CHAPTER - II
WOMEN OF SUBSTANCE
ANTIGONE

I give my life
To the law of God above the law of Man

- T.S. Eliot - Murder in the Cathedral

Sophocles's Antigone is one of the most celebrated plays in Greek literature. The play, it is generally agreed, was produced before and fairly close to the year 441 B.C. The fact that Sophocles was one of the nine generals elected, with Pericles, for a campaign against the revolt of Samos in that year extends to the popularity of Antigone. "The ancient introduction to the play, found in most of the manuscripts, records, tradition that Sophocles owed his election to office to the popularity of Antigone" (Knox 1). Here the dramatist applies himself to a basic conflict, the rival claims of the State and the individual conscience. The play is rightly called Antigone, for Antigone is the titular heroine. Sophocles's aim seems to have been to confine the conflict to the main characters.

Antigone was probably the most popular of Sophocles's plays during his life time. It drew a powerful response from its audience. George Steiner states, "In the constellation of the seven extant
tragedies of Sophocles, the first magnitude was assigned to Antigone” (Antigones 4). The conflict between Creon, the ruler of Thebes and Antigone, his dead sister’s daughter has its starting point in the problems of law and justice. Should the traitor Polynice, Antigone’s dead brother be forbidden burial or not? From beginning to end, one is in the presence of a conflict between two ideals of justice. Both are sacred; both are necessary for the welfare of man and the full developments of his powers. Antigone and Creon are clearly the central focus of the play. Yet together they give the play a double focus.

According to Allardyce Nicoll, Antigone is unquestionably “the finest and most delicately balanced of all the tragedies, the Greek stage has to offer us” (35). An initial experience of the play makes one feel sympathy for Antigone, who is young, helpless but courageous, burdened with the sadness and horror of the curse on the family. But for Charles Segal, “Antigone has asked to be left to suffer the consequences of her folly” (66).

The story of Antigone and Ismene, sisters of Eteocles and Polynice, is picked up at the point at which Aeschylus left it at the end of Seven Against Thebes. The brothers are dead, and Creon has decreed that the body of Polynice shall remain unburied.

The play commences with Ismene, Antigone's sister being introduced partly because she is a part of the myth and partly to serve as
a foil to her sister Antigone. It is clear from the opening dialogue between two sisters that there is going to be a conflict between Antigone and Creon. Antigone tells Ismene that god has once proved unkind to them. Already they have undergone a plethora of suffering and dishonour. Now they have to face another misfortune. King Creon has decided to give funeral to only one of their brothers Eteocles, but the dead body of Polyneices should meet the fate of a traitor’s corpse. The King orders, “that none shall entomb him or /mourn, but leave unwept, unsepulchred, a welcome/ store for the birds” (Antigone 131).

It was believed by the Greeks that unless a body was buried, literally or symbolically, the soul of the dead man could not find rest in Hades. This explains why such importance is given, in the play, to the burial of Polyneices.

Antigone, faithful to her brother as to her father, had stood beside the dying Polyneices. With his last breath he had made her promise to do for him those funeral rites without which his soul might not rest in peace. She is not an ordinary woman, and she breaks ordinary rules for a remarkable reason. No threats of Creon can change her sisterly heart. She makes up her mind to defy the royal proclamation and to go ahead with the burial. There is a contrast between the characters of the two sisters. Ismene, is by nature, a timid woman. She shrinks from taking all risks, especially the risk of death. When analysing this contrast, Lee A.
Jacobus declares, “The opening dialogue with Ismene clarifies the important distinction between human law and the higher law on which Antigone says she must act” (67). When Ismene inquires Antigone what she can do under such circumstances, Antigone bluntly raises a question, “Wilt thou aid this hand to lift the dead?” (131). But Ismene turns down for she is terrified at the consequences in defying the King’s decree. Moreover she suggests that Antigone is defying not only the law, but the will of the citizens. Antigone reminds her that Polyneices is her brother too. Her conscience dictates proper ceremonies and proper burial to be performed for the dead body of her brother. She requests Antigone to recall the misfortunes which their parents had suffered and how their brothers perished in shame and misery. “Ismene”, observes C.M. Bowra “pleads for a quiet life after the dire misfortunes of their family and wishes to take no risks” (Sophoclean Tragedy 79). Ismene believes that they should not fight against men. She boldly asserts, “We were /born women, as who should not strive with men” (Antigone 131). She feels her womanhood as something negative, as a weakness whereas Antigone finds in it, a source of strength.

When Ismene urges the need for secrecy, Antigone informs her to blazen the news abroad. Her sense of duty seems to have dried up all human feelings except love for her brother. His body must be given burial. This, she regards as a law of the gods, which human beings must obey. Her firm determination is revealed as she cries:
But leave me, and the folly that
is mine alone, to suffer this dread thing,
for I shall not suffer aught so
dreadful as an ignoble death (132).

Antigone accuses that Ismene has failed in her duty. She is absorbed in the dead, but Ismene continues the ordinary life of the living. She is intent on doing what is right. This may make her act harshly, but she is not harsh by nature. The burial of her brother is a matter for bitter disagreement not only between Antigone and Creon but also between Antigone and Ismene. The chief traits of Antigone's character emerge in the prologue itself. In this context it is apt to quote Louis Campbell, who compares Antigone with Electra, "The heroic ardour of Antigone and the no less heroic persistence and endurance of Electra and both founded on the strength of their affection" (Sophocles XXIII). Even though the burial violates the conventional prudence urged by Ismene, to Antigone, it is prudence in the long term.

Besides affection and family philia, Antigone's principal motivation is a prudent respect for the gods and their demands. Ismene argues against Antigone's proposal by reminding her of their family history, their solitude and weakness. They must obey in these things, and "in things yet sorer" (Antigone 131). But Antigone makes no attempt to win Ismene over. She declares that even if Ismene changes her mind she
will not like to have her help. She bitterly rejects the love of one "who cares for Creon." (135). She demands not affection but action and that of the most extreme variety. She considers her life so miserable that she has nothing to lose. Like Ajax and Philoctetes, she prays before she dies that Creon may suffer the same evil that he is unjustly inflicting on her. Despite her firm devotion to a brother, Polyneices, who made war on his own brother, Eteocles, and their native city, she rejects her sister for a perceived disloyalty.

Antigone has appealed to the unwritten laws. Creon stormed like a tyrant on learning by whom his edict had been defied. In the middle of his furious reply, he condemns Ismene to death and orders her to be brought before him. Then he addresses the Chorus, the elder men of Thebes. He imparts a series of general maxims about himself and his positions, about government and patriotism. He considers the interests of the country to be above all other considerations. He certainly wins one's admiration by his intense patriotism, his concern for the welfare of his people and his conscientiousness in the performance of his duty. Creon's first speech is as good an example as one finds anywhere in Sophocles's ability to draw a man's character not only in what he says, but also in the way he says it.

From Creon's first speech, the contrast between Polyneices and Eteocles is brought out. Creon hates Polyneices because he was the one:
who came back from exile,
and sought to consume utterly with
fire the city of his fathers and
the shrines of his father's gods (132).

He wishes that Polyneices's body should be left unburied, "a corpse for
birds and dogs to eat" (132). Though the Chorus accept Creon's edict
without criticism, they do not approve his edict, and are not prepared to
oppose his edict. Creon has the power, "to take what order thou / wilt,
both for the dead, and for all of us who live" (133). These words suggest
some doubt and uneasiness. Creon himself, well aware of their loyalty
and position in the city, places upon them the responsibility of acting as
"guardians of mandate" (133). It is the Chorus who conclude that the
penalty of disobedience is death. When they suggest that the burial may
have been instigated by the gods, Creon's reaction to the Chorus' suggesion is an outburst of anger. He cannot think that the Gods can
have a hand in the burial of the one who committed sacrilege. Anger and
irreverence mount in Creon.

Like every absolute ruler, Creon is prone to suspicion. He is
certain that his law had been defied by a group of people in the city. His
suspicion falls on the Sentry also. He orders him either to find the culprit
or to be prepared for the torture. He is sure that he is right.
Commenting on the character of Creon, C.M. Bowra observes: "His
delusions lead to impiety, a special kind of pride. Just as Pentheus for similar reasons refuses to recognise the Divinity of Dionysus and is equally guilty of impious pride" (Sophoclean 71). Each fails to see what their divine duty is and has excuses for avoiding it. Creon is more an unbeliever than Pentheus is. But in holy matters, he too suffers from a deluding pride. This pride makes him irreverent, and he is wrong in judgement. He is betrayed by his reason.

What is the flaw in his reasoning? How does he arrive at this false conclusion? He neglects the distinction between what is due to the gods and what is due to man. He fails to take account of the gods. As the plot develops, Creon's faults also develop. He becomes more tyrannical when he learns that the burial of Polyneices was performed by Antigone. When he enquires Antigone whether she denies her action, she replies boldly, "I avow it, I make no denial" (Antigone 134). The Chorus blame Antigone for her stubbornness and insolence. Creon is so proud in replying the Chorus that he knows how to tame this over-obstinate girl. He believes that his authority can control the independent Antigone. But he is unaware of the fact that his edict cannot over rule the unwritten, unalterable and everlasting laws of the gods. If she had obeyed his edict, then she would have been guilty of transgressing the laws of heaven. T.B.L. Webster comments:
In the earlier part of the play, she speaks scornfully of ‘good Creon’ and says, “I did not think your decrees were so strong that you a mortal would transgress the unwritten and sure laws of the gods” (Introduction 62).

