

Werman, D. (1979). Methodological Problems in the Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Literature: A Review of Studies on Sophocles' *Antigone*. *J. Amer. Psyc...*



(1979). *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 27:451-478

## Methodological Problems in the Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Literature: A Review of Studies on Sophocles' *Antigone*

David Werman, M.D.

EVER SINCE FREUD DISCOVERED psychic function, applied psychoanalysis has been closely related to the main body of psychoanalytic theory. This relationship was a natural consequence of Freud's classical education and his fascination and preoccupation with literature as a derivative of man's mental life. In art and literature Freud found illustrations of the theoretical concepts he was organizing out of his clinical experience; at the same time, art and literature presented a convincing body of data to corroborate and demonstrate his ideas.

Although Freud and others such as Abraham and Rank made extensive and often brilliant excursions into a number of cultural areas, recasting them in the light of psychoanalysis, their efforts were limited by methodological difficulties which were evident to the writers themselves. The inherent problem is that the psychoanalytic interpretation of a cultural phenomenon lies outside of the therapeutic process in which an interpretation can be inserted and become a

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 451 -

"mutative" element. Ricoeur (1970) likens applied psychoanalysis to data about the analysand that might be supplied to the analyst by a third party. Despite the claim of some authors, such as Greenacre, that "the study of the works of a prolific artist offers material as usable for psychoanalytic investigation as the dreams and free associations of the patient" (1955, p. 13), this assumption has been disputed.

This essay will present some of the methodological problems encountered in the psychoanalytic study of literature. For my purpose I shall examine selected aspects of a number of psychoanalytic studies of Sophocles' *Antigone*. I shall also indicate methods of approaching the work based on textual analysis and on subjective response—procedures that appear complementary to the usual methods of psychoanalytic explication of literary works.

It might be appropriate to begin by reviewing the mythological background to the *Antigone*. Following Oedipus' death, his sons agreed to rule Thebes during alternate years. But at the end of his year on the throne, Eteocles refused to step down. His brother, Polyneices, with his father-in-law, raised an army and attacked Thebes, but their attempt ended in a disastrous rout. At the foot of the walled city the two brothers killed each other, and Creon, the former regent and uncle of the brothers, became king. Although he buried the Theban dead, he denied sepulchre to the enemy, including Polyneices. According to the myth, Antigone managed to bury her proscribed brother. The foregoing is all we possess of the mythological context of the play, and it is presumed that the events occurring in Sophocles' tragedy are largely his invention or that of his contemporaries.

The play opens on the day following the deaths of the brothers and Creon's assumption of the throne. Antigone tells her sister, Ismene, of Creon's edict that Polyneices' body must go unmourned and unburied, "a tasty meal for vultures," and that whoever violates his decree shall be stoned to death. Pleading fraternal love and the laws of the gods,

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 452 -

Antigone announces her determination to bury Polyneices even if she must forfeit her life. The more Ismene insists that the idea is madness and bound to fail, that as women they must be obedient, the more hardened does Antigone become in her resolve.

When she attempts to carry out the funeral rites, she is seized and brought before Creon, to whom she avows her act but evokes "unwritten laws"—divine laws—that are timeless and universal, that transcend the edicts of any man. Creon proclaims his rule and law, asserting that enemies must be treated differently from friends, even though they be blood relatives. Antigone responds that she loves both her brothers. The king rejects this view and condemns her to death, absurdly and spitefully including Ismene in this sentence. Although Ismene pleads to be permitted to die with her sister, Antigone spurns her offer, desiring neither help nor a partner to share her sacrifice.

Creon's son, Haemon, appears before him and asks that Antigone be pardoned. Although engaged to marry her, his plea is free of emotion; he is logical and tactful, dealing with issues of justice and what he perceives are his father's profound errors. The scene ends with father and son exploding with rage and pain, and Creon poised to kill Antigone before Haemon's eyes.

Nevertheless, the king decides not to carry out the sacrilegious execution and orders that Antigone be immured in a cave with "enough fodder only to defend the country from the filth of a curse" (Braun, 936-937).<sup>1</sup> In her last appearance Antigone chants of her pain in departing from life, of never having been a bride, and never having nursed a baby.

She is succeeded on stage by the prophet Tiresias who describes a series of strange omens symbolic of the gods'

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from Braun (1973) unless otherwise indicated. I should like to thank Professor Braun, as well as the Oxford University Press, for their kind permission to quote from his translation. Numbers correspond to lines in this edition.

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 453 -

anger with Creon's impious decree. It is clear that Polyneices must be buried at once. Creon incredibly accuses the seer of selling him out for money; Tiresias replies that the king is a sick tyrant who is committing a "crime of violence" and will be pursued by the "furies of death and deity." Although he repudiates the prophet, Creon is frightened and turns to the Chorus for counsel; they advise him to immediately release Antigone from the cave and to build a tomb for Polyneices. When he sets off to rescind his edict, the dramatic action rushes toward its ineluctable tragic end: Eurydice, his wife, learns that just before Creon reached the cave, Antigone had hanged herself. Haemon, in a frenzy of rage and anguish, attempts to kill his father, fails, and plunges the sword into himself.

Creon enters, bearing Haemon's shrouded body, lamenting his folly and violence; but his punishments are not yet at an end, for a messenger reveals that Eurydice, cursing her husband, has stabbed herself. Torn with grief and guilt, Creon yearns for oblivion, and the play ends.

