

CONFLICT OVER BURIAL OF THE DEAD: ANALYSIS OF SOPHOCLES' ANTIGONE AND ROBERT FROST'S "HOME BURIAL"

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ABSTRACT

We don't always need giant issues, events, wars, national and international conflicts and catastrophes to reflect upon the culture, history and politics of a society at a given time and place. Routine and domestic issues are potentially possible to become terrific point of reference to debate and reflect larger concerns governing society and cultures. This essay analyzes how a routine, fundamental subject of burial of the dead creates conflicting discourses on relative position of law, religion and passions in different culture and how it leads to generate critical debate on women status, their efforts for identity, man-woman contrary response to death/burial and husband –wife relationship with reference to two literary texts of Sophocles' Antigone and Frost's "Home Burial".

Keywords: Religion, law, conflict in Sophocles's *Antigone*, religion, passions, Death in Frost's "Home Burial"

INTRODUCTION

Undisputedly religion has remained integral part of human culture and civilization. Literary works of the ancient Greeks provide an exhilarating account of the role of religion, law in the civic life of its citizens and scores of studies have brought forward the predominant religious factor, preponderance of gods and their unwritten injunctions concerning human affairs and cosmology (Sourvinou-Inwood, 2009, Seaford, 2009, Cartledge, 1997, Mikalson, 1991). Mikalson in his study analyses various religious elements that made regular appearance on Greek the tragic stage and reference are made to suppliant scenes, divine interventions, divination, burial rites, oaths, and other such areas. Sourvinou-Inwood (2009) in her detailed analysis of the nature of religion in Greek tragedy discusses theatre as a mode of ritual performances (10) and "that the rites, gods, and other religious elements in the tragedies were perceived to be representations of part of the audiences' religious realities" (10). However, she also points out the indeterminate nature of the religion in Greek civic life and art. "Unlike Christianity", writes Sourvinou- Inwood, "Greek religion did not have a canonical body of belief, no divine revelations, nor scriptural texts, only some marginal sects had sacred books" (8). The only guidance therefore available was "through prophecy: and indeed various cities consulted the oracles on cultic matters. But, while gods always spoke the truth, human fallibility could intervene and falsify the deity's words, and so the Greek could never be certain that a particular prophecy was true" (9). Next to religion, law was also closely associated with theatrical performances in Greek tragedy (Allen, 2005) and Fletcher (2008) writes that some of the most authoritative speech acts were collectively voiced by citizens in the legislative assembly and law courts" (10) and when "tragedy mirrors the legislative processes of Athenian democracy, it make the heroic world of mythology more familiar and accessible to the fifth century citizen audiences" (1). *Antigone* writes Fletcher holds a special place in any consideration of the representation of law in tragedy since it poses disturbing questions about the possibility of language to create law in tragedy and force and specifically . . . about the role of citizenry to create law" (1). Theoretically Law refers to totalitarian political order/system established not necessarily in conflict with general religious commands and injunctions. But it denotes political power and authority of the king in the state. Greek tragedy also provides significant interaction between law, religion and theatre. Aeschylus' *Orestia*, for instance refers to settlement of a private dispute, role of gods and arbitration and law for settlement of private dispute (Cartledge, 1997: 22). But it needs to be emphasized that "legal practices of Athens are not in its

drama in any simplistic or merely self regulatory manner. Law is represented as a complicated and sometimes precarious power” (Fletcher, 2008).

Modernism on the other hand implies rise of secularism, decline in the role of faith/religion in individual/communal life (Karim and Butt 2011), and greater stress on individualism, spiritual crises and religious scepticism. Law making on the other hand has been shifted to elected/constitutional bodies to make it more equitable and universally applicable to all citizens of the state. The study analyses Frost’s “Home Burial” as a reflection of religious scepticism and crises as prevalent in the modern age.

