



## From Hegelian Ethical Substance to Lacanian Impossible Thing: An Ethical-Psychoanalytic Study of Sophocles' *Antigone*

Mehdi Khoshkalam Pour (Corresponding Author)<sup>1</sup>

Faculty Member of the Islamic Azad University, Abadeh Branch, Iran

Mohammad Rostam Pour<sup>2</sup>

Assistant Professor of English, Islamic Azad University, Abadeh Branch, Iran

Article ID: CLS-2002-1042

Received: January 19, 2020    Reviewed: February 23, 2020    Accepted: March 10, 2020

### Abstract

Hegel's approach to tragedy is innovative and impressive, putting such a tremendous impact on the ethical canons that has been unprecedented since Aristotle. Hegel studied both the modern and the Greek classic tragedies, concluding that "the Greek tragedy, in particular Sophocles' *Antigone*, is superior to all the masterpieces of the classical and modern world... the most magnificent and satisfying" (*Aesthetics II* 1218). Resorting to his dialectics, he declares that *Antigone* is a brilliant demonstration of what he names the ethical substances, the universal pathos or divine wills of the Greek mythological gods incarnated in the particulars, that's is, the human beings that consciously choose to actualize them. Hegel thus illustrates that in *Antigone* the characters' wills and actions are counterpoised by the unseen and intangible ethical substances in order to confirm the triad of the Dialectal method, where the thesis and anti-thesis's dispute will subside down at the reconciling synthesis. Jacques Lacan, despite the incontrovertible impacts he takes from Hegel, argues that the essence of tragedy has to be sought in the very private world the subject internalizes in itself in interaction with the object-cause of its desire. Lacan adds that the object-cause of desire, unlike Hegel's dynamic and lively external stimuli, is a common object that the subject elevates to the level of sublimity. Lacan also proposes

---

<sup>1</sup> [mkhoshkalam@iauabadeh.ac.ir](mailto:mkhoshkalam@iauabadeh.ac.ir)

<sup>2</sup> [mrostampour@iauabadeh.ac.it](mailto:mrostampour@iauabadeh.ac.it)



that the very incomprehensibility of ‘the Thing’ causes the subject to encounter the blinding Real, as an essentially-internal part of the subject’s symbolic world.

## Keywords

Dialectics; Ethical Substance; The Real; The Thing; *Antigone*; Death Drive

## 1. Introduction

One significant step to know Hegel (1770-1831), and in particular what he means as the ‘ethical substance’, as an essential constituent that every proper tragedy should possess, is to have a rudimentary comprehension of his dialectal method. The significance of the dialectics lies on the fact that, as Hegel predicts, it is the essence of the whole universal phenomena to the extent that it seems impossible or incoherent to imagine a category deviating from the dialectics. Based on the dialectics, “every thought has its own opposite into itself and it is possible to deduce that opposite from that very thought” (Inwood 200). Accordingly, every immediate category cannot continue to remain anchored and steady forever; rather, it is destined to beget its own opposite. Reformulating Spinoza’s ‘monism’ that emphasizes the fixed and indivisible immediacy of the universe’s initial substance (Stace 121), Hegel intends to substitute ‘understanding’ with ‘reasoning’ where constant stability seems ultimately illogical and impossible:

In a wide sense, Hegel’s dialectic involves three steps: (1) one or more concepts or categories are taken as fixed, sharply defined and distinct from each other. This is the stage of understanding. (2) When we reflect on such categories, one or more contradictions emerge in them. This is the stage of dialectic proper or of the dialectical or negative REASON. (3) the result of this dialectic is a new, higher category which embraces the earlier categories and resolves the contradiction involved in them. This is the stage of speculation or positive reason. (Inwood 82)

The positive reasoning, or the ‘synthesis’ is the ultimate reconciling point where the initial thesis, and its self-induced anti-thesis finally come together, so that they can reconcile and put away their antagonism. Apropos, ‘It [dialectics] is in general the principle of all motion, of all life, and of all activation in the actual world. “Equally, the dialectical is also the soul of all genuinely scientific cognition. Life itself is dialectical



to the extent that all life involves change” (Sedgwick 62). Hegel thus proposes that whatever one sees is pregnant with its opposite.

Hegel expects the relationship between human beings to follow the schemata included in his dialectical method. Within family, as the earliest and most fundamental building block of society, woman functions as the thesis that collides with her antithesis embodied in her husband. Woman in Hegel’s social studies acts as the thesis that creates and fosters man as the server of the community. Hegel anticipates the same pattern in far larger scale within the society where family and the state inevitably come into opposition. Woman is not only a family member, but also a member of the state; likewise, the state is not only the society’s sovereign order but it is also a community of fathers and husbands. Woman is the guardian of family’s sacred tie of blood, and the state is defender of the nation’s political authority. “There is immanent in both woman and the state something that in their own way they attack, so that they are gripped and shattered by something intrinsic to their own actual being” (*Aesthetics I* 1217). As shown, both family and the state seem to be two equally justified thesis and antithesis disposed against each other.

Likewise, Hegel draws his dialectical method to the subject of tragedy, and his ethico-philosophical approach to tragedy becomes more remarkable when one realizes that “since Aristotle dealt with tragedy, and, as usual, drew the main features of his subject with those sure and simple strokes which no later hand rivaled, the only philosopher who has treated it in a manner both original and searching is Hegel” (Paolucci 367). He contends that a thorough tragedy should narrate a conflict that places the heroic subject between two or more legitimate institutions or rights that are equally reasonable. In classical tragedy, in contrast to the modern psychological tragedies, the hero never finds himself torn between inhumane and divine forces. Logically the tragic fate that befalls the hero is not an appropriate consequence of his inclination towards the devilish whims; rather, “it is the false consciousness of the tragic hero, who, convinced of his own rectitude, embodies a stubborn fixity of will that issues in one-sided action that both violates another legitimate right and plunges the hero into self-contradiction” (Williams 8). In tragedy, as Hegel implies, the frightening thing is that the tragic subject becomes guilty in doing the right thing



rather than the wrong one; consequently, the tragedy comes into being when the subject violates another right by doing a right action.

The synthesis that Hegel promises should be a resolution where the two opposing right forces meet in order to reconcile and alleviate the vindication of their claims. “A great tragedy must have not only a tragic conflict, but also the necessary reconciliation, a resolution that manifests the essential harmony that restores the substance and the unity of ethical life with the downfall of the individual who has disturbed its peace (Hegel, *Aesthetics II* 1193). An appropriate resolution should also amount to a moral knowledge that paradoxically both grants the pertinacity of the opposing powers involved, and moderates their one-sidedness. The reconciliation should contain “a positive solution to the dilemma that would be both intellectually and emotionally satisfying to both parties to the dispute, given only that they overcame their blinkered one-sidedness” (Young 120). Regarding the dispute between family and the state, the reconciling synthesis is expected to eventuate in a new phase that removes the one-sidedness of the conflicting forces.

