The Binary Opposition Of Two Disparate Minds As The Major Conflict In Sophocles' Antigone

Occurring in the moral realm, the major conflict in Sophocles' Antigone finds its very essence in the binary opposition of two disparate minds, the upholder of divine law and the advocate of human law. This clash between two social forces is embodied by the author in the persons of Antigone, who is determined to follow her pious duties towards her defunct brother, and Creon who is intent on founding a state in which the King's decrees take precedence over any traditional belief system. Both sides of the dispute taking a firm and substantiated stance, they have been matter for vigorous debates surrounding their respective righteousness.

Professor Simon Goldhill, who also participated in the Antigone vs. Creon debate, suggested that a ‘sense of the complexity of conflict, where there is right on both sides […] is fundamental to Sophocles’ play’ (Goldhill, 2012). Indeed, although Antigone and Creon may be both mistaken when seen through one another's perspective, the main conflict that tears them apart is not one between good and evil but between two claims in society that are fundamentally incompatible.

The central conflict of the play has impelled both scholars and readers to side with either Creon or Antigone. However, rather than a clash between 'right' and 'wrong', between a protagonist and an anti-protagonist, the play presents joined protagonists whose blinded obstinacy causes each other's downfall. Hence Hegel, in his analysis of the Antigone, characterized them as one-sided characters who are unable to acknowledge the existence of other values and beliefs (Roche, 2006). Antigone, the lonely martyr, may be said to show a foolish obstinacy or reckless impulsivity that pushes her to take extreme initiatives, whereas Creon performs his role as a tragic hero who, lacking empathy and unable to conceive any contradiction from his inferiors, contributes to his own devolution. Thus, even though Antigone remains faithful to her role within the household, she fails as a citizen.

Similarly, Creon, engrossed in his performance a as ruler, completely neglects his family as a father (Roche, 2006). Each takes their stance as absolute and beyond criticism, which answers for the unreflective, even impetuous, way they both pursue a relatively right action that fatally fails to be fulfilled. Indeed, no matter how righteous they are in their loyalty and faithfulness towards their own believes, Antigone and Creon adhere to one rule but inevitably disregard the other, obey and violate at the same time (Farneth, 2013). Antigone’s burial of her brother Polynices is a civil disobedience of the state and the laws established by Creon that eventually results in tragic repercussions. Her boldness and obsessiveness were commented upon by the chorus who declared prior to her death, ‘You have gone on to the utmost extreme of daring, and you have fallen, my child, a long fall against the lofty throne of Justice.’ (11. 852 – 6). She is indeed perceived by Creon as a threat acting outside the limits of her gender, and that publicly and boldly challenges both the ruler and the radical binaries that characterise his self-divided society.

On the other hand, asserting the supremacy of God’s power through its eternal power, Antigone regards Creon’s absolute power as the ‘violence of human caprice’ that only operates temporarily. Creon, in response to her defiance, takes drastic and unjust punitive

measures in segregating and destroying Antigone. By the end of the play, the ‘wisdom’ he first exhibited in his attempt to maintain order within Thebes has turned into an absurdity that even his own son fails to understand, and which he wisely tries to demonstrate by saying that, ‘A city which belongs to just one man is no true city’. This debate on culpability is closely interwoven with the question of the true tragic figure of the play on which critics and scholars share divided opinions. While some critics view Antigone as the heroine of the play (Palmer, 2014), other scholars have found in Creon the true tragic hero whose mistakes in judgement and hubris that occasioned his ultimate punishment coincide with the dramatic composition of the tragic hero (Bollack, 1999; Tierney, 1943). Therefore, despite their unswerving resistance to one another, Antigone and Creon form a striking parallel, two inimical forces who are not fundamentally bad or right but show not only a refusal to yield out of loyalty to their cause, but also an excessive pride and absolutism that fatally provoke their tragic end (‘My own blind heart has brought me from darkness to final darkness’, 987).