Religion, Law and Passions in *Antigone*

Conflict in *Antigone* involves religion, law and passions. After the fall of Oedipus’ children (Eteocles and Polyneices) in the civil war, Creon assumes the royal authority as well as parental responsibility to look after Oedipus’ daughter Ismene and Antigone. The administrative system established is strictly autocratic and demands indubitable obedience from the masses in all matters “Little or great, just or unjust (*Antigone*: 610). His despotism extends to regulating even customary human affairs like burial of the dead and penalty for violator of the order. His instructions are that one of the killed brother Polyneices is not worthy of honoured burial for his unholy act of invading the city of his fathers. He therefore decrees that the wretched body of Polyneices “shall lie unmourned, unwept, unsepulchered / sweet will he seem to the vultures when they find him / a welcome feast that they are eager for (*Antigone* 28-30). He has also decreed a ruthless retribution of stoning to death for the one who offends his law / authority. Eteocles on the contrary is given appropriate burial for siding with the royal forces in defence of the city. But being a part of the religiously cultured society, he is deeply cognizant of the fact that mere legality of the order would not stay long and that he must have god’s commands to support his orders and make it permanently effectual and acceptable to the citizens. Therefore he tries to bring forth certain general religious commands governing the state, inviolability and sacredness of the temples. He terms it his ethical, religious and lawful responsibility to guard the city and refers to the religious injunction to defend temples of gods against all the invaders and the one who attempts to disgrace the temples. He refuses to believe that gods would ever sustain the one who comes with clear goals to debase their temples and cause bloodshed. In answer to the guard’s statement that gods must have buried the dead Polyneices, Creon angrily replies:

You say the gods
Cared for this corpse. Then was it for reward,
Mighty to match his mighty services
That the gods covered him? He who came to burn
Their pillared temples and their votive offerings
Ravage their lands, and trample down the state
Or is it your opinion that gods
Honor the wicked? Inconceivable! (*Antigone* 258- 265)

Antigone refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the orders and moves ahead to inter the body of the killed brother. The decision is not only contrary to what Creon orders, but also is a blend of views involving love for the brother, passions and obedience to religious compulsion. She refuses to agree to point that gods will hold up such a type of punishment as decreed by Creon. On the contrary and in response to the charge of violating king’s law in burying her brother, Antigone declares, “Yes. For this law was not proclaimed by Zeus/ Or by gods who rule the world below”. She passionately argues that gods themselves command honoured burial to the dead, “I don not think that your edicts have such powers/ that they can override the laws of heaven” (*Antigone*: 409-410). In spirited defence of right to inter the dead body, she draws unambiguous line of division between the king’s law and the laws of heaven that must overrule all other laws. Clearly a defiance based on self righteousness is there and fill her with audacity to face untimely death, “For me to face death is a trifling pain/That does not trouble me” (*Antigone*: 424-425). She feels it greater loss to allow the dead body remain

unhurried, “But to have left/the body of my brother, my own brother/lying unburied would be bitter grief” (*Antigone*: 427-428).