Lacan argues that the subject is ‘innately’ and ‘irreparably’ ‘barred’; “an emergence which, just before, as subject, was nothing, but which, having scarcely appeared, solidifies into a signifier” (*Book XX* 199). Lacan’s theory of the subject, formulated as  $\$ \diamond a$ , delineates the subject’s endless expedition for the unsymbolic “Thing” that exposes itself only when the subject has entered the *lamella* (*Book VII* 110). What Lacan’s formula indicates, as Žižek confers, is that the Thing, as ‘death drive’, is the subject himself, and Badiou’s theory of the subject and the subjectivity generated by the Event, are indeed a narration of the subject’s quest for himself. The Real of the subject is his ‘split’ essence, “‘divided subject’ or ‘barred subject’—all written with the same symbol,  $\$$ —consists entirely in the fact that a speaking being’s two ‘parts’ or avatars share no common ground” (Fink, *Lacanian Subject* 45). The Thing is thus a common object that has got sublimity in the eyes of the subject.

The Thing is the narration of the subject’s fantasmic relationship with the “*objet petit a*, an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of the Thing” (*Less Nothing* 696). The *objet petit a* thus comes to actualize the lack of the Real, and compensate for the inaccessible kernel of the subject within the signifying system. The *objet petit a* enables the subject to constitute its process of subjectivization, and to supply itself



with a sublimated substance that guarantees the subject's consistency within the world of reality. However, the Real unmasks the void of the *objet petit a* included it, with a collapse of "the ground from beneath our feet, and the very place from which we speak and perceive reality" (Žižek, *Ticklish* 277). The *objet petit a*, or the Thing, is encapsulated by an enchanting mystery whose only function is to make a gap between the subject's fabricated identity and the Real; notwithstanding, the Real, as a traumatic factor eventually intrudes into the subject's symbolic reality, causing him to come face to face with a frightening fact that reveals the hollowness and triviality of the *objet petit a*.

This essay's major aim is to illustrate the tragic character's interaction with the celestial ethical substances that are descended from the Greek gods; consequently, this essay pays close attention to the tragedy of *Antigone* that can supply a unique chance to demonstrate the initial collision and subsequent reconciliation between the ethical substances that the ancient Greek divinity inserts on subjects. The present paper demonstrates that the tragic characters in the Greek classical tragedies are unique due to the fact that they both generate an equilibrium between their particularities with the universality of the ethical substances, and consciously associate themselves with the divine decrees of the Greek mythological gods. However, this essay resorts to Lacan to examine the ethical disputes in the tragedy of *Antigone* from a new horizon. Consequently, Lacan suggests that Sophocles' *Antigone* ought to reveal the intrinsic limitations of the symbolic Order, rather than the external ethical substances. Lacan thus theorizes how Antigone is fascinated by the impossible Thing that she adores. The Thing, as Lacan suggests, can be presented to Antigone only when she has dissociated herself from the known world of signs and symbols.

This study includes six sections. The first section is the 'Introduction' that brings out the main argument, along with a background of Hegel's dialectical method a basic knowledge of which enables the readers to better comprehend Hegel's perception of the opposing ethical substances of the Greek classic tragedy. The first section also offers some details concerning Lacan's the Thing and the subject's inability to express it. The second section, the 'Theoretical Framework,' will explore in detail Hegel's notion of the justifiable ethical substances and Lacan's insights into the



unspoken and unintelligible Thing. The next section aims at illustrating in practice Antigone's entrapped position between opposing ethical substances and her involvement with the Thing that proves to be entirely unspeakable. The fourth section illustrates how both Hegel and Lacan attribute Antigone to the realm of the deads, showing her as a walking dead among the livings. Next section reflects Hegel's and Lacan's identical criteria of heroism whereby Antigone, both Hegel and Lacan confirm, becomes a candidate for true heroism.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. The Ethical Substance

One may aptly ask what is included in family and the state that makes them equally and intellectually righteous and appealing. Why and how can two opposing powers in the Greek tragedies seem simultaneously desirable and infelicitous to the parties involved? The answer to these questions lies in what Hegel construes as the 'ethical substance' as the shared ethos practices and revered within the ancient Greek community. In *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806), the ethical substance, as Hegel describes, is an amalgam of 'human' and 'divine' laws; namely, the ethical substance is the turning point or the synthesis that emerges after the divine 'universal' decree collides with the 'particular' human will.

The ethical substance is the divine power that addresses the fundamental and conventional institutions of ethical life. "Hegel notes that these ethical powers are venerated as divine, not the divine 'in itself' but rather the divine made present in the world and in human experience. They become, either separately or as a whole, objects of human pathos and allegiance, the cause which the hero serves" (Williams 127). The ethical substance or the pathos associates the will of gods with the personal decisions of the tragic characters. Accordingly, the tragic hero finds justification in what he does due to the fact that his individual resolution is now ethically admitted by the Olympus' gods. The ethical substance enables the tragic character to "make himself inseparably coalesce with particular aspect of the capital and substantive life-content ... and deliberately commits himself to that" (Paolucci 47).

As Hegel remarks, having adopted the ethical substance and the divine pathos, the tragic hero seems also free of the consequences of his actions, including the harms that he might do to the fighting opponents that are respectively upheld by



opposing ethical substances: “O man, out of thine own passions thou has created the gods, and the whole Olympus is assembled in thine heart” (*Aesthetics I* 236-7). As a consequence, the Greek tragic heroes act in accordance with something beyond themselves, something powerful and impressive, though intangible and unwritten; accordingly, any judgment made about the tragic characters and their performance includes the specific pathos or ethical substance that dominates them:

As we have seen, ethical substance, ‘the divine actualized in the world’, is the foundation of character, the foundation of everything genuine and absolutely eternal in the make-up of the individual. The principal function of the hero of a Greek tragedy is to personify one side of the tragic dialectic. This means that while the heroes of epic poetry typically have a variety of character traits, tragic heroes are simply the one power dominating in their own specific character. In that respect they should be, as it were, ‘sculptures’, embodiments of, for example, family piety in the case of Antigone, the good of the state in the case of Creon. (*Aesthetics II* pp. 1194–5)

Compared with the modern tragedy, the Greek tragedies and Hegel’s theorization of the ethical disputes seems equally incomprehensible. On that account, Martha Nussbaum (1947-), the contemporary philosopher and professor of Law and Ethics, does have a deterministic stance on the Greek tragic heroes, and not thinking of them as positively as Hegel does. Nussbaum proposes that what is indeed at stake in the Greek tragedies is the ‘goodness’ itself, rather than the characters themselves. Thus thinking, she suggests ‘the fragility of goodness’ as the nerve of tragedy in general, adding that “Greek tragedy shows good people being ruined because of things that just happen to them, things that they do not control” (25).

Nussbaum proposes that two modes of ruin happen in Greek tragedy. The first is the tragic character’s “‘ignorance’ of the consequences of his action or of the circumstances in which they are performed” (25) and the second is an irresolvable ‘ethical dilemma’ where whatever the tragic character does vexes another ethical principle that both he and the rival party reverence, and so from which he cannot escape guiltless and acquitted. However, Hegel’s account of tragedy connotes that the tragic hero consciously chooses the ethical substances and zealously embraces the consequences of his deed to the extent that he feels responsible even for the consequences of his ancestors’ misdeeds. Hegel exemplifies the Oedipus’s family,



signifying how Antigone bravely ties herself with his father's destiny narrated in an oracle's prophecy.