From his studies on "neurotic virginity and old maidenhood," Weissman (1964) sought to demonstrate that Antigone is a typical "old maid" reflecting a specific psychosexual development. He found that the fixation of the old maid is not "truly Oedipal," but a fixation on the preoedipal mother — a wish for unification with her; and by displacement these disturbed object relations lead to the wish for unification with other family members — father and siblings — which results in an "indiscriminate devotion and loyalty to various members of the immediate family" (p. 32).

In support of his thesis Weissman cites Antigone's passionate desire to bury her brother as a demonstration of her "irrational devotion to the family unit" (p. 34). Similarly, Antigone's request that Ismene join her in the burial is regarded as an "unconscious motive" to unite all the family members in death. Since the pivot of the tragedy consists of

---

<sup>2</sup> Sophocles also dealt with this issue in the *Ajax*.

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 454 -

Antigone's unrelenting drive to secure Polyneices' burial, Weissman does not lack for quotations to buttress his point of view. But at no point does he suggest an alternative interpretation of these actions, such as the sacred import of burial in ancient (and even modern) times. For the ancient Greeks, failure to bury the dead was an unspeakable crime. Bowra (1944) wrote that, although Sophocles' audience might, at most, have disagreed with Antigone, they would have readily understood her need to bury Polyneices. The dead have undeniable rights: to justice, to vengeance, and especially to proper burial. Without sepulchre the body lies unsanctified and homeless.<sup>2</sup> Through powerful images the dramatist makes us see the degradation of Polyneices' corpse: "ripped for food by dogs and vulture," "the body was oozing," "the mangled body lay ... where the dogs had dragged it," "the eagles ripped him for food," and so on. Clearly, the poet forces us to experience the horror of this uncared-for body. The omission of the issue of burial seriously weakens Weissman's thesis.

He stresses Antigone's "irrationalism," indicating that it comes from her unconscious wish for reunion with her mother; logically, her defiance of Creon's edict is "irrational," since it will lead to the death she unconsciously seeks. Weissman quotes an exchange with Creon wherein she declares that Hades makes no distinction between the brothers. But Creon retorts, "Not even death can metamorphose hate to love." To which Antigone responds: "No, nor decompose a love to hate" (p. 34).<sup>3</sup> To this affirmation of the power of Eros, Creon, the "rational" protagonist, exclaims, "Curse you! Find the outlet for your love down there [in Hades]" (p. 34).

To further establish Antigone's irrationality, Weissman presents Ismene not only as a standard of rationality, but as

---

<sup>3</sup> This line is usually translated as: "I was born not to hate but to love." See translations of Braun (1973), Fitts and Fitzgerald (1939), and Wyckoff (1973).

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 455 -

the "loyal mature mate or daughter," who "gives evidence ... of a mature oedipally derived love ..." (p. 40). His evidence for this characterization is that Ismene, unlike Antigone, did not wish to die when their father, Oedipus, died. Furthermore, during Oedipus' lifetime, Ismene did not "become his eyes or his single prop, or his partner in pain" (p. 39). Her maturity is illustrated by her "see[ing] no sense in Antigone's wish to die for her dishonorable brother. Her wish is to live, to be forgiven, and perhaps fulfill her own life" (p. 40). (Goethe described Ismene as a "beautiful standard of the commonplace [Eckermann, 1836, p. 185].)

Finally, Weissman's interpretation of an ambiguous passage is of particular significance. He asserts that the following speech of Antigone gives us a

climactic portrayal of [her] psychosexual development toward old maidenhood, her preoedipal attachments, her devaluation and incapacity for a finalizing heterosexual relationship and having her own child. She explains to Creon:

On what principle do I assert so much?

Just this: A husband dead, another can be found,

A child, replaced; but a brother lost

(Mother and father buried too)  
 No other brother can be born or grows again.  
 That's my principle, which Creon stigmatized  
 As criminal — my principal for honoring  
 You my dearest brother. So taken  
 So I am led away; a spinster still  
 Uncelebrated, barren and bereft of joys;  
 No children to my name [pp. 34-35].

While Weissman's broad interpretation of these verses seems challenged by the last three lines, his choice of this passage is of special interest because these lines (904-920 in the original version) have been the focus of a long-standing

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 456 -

unresolved controversy among scholars regarding their very authenticity. At this point it will be useful to make a detour in order to review another psychoanalytic study which is based entirely on the foregoing speech.

Van der Sterren's (1952) thesis is succinct and his methodology explicitly described: "I have used Freud's views on the psychology of the dream as my starting-point ... myth and poetical productions come into being in the same way and have the same meaning ... [except that] the secondary elaboration is much further developed ... I hold, *a priori*, that this conception is the correct one, and the close study of these plays of Sophocles has shown me once more that this approach alone is able to solve the various problems and is moreover, a fruitful method" (p. 343). Van der Sterren seeks to demonstrate Antigone's neuroticism by asserting that by the time she speaks these lines (904-920) she has "lost the esteem of everyone." Clearly, if this allegation is correct it would totally undermine our acceptance of Antigone as a heroine. However, the evidence to support it is flimsy: Ismene rejects helping in Polyneices' burial only because it means risking her life; the Chorus, a group of timid old men, indeed at first support Creon's edict, but by the time of Antigone's final confrontation with the king they proclaim to her: "You go with fame and in glory/ to the hidden place of the dead ... Your doom is worth grand fame; for living and dying, both you share/ the heritage of the gods' equals" (972-973, 988-990). Tiresias flatly calls Creon "stupid" and "criminal." Haemon declares that "the whole nation denies [that Antigone did wrong]" (882). Creon himself, far from disputing these assertions, retorts: "Will the nation tell me what orders I can give?" (883). And the denouement of the tragedy is Creon's destruction, working as a counterpoint to the paean of praise to Antigone.