Thus the fundamental dispute in the play is not between an absolute autocrat and a defiant/rebellious woman, but between two different interpretations of religious aspects and injunctions. Creon’s allusion to religious injunction forbidding the burial highlights the general and non benevolent side of religion, something that is solely concerned with the right of the supernatural powers like gods, their temples and state. Antigone on the other hand alludes to more specific religious injunction regarding burial and gods’ annoyance on the desecration dead body. Her standpoint carries superior humanistic appeal and stand for the pre-eminence of right of individual in accordance with unambiguous religious injunctions regarding honor to the dead and therefore her stance wins over initially hesitant Chorus to her side. It appears more acceptable to gods who honour blood relationship and respect to the dead over and above something that is concerned with themselves/ their temples and the state. Creon’s argument that he would not allow burial of the one who attempted to dishonour temples and devastate the state serves to highlight certain limitations of his approach and develops into a dispute between the general and specific application of religious injunctions. Its basic weakness lies in the fact that it ignores the right of the human dead and therefore essentially humanistic aspects and human obligation to fellow beings and blood relationing. In fact it brings right of the dead human directly in clash with the right of the all powerful supernatural beings. But politically it serves an important function and help Creon in perpetuating his rule and autocracy in the city state. As commented above, ruling in a democratic city state with variable, but definite belief in religion he needed religious sanction behind his act to win public approval. Its chief limitation lies in the fact that it refers to general application of religious order regarding desecration of temples and punishment accorded to the offender. This application of religious order lacks humanistic element of ignoring the right of the dead to be given honoured burial irrespective of his political affiliations. It also ignores familial emotional bonds that could lead to violation of this general injunction. It also ignores that fact that women in Greek polity were traditionally associated with mourning and playing “a major role in funerary ritual” (Murnaghan, 2009: 248). In tragedy “lamentation is a leading speech genre of female characters, and the plays contain a large number of laments, in which women’s expression of loss raise broader, difficult issues or precipitate new catastrophes” (2009: 248). In *Antigone* for instance writes Murnaghan, “Antigone goes to her death lamenting for her self, mourning in particular her last chance of marriage and motherhood, and so underscores the injustice of her punishment by Creon” (Murnaghan, 2009: 249). Sometimes, the intensity of lamentations could be “subversive or disruptive force, incorporating social protest or inspiring vengeance” (Murnaghan, 2009: 248). Its limitation also lies in the fact that due to his autocratic inclinations, he refuses to pay heed to voices of dissent against his orders in the public and within the family. Haemon speaks eloquently in support of Antigone and even calls his father over rigid and advices him to listen to others. Chorus initially supports Creon’s stance of rule of the law over any other matter, but later it pleads Creon to be considerate to Haemon’s request for respect for the dead. Limitations of Creon’s specific stance or his preference of general over specific injunctions is also obvious in god’s ultimate displeasure after his orders, “Your edict brings sufferings to the state/ for every hearth of ours has been defiled”. They have refused to accept sacrifices and “the flames of our burnt offerings” at the temples. Finally, Creon’s limited notion of application of religion is also obvious in the fact that he stresses on only the punitive aspect of religion. Had he paid to benevolent part of divine injunction regarding honoured burial, he would have saved his house and state from utter ruination and discord.

Antigone’s standpoint contrarily mirrors specific and more humane side of application of religious injunction regarding human dignity, dignity of the dead. She alludes to specific religious injunctions of burial to all those killed/dead in the land. Antigone asserts that she has not broken any heavenly law, “what is the law of heaven that I have broken” (*Antigone*: 853), rather she asserts that she is being taken and pushed to the doom “Because to the laws of heaven I held fast” (*Antigone*: 875). Antigone’s stance is also reflection of pre-eminence of passions over the political law. Traditions required her to passionately mourn and honor the dead in the family. She has done it in the past and the emergent situation requires her to act similarly once again. She is confident that the deceased family members would receive her happily as she goes to Hades after the burial act:

Yet high are the hopes I cherish that my coming
Will be most welcome to my father; welcome
Mother, to you; and welcome to you brother.
For when you died I ministered to you all
With my own hands washed you and dressed your bodies
And poured libations at your graves, and now
Because I have given to you, too Polynices
Such honors as I could, I am brought to this.
(*Antigone*: 827-834)

