

10-1-2008

# Time-Transcendent Father-Son Dynamics in Antigone

Olivia Spadlowski  
*College of DuPage*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/hcir2009>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Spadlowski, Olivia, "Time-Transcendent Father-Son Dynamics in Antigone" (2008). *2009 Honors Council of the Illinois Region Papers*. Paper 2.  
<http://dc.cod.edu/hcir2009/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2009 Honors Council of the Illinois Region Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. For more information, please contact [koteles@cod.edu](mailto:koteles@cod.edu).

In the ancient tragedy, Antigone, the Greek dramatist Sophocles presents a primary conflict that features a desperate struggle for dominance and challenges the blind justification of authorial power. Although the tragedy bears the name of its doomed heroine as its title, it is the character of Creon who provides the reader with a cathartic release through the development of his humanity throughout the course of the play. He is the figure most akin to the classical Aristotelian definition of the traditional tragic hero. In Aristotle's book, Poetics, the philosopher defines a tragic hero as someone of high status, flawed, afflicted with *hamartia* (tragic flaw) and *hubris* (arrogance), is punished severely, and in the end gains wisdom. The character of Creon is more emotionally developed and the breadth of his humanity is greatly accessible as he is flawed and as such, true to life. The complexities that transcend the main conflict within the play are numerous and striking, but for the purpose of this essay, the subject of study will be the conflict between the dominant and the subjugated. Specifically, the focus will be on the conflict between father and son. In Sophocles' Antigone, the opposition of Creon and Haemon mirrors the main conflict and is a reflection of the modern dynamics of father-son relationships rendering the subject eternally relevant and accessible to audiences of the present day.

The character of Creon is presented in direct opposition with the character of Antigone, but it would be premature to pass immediate judgment on Creon and call him a villain. The singularity of the tragedies of Sophocles is that they are self-contained. It is commonly assumed that the three works that chronicle the curse of Oedipus were intended as a trilogy, but although Antigone follows Oedipus Rex chronologically, it was actually written earlier. When comparing the character of Creon, as presented in

Antigone, with the character as presented in Oedipus Rex, the differences in characterization are remarkably apparent. In Oedipus Rex, Creon is portrayed as a benevolent figure with seemingly little interest in power yet in Antigone; he is desperate to maintain total and complete control in his rule. Is this meant as a commentary on the effect of power that can alter the established character of a man? Perhaps so, but given the order in which the plays were written, might it not also be perceived that Sophocles interpreted Creon as more than a villain?

According to Aristotle, the tragedy that affects the classical tragic hero is the result of his own human flaws as opposed to the interference of an exterior force. In choosing to disregard the will of the gods by denying the proper burial for his nephew Polyneices, he begins the chain of events that will ultimately lead to the destruction of everything he loves. Traditionally, opposition to the will of the gods would result in destruction created by the offended immortal. It is important to recognize in the analysis of Creon, that although he is acting against the will of the gods, he is not purposefully challenging them. Creon states, "Never, while I rule, will a criminal be honored higher than a man of justice. But give me a true friend of this city and I will pay him full honor, in death or life." Antigone's opposition to his decree condemns her in the eyes of Creon. To him, she is challenging what is legal and just thereby making her opposition seemingly illegal and unjust. It is important to recognize that Creon believes that his decision is just and it is this conviction of belief that blinds him to the warnings of his loved ones and leads him to his imminent downfall.

The main contenders in the conflict of the tragedy are Creon and Antigone but symbolically, they represent a conflict of authority. Creon is the established figure of

authority in Thebes and is just in defending his position against the defiance of a civilian. However, Antigone, in her plea, is the representative of the higher power of the immortal entities, and so what at first presents itself as a case of civil disobedience is broadened into a conflict of mortal versus immortal law. In order to understand the complex struggle for power and authority that wages within the course of this tragedy, it is necessary to look to an offset of the primary conflict, such as the strained relationship between Creon and his son Haemon, so that it may be put into a more clarified perspective. This is not to say that the desire to reconcile logic and understanding with religious beliefs is an inaccessible conflict but that the familial relations between father and son are more appealing to our grasp of comprehension, as opposed to the convoluted turmoil of our souls.

