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## **A Study of Modern Adaptations of *Antigone***

A Paper

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## **Dedication**

To all Iraqi Martyrs, and specifically to the soul of my elder Brother who  
was officer in Iraqi Ministry of Defence.

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## Abstract

The objective of the current paper is to shed light on the modern adaption of Sophocles' *Antigone*, which was written and performed for the first time about 440 B.C.E., namely Slavoj Zizek's adaptation. It is Zizek's first dramatic work and first published in November 2016. Slavoj Zizek, in his argumentative rewriting of Sophocles' tragedy, rechecked the work in expanded way of his own philosophy and adding something from his own philosophical beliefs and ideas into *Antigone*. Slavoj Zizek has tackled Sophocles' *Antigone* in many different philosophical works but Zizek in his recent work in twentieth century has built negative impression towards Sophocles' *Antigone*. Zizek criticizes Sophocles' tragedy in which Antigone is not an adequate symbol of a true social revolution, according to this idea, he created his own copy of *Antigone* with the end in which the chorus made a revolution and judged Antigone to death. Slavoj Zizek tried to make Antigone part of the problem. Also, there is some sort of strangeness in Zizek's play because it concludes three times that is to say it begins with traditional story and it ends with three endings. There will be a comparison between the two plays — the original work of Sophocles' *Antigone* and the new one of Zizek's *Antigone*— showing that Sophocles' Antigone is a rebel but not a revolutionary, whereas Zizek's Antigone is portrayed as a revolutionary character and of course there is a big difference between the two concepts.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Zizek, Sophocles, Antigone.

## Introduction

A literary adaptation is a piece of art rewritten in to a new work depending on the original ideas of the original work but changing certain aspects like the setting or the characters or the central message for the sake of the author or the government itself or it is usually being influenced by different cultural times. Adaptation can be done either with different or new genre or within the same medium for different purpose as it is done with the play of Ziezk's *Antigone*. The main aim behind adaptation is to revisit or re-examined a literary work that has moved or captivated the author or the director by using a creative medium of his choice for example (film, novel, play or musical or as we said above that it is done within the same medium as in the play of Ziezk's *Antigone* which is one of the adaptations of Sophocles' *Antigone*) in order to express something authentic, interesting and new to the readers. There are dozens of adaptations of *Antigone* over the years, which are including film, stage, and musical compositions. Some of these adaptations have changed something in the story by the artists and some have kept it as it is by noticing that the themes of Antigone are related to the world today or to another historical era.

Linda Hutcheon mentions that adaptations are not new to our time rather Shakespeare transferred common cultural stories from “page to stage” and made easily available to the common audience. It is not a new one that writers respond to one another's work, transforming the ideas and themes, and using or adapting a particular narrative structure for their purpose. Hutcheon noticed that “Art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories and there is a reason for the possibility as well as for the necessity of adaptation.” (Hutcheon, 2006: 3)

As Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier mentioned that adaptation “as a notion can expand or contract. Adaptation includes almost any act of alteration performed upon given cultural works of the past and dovetails with a general process of cultural recreation”. (Fischlin and Fortier, 2000: 4)

A literary work of adaptation may include ; a statement tackling any literary work that we have chosen to make some changes, and the reason behind that, a description of the setting of the adapted work, when and where our story occurs, and why we have chosen this place and era , how our setting amplifies the important struggles or matters raised by the original work, a description of at least one character that serves as a counterpart to a character from the original work, explain the similarities and differences between the character of the original work and the one we have invented, and clarify our choices, a detailed description of at least one adapted scene from the original work explaining how we will change the scene, and why, clarify what elements of character, theme or plot development that we will maintain, and what we will change to better in order to support our setting, characters and story, a reflection on the central topic or message that our adaptation explores and what ways in which we are going to comment on contemporary politics, society or culture, and the philosophical questions or ideas that will encourage our creation, and what we hope our audience will wonder or think about. However, the aim of this research is to provide light on a modern adaptation of Sophocles’ Antigone which was written and performed for the first time about 440 B.C.E., namely Slavoj Zizek’s adaptation.

