

Festivals of Dionysus

Religious festivals were celebrated in Athens to pay homage to the God Dionysus, the patron of wine. He brought joy and fun but rage and thoughtlessness too. This is similar to the effects of wine on people; wine makes people either happy or thoughtless. Dionysus died in winter and was reborn in spring. The festival took place for five days in spring to worship the rebirth of Dionysus and grape vines. In the mind of an ancient Greek person, the theatre was a product of Dionysus. Therefore Sophocles, when writing the play, included a scene of thanks to Dionysus which the chorus perform. This would have been interpreted by the Athenians as a noble inclusion and made Sophocles popular.

The festival evolved from the rural town of Dionysia. In the large cities dramatic performances took place. The dramatic element developed when competitions called for playwrights to design plays and showcase them at the festivals. Two popular forms of drama materialised from these competitions: Tragedy and comedy. Tragedies aimed to teach religious lessons. Sophocles was a tragic playwright and his play “Antigone” is an example of this. Comedies were seen as trivial and a waste of time to ancient Greeks. Comedies joked about the gods and intellectuals, albeit in a respectful manner.

The theatre in ancient Athens had the ability to teach moral lessons, inform of contemporary issues or amuse. It was a powerful tool and was used by governments/polis to influence people’s opinions and keep their populations up to date with current affairs. For this reason the government encouraged all men to go to the theatre. Those who could not afford to go were even offered free grants.

“Antigone” was aimed at an Athenian audience. The play showed the downfall of man and highlighted how bad Thebes was. Athens was a democracy whilst Thebes was under dictatorship. Men visiting the theatre would see how oppressive the life of a Theban was thus increasing support for democracy. This mattered to the local polis because if the people were against a party’s ideas they would not be elected in further terms.

Role of Women in Society

A woman was meant to be obedient to the ruling man in her life. Once a girl reached thirteen years of age she was negotiable for marriage. Women in Athens were devoid of rights. They could not go out of the house unless it was to see another woman and could not vote or influence the government. Women were not allowed to go to the theatre. The reason women were treated with so much injustice is because they were viewed by men as uncontrollable and wild. However women did play an important part of everyday Athenian life as they ran the house. In some ways men were indebted to women.

Although women were generally viewed in this light, the audience of Antigone were ambivalent as to which way they viewed her. Antigone articulates the fears of every Athenian male. She is uncontrollable, untrustworthy. In this way Antigone would have been received negatively in the eyes of an ancient Greek man. However she stands for issues which Athens support such as democracy and the importance of a proper burial. Athenians had deep rooted hate for dictatorship, therefore when Antigone goes against Creon she would have won support for her character. There is ambiguity into which way the audience would have sided, but this was planned. The ambiguity forces the audience to think about the issues and politics of the play.

A society at war

As “Antigone” was being created a war was unfolding in the Peloponnese area. This was occurring as a result of a long dispute between the alliances of Sparta and Athens. Thebes was one of Sparta’s allies, thus was against Athens. Sophocles might use Thebes as the setting of the play as Athenians were against the city thus building more support for the city of Athens. The issue of war was contemporary, therefore the Athenian government would have wished to have it discussed in Athens’s favour at the amphitheatre.

Sophocles and fellow Athenian men would have no doubt been adversely affected by the war. Sophocles might be trying to show that there are undesirable affects from a war. After all, the incidents did start off when Polynices attacked Athens. Therefore, Sophocles might be trying to show that the war affects not only a nation as a whole but individual circumstances such as families and relationships.

In an Athenian audience, Creon might have been viewed negatively given the fact that he was against everything that Athens stood for; Athens was a democracy whilst Thebes was an Oligarchy. An Oligarchy is a government ruled by a few influential members and is the opposite to a democracy. When Creon goes against the rules of the gods, the audience would have interpreted this negatively. Although he punished Antigone for going against his word, which might have won him support, the “crime” he is punishing her for is not a crime but an action of respect for the dead.