Van der Sterren castigates critics who have questioned the validity of the speech; they are attempting to cover up its "real motive," he notes, and they "make false translations"

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 457 -

(p. 349). In this context, he ambiguously quotes Goethe. Inasmuch as Weissman (1964) and Seidenberg and Papatomopoulos (1962) also refer to Goethe's comments, it would be instructive to examine them. According to Eckermann (1836), Goethe observed that: "... Creon by no means acts from political virtue, but from hatred towards the dead. Polyneices ... did not commit such a monstrous crime against the state that his death was insufficient, and that further punishment of the innocent corpse was required ... Creon ... *has everybody in the play against him*" (p. 177-178; emphasis added). As for the disputed passage, Goethe did regard it as a "blemish," but stated he "would give a great deal for an apt philologist to prove that it is interpolated and spurious." In short, he believed the "passage ... very far-fetched" (p. 178).

Although Jebb (1898) observed that "Few problems of Greek Tragedy have been more discussed than the question whether those verses, or some of them, are spurious" (p. 164), only Seidenberg and Papatomopoulos utilize this literature. This apparent lack of familiarity with the work carried out by nonanalytic scholars, as well as the not infrequent neglect of primary sources, often justifies the criticism of amateurism leveled against studies in applied psychoanalysis.

One might agree with Weissman's thesis that "neurotic virginity and old maidenhood" may mask a deeper attachment to the preoedipal mother; such a psychological schema may be an important factor in some women's avoidance of marriage; but we have little basis for assuming that Antigone had such an attachment to her mother. In fact, we do know that she is betrothed and deeply in love with Haemon; that she yearns for marriage and children; and that, far from "welcoming" death, she goes toward it with suffering and reluctance. At the end she chants: "No wedding song has been sung for this bride. I never nursed a child; and with those I love gone, I go alone and desolate" (1072-1074). These do not sound like the words of a woman in search of

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 458 -

death fleeing from life, love, and men. We are overwhelmed by her death because it is a denial of all she desires. The poet obliges us to perceive Antigone as *especially* rich with the promise of life, precisely so that we experience the tragedy of her death rather than regard it as senseless, paltry, and banal.

Seidenberg and Papathomopoulos have dealt with Antigone in two communications. The first (1962) presents literary examples of "daughters who tend their fathers"; the second (1974) overlaps the earlier paper, but deals entirely with the "enigma" of Antigone. Their thesis is that Oedipus bound Antigone into caring for him, an "enslavement" which she dutifully accepted. "Although she is unable to fight on the battlefield, she seeks *arete* [virtue] in the capacity of a rebel, against the humiliation which her uncle demanded" (1962, p. 154); she prefers honor and *arete* to marriage and motherhood; in agreement with Van der Sterren they believe her defiant act represents an "abandonment of the feminine role," and is perhaps a defense against incestuous wishes toward Polyneices; that her defiance of Creon's edict represents an identification with her brothers; and that she has "at last succeeded in playing a role on the battlefield." They believe that "in the age of misogyny" Sophocles apparently realized the "hidden desires of certain women who did not conform to the general role ... of homemaking and child rearing" (p. 155). Thus, while Antigone perhaps lamented being deprived of marriage and children she "secretly gives them up in favor of ... a nobler destiny" (pp. 155-156).

Why Antigone "secretly" means the opposite of what she says is not demonstrated. Indeed, if Sophocles intends her words to be false, the drama would cease to be a tragedy and Antigone a heroine. Their speculation (also made by other writers) of her incestuous yearnings for Polyneices cannot be faulted. But much more prominent is the special role of women, in ancient societies, of attending to the sacred burial

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 459 -

rites. If one views Antigone's behavior in terms of the values and mores current in Sophocles' time, one tends to accept this as a motive rather than a desire to shed her enslaved feminine self. Curiously, while Van der Sterren's argument is that Antigone is neurotically unhappy being a woman, Seidenberg and Papathomopoulos refer to him in support of their position that she is secretly and *appropriately* unhappy being a woman — because she is oppressed.

Seidenberg and Papathomopoulos demonstrate another methodological error in treating Antigone and other fictional characters re-created by the artist (despite their mythological antecedents), as if they are historical figures, treating Euripides' Antigone to explain Sophocles' Antigone.

In their 1974 paper these authors again "confirm" Weissman's contention that Antigone is "a pre-oedipal old maid whose basic drive is to return to her nurturing mother." Through unification with her mother, Antigone "would make herself and create unto herself all those things which her mother lacked, strength, loyalty, convictions, in order to win mother, to be loved and be united with her. With good authority, Antigone would become irresistible to such a mother, for mother could never resist authority" (p. 202). Seidenberg and Papathomopoulos arrive at these conclusions in the following manner: Robert Graves, they note, "feels" that the name of Antigone in Greek means "in place of a mother";<sup>4</sup> "in place of mother' ... might ... mean identification with mother; it is more likely the name represents the life that a woman might lead apart from motherhood with the confinements and passivity it engenders. The ancient Greeks in their wisdom knew that all women did not submit to the role of inferiority that the culture ruthlessly demanded" (p. 202). Such linguistic "evidence" is unconvincing and, furthermore, does not explain the contradiction

---

<sup>4</sup> Braun notes: "Sophocles took their [names'] meaning seriously, for he created an Antigone who, 'born to oppose,' relies on innate courage in facing tyranny ..." (1973, p. 7).

