

Nadezhda Mushkovskaia. 003257-015

How is the theme of death portrayed in “Antigone” and “The Outsider”?

Death is presented to the audience as a form of punishment, in both The Outsider and Antigone. But the protagonists in the two texts develop different attitudes towards death. Antigone anticipates her own death from the opening scene and faces it bravely, but her confidence wanes after she is sentenced by Creon and she begins to appreciate what she will lose. Meursault, on the other hand, is surprised and horrified when the court decides his punishment, but towards his conclusion of the story he accepts it.

In the opening scene of Antigone, Antigone announces to the audience and her sister Ismene, her determination to bury her brother: “Be as you will; but I will bury him”<sup>1</sup>. According to Creon’s laws, this is a crime to be punished by death, whereas for Antigone, the consequences of not burying her brother are worse than dying. Antigone shows clear awareness of the consequences of disobeying Creon’s edict: “I knew I must die – how could I not?”<sup>2</sup>, and therefore her confidence makes her an extremely courageous character. By the use of this rhetorical question, Antigone makes it plain that there is no other way. Her reasons for disobeying Creon include pleasing the Gods: “I know that I am pleasing those I should most please”<sup>3</sup>. Antigone defends her actions on behalf of her *philos*.<sup>4</sup> She explains the importance of pleasing her *philos* as well as the Gods of the underworld. By the use of word “most” she prioritizes her *philos* and the Gods above Creon. Antigone does not see herself as a criminal, and emphasizes that it is only Creon who will consider her a criminal. She states that she is “guilty of the crime of holy reverence”<sup>5</sup>. This highlights Antigone’s morality, and at the same time works

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<sup>1</sup> Antigone, pg 7, line 63.

<sup>2</sup> Antigone, pg 35, lines 424-425.

<sup>3</sup> Antigone, pg 9, lines 79-80.

<sup>4</sup> Antigone, pg2, *Philos* is a loved one (including close family and friends), plural form is *philo*.

<sup>5</sup> Antigone, pg 7, line 65.

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against Creon in the eyes of the audience. Antigone is initially depicted to have no fear of her own death and this is further demonstrated through her feeling that her death could be to her advantage. She accepts her death with equanimity: “to meet this fate is no pain at all”<sup>6</sup>. Sophocles crafts Antigone’s philosophical reasoning as a way for the audience to admire and agree with her rather than with Creon’s laws. The *stichomythia*<sup>7</sup> between Creon and Antigone serves to present the opposing views of both characters and their certainty of the righteousness of their actions. Through Antigone’s reasoning, the audience is persuaded that for her, there can be no alternative solution but her death. Sophocles has Antigone reach the conclusion that there will be honor in her death. Antigone firmly decides that her situation offers no alternatives: “for I will suffer nothing as bad as an ignoble death”<sup>8</sup>. It can be therefore deduced that Antigone takes her actions rationally and, initially, meets her death with composure.

Unlike Antigone, who knowingly chooses to do actions that will inevitably lead to her own death and then faces it with self-control and pride, neither Meursault nor his lawyer anticipate that Meursault’s punishment could be death. Meursault is therefore taken unawares by his death sentence and at first reacts in a shocked manner. In contrast to Antigone, Meursault goes to jail for the murder of an Arab. Meursault does not regret his crime, nor does he sympathize with his victim. He regards his crime in a manner that seems divorced from any thought of the consequences of his actions. During Meursault’s sentencing, the lawyer was “convinced the outcome would be favourable”<sup>9</sup>, so when

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<sup>6</sup> Antigone, pg 35, lines 428-429.

<sup>7</sup> Antigone, pg 40, *Stichomythia* is a dialogue with one line exchanges between characters.

<sup>8</sup> Antigone, pg 9, lines 87-88.

<sup>9</sup> The Outsider, pg 102.

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Meursault heard his verdict, he “stopped thinking altogether”<sup>10</sup>. This vacant reaction is conveying shock. It is the first time throughout The Outsider, that Meursault is shown to be caught unawares. Further, Meursault experiences irrational moments when he would “feel dreadfully cold... teeth would be chattering uncontrollably”<sup>11</sup>. Through this imagery, the author successfully conveys Meursault’s feeling of terror regarding his future. Meursault is extremely anxious about his own death, occupying his mind with “trying to escape from the mechanism, trying to find if there is a way out of the inevitable”<sup>12</sup>. He is on the verge of a mental breakdown and to remain sane he makes an “effort to divert [his] thoughts”<sup>13</sup>. Meursault’s reaction is the opposite of Antigone’s who initially accepts her consequences with composure. Furthermore, there is a distinction between Antigone’s and Meursault’s reasons for being sentenced to death; Antigone is punished for disobeying Creon while Meursault is punished for not following society’s social norms.