## 2.2. The Inarticulable and Unsymbolic Thing

Jacques Lacan argues that the essence of tragedy lies in the fact that the tragic subject comes across an essence that is excessively incomprehensible and unvoiced. Lacan adds that this inaccessible and mysterious element is to some extent revealed to the subject, yet the subject cannot dominate it. Consequently, the true essence of tragedy should be searched within the reality, or the subject's life, rather than an external ethical and absolute factor that the unknown divine powers may impose on the tragic hero. While in Hegel, the tragic hero has to establish an equilibrium between two or more ethical substances that equally influence him, in Lacan the tragic hero is, thus, involved with an element within his symbolic reality that then and now intrudes into his life, though it never comes into words or signs understandable to the tragic hero (Žižek, *Antigone* xxiii). Such an element most resembles the traumatic Real that remains inaccessible to the subject as long as the subject is associated with the symbolic Order.

Lacan's the Real is an irreducible negativity or incommensurability that influences the contemporary life and culture in all its aspects: economic, political, artistic, religious, social, sexual, and intellectual (Kelsey 41). The Real is that unspoken and elusive "Thing" that intrudes into the symbolic, though the symbolic order has abortively been trying to eliminate or disavow it. "The symbolic implies primordial repression of the Real" (41); therefore, the Real logically precedes the symbolic order, and it is not an external visitor to the symbolic. "The symbolization mortifies, "empties," and separates the Real from the reality. It [the Real] is the surplus, the remainder that eludes symbolization and as such is produced by it." (Žižek, *Sublime Hysterical* 58). Appropriately, the symbolic can be viewed as a 'response' to the Real, that is to say, the symbolic is a mechanism whose most essential affairs are codified in accordance to the attacks and retreats of the Real.

Nevertheless, one cannot be indifferent to Hegel's impact on Lacan, in particular when Lacan talks of the Real as an irreducible element within the symbolic Order. Thus, the Lacanian Real can correspond with the Hegelian One that is the ideal unity of the thing beyond the multitude of its real properties. The One is the essence of



reality that is sublated. Like the Real, the Hegelian One reflects “the transition of a thing from reality to ideality. The transition is practical only when “the Thing as an element of reality is “killed,” canceled, suppressed, and at the same time elevated to its symbol, which places it as One above the multitude of its properties by reducing it to a single trait the unary trait, its signifying mark” (51). In other words, the passage from the Thing to the ‘One’ in line with the Real, narrates how a thing-for-another purifies itself of all its associated properties in order to become a thing-for-itself. “Being for—itself means the existence of the thing for its own symbol; the thing is “more itself” in its exterior symbol than in its reality, in its immediate reality” (51). On that account, the Lacanian Real and the Hegelian One measure up to the Kantian ‘beautiful’, as an object that is assessed only through its particular properties, not based on the common criteria of the symbolic Order. “Everyone must allow that a judgment on the beautiful which is tinged with the slightest interest, is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste. One must not be in the least prepossessed in favor of the existence of the thing, but must preserve complete indifference in this respect” (Kant, *Judgment* 37). Kant, Hegel, and Lacan all stress on the existence of an inaccessible element within the familiar world that needs unknown criteria beyond the known benchmarks to characterize it.

The Lacanian Real seems to match the Thing, an *objet petit a*, or the object cause of desire (Žižek, *Less Nothing* 696) that has been elevated to the level of sublimity in the Kantian sense in view of the fact it challenges the subject’s reason by exposing it to a phenomenon or even a formless object that is not logically comprehensible (61). The subject is in the urgent need of the Thing, or the *objet petit a*, in that it enables the subject to constitute its process of subjectivization, and to supply itself with a sublimated substance that guarantees the subject’s consistency within the world of reality. The Thing also resembles the ‘dynamic sublime’ because it exposes the subject to a phenomenon that bears an overwhelming power over the subject (Wenzel 106). In line with Kant, both Hegel and Lacan approve that it is the mind of the judging agent, not the external object itself that generates the generator of the sublime effect. “The Real is simultaneously the Thing to which direct access is impossible and the obstacle which prevents this direct access; the Thing which eludes our grasp and the distorting screen which makes us miss the Thing” (Žižek,



*Less Nothing* 535). The symbolic order, due to the basic limitations it includes, is not fundamentally equipped to touch the Thing, and “the desire as desire for the Thing is an effect of signifiers that refer to something beyond and which itself can no longer be expressed within the order of the signifiers” (Harasym 110). The Thing in this sense can be equal with trauma, an intruding factor, the unknown X that the subject cannot directly approach, and distorts the subject’s perspective on reality.

The Thing is not entirely out of reach of the subject; the subject can have access to it, but the expense to touch the Thing, as in the Real, is the subject’s symbolic disintegration. “Lacan wishes to ascribe to beauty a “sublimatory” effect. Indeed, for him, “sublimation” means nothing else than the possibility of coming into contact with the Thing without losing oneself as a subject” (Harasym 116). Namely, the subject, to become the subject of sublimity, has to detach itself from the known world of the symbolic Order, and enter the infernal *Ate* or the *lamella*, “the impossible, unsymbolizable kernel that marks the annihilation of the signifying network” (Žižek, *Read Lacan* 74), and includes that form of suffering that never ceases to torture the doomed subject, “the same way as the tradition of hell in different forms has always remained alive, making the sufferings inflicted on a victim go on indefinitely” (Lacan, *S VII* 295). Accordingly, the subject who experiences the Thing or the Real is symbolically dead, a living dead walking among the livings, though dissociated from the real life.

The Real or the Thing, as the elusive element of the symbolic Order is also detectable in Hegel’s dialectical method; viz, “the logic of the dialectical process is that of the Imaginary-Real-Symbolic” (Žižek, *Lost Cause* 66). Hegel’s thesis does not mean that it is innately impregnated with its opposing antithesis, enticing the viewer to search for the antithesis within the thesis. What Hegel actually means is that the thesis to exist and find concretization needs the antithesis; correspondingly, the thesis can function only through opposition to the antithesis. Once more it should be noted that the thesis and the antithesis, as two opposing forces, are not to play mutually complementary roles for each other:

The position of an extreme is not simply the negation of the other; it is, in its abstraction of the other, the other itself. At the moment where an extreme tries to radically oppose itself to the other, it becomes that other. This is how we end up in the “immediate exchange” between the extremes, between the alternate poles (love-



hate, good-bad, anarchy-terror) that immediately pass into each other. This immediate passage takes us beyond the level of external negativity. Each of these extremes is not only the negation of the other, it is also the negation turning back in on itself, its own negation. The impasse of this “immediate exchange” between the thesis and the antithesis is resolved by the synthesis. (66)

Likewise, the imaginary order, as the feminine realm of family bonds and the secured association between the mother and the child needs the symbolic order incarnated in the state, as the opposing and negating antithesis whose existence assures the solidity of the thesis family.

