Antigone and Creon: A Comparison

Oftentimes, those that seem so opposite in their actions are in fact the most alike in their motivations. Sophocles’ play *Antigone* highlights this phenomenon through the characters of Antigone and Creon, two individuals who at first glance seem to be the antithesis of each other; and to some extent they are. Both figures hold diametrically opposed values on the moral spectrum, and both take a stand for two drastically different ideals. However, if one looks closely at these characters’ actions, one can discover that there are more similarities between them than first meets the eye.

Before looking closely at the similarities between the two main characters of *Antigone*, it is important to have a solid understanding of the context of the play. At the start of *Antigone*, Oedipus’ youngest daughter Antigone is distraught in hearing of Creon’s newly announced law that forbids the burial of her brother Polynices on the grounds that the man is a traitor to the state and is thus undeserving of proper burial rites. Spurred to action by this, Antigone decides to defy this law and bury her brother anyway, and in the process, condemn herself to death at the hands of the state. Creon is then faced with the decision on whether or not to follow through with his promise to kill those who break his new law. The ensuing interactions between Antigone and Creon, as well as with the other minor individuals in the play, help define more clearly exactly who these “opposite” characters truly are.

  The first major similarity between Antigone and Creon can ironically be derived from that which makes them appear so at ends with each other: their extreme commitment to their beliefs. Both characters have an iron sense of what is right, and stick to their respective ideas with a vice-like grip. In Antigone’s case, she goes to the grave clinging to the belief that her sense of moral justice was the right one. Her belief is that every human being, no matter their past grievances, is deserving of the right of a proper burial, something that goes directly against the principles held by Creon. His ideology revolves around the idea that everyone and everything should be in service to the state, and a lack of loyalty to the state is viewed as the greatest insult. Creon sees himself as equivalent to the state. Subsequently, everyone should be subservient to him and everything he says. While obviously the beliefs that these characters hold are opposite in their goals, the characters’ unwavering faith in their own beliefs ties them together.

  The next glaring similarity between Antigone and Creon is their inability and unwillingness to listen to criticisms of their beliefs or basic reasoning. For Antigone, this becomes obvious in her interactions with her sister Ismene, who attempts to persuade her younger sister to abandoned her foolish idea of defying Creon and burying their brother in favor of remaining silent and waiting out Thebe’s ruler’s tyrannical reign, claiming that they will “perish terribly if we violate law and try to cross the royal vote and power.” (ln 59-60). Antigone refuses to listen to Ismene, and instead follows through with her plan and buries Polynices. Creon behaves in a very similar fashion when listening to his son Haemon’s reasoning behind why his father’s behavior goes against what Haemon dubs basic human decency. Haemon speaks with wisdom and conviction beyond what his age might imply, however his father rejects everything that he says at every turn, exclaiming “At my age I’m to school my mind by his? This boy instructor is my master, then?” (ln 727-728). Creon exhibits his inability to listen to others again during his interaction with Teiresias. The old prophet comes to Creon to proclaim that his actions will lead to his own demise, and that he must stop what he has started through pardoning Antigone and abolishing his newly established law. Rather than heeding the counsel of Teiresias, Creon denounces the prophet, claiming that “the whole crew of seers are money-mad.” (ln 1055). Not listening to the advice of those close to them is what ultimately leads to both Creon and Antigone’s downfall, albeit in different ways.

  While their fundamental beliefs are polar opposite, there is one ideal that both Antigone and Creon hold dear: loyalty. For Antigone, this belief is shown through her interactions with her sister during the beginning of the play. After listening to Ismene’s pleas for her sister not to go through with burying their brother, Antigone ignores her and instead asks Ismene to accompany her in her forbidden task. When she refuses, Antigone disowns her sister, stating that “If that’s your saying, I shall hate you first, and next the dead will hate you in all justice.” (ln 93-94). Even after the deed is done and Ismene wishes to share in the blame when confronted by Creon in an attempt to possibly lessen the punishment towards her sister, Antigone will not recognize this wish. Instead, she calls her out on her lie, saying that “Death and the dead, they know whose act it was. I cannot love a friend whose love’s mere words.” (ln 542-544). Antigone’s vehement rejection of her sister after her lack of loyalty when first called upon is similar to the ideology that Creon holds in regard to loyalty to the state. His newly imposed law highlights his strong sense of loyalty in that it is targeted directly at those who oppose the beliefs of the state or who move against the state in any way. Again, as seen in the previous similarity, Antigone and Creon’s extreme loyalty contributes to the overall conclusion of the play, leading to each of their respective climactic falls.

Wisdom, or the lack thereof, is another aspect that both Antigone and Creon share. For the purpose of this comparison, wisdom will be defined as the capacity for self-knowledge and the ability to realize one’s own mistakes and take action to fix them. Both Antigone and Creon lack this quality throughout most of the play, with Creon finally realizing the error in his ways at the very end of the narrative. Antigone’s lack of wisdom shines through again during her scene with Ismene as well as when she is being taken away to her death. During this time, she refuses to admit to the extreme nature of her thought processes and thus save her life, and instead charges onward willingly, sticking to her moral values to the very end. If she were to have the self-recognition to realize that the extent to which she allowed herself to fall could have been stopped by simply speaking with Creon rather than maneuvering behind his back, she could have avoided her grisly end. Creon’s absence of wisdom is extremely evident during his conversation with his son. The high levels of wisdom displayed by Haemon, juxtaposed with Creon’s ineptitude and child-like attitude, make this absence unmistakable. The lack of wisdom by both characters is is easily one of the largest factors that drives the story to its conclusion, as this deficiency in self-awareness is the key factor in their inability to recognize their stubbornness that is pointed out by those around them at every turn.

  The final similarity between Antigone and Creon that is obvious upon observing each character closely is the way in which they think about situations and the reasoning behind people's actions. Both characters have a very black and white way of viewing the world, refusing to acknowledge the moral grey areas in which society functions. In both Antigone and Creon’s case, this flaw in their way of thinking becomes painfully obvious through their interactions with nearly every character in the play. For Antigone, when discussing with Ismene whether her sister will join her on her quest to bury their brother, her binary perspective is very evident. She refuses to acknowledge that there are any alternatives to her point of view, and that burying Polynices is the only logical option. Creon displays similar characteristics during his conversation with both Haemon and Teiresias, who both try to convince Creon to alter his twisted, one-way mindset that is destroying him and those he cares for.

  All of these similarities drive home the point that even if at a cursory glance two people seem to be as opposite in mannerisms as they could be, if one looks closely at their beliefs and their motivations behind their actions one can find parallels in several places. Sophocles illustrates this idea perfectly through his creation of Antigone and Creon, two characters who on paper should be nothing alike, but in reality, share more in common than most.