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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Sophocles'

Antigone

from

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Tom Zolper



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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Antigone*

ANTIGONE IS A GREEK TRAGEDY written by Sophocles in approximately 442 B.C.E. Greek tragedy focuses on the reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) and downfall of the *tragic hero* and the events leading to that downfall. In *Antigone*, the title character experiences no *peripeteia*. When the play opens, she is already burdened with her family's curse and mourning the deaths of her brothers; she never experiences a moment of good fortune or favor with the king.

Creon, however, has become sole ruler of Thebes at the deaths of his nephews. Due to his stubborn insistence that *his* law be obeyed and his blindness to see that his law is in direct opposition to moral law, he loses his only surviving son and his wife, ending a broken man. This downfall is the *peripeteia* of the tragedy, and Creon is generally considered to be the tragic hero.

The tragic hero's *peripeteia* is the direct result of his (or her) *hamartia*. While the *hamartia* is commonly regarded a "tragic flaw" like pride or wrath or greed or envy, it is actually an error in judgment or perception; the hero's inability to see his weakness or to accurately foresee the consequences of his decisions or actions. Often, the misperception is the result of some character flaw, but the flaw itself is not the *hamartia*.

One common trait associated with *hamartia* is **hubris**. Hubris, or hybris, is exaggerated self pride or self-confidence, which often results in fatal retribution. One extremely well-known example of hubris is Odysseus' boldly telling the Cyclops his *real* name after escaping his cave. Another is Oedipus' refusal to yield to Laius on the bridge. His refusal to yield results in his killing Laius (who, it turns out, is his father), and the fulfillment of his own awful destiny. Creon's refusal to grant his nephew a proper burial and his stubbornness in the face of all opposition and evidence that his edict has angered the gods are likewise acts of hubris.

The downfall of the tragic hero (*peripeteia*) was intended to arouse in the audience extreme feelings of fear and compassion. These emotions would build until they found a release (*catharsis*) at the climactic moment of the play. As Antigone refuses to compromise her moral principles to save her life, and Creon accepts the consequences of his errors, the audience learns a truth about life. The action leading to the descriptions of Antigone's, Haemon's and later Eurydice's suicides produces the catharsis which the audience has been expecting.



Feminist Criticism Applied to *Antigone*



Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The feminist movement in society found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has been accepted as the norm by both men and women. Feminist critics have even dissected many words in Western languages that they believe to be rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that, since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it—, Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females need to be added and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Examining the Play for Female Stereotypes

1. Divide the class into three groups (or a number of groups divisible by three).
2. Assign each, or allow each to choose, either Antigone, Creon, or Ismene.
3. Have each group reexamine the play and note all instances of its character expressing female stereotypes, either by words or actions.
4. Reassemble the groups so that each group contains a member representing each of the three characters.
5. Have members of the new groups share their previous group's findings and discuss the following:
 - What evidence of female stereotypes can be found in the play?
 - To what extent is each of the characters defined by these stereotypes?
 - To what extent does the functioning of female stereotypes define the action of the play?
6. Reconvene the class and discuss the above questions.



Marxist Criticism Applied to *Antigone*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social hierarchies are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Examining the Play for Evidence of Class Conflict

1. Divide the class into four groups (or a number of groups divisible by four).
2. Assign each (or allow each to choose) one of the following:
 - Creon
 - Chorus
 - Guard and messenger
 - Antigone and Ismene
3. In their groups, have students place their assigned character(s) into a social class.
4. Have students examine the play for evidence to support their placement.
5. Redistribute the groups so that each new group has at least one representative for each of the above characters.
6. In their new groups, have students answer the following questions:
 - What social classes are represented in the play?
 - Who represents each class?
 - What evidence of social class strife is there in the play?
 - attempts to rise in social class?
 - social oppression (i.e. attempts to prevent upward mobility)?
 - resistance of the lower class(es) to upper-class oppression?
 - surrender of lower class(es) to upper class oppression?
 - What evidence of cooperation between the social classes is there in the play?
7. Reconvene the class and discuss the above.

NOTE: It is not important for all students to agree, or even to come to consensus. The point is, quite simply, to consider the play from this perspective.



Psychoanalytic/Freudian Criticism Applied to *Antigone*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Searching for Evidence of Id, Ego, and Superego

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Antigone*: Psychoanalytic Activity One: Evidence of Id, Ego, and Superego.
2. Divide the class into eight groups, or a number of groups divisible by eight.
3. Assign each (or allow each to choose) one of the following:
 - Haemon
 - Antigone
 - Ismene
 - Creon
 - Eurydice
 - Guard
 - Tiresias
 - Chorus
4. Have each group examine the play and note on the handout any lines of dialogue, speeches, or actions by its character that would suggest an interpretation of that character as representing the id, ego, and/or superego. (Most of the characters will probably lend themselves to more than one interpretation.)
5. Redivide the class into groups of eight so that each group has a member representing each of the characters.
6. Have the new groups create “personality sets” of characters. In each set, one character represents the id, one the ego, and one the superego. How does the student’s understanding of a particular character change as that character serves different functions in different sets?
7. Reconvene the class and discuss the extent to which their understanding of a character changes as they consider that character from a variety of personality perspectives in relation to other characters.