Antigone's position is also more inclined to humane and benevolent part of gods will and injunctions. She prefers to undergo punishment instead of desecrating the dead and letting his body consumed by the animals and beats. But it obviously brings her into conflict with the Law. Her heroism lie in facing the totalitarian order, valuing traditional obligation over blind observance of a political law, abiding by the passions and valuing more specific humane aspects of religion and god's commandments. One key reason behind Antigone's choice to stress the religious justification for proper burial could be identified in the fact that only religion as in vogue through unwritten injunctions gave woman a chance to parity in Greek Polity. So her recourse to religion in the matter of burial was in fact an attempt to seek parity in otherwise patriarchal social order. Finally the refusal to abide by what totalitarian rule decrees, Antigone prefers to choose underground imprisonment for her self. Two factors need to be debated here. Firstly her whole conduct as she is taken in captivity is marred by lamentation unusual for a woman who had expressively revolted against the political orders of a despot. The choice to resist the commands of the king and publicly express her audacity was her own, but her lamentation on path to imprisonment reflects a typical feminine aspect of her personality in the face of distressing situation. She appeals to the chorus, "See me, my countrymen! See with what pain /I tread the path I shall not tread again" (*Antigone*: 753-754). Her lamentation in fact assumes close parallel with departure of a bride to her ultimate destination (marriage bed) and leads to develop parallel between marriage and death. Usually such occasion are occasioned by songs from the relatives and parents. But Antigone is found complaining, "Unwept, unfriended, without marriage song/Forth on my road I miserable am led". Later she is found repeating the same idea, "no bridal song/no share in the joys of marriage, and no share /in nursing children, and in tending them. Emily Dickinson's "I could not stop for Death" is comparable to this correspondence between death and marriage, but with different intentions. Free from lamentation and expressive resistance to the punishment, the narrator in Dickinson's poem equates the process of dying with marriage. Here bridal house and the grave are synonymous, but with clear intentions to project negative aspects of marriage for an independent 19th century woman. The poet has plainly used the language of love, romance and courtship to talk not about marriage but about liberation from bonds of traditional marriage that confines her domestic labours and leisure. Here death appears as a personified gentleman to take her away from this traditional living towards independence from worldly conventions. She politely refers to the civility of the personified death and through the imagery of carriage, and the slow movement of the carriage in the company of the gentleman (death) suggest that conventional life/ living so far has been like a slow movement towards death. The narrator provides us a catalogue of different sites that they pass to reach ultimate destination of grave in the grave yard. They pass by a school; a farmland and the setting sun till she reaches the "GROUND" symbolizing grave; each suggest a phase in her life in the past bands present and assert close parallel between conventional married living and death.

Conflict in "Home Burial"

Robert Frost is a universally acclaimed great literary voice that American literary culture produced over the years His poetic art, "Rarely given credit during his lifetime for his ideas about poetic form and technique, he was nevertheless a primary force in the American poetic renaissance that took place after 1910 (Reiner, 1987). In his critical essay "Robert Frost and a New Tradition:" His "Incalculable" Influence on Others , Barron argues that the way Frost combined a Wordsworthian Romantic aesthetic with modern scepticism makes him representative of, and a major influence on,

contemporary American poetry (Barron, 1994). There is no doubt a great deal of controversy surrounds the exact nature and temper of his poetry (Faggen 2001: 5) and his poetic art defies any standardized interpretation. He himself has warned his readers of not to stop with “obvious associations” in his poetry and always go for “further implications” (qtd in Bacon, 2001: 75). Bacon acknowledging the complexity of implications in Frost’s poetry writes that critical readers have always discovered many forms of thoughts ranging from bible to include theological, philosophical and scientific thoughts “of an increasingly global world” (Bacon 2001: 75). This assertion can not be disputed as his poetry represents adherence to such diverse areas as classical pastoral traditions (Bacon, 2001: 75-101) New England regionalism, (Buell, 2001: 101-123) and deeper reflective/meditative aspects (Paker, 2001: 179-197) in his poetic art. Oster further warns us that mere recognition of the multiplicity of meanings in Frost’s poems is not sufficient in itself to help us understand what Frost means to express (2001: 161). The poem, he writes, “encompasses more we would probably all agree, but we would have trouble agreeing on, or even identifying the exact line where we began to feel those larger meanings_ life and death, the risks and the costs and joys of love, or art . . .” (2001: 161). The supreme art of Frost, he writes, “lie preciously in the way it blurs the distinctions between concrete fact and imagination, between catching us up in the experience of the poem and forcing us to contemplate it in a more detached manner - the same tension, of course, between experience and contemplation that is every where in the poem (2001: 161). Frost’s use of metaphor also plays principal role in creating multiplicity of meanings. “One could also relate”, writes Oster “the image of radiating to frost’s metaphor of a poet’s getting his ideas to ‘flash out new’ like quicksilver rolling in a dish” (2001: 166).