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 460 -

between what is described as a "ruthlessly" misogynistic society and the wise ancient Greeks who inhabited it. Through the same need to establish an aura of *universal* misogyny, they cite, correctly, Creon's depreciation of women. Yet they observe that Antigone was "esteemed" by the "whole" city. Actually, Sophocles seems primarily intent on the aesthetic task of polarizing Antigone and Creon in every plausible way. Undoubtedly, the growing regard for women in fifth-century Greece had some impact on him. But his artistic imperative is to stress the conflict between Creon and Antigone, and this is expressed in their respective imagery, the rhythms of their speech, their age and their sex — in order to make the drama work as theatre. Accordingly, Creon is the *only* male character who demeans women. Seidenberg and Papathomopoulos, along with the authors reviewed here, minimize aesthetic considerations.

The conclusion of their article reiterates their feminist interpretation of the *Antigone* through a series of speculations, of which I shall quote but one: "Had Antigone been a male youth and had been similarly disobedient, there would have been at most talk of generational gap, oedipal conflict, primal horde, but not deformity" (p. 204). One cannot disagree with the authors' impassioned denunciation of the oppression of women, but one must challenge the correctness of their interpretation of Antigone, its ahistoric viewpoint, and their concept that the *Antigone* concerns the subjugation of women.

Along with others, Kanzer (1948), (1950) regards the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the *Oedipus at Colonus*, and the *Antigone* as an Oedipus Trilogy, which "dramatize[s] three stages in the development and resolution of the oedipus complex" (1950, p. 571). Kanzer's focus is on Oedipus, and his remarks on Antigone for the most part relate to her relation to him. For example, he interprets the blinded Oedipus' dependence on Antigone as her playing the "role of the mother." Similarly,

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 461 -

he regards her defiance of Creon's ban on the burial of Polyneices as a displacement of "her loyalty from her father to her brother"; thus,



whole" (xlix-l). Disagreement with Jebb — and other likeminded scholars — is hardly a breach of critical rigor, but such differences should be acknowledged even if not evaluated.

Again, like Kanzer, Fromm interprets the conflict between Creon and Haemon as analogous to the clash between Oedipus and Polyneices in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, where the unforgiven son is cast out. But where Kanzer interprets this conflict as fueled by the son's incestuous strivings in a headlong encounter with the castrating potential of the father, Fromm explains it in terms of a conflict between a matriarchal principle incarnated by Oedipus, Haemon, and Antigone, and a patriarchal principle represented by Creon. These principles were formulated by J. J. Bachofen, between 1859 and 1870, and emerged from his detailed scholarly work on "mother right." Since Fromm reviews this work, and it is also alluded to by Kanzer, only a brief exposition of it is required here.

Bachofen studied the symbols found in the myths, art, and artifacts of ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, and other areas of the Mediterranean basin. He conceptualized a nomadic, hetaeristic, primitive world governed by unbridled sexuality, which was slowly replaced by an agricultural, socioreligious culture, in which mother right dominated. Ultimately, this era was superseded by a patriarchal society which brought the "liberation of the spirit from the manifestation of nature, a substitution of human existence over the law of material life ..." (Bachofen, 1859, p. 109). Bachofen stressed that elements of the old often coexisted with the new, or re-emerged after periods of oblivion.

During the era of mother right, there was an "emphasis on maternal property and the name of the maternal line, the closeness of maternal kinship ... and the inexpiability of matricide" (p. 71). There was greater love for sisters than for brothers, loyalty to mothers, and "... the divine principle of love, of union, of peace" (p. 79). Matriarchal love is more

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 465 -

intense, and unlike the patriarchal principle, which is "inherently restrictive, the matriarchal principle, is universal." It is the basis of freedom, equality, and hospitality. "Devotion, justice, and all the qualities that embellish man's life are known by feminine names ..." (p. 91). The rise of patriarchy saw the emergence of spiritual over corporeal existence, of the Apollonian over the chthonian-maternal principle. Laws, rationality, monogamy, authority, a hierarchical order in society, and inequality became the hallmarks of the new epoch.

Against all objections to Bachofen, Fromm finds the theory of matriarchy "established beyond any doubt," and thus he explicates the Oedipus "trilogy" as a clash between the matriarchal and patriarchal principles. The slow, painful, and often violent passage of matriarchal into patriarchal society, and the continued presence of aspects of the earlier period in the later is represented, according to Fromm, in the conflict in the *Antigone*. Antigone herself embodies the importance of the human being, of natural law and love, in contrast to Creon who proclaims the state, manmade laws, and obedience. Ismene is the prototype of the woman who accepts patriarchal domination and the defeat of women. For Creon, his son is mere property whose unique purpose is to serve; the king's defeat brings to an end the "principle of authoritarianism, of man's domination over the people" (p. 353).

