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IB English Written Assignment

*Religion vs. Secularism in The Burial at Thebes*

In *The Burial at Thebes* by Sophocles, there is constant clash of religion and state. Before Thebes was taken over by King Creon, Thebans lived off religious principles and looked to the gods for guidance. But once Creon took over, religion started losing its prowess. Sophocles believes that a secular state can only produce anguish, so he uses the late king’s daughter, Antigone, as a way to combat secularism. He specifically uses Antigone’s entombment to symbolize that secularism corrupts morality and sanity because there is a lack of religion. The events leading up to and after Antigone’s entombment all show how religion is a necessity both individually and socially.

Sophocles uses Antigone to act as a messenger of the gods that criticizes Creon so that his secular actions are questioned. She states, “What they decree is immemorial and binding for us all. The proclamation had your force behind it but it was a mortal force, and I, also a mortal, I chose to disregard it.” (Sophocles 29). She indicates how useless Creon’s rule actually is and how the god’s law is the only law that can be practiced. Her reasoning was supported by the Greek ideal that one cannot get into heavens without a proper burial (Metropolitan Museum).

Creon is taken aback by how steadfast she is of her opinion. Creon cannot be questioned because of his self-proposed authority, so sentencing Antigone to entombment is the only way to silence her, and thus, silencing the gods. Ironically, he truly believes that his actions are a reflection of the god’s will. Sophocles uses Creon as a model for power hunger overriding one’s religion.

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Antigone is the voice of the people, who act off their religion. With Antigone and Creon clashing, religion and state clash as well.

Sophocles highlights Creon’s actions and their immorality through the chorus as well. The chorus states, “Here is what happens: hope and mad ambition are many a time fulfilled for many a man; But just as often they are will-o’-the-wisps that’ll send him wild-eyed into fire and flood.” (Sophocles 40). The “hope and mad ambition” they are referring to is Creon’s desire to enforce his laws without any retaliation. Antigone disregarded his laws, thus creating the “will- o’-the-wisps” that will send Creon to demise. To keep his legislative dignity intact and prolong his demise, he sentences Antigone to entombment. Creon does not consider the god’s will in his sentencing. Instead, he relies on the state, which he believes to be the foundation of Theban principles. In the dual of religion versus state, the playwright makes it seem as though religion has lost because Antigone was exiled so quickly. However, his son, Haemon, questions his actions which brought a halt to the undermining dual. Haemon states that he’s, “Not against you. Against your going wrong.” (Sophocles 46). Creon is deaf to any kind of criticism at this point, whether mortal or immortal. Sophocles uses Haemon’s critique to give Creon a chance at going back on his sentencing, but Creon is too far gone with his power and sees no reason for reform. He casts off his own son as a traitor, even though nothing Haemon says proves to be wrong. The real traitor is Creon because of his negligence to religion and following burial rites. Another reason Sophocles has Creon deny Haemon is to show inevitability of Antigone’s entombment.

The playwright needs this event to occur so that Creon will get what he wants, but later regret it.

When Antigone is entombed, Creon feels he has won and asserted his power. However, the prophet, Tiresias comes to the throne to express that the battle Creon supposedly won will be to

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his detriment. Creon refuses to listen to Tiresias's prophecies by stating, “Not if Zeus himself were to send his eagle to scavenge on that flesh and shit it down, not even that would put me back on my word.” (Sophocles 59). Sophocles shows how the state’s reverence for the gods is completely gone and how Creon has made it a vendetta for his ruling not to be reversed.

Antigone’s entombment is meant to make a statement, which is that religion has lost its grip. Not by its own merit, but instead by the selfishness of the state. Zeus, the god of gods, has ultimate jurisdiction over all mortals and immortals (Hatzitsinidou). Creon sees himself as higher than Zeus, which could be considered the cardinal sin of this situation because Zeus is supposed to rule over all without any kind of backlash. Tiresias even states, “This is what you’ll get for thrusting down a daughter of the sunlight to the shades. You have buried alive, and among the living you have forbidden burial of one dead, one who belongs by right to the gods below. You have violated their prerogatives.” (Sophocles 61). By committing two crimes of inconsistent burials and denying the obscenity of the acts, the gods can now find Creon guilty. Sophocles has Tiresias introduce the prophecies so that the consequences of secularism can be laid in their entirety. Once Tiresias exits, Creon consults with the chorus and realizes that Tiresias may be right. He states, “It goes against the grain. But I am beaten. Fate has the upper hand.” (Sophocles 63). Creon tries to reverse his decision in hopes that the gods don’t strike down on him for his wrongful burials. Unfortunately, the damage has already been done. Creon and his guards go to get Antigone out of her tomb, but she hang herself before they could save her. The playwright use this suicide to make a send-off for religion and leave a void. The void could be filled by the state, but the events after Antigone’s suicide would suggest differently.