Nevertheless, like the dialectical process indicated, it would be a mistake to consider family and state as two opposing poles reciprocally creating each other. Rather, the family and the state as the imaginary and the symbolic orders are of one essence, inextricably interwoven. The Real or the synthesis for the opposing poles of family and the state signifies the sublime moment where the antagonism between them, and the enigma of complementarity evaporate and a new symbolization comes about where the ethical substance of family/imaginary and the ethical substance of the state/symbolic once more unite, but against the background of their common lack and antagonism.

### 3. Antigone: Entrapped by Ethical Substances and Unsymbolic Thing

Apropos, Hegel views Sophocles' *Antigone* as kind of tragedy that fundamentally relies on collision of ethical substances where Antigone and Creon respectively defend the divine and human laws of family and the state. Both Antigone and Creon are equally justified in supporting the opposing laws of family and state; nevertheless, they are accused of violating each other's pathos because they are not ready to partly renounce the strict claims of their ethical substances (Roche 75). Indeed, both the state and family are two divine institutions that should cooperate to actualize the ideal society proper to man and gods:

What, if they were true to their own nature, they should be honouring. For example, Antigone lives under the political authority of Creon; she is herself the daughter of a King and the fiancée of Haemon [Creon's son], so that she ought to pay obedience to the royal command. But Creon too, as father and husband, should have respected the sacred tie of blood and not ordered anything against its pious observance. So there is immanent in both Antigone and Creon something that in their own way they



attack, so that they are gripped and shattered by something intrinsic to their own actual being. (Hegel, *Aesthetics I* 1217-1218)

Creon considers Eteocles, Antigone's other brother, as the defender of the state that deserves a proper funeral, but Polyneices, the other brother of Antigone has attacked the state; consequently, Creon insists that the traitors to the state should be treated as enemies of the people. On the contrary, Antigone the vindicator of the gods of the nether world and new gods of Olympus has the responsibility to defend the sanctity of the family relationships and blood ties. Apropos, she refuses to divide and classify Polyneices and Eteocles into hero or traitor. Antigone thus determines to bury Polyneices as the ethical substance of family bonds dictates:

But I will bury him; and if I must die  
I say that this crime is holy: I shall lie down  
With him in death, and I shall be as dear to him as he to me.  
It is the dead,  
Not the living, who make the longest demands: We die forever.... (Sophocles 55-60)

Antigone also announces that what she does is not merely her aim; indeed, what she is decisively determined to do corresponds with the will of the gods of the nether world that vindicate the rights of the dead and family bonds:

It was not God's proclamation. That final Justice  
That rules the world below makes no such laws.  
Your edict, king, was strong,  
But all your strength is weakness itself against  
The immortal unrecorded laws of God.  
They are not merely now: they were, and shall be  
Operative forever, beyond man utterly. (II 55- 62)

Antigone thus publicized that she is practicing what the gods of the underworld have ordered her to, the gods whose unwritten and unvoiced orders, a Hegel remarks, can be at variance with Zeus, "the personification of the dominating power over public life and social order" (*Aesthetics II* 1213). The conclusion is the challenge between the various, yet equally logical ethical substances that Creon and Antigone face. That the laws are unwritten connotes that the tragic characters are prone to confusion and crushing uncertainty over what they do; nevertheless, to the ancient Greeks, such laws were assumed divine, suggesting that human beings are not authorized logically



to challenge or question them. “To the he Greeks, no individual can criticize, set himself in judgment on, and so apart from, communal ethos because ethical substance constitutes his very ‘being’, his reality” (Young 112). Hegel seems to imply that the Greek ethical substances can dominate people differently, that’s is, every individual, based on the social place ho/she occupies, is chosen to represent a particular ethical substance.

The tragic subject, as Hegel implies, is in need of another being that can mirror the subject’s image; that is, the subject has to see itself through the mirror that the other would hold up to it. The hypothesis hid behind this act magnifies the Hegelian premise that the existence of the other is essential in supplying the subject with a perception of selfhood and subjectivity. Not having access to a reflecting other, the subject in Hegel sounds incomplete and consciously split:

Hegel points put to the “come outside of” oneself in order to see another as a self-consciousness means two things. It means that the other is not constituted as another self-consciousness. The other is only constituted as a projection of self-consciousness that the first consciousness has not yet become aware of in itself... Hegel also points out that to “come outside” means that the first does not know itself, but on the contrary it has falsely discovered itself in another being and therefore has found itself as another being. (Sadjadi 139)

Antigone’s rigid adherence to the ethical substance thus unveils that she not only finds her subjectivity in searching herself in the pathos she follows, but she also connotes that her symbolic existence is so firmly embedded in the ethical substance that any endeavor to view them separately seems impossible. Antigone like any other Greek tragic hero has to recover her intellectual equilibrium when pressed by the equally justifiable forces that cause a split between his conscious and unconscious parts. Accordingly, each character’s individuality is indeed a socially-constructed feature. Likewise, the ethical conflicts that a character may confront is a potential threat to the unity and solidity of his subjectivity. Ismene, Antigone’s sister with the same responsibility to the family bonds, fails to emerge as a thorough hero because she cannot construct the bonds that Antigone has with the pathos incarnated in her; consequently, throughout the play she represents herself as a hesitant and weak character split between the universal pathos and her pathological urges:



Think how much more terrible than these  
Our own death would be if we should go against Creon  
And do what he has forbidden! We are only women  
We cannot fight with men, Antigone!  
The law is strong; we must give in to the laws.  
In this thing, and in worse. I beg the Dead  
To forgive me, but I am helpless: I must yield  
To those in authority. And I think it is dangerous business  
To be always meddling. (44- 52)

Ismene is entirely mindful of the ethical substance; therefore, she is divided between the pathos of the nether world, and her hesitation in disobeying the state orders; consequently, she never can achieve the importance that Hegel attributes to Antigone. On the contrary, Creon, as a father and husband, and as Antigone's uncle is equally challenged by his love for Polyneices and Eteocles, yet he is conscious of the fact that he has to defend the ethical pathos of the state, the responsibility put on his shoulder by Apollo and Zeus, the strong counterpart powers whose influence equalizes with that of the Penates of nether world:

I have nothing but contempt for the kind of Governor who is afraid, for whatever reason, to follow the course that he knows is best for state; and as for the man who sets private friendship above the public welfare ... and I need hardly remind you that I would never have any dealings with the enemy of the people. No one values friendship more highly than I; but we must remember that friends made at the risk of wrecking our ship are not real friends at all. (17-27)

Both Creon and Antigone can be equally involved with *hamartia*, and to the same extent tainted by the sin of braking each other's ethical substances that are designated by the Greek gods. As Hegel states, both Creon and Antigone have justification for their deeds, while each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by denying and infringing the equally justified power of the other. The consequence is that in its moral life and because of it, each is nevertheless involved in guilt. (*Aesthetics II* 1196). This also should be noted that, in contrast to the modern tragedy that illustrates the innocent tragic heroes afflicted by fate, Hegel insists that the Greek tragedy does not aim to narrate victimhood; rather, the Greek tragic hero's *hamartia* is self-inflicted; namely, the ultimate *hamartia* appertains to the inflexible one-sidedness that tragic characters follow in the ethical conflict befalling them. Likewise, neither Creon nor Antigone cares about the ethical



claims of the other party. Indeed, the guilt of hubris or arrogance is the inseparable thing featuring the Greek tragic characters since any hesitancy about the ethical duties causes the Greek tragedy to fall into the abyss of the modern tragedy where the tragic character is involved internal unresolved psychological conflicts, let alone the tough decisions over the sublime ethical substance.