Fromm thus projects onto the *Antigone* his social ideology, but, despite undoubted relevances, his formulation seems strangely external to the passions of the drama itself; its approach to the play is with an ideological yardstick that reductively interprets this (or any) work of art, in which the protagonists are in conflict over such issues as authority, law, conscience, and religious standards, as representing a conflict between the matriarchal and patriarchal principles.

Fromm appends to the foregoing interpretation of the *Antigone* an auxiliary but unintegrated view which attempts

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 466 -

to relate the drama to the "specific political and cultural situation of Sophocles' time." He identifies Sophocles as an adversary of the Sophists, whom he describes as seeking to establish a despotism of the intellectual elite and "upholding unrestricted selfishness as a moral principle" (p. 354), and he equates Creon with the Sophists, a view shared by Kanzer. While both authors urge us to accept Sophocles' straightforward antagonism to Sophism, Fromm interprets the trilogy as specifically expressing not only Sophocles' opposition to the Sophists, but his sympathy for the old, nonolympian, religious traditions of the matriarchy, when love, equality, and justice were valued. These assertions are questionable if we look at Sophocles' place in Athenian society. Bowra (1944), Kirkwood (1958), Kitto (1956), Whitman (1951), and other scholars mentioned here, have made authoritative contributions in this area. I shall only touch on some of the sociologic issues raised by Fromm and Kanzer.

There is, in fact, little difficulty in identifying aspects of the *Antigone* with matters that were prominent in Sophocles' lifetime. That he himself was totally a part of his era, if not an active partisan of positions, is attested to by even the scant knowledge we have of him: a total of perhaps four pages of uncertain biographic data. Letters (1953) sums up some of this material: "Sophocles was not only one of Athens' 'lofty, grave tragedians,' he was an active citizen, man about town, lover of food, wine and company, musician, conversationalist, wit, homosexual, actor, literary dictator, juror, admiral, priest and copious writer of Rabelaisian farces ..." (p. 2). It is not then surprising that the play brilliantly reflects issues such as divine and human justice, the nature of the unwritten laws, the position of women in society, the individual vis-a-vis the state, the role of the king, and fate versus free will. Much of the critical literature seeks to establish which of these questions is what the *Antigone* "is about." And yet, the only certain conclusion one can reach is that the

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 467 -

drama is as remarkably free of open partisanship on these issues as it is thoroughly penetrated with the social, philosophical, political, and

religious issues of its day.

The *Antigone*, on one level, demonstrates that unreason, impiety (even if religion is only a projection made by man — as the Sophists averred), and pride (*hubris*) are among the greatest dangers for man. These themes are characteristic of that "impact of society" on the drama to which Kanzer alluded, and they reach us on conscious and preconscious levels of apprehension. But there exists another dimension to the poet's work, of which he himself may have been unaware, and which we may deeply experience even if without intellectual understanding: the resonance of the drama with our unconscious, which has only the most intricate, indirect, and long-term relation to society.

If we seek a psychoanalytic understanding of the *Antigone*, or any other work of art, we must turn to the text, with as few a priori ideas about it as possible, as the source best embodying the data to be studied (the analogy of listening to the patient, rather than studying documents from other people, seems valid). It is my impression that the first and most striking observation about the drama, as an aesthetic entity, is that it is a tissue of contrasts. The structure is built up through a series of confrontations: of Antigone and Ismene, of Creon and the sentry, then with Ismene, Haemon, Antigone, and Tiresias. Light and dark episodes alternate, as do life and death, hope and despair, authority and revolt, justice and injustice, man's law and divine law, piety and impiety, free will and fate, democracy and autocracy, the individual and the state, reason and passion, flexibility and rigidity — the list of antinomies could be continued. And affectively, as scene follows scene, we swing between states of tension and relaxation, until we are finally swept to the horrifying denouement.

The poet uses all his craft to suggest contrast. As mentioned earlier, the very language used by each character, the

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 468 -

cadences of their speech, their imagery—everything builds the atmosphere of conflict. The details of how this is done, e.g., Creon's repeated use of animal images, has been elucidated by Goheen (1951).

Although the superstructure of the tragedy consists of contrasting elements welded into an aesthetic whole, and the chief polarities of that conflict are represented by Antigone and Creon, these characters are not simple conduits for contrasting beliefs; on the contrary, they are concrete as well as generic individuals, whose personalities reverberate in our unconscious. It is because Creon and Antigone are not mere standard-bearers, engaged in abstract verbal exchanges, but are plausible flesh-and-blood individuals, that the drama "works" on the affective as well as cognitive levels. The poet engages us in a powerful enterprise of empathy.

To experience the play is also to recognize that Antigone and Creon transcend simple opposition, for each serves to define the other. If "Antigone is the balance in which Creon is weighed and found wanting" (Whitman, 1951, p. 80), then Creon must be the crucible in which Antigone becomes tempered so that she may achieve the grandeur that death bestows upon her. Creon's behavior leads Antigone to heroism. To experience the *Antigone* obliges us to enter Creon's inner world.