The Influence of the Gods

Zeus was the final son of Cronus and Rhea. The other children, upon birth, were swallowed by their father, Cronus, as he was afraid they would overcome him. However, when Zeus was born he was hidden by his mother inside a cave, and Cronus was given a rock, disguised as a baby, to swallow. When Zeus grew up, he ordered his father to regurgitate the stone and his siblings. The male children overcame Cronus and divided up the world. Zeus became the God of Gods for doing what was right, and received the skies and the heavens. Poseidon and Hades received the sea and the underworld respectively. As Zeus was the king of Gods he was worshipped by all. Zeus was revered and respected for if he was not, he was known out of anger to throw bolts of lightning to the ground. Just the mention of going against Zeus would have caused outcry.

Antigone shows reverence to Hades, god of the underworld. Hades role was to ensure entry to the underworld occurred rightfully. It was believed when a Greek person died they crossed the river of Acheron, river of life, from the banks of life to the banks of death by boat. In order to traverse the river they had to be given their rites, buried and have a coin under their tongue to pay the boat’s captain, Charon. This job was carried out by women and is the reason why Antigone feels so passionately about burying her brother. If a person was left unburied or lacked the coin under their mouth, they would roam the banks of life and could not cross to the banks of death. Therefore when Polynices is not buried he is left to roam the lands, so Antigone goes to give him the burial he deserves.

The Playwright

Sophocles was one of Ancient Greece’s greatest playwrights. The reason that Sophocles was such a good playwright is because he had an ability to rebel conventional drama and produce plays that provoke debate. In Antigone, he gives the genuine thoughts and feelings of women in ancient Greece, which must have been difficult seeing as men and women were so detached. Apart from being a playwright, Sophocles was a politician and an Athenian General. He played an active part against the allies of Sparta in the Peloponnesian war and was a hero for Athens. Antigone’s base is war, the war fought between two brothers, between family members or father and son. As Sophocles had so much experience in war this story would have greatly appealed to him.

The Oedipus Curse

Oedipus is cursed to wed his mother and kill his father. The curse is a result of Oedipus’ father raping a young boy. Oedipus fulfills the curse and impregnates his mother with four children. When Oedipus finds out what he has done he blinds himself and his wife/mother commits suicide. Oedipus then abdicates his role as king to his two sons, Eteocles and Polynices. Prior to the play, the curse is inherited by the sons as a manifestation of jealousy; both wish to be king but cannot. They decide that every year they will alternate who is monarch. Eteocles is first to rule for one year but will not hand over power when Polynices’ turn arrives. A fight ensues and the brothers kill each other.

An audience, upon learning the characters were descendants of the incestuous Oedipus, would have perceived Antigone and her sister as filthy, cursed individuals. The audience would expect the characters to commit grave and shocking crimes. The audience's expectations come true when Antigone disobeys Creon. However, Creon might have also been expected to fail as he was Oedipus' brother. When Sophocles makes the characters do what the audience expect, the audience would have interpreted this as curses never die and are inherited by one's family. The audience would have evoked a response of fear.

The Life and Times of a greek citizen

Men were either politicians, farmers or fighters whilst women brought up the family and helped religious festivals. This extraneous work and the lack of medicinal resources meant that people had a short life span. Even healthy people could die prematurely by an illness or disease. To combat this citizens ate healthy and exercised. A meal was simple but full of vitamins, vegetables and oil. The family of an Athenian was very important and was built on love. Therefore, when the Athenian audience saw the feuds in Antigone's Theban family, the royal family, they would have been disgusted to think people were being led by such a bad example. Thebes was located inland whilst Athens was located near the sea. This made Athens' naval fleet useless when it came to attacking Thebes, whilst Thebes' naval fleet caused havoc on Athens. Argos is located south of both Thebes and Athens, near the sea and was a neutral territory. Greece at this time would have been a nation under war. Greece's people would have been proud of their territory yet scared of invasion. Athens, Argos and Thebes were in the Peloponnese area.