

### Examination Essay Writing

*'Rooted as it is in the fabric of social life, the play cannot avoid making some criticism, even if only obliquely.'*

*Have you found that the plays you have read vary from each other in the degree to which they present criticism of society? Consider the concerns of two or three authors in your answer.*

Anouilh's "Antigone" and Aristotle's "King Oedipus" both present varying degrees of social criticism. In 'Antigone', the role of the guards project the moral debasement of the society, which reflects the context in which the play was written. The major theme of following orders without independent judgment reflects the society at that time during the second world war and being impartial to the moral corruption and decay of their community. In 'King Oedipus', although to a lesser extent than in 'Antigone', Aristotle highlights the danger of complete dependence on an individual. Despite Oedipus Rex's apparent indestructibility, there is great human frailty in his character and indeed in every human being, and to invest too readily and eagerly in one particular individual, doctrine or personality can be dangerous. However, the overt criticism of society in 'Antigone' and the oblique criticism in 'King Oedipus' are only one theme in both these plays. There are more central themes that are particular to each play and in some cases the social criticism enhances and reinforces these themes.

In 'Antigone', the audience is introduced to the 'eternally innocent, eternally complacent' society. It is apparent that the society, in being 'eternally innocent', does not formulate a moral judgment or opinion to the laws and principles that they live under and therefore merely comply and get carried in the wave of popular consensus. The theme of blind subservience of society is evident when the citizens justice 'for the time being is the justice of Creon' and later Creon's justice is further undermined when he himself gets arrested. Anouilh directly attacks society for obeying all authority despite the fact that the present law may completely undermine human principles and breaches former laws and decrees. Through the passive and obedient society, Anouilh portrays a society that has no dignity and confidence the laws and decrees it was established upon and only believes in the might of absolute authority. However, this belief in absolute authority is not because of the righteousness of the leadership, but because of self-interest. This selfish pursuit of self-interest and advancement is reflected in the role of the guard, Jonas. He asserts that he is 'just [obeying] orders' and begins to list his honors when his life and title is threatened by Creon in scene two. The guard reflects the high corruption of values in

society to the extent of turning a blind eye to what is righteous and of human dignity, such as the proper burial of the dead..

In 'King Oedipus', Aristotle's criticisms of society are more subtle. The play opens with numerous citizens sitting in attitudes of supplication. As the old priest explains to Oedipus Rex the horrific situation that the country is in, it is apparent that society, from the old priests to the young children, revere Oedipus Rex almost as a god, 'the first of men'. It is also evident that they have total dependence that he will 'find some deliverance'. From then on, no citizen questions the authority of the king and his assumptions. The eventual fall of Oedipus Rex, from being the 'greatest of men' to his pathetic ending, highlights the human flaw inherent in every human being despite their apparent unbreakable character. Aristotle attacks the people for obeying and following too readily. The swift replacement of Oedipus Rex as king after the slaying of the Sphinx and the complete neglect of their former king Laius, illustrates the irresponsibility and disrespect of a society and how easily society is swayed by reward. Furthermore, this complete dependence and subservience to an individual may not only be fatal for those who are following, but also to the individual itself. As for Oedipus Rex, it was his obligation to the citizens to 'leave no way untried' and also the source and motivation of his pride, that led him to avidly pursue the death of Laius to his own destruction.

Social criticism is a particularly important theme in Anouilh's 'Antigone' as it reinforces the central themes of individual dignity and moral responsibility. Anouilh not only uses the role of the guards to accentuate this moral decay of society but also conveys these themes through the characters of Antigone and Creon. Antigone is adamant about her obligations to uphold her personal and familial integrities by burying her deceased brother. Creon, on the other hand, has no understanding and empathy for the depth of integrity, choosing instead to brush the matter off as 'merely a political scandal'. Creon clearly does not have the capacity to understand the fundamental human values that define an individual and society. Antigone becomes more affirmative to her decision to bury her brother, believing that 'what a person can do, a person ought to do'. She lives her life passionately and allows herself to take risks, however, Creon, reluctantly carries out his tedious routine of which he was 'forced' to doing. He represents over-

pragmatism and the reluctance of discovery and challenges which diminishes life to a tedious and oppressive journey.

In Aristotle's "Oedipus Rex", the main theme of societal subservience to King Oedipus feeds and develops the king's flaw-his pride. The central theme in "King Oedipus" is of temperament and the need to strike a balance between pragmatism and passion. Oedipus Rex ignored the signs that would lead to his own destruction, only wishing to 'pursue [the discovery] until death'. He let his passion of the blind pursuit of the truth consume him and the ones that he trusted and loved. In addition to Oedipus's pride, he was an extremely quick-tempered king and relied solely on his own capabilities, shunning out the advice of the shepherd, Teriestas, Creon and even Jocasta.

The both the endings of 'Antigone' and 'Oedipus Rex', the audience is left with a decision to make. In 'Antigone', we are to make a moral judgment of following the guards and Creon in believing that living a passionate and meaningful life as Antigone did was 'all dead: quite stiff, quite useless, quite rotten'. In 'King Oedipus', we are also to decide whether we are going to idolize ourselves and others to a point of destruction and blind submission. Both these plays criticize the particular society, however, these themes still gravitate significance in the modern society and through the themes projected, such as individual integrity, pride, pragmatism, we too are forced to see the flaws in our society and re-assess our positions and obligations to ourselves and community.