What manner of man is this ruler? Some authors, such as Kitto (1956), assert that he is the central character in the *Antigone*; in fact, a third of the drama takes place after Antigone's final appearance. For the Athenian audience, to whom Sophocles spoke, Creon is a tyrant. He first appears with homage to the gods on his lips, asserting that the worst ruler is one who "fails to embrace the best man's counsels" (218). But he swiftly reveals his duplicity, and by the end of his first speech his authoritarianism is revealed in his decree that brutally violates all tradition. Each succeeding confrontation of his power progressively exposes him as stubborn, arrogant, violent, and irrational. At one point his sense of

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 469 -

reality is so overwhelmed by rage that he forgets that it is only Antigone, and not Ismene as well, whom he has condemned to death! The more his authority is challenged or even questioned, the more his self-esteem is threatened and the more are ignoble qualities brought to light. His piety is a sham; he courts the gods only when they serve him and denigrates them when they no longer meet his needs. When he fears their anger at his decree of death for Antigone he changes only the letter of his command by ordering that she be permitted to die of starvation. From wherever the source, whatever the validity, he intemperately rejects all criticism—even the timid questions of the old men in the Chorus.

Repeatedly, Sophocles shows us that Creon values individuals only as possessions to be utilized and manipulated for his own aggrandizement. His view of love is mostly limited to its physical aspect: when Ismene asks him if he means to "kill the girl you promised your own son would marry" (701-702) he crassly responds that "There are other fields to furrow" (703). Of utmost importance are the growing distortions in his thinking: he levels totally unjustified accusations of corruption by bribery against those who oppose him: the unknown individuals who first attempt to bury Polynices "were seduced by money" (372); the sentry who reports the deed is told that "for money—you sold your soul" (402); even the saintlike Tiresias has it flung in his face that he "and his kind, for a long time now, have been selling me out ..." (196-197). This almost delusional thinking is scarcely surprising, for early in the play Creon complains of "certain men in the city ... [who] mutter about me" (366-368). When Tiresias aptly states "you are a sick man" (1216), we concur that Creon indeed exhibits paranoid thoughts. His narcissistic hunger pervades all his behavior, his thoughts and feelings, domestic as well as public, and leads to his resentment of youth and women and to his voracious yearning for power. "Nations," he pronounces, "belong to the men with power. That's common knowledge" (888-889).

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 470 -

And yet, beyond all expectations, at his downfall, after we have witnessed the blood bath he has brought about, we do not cast this prototypical tyrant into darkness, but instead feel, as Bonnard put it (1951), "only tenderness and pity." Creon is a figure of "human error" whom Sophocles has given us, not as a warning, but as a fraternal being; too much *a part of us* to condemn him from the heights of our own abstract principles. Within his character Creon is "right" and must act he does so that the drama will confront us with our divided self and the real world in which it must act. Through Creon the poet awakens sleeping aspects of ourselves, illuminating our complexity. His childlike tyranny acts not only on the people around him but on himself because he is in bondage to his instinctual impulses and primitive modes of response. In contrast, Antigone is more autonomous and object-seeking, and through her death she escapes the very solitude that finally descends on Creon. His need for power becomes impotence; he fears and despises Eros for it would make him vulnerable to the world, and with the loss of narcissistic objects his world collapses. But his late-learned wisdom echoes our yearning to be free from the imperious reign of our own infantilism—thus we rejoice in his tragic growth as we do in Antigone's tragic and heroic death.

This brings us to consider the feelings we experience at the conclusion of the drama. I believe that this subjective dimension, the experience of the spectator, is a critical aspect of the psychoanalytic investigation of literature, and yet, more frequently than not, it is neglected in favor of more "objective" criteria. The "evenly suspended attention" of the analyst in the analytic situation, his brief identifications with the patient, the scrutiny and analysis of his own fantasies, dreams, and feelings are processes that do not often occur in applied psychoanalysis. Paradoxically, the *Antigone* leaves us with a special sense of pleasure, which suffuses us at the conclusion of the tragedy. The universality of this experience

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 471 -

may be open to question, but its widespread occurrence is readily observed. "Tragic pleasure" is more than a simple experience of evasion and disengagement, or a vicarious brush with Antigone's pain from which we escape unscathed. Bonnard (1951) described it as "the price of our active participation in the poet's work. It manifests our commitment to this enterprise of recreation of the world" (p. 71). The tragic poet's classical vocation was educative and formative, and his drama, in which we participate, becomes an apprenticeship in pain that leads to a mastery of the human condition through a process of self-elucidation—a process reminiscent of psychoanalysis.

The contradiction between our pain and our pleasure is only apparent once we recognize that Creon and Antigone represent profound aspects of our self. As Creon acts out before us his infantile wishes for omnipotence, omniscience, approval and admiration, and total license, we cannot reject him because too much of him resonates with elements that once were in us—and may still reside in only relative silence; we see in him our "negative ego ideal"; he incarnates all that we would project on to the other. Antigone, on the other hand, embodies what we would become. Her tragic end represents the expression of our yearnings of our ideal ego; with her we triumph over blind fate, over our infantile self, and we identify with her victory.

Antigone might be perceived as embodying many facets of our ego ideal: courageous, passionate, loyal to her kin, eloquent, loved and loving, generous, competent, and possessing "superior powers"; in short, the qualities described by Bibring (1953) as constituting our narcissistic aspirations. Although we are aware of her arrogance, irrationality, and stubbornness, it is her positive characteristics that engage us. On the other hand, while Creon is stubborn, increasingly irrational, arrogant, misogynistic, unloved, and not truly loving, he feels pain, bereavement, fear, shame, and in some manner he loves his wife, his children, and his subjects, and

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 472 -

years to be approved of by the city. His downfall brings us no pleasure, for we experience his despair.