The confrontation between Antigone and Creon is one whose both sides are right inasmuch as they are justified. Both characters enact a universal contradiction between the state and the individual, familial and political principles, the eternal law of the gods and the temporary law of the King. Sophocles, rather than plainly presenting these two embodiments in society, intertwines the plots of two antagonistic protagonist whose duality manifests itself in various areas. Indeed, throughout the play can be observed a series of binary oppositions that reflect not only the heroes' psychological struggle but also the Greek society that was in conflict with itself. One of the most significant and consequential distinction takes place between men and women and attributes to them unquestioned sex-based roles in society (Farneth, 2013).

Antigone, whose identity is defined by her role within the family, is expected to comply with her obligations towards the divine law; and is thus resolute to perform the burial rite necessary for the reinstatement of her brother into the community. On the other hand, Creon, new on the throne, intends on grounding his edicts with authority and expects them to be shared and abode by the whole community. Regarding the legitimacy of their respective claims, Hegel in his analysis of Antigone noted that their personality are created through the ethical system they adhere to; therefore, Antigone and Creon unconsciously perform distinct roles in society and consequently honour different and seemingly discordant obligations (Roche, 2006). Hegel hence suggests that this gender-related distinctness is taken as a given and thereby cannot possibly bring discussion and/or revision. Antigone and Creon, blinded by their won conception of justice, are unable to arrive at a mutual understanding and thus participate in a conflict that cannot end in reconciliation.

The depth and pervasiveness of their motivations have been probed by many scholars engaging in various perspectives. Antigone, who dedicates herself to act against the polis to bury Polyneices, declared a traitor in Thebes, exhibits courage and consistency throughout the play, which characteristics contribute to depict her as a strong feminine and political figure within a highly patriarchal society. She takes a stand against the coercive and oppressive power of Creon. Perceived as the 'Other', barred from the political realm, Antigone makes her voice heard and longs for political recognition; in other words, she is not merely rebelling against Creon’s arbitrary power but also makes a comment on the gender hierarchy and subsequent disorder that were at the basis of the patriarchal Greek society (Cavanagh, 2017). Thus, a feminist interpretation of the play views Antigone as a woman warrior, a feminist, a martyr with a strong ethical appeal who follows a moral necessity to rebel against injustice (Cavanagh, 2017; John D.B. Hamilton; Holland, 1998). On the other hand, Antigone’s radical act has been

contrasted with the logical appeal of civil duty which characterises Creon’s argument (Tierney, 1943).

At the beginning of the play, Creon is not depicted as a tyrant but as a good king intent on restoring Thebes. Underneath his folly and rashness indeed lies a desire to fulfil his role as a leader and preserve the state’s safety through the upholding of the law. His motivations are consequently more complex than the typical villain. In light of the aforementioned points, Creon and Antigone can be viewed as the inevitable collide of ethics with politics. This antagonistic tension at the heart of the play arises further questions surrounding conscience vs. law, temporal vs. transcendent powers, faith vs. logic, emotion vs. reason; and, the irresolution that ends the play between two competing political authorities, the family's values and the polis' interests, is particularly what contributes to the complexity and subsequent timeless debate surrounding the play.

In conclusion, Antigone revolves around a complex conflict between two seemingly irreconcilable claims, the ethical and the political. Neither purely wicked or purely good, both Creon and Antigone are utterly and unreflectively convinced of the supremacy of their values and the rightness of their actions. Despite the discrepancy between their respective goals and the tools they employ to achieve them, Antigone and Creon share core characteristics, such as strength, confidence and self-centeredness, that bestow to each a tragic quality which hinders any possibility of harmony and reconciliation. Antigone’s investment in the Oikos (family) and Creon’s commitment to the polis are, however, legitimate as the former is devoted to eternal rules and an unconditional reverence to the gods while the latter is determined to hold rigidly to the rules he established within the state. The irrational devotion, the absolutism, the flaws, inflexibility and narrow-mindedness of these two protagonists is what makes the conflict complex and unresolvable. The long-standing debate around the political realm and its control over personal faith has brought subsequent key questions on fate, the human condition, and most importantly, wisdom. After all, there is no such thing as a fixed condition of human nature, as ‘All men make mistakes, but a good man yields when he knows his course is wrong, and repairs the evil. The only crime is pride.’.