Creon’s true temper is seen when he regards others, even his own kin with contempt. He always exerts his power against people like women, young men, servants, the old men of the Chorus who are weaker than himself. He swears to punish Antigone, even if she is his sister’s daughter, even if she is closer in blood. She and her kinfolks cannot avoid a doom. According to Hegel’s Thesis, Creon, a father and husband should respect “the holy nature of a blood relationship and not give any order which would offend this sacredness” (qtd in. Vickers 533). Whenever the claims of family are put on him, he tramples on them. One can see this again when Ismene questions Creon, “But wilt thou slay the betrothed of thine own / son?” (Antigone 136). Creon’s callousness is brought to light from the answer he bestows Ismene:

Creon : Nay, there are other fields for
      him to plough.

Ismene : But there can never be such love
          as bound him to her.

Creon : I like not an evil wife for my son. (136).
The Greeks welcomed a high degree of respect from children to parents. Here Creon greets his son Haemon who is a victim of Eros with a sense of paternal dignity. But Haemon comes in to plead with him for Antigone's life. He has been brutally repulsed that he has gone out making obscure threats towards his father. Creon delivers a long sermon to his son, regarding the duties of sons to their fathers and subjects to their king. He tries to divert his son's mind away from Antigone and requests him to think her as if she is his enemy, and let this girl go to find a husband "in the house of Hades," (136). Creon's angry and autocratic nature is revealed still more clearly in his treatment of his son.

Haemon in his reply shows his intelligence, his regard for public opinion and his true love for Antigone. He is exceedingly anxious to prevent his father from persisting in a wrong course of action. He defends Antigone's action as not dishonourable. The people of Thebes admire Antigone for her action. Creon declares that he will never depart from the law for the sake of a woman. He turns a deaf ear to the sober arguments of his son and retorts that he cannot be expected to take lessons from a young man like Haemon. Haemon's valid suggestion that the king must take into consideration the views of his subjects is spurned by Creon, who asserts that the state belongs to the king, and he must rule according to his own will. Instead of answering Haemon's arguments, Creon flies into a rage and calls him a despicable coward and
calls him a "woman's slave" (137). Haemon wishes to be loyal to his father, but he has to save the life of his beloved. So there is a double conflict between duty and love. Indeed Haemon wins every argument of this great scene. He is the personal link between Antigone and Creon.

Through Haemon, Sophocles shows his trust in the average man when it comes to a real question of right and wrong. He chooses to play down the love-relationship between Antigone and Haemon because he wishes to emphasize the father-son relationship. H.D.F. Kitto in his work, Form and Meaning in Drama, observes: "Through Haemon, Sophocles tells us what the ordinary citizen thinks of Antigone" (65). But nothing moves Creon even when Haemon says, "She must die, and in death destroy another" (137). The dutiful son, who valued nothing more than his father's well-being, has become the violent agent of that father's downfall. Despite his claim to value Creon's good advice above any marriage, his loyalties to father and bride have proved as irreconcilable as the conflicting claims of family and polis. His special tragedy is that unlike either Creon or Antigone, he has a full understanding of the values of both. His concern for Creon and the polis are complimented by an appreciation of both personal and family love. Even the Chorus is impressed by Haemon's argument and comments that there is something noteworthy in what he has said. Creon has placed Haemon, like Antigone, in a dilemma to which the only solution is death. His final
lines contain a transparent hint at suicide. This shows his true love towards Antigone and firmness in his views. His great and underserved sufferings make him a tragic character.

When the Chorus anxiously inquires Creon whether he is going to punish both the sisters, Creon replies that he is not interested in giving the punishment to the innocent Ismene. But he has decided to imprison Antigone. The Chorus pity her for the cruel fate that she has to meet but still convinced that her action was wrong. In this scene Ismene tries to do her best in sharing the consequences of Antigone's deeds and die with her. Death shared with her now seems desirable as she begs for the 'honour' of revering the dead by her own death. No desire to share her sufferings can compensate for that initial failure to act. Antigone glories in her 'holy crime' until the last; she does well to glory. The force of her character urges her to fly in the face of law.

The arguments are over and Antigone knows that she must pay for what she has done. All mortals must die, and if death comes prematurely, that is a positive gain for one in for circumstances, and would give her no pain. What would give her pain would be omission of the action she believes is right. She gives her last speech. She is led to her death and will be buried alive. Now commences the flow of her lament. She bemoans the premature death she is going to meet. She cries in despair:
no bridal bed, no bridal song hath been mine, no joy of marriage, no portion in the nurture of children; but thus forlorn of friends, un/happy one, I go living to the values of death (Antigone 138).

The crucial function of Antigone's lament shows an awareness of these ties she has sacrificed, thus enhancing her tragic stature. The Chorus admit that the honour in which she holds her dead brother is a kind of reverence. She does not understand the true meaning of reverence.

They think that high temper and pride have ruined her. Her heroic journey has a feminine character. She compares herself to Niobe, a loving mother. Charles Segal comments, “yet Niobe, too, like Antigone, suffered from excessive love and pride; but in her as in Antigone, loneliness and sorrow are transmuted to a higher plane” (73). She appeals for her own sake. She is a woman like every other Theban woman who has the hopes and expectations of womanhood. She may not have taken this for a husband or a child. They can be replaced by others, but a brother whose parents are dead cannot be. In her life, her love for Polyneices is the strongest tie she has known. She could have neglected her brother and lived happily with Haemon. But she has chosen otherwise to satisfy her love for her brother at the cost of her life. Now, “no persuasion, no threat, not death itself can break into resolutions.” (Knox 50). In her, there is no conflict between love and
duty, between what she wants to do and what she considers to be right. She is forced, like Creon, to take sides between her dead brothers, not just by patriotism but by her own values. This is what the gods demanded from her. But she loses faith in god when Creon accuses her act as “unholy” and “impious” (Antigone 139). She feels dejected and forlorn:

what law of heaven have I transgressed?/
why, hapless one, should I look to the
gods any/more (139).

Even now she does not waver; she goes to death with an insult to Creon, “see what I suffer, and from whom, because I feared/to cast away the fear of heaven!” (139). When criticising Antigone’s last speech, H.D.F. Kitto remarks:

In that marvellously moving and tragic speech which was not to the taste who saw in Antigone chiefly a martyr to the Higher Law, she abandons everything except the fact that she did it and had to do it (Greek Tragedy 30).

Antigone’s life, she declared in her opening speech, lacks nothing that is painful, dishonoured or disgraceful. Only on the way to the tomb, her bridal chamber, she bewails her fate. Now her confidence wavers, but
still she expects all to become clear in the under world. When the Chorus states that she is paying for her father’s deed, she responds by recalling the dreadful fate of her family, her most painful concern. She laments both “the fatal marriage of her parents,” (138) and the fate of her brothers which is the indirect cause of her own death. She refers herself repeatedly as “bride of Hades” (Antigone 138). She will neither be dead nor alive, but suffer a living death, a death in life. Finally, she considers her life so miserable that she has nothing to lose.

With her last words Antigone denounces the injustice of her sufferings. When Antigone leaves the stage for her rocky prison, she curses Creon. He should undergo the punishment inflicted by gods. Her prayer is answered by Teiresias, the prophet, the first agent in its consummation. He too starts out by winning Creon’s approval. Like Haemon, he begins and ends with warnings to take thought and learn from others. But he disregards the warning. He threatens Creon, “thou standest on fate’s fine edge” (139). He informs him about the evil signs, the confused jargon of the birds, the sacrifices which will not burn. He knows something is wrong, and the gods have been angered by Creon’s impious edict. But Creon does not heed the advice of the highly esteemed Tiresias. H.D.F. Kitto in his book Sophocles - Dramatist and Philosopher, blames Creon for the sufferings of the city, “Creon has committed an outrage on Nature, and nature in one way or another, has
the habit of hitting back” (40). Creon’s furious reply to Tieresias begins with a characteristic accusation that the prophet has been bribed. Tieresias is not angry with him. He warns him for his own good and expects the warning to be accepted. He tells Creon that he will lose his son in return, for the living being he has imprisoned in the tomb and the corpse of Polyneices he has kept in the sunlight. He will himself become a living corpse as he reversed the proper status of the dead and the living.

Tieresias advises him to be careful about the divine avenging spirits Erinys, the agent of Dike. Dike, justice is not merely a moral quality, it is a natural law. But the gods do not intervene directly in the action. Events take their natural course. Creon must suffer because he has done wrong and refused to undo his wrong in time. In his abuse of an old man he displays the lack of respect for age which he abhorred in Haemon. After warning the Chorus not to be foolish at their age, his contempt for the polis betrays a juvenile folly unworthy of his own years. Only the most devastating suffering will teach him finally to learn good sense in old age. Thus he fails to honour his own principles, to put polis first and listen to the best plans. All his decisions can be rationally defended. But his irrational anger and stubbornness, and inability to tolerate rational criticism, prevent him adapting those principles to the particular circumstances. This leads to disaster. He killed his wife and son against
his will, but the blame is his, for he rejected warning after warning. When he finally yields, it is not to rational persuasion but to fear.

When Tiresias has gone, the Chorus praises the prophet, “He hath never been a false prophet to our city” (Antigone 140). Creon agrees but still hesitates:

I, too, know it well, and am troubled in soul
'Tis dire to yield, but, by resistance to smite my
Bride with ruin this, too, is a dire choice, (140).