## Section One

### Comparison between Zizek's *Antigone* and Sophocles' *Antigone*

Sophocles wrote more than a hundred plays for the Athenian theatre and there were seven of them survive only. *Antigone* was the most beloved play by the modern audiences and it was written and performed first around 440 B.C. *Antigone* was the last play in the Theban Trilogy which contains *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*. Ironically enough, the play which considered the last of the three was written first.

Translated into other languages began in the early 16th century, and the Western world has since produced thousands of exegetic works as well as countless poems and dramatic adaptations. A creative standout is Slavoj Zizek's (2016) *The Three Lives of Antigone*, which begins with the traditional story and offers three possible endings. (Luepnitz 2020: 345)

When Oedipus learned that he has killed his father, Laius, and he has married his mother, Jocasta he blinds his eyes and left the town in exile with his daughter, Antigone. When Jocasta knows the truth, she hangs herself. Their sons, Eteocles and Polynices has quarrelled and kill each other in battle, fulfilling their father's curse.

As *Antigone* opens, we learn that one brother has been given a state's burial, while the other has been left outdoors to rot. According to Theban mores, it was essential that a body should be covered with at least a handful of earth so that the deceased could make its way in the underworld. Creon, who, as brother-in-law of Oedipus, has become King of Thebes, decrees that anyone caught burying the body of the traitor will be put to death. *Antigone*

approaches her sister, Ismene, and suggests that together, they bury him. The latter initially recoils in fear, so Antigone acts alone twice. She is caught only the second time and remains defiant before Creon, saying the gods deem all men to be equal in death and burial. He condemns her to die, but after a damning prophecy by Tiresias, reverses course, and agrees to bury Polynices. His attempt to rescue Antigone fails, and she is discovered, having taken her own life. Haemon, her fiancé, falls on his sword in grief. On hearing this news, his mother, the Queen, commits suicide. (Luepnitz 2020: 347)

It is a story of pitting the law of the gods which is unwritten law against the laws of the human race, family ties against civil duty, and man against woman. Some playwrights in ancient Greece employed mythological stories to criticize on the social and political institutions at that time. It might be the same thing that Sophocles meant when he wrote *Antigone*. Depending on Oedipus myths, Sophocles might be trying to deliver a message to the Athenian king, Pericles, about the dangers of authoritarian judgement. In other words, Sophocles was writing in the culture of 5th century Athens – the "golden age" of drama. During this period, playwrights were keenly aware that their plays would be seen by tens of thousands of people, including the political elite. In other words, Sophocles had an incredible platform with which to share his insights about democracy, rule of law, the individual, the state, the role of religion in society and in law, military conflict, the economy – all the pressing issues of the world's first democracy. This play also raises one of the most important issues in human history, namely: Where does the right of the ruler end and where does the right of the people begin? OR in other words: at what point is disobeying the order of the ruler – or the dominant power – inevitable, even if the punishment is to be buried alive in a rocky tomb

among the dead? As did Antigone, who dies as a martyr defending the religious law approved by the people and which orders the burial of the dead, challenged King Creon, who enacted a different law prohibiting the burial of the dead and threatening death to anyone who challenges his law. Antigone says to King Creon: "Your death sentence does not matter!" (Sophocles, 2004:102)