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Haemon rushes in to be with Antigone, but he sees the corpse of his love. He takes his life to be with her, but the blood is left on Creon’s hands. Once he returns to his throne, he states, “Behold your king of wrong. Wrong-headed on the throne, wrong-headed in the home, wrong- footed by the heavens.” (Sophocles 70). Creon now represents the aftermath of secularism.

Through this statement, Sophocles shows how secularism will fail anywhere it is applied. He is criticizing the bullheadedness of those left in charge by making a “too little, too late” situation. Antigone’s death made that possible because once she dies, everything goes wrong for Creon. Also, the playwright makes Tiresias’s prophecy come true to show that secularism’s treasures are short-lived. Sophocles furthers this truth by having Creon’s wife, Eurydice, commit suicide after she hears of Haemon’s death. Now, Creon has married and fathered death. Secularism cannot parent a functioning society because it turns its head away from any point of reference other than itself. Without any point of reference, religion in this case, the only thing possible would be self- deception in doing the right thing.

Sophocles uses Antigone’s death as a climax of this clash between religion and state. The events leading up to it consisted of Creon denying any criticism while the events after it highlighted the inevitability of secularism failing. Sophocles has secularism reign supreme for the majority of the play to show how prominent it has become in his society. But in the end, Sophocles makes it clear that religion is a necessity to have a well-organized society built on explicit moral convictions. Creon shows how secularism disregards said universal morals imposed by religion and goes out on a limb to impose its own moral standards.. Once religion is removed from the equation, secularism takes over as catalyst. But, that catalyst can only lead to a falling action rather than provide lasting benefits. Also, this ending for Creon is fate. Not even

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Zeus can intervene with fate (Hatzitsinidou). Sophocles leaves it up to fate so that the truth is clear, which is that secularism has failed the system and failed several people’s lives.

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**Reflective Statement**

When I first read through “Antigone”, I couldn’t understand why women were talked down to. But, with the help of the class discussion, I am able to explain why Sophocles wrote in such a patriarchal way. In Ancient Greece, gender was a central to one’s status. Antigone was by default lesser than Creon because she is a woman. Granted, she is an upper-class woman.

However, women are meant to be subordinate to men and not speak out against them. Antigone goes against the grain of gender roles through her actions. The relationship between her and the king is like a corrupt gamos ceremony. These ceremonies represented a father passing his daughter onto his son-in-law. The way this ceremony was carried out was neither typical nor traditional. Since Oedipus didn’t pass on his daughter by choice, this ceremony entails nothing good in the end.

In her argument with Creon, she uses the gods to justify burying Polynices, even though Creon said not to. Greek women had a strong voice in religion; some even became priestesses. So, it is no surprise that Antigone would be so invested in her beliefs. The gender norms state that women are to be at home, taking care of the house and not to be seen in public, especially noble woman like Antigone. Her sister, Ismene, is representative of what a woman should do in Ancient Greece. When she is learning about the plot to bury Polynices, she points out how

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women should never go against the law. Ismene was brainwashed into believing the patriarchy set forth by men.

When Haemon comes to Creon after he has sentenced Antigone, Creon says the word “woman” over and over when he is referring to Antigone. Sophocles is exemplifying how women were considered lesser than, almost like a burden rather than a human. Patriarchy was embedded within the government, causing officials to follow it strictly. Creon is all about the law and how it is absolute. Women are to steer clear of any governmental intervention and are best kept quiet. Antigone is the voice of feminism. She fights the gender norms by standing up against the king and pointing the flaws of his agenda. Sophocles uses Antigone to act as a call out against Greek government and its suppression of women.

# Word Count: 381

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