It is evident that Creon suffers from a sense of guilt. He is torn between pride which counsels obstinacy, and fear that he may suffer. The Chorus urge speed, yet even now he traces his old self. What moves him is the force of circumstances. He finds it very difficult to yield but admits “its hard, but I resign my cherished/ resolve - I obey. we must not wage a vain war with/ destiny.” (140).

Now he sets out to undo the evil which he has committed. He has two tasks, to release Antigone and to bury Polynices’s body. Antigone’s life can be saved by quick and immediate intervention. The burial of the dead body can wait until the more urgent task is done. But he acts otherwise. He first gives full burial to the dead body, then goes to release Antigone from the prison. He is too late. On opening the rocky prison,
they hear the cries of Haemon. He was clinging to the dead body of Antigone which was hanging. On seeing his father, who called him, he rushed upon him with his sword. However he missed the aim. Just after this he killed himself with the same sword. Even in his dying moments his arms are entwined around the dead body of his beloved. It seems as though their bodies were wedded in death. Haemon struggles with his loyalties but his criticism has to come out. Now Creon is left alone “in a kind of living death of remorse, self-loathing, worse than that which he had prescribed for Antigone” (Gowda 10). Since disaster must come, it should come at the end.

The time has arrived to Creon to undergo the punishment. He has done outrageous things - to Polyneices’s body, to Antigone, and to his own son Haemon. For this, he is punished by the death of his son and his wife, Eurydice. The Queen is not mentioned until she steps out of the palace to hear the story of her son’s death. She listens to the Messenger’s account of the death of her son quite calmly. She does not interrupt the Messenger as he relates the incident of the suicide of Haemon. But as the Messenger describes how the blood spurring from Haemon’s dying body stained the pale cheeks of Antigone, she quietly leaves the stage. The Chorus observe that silence can itself be ominous. She does not have the courage to live after the death of her only son. So she kills herself before the altar of the God. Her suffering is indeed
pathetic. Her death is the climax of Creon’s own ruin. She invokes evil fortunes upon Creon, the slayer of her son.

In the final scene Creon bemoans and laments over his fate. No wonder that he feels annihilated and wishes to die. He regrets for what he has done, “O miserable that I am, and steeped in miserable anguish!” (Antigone 142). The deaths of Haemon and Eurydice would be accepted as part of the divine plan to punish him. For, in their deaths he finds the sorrow which humbles him. His tyrannical rage and his lack of understanding led him to disaster.

Antigone’s character is pathetic and impressive enough, but Creon’s has the wider range and is more elaborate. H.D.F. Kitto states, “Her fate is decided in the first few verses and she can but go to meet it; most of the dramatic forces used in the play are deployed against Creon” (Greek 127). Her tragedy is terrible, but it is foreseen and swift. Her death, which leads directly to the destruction of Creon’s family is a “tragic web spun by powers who are beyond our comprehension” (Knox 5:1). Creon is an example of a man who does not attend to the Delphic command, “Know thyself”. The Chorus in the last words accuse:

Great words of prideful men are ever
punished with great blows, and, in
old age, teach the chastened to be wise (Antigone 142).

It is pride which is responsible for his fall. One should regard Antigone as one of the instruments of heaven for bringing Creon's wrong action back on himself. The desperate emotions of his son, his wife and Antigone all contribute to his downfall.

The conflict between Antigone and Creon is partly in character and partly in outlook. The pain and suffering are the direct result of character and action. Antigone rebels against Creon for many reasons at once: loyalty to her family, love for her brother, religious duty, mere physical and emotional revulsions against the horror. Human figures are as puppets of circumstances created by a malign fate. Elizabeth Drew comments:

Antigone too is a purely 'good' character, but she differs from Job in that she deliberately chose the path which led her to her own destiny. She is an example of the saying that 'character is destiny' (178).

She obeys the gods. She knows what she is doing and when she is pressed, she explains. With her last words, Antigone denounces the injustice of her sufferings, and emphatically repeats the claim that her
deed was one of reverence. The conflict between Antigone and Creon is also of principle. Each goes as character demands, she to duty through love, he to brutality through pride. What is in essence, a conflict of principle becomes a personal conflict between Creon and Antigone. Hegel formulated the conflict in Antigone as "one between woman defending her family and man supporting the states" (Gassner 51). Her courage and decision are brought into high relief.

Two modern adaptations of the play, both of them live with political urgency are highlights in the history of the modern theatre. Jean Anouilh produced Antigone, a play in one-act in 1944 and published in 1946. It is unmistakably identified with the French resistance. The plot follows Sophocles dramatization of the Greek legend of Antigone's rebellion against her uncle Creon's edict. But the language and atmosphere are modern. There are references to cigarettes and automobile. The Chorus speak in prose and reflects Anouilh's reinterpretation of the classical issues. Antigone is his protagonist, who for the sake of principle alone, disobeys Creon's law and thus sacrifices her happiness and her life. She rejects hope and this theme of reconciliation is repeated by the Chorus. The chorus define tragedy as something restful and clean because it stripped of all elements of hope.

In Bertolt Brecht's Antigone, Creon has launched Thebes on an aggressive war against Argos, and Polyneices had been killed for
deserting the battle line when he saw his brother Eteocles fall. At the end the tide turns against Thebes as Argos counter attacks. Creon takes Thebes with him to destruction rather than surrender. “Against this Hitlerian black, Antigone is all white. She is the image of what Brecht longed to see - the rising of the German people against Hitler, a resistance that in fact never came to birth” (Knox 36).

In the earlier scenes Antigone is depicted as too defiant, sarcastic and aggressive to win one’s unreserved sympathy. Gradually, however, her tenderness and humanity come out, and her suffering wins the heart of the audience. On the other hand, Creon reveals more and more of his egoism and stupidity. Antigone emerges as a heroine who presses forward in the full conviction that she is right. She is in one sense active in the knowledge, but in another she is bold enough to punish Creon. She forces him to harden his nature and set in motion the ultimate tragedy the loss of his son and his wife. Her courage is commendable. She is a martyr to her beliefs, a Greek Joan of Arc. “Greek tragedy has its martyr heroine in Antigone, who faces Cordelia across in centuries in uncompromising virtue and some would add in stubbornness and pride in her virtue” (Gardner 48). One can agree with F.L. Lucas who gives a fitting remark to Antigone’s character:

Antigone remains, it may be his most immortal character - hard at times, and headstrong, like
Cordelia, but heroic as few heroines have been— all the more because, between Senile elders, well-meaning sister, and domineering king, she stands so utterly and indomitably alone. 'Stern Daughter' of the voice of God (Greek 129).

It is her character that brings suffering and death on her:

There is unswerving loyalty of Antigone, impatient with the technical details of ritual, utterly single-minded in her disobedience to Creon, insolent even in her stubbornness but spreading around her this progressive circle of sympathy that ultimately overthrows the kin (Henn 109).

Her resolution never wavers. Yet, rooted as it is in love, it suffers from the natural reaction of other feelings proper to her age, and in her last scene she is well aware of all that she has sacrificed.
ELECTRA

She paid the highest price
In suffering. That is part of the design.

- T.S. Eliot - The Cocktail Party

All three Greek tragedians have written plays on Orestes's murder of his mother. "For Aeschylus, the moralist," observes F.L. Lucas, "it became a theme of crime and punishment, for Euripides, the intellectual humanist, a lesson of the utter foulness of brutal vendetta and lying of Gods" (Greek 209). For Sophocles, Electra is a "picture of vivid characters in a vivid action - like not Hamlet, but the original story of Hamlet" (209). Sophocles's version of the Electra story covers the central part of Orestian trilogy of Aeschylus's as does Euripides's Electra.

Sophocles based his treatment of the myth on a single dramatic twist, where as in Aeschylus's Libation-bearers and Euripides's Electra, the murder of Aegisthus precedes that of Clytemnestra. But Sophocles makes it his climax. He deals with a revenge drama. So the conclusion contains the glorious moment of pure theatre in all Greek tragedy. "Sophocles was particularly skilful in steering his audience along paths he wished them to tread without allowing them to become diverted" (Walton 114). The 'urn' scene, in which Orestes offers Electra a proof of his own 'death' is an apt example of Sophocles's use of a physical property to highlight emotion.
Sophocles's aim is to explain the legendary story in human terms, and to effect this aim he concentrates, not on the theme itself, but on one character. All is subordinated to Electra. The Chorus does not take any dominant position; Orestes and the tutor are but broadly outlined. According to Allardyce Nicoll, "In Electra, however, there is a psychological study such as appears no where in any of Aeschylus' works" (From Aeschylus 31).

The time of the action is some fifteen or twenty years after the return of Agamemnon from the Trojan War and his murder at the hands of his wife, Clytemnestra, and his cousin Aegisthus, Clytemnestra's paramour. The date of the first production of the play is unknown and for H.D.F. Kitto it was "probably some time between 425 B.C. and 415 B.C" (Sophocles 100).