Slavoj Zizek lately published his first play, *The Three Lives of Antigone*, which contained a preface written by the author with its simple title *Antigone*. It is a brief version of *Antigone* by Sophocles, to which Zizek inserted some original verses. Zizek rewrites the play to end in three different endings making a political and ethical argument with his last ending. The events follow the way of Sophocles' *Antigone* in the first ending in which Antigone is hanged, Haemon kills himself by committing suicide, and Creon is left with complete sorrow. In the second ending, Creon violates the law and helps Antigone in burying Polyneices. People who are living in Thebes angered by the King's behaviour and they burn the whole city to the ground. In the third ending, the Chorus becomes a radical political agent, rises up and establishes a democratic political system before the conflict of Antigone and Creon escalates into violence. In this ending that the chorus becomes a real revolutionary factor, in contrast to the "problematic" rebellious Antigone. Lacan offers an extended reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* in his *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, in which he discusses the ethical significance of the heroine. It is this reading that informs much of Zizek's interest in the play. We as readers have to know what is the wrong thing with the ancient Greek *Antigone* that made tragedian to anger the philosopher?

The young Zizek in his early years, his works has been influenced by Heidegger and he was his most important reference. Later on, and

specifically in Ziezk's doctoral dissertation, we will recognize his distinctive combination of Lacanian psychoanalysis with a materialist reading of Hegelian idealism. It is worth mentioning that Hegel, Heidegger and Lacan are the three main heroes in the philosophical development of Ziezk from his student years to world fame. These thinkers have one thing in common which is the fact that they all read *Antigone*, they offered original, competent interpretations that any thorough modern philosophical discussion of the play must deal with, whether by embracing or rejecting them.

The ambitious Ziezk was not satisfied simply with these discussed interpretations of Sophocles' play or with summarizing, and comparing it; Soon after his doctoral degree, he began to seek to develop his own interpretation. In fact, Ziezk does not agree with Lacan at all. while Lacan sees *Antigone* as *above* morality, in the sense that no recognized human good is what it seeks, Ziezk regards her as a "party to an ethical dispute" (Young 2013: 260)

Jacques Lacan made *Antigone* as a moral figure, while at the same time criticizing previous sentimentality. Lacan describes the unholy behaviour of her beloved heroine Sophocles, beginning with the cruel treatment of her sister. When Ismene promises to keep *Antigone's* illegal act a secret, the heroine *Antigone* says: "Publish it to all the world! Else I shall hate you more" [lines 82–83]. (Ziezk 2016: 4)

Sophocles' *Antigone* as manifested throughout Ziezk's eyes only reflects the old complaint about the unresolvable nature of human contradictions. Ziezk's continuing writings on the play fail to connect genuinely with the famous philosophical and analytical interpretations of the tragedy because Ziezk has nothing to offer in the field of tragic philosophy so that his attitude to the figure out *Antigone* is different. If

Ziezk in his earlier writings at least partly imitates the way of his old writers, and discusses Antigone's sainthood. He warns against the domestication of her sublimeness and says her revolt against Creon to be "the act par excellence" (Ziezk, 1992: 156)

After twenty years, he announces that his love has turned to be cold toward Antigone and Antigone is a "whore" in contrast to the interpretation of Sophocles' Antigone. Ziezk is also ashamed of his romantic comments about her in the past. In 2008 he sharply criticized the underlying ethical position of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. (Ziezk 2008: xviii) Fortunately, after years of hard work, he nevertheless managed to "identify and liquidate these dangerous remnants of bourgeois ideology." (Ziezk, 2008: xviii)

A significant part of philological treatments of *Antigone* in the twentieth century is the focus on reducing Antigone's well-established heroic position in the Sophocles' play just like what we are going to see in modern adaptation of Slavoj Ziezk's. Some commentators see "Ismene as the true heroine" (Rouse, 1911:40-43), others "on Creon" (Hester, 1971:15), others emphasize the significant of the role of the gods. In these related interpretations those harsh judgements about the character or actions of Antigone are very frequent. The negative characteristics of Antigone are found in some of the earliest modern interpretations of Sophocles' tragedy. However, Ziezk is partly correct in claiming that his approach to assessing Antigone's personality is unique. It depends on a unique misunderstanding: it reduces the act of Antigone, which indicates a moral obligation beyond the limits of political arbitrariness, to a kind of political statement and this is Ziezk's point of view.

