The Defiance of Jean Anouilh's Antigone

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Abstract

The present research focuses on studying the defiance of Jean Anouilh's heroine Antigone in his famous play Antigone. She rebels against the will of her uncle, Creon, king of Thebes. The argumentative battle between Antigone and Creon reveals that the idealism of that young woman stands behind her defiance. She rejects the materialistic world and embraces death rather than compromise and surrender.

After the Second World War, the spirit of the traditional theatre in France underwent a radical change in that it wished to embody an awareness of an altered world situation, even if it was not concerned with changing its form, it felt obliged to change its content as Thierry Maunier indicates: “[most of] the historical plays after the war were concerned with the problems of the contemporary world.”1 The first half of the twentieth century is baffling hard to classify. There are no literary schools
nor periods; strands of classicism, romanticism are rediscoverable interestingly with surrealism and existentialism. Each author must be studied in isolation and with reference to his own reaction to the tragedy of war, occupation, national decline, tyranny and injustice. Moreover, man is portrayed against a background which is especially dark and confusing. The period thus must be seen as a continuation of the previous three centuries in which the study of the human mind was the main concern of the writer. Ancient mythology and history had been drawn upon by the French dramatist Jean Giraudoux (1882-1940) and were reused again by Jean Paul Sartre (1905) in his play The Flies (1943) and also by Georges Neveux (1900) in his play The Voyage of Theseus (1948). Whether they used a historical framework or not, there were many works that can be defined as “Problem Plays” their themes were taken from contemporary events.

Like other French playwrights, Jean Anouilh (1910-1987) treated classic themes in the spirit of his own age and temperament. Among his famous plays were Euridice (1941), Antigone (1944) and Medea (1946). The best known of Anouilh's plays was Antigone, a veiled criticism of the Nazis who must have permitted it to be produced in occupied Paris because Anouilh's pessimistic view of humanity made the play seem unpolitical.

Anouilh's outlook on life is a rebellious. Some of his plays are called tragedies of sensitive people crushed by insensitive surroundings. He has however, written plays based on Greek myth. He mainly uses these plays of myth as he does his own idiosyncratic view of life rather than trying to see what are the issues of the particular crises he describes and then putting them over in universal terms. All his plays tend to coalesce. They are shouts of defiance at society. Tragedy for Anouilh is to shout at the top of your voice when hope is lost.

Many of his plays revolve round a simple theme: an idealist, searching instinctively for a life of perfect sincerity, is brought face to face with a society which is false, corrupt and pretentious. He or she will choose isolation, misery and even death rather than compromise with hypocrisy which is seen as a triumph rather than a tragedy. Having been contaminated by society, the idealist will perhaps have a second chance to live or die; or perhaps purity will conquer corruption. Such situations allow for some familiar shafts against bourgeois society.

The central figure in Anouilh's plays is the one who says "no" and who refuses life. His heroines are usually contaminated by a corrupting family relationship, some social pressure, or the memory of family and social entanglements. J. Chiari indicates:
All Anouilh's heroes are obsessed with purity, and with the uncompromising attitude. [They ] search for purity and say no to life...These heroes and heroines of negation have been defeated by rational arguments and in fact say no to reason and logic.7

Anouilh's heroes are usually girls, who want to be boys, and whose relationship with their lovers is that of comrade. They are not conventionally beautiful, though fascinating in an odd way, like Antigone. They are thin, pale and usually dark. They love childhood and wish to return to its simplicities. It becomes obvious that all his plays are about those who say "yes" or "no". Thus most of his myths ultimately coalesce into this single question, and in every situation it is right to say "no".8

It is almost true to say that Anouilh never has traditional heroes or heroines; they are all at any rate spiritual adolescents as Marsh describes them:

They are existentialist of Romantic self-centeredness. They are contemptuous of life, especially of any intellectual activity, since intellectual activity inevitably involves compromise. They all say no to life and this word becomes a mark of their nature. Humanity is divided into "yes" or "no" sayers. To say "no" is to perform an absurd acts.9