Nature also partakes in human drama. The play opens with dawn chasing away night, and with the cheerful songs of the birds. As it proceeds it becomes gloomy and unrelieved beyond any other play of Sophocles. The scene is the palace of Agamemnon. Orestes accompanied by the Paedagogus his attendant, has returned to carry out Apollo's command and avenge his father. The Paedagogus will announce in the palace that Orestes has perished in a chariot-race at Pythian games, so that he can enter into the palace. Orestes and Pylades, his friend prepare to follow Paedagogus disguised, carrying an urn supposed
to contain the ashes of Orestes. Meanwhile Clytemnestra, warned by an
ominous dream, has sent her daughter Chrysothemis to pour libations on
the tomb of Agamemnon. Electra leads a wretched life. She is illtreated
by her mother and Aegisthus. Electra persuades her sister Chrysothemis
to submit herself and accept the circumstance. As Chrysothemis refuses
to share the deed, Electra decides to act alone.

Orestes who enters with Pylades, slowly reveals himself to
Electra. The sorrow is replaced by joy. Suddenly they hear the shrieks of
Clytemnestra for mercy as Orestes kills her. In the final scene, Aegisthus
is lured into the palace to see the dead body of Orestes, but to his horror
finds the dead body of Clytemnestra. He is driven into the palace to be
killed. The Chorus of Mycenean women rejoice at the passing of the
curse which has rested on the house of Atreus.

In Electra, Sophocles has drawn the characters and the situations
in detail. The play is "the study of a noble spirit, first tortured and then
ruined by the cruelty of circumstances and a vicious creed" (Sheppard
1918). Electra is the protagonist, and she is far more tragic than her
brother. Like Orestes, she believes that vengeance is a high religious
duty. At the beginning she is poles part from the men. But by the time
Orestes rejoins her, she has developed her love and affection towards
him in certain respects, so that they can work as partners in the finale.
On her first appearance, she bursts into an appeal for vengeance to the
gods of the nether world, "avenge the murder of my Sire, and send to me my brother" \textit{(Electra} 157). From her speech to the Chorus, one can feel her mental agony regarding her father’s death. She cries in despair, “for I have no more/the strength to bear up alone against the load of/grief that weighs me down” (157).

It is mourning Electra, and one would look long before finding a more moving expression of personal sorrow. The sympathetic Chorus pity her when she calls herself, ‘Queen of Sorrow Niobe (157). They console her with the assurance that “Zeus shall, have brought him to the land-Orestes” (157). Sophocles writes a long lyrical dialogue between the Chorus and Electra. All the instincts of the Chorus are for compromise. They advise her to be moderate in her grief, to compromise with the usurpers, like her sisters. They admit that the deed was heinous, and the guilty really ought to be punished. Her replies express how impossible this is to one like Electra. “It is true that the consolation and advice offered to Electra by the Chorus in the first dialogue emphasise for us the strength of her loyalty and determination” (Kitto, \textit{Greek} 169). Their general approval of Electra’s values is from their praise and sympathy. They advise her to moderate her hatred, and remind her not to forget her foes.

It is the only extant play of Sophocles which introduces the principal actor with a monody before the entry of Chorus. Thomas
Woodward in "The Electra of Sophocles" observes, "Unlike Aeschylus, Sophocles makes Electra the focal point, and she overpowers the men's plot with her own strength and passion" (115). Electra dominates the play excessively. Her speaking part is one of the longest in Greek tragedy. She is on the stage for almost the whole play. No ghost-raising, no skilful intriguing, no realistic detail or elaborate description distracts the attention of the audience from her tragedy.

Electra reveals how deep into sorrow she plunges by comparing herself to the nightingale that weeps evermore for Itys and to Niobe. Like the nightingale, she will never cease from mourning. She knows that her grief is right because it rises out of love and loyalty. "When Antigone compares herself to Niobe, it is because of the fearful doom that awaits her" (Bowra, Sophoclean 243-44). Niobe was turned into stone and beaten. She is indeed 'most piteous'. No one feels jealous over her lot. But Electra does, "Ah, Queen of Sorrow/Niobe, thee I deem divine - thee, whoever/ more weepest in the rocky tomb!" (Electra 157).

The comparisons show the nature of her grief, its intensity and its justification. She is not satisfied merely to mourn like the nightingale or Niobe, though their state may be enviable. Her individuality is seen in her grief, which shows itself positively to take revenge on evil doers. She lives with her mother and is persecuted by her for many years. Her position in this household is clearly indicated, and as scene follows scene
her personality unfolds before the audience. She suffers from self-pity. Is she thinking too much of herself, or her own sufferings? Certainly, she does not conceal them, “like some despised/alien, I serve in the halls of my father, clad in this/mean garb, and standing at a meagre board” (157). She remains stiffly aloof. As a result, she becomes the object of mistreatment and abuse. She is sensitive. Her behaviour may seem eccentric, but her motives behind it are natural.

Like Antigone, she was born to join in loving not in hating. But she is distracted by the clash between her own instinctive modesty and her prayer for vengeance. She lives to keep a protest in the name of righteousness alive. Antigone is thrown into conflict - her religious beliefs, her love for her brother, her loyalty to her family and her physical revulsion against the horror. Electra is totally engaged in the personal affronts that she suffers, take their place alongside her loyalty to her father and to the god’s law. Though she is conscious that it is wrong to kick against the pricks, she yet justifies her desire for vengeance as being in accordance with the laws of god. T.B.L. Webster in Introduction to Sophocles’s Tragedies, aptly observes; “Religious certainty and recognition of their own lack of Sophrosyne distinguishes Antigone and Electra from such Euripides’ heroines as Medea” (63). It is not right on her part to be neglectful of her dead father. She shows the depth of her love and pity for him, her conviction that she alone remembers him. Her excess of grief is prompted by love.
Presently in a long speech, she gives the picture of her daily life in the palace. Her daily association with her father's murderers had made her dedicate herself more to her father's memory. She has brooded for eight years over the murder of Agamemnon. She is obsessed by the affection in which she holds her father and brother, by the horror of her mother's crime, and by the indignity of her own position. This naturally increases her desire to avenge him. She is no longer strong enough to bear the burden of grief. The Chorus elicit remarks from her which reveal the excess to which the sorrow has driven her. She moans, "I can never know a respite from my sorrow or a limit to this wailing" (Electra 157). Commenting on the Chorus' reaction to Electra's grief, R.W.B. Burton observes: "The Chorus draw on their imagination under the stimulus of Electra's grief and evoke the full pity and horror of the scene at the moment of the axe's blow" (193). The Chorus then predict that her brother Orestes will return soon by the guidance of Zeus.

Chrysothemis, Electra's sister is introduced. Sophocles is too much an artist to make her the foil of Electra. She increases the stature of her sister by contrast. This, the dramatist does for the sake of dramatic contrast, black against white. The Chorus introduces Chrysothemis, as "daughter of the same sire and mother," (158). She is no less loyal to the family than Electra herself. But she has no strength, passion and recklessness to resist. She utters cowardly, "but if I am to live in
freedom, our rulers/must be obeyed in all things” (158). She has already suggested that her vocal protests are a source of intense displeasure to her mother and Aegisthus. She must be called ‘mother’s child’ (158), rather than child of the father. Her warning of the greatest evil which is approaching constitutes a direct challenge to Electra’s claim that mere existence suffices for her. Chrysothemis undercuts her own confused argument by conceding that justice is on Electra’s side. She explains that she must obey those in power in all things in order to remain free. Her freedom is thus no better than the servitude of Creon’s subjects in Antigone. Electra affirms the justice of her own cause and acts accordingly, whereas Chrysothemis fails not only to act on her alleged distress, but to do what she admits, is just.

Electra informs her sister of the news of their brother’s death. She warns her that, although he is gone, she is determined to act unaided. She yearns to fulfil her own prayer for vengeance. She is impatient with her to the point of scorn when she pleads for submission and acceptance of circumstance. She brands her sister’s fault as cowardice - the lack not of physical but of moral strength. She blames her for the betrayal of her father. She complains that her sister supports the slayers of her father. Chrysothemis, fully convinced by the eager proofs of Electra that Orestes is dead, timidly refuses to join in the perilous attempt, and retires before the storm of contempt and indignation which breaks upon her head. She
is unaffected by her sister's scornful speech. Instead, she warns Electra that the murderers plan to kill her if she "will not cease from these laments." (159). Electra is determined in her principle, "I will fall, if need be in the cause of my sire," (159).

Electra's values emerge most eagerly from her attempt to persuade Chrysothemis to join her in killing Aegisthus. "The dispute between Electra and Chrysothemis over how they should react towards their mother compares with the feud in Antigone between Antigone and her sister over the burial of Polyneices, but is no mere copy." (Walton 114). Ismene and Chrysothemis are younger and unmarried. Both have a real affection for their more ardent sisters. Both are conscious that they are women and cannot fight with men, especially with the rulers of the city. Both try to retain their sisters from bringing ruin on themselves. Here the similarity ends.

Ismene refuses to help Antigone in the beginning, but when the deed is done, she recognises the supreme right of the divine law, and claims her share in the guilt. But Webster states, "Chrysothemis's compliance with the rule of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus merits the reproach that she is unworthy of Agamemnon's fatherhood" (Introduction 77). She understands that Electra is right. But neither the hope of marriage nor of glory will move her from her complacency. She belongs to the household of Clytemnestra which Electra has declared she will never join.
Electra's individual traits are brought to light through the long and harsh wrangle between her and her mother. Clytemnestra has come to offer sacrifice to Apollo. Her pairing of words and deeds, implying the sum total of behaviour, contrasts to Electra's sole activity, talk. She sees Electra and scolds her for putting them all to shame. She, like Jocasta, is a woman of strong affection embittered against her husband by his sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia. She defends herself:

> For myself, then, I view
> the past without dismay; but if thou deemest me
> perverse, see that thine own judgement is just
> before thou blame thy neighbour (Electra 160).