When his play appeared in German, Ziezk explained that Antigone annoyed him above all as an inappropriate symbol of the revolution against

the state. In defiance of Antigone, he saw an attack on the "universality of the public space of State Power" in the name of "certain family roots" (Zizek, 2006: 398)

Sophocles' *Antigone* is a good example for his modern techniques. The theoretical essence of the play is the conflict between individual conscience and the power of the state whereas Zizek sees the function of Antigone is that, she acts, defying the Law and showing its inherent contradiction – Creon's violence, which is an exception to the very law he stands for – opening up, in this way, the possibility of a new social order. Zizek's play not only brings Antigone back into the domain of politics, but make her into the revolutionary character par excellence, one who challenges the established social order, a role model, in a way, to be followed if we want to make our society better whereas Sophocles' Antigone is rebellious figure not revolutionary, she doesn't want to exile Creon and replace his dictatorship with a more democratic system but he is showing us how the law and dissent create and generate one another and he is illustrating the necessity of tension between the government and lay men.

Zizek sees that not only Antigone's goal but also her method of pursuing it becomes controversial due to this narrow specificity. The heroine, that is, does not strive for the general application of her principle. She was willing to do what she does for her brother only, and not for all the oppressed and excluded. The tragedy of Sophocles needs a different hero in order to solve the problem successfully that is presented So, who might Zizek think?

Zizek's Antigone is largely based on Antigone Sophocles. The gist of Zizek's intervention in the text is his first two alternate endings: Zizek is convinced that if Creon fulfils Antigone's demands, he will throw society

into utter disaster; Burying the traitor would cause disorder among the common people, a slaughter would occur and the city would destroy:

**Messenger**

we saw Antigone in tears, while Haemon  
had his arms around her waist. Led by Creon  
all three together went to the place  
where Polyneices' corpse was left to be devoured by birds,  
and performed a proper burial. But people who saw this  
spread the rumour around the city, and the crowd  
which considered Polyneices a traitor attacking his own city  
was shocked and enraged. Passions flared up,  
the crowd entered the royal palace, savagely slaughtered  
Creon and Haemon, and, unable to restrain and control  
their demonic passion, they went on a murderous spree  
of destruction. Now the entire city of Thebes is on fire.

[**Antigone** enters, dazed and half-crazy, she walks in a trance  
among the ruins, with fires burning all around her]

**Antigone (repeating)**

My nature is to love. I cannot hate ...

**Chorus**

But the horror around you is nonetheless your deed.

(Ziezk 2016: 23)

Ziezk understands Polynices' burial as a rehabilitation of a traitor, although this was never a request or desire of Antigone. This imaginative dimension of the story of Antigone, which cannot be inferred from Sophocles' text, is Ziezk's grounding for the assumption that Antigone's success is politically dangerous. In *Antigone Sophocles*, Ziezk focuses on a supposedly problematic premise of the heroine who is considered heroic for her struggle for a noble cause and sacrificed her life for it; With an alternative development, Ziezk seeks to show that this hypothesis is an illusion and that the desired outcome of Antigone would have led to a greater catastrophe with broader implications for society. Ziezk wants to convince the reader that Antigone is not and must not be understood as a heroic character, but only, as he describes her, as "part of the problem" (Ziezk 2016: 25) In the introduction to his 2016 play *Antigone*, Ziezk writes:

The problem with Antigone is not the suicidal purity of her death drive but – quite the opposite – that the monstrosity of her act is covered up by its aestheticization: the moment she is excluded from the community of humans, she turns into a sublime apparition evoking our sympathy by complaining about her plight.

(Ziezk, 2016: xv)

This is Ziezk's point of view of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Ziezk does not explicitly specify what the "problem" might suppose to be. In fact, since he doesn't seem to have many reservations about banning the original Creon, it seems that the only problem with Antigone is Antigone herself. She is described as a monster who has strived to present herself as a tragic hero.