In his famous play Antigone, Anouilh presents the heroin of the play as an anti-heroic character. This play is a tragedy inspired from a Greek mythology and the play of Sophocles from the fifth century B.C. She is presented as a figure of the French Resistance. She rises up alone against the state power. Anouilh's adaptation strips Antigone's act of its moral, political, religious and filial trappings allowing it to emerge in all its gratuitously. Anouilh uses a classical tragedy to reveal a universal truth by clothing the awesome figure of antiquity in modern dress and by putting modern expressions into their mouths. He bridges the gap between past and present and links the emotions of Greek characters with that of our own. Antigone is the antithesis of the melodramatic heroine. She is no longer the Antigone of Sophocles, defending right against wrong, representing freedom against tyranny, but archetypal character. Antigone who has been ordered by king Creon, the dictator of Thebes, to do not bury the corpse of her brother Polynices, is externally modernized.
She has coffee, bread and butter for breakfast; her brother went about in fast cars. In addition to that, she is no longer the Antigone of Sophocles, defending right against wrong, representing freedom against tyranny, but rather one of Anouilh's obstinate little idealists. She is presented as a rebel character who challenges the will of the king. Creon tries to save Antigone from the consequences of her efforts to bury her brother Polynices. He reminds her of her own lack of religious faith and points out that her brother is a villainous man, who does not worth the sacrifice of her life.

The play begins with the Chorus who relates the events of the recent past. Oedipus, the late king of Thebes, who was the father of the two girls, viz. Antigone and Ismene, had also two sons: Eteocles and Polynices. Oedipus had decided that the sons should share the throne and the rule in alternating years after his death. Eteocles, at the end of his year's reign, refused to step down for Polynices' turn. A civil war between the brothers therefore took place. Although Polynices engaged six foreign princes and brought them to the seven gates of the city, they were yet defeated. During the fight, both Polynices and Eteocles were killed. After their death, Creon, the brother of Oedipus, seized the throne and ordered that no one is to bury Polynices, who is regarded a traitor of the state. Any person who tries to give Polynices a religious burial will be put to death. On the other hand, Eteocles, with whom Creon sided, is given a state funeral as the Chorus indicates:

Creon has issued a solemn edict that Eteocles, with whom he had sided, is to be buried with pomp and honors, and that Polynices is to be left to rot. The vultures and the dogs are to bloat themselves on his carcass. Nobody is to go into mourning for him. No gravestone to be set up in his memory. And above all, any person who attempts to give him religious burial will himself be put to death.

From the very beginning of the play Antigone is exposed as a rebel character who revolts against the will of the king to stand up for her family. Antigone explains in what seems to be a rational tone that she and Ismene are bound, as by duty to bury Polynices and face the execution. She makes it clear to Ismene that there are no ways about it:

We will do what we have to do... We are bound to go out and bury our brother. That's the way it is. What do you think
We can do to change it?
( *Antigone*, P.187)

She argues with her sister that she is not eager to die: “I'd prefer not to die, myself”\(^{11}\), but they have no other choices. Antigone tells her that she is definitely going to fulfill her sacred duty of burying her brother. She does not share her sister the fear of the law, nor does she fear Creon as a king and man of the state. She makes rushing decisions based on her innocence and naivety, as young people often tend to do. Ismene, a little older and perhaps wiser, suggests that a compromise with Creon is the best solution since he is the king and confronting with him will lead them to face many problems:

**He is stronger than we are, Antigone. He is the king. And the whole city is with him. Thousands and thousands of them, swarming through all the streets of Thebes...A thousand arms will seize our arms. A thousands breathes will breath into our faces. We'll be dragged into the scaffold for torture.**

(*Antigone*, PP. 188-189)

Antigone's view is a simple statement: “I don't want to sort of see, anything.”\(^{12}\) Antigone speaks with the rashness of youth that causes the young to believe that a compromise is not a solution. She wants things to be in her own hands, and she will not accept further alternatives. She tells her sister that:

**There will be time enough to understand when I'm old...If I ever am old. But not now.**

(*Antigone*, P.188)

With that statement, she implies that she knows what will happen to her and she is quite aware of the reaction of her uncle. Antigone sees that wisdom and compromise come as a result of old age and weakness. “She often speaks with a sort of calm, rehearsed wisdom of her own. The wisdom she speaks with is false; it is caused by the results of her quick decision making.”\(^{13}\) In facing her impending doom as she believes, she will be sentenced to death. She has come to find a sense of resignation for designs. She begs her Nurse to take care of her dog and speaks to her fiancé Haemon as though she wants to tie up loose ends. She explains her behaviour from their most recent encounters and she apologizes for not having been so much kind to him. She clearly loves him, but even her
love is not enough to prevent her from fulfilling her own rushing decisions.

Antigone is opposed to her radiant sister Ismene. Unlike her beautiful and docile sister, Antigone is scrawny, sallow, with drawn and recalcitrant brat. She has a boyish physique. From the very beginning of the play, it becomes very obvious that Antigone is a rebel character as the chorus describes her:

The thin little creature sitting by herself …
She will burst forth as the tense, sallow, willful girl whose family would never take her seriously and who is about rise up alone against Creon, her uncle, the king.