But the most unequivocal part of Frost’s poetry lies in its astute representation of dilemmas and problems in modern age. In fact Frost’s poetry exposes spiritual turmoil, absence of divine order; break down of values in modern life and the disillusionment of the modern life and modern man in metaphorical, symbolical and mystical terms as the case may be. Most of his poems therefore deal with persons suffering from alienation, loneliness, frustrations and disillusionment. Importantly one of the most striking themes in Frost’s poetry is related to human despair and its isolation from God, religion and environment. Henrichsen (2008) argues that “Frost’s poem enacts a psychic process of displacing and managing generalized anxiety through converting it into object-specific fear”.

“Home Burial” is one of Frost’s most important dramatic poems. The background of the poem is a New England farm with a family burial plot in the yard that indicates obvious association between death, burial and the present state of affairs in the family. The setting is a distant rural area of New England, where people have big, but thinly populated farms. A kind of fatalistic alienation hangs over the entire area. Being sparsely populated with homes stretched wide apart without any impression of the neighbourhood, the presence of burial plot in the yard and father’s digging of the grave of the dead child increases the impression of alienated existence of the family in that particular situation. This type of existence assumes fatalistic proportion as it shifts the entire burden of mourning and burial to the family itself. A different kind of setting where people live in closer relationship/proximity could have liquidated mother’s grief and trauma and relieved father of digging the grave and giving burial to the dead child without disturbing marital relationship. At the same time the poem through intensity of conflict between husband and wife and the prevalent moods lay bare some other elements of the 20th century modern society. The poem begins with tense and stern gestures between the man and woman as she stares from a stairway window at the backyard grave of her recently dead child. The man (husband) does not seem distressed by the scene of child grave out in the yard, but his affectionate description of the gravestones and the child’s mound shows that he is not heartless person. He has however taken it as a duty to give proper burial to his child performs in the existing situation. Although Frost often denied an autobiographical structure of this poem, but one cannot ignore the more likely connection between this remarkable poem and the death of the Frosts’ first son in 1900 at age four. Rotella refers to autobiographical background of the death, burial and tense relationship between husband and wife after the sad incident. He write, “Shortly before the move to Derry, the Frosts’ first child, Elliot, died of *cholera Infantum*, and Frost and Elinor suffered and somehow endured the desolating marital strains suggested in “Home Burial”(2001: 249). Frost even refused to read the poem in public because the emotion overwhelmed him, and his biographer Lawrence Thompson reports that Elinor could not overcome her grief following the boy’s death, declaring that

the world was evil. Written in 1912 or 1913, the poem is apparently an engaging account of conflicting ways of grieving the death of the child. But this particular factor becomes a greater means to delve into other issues affecting not only this particular family but the modern age as well. It is an effective representation of the underlying alienation in the modern life and problems of But what has remained neglected in critical analyses of the poem is that it reflects Frost' personal as well as cultural aptitude to religion. Watkins argues "in conversation and in his letters [he] vacillated from one extreme to the other in religion, and his attitudes were more changeable than Aleutian winds. From youth to old age he may have moved from some belief to scepticism and back toward belief, but at any given moment he could turn in any direction.... (1974: 445).). He argues further that:

Frost's statements of disbelief reach far greater extremes than his affirmations. . . .Almost promising never to believe, Frost described himself as "safely secular till the last go down." And he stated that he had "never had a religious experience." He said that he "never prayed except formally and politely with the Lord's Prayer in public" (1974: 445).