Somewhat analogous to the two levels of experiencing the *Antigone* which I have described, Holland (1968) hypothesized two paths of experiencing a work of art: one tests reality, is intellectual, is generally characterized by other aspects of secondary-process thinking, and is in connection with the "central theme" of the work; the other is characterized by the introjection of the work, the experience of the nuclear fantasy and the formal management of that fantasy as if it were our own. We analogize the work to our own fantasies which become more acceptable to us, and the work itself takes on an intellectual meaning. Our identification with a character would be due to a complicated mixture of the introjection of that character's drives and defenses and our projection onto him of elements within ourself. We can identify with certain characters chiefly on the basis of their instinctual drives, and with others mostly because of their defenses. From this perspective, some of the pleasure of literature would derive from various combinations of limited gratification of drive and other fantasies, and the defensive management of those fantasies, leading to pleasure in the totality of the work. Holland's conceptualization further explains the pleasure we experience from the *Antigone*.

This dimension of aesthetic pleasure appears to promise much in furthering a psychoanalytic view of literature. Despite studies by Freud (1905), Kris (1952), Lesser (1957), Rose (1964), Waelder (1965), Coltrera (1965), Within (1969), and Ricoeur (1970), among others, the subject remains far from resolved. The analysis of the aesthetic response offers the advantage of obliging us to consider the work as an artistic unity, rather than as a collection of isolated characters and events. It becomes a part of the task of viewing the work as the creation of a given poet in a particular culture, which is being experienced by concrete

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 473 -

individuals at the same and other times and places. Such a holistic view necessarily leads to interdisciplinary studies.

Regarding the expression I have used here, "the psychoanalytic interpretation of literature," it must be avowed that the term is



imprecise because interpretations made in the analytic situation cannot be equated with those made in applied psychoanalysis. Loewenstein (1951) succinctly defined interpretation: "In psychoanalysis this term is applied to those explanations, given to patients by their analyst, which add to their knowledge about themselves" (p. 4); these explanations are given piecemeal and ultimately encompass ego and id elements. This definition applies specifically to the clinical psychoanalytic situation. A number of authors have discussed the differences between interpretation in analysis compared with other settings. Kohut (1960) observed that in applied psychoanalysis there is no free association, no therapeutic alliance, no emotional tie to the therapist, no reverberatory dreams that might follow an interpretation, and no motivation (and, one might add, there is no patient). Ricoeur (1970) noted that "the psychoanalytic interpretation of art is fragmentary because it is analogical" (p. 164). What is lacking is the *process* of interchange, on many levels, between patient and analyst, involving fluctuating levels and varieties of resistance, the vicissitudes of transference and the integration of insight—in a word, the flux of a human relationship in the analytic setting.

## Conclusions

The problems inherent in the psychoanalytic interpretation of literature, not to speak of other areas of applied psychoanalysis, have led at times to skepticism that scholarly work can be accomplished in a field so fraught with pitfalls. Such a position is counterproductive because it is only through many efforts and repeated critiques that more rigorous approaches will be developed.

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 474 -

Great works of art, such as the *Antigone*, offer different levels of meaning. They are ambiguous in that the elements within them are highly overdetermined—a concept explored by Kris and Kaplan (Kris, 1952). It is natural that exclusive attention to selected aspects, or levels of meaning, of a literary work, can be carried out for research purposes, but these must ultimately be integrated into the work as a whole lest serious distortions occur. Similarly, while it may be useful to isolate a character from a work, to explore him "independently," that character must be reinserted into the network of his dynamic relations with the other characters and with the writer's overarching aesthetic conception. Perhaps the greatest weakness in the psychoanalytic studies of literature is that they rarely acknowledge that several interpretations may all plausibly reveal something about a work of art.

It must be stressed that psychoanalytic interpretations of literature, just as interpretations in the analytic situation, must not only be logical and internally consistent, but must be supported by the text. The more of the work that can be reasonably explained and the fewer the exceptions and contradictions, the sturdier will be the interpretation. The text itself is the final arbiter: other data—such as information about the author and his motives—can at best be used to support and confirm interpretations based on the text, its style, form, and content.

To seek to understand some literature through a purely "psychological" approach appears as untenable as the reverse of that coin—a purely "sociological" approach. It has become increasingly apparent, especially for certain literary works, that it is not possible to understand them unless the web of relations of the work to society are carefully explored. Similarly, certain works will remain an enigma unless brought into relation with the author's life if useful data about it are available. In still other works, biographical data and information about the social setting may be relatively

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 475 -

unimportant for our understanding, and the text itself remains the crucial datum.

Despite the hazards that confront psychoanalysis when it attempts to understand literature, despite the shortcomings and the reductionism, there is little doubt that psychoanalysis has made valuable and unique contributions. Psychoanalysis, of all disciplines, remains the only one able to explore the unconscious and all its derivatives. The cultural products of man are therefore a most fitting subject for psychoanalytic investigation, and if the difficulties are vast, the process itself is its own reward.

## SUMMARY

Through a critical review of several studies dealing with Sophocles' drama, the *Antigone*, I have explored some of the prominent methodological problems encountered in the psychoanalytic interpretation of literature. Foremost among these is the inherent difficulty that the interpretation of literature is unable to benefit from the process of the analytic situation. Divorced from the realities of the therapeutic process, the drama itself is often used to corroborate an author's theoretical bias or to advance some special interest, with consequent distortion or blurring of the text. Although data about the artist's life and sociocultural environment may be of crucial significance, it is the text itself that must be the ultimate object of study. Through a re-examination of the *Antigone* as an aesthetic totality I have sketched out what appears to be an alternative manner of approaching the drama, and suggested that works of art reach us on both unconscious and conscious levels. I have stressed the need to analyze our emotional response to a work as affording a valuable source of insight into the work itself.