In the second alternative ending is supposed to offer Ziezk real solution to this problem; Ziezk calls this solution an "away out". Surprisingly, it

does not lie in changing the actions or personality of Antigone or any other central figure. Zizek thinks his solution in the chorus transformation. He contemplated the role of the Sophocles' Antigone chorus already in his early works, the chorus is understood above all as a kind of emotional aid to the audience. Zizek's Antigone suggests a kind of liberation of the old chorus; their roles change from passively supporting all the other aspects of the play into actively struggling for power within it. There is accused that Antigone is concerned with herself and with appearances and she doesn't concern with principles themselves which she claims to be working for and this is clear in the speech of the Chorus "when it calls her "a girl in love with herself, vain enough to think about her look even when she is about to die" (Zizek, 2016: 12)

Therefore, Zizek's chorus presents a "Stalinist twist" (Zizek2016: 14) in *Antigone* by carrying out a quick condemnation and liquidation of all the main figures and establishing the basis of a self-proclaimed "people's democracy" through this revolution. For Zizek, this solution appears to be more than a solution to Antigone's problem. From Zizek point of view, it filters out the core problem of Antigone it symbolizes the final political solution and the answer to the fundamental "problem" of our world. The political model that Zizek celebrates in Antigone is depended on his ethic of violence. Major Marxist currents think violent revolution primarily as a means to achieve justice in the society, while Zizek thinks violence as an end in itself.

The ethical system that puts the destruction and consuming of the enemy on a pedestal, and understands everything else as a result of this primary goal, is clear from the beginning that prevents Zizek from realizing the heroine in Antigone. Zizek is not able to perceive heroism in a person who has not succeeded by violence, that is to say, who has not subdued his

opponent by force. The hero must either possess the power or show a serious possibility to control it. Accordingly, to Žižek's understanding, *Antigone* Sophocles is indeed a problematic text because his conclusion in a sense symbolically reduces the ruler's power without anyone assuming or subordinating that power. Žižek thinks in Sophocles' text above all the limits of state power. Žižek, the hero of expanding the power of the state, looks for resolve this inappropriate situation in his version of the play by creating a new ruler, the chorus, which is in fact merely the faceless weakness of Creon before he realizes his own sin. This ambiguity eliminates the very thing that finally made Sophocles' Creon surrender to Antigone which is his personal circumstances and his privacy. Žižek's chorus is Creon's instrument which is impersonal and a machine of judgment, in which no trace of a certain humanity remains. A machine that will not give up in the face of Antigone's touched sorrow and the fantastic warning of Tiresias who is a prophet with a history of being reviled and ignored by those most in need of his advice and support. Although the kings in both plays (Sophocles' play and Žižek's play) revile him, Tiresias keeps on his role. He rejects to back down, knowing that he is the spokesperson of the gods.

With Žižek's *Antigone*, he has once again proven to be an extremist only in apologizing for the current social status. This absolutely follows from his slippery ethic of violence, which it finds its concrete and idealized model in *Antigone*, that he cannot think of any essential difference between the consolidation of the existing political order and its complete overthrow.

Žižek's *Antigone* which is written at the beginning of this century, is the final choice today. How can the real political struggle continue? "Through the fidelity to the old organic Mores threatened by Power, or by out violence Power itself?" (Žižek, 2001: 158). Revolution can be better

than forces that are only in the sense that it brings someone stronger and more violent to the political battlefield. Zizek also dealt with it in his philosophical works and represented it in his play. However, Zizek's ethics, it is actually better for the authorities to be much stronger so that they can prevent the revolution in such a way that more violence is committed and the power is more firmly entrenched. The essence of every stable authority and its related alternatives, the implicit basis of Zizek's position, is the same. So, alternatives to the existing social system are not alternative in the sense that they bring something new. They all establish and justify the same thing, that is to say violence. The person in power proves himself right once he is in power. The truth of the ruler's speech can only be elicited from him by a stronger political representative assuming his throne.