Once Antigone starts to consider what she will lose by dying young, there is a change in her attitude towards death. She shifts from acceptance to becoming sad at the thought of “Looking at the sun for the last time”<sup>14</sup>. She regrets having “had no share in the hymns of [her] marriage procession”<sup>15</sup>. This conveys Antigone’s regret at not having a chance to get a new start in life by getting married. She will also have no chance to do what other women take for granted, create a new life. Antigone reflects upon her life of

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<sup>10</sup> The Outsider, pg 103.

<sup>11</sup> The Outsider, pg 106.

<sup>12</sup> The Outsider, pg 104.

<sup>13</sup> The Outsider, pg 108.

<sup>14</sup> Antigone, pg 61, line 760.

<sup>15</sup> Antigone, pg 61, line 764-765.

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misery and feels sorry for herself as she would “go unwept by loved ones”<sup>16</sup>. She feels depressed dying, but is not shown to regret her crime. Sophocles intends to present Antigone as an ordinary woman; despite her atypically strong will, she is still vulnerable and experiences the natural emotions of depression regarding her early death. By describing Antigone as capable of such emotions, the audience can relate to her and have a closer involvement with the events happening on stage. She is the sympathetic character in Sophocles’ Antigone.

After thorough reasoning, Meursault comes to the logical conclusion that he should accept his own death. His prime reason is "Given that you've got to die, it obviously doesn't matter exactly how or when"<sup>17</sup>, he justifies this by suggesting "people would forget about me once I was dead"<sup>18</sup>. As in relationships, Meursault takes an existentialist approach and distances himself from his execution. He reasons from his experience, he stops longing for Marie after not seeing her for a while, and expects Marie will feel the same once he was dead. Meursault's logic is opposite to Antigone's, as he does not believe in the afterlife and decides that longing for a life he could not experience is a waste of time. Here we can see how Camus has presented Meursault to be a genuine outsider, how Meursault's attitude is completely divorced from to society's reckoning. This is in contrast to Antigone who adheres to societal expectations.

At the final moment before death, Antigone describes herself as “led in misery”<sup>19</sup>. She is very sad about not having experienced life in the way other women do, but looks optimistically to the afterlife. She calls upon the Gods to pity her and to “See what [she]

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<sup>16</sup> Antigone, pg 63, line 804.

<sup>17</sup> The Outsider, pg 109.

<sup>18</sup> The Outsider, pg 110.

<sup>19</sup> Antigone, pg 65, line 846.

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suffer[s], and at whose hands”<sup>20</sup>. This, again, helps to reinforce Antigone’s humanity, and is in contrast with Meursault’s attitude.

Just before he dies, Meursault realizes that his “mother must have felt liberated and ready to live her life again”<sup>21</sup> when she was close to death. It is paradoxical that the time closest to death is the time when people can feel most free. Meursault found himself “open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world”<sup>22</sup>. This oxymoron helps convey Meursault’s understanding that people often lie about what they are feeling to be accepted in society, and may pretend to care when they really do not. He also “realized that [he]’d been happy, and that [he] was still happy”<sup>23</sup>. In his final moments, Meursault wished for “a crowd of spectators at [his] execution and that they should greet [him] with cries of hatred”<sup>24</sup> which would represent their honesty as it is obvious that people do not understand him and therefore do not accept him in the society. This once again helps to reinforce Meursault’s unnatural behavior towards death and how the majority of people would not understand his logic, which is the reason he is condemned in the first place.

Both Meursault and Antigone change their perspectives about facing their deaths as their stories develop. Antigone’s attitude changes from acceptance to depression. At first she reasons that her death is noble and heroic but as the play develops her reasoning leads her to feel regret and to long for a life of experiences impossible in the underworld. Meursault’s attitude changes from panic to indifference. He is initially stunned by his verdict but eventually reasons his way into acceptance. By comparing Sophocles’

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<sup>20</sup> Antigone, pg 69, line 907.

<sup>21</sup> The Outsider, pg 117.

<sup>22</sup> The Outsider, pg 117.

<sup>23</sup> The Outsider, pg 117.

<sup>24</sup> The Outsider, pg 117.

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Antigone with Camus’ Meursault, it can be concluded that there is no single appropriate way to react to one’s own death. Both authors also present the idea that the initial reaction may not be the same as the way in which death is finally faced. Words: 1465.

**Bibliography:**

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