( *Antigone*, p.179)

She curses her girlhood when Ismene reminded her that she is a girl and it will be impossible for her to bury her brother:

Ismene : Antigone be sensible. It's all very well for men to believe in ideas and die for them. But you are a girl!
Antigone : Don't I know I'm a girl? Haven't I spent my life cursing the fact that I was a girl?

( *Antigone*, pp.189-190 )

Antigone has always been difficult to be understood. In her childhood she used to quarrel with her sister Ismene, insist on the gratification of her desires and to refuse to understand the limits placed on her as she says: “I am not here to understand.”¹⁴ She is much more cut off from the world, remaining distant from those who once surrounded her. Her tragedy rests in her refusal to cede on her desire. Against all prohibitions and without any just cause, she will bury her brother to the point of her own death as her confrontation with Creon reflects. Her insistence on her desire beyond the limits of reason renders her ugly object tabooed.

Thus the battle between Antigone and her uncle starts when she attempts to bury the corpse of her brother Polynices. Creon is shocked at the guard's news that the edict has been violated. His fear is intensified when he realizes that the criminal is his niece Antigone. He wishes to cover up Antigone's crime and asks her to comply:
Creon: Did you meet any one on your way-coming or going?

Antigone: No, nobody.

Creon: Very well. Now listen to me.
   You will go straight to your room…
   You will go to bed. You **will** say that you are not well and that you have not been out since yesterday. Your nurse will tell the same story.

( *Antigone*, p. 207 )

In their debate, Creon and Antigone clash strongly, and their mood conveys pain coupled with joy. Antigone is stubborn and argues that she has promised Polynices and she would perform the ritual burial for him:

I owe it to him to unlock the house of the dead in which my father and my mother are waiting to welcome him.

( *Antigone*, p. 207 )

The king doesn't want to impose the penalty on Antigone; he painfully issues her punishment when she refuses to come to terms with him. Antigone claims the sanctity of the religious laws, while, Creon argues for the authority of the laws of the state:

Creon: I merely devote myself to introducing little order into this absurd kingdom.

( *Antigone*, p. 209 )

The conflict takes the form of a fierce verbal duel between the uncle and the niece. In this confrontation, Creon warns Antigone that he is bound to ignore the law and bury her alive as a penalty for her disobedience of his decree:

Creon: Why did you try to bury your brother…I had forbidden it.

Antigone: Those who are not buried wander eternally and find no rest.

Creon: Polynices was a rebel and a traitor, and you know it.
Antigone: He was my brother.

Creon: You know the punishment I decreed for the person who attempted to give him burial.

Antigone: Yes, I know the punishment. (*Antigone*, P. 208)

There is no doubt that “Creon is rational and practical, whereas Antigone is idealistic and impractical.” In the mighty clash of their egos, Antigone calls him a frightened man. She is morally superior and is not afraid of the consequences of her act:

**You are the king, and you are all-powerful...
... You are a loathsome man!** (*Antigone*, PP. 211-213)

Creon tries to convince Antigone to accept his viewpoint. He tells her that his only interest is in political and social order. He does not have time to waste it in such trivial things since he has more important matter than these things: “kings my girl, have other things to do than to surrender themselves to their private things.” Creon is bound to ideas of good, sense, simplicity and the banal happiness of every-day life. To him, life is but the happiness that one makes: the happiness that inhabits in grasped tools, a garden bench and a child playing at one’s feet. He tries his best to stimulate Antigone to his opinion:

**Antigone be happy. Life flows like water, and you young people let it run away through your finger. Shut your hands; hold on it, Antigone. Life is not what you think it is. Life is a child playing round your feet, a tool you hold firmly in your grip, a bench you sit down upon in the evening, in your garden...Life is nothing more than the happiness that you get out of it.** (*Antigone*, P. 220)

Creon's speech does not satisfy Antigone who insists on burying her brother regardless of Creon's laws. Antigone is the defiant, the heroine of resistance who has driven herself into corner by the sheer reason of the course, asserts her right to refuse, accept a compromise and to die. Creon has no desire to sentence Antigone to death. He thinks that she is far more useful to Thebes as a mother to its heir than a martyr, and
he orders her behaviour covered up. Her sacrifice in Ceon's eyes is completely unjustified:

You are going to marry Haemon;  
and I want you to fatten up abit so that you can give him a sturdy boy.  
Let me assure you that Thebes Needs that boy a good deal more than it needs your death.  