Deliberately and not by accident Zizek became one of the court philosophers in the contemporary liberal West. With his supposedly radical teachings, which he proclaims everywhere. He sows in his readers a sense of the pluralistic and dialogical nature of our societies, which enables discourse of every kind, even one that aggressively attacks the central values of these societies.

At the same time, Zizek's teachings are music to the ears of the prevailing ideological currents because his gruesome parodies of his criticism are not really problematic in the current situation, but rather justify it by the unspoken consequences of his basic assumptions. The main ideological points emphasized by Zizek's authorship, and which are revealed extensively in his discussions of *Antigone*, are merely a different and more attractive encapsulation of the liberal doctrine about the end of history. There are only two options on Zizek's moral and political schedule: either

the current Creon will remain in power, or another stronger and more violent Creon will dominate.

Also, it is worth mentioning that Feminism, as we know it in the modern era, was not "a thing" in 441 BC. People who are watching Antigone openly and passionately defy Creon, they might probably have felt some shock and amazement to see a woman acting that way. Although it is ironically enough that the role would have been played by a young man because women were not allowed to act on stage. The themes developed by Sophocles are still vivid today. In particular, the play shows the firm will of Antigone to conduct a private action, the burial of her brother, against the State will to power, illustrated by Creon's decree banning funeral. Antigone asserts that citizens are allowed to break State laws which are contrary to the natural order or which prevent from honouring the Gods. This analysis is very close to the modern concept of civil disobedience. (Griffith, 1999: 186)

## Conclusion

To sum up what we have tackled in this paper, Sophocles' *Antigone* is a rebel but not a revolutionary she doesn't want to exile Creon and replace his dictatorship with a more democratic system but he is showing us how the law and dissent create and generate one another and he is illustrating the necessity of tension between the government and lay men, whereas Žižek's *Antigone* is portrayed as a revolutionary character by Žižek's point of view challenging the established social and political order that is why the play stands as a play of radical political struggle. We saw that although Žižek's play neglects *Antigone* and discovers the inherent mistakes in challenging the establishment, *Antigone* remains at its core a call for revolutionary-minded individuals to take place. For Žižek's moral and political schedule there are only two options: either the current Creon will remain in power, or another stronger and more violent Creon will dominate.

Also, we mentioned that Žižek's *Antigone* breaks away Sophocles' *Antigone* and his previous attitude regarding the heroine *Antigone*. In former times he considered her as an authentic Actor, but in the 2016 *Antigone* in attempting to resist Creon Žižek wants to portray *Antigone* as a problematic, failed figure. She is described as a bad woman by him. It seems that his point of view towards the heroine changes into negative one which is similar with Lacan's view which we have clarified it previously.

From Žižek's words in his introduction of 2016 *Antigone*, we understand that he wants to underestimate *Antigone* and to convene us as readers that *Antigone* is not a heroic figure and he describes her as a monster woman who has wanted to present herself as a tragic hero and this is something surely and definitely contrasted with her real truth. In fact, she is a victim of some powers far beyond her power and she has been

immortalized because of her good deeds. Also, we have noticed how Ziezk transformed from the traditional model of tragedy in which the Chorus rarely takes a role in the events, instead making the Chorus commits an authentic revolutionary Act.

*Antigone* by Sophocles, is not about Athens' burial of the war dead. And it is not about contemporary democratic ideology. It is a story about a conflict of wills, a conflict of principles and a conflict of loyalties. It is about authority, limits and legitimacy. It is about commitment, perseverance and integrity. And it is not a sermon. It raises up more questions than it answers. It is done in any theatre of the Greek world, as it has played in countless theatres in different languages at that time. But for its Athenian audience the echoes of contemporary areas of tension gave it an added intensity. Whereas Ziezk's *Antigone* focuses on politics in the specific sense of the organisation of the state.

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