While Hegel searches for the essence of tragedy within the tragic character's interaction with the ethical substances, and tries to formulate an equilibrium between the tragic character's particularity and the ethical substance's universality, Jacques Lacan implies that the very limitations within the symbolic order and the inarticulable and inaccessible Thing/Real are responsible for the tragic atmosphere surrounding the characters. In his seventh seminar on the "Ethics of psychoanalysis" Lacan recounts how during a stay in London Hotel, his wife made him aware of the fact that professor D. was also lodging there. Lacan was sure that during that time professor D. was living in London. To his question how his wife had understood that professor had room in that hotel, his wife answered: "I have seen his shoes." Lacan became highly amazed as he heard his wife's document. However, Lacan remained skeptical, since there was no good reason to think that professor D. was in London. Lacan considered the whole incident as an amusing joke. Nevertheless, one cannot grasp Lacan's astonishment when he saw professor D. walking through the hallway in his robe (Rabate 81). How can professor D., Lacan's idol, be recognized just through a pair of shoes that can belong to anyone else?

Lacan calls this astonishing incident as his experience of the Beautiful. Lacan divides the world around himself into two spheres. One sphere is the personal one which is based upon the common expectations, intentions, representation, and whatever that lent itself to the symbolic world of signifiers and signifieds. This sphere is called 'personal' world with which one can identify and in which one can recognize himself. The other sphere which escapes man's senses and expectation is the 'impersonal' world whose incidents and definition never can be grasped in articulable terms. The Beautiful is the transition that an object makes from the personal familiar world into the unknown impersonal world.

For them [the personal objects] to appear beautiful..., they must loosen themselves slightly from our familiar world in which everything has a place and a meaning... An object can appear "beautiful" only when it incarnates the transition point at which



the world of meaning loses its self-evidence and appears vulnerable. The Beautiful is the infinite approach of that in which we cannot recognize ourselves in any way whatever. (Harasym 105)

Lacan views the story of Professor D.'s shoes homogenous with the tragic events overcoming Antigone, stressing that the very existence of Antigone is in charge of the tragedy she experiences. Lacan supplements that Antigone functions as the Beautiful in her tragedy because through becoming the Beautiful, she has managed to depart entirely from the common symbolic Order, and has exposed herself to some unintelligible and horrible experiences whose burden is not bearable for the common men. Antigone stands for something beyond speech, and she incarnates the image of beauty since as Kant formulates, Antigone has transmitted herself from the symbolic world of words into an elevated sphere where words lose their meanings. As the chorus confirms, Antigone's uniquely incomprehensibility is too bright for their human eyes:

Where is the equal of Love (Epos)? ... he is here  
In the bloom of a fair face  
Lying in wait;  
And the grip of his madness Spares not god or man,  
Marring the righteous man,  
Driving his soul into mazes of sin  
And strife, dividing a house.  
For the light that burns in the eyes of a bride of desire  
Is a fire that consumes.  
At the side of the great gods Aphrodite immortal  
Works her will upon all. (*Antigone* 147-148)

At this precise point, Antigone enters among guards, and the Chorus adds:

But here is a sight beyond all bearing,  
At which my eyes cannot but weep;  
Antigone forth faring  
To her bridal-bower of endless sleep. (148)

Lacan reflects that Antigone's beauty has absolved her, and particularized her as a unique phenomenon that words fail to describe; in other words, "she has subtracted herself from the circuit of the symbolic exchange" (Rabate 78). Nevertheless, one may aptly ask what features Antigone has that have made her the image of beauty, or what she really signifies that the symbolic Order cannot bear. Lacan clarifies that



“Antigone reveals to us the line of sight that defines ‘desire’. This line of sight focuses on an image that possesses a mystery which up till now has never been articulated, since it forces you to close your eyes at the very moment you look at it” (S VII 274). But what is that sight that Antigone looks at?

Lacan apparently associates Antigone with a bright and burning ‘desire’ that has made her the image of beauty. Nevertheless, Antigone’s desire is unique in that it enables her to find and possess the Thing, that unknown and unvoiced treasure that no logic can comprehend. The mysterious Thing is indeed her brother, Polyneices, “that unique Other that insofar as it essentially evades our world of representation, is coined as the Thing” (Harasym 107). Accordingly, Lacan conveys that Antigone has found the simple body of Polyneices, her dead brother, as the only sphere through which the Thing can emerge. To Antigone, it is only Polyneices who can incarnate the unattainable Thing. Such a feature causes the dead body of Polyneices to possess divinity, a sublime object that has mesmerizes Antigone, while others remain unaffected by it. Antigone’s desire for Polyneices cannot be translated to any language.

It was by this service to your dear body, Polyneices,  
 Learned the punishment which now I suffer,  
 Though all good people know it was for you honour.  
 O but I would not have done the forbidden thing  
 For any husband or of any son  
 For why? I could have had another husband  
 And by him other sons, if one were lost;  
 But father and mother lost, where would I get  
 Another brother? For thus preferring you,  
 My brother, Creon condemns me and hales me away,  
 Never a bribe, never a mother, unfriended,  
 Condemned alive to solitary death. (*Antigone* 150)

It is the irreplaceability of Polyneices that really concerns Antigone. There exists no father or mother to give birth to another brother for Antigone. “What interests Lacan here is that what makes Polyneices unique and incomparable eludes expression in the signifiers of language. His unicity does not lie in anything that can be said of him, it does not lie in properties that can be articulated in linguistic signifiers” (Harasym 112). Furthermore, even Hegel confirms that there is something unique in Polyneices



that makes him extremely precious. A family, as Hegel delineates, can form three kinds of relationship within its sphere. The first is the 'unethical' husband-wife relation where the natural and sensual needs govern the ways between them. The second is the relationship between the parents and children, which like the husband-wife relation, relies on natural and unconscious bonds; thus, it cannot be the receiver of the ethical substance of family bonds that Hegel anticipates to counteract the state affairs.

Nevertheless, it is the third kind of relationship within family, that is, the bonds between sister and brother that Hegel assumes as entirely ethical and pure of any earthly consideration. Sister and brother do not owe each other their 'physical' and symbolic solidity; each of them has her own autonomy that is not tainted by sensual considerations (Paolucci 238). Consequently, the sister-brother relationship can be the receiver of the ethical substance of family to the extent that if it were not for this relationship, the family would become an unethical and animal sphere like the one amongst the unintellectual creatures. Notwithstanding, Hegel lays the blame on the state as a saboteur of sister-brother ethical bond because it is the state that snatches the brother from the bosom of family, leaving the sister bereft of the chance for presenting her spiritual emotion to her brother.