She accepts that she had killed her husband. Electra accuses her and sarcastically calls her "a slave's mistress" (161). Clytemnestra loses her temper and starts threatening her daughter when she says, "for base deeds are taught by the base" (161).

Clytemnestra proves to be a cruel woman. She does not show any love or care towards her children after the gruesome death of her daughter. She treats Electra as a slave. Her brutality is seen when she makes Electra live a life without a husband or children. The absence of children refers to her suffering in the old age as there will not be any one to look after her. Now she is unprotected, isolated and friendless.
Clytemnestra thus succeeds, in spoiling the life of Electra. In this context C.M. Bowra remarks:

Clytemnestra glories in her crime and its evil fruits. She has exalted her paramour to the honours that once were Agamemnon's. He sits on the dead man's throne, wears his clothes, pours libations on the hearth where the murder was committed and sleeps in his bed (Sophoclean 232).

She even arranges monthly festival in celebration of the murder. A good wife must of course make offerings to her dead husband's spirit. But Clytemnestra, so to speak, has ceased to be his wife. She has been disturbed by a dream, a dream in which Agamemnon returned to life, and place his sceptre by the hearth; and this grew into a tree which covered the whole country. She wants to appease Apollo by offering fruits to him. She wants to enjoy untroubled peace and unbroken prosperity. She does not possess the courage and freedom, as she is controlled and used as a puppet by Aegisthus. She lacks confidence, without him.

Electra knows that Clytemnestra's true motive in killing her husband was her adulterous passion for Aegisthus. She does not agree with the argument based on the sacrifice of Iphigenia by believing that
Agamemnon had to sacrifice his daughter to appease the wrath of Artemis. He can follow no other way to bring his men safe home or to cross Troy. Clytemnestra has no real defence against Electra. She can only accuse her that she is shameless. According to Electra, her mother suffers from excessive passion and inability to listen. Each claims justice for her own deeds while accusing the other of injustice.

Clytemnestra threatens Electra that she has “to pay this boldness as soon as Aegisthus returns” (Electra 161). But Electra’s trump card is the announcement of the arrival of Orestes. On hearing this, Clytemnestra is tormented by fear. There is no alternative for Electra but to dishonour Clytemnestra. The base deeds of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus teach Electra to be base and to wish for her mother’s death. The thought of vengeance prevails in her heart. “After exchanging wounding words with her mother in the early part of the play, she feels ashamed” (49), comments John Gassner. In her fear and hatred of Electra, Clytemnestra decides to get rid of her. All human feelings that she may ever have had for her daughter are dead. As the doer of shameful deeds, Clytemnestra is responsible for the shameful words that result.

Sophocles could make both plot and situation more complex and thereby draw character more fully. Electra faces in succession atleast ten distinct situations, first alone, then with the Chorus, with Chrysothemis,
Clytemnestra, the Messenger and so on. Each situation brings out a different facet of her nature. "The new complexity of situation is best illustrated by the triangular scenes in which Aeschylus and Euripides had little interest and Sophocles no rival" (Classical 1001). Three persons are involved in the same situation at the same time but with contrasting hopes. Thus the Messenger conveys his false story of Orestes's death in a chariot race at Delphi in order to deceive Clytemnestra and further Orestes's vengeance. She is happy and inquires with ecstasy, "O Zeus, what shall I call these tidings glad/tidings?" (Electra 162).

Clytemnestra speaks the truth. She knows that her son's death is an advantageous factor, but still she has some doubt about saving her life at the cost of his. That is why she comments, There is a strange power in motherhood; a mother may be wronged, but she never learns to hate her child, (160). When she hears about the death of Orestes, for a moment, she breaks down. Her affection for her children made her hate Agamemnon. One can observe a strong insolence which attends her lust and maintains her in her evil ways, fearing no Fury.

Orestes himself and his friend Pylades enter as strangers with an urn bearing the supposed ashes of Orestes. Electra begs to be allowed to hold it in her arms for a moment. She delivers her most moving soliloquy. The two men stand at the back some sixty or seventy feet away. This time her love turns not to her dead father but to her 'dead'
brother. She identifies herself more strongly with her dead brother whom in turn she links closely with Agamemnon. She remembers him as she knew him in childhood as she nursed and "loved best on earth" (165). He was never his mother's 'darling' so much as Electra's (165). Now she wants to die because she may not be parted from him in the grave, and she sees that "the dead have rest from pain" (165). This lament, so simple and affecting is only the prelude to joy. Orestes feels extremely sad to see his sister's suffering, and he changes the course of action. He gently reveals who he is.

Commenting on the brilliance of the scene C.M. Bowra observes, "In the scene where Electra weeps over the supposed ashes of her brother, it reaches a strange and unexpected pathos" (Ancient 101). But speech plays a vital role in this scene along side the urn. Electra's lament overpowers Orestes. For the first time in the play, Orestes suffers under the force of evils from outside. She is as vehement in her joy as in her sorrow and hatred. He does not at this stage wish to reveal himself even to his sister, but his resolution changes when he hears this lament. He realised gradually what she has suffered physically and mentally by keeping faith with his memory.

Orestes is a sharp contrast to Electra. He is a young man whose character should be seen only through Electra's eye, the heroic minister of Dike. If Orestes is free-ranging, atheletic and business-like, he is a
purifier sent by the gods in the name of justice. Electra is tied to the home, unambitious and despairing. She is miserable at home, and she refuses to seek to better her standard of living. She does not see herself engaged in any public life at all. The palace walls bound her world. She laments; reiterates the memories that haunt her; and dwells on her suffering. Her grieving is self-perpetuated; yet it flows from a perception of real horror and torment. Through her eyes, one sees the murder of Agamemnon, as well as the wretched life that she has led since. Electra's despair when she hears the report of Orestes's death, is made more obvious by Clytemnestra's joy. The isolation lays great stress on her sufferings.

Orestes is a young man. He is sure what he does is correct. He plays his own part in perpetuating the evils of retaliation. He has been brought away from home. For many years he has been instructed that his duty is to avenge his father's death. The Paedagogus has brought him up for a single purpose of vengeance. He hardly knew his father, and so he does not have any feeling of love and affection towards his father. But he has understood the facts from his sister's misery and degradation. Like Neoptolemus, he yields to pity and confesses his identity. Sophocles has contrived his plot that son and mother never meet until the crisis. For Orestes, the task is of abstract right but for Electra of intensely personal feeling. He is full of confidence as he has the support of the
Paedagogus. He is appalled to see her sad plight, her wasting neglected body and her unmarried miserable condition. Orestes remarks dejectedly, “Hapless girl, how this sight hath stirred my pity!” (Electra 166).

After seeing Electra’s suffering, his resolve wavers when faced first by the moving lament she addresses to his ‘ashes’ and then by the gradual realization of her appearance. Just before revealing himself to Electra, Orestes declares that he has long felt-pity for her. Electra feels extremely happy as he is the only person who has pitied her. When they recognise each other, they forget themselves. With a sense of fathomless relief, love and satisfaction, she turns from hatred to love, from despair to hope, from solitude to intimate companionship. Now they join together to face their task. Electra agrees to cooperate, and she provides him the fact that he must know. The Paedagogus warns them to be silent because they may be overheard inside. “The conclusion of his speech sums up the dramatic moment as one experience it in terms of the necessity to put talk aside” (Woodard 140). They are already philoi by birth and emotional confirmation. Orestes feels that he enters on a solemn task, and he offers a reverent prayer to his “father’s god” (Electra 167). In action so dread as this, the gods must help. He goes along with his friend Pylades to complete his mission. Electra prays to Apollo:
I implore, grant us
thy benignant aid in this designs,
and show man
how impiety is rewarded by the gods (167).

Electra stands at the door and observes every stage with an ecstatic joy. She reminds him, “If you have the strength, strike her again” (167). She is athirst for justice for blood and satisfied only when she gets it. She leaves Clytemnestra virtually in tears. When she begs for mercy, Electra, knowing that the time of judgement has come, is adamant in her pitilessness. The ancients regarded vengeance as a duty where as the moderns regard it as vice. Since Clytemnestra did not spare Agamemnon, she herself has no right to be spared. But with Orestes, it is different. He has no personal hatred for Clytemnestra, though his sister’s miseries have awakened him.

When Electra enquires how the task fares with him, Orestes replies, “All is well with in the house, if Apollo’s oracle/spoke well” (168). He may doubt about his deeds, but he is certain that Apollo commanded it. Though for a moment he feels the horror of his deed, he tries to comfort himself with the thought that Apollo ordered him to do it.

