

English – World Literature Essay

Does the motivation of tyrants differ in Sophocles' *Antigone* and Lorca's *The House of Bernada Alba*?

Thesis Statement: Although the outcomes are the same, the motivations of Creon and Bernada Alba are fundamentally different.

Tyrannical characters are common in plays; Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is an oft-cited example, and tyranny runs through literature as a theme as far back as Plato's *The Republic*. Both the plays I will be studying here examine tyranny, and in both, the easily-identifiable tyrant is an important character in the plot. Both *Antigone's* Creon and the eponymous Bernada Alba are displayed as people as well as rulers, and this allows us to look at their motivation and drive. I will endeavour to demonstrate the contrast, and perhaps the similarity, in the motivations of these two characters.

Creon is the recently-appointed Ruler of Thebes at the time *Antigone* is set. The city is just emerging from a period of war with Argos, in which the brothers Polyneices and Eteocles were slain. Creon declares that Eteocles, who fought on the side of Thebes, be buried with full ceremony, but Polyneices, who commanded the opposing army, of Argos, must not be. Antigone relates this to Ismene in the first act, lines 21-38. We can see that from the very beginning of the play, Creon is shown to have a harsh side to his rule. In Ancient Greek times, not burying a corpse was a grave punishment to bestow on a person (meaning that they cannot reach the afterlife), and Creon would be defying the gods in his defiance. Even Ismene, who is sympathetic to the law of the state, calls Creon's command a "dictator's decree".

Creon's first appearance on stage is soon to follow: a long speech (lines 162-210). In it, he puts forward a somewhat different view of himself; he declares that the true test of a person is in their ability to rule, and that honesty and good policies are important. He also decries nepotism: "But its even worse when he plays favourites/Puts family or friends ahead of fatherland". Essentially, Sophocles is trying to give the impression that Creon wants to be a good ruler. However, his iron will is made sorely apparent. Both translations I am studying use language such as "I will never", "Never, while I rule", "Such are my laws", that highlight his determination and resolve, in a brutish unforgiving way.

This strength of character is not necessarily a good trait however; his intense desire, perhaps, to be a good ruler and not bow who he considers criminals, leads him into some very sticky situations. On lines 280-285, his anger is apparent when the Chorus suggest that the gods were behind Polyneices' burial, something he considers unacceptable. Toward the middle of the play (line 441), Antigone and Creon meet for the first time on stage, and the clash of characters is readily apparent: "And yet you dared to violate these laws?", Creon finds it hard to believe that anyone could do this; his sees his role as leader to mean that his commands are unbreakable. Antigone rebukes him: "What laws? I never heard it was Zeus/Who made that announcement ... You, a mere human being." She puts him in his place, though all this can suffice to effect is Creon's greater rage to follow. Indeed, his 'quest' for justice is distorted through this rage and leads to his equal condemnation for Ismene, who has done nothing against his wishes.

In the same section, Creon says "Listen, if she's not punished for taking the upper hand/Then I am not a man." He is desperately trying to retain authority, and this may indeed

lead to his later actions: Antigone, by criticising his rule ("And it wasn't justice either"), pointing out his tyrannical suppression of the Chorus ("They all see it the same. You have silenced them"), has made him look weak, and believing himself to be the rightful leader and believing he can be a good leader, he acts rashly in order to maintain control.

His belief in the sanctity of the ruler's command is expressed fully on lines 666-7: "But when the city takes a leader, you must obey/Whether his commands are trivial, or right, or wrong." (Some editors however, question the accuracy of these lines). But later: "A city belongs to its leader. Isn't that the rule?". These quotes are all from his debate with Haemon over the moral of leadership. While he may be saying such things to impress his son, to, like in his first speech, provoke the image of a wise leader: ("Anarchy tears up a city...For this reason, order must be maintained"), he lets the façade slip with comments such as "Never say that a woman bested us!". This revealing line best showcases his real motivation: fear of appearing weak.

Bernada Alba is another such tyrant, and although her sphere of influence is smaller than Creon's, she commands as much respect as he does, in her own domain.

Her tyranny over her daughters is much more subtle than Creon's outright commands. Though she does shout at her daughters, and is often brusque with Poncia, her control over them is wrought in a different manner to Creon's; he commands with decrees and threats made through anger or rage, whereas Bernada bosses the inhabitants of the house around with an arrogant self-righteousness. She looks upon her family as if it was pre-determined that they should defy her, where Creon would believe that no-one could defy him.

Bernada's reason for her tyrannical control over her household is somewhat apparent; she wants to appear as the paragon of society, not at all touched by a whisper of scandal. This is mostly cleanly summed up as the play finishes (no doubt Lorca's intention): "dress her as if she were a virgin." This constant preoccupation with social outlook is perhaps comparable to Creon's fear of his own weakness.

To sum up the two characters in terms of similarities and differences is not as straightforward as it might initially seem. Creon, brought to power after the successful reign of Oedipus and earlier Laius, has a lot to live up to; he tries to be a good ruler, fair and honest. This is in contrast to Bernada, who knows the control she wants over her household and family. For both characters however, the grapes turn sour in similar fashions: Creon's drive to control the situation is comparable to Bernada's attempts to maintain her family's dignity and reputation by interfering. In the end, much similar results are achieved.

I believe that despite this, the characters approach their tyrannical nature from different ends of a spectrum. At one end, Bernada is, although I don't want to use the word evil, certainly cruel in her lack of regard for the girl's feelings faced with public perception. Creon however, sits in the unenviable position of being forced to defend his decision where his own stubbornness will not let him relent (until it is too late). Bernada's motivation is borne of her own negative character traits, specifically her desire to control. Creon's is drawn from his debatably positive character traits of determination and force of will.