaimed by Creon. Although the burial of Polyneices forms the immediate point of conflict, the larger issue of the tragedy revolves around the difficult question of what is the correct attitude to be adopted towards the gods in a world in which the will of the gods is not automatically understood; because the traditional religious practices of the oikos conflict with the newer demands of the polis.

[4]Nonetheless, ' the character of Antigone was portrayed throughout the tragedy as being clear of mind, always certain not only that honouring the divine was the proper course to take in any situation, but also of how exactly to pay respect to them'[5]: " The gods will be proud of me." (Heaney 2005: 6). Antigone ' believes she is in the right because the gods command justice for the dead. She believes her retribution for breaking Creon's law is much less than the retribution for breaking divine law.'[6]She thinks of Creon as a " mere mortal", attempting pitifully to " override the gods", she reduces his status making him incomparable to the gods. Creon has no recourse but to call Antigone " stubborn" and ironically tells her that there is no room for pride. But when Creon resorts to violence upon Antigone, the ' consequences of his forceful actions are disastrous. He loses his son, his wife, and his power, Creon laments'[7]: " My recklessness and pride/I paid for in the end."(Heaney 2005: 56). There is a clear struggle between god's law and man's law. Antigone believes in god's law, while Creon believes that the laws that are created by man hold a higher power than the laws of the gods. Creon links the justice of the gods with the laws of man, but fails to obey god's laws. The relationship of man's laws to gods laws is the crux of Sophocles' drama and the struggle between Creon and Antigone: man must

live under laws, but those laws must respect the gods. ' Creon's actions are guided by the ideal that infers that man is the " measure of all things." The Chorus emphasizes this point during the play by saying that man has " mastered thinking," (Heaney 2005: 17). Creon believes that the good of man comes before the gods.'[8]Many critics have suggested that Antigone is used by the gods as a tool to implement moral justice. In retrospect, Antigone's power is tremendous; her serious of actions in this tragedy topples Creon and collapses the government. Although she commits suicide, one must not assume she is weak, rather, we can infer she commits a noble sacrifice. An ' important aspect of divine inscrutability is the arbitrariness of action and inaction. There are many details that support Antigone's view that she is acting on behalf of divine law.'[9]' There are signs in the natural world that the gods are on the side of Anitgone. For one, there are no footprints left beside the body when Antigone first puts dust on Polyneices. It seems the earth itself is attempting to aid Antigone in her " crime". When the sentry reports this strange phenomenon, the Chorus asks Creon if it might be the " gods" work. The king dismisses the idea'[10]claiming that it is not possible the gods would help somebody as terrible as Polyneices. ' We also see divine support for Antigone when the storm rages outside of Thebes. The sentry and friends go back to Polyneices's body and wipe away the soil that Anitgone sprinkled there. No sooner do they do this than the dust erupts from the Earth and blots out the sky. In the center of the storm stands Antigone, wailing for the gods to destroy whoever has re-desecrated Polyniences's body.'[11]Antigone's divine symbolism is aslo seen when she is dragged before Creon first after the Chorus's famous " Ode to man". The

Chorus has finished singing a song which glorifies man for conquering nature and no man should step to the mighty laws. However as soon as they finish singing, Antigone is hauled in. (Heaney 2005: 17). Many see this as the gods' answer (using Antigone) to challenge the Chorus's overweening pride. She can be seen as gods' tool for revenge. The Chorus of Sophocles had a highly valuable part to perform. As the religious element in the Greek drama was never forgotten, and was always most strongly marked in the Choral portion of the drama, ' we may readily understand how a body of aged counsellors, trembling alive to their own safety, and constitually anxious for the maintenance of existing authority, but obliged, as a chorus, to assert the duties of religion, would minister to the illustration of the antagonism between divine and human ordinances, in which the plot is made to depend.' [12] While they admire and applaud the sentiments of Creon and have certainly no wish to incur the penalty of death by violating his decree, and while they are shocked by the stern and stubborn temper of Antigone, they timidly suggest whether the burial of Polyneices may not have been effected by divine intervention (Heaney 2005: 14), they recognise the merits, while they censure the forwardness of the heroine; they embrace with eagerness the king's proposal to obey Teiresias, and exult religiously in the hope that all mischief will be averted. When the catastrophe has taken place they are not slow to point out to Creon that he, as well as Antigone, has rued his own errors; and they conclude the play with a wise saw or two on the importance of self-control and religious reverence. They thus fulfill all the functions of their dramatic position, as representing the citizens of Thebes, they are the advocate of loyalty and obedience. The function of the Chorus

leads to another ' possible understanding of the role of gods in the play: they were in control of everything, causing the events to unfold, perhaps to teach a moral lesson to the city or even to the audience itself.'[13]Consequently, it will help our understanding of the play to know that ' Sophocles never presents us with the black versus white, heroes versus villains. As Oscar Wilde said, ' A thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it.' Sophocles' Ajax declares that a noble man ought either to live with honour, or die with honour (497-80). Creon did neither. He aimed at honour, but missed through the excessiveness of the pursuit. He loses his son, and his wife dies cursing him, he loses his honour along with his family.'[14]Nonetheless, although Antigone commits suicide, her death for many, seems noble. It is important to note that much evidence suggests that the gods were certainly on her side, yet Antigone dies not knowing of the gods favour. ' For critics who take a fully Hegelian view that Creon and Antigone are equally in the wrong, this lonely fate is perhaps not problematic, but most critics correctly see that by the end of the play Creon is clearly not on a par with Antigone'[15], and has in fact angered and distressed the deities. ' The contribution of the gods to the events of the story may be open to largely different interpretations, ranging from indirect influence to constant involvement. It can be seen that while the direct interaction of the gods was nonexistent'[16]for some critics, we can at least say their indirect effect on the stated beliefs and actions of the main characters influenced the events of the entire play.'[17]