Unlike Clytemnestra, Aegisthus has a brief confrontation with Orestes. When he realises the truth, he is denied the opportunity to
defend himself. Electra's words recall Creon's harsh curtailment of Antigone's lament. Like Creon, she demands that the offender be killed as quick as possible. She adds that he should be "cast to the creatures from whom such as he should have burial, far from our sight!" (168). Aegisthus is lured to the doom by the same false story of Orestes's death. He is presented with a corpse, which, when uncovered, turns out to be Clytemnestra's. Aegisthus must die on the spot where he killed Agamemnon. Orestes pushes him inside. Electra, who was ruled by wrath and hatred, is now "conquered by pleasure" (168), an overpowering emotion which actually inhibits the vengeance she has awaited so long. At the end of the play, she is willing to sacrifice her own pleasure and profit to those of Orestes. Her tragic stature is enhanced by an awareness that she is violating accepted norms. Electra is almost an avenging fury. Orestes and Pylades are like furies, arrived to punish the murderers. They act not for Clytemnestra but against her. The play focusses primarily on the murder of Clytemnestra qua revenge, not matricide. This is the only reason why Aegisthus dies last. "Sophocles alone has Clytemnestra die before Aegisthus; this order also keeps prominent the earlier crime and the justice of the present deed. But this is Electra's play not Orestes's" (Shipley 736). The audience feel that they are left with the grim brutality and vengeance, without the complicating emotion of horror at matricide.
The killing of Clytemnestra is understood and accepted as nothing more than the successful execution by Orestes of the god's command to him. Orestes himself rests confidently on the authority of the oracle, and his mother's death, once accomplished, is in the fullest and simplest sense the play's confusion. So the Chorus declare in the final lines that the family is made perfect, coming at last, through suffering to freedom. The more unpleasant details of Clytemnestra's death is forced into the back ground, and the sympathy of the audience is won for the children of Agamemnon. According to John Gassner, "only the murder of Clytemnestra by her own son, callously presented without any reaction by Orestes, alienates the modern reader from the tragedy" (50).

At the end it must be seen that in the play there is no conflict between what the gods command and what the human conscience feels. The gods order the death of Clytemnestra as she has instituted a festival on the day of Agamemnon's death, and she prays to kill his own children. If murder passes unpunished, a great rule is violated and many high things are set at naught. Justice and order are restored. Clytemnestra's death and Aegisthus's death can be represented as justifiable and pious acts.

Sophocles's innovations are directed to two ends: the justification of Apollo, who has given the command to punish the criminals and the portrayal of Electra, a noble lady, living in complete isolation in the
house of her father's murderers. According to John Gassner and Edward Quin:

The simple device of delaying the recognition between brother and sister produces a series of brilliant scenes which display Electra's heroic resolution under constant attack. It remains firm even at the news of Orestes' death and rises to its climax when she makes her heroic resolve to act alone (200).

A stern task is carried out in a spirit of revenge and righteous wrath. The play ends with a note of victory. The dead Agamemnon and the protecting gods are appeased. Apollo has been obeyed. The victory has been gained after excessive suffering. What has happened has been undeniably painful.
THE WOMEN OF TRACHINIAE

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport.

Shakespeare - King Lear

The Women of Trachiniae is the most problematical of all the plays of Sophocles. There is wide disagreement about its date, structure and meaning. No date can be given for this play, but stylistic and structural features favour the middle thirties. “The Prologue and the erotic theme have been thought to indicate Euripidean influence and a late date” (Gassner and Quin 854). The structure of the play with its two chief characters who never meet and who each have a separate drama, has been labelled diptych. The same term has been applied with less intensity to Ajax and Antigone. It is the only extant play of Sophocles which takes its name from the Chorus, the Women belonging to the city of Trachis.

Not surprisingly the play has given scandal to critics looking at Sophocles as an embodiment of the classical idea of harmony and serenity. When Charles Segal analyses the authorship of this play, he quotes, “August Von Schelegel declared, crediting the play to Iophon, critics as different as Patin in the eighteenth century and Adams in the twentieth have followed Schelegel in doubting Sophoclean authorship” (Yale 101)
Those who allowed it to be Sophocles's work have called it the weakest of the extant plays, "Inferior, imperfect, very poor and insipid, gloomy, dark, puzzling, odd, nebulous, curious, bitter, difficult; these are its standard epithets" (Yale 101).

The Women of Trachiniae is depicting the last crisis in the life of Heracles, 'a demi-god’. It is of interest for several reasons. It is the only surviving tragedy which ends in death of both the chief characters. The gods as in the other Sophoclean plays take an active part, but in this painful play, they are unseen, though from beginning to end it is their will that is fulfilled. The tragedy is of universal interest because it emphasizes devotion and love inherent in womanhood. In the awful agonies of Heracles, are embodied the heroic endurance and strength representative of ideal masculinity. Bowra comments, "In Antigone the conflict between Creon and Antigone leads to disaster for both. In this play, Sophocles has made his protagonists of opposite sexes and again brought both to tragic end" (Sophoclean 116). The main theme of the play is a woman’s excessive love for her husband.

The play takes its rightful place as one of the most original and powerful works of the fifth century. Sophocles's heroine and his plot bear some resemblance to a poem which was probably written early in the fifth century, "Ode XVI of Bacchylides." Bowra states:
It gives a short and poignant account of Deianeira and makes her neither an Amazon nor a murderess. For him, her story is of a tragic mistake; Deianeira tried to win back her husband, but lost him (Sophoclean 117).

This is the substance of Sophocles's play. No other extant Sophoclean play makes use of such intractable mythical material, and faces such a gulf between the characters as human beings and the characters as symbolic figures. The gulf creates much of the difficulty of modern response to the play. Sophocles draws Deianeira’s domestic tragedy with the fullness and naturalism appropriate to the developed sensibilities of the civilized world where she belongs. But Heracles never comes completely out of remote mythology and from the ancient powers of nature which he vanquishes.

Deianeira, the wife of Heracles has been left behind in Trachis. The first forty-eight lines are a careful presentation of the heroine, full of significance for the rest of the play. She begins by recalling her past, how she was courted by the terrifying river god Achelous who came to her in the guise of a bull, snake, and bull-headed man. Heracles appeared and challenged him, and there was a duel. Deianeira could not bear to see the fight. The battle between Heracles and Achelous is the introduction to the story. It sets the tone for the rest of the play. Then
Deianeira describes Heracles's victory and their subsequent life together or rather apart. He was always away from home performing his Labours, herself waiting in lonely anxiety.

Heracles serves his penance of exile for killing a member of the royal house of Oechalia. Now she is disturbed by a riddling Oracle which said that after Heracles's Labours he would find rest. Her son is sent to find out where Heracles is. He arrives and reports that his father back from exile, is leading an army against Oechalia. Now she is worried about her husband. The Chorus try to comfort her. A messenger announces that Lichas, herald of Heracles, has arrived with news of victory. He leads on a train of women captured at Oechalia. One of them, lole, more noble in appearance than the rest, arouses Deianeira's curiosity and sympathy. Lichas pretends not to know who she is. He tells her that Heracles's motive for sacking Oechalia was revenge. The messenger informs her that Lichas had not revealed the truth that Heracles, only for love of lole, has destroyed Eurytus, the maiden's father. It was not his adventures in Lydia, his serfdom with Omphale, a barbarian Queen, not the death of Iphitus which had held him these years, but love for this maid. Deianeira cruelly hurt, calls upon Lichas. He confirms the news. She does not have courage to think of another lady sharing her husband's affections, as she is deeply in love with Heracles. So she decides to use a magic charm to regain Heracles's love.
The love-charm was given by the Centaur Nessus, who was killed by the arrows of Heracles, and it was dipped in its blood. Centaur's work was to carry the wayfarers across the river Evenus. When Deianeira, as a bride was on her way to Heracles's, she too was carried by the Centaur, but in midstream he lewdly sought to take her. Her screams brought from the waiting son of Zeus, an arrow that pierced the Centaur's lungs. The Centaur, in dying by the arrow of Heracles, told her that she would profit from this love-philter made from his wound. This will act as a love charm. She is not aware of the fact that this arrow had been dipped in the venom of the Hydra.

Deianeira is in an agony of fear when she sees the tuft of wool she used to smear the robe, has disintegrated under the sun's rays. Hyllus returns and accuses her of killing his father. He informs her how Heracles in torment due to the poison, threw Lichas from the cliffs to his death. On hearing this, Deianeira rushes to end her life. With a sword she pierces her heart and dies. Heracles decides to punish her, but Hyllus reveals him of the suicide of his mother and of the love-charm. Now he remembers an Oracle that said he could not be killed by the hand of any living creature. At the close of the play, he, while yet alive, is carried towards his pyre on Mount Oeta.

The subject of the play is the reversal of human schemes by powers that are beyond man's comprehension. The play opens with
Deianeira lamenting the constant absence of her husband while she is forced to make her home. She speaks with truth of her experience as a deserted wife. She expresses her feeling in a melancholic tone, "But I, even / Before I have passed to the world of death, I know / well that my life is sorrowful and bitter" (Trachiniae 170).

For nearly two-thirds of this play, Deianeira is its dominating character. This shows how Sophocles had given importance to this pathetic character. From the beginning, he conveys both her charm and pathos. Her first words spoken before dawn, reveal her anxiety and unhappiness in which she has lived for fifteen months, "I only/ know that he is gone; and hath pierced my heart/ with cruel pangs for him" (170). She is disturbed by oracles. She knows that within the period, his fate, one way or another will be settled. P.E. Easterling in his "Character in Sophocles" observes:

Here we have a speech of the greatest importance for our understanding of Deianeira, establishing her history as the princess who was the object of violent passion and showing how her life as a wife of Heracles has brought her nothing but fear, pain and loneliness (Oxford 139).
Indeed her loneliness is a familiar enough feature of an Athenian woman's life in the fifth century. In a time of war, many Athenian husbands stay away from their families for many years. So, too, for Deianeira the lonely night is a time for brooding and fear, "One night brings a trouble and next /night in turn, it drives it out (Trachiniae 170). She utters these words out of her bitter experience of solitude.

