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IB Literature 11 HL

Mrs. Townzen

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Cultural Reflection

Originally, I did not know that there was a strong historical background for Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*; although I understood that the reason why the Nazi Germans allowed the play to be presented in Vichy France is because it fits with their agenda, I did not know that the main characters in the play represent groups that existed during the Vichy Regime; I originally assumed that the role of the characters was incidental. The Nazi Germans allowed the play to be premiered during the occupation because it represented their opinions towards the organized resistance movement, and they could use the roles of the characters as propaganda to show the French civilians and the protestors how irrational resistance is.

During the Vichy Regime, the Germans occupied Vichy France and set up a puppet government made up of French people who were loyal to them. Naturally, many French citizens did not appreciate the Germans' invasive actions, so there was a resistance movement against both the government and the Germans. Antigone represents the French resistance; both are hopelessly standing up against authority and are being needlessly stubborn. The Nazis wanted the citizens to think of the resistance in this manner, because they are wasting their time and lives trying to stand up against the Nazis, and that they should submit. Creon represents the puppet government put in place by the Nazis that was made up of French people; both Creon and the puppet government felt "family obligations" to the resistance which conflicted with their

obligations as an authority. Antigone was the soon-to-be queen in Thebes and was directly related to Creon, and the French resistance was made up of people from the same country as the people in the government who shared the same blood. The Chorus represents the Nazis because they both are omnipresent and are somewhat subtly controlling Creon and the puppet government, respectively. Throughout the play, the Chorus intercedes and talks to the spectators as if it is not actually in the play, and is aware of everything. The Nazis wanted the resistance to think that they were omnipresent and seemingly omniscient like the Chorus is in *Antigone*.

Given that the characters in Anouilh's version of *Antigone* mirrored the Nazi's opinion of the actors during the Vichy Regime, it makes much more sense now why the Nazis would allow Anouilh's *Antigone* to be premiered despite their strict censorship of arts.

(Word Count: 399)

Selfish Self-Fulfillment

Nearly all world religions consider selfishness to be a negative attribute of a person, especially Indian religions. In Hinduism, in order to reach the ultimate goal of the state of *moksha*—enlightenment, perfection, and happiness—one must live a life governed by *artha* by always avoiding selfishness and worldly desires. Counterposing the expectations of many religions, characters, in Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, who believe that they have a sense of duty to themselves are more satisfied than those who have a sense of duty toward others. Anouilh suggests that ultimately what matters for satisfaction is duty to one's self; that is, putting oneself first results in physical and mental happiness.

Many of the characters in *Antigone* have a duty to people or groups other than themselves. For example, Creon has a duty to the kingdom and the people of Thebes and has obligations to his family. Neither are to himself. But he takes his duties to others very seriously; he thinks that he “broke the back of the rebellion; but like a snake, it is coming together again” (21). Creon believes that there is an organized rebellion against the government and his monarchical rule and that he has failed to fulfill his duty; it is his job to keep the government intact and to prevent organized rebellion. The dramatic irony emphasizes the irrationality of Creon's serious attitude towards his duty. Naturally, because of his commitment to his duty, he knew very well that he must observe the law and abide by the obligations that come with his position of leadership. When asserting that “nobody has a more sacred obligation to obey the law than those who make the law” (28), he uses the word *sacred* to describe his obligations which suggests that he has a nearly religious dedication to his duty—as if it would be sinful for him to go against his obligations. However, he also feels conflicting obligations towards his family when his niece's life is at risk, so he must decide which is more important to him. Neither of the obligations are selfish. Much like Creon, Antigone has a duty to her family and to eventually

marry, assume a leadership role like him, and become the queen. She repeats the phrase “I owed it to him ... I owed it to him” (29) while confessing her motivations to Creon because she is stubborn. Her original motive for breaking the law and burying her brother was her sense of duty to her close family and because she does not feel compelled to reveal anything to Creon since he is not close. When Antigone says “No, Creon! You said yes, and made yourself king. Now you will never stop paying” (36), she admits that her other duty—in addition to her family and to eventually being the queen—is to the people, to stand up against the tyrant Creon and to say *no*. Neither of her duties are to herself. Haemon’s duty, however, is to her—to protect his love, Antigone. Haemon repeats the name *Antigone* in every sentence of his heartfelt plea to Creon: “Live a life without Antigone? ... I love Antigone. I will not live without Antigone” (46). The repetition reveals his emotional mood and stresses his duty to protect his love. His wording makes it seem as though his only purpose in life is to keep her safe—Haemon’s only duty is to her.

Creon, Antigone, and Haemon all put other characters besides themselves first; their duty is not to themselves. So, in the end, none of them achieve physical or mental happiness. The Chorus uses the word *begin* before the infinitive *to wait* when telling the audience that “[Creon] can now begin to wait for his own death” (53), which suggests that Creon was not waiting for death before everyone else died; that is, he was supposed to die, but only after suffering. And now, because Creon did not believe in a sense of duty to himself, he is distraught over the deaths of everyone in his family and now waits for himself to die. Similarly to Creon, Antigone is also depressed; before the end of her life, Antigone realizes that “it is terrible to die ... [especially because] I don’t even know what I am dying for” (50). The reason why she thinks that she is not ready to die is that she does not have a purpose. She does not want to die unsatisfied, but she does. And finally, Haemon dies lonely. Before his demise, while staring into Creon’s eyes,

“[Haemon’s] eyes [were] full of contempt ... [he gave] a glance that was like a knife” (51). The moment felt slow despite it being as fast as a glance. Haemon is full of contempt towards Creon, and he establishes with his father that the family is separated shortly before dying alone.

Many of the characters in *Antigone* have a sense of duty to other groups or people, but only the soldiers have a direct duty to themselves. The soldiers each had the option and ability to either accept or deny the responsibilities of being a soldier. Choice is duty to self because it allows one to make the decision that benefits themselves the most. The soldiers do their job for personal satisfaction and fulfillment—their job is voluntary. So, their duty is to themselves, not the king. The syntax of the short, simple sentences when the First Guard describes himself to Creon as “volunteer. Wounded three times. Two mentions” (20) draws attention to the aspect of himself that he finds the most important—his experiences in the armed forces—because he describes himself as concisely as possible. He performs his job selfishly in order for himself to gain more experience. Because the soldiers have a sense of duty to themselves, as expected, they are the characters who are satisfied at the end of the play. In the play’s denouement, while Creon is in anguish while grieving over the loss of his family, the guards simply “resume their places on steps as at the rise of the curtain, and begin to play cards” (53). To them, it is as if nothing has happened—they continue in their pleasure. The soldiers are the only major characters that Anouilh specifically points out as being satisfied at the end, and they are the only characters who put themselves first. In the end, the Chorus tells the audience that “none of this matters to [the guards]. It’s no skin off their noses” (53). The idiom means that everything that has happened does hurt someone, just not the soldiers. It has neither a positive nor a negative outcome for them. Because the soldiers are selfish, they do not have to care about how events impact others; all that matters to them is how events impact themselves.

The commonality between the characters who, at the end of the tragedy, are dissatisfied either mentally or physically is their sense of duty to people and groups other than themselves. Using the soldiers, Anouilh demonstrates to the audience that a sense of duty to oneself is the primary factor that contributes to one's happiness. Selfishness goes against the values of most world religions. But by being selfish, one can avoid being the victim of others' misfortunes.

(Word Count: 1202)

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