Hegel magnifies the significance of death as the promised synthesis that reconciles family and the state after their perennial disputes. Death has also a vital role in the relationship between sister and brothers. "Death is the ethical and natural given ground around which the two ethical principles commune" (de Beistegui 22). Indeed, it functions as the synthesis of the natural life on the earth and the divine life of the nether world. Death melts both of these two spheres into itself because, as the Greek mythology implies, during death the body decays, and Charon carries the souls of the deceased across the Styx and Hades.

The truly significant role of death and funeral is that they let the sister reveal her ethical and immediate feeling towards her brother, and have the last chance to express what she has always been prevented from; that is, her pure love as the essence that ties the divine ethical substance to the family's domain. No one should prevent the sister this critical moment because every limit set on the sister's love for her brother, as Hegel warns, will threaten and ruin the foundation of the community



and the state, and “the femininity will come to fight the masculinity for such a suppression” (23). Creon makes the same mistake in preventing Antigone from performing a thorough mourning and funeral for Polyneices. The direct consequence of Creon’s act is that the house of Creon faces the wrath of the revengeful Furies and Nemesis, the guardians of family bonds and bloods, and his son Haemon that committed suicide after he could not reason with his father.

#### 4. Antigone: A Walking Dead amongst the Livings

Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler follow Lacan in associating Antigone to the death drive. “The death-drive is the blind and indestructible insistence of libido, an uncanny and excess of life that persists beyond the biological cycle of life and death, with an undead urge to repeat painful past experiences” (Žižek, *Read Lacan* 62-63). In death-drive, the aim is not to satisfy the pleasure principle; rather, the true aim is to sustain a desire unhealed and unsatisfied in order to guarantee a desire whose everlasting roaring flames keep the subject permanently desirous (*Puppet* 93). Butler believes that the tragedy of *Antigone* is not simply a play stressing the sacred rights of the family and the dead; rather, *Antigone* is about the passion that moves fast towards self-destruction. “Antigone is approached by Lacan first as a fascinating image and then in relation to the problem of the death drive” (Butler 47). Antigone’s stress on and masochistic passion for the body of Polyneices, as an unvoiced and inarticulable Thing have taken Antigone, as Butler states, to the abyss of *Atè* where words and signs lose their meanings. The *Atè* or the *lamella* is the horrible inferno between two deaths, the symbolic and the biologic, that living creatures may not cross. “Antigone is already in the service of death, dead while living, and so she appears to have crossed over in some way to a death that remains to be understood” (48). The Thing or the *objet petit a* stands for Polyneices, a death-drive that Antigone searches even though she knows that it can terminate in her death.

In line with Butler, Žižek views Antigone as a pure agent of death drive due to the fact that her wholehearted insistence on the subject of the symbolic ritual and proper funeral cause her to walk on the verge of death that is the result of something that is impossible in the symbolic Order. Nevertheless, Žižek restates Kierkegaard’s insight into Antigone, announcing that Antigone is primarily centered on a truth that no one should know. Žižek thus substitutes the unsymbolic image of the Thing incarnated in



Polyneices with a new Thing that is so indecent and ignominious that it should not be revealed to the public. “While Antigone admires and loves her father Oedipus, the public hero and savior of Thebes, she knows the truth about him (murder of the father, incestuous marriage). Her deadlock is that she is prevented from sharing this accursed knowledge: she cannot complain, share her pain and sorrow with others” (Žižek, *Antigone* xiii). To clarify his premise, Žižek refers to the story of Abraham whom God orders to sacrifice his son, while he cannot communicate to his people the reason of his act. What exacerbates Abraham’s position is that he has to dissemble his suffering by obedience to a sadistic God whom he should sanctify of illogicality. Like Abraham, Antigone is doomed to ‘impassive suffering’, painfully concealing her father’s guilt.

The aim of the analogy made between Antigone and Abraham, however, seems to accuse Antigone of masochism where she attempts to make the law come into being. To be exact, Antigone tries to wash the ugly face of Oedipus and hide the truth of his crimes and incest. Consequently, she participates in a self-inflicted suffering whose true aim is to hide from others her father’s scandalous life; in other words, she strives to conceal the barred, hollow and decentered position of Oedipus from the public and even Oedipus himself. Antigone’s passive suffering is thus a trap to distract the public as well as Oedipus from the crimes his father has committed. “Look, I suffer, therefore I am, I exist, I participate in the positive order of being” (Žižek, *Ticklish* 281). Like a masochist who calls upon or appeals to the father, hoping to make the father fulfill the paternal function (Fink, *Clinical* 181), Antigone attempts to reveal to Others including Creon a brilliant and lively face of her ill-famed father.

Following Lacan, Žižek advocates ‘symbolic suicide’ the aim of which is to reveal the void and emptiness of the barred Other and the encumbrances of the symbolic (*Enjoy* 44). In contrast to the symbolic suicide that eventuates in the ‘suspension’ of the symbolic Order and all the organisms that serve it, Žižek points out another type of self-annihilation *qua* demonstrative suicide (59) that resembles an elusive act that is still done in the hope of restoring the big Other through keeping it unaware of its inherent inconsistencies. Indeed, the Father/God is dead (Meyer 49), yet Antigone does not allow him to know of his death. Antigone seems to summon all pains and



suffering upon her body and sacrifices herself for a baseless cause, to wit, sanctifying the house of Oedipus of its ugly past.

Antigone's death is also confirmed in other ways. Indeed, both Lacan and Hegel agree that the word is the death of the Thing; namely, the subject faces its death as it is narrativized through words. Consequently, any articulation through words causes the intact being or existence of the subject to collide with its symbolic counterpart that is nothing but an empty semblance or simulacrum of the subject. What is most at stake is the intact and unimpaired integrity of the subject that is lost among other signs and words as communicated to others. "The law of heart ceases through its very realization to be a law of heart. For it thereby takes on the form of "being," and is now universal power, which holds this particular "heart" to be a matter of indifference; so that the individual, in establishing his own ordinance, no longer finds it to be his own" (Paolucci 249). Hegel thus thinks that the words expose the subject's uncontaminated and unspoken particularity to the external world. The subject undergoes an alienation and "lets himself get detached from his own self; qua universality he lives, grows on his own account, and purifies himself of individuality" (249). The words thus betray the pure and unimpaired 'being' of Antigone to its innate opposite, the non-being, as the dialectical process shows. Consequently, Antigone is overtaken by an ending oscillations between opposing being and non-being that never emancipate her.