Throughout, I have drawn attention to the need for greater scholarly rigor and the value of interdisciplinary collaboration. An open recognition of the problems in the

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 476 -

psychoanalytic study of literature should serve to minimize dilettantism and raise the level of scholarship.

## REFERENCES

- Bachofen, J. J. 1859-1870 *Myth, Religion and Mother Right* Trans. R. Manheim. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967
- Bibring, E. 1953 *The mechanism of depression* In: *Affective Disorders* ed. P. Greenacre. New York: International Universities Press, pp. 13-48
- Bowra, C. M. 1944 *Sophoclean Tragedy* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bonnard, A. 1951 *La Tragédie et l'Homme* Paris: A la Baconnière.
- Braun, R. E. trans. 1973 *Sophocles Antigone* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Coltrera, J. T. 1965 *On the creation of beauty and thought: The unique as vicissitude* *American Psychoanal. Assn.* 13:634-703 [→]
- Eckermann, J. P. 1836 *Conversations with Goethe* Trans. J. Oxenford. London: Dent, 1930
- Eissler, K. R. 1959 *The function of details in the interpretation of works of literature* *Psychoanal. Q.* 28:1-20 [→]
- Eissler, K. R. 1968 *The relation of explaining and understanding in psychoanalysis: Demonstrated by one aspect of Freud's approach to literature* *The Psychoanal. Study Child* 23:141-177 New York: International Universities Press. [→]
- Fitts, D. & Fitzgerald, R. trans. 1939 *Sophocles The Oedipus Cycle* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Freud, S. 1905 *Psychopathic characters on the stage* *Standard Edition* 7 305-310 [→]
- Freud, S. 1921 *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego* *Standard Edition* 18 67-143 [→]
- Fromm, E. 1949 *The Oedipus complex and the Oedipus myth* In: *The Family: Its Function and Destiny* ed. R. N. Anshen. New York: Harper, pp. 334-358
- Gedo, J. E. 1970 *Thoughts on art in the age of Freud* *American Psychoanal. Assn.* 18:219-245 [→]
- Goheen, R. E. 1951 *The Imagery of Sophocles' Antigone* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Greenacre, P. 1955 *Swift and Carroll: A Psychoanalytic Study of Two Lives* New York: International Universities Press.
- Holland, N. 1968 *The Dynamics of Literary Response* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jebb, R. 1898 *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments Part III The Antigone* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972
- Kanzer, M. 1948 *The passing of the oedipus complex in Greek drama* *Int. J. Psychoanal.* 29:131-134 [→]
- Kanzer, M. 1950 *The Oedipus trilogy* *Psychoanal. Q.* 19:561-573 [→]
- Kirkwood, G. M. 1958 *A Study of Sophoclean Drama* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 477 -

- Kitto, H. D. F. 1956 *Form and Meaning in Drama: A Study of Six Greek Plays and of Hamlet* London: Methuen.
- Kohut, H. 1960 *Beyond the bounds of the basic rule* *American Psychoanal. Assn.* 8:567-586 [→]
- Kris, E. 1952 *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Lesser, S. O. 1957 *Fiction and the Unconscious* Boston: Beacon Hill Press.
- Letters, F. J. H. 1953 *The Life and Work of Sophocles* London: Sheed & Ward.
- Loewenstein, R. M. 1951 *The problem of interpretation* *Psychoanal. Q.* 20:1-14 [→]
- Ricoeur, P. 1970 *Freud and Philosophy* New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Rose, G. J. 1964 *Creative imagination in terms of ego "care" and boundaries* *Int. J. Psychoanal.* 45:75-85 [→]
- Seidenberg, R. & Papathomopoulos, E. 1962 *Daughters who tend their fathers. A literary survey* *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society* 2 135-160 New York: International Universities Press.
- Seidenberg, R. & Papathomopoulos, E. 1974 *The enigma of Antigone* *Int. Rev. Psychoanal.* 1:197-205 [→]
- Van der Sterren, H. A. 1952 *The "King Oedipus" of Sophocles* *Int. J. Psychoanal.* 33:343-350 [→]
- Waelder, R. 1965 *Psychoanalytic Avenues to Art*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Weissman, P. 1964 *Antigonea preoedipal old maid* *J. Hillside Hosp.* 13 32-42
- Whitman, C. H. 1951 *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humans* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Within, P. 1969 *The psychodynamics of literature* *Psychoanal. Rev.* 56 556-585 [→]
- Wolman, B. 1965 *The Antigone principle* *Amer. Imago* 22 186-201 [→]
- Wyckoff, E. trans. 1973 *Sophocles Antigone* ed. D. Greene & R. Lattimore. New York: Washington Square Press.

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the PEPWeb subscriber and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form.

- 478 -

## Article Citation [Who Cited This?]

- Werman, D. (1979). *Methodological Problems in the Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Literature: A Review of Studies on Sophocles' Antigone*. *J. Amer. Psychoanal. Assn.*, 27:451-478

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the subscriber to PEP Web and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form whatsoever.