One can compare her suffering with that of Clytemnestra, who says how a woman suffers when her husband leaves her alone at home. Both of them have passed through the same state while loneliness makes Clytemnestra console herself with her paramour Aegisthus, Deianeira longs for her husband to return. His absence disturbs her exceedingly, "were it not for the series of fears which torment her, the first speech might bear comparison with the comic opening of Euripides's Helen” (Walton 110). She has ended her long speech with an account of her present anxieties. Heracles is still away. No one knows where, but there is a reason to fear that he is in danger. Deianeira has received an Oracle that Heracles will either meet his death in Euboea or will survive to live a peaceful old age. The aged Nurse suggests the sending out of Hyllus to obtain the news about Heracles. After a short dialogue, he gives a vague report of his father's return to Euboea, the realm of Eurytus. Deianeira is shocked to hear this city's name, as it is connected with the threatening oracles.
Like sacrifice, oracles are a vehicle of communication between man and god. Unlike sacrifice, these oracles cannot be corrupted, only misunderstood. Early in the play, oracles and sacrifices are closely linked. Deianeira inquires Lichas if Heracles’s sacrifice is motivated by a vow or “some prophecy” (Trachiniae 172). An oracle informed her that Heracles’s expedition against Ochalia will bring either the end of his life or happiness ever after. According to Charles Segal, “The two oracles, Deianeira’s and Heracles’s express from two different angles, the disastrous consequences of Heracles’s savagery; wilful destruction of a civilized city and defeat by the beast centaur” (Tragedy 98). The Chorus arrive to console her. She replies them with “a typically Sophoclean passage on happiness of youth in contrast to the burdening cares of womanhood” (Lucas, Greek 162). The Chorus praise the virtues of hope. They pity her, and tell her that “she is haunted by a sleepless fear for her absent Lord” (Trachiniae 171). They see the seed of hope and encouragement in the disturbed mind of Deianeira, “Sorrow and joy come round to all, as the Bear moves/ in the circling paths” (171). They question her, “for when hath Zeus been found so careless of his children?” (174). She replies that it is anguish which consumes her heart. She becomes passive and helpless as she depends completely on him. She seems content to suffer in ignorance. She becomes a prey to fear and melancholy. Deianeira is distressed because Heracles before departing had told her that in ‘fifteen months’, he is destined to find either death
or rest from his Labours. Now the fifteen months have gone. The Chorus hope that Zeus will protect his son Heracles, but their hopes are shattered. Once Heracles’s anger at being insulted by Iphitus, the son of Eurytus, hurled him from a cliff. This deed of violence made Zeus punish Heracles, for all that he was his son. He had to serve Omphale. Enraged at this indignity, he had to sack the city of Eurytus.

It is evident from Deineira’s opening speech, she has doubts even about the good fortune of having married Heracles. Sadness has habituated her to expect the worst. The Chorus know this side of her character and compare her “to some bird lorn of its mate” (171). The Chorus are unable to ally her fears. R.W.B. Burton, on discussing the role of the Chorus observes, “their main task is to form a sympathetic audience for her changing moods” (Chorus 41). Deianeira’s character is delineated in the first scene with great clarity. She is gracious and courteous to the Nurse. She listens to her advice. She has the appearance and manners of a gentle lady. Sophocles proposes to give her a suitably dignified and a queenly response. The dramatist prepares her to face the startling events in her life. At the same time, he tries to make the audience have sympathy on her, portraying her deep devotion and her natural warmth of heart.

A self-appointed messenger, arrives in advance of Lichas. He tells of Heracles’s victory, and he is on the way to Trachis. Lichas is already
approaching with a procession of captive women from Oechalia. Deianeira is struck by the beauty of a fair captive. She is Iole, the strikingly attractive daughter of the king of ruined Oechalia. He does not tell her that Iole is brought as a captive to live with Heracles. But the messenger who brought the first news, discloses the truth. The deception of Deianeira, Lichas admits, was all his own idea. Heracles ordered him not to conceal the matter. It is he, not Heracles, who worries as he says that he might bring pain to her heart. For the moment, she is at a loss. Only after hearing the advice of the Chorus, she questions Lichas. She tries to keep her emotions in check, and introduces the subject with dignified restraint. Thus instead of merely told facts, one can realise a sequence of scenes full of tension and realise the shock that Deianeira suffers. No suspicion enters her mind that Heracles intends to make Iole, the concubine. She speaks to the captive girl in words of charming simplicity and tenderness. Since Iole is broken with misfortune and misery, she does not make any reply to Deianeira. Deianeira's desire to learn the captives' names is not due to idle curiosity but part of the civilized desire to individualize and sympathize. Bowra declares, "Bacchylides had shown her to be the victim of jealousy. But in Sophocles, real jealousy has hardly any place" (Sophoclean 147). She does not show any hardness or hatred towards Iole.
Deianeira insists Lichas to reveal the truth, but she hides her feelings from Lichas. Instead she speaks of the power of love which Heracles also must obey. She reveals her willingness to do as he wishes. She calls herself mad and in utter dejection laments:

If I blame my husband, because that distemper hath seized him, or this woman, his partner in a thing which is no shame to them, and no wrong to me (Trachiniae 174).

Deianeira is modest and simple. She overcomes this shocking news. She is not hard-hearted to send Iole away. “But the thought of lying ‘under one blanket’ (175) with Iole overwhelms her” (Jones 216). “Men are so made that they turn away from the old” (Trachiniae 174). She asks “what woman could endure it?” (174). Now her new intentions are revealed. It is now clear to her that she cannot welcome Iole under one roof. She fears that while Heracles is called her spouse, but he will be “the younger’s mate” (174). Her fear of “her waning beauty and of Iole’s ripeness, expresses the presence of those forces at work in the human world and they drive her to the dark magic of the centaur’s blood” (Jones 216). Therefore she has made a desperate decision to stick on to the love-charm which is the last resort of a desperate woman to regain the love of her husband.
With regard to the decision taken by Deianeira, it is apt to bring the comparison between Deianeira and Clytemnestra. Both of them are set in the same situation, but their reaction to that situation is different. In *Agamemnon*, Cassandra is brought home by Agamemnon, but Clytemnestra does not treat her as Deianeira treats Iole. She suspects at once that Cassandra is Agamemnon's concubine, though she does not say until she has killed her. Cassandra, like Iole, keeps silent. Clytemnestra is suspicious, brutal, abrupt; Deianeira trusting, gentle, considerate. Bowra states, "Surely Sophocles intends to remind his audience of Clytemnestra and to show that in a like situation Deianeira acts completely unlike her" (* Sophoclean 124*). In Deianeira, Sophocles's audience would recognize the humane spirit of the fifth century at its best, the compassion for the weak and helpless exemplified in the Odysseus of the *Ajax* and the idealized Athenian ruler Theseus in Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*.

When Deianeira gives Lichas the robe dipped in centaur's blood, to be carried to Heracles, the entire conflict between affection and passion, between love and hate becomes crystallized in this crucial property. Lichas departs with the robe to rekindle love. As Deianeira enters, she is alarmed to see that the wool with which she rubbed the blood on the garment has dissolved into bloody foam in the sunlight. This hideous event has brought her back to her senses. She knows that
she has done a terrible thing that her lesson is too late. She feels that she is an evil woman fit only to die alone. She is tormented by guilt and shame. The arrival of Hyllus confirms her fears. He gives the entire details of fire, blood, screams and pain which the charm has released on Heracles. He curses his mother for killing the best of men. May avenging Justice and Erinys visit thee (Trachiniae 171). She refuses to utter a word in her own defence. She walks straight into the palace to die. After an interrupting Chorus, her death-scene is elaborately described. Deianeira, "like Jocasta in the Oedipus Tyrannus, slips out in silence to die" (Tragedy 79). Her tragedy is indeed a tragedy of late learning.

Sophocles may have been the first to represent Deianeira’s deed as innocent. Probably the common tradition was that she acted out of jealous revenge. There is no trace of this in Sophocles’s play. She has gained her knowledge about the love-charm only later. She, being the instrument of the beast’s vengeance destroys her husband. She feels guilty that it is her crime, and that she must pay for it. Once she tells the Chorus: “I am resolved that, if he is to fall, at the same time I also shall be swept from life” (Trachiniae 176). She has taken a risk and failed, she has lost one thing in her life, her husband.

The Nurse later reports how Deianeira has moved from room to room in the house, touching all the objects. Then she sits in the middle of the bed and has driven a sword to the heart. Commenting on this,
Michael Walton remarks, “a Greek drama offers no more touching portrait of a loving wife” (Greek 111). This charming and gracious woman comes to tragic end because of a simple, terrible miscalculation, a mistake of judgement. “Deianeira is,” as Kirkwood says, “involved in the unmangeable sweep of events, caught in the realm where she has no valid point of entry, and so destroyed” (Study 50). Her tragedy ends as it began in loneliness with in the house.