( Antigone, PP.209-210)

Antigone is momentarily distracted by Creon's vision of happiness, but she calmly chooses to die for her deed. Her insistence on her desire in facing the power of the state brings ruin into Thebes and to Creon specifically as well. With the death of his family, Creon is left utterly alone in the palace. His throne even robs him of his mourning, the king and his pace sadly shutting off to a cabinet meeting after the announcement of the family's death.

In her search for an ideal and spiritual truth in burying Polynices and defying the law, Antigone rejects the world's formula for obedience and happiness. She refuses a conventional happiness as it is too human, a word unworthy of her heroic sacrifice and idealism. She curses Creon's filthy happiness of secular love and material comfort:

I spit on your happiness! I spit on your idea of life - that life must go on, come what may. You are all like dogs that lick everything they smell. You with your promise of a humdrum happiness-provided a person doesn't ask too much of life. I want everything of life, I do and I want it now. I want it total, complete: other wise I reject it! I will not be moderate. I will not be satisfied with the bit of cake you offer me if I promise to be good little girl. I want to be sure of everything this very day; sure that every thing will be as beautiful as when I was a little girl. If not, I want to die!  

( Antigone, P 222 )
Hence it is clear that happiness is found in having principles and adhering to them. Such ideal is highlighted in the debate between Antigone and the king. Antigone rejects the ordinary concept of human happiness that Creon accepts; love, marriage, children and comfort are not important to her. For Antigone this formula spells a compromise as she indicates: “I don't have to do things that I think are wrong.” Instead, she lives by divine law and sacred duty. In refusing these, Antigone rejects the materialistic world and embraces death: “You choose life and I choose death.” Antigone is an idealistic person who seeks the peace of truth, even if it is found in death. She represents the quest for perfection and the refusal to compromise and surrender as J.Guicharnaud asserts that:

Anouilh's heroines fight as much against abstraction as against the sordid aspects of concrete reality. Some of them take refuge, paradoxically, in idealism, but that idealism is more a nostalgia for happy life than a philosophy and is finally dangerous and negative—hence the source of their tragedy.

Antigone defies her uncle. She sticks up for what she believes to be right, no matter what it costs her. Antigone's pride is part of what makes her adhere to her decision as Creon assures:

The pride of Oedipus and his headstrong. For him as you, human happiness was meaningless. 
( Antigone, P.208 )

What is clear here is that “the battle between an older, wiser generation and a younger, emotional generation is displayed right in this play.” Thus one can say that the difference in age between the two helps to set the argument between Creon and Antigone on fire, as the Chorus indicates:

Chorus: You are out of your mind, Creon. What have you done? . . .

Creon: She had to die.

Chorus: She is a mere child. 
( Antigone, P.224 )
If Antigone is the embodiment of youthful vitality and idealism, Creon turns to be the reflection of age, wisdom and bitterness. He says that he “woke up one morning and found [himself] the king of Thebes.” He does not want to shoulder the responsibility that comes with the title. Creon indicates that he is able to compromise and put his own idealism on hold for the sake of the kingdom. It is wisdom and maturity that allow him to make these decisions. When he supposedly crushes the rebellion that Polynices has formed, he lays Polynices' corpse out in the field and refuses to bury him. In his bitterness, he wants the kingdom to know how the true ruler is and as such uses the stench of a rotting carcass as a reminder as he tells Antigone:

Isn't your brother's corpse, rotting there under my windows, payment enough for peace and order in Thebes? (Antigone, P. 215)

Creon's only concern is how to keep order in his kingdom as Raymond Williams indicates:

[According to] Creon's conception of order, it does not matter to him which of the bodies lies rotting and which is buried in state; one must rot, so that the citizens may smell the end of revolt. So this must be done for order."

Thus Creon's choices are not based on the fear of losing his power, but rather made for the sake of keeping security and order to Thebes. As he asserts his compromise as selfless, he accordingly makes his mind to punish Antigone: “I shall have you put to death.”

Antigone at the end has a kingdom which Creon cannot enter. Creon thinks of kinship as the job of ruling. The two characters represent different concepts which cannot be reconciled. Creon is a man who says 'no' and decides to say 'yes' and accepts responsibility. He believes that life needs the one who says 'yes'. He believes that compromise is something essential in life since it necessitates the one who is ready to surrender especially the ruler:

Can you imagine a world in which trees say no to the sap? In which beasts say no
to hunger or to propagation? Animals
are good simple, tough.