In modern culture as stated above, religion has lost its place as a centralized entity. There are however some practices that carry religious sanction behind them and have continued to exist in every culture and remain part of our individual as well as collective/communal life. One of them is that of giving burial to the dead which is still a universally recognized religious practice in all cultures (the Hindus prefer to burn the body (cremation) of the dead instead of burial. But Frost's "Home Burial" through its inspiring analysis of death and burial issue in the family highlights typical 20th century secular, non religious and sceptical aptitude of the modern person in matter of routine happening/existence. It needs to be emphasized that death despite its overwhelming presence in the backdrop of the existing tense and distressed family condition is not hinted as the major issue and no where in the poem, she accuses the husband of being responsible for the death of their first child. The issue is burial of the dead child which involves father in digging the grave, laying the body in the grave and covering it with mud to create a permanent mound over the grave. As the mound over is a permanent presence, it continues to haunt and shock the mother permanently:

If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand, how could you? His little grave;
I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought who is that man? I didn't know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting
(Home Burial [HB]: 72- 80)

Her trauma finds depressing expression in the form of her tense relation with the husband, deeper sense of suffocation inside the home, and avoidance of normal marital sexual ties. This particular state is obvious right from the beginning of the poem. She looks stressed and her eyes fixed on a mound that could be seen through the window in the home. He saw her from the bottom of the stairs/before she saw him. She was starting down/Looking back over her shoulder at some fear. Initially husband has no idea of what she is staring. But with a murmur 'Oh,' and again, 'Oh.' at last, he is able to understand it that is the child's grave that she has been staring at, "but I understand, it is not the stones/But the child's mound--" (HB: 29-30). Gravity of her traumatic state is obvious in her expressions of 'don't, don't, don't, don't'. There are of course diverse meanings inherent in these words. For instance it reflects her avoidance of sexual contacts, resistance to husband's advances for sexuality and denial of reality governing death and burial. Here she falls short of accepting social and religious reality/obligation that burial must follow the death and in the particular pastoral setting of the poem, only the father could perform burial rites of digging the grave and burying the body. Amy's attitude is, therefore, indicative of individualized/ sceptical stance about religion/religious injunction

regarding all types of affairs in life. The husband on the other hand shows his understanding that burial has to follow the death. It could not be even deferred for any reason what so ever. But the problem is that despite acting reasonably and realistically in giving appropriate burial and not letting him rot in the air, he fails to communicate the reasonableness of the activity to the grieved mother. His talk could have helped her come out of initial trauma and move towards normalization of marital life. His indirect speech on death as an inevitable and unavoidable reality fails to moderate her grief. Amy complains that he could not adequately express himself. A direct talk on the rationality/necessity of burial of the child could easily have helped Amy come out of her state and accept the realities governing life and death. Overall his attitude is positive not only in the case of burial, but also in being concerned about her state. Only at the end of the poem, when Amy determinedly tries to move out and go elsewhere, he shows his frustration and anger, "Where do you mean to go? First tell me that/I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will! (HB: 115-1116)" In a modern liberal society, his "I will" would irritate the feminists as it violates women individuality and reflects woman subjugation to man's desires, but it also reflects his desperate desire to bring her out of stressed condition and accept the reality. It also reflects his strong and compelling desire for sexuality as he understands that only full-bodied sexual relationship can bring the woman out of trauma of child's loss and burial.

Literary texts are rich in meanings and defy any uniform reading towards predetermined conclusions. They also mirror the cultural life as it functions in a society and as the culture is complex of traditions, conventions, religion, law, literary text becomes a greater means to understand a wide range of cultural issues and factors. The study above used two literary texts to debate issues involving religion, law, passions, marriage after customary affair of burial of the dead in each case. And the conclusion is drawn that giant issues, events, wars, national and international conflicts and catastrophes are not always required to reflect upon the culture, history and politics of a society. Mundane life issues like burial of the dead life are rich in prospects to become remarkable point of reference to discuss larger concern governing society and cultures.

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