Creon As Antigone’s Tragic Figure Essay, Research Paper

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In Sophocles Antigone, Creon clearly fills the role of the tragic figure. He fits all seven of the traits of a tragic hero as defined by Northrop Frye. Two of these traits stand out especially; Creon s sense of commitment to his decision and his transfiguration after suffering the consequences of his actions.

Creon s decision to outlaw Polyneices s burial sets the stage for the tragedy that ensues. He regards Polyneices as an enemy of Thebes and sees no reason to honor his death. He remains dedicated to the decree in opposition to convincing arguments from Antigone, Haemon, and Teiresias.

The first and most passionate challenge brought against Creaon s edict comes from Antigone. Her blatant disregard of his orders stun Creon. He holds fast in his arrogance despite Atigone s protest:

Antigone: It was not Zeus who published this decree, / Nor have the Powers who

rule among the dead / Imposed such laws as this upon mankind; Nor could I think that a decree of yours – / A man – could override the laws of Heaven. (ll. 450-454)

Creon ignores the insight of her comment and likens Antigone to nothing more than a wild horse and a slave. (ll. 477-479) By disregarding her observation, he shows us that he truly does believe his word can refute that of the gods. He is set in his belief that his authority overrides the importance of spiritual tradition and divine order.

The second passionate challenge to Creon s decision is his own son. Haemon attempts to offer his father advice rather than directly challenging him, but a fierce argument ensues. Haemon acts as an advocate for himself, his fianc e, and the people of Thebes. He presents the most logical case for the reversing of Creon s dictum.

Haemon: The city mourns this girl. No other woman , / So they are saying, so

undeservedly / Has been condemned for such a glorious deed. / When her

own brother had been slain in battle / She would not let his body lie unburied / To be devoured by dogs or birds of prey. / Is not this worthy of a crown of gold? (ll. 693-699)

There s no disgrace, even if one is wise, / In leaning more, and knowing when to yield. / See how the trees that grow beside a torrent / preserve their branches, if they bend; the others, / Those that resist, are torn out, root and branch. (ll. 710-714)

Despite Haemon s wise words, Creon remains committed to his decision. The King is much to proud to accept the advice of his son, or any one else. It is fully within his power to reverse the prohibition of Polyneices s burial. However, he asserts his freedom to let the process follow its chosen direction. He does so to the point of ignoring his sons threat of suicide upon the death of Antignoe:

Haemon: So, she must die and will not die alone.

Creon: What? Threaten me? Are you so insolent?

Haemon: It is no threat, if I reply to folly.

Creon: The fool would teach me sense! You ll pay for it. (ll. 751-755)

It is not until his confrontation with Teiresias that Creon realizes how blind he has been to what is going on around him. When they first converse, Creon acknowledges the seer s wisdom. However, as soon as Teiresias brings Creon s follies to light, the King accuses the seer of dishonesty and corruption:

Teiresias: Sickness has come upon us, and the cause / Is you: our altars

and our sacred hearths / Are all polluted by the dogs and birds / That have been gorging on the fallen body of Polyneices. (ll. 1014-1019)

Creon: Go, make you profits, drive your trade / In Lydian silver or in Indian gold,

/ But him you shall not bury in a tomb, / No, not though Zeus own eagles eat the corpse / And bear the carrion to their master s throne: / Not even so, for fear of that defilement, / Will I permit his burial for well I know / That mortal man can not defile the gods. / But, old Teiresias, even the cleverest men / Fall shamefully when for a little money / They use fair words to mask their villainy. (ll.1037-1047)

By reacting this way, Creon demonstrates continued committed to his decision, even in the face of irrefutable wisdom and perception from Teiresias. This prompts the seer to foretell what finally acts as the inevitable reality that forces Creon to change his mind about the burial:

Teiresias: You will not live / Through many circuits of the racing sun / Before you

give a child of your own body / To make amends for murder, death for death. (ll. 1064-1067)

After forecasting the world of terror which will soon envelope Creon, Teiresias leaves. The King is suddenly unsure of himself. The seer s words are terrifying enough to force him to rescind his edict. Creon s fears are affirmed by the Chorus which advises him to release Antigone and bury Polyneices.

Despite Creaon s change of heart at this point in the play, he has not yet made the transfiguration of a tragic figure. He is acting in selfishness and fear, not yet seeing any deeper into the human condition. His transformation comes later, upon discovering he has changed his mind too late.

Creon s will is crushed with the discovery of what his actions have done. First, he finds both Antigone and Haemon, dead by their own hands, in each others arms. While grieving for his son, the news arrives that his wife has also taken her own life. Here, finally, the King makes the transformation of a tragic hero:

Creon: The guilt falls on me alone; none but I / Have slain [Eurydice] ; no other

shares in the sin. / Twas I dealt the blow. This is the truth, my friends. / Away, take me away, far from the sight of men! / My life now is death. Lead me away form here. (ll. 1318-1322)

Creon has learned from the pain he has caused himself, his family, and those he rules. He now better understands the human situation and is softened by what has happened. The once arrogant King is now humbled and has accepted his proper place in the universe and in relation to the gods. As a result of his transformation, he will be remembered as a great man.

Through the two traits discussed, sense of commitment and transfiguration, we can see that Creon fills the role of a tragic hero in Antigone. The audience sees his stubborn arrogance in holding to his destructive decision. The audience watches him defend it and attack others for questioning him until he falls, battered and defeated. Then, the audience sees him rise again, wise, redeemed, and recognized as a hero.