After the death of Deianeira, the change of interest from her to Heracles, shows that the plot is equally concerned with both the protagonists. When analysing the character of Heracles, C.M. Bowra observes that Heracles is a hero of great strength, “an almost divine figure who delivered mankind from pests and monsters, the protector of the injured and in the end, the equal of the gods” (Sophoclean 131). This physically splendid man is destroyed in peculiarly painful way. He is brought on to the stage, in a state of complete exhaustion. Deianeira’s robe ‘symbol of lust’ becomes the woven net of the Furies which traps her husband. The poisoned robe clings to Heracles tightly. He suffers from a ceaseless attack of pain. Albin Lesky comments aptly on the sufferings of Heracles, “The Doric ideal of strong inflexible manhood is helplessly writhing in agony” (Tragedy 109). All that remains to him after a life of heroic effort is his desire for revenge on his wife. Out of his torment, emerges his hatred for Deianeira whom he believes to be the deliberate cause of it. He wishes that she may die such a death as his.
The mere mention of his wife is enough to put Heracles into an ungovernable frenzy of rage. When he hears his son’s words that she is dead, he feels elated and utters these words, “Alas, ere she died by mine, as she deserved” (Trachiniae 179).

Now his attention turns towards Lichas who is an instrument of his sufferings. ‘Hurl down thy Thunder bolt’ (179), he prays to Zeus. Heracles is so absorbed in his own defeat that he is slowly losing his power to reason out. His mind is dominated by the contrast between his former state and his present situation. The memory of the past makes the present all the more appalling. He looks at his wasting body which was once the source of super-human strength. He finds the sight intolerable and addresses his own limbs, “O hands, my hands, O shoulders and breast and trusty arms, ye, now in this plight” (179). It is made the more pathetic when he thinks that this horrible change has been brought by a weak woman who is also his wife.

Hyllus tries to tell Heracles about Deianeira’s intention and her error was not committed willingly, and her aims were noble. Heracles is not ready to believe the words of his son. He bursts into anger against Hyllus:

Villain - what has thou dared to breathe her name again in my hearing the name of the mother who has slain thy sire (179).
When he realises that she caused his impending death unintentionally through the poisonous blood of centaur, he recognizes the hand of destiny. He reaches a new knowledge of what his suffering means, when he connects dead Nessus with the prophecy that nothing alive could kill him. His first realization of it is a great shock, but he soon recovers himself and tells the truth. He does not complain the gods for his sufferings. There is noble simplicity in his ready acceptance of his doom from the dead centaur. Now the prophecy has been fulfilled. He cries in agony, "Alas, alas, miserable that I am! Woe is me /I am lost - undone, undone!" (180).

Heracles's last journey, Deianeira had said early in the play is out of the house. Deianeira's own last journey is taken with unmoved foot, and she does not go further than the marriage bed. The Protagonists do not exchange any words except the robe with its seal (death). What Deianeira understands as a gift of love, Heracles receives as a gift of death. The Oracle reveals its hidden meaning. It is seen in the dead and remote past which kills him. The Centaur's poison acting with the heat of his own lust, brings it to life again. One can see his loss and then recovery of his humanity. Discussing on Heracles's reversal of fortune Charles Segal observes, "Here as in Oedipus Tyrannus, Ajax and Philoctetes, the oracles are wise and tell us truths that we resist or are reluctant to uncover" (Tragedy 99). By suffering and overcoming the ancient gift of the beast of old, he wins again his old victories over the
beasts. Now he can become the hero worthy to be the son of Zeus and “the best of men” (Trachiniae 174).

After coming to the conclusion that he had to meet death, Heracles makes his son pledge to erect the funeral pyre on Mount Oeta and to make Iole his wife. Hyllus is bewildered when Heracles proclaims that his son is the healer of his sufferings. He is the “sole physician of his pain” (180). Hyllus inquires his father how he can cure his body by burning. According to Heracles, the flames on Oeta bring mysterious cure, and it is a part of a secret knowledge that he has, because of his special relation to the gods. The fire which kindled the poison of the beast and reduced him to almost bestial status, gives way to a fire which shows his passage to the gods. On Oeta, the victim leads upward, toward the divine powers, away from the downward pull of beasts. Here, the burning of his body will have just the opposite meaning from its consumption by the fire-kindled poison at Cenaeum. These fires, far from causing disease, will cure it. When Hyllus finds the idea hard to accept, Heracles replies with an unexpected reasonableness, “Nay, if that thought dismay thee, at least/ perform the rest” (180).

The calm tone itself shows the cure. He endures his suffering in at least partial ignorance.

Heracles’s final words show the protagonist is inwardly ready for apotheosis. He cries that he is gone, and his light no longer shines. The
light characterized Iole’s destructive beauty which is kindled, the poison now denotes an inward illumination of the points towards the gods. The sufferings began with the altar’s flash in a corrupted sacrifice. They are ended with the torch’s flash ordered by the gods. One can see the hero emerging from the dark violence of the beast’s enchantment into the light of sanity. Heracles becomes a tamer of inner beasts. Through this scene, Heracles racked with pain and conscious of death has shown a tremendous fortitude and endurance.

Iole is distinguished by her tolerance from the other captives. Her personal distinction draws attention to herself. The interest is heightened when one learns that Heracles is secretly in love with her. She, in the youth and innocence of her beauty, becomes the catalyst of the violence of the archaic past. The excessive brilliance of her beauty is symbolically related to the destructive brightness of the sun and fire which kindle the poison. She leaves an impression so strong that one easily forgets that she has not a single word to speak. The mere presence of this silent character is a major contribution to the play.

Deianeira and Iole are victims of erotic violence, and both unknowingly cause the destruction of their house through love. Both women are prizes won as a result of the battle of Heracles with Achelous and Oechalians. Of both women, it is said that their beauty destroyed them.
Deianeira, the guardian of the house kills her husband and gains her son’s curse. Heracles, the protector of civilization destroys cities; Deianeira, instrument of the beast’s vengeance, destroys her husband. The shocked Chorus inquires the Nurse whether a woman’s hand dare to do such deeds. But her attempt to protect the house from ‘harm’ has just been proven disastrous. The main cause, Iole the ‘new-bride’, brought forth an *Erinyes* for the house.

Hyllus initially stands on Deianeira’s side within the house. Corresponding to him on Heracles’s side outside the house, is Lichas. Both Hyllus and Lichas are emissaries of reconciliation between outer and inner worlds. Both effect just the opposite of their assigned task. They are the instruments of mutual destruction of the husband and wife. Hyllus goes from his mother to Heracles, witnesses his father’s terrible suffering, and carries the news that makes the mother meet her death. Lichas does the same type of journey in reverse. Going from Heracles to Deianeira, he brings back to Heracles the gift from the wife to husband which destroys him.

On seeing his father’s suffering, Hyllus accuses his mother. When he is aware of his mother’s innocence, he grieves. He is a pathetic figure, orphaned of both parents, experiencing emotional pain and tortured by mental agony. In terrible grief, he accuses the gods for allowing this suffering upon their great hero. This outburst is
immediately off set by the significant final words of the play, "In all this there is nothing but Zeus" (181).

It is to the Chorus that Hyllus addresses his last words, his final lament on the death and sufferings he had witnessed. The Chorus agree with Hyllus that Zeus is behind all that has happened, but they do not approve his accusations of cruelty of the gods. Over against this bitterly accused Zeus of Hyllus's speech, however, there is another Zeus, the Zeus who has called Heracles to Oeta. By giving the oracles, He enables him to meet his final sufferings with strength and heroism. Sophocles's plan is that Heracles is the embodiment of heroic manhood on whom the gods have laid burdens all his life. So he stands outside ordinary human claims, even he does not worry about his wife. "When Sophocles prepares us for his death, it is for an apotheosis a reward, for all that he has suffered" (Bowra, Ancient 97). This type of reward can be applicable even for Deianeira's death because the appalling mistake was not a mistake after all, but part of the divine plan to release Heracles from his Labours.

Like other Sophoclean heroes, Heracles is harsh. Yet this harshness is also inseparably connected with a towering heroic strength. His moment of illumination suggests an even more famous passage in Sophoclean tragedy, the finale of the Oedipus at Colonus. The two heroes and the two situations are obviously very different. Oedipus has
his illumination from the beginning. Heracles discovers his only at the end. Both share a personal insight into a god-given destiny that separates them from others, and gives them a special guiding authority in the last scenes of their life. Once the pyre and marriage of Hyllus and Iole are assured, there is something like calm about Heracles. He does not force Hyllus to do it, as he might have. Where he can yield, he does. Now he does not curse the gods, but determinedly takes the necessary steps for the closing act of his life.

This play is painful, in which suffering is intensive as it is foreordained and foretold. The protagonist cannot escape from the suffering. Unlike Antigone, who chooses her own destiny, Heracles and Deianeira undergo their suffering ordained by the gods. They may have some faults, but each one attracts the attention of the audience: Deianeira, for her love for her husband; Heracles, for his superhuman strength and power. Like Heracles, Deianeira has her heroism too. Her courage to search out, and face the truth suggests the heroic determination of the hero of the Oedipus the King.

Like Heracles, Deianeira has her heroic silence, and she does not want to be seen in her suffering. When she sees the probable outcome of her acts, she determines to do on her own impulse. Her isolation at the end is even more terrifying than Heracles's. Her last and noblest act passes virtually unnoticed by the man for whom she has suffered so long
and patiently. Like Jocasta and Eurydice, her death is an ending and nothing more. Bowra in his *Ancient Greek Literature* observes: "This passionate woman who is made to suffer and to endure, submits to a hard fate with patience and sweetness, but whose love is strong, and will not waver with the rudest shock" (97). Her suffering is total. Knowing thus it was the will of the gods, Heracles faces death nobly. It is only in death that both achieve their freedom from the bestial, elemental forces which surround their lives. This play certainly is one of Sophocles's darkest and saddest works ending as it does with a powerful denunciation of the heartlessness of the gods.