Alienation is one of the major characteristics of the Lacanian subject. Linguistic alienation happens when the subject enters the symbolic; that is, when he/she acquires language. The emerging subject is alienated in that he/she has not been the main cause behind the construction of his/her identity. Instead, the subject's identity is the result of his/her identification with the signifiers. It is these signifiers that form the subjectivity, and thus determine the future identity, of the subject. The Lacanian subject is the subject of the language he/she is exposed to in the Symbolic... the [subject] can never experience the state of full identity between him/herself and those signifiers. In all his/her life, the subject attempts to fulfill this desire. However, the desire is never fulfilled and the gap is never filled. (Sadjadi 136)

Following de Saussure, Lacan remarks that every word is a combination of a signifier and a signified that rarely match due to the arbitrary and unstable bonds between them. Through naming, the subject becomes a sign, a split occupying the inconstant space between a signifier and a signified. "I am what I think', therefore I



am: divide the 'I am' of existence from the 'I am' of meaning. This splitting must be taken as being principle, and as the first outline of primal repression" (Lemaire 77). Furthermore, as Žižek indicates, Antigone as well as all human beings are sentences to symbolic death through narrativization:

The integration of the subject's position into the field of the big Other, the narrativization of his fate, becomes possible only when the subject is in a sense already dead.... Insofar as the subject does not assume this stature of the "living dead", every attempt at narrativization, at the integration of his fate into the symbolic texture, is by definition lethal: a deadly menace looms over his endeavor to "tell the entire story" about himself. The putting into words... gives rise to a mortal danger. (Žižek 151)

Antigone and the whole house of Oedipus are doomed to death in that they are all some knots within the narrative of the Delphic oracle. Thus, Antigone has to face up to the same curse that follows her family in exactly the same way her father just actualized what had been predicted about him. Oedipus, Eteocles and Polyneices his sons, Jocasta, Creon and Haemon all are suffering the symbolic disintegration befalling them just through being named in the prophesy of the oracle. Since then, even they themselves are mindful of such a bitter truth that they cannot modify or alleviate; therefore, one should not be surprised at seeing these characters bravely embracing their doomed suffering and subsequent deaths. On the contrary, any attempt made to change the prophesy and escape the doomed destiny seems improper and sign of anti-heroism amongst the Greek tragic characters.

### 5. Antigone: From Hegelian to Lacanian Ideal Hero

The Hegelian and Lacanian ideal heroes seem to be of the same essence and be conscious of similar ethical values. Correspondingly, Hegel and Lacan ought to be like-minded when characterizing their anti-heroes. Fidelity, dutifulness, faithfulness and responsibility are the features that Hegel and Lacan value most when searching for their ideal hero amongst the tragic characters. Apropos, these two thinkers have nothing but contempt for the modern romantic characters that act through passion; that is, their actions seem devoid of any ethical substance. On the contrary, an ideal hero's "firm and strong character is one with its essential 'pathos', and what excites our admiration is this indestructible harmony" (Drapper 114), whereas no pathos is felt in the motivation of modern tragic characters and no god seems willing to uphold



them. One quick consequence is that the romantic and modern tragic characters cannot live up to the Hegelian dialectical process and their actions never seem to search the Real.

The most undesired feature of the modern tragic characters is that they do not feel responsible for those consequences of their actions that have got out of their hands; that is, they just stand in charge of the actions that are in line with their intention while they timidly attempt to manipulate or attribute the undesirable results of their performance to fate or any other factor hoping to acquit themselves of the miserable results of their deeds (Young 125). The modern tragic character thus morbidly considers himself the victim of other people's mistake and believes that he is sacrificed for what is not his mistake. Therefore, he appertains the entire disadvantage and misfortune to others, and insists that others rather than him should be punished. Such an anti-heroic atmosphere has got widespread in today's ethical appraisal to the extent that modern readers think that the tragic characters should be liable just for those actions that have been done quite consciously and intentionally:

We assume that only full responsibility can attach where the individual under consideration is in complete possession of the true nature of his action and its attendant circumstances... He will thrust on one side that part of it [his action] which he would not have done had he known completely or not misconceived the circumstances, and he only accepts that which was fully under his cognizance and carried out with deliberate intention in conformity there to. (Paolucci 102)

The Greek classic hero, however, differs entirely from the romantic one. Not only does he take the responsibility of all his conscious actions, but he also considers himself responsible for even the unconscious results of his deeds. For example, Oedipus construes himself in charge of the crimes committed either consciously or unconsciously, and never attributes his crimes (Drapper 113). Thus, Oedipus as well as all his clan heroically receive the curses that have befallen them, and his sons and daughters share his bad as well as good fortune. Antigone, correspondingly, seems determined in observing the Greek heroic values and bravely embraces the curse afflicting her father, Oedipus, though she has not had any hand in what came to her father because she is conscious of the Greek convention that the past, the present



and future scandals and honors are equally shared among different generations of that particular dynasty.

Antigone: you have touched it at last: that bridled  
Unspeakable, horror of son and mother mingling:  
Their crime infection of all our family!  
O Oedipus father and brother!  
Your marriage strikes from the grave to murder mine.  
I have been a stranger here in my own land:  
All my life  
The blasphemy of my birth has followed me. (Sophocles 37-44)

Here Antigone acknowledges that she has in herself the inheritance of misery and curse which is handed down from Oedipus to his descendants. Such a curse is inevitable and Antigone respects this truth. Moreover, Antigone confirms that she has done her duty to her dead brother knowingly and she never escapes the death proclaimed by Creon. Antigone thus indicates how responsible and loyal she is to the collective destiny of her family to the extent that quite consciously she welcomes the death penalty that Creon asserts on her life:

Antigone: Creon, what more do you want than my death?  
Creon: Nothing. That gives me everything  
Antigone: Then I beg you: kill me ...  
I should have praise and honour for what I have done. (II 91-97)

Antigone clearly announces that she is ready to face her death, and such a death brings honor and fame to her. Death is the result of what she has done, and she embraces her death warmly and never loses her heart before death. In another place the Chorus accosts Antigone and recites that Antigone herself has brought her death upon herself and her choice to face death has been absolutely conscious. Even in the last moments of her life, when she faces the result of her revolution against Creon, she never feels remorseful for what she has done. She eagerly recites that she has known that her final destination is death, but such death is her pride and honour.

Slavoj Žižek determines to illustrate what a Lacanian ideal hero might look like; therefore, he intends to demonstrate the path Lacan explores to find his ideal hero. Žižek opens up his discussion by referring to Lacan's insight into Edgar Allan Poe's 'purloined Letter' where Lacan, assisted by his semiotic experiences, concludes that "a letter always *arrives* at its destination". Žižek clarifies that Lacan's true message is



that whenever a subject sends a letter, its addressee undoubtedly will receive that letter and answer it. The subject through such a letter sends a message to the addressee, and the addressee receives the message and surely answers the sender's letter. The message is always a demand which motivates the addressee to take action. Therefore, Žižek recites that the letter always makes a complete circle where the subject or sender and the addressee or receiver are the organizers of its diameter. Such a circle is always assured, and the connection between the receiver and the sender never cuts off. As soon as the addressee receives the letter, he writes a letter and sends it to the sender or subject. So the sender always receives its desired response from the addressee.