The relationship between Creon and Haemon is seemingly too complicated to be considered applicable to the modern relationship between father and son. Presumably, there are not many men who have found themselves in the position of being heir to a throne with a fiancée sentenced to death by their own father. Essentially, the conflict between father and son is created from an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile their opposing views. This basic understanding of the conflict is easily applicable to the private lives of each individual reader for it is a rare person indeed that would claim not to have had a disagreement with at least one of his or her parents. Although the issues between Creon and his son have been brought about by a series of unfortunate events, it can be argued that there exists a conflict between parent and child that is psychologically inherent to human nature.

Modern psychology was founded by a man whose most famous theory was inspired by another of Sophocles' works. According to the Freudian theory of the Oedipus complex, during the early stages of a child's sexual development, the child will form an attachment to the parent of the opposite sex while maintaining hostility towards the parent of the same sex. Presumably, a son's first sexual feelings are developed towards the woman he is in daily contact with, naturally, his mother. Of course, the figure that presents the greatest threat to the son's desires is his father. According to Dr. Tabitha Freeman, "It is through presenting himself as an irrefutably powerful and feared rival for the mother's love that the father instigates the crucial severance of the mother-infant bond by instilling the cultural prohibition of incest." Further explanation of the significance of the father reveals that "the appearance of the father thus compels the child to achieve a separate identity and moral consciousness, initiating an internalization of authority that is synonymous with the development of the super-ego." The strange feelings that the son has towards his father are made doubly complex by an added fear as a result of his discovery of the absence of a phallus in women. This traumatic discovery leads him to subconsciously assume that it was removed as punishment. This resolves itself into a fear of castration at the hands of the father, or, in certain cases, at the hands of the mother.

Although Sigmund Freud is esteemed as the founding father of psychology, his theories are not immune from scrutiny or rejection, and so I humbly take this opportunity to disagree on certain aspects of his proposal. Primarily, I take issue with his belief that these feelings are exclusive to children within the range of three to five years of age and so eventually resolve in time. I do not disagree with these feelings being associated with children at an extremely young age but that these feelings are exclusively limited to this

range, I have my doubts. Surely, it is during the pre-pubescent stage that an adolescent first betrays hostility towards his parents as well as an active interest in sexuality.

Haemon is a young man who is naturally and psychologically in opposition to his father Creon, but due to the traditions and cultures of Ancient Greece, he dare not challenge him. Further complicating his relationship with his father is the fact that Haemon is at the stage of his life where he must begin to accept the responsibilities of a man all the while in the shadow of the intimidating figure of his father who is the supreme authority of Thebes. That is why it is interesting to examine the motive that prompts Haemon to finally confront his father. He faces him not in anger, but with love and concern for his welfare. Perhaps Haemon's ability to transcend the natural conflicting elements that exists between him and his father stems from their similarities. As stated in the introduction to Antigone by Paul Woodruff, Woodruff explains "he is remarkably like his father... Like his father; Haemon steers clear of addressing the moral issue of burial versus non-burial. He does, however, put his finger on exactly what is wrong with Creon- his rigidity and his inability to listen to opinions he does not share." Haemon is remarkable in the fact that despite his grief over the condemnation of his fiancée and his anger at the stubborn resistance of his father, he still persists in going against traditional values in a desperate effort to protect the father he loves.

The opposition of Creon and Haemon mirrors the main conflict and is a reflection of the modern dynamics of father-son relationships rendering the subject eternally relevant and accessible to audiences of the present day. The conflicts and relationships in Sophocles' Antigone are brilliantly presented in this great tragedy and the truth and humanity of the characters transcend the extraordinary situations forming a bridge

between modern day and the ancient world that must be preserved through the analysis of the precious texts available. Of the one hundred and twenty works credited to Sophocles, only seven survive. Works to be cherished, studied, and learned from.

#### Works Cited

- Freeman, Tabitha. "Psychoanalytic Concepts of Fatherhood: Patriarchal Paradoxes and the Presence of an Absent Authority." Studies in Gender and Sexuality. 113-139.  
EBSCO Host. College of Dupage. College of DuPage Library, Glen Ellyn. Dec. 5 2008.
- Sophocles. *Antigone*. Translated, with Introduction and Notes by Paul Woodruff.  
Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Ince., 2001.
- Woodruff, Paul. "Introduction and Notes." Antigone. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001. (vii-xxviii).