(Antigone, p. 216)

Here the two ways of life are represented as the result of choice, and not
as an inevitable birthright. At surface value this is a wise choice because it
prevents the kingdom from entering a state of chaos and conflict without a ruler:

There had to be one man who said yes.
Somebody had to agree to captain the ship.

(Antigone, p. 215)

Antigone mocks Creon for his readiness to agree on anything to avoid
conflict, but his response redeems him. She looks at his view as a kind of
cowardice. Antigone tells him that he starts losing those characteristics
that enable him to say 'no' since he lacks the courage to utter such a word. She
says that he has lost all of the passion and innocence of youth that she still possesses. She indicates that she used to refuse all things which she thinks are vile; therefore she cannot surrender:

I didn't say yes. I can say no to
anything I think vile and I don't
have to count the cost.

(Antigone, P. 214)

Antigone rejects the compromise of Creon and accordingly throwing
back in his face all that he has learned during his past years. Antigone's words hurt Creon's pride and force to face monstrosity he has obtained. He defends his acceptance of the crown and therefore his acceptance reflects his ethics when he says:

I should have been like a workman
who turns down a job that has to be
done. So I said yes.

(Antigone, P. 214)

Creon's redemption from the evil of compromising his ethics lies in
the fact that he learns the true value of responsibility. He comes to realize that there would be a time when one must accept responsibility, despite the desire to return to youthful innocence. He has a greater sense of responsibility than he is ever able to instill in Antigone. On the other
hand, Antigone wants life to be a perpetual state of childhood which is free from any restrictions.

So the play reflects that man's heroism lies in facing life: prefer waging a losing battle rather than escaping it. Neither Antigone nor Creon really faces life; one is unbending in idealism, leading to death, and the other lives by crime and compromise and not facing life as it really exists. In the tragic world presented by Anouilh, there is a little hope in living. “Any attempts to conquer the mediocrity of the human situation invites doom or death. Thus, the heroes of Anouilh must live alone and die alone.”\textsuperscript{25} The solitude of the heroic character is brought sharply into focus in this play, with Antigone being isolated in death and Creon being isolated in living. At the end of the play, Antigone is led away before the shocked people of Thebes to be buried alive in the cave of Hades. After Antigone's suicide in the cave, the powerful king Creon loses both his son who commits suicide after hearing the death of Antigone and his wife who dies of a deep grief.

Creon's ethical choices led him eventually to die completely alone as an old man. Antigone's choices lead her to die alone and at a very young age. Each of them had options outside the set behaviour he or she had chosen as their own. The stubbornness of both youth and old age led them to this plight.\textsuperscript{26} No one could stop Antigone because death was her aim and her brother was as just a pretext as Creon indicates:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{No one on earth was strong enough to dissuade her. Death was her purpose, whether she know it or not. Polynices was a mere pretext.}
\end{quote}

\textit{(Antigone, p. 224)}

Anouilh makes it clear that there were other paths to follow and that those paths might have led to other courses of events in life. Antigone thinks that she is maintaining her integrity by denying cooperation with those that would have been given way to compromises. Creon believes that his integrity is spared in that he saves the kingdom from its own chaos when he assumes the throne. Jean Anouilh uses the extremes of both characters to comment on the choices one can make to maintain one's integrity and innocence in the face of compromise and corruption.\textsuperscript{27}

There is no picture in the play of a benevolent deed, there is no hope for reconciliation. As a result, the audience is left in a continuous state of mental distress, as opposed to the classical definition of tragedy.
which ends with catharsis and the promise of spiritual renewal. The dramatist refuses to please the audience by providing a neat solution to the problem he has raised. Instead he leaves the final decision to his audience to judge whether Antigone is right or wrong.

It becomes obvious that the defiance of Antigone is based on her own idealism. It is the idealism of young which is the result of rashness and obstinacy. This young woman thinks that, by declaring her rebellion, she can conquer evil represented by the will of the king. In fact, Antigone is a victim but of her irrationality which is the outcome of her unstable circumstances she lives in her childhood. She is stubborn and used to show revolt whether against her family or the authority. She rejects the materialistic world and prefers to enjoy happiness, which is different from that of others and which is created by her. Thus, Antigone chooses death instead of surrender.

Notes


5. Thiman, P.207.


12. Ibid, P. 188.


15. www Pink monkey notes.com, Anouilh's Antigone.


17. Ibid, P. 214.

18. Ibid, P. 223.


21. Ibid.

22. Antigone, P.213.


27. Ibid.
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