However, Jacques Derrida attacks the theory of the letter and considers it an illusionary circle which never becomes externalized. Derrida asks Lacan; "So why does the letter always arrive at its destination? Why could it not- sometimes, at least- also fail to reach it? ... Isn't it always possible for a letter to go astray?" (Žižek, *Enjoy* 13-14). Derrida's true aim is to remind Lacan of the fact the sender and the receiver of the letter resemble the two parts of a sigh, here the letter; nevertheless, Derrida implies that Lacan should be conscious of the arbitrariness and instability of the ties between the signifier and the signified, resulting that the sender/signifier may not necessarily find its proper receiver/signified. Or the letter might go to astray, or at best the addressee might not be willing to respond the letter back. Therefore, Derrida thinks that such a Lacanian circle is open to many questions, and Lacan, Derrida assumes, has to reformulate his theory of the latter.

Despite the coherent objection which Derrida makes to the theory of the letter, Lacan becomes determined to respond Derrida's question. Lacan recites that the letter which the subject sends to the receiver has no certain address on itself. Indeed, everyone who receives this letter is the addressee of the letter. Therefore, the addressee is not a predicted certain person. Lacan writes that his theory of the letter is unquestionable and the circle he anticipates is certain and assured. "A letter always arrives at its destination since its destination is wherever it arrives" (10). The letter which the subject has composed, has not had a certain addressee from the beginning, so everyone who intends to read this 'addressless letter' is its receiver.



Lacan then points out the famous experience of what is called in German *Flaschenpost*. Through such an experience someone who is encircled and entrapped in a remote unresidential island puts a SOS message into a bottle and throws it into the ocean. This message or letter is sent by the subject, while he does not certify somebody as the addressee. So everyone who takes the bottle from the ocean and reads its message is the real addressee of the letter. Lacan's theory of the letter measures the same process seen in the experience of the ocean bottle.

The importance of the theory of the letter rests in the fact that it can link Hegel and Lacan in their insights into the tragic character's reflection versus the consequences of his action. Lacan concludes that "the sender always receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form, the repressed always returns, and the frame itself is always being framed by part of its content" (12). It means that the message sent by the subject causes an answer in the addressee, and this answer is exactly the externalized meaning of the message sent by the subject. In other words, the reaction which the receiver indicates before the letter, is exactly what the sender has asked the receiver to show. Therefore, the receiver can be considered as a mirror which reflects the intention of the subject himself.

Such a hypothesis enables Lacan to express his definition of the 'beautiful soul'. Achieving the beautiful soul, the Lacanian hero, in line with the Hegelian idealized character, takes the responsibility of the consequences of his message. He remains faithful to what he has longed for, and simultaneously accepts to be in charge of the unpleasant outcomes of his performance. The heroic subject finds a structural homology with Hegel's figure of the "beautiful soul" (*Abyss* 192) in that the subject becomes capable of recognizing the inherent deficiencies of the world surrounding him, and determines to lay the foundation for a new creation.

This answer, in which the "Beautiful Soul" is confronted with how it actually partakes of the wicked ways of the world, closes the circuit of communication: in it, the subject/sender receives from the addressee his own message in its true form, i.e., the true meaning of his moans and groans. In other words, in it, the letter that the subject put into circulation "arrives at its destination", which was from the very beginning the sender himself: the letter arrives at its destination when the subject is finally forced to assume the true consequences of his activity. (Enjoy 12)



Žižek argues that the true meaning of the message sent by the subject is the reaction that the addressee shows. As the subject observes how enormously his message has shaken the receiver, he has no right to say that “But I did not mean it.” Such a tolerance and cheerfulness which the subject exhibits before the consequences of his demand causes him to emerge as a Lacanian hero. “Lacan defines “hero” as the subject who fully assumes the consequences of his act, that is to say, who does not step aside when the arrow that he shot makes its full circle and flies back at him” (13). Whatever the addressee reflects is what the sender has wanted him to do. Therefore, surprise and confusion must not encircle the subject because he knows he is taking what he has paid for.

Having in mind Lacan’s letter theory, one can observe how Antigone can shine as a Lacanian hero while Creon emerges as an anti-hero devoid of humane and ethical values. To perceive Antigone, one is asked to consider her as a subject who sends a message to her addressee, that is, Creon. As a Lacanian hero/ heroine she remains faithful and responsible towards the consequences of her message sent to the addressee or big Other. The big Other, here Creon, plays the role of the addressee who responds Antigone’s letter as she has wished. Antigone’s message/letter to Creon is that she publicly recites her opposition to the decree of Creon, and Creon as the receiver of the message, intends to answer back Antigone through sentencing her to death. Antigone from the beginning knows what might be her answer, and as she receives her answer from Creon, she does not become surprised or remorseful.

Antigone: you must decide whether you will help me or not

Ismene: I do not understand you. Help you in what?

Antigone: I am going to bury him.

And some lines later Antigone adds that:

Antigone: But I will bury him; and if I must die. (Sophocles 27-55)

Such a message is a message of war that will escalate into a full-scale tragic scene; Antigone is inviting Creon to a battlefield whose only outcome is nothing but death. Antigone as a heroine knows that Creon, the receiver, has no answer but death for her. However, Antigone’s consciousness of Creon’s certain reaction does not make her lose her heart. Throughout the play she never becomes regretful or disappointed for her risky endeavor to bury her brother. The risk of immediate death cannot make her implore Creon to forgive her.



Antigone: I knew I must die, even without your decree:  
I am only mortal. And if I must die  
Now, before it is my time to die,  
Surely this is no hardship. (63-6)

Antigone thus never becomes surprised at her death and considers Creon's message as the true answer to her message. But the reader might ask rightly what might happen if Creon were the sender of the message and Antigone were the addressee. Does Creon carry in himself that beautiful soul which enabled Antigone to remain faithful to her demands? Does Creon become regretful when he realizes the true meaning of his message? To answer such questions, one should view Creon as the starter of the communication between Antigone and him. Doing so, the reader soon realizes that Creon does not deserve to be regarded as a Lacanian hero because he is not qualified enough to possess the beautiful soul. Confronting Antigone's response, Creon becomes confused and flabbergasted due to what he has triggered; therefore, he emerges as an anti-hero that gets frightened in front of the consequence of his action.

Creon: Polyneices, I say, is to have no burial: no man is to touch him or say the least prayer for him; he shall lie on the plain, unburied; and the birds and the scavenging dogs can do with whatever they like. This is my command ... (35-7)

Encountering the bitter and ungovernable repercussion of his provocative decree, Creon emerges as an anti-hero that cannot tolerate the heavy burden of what he himself has initiated; namely, Antigone's death and Haemon's imminent death:

Choragus: Go quickly: Free Antigone from her vault  
And build a tomb for the body of Polyneices  
Creon: You would have me do this?  
Choragus: Creon, yes!  
And it must be done at once: God moves  
Swiftly to cancel the folly of stubborn men  
Creon: It is hard to deny the heart! But I  
Will do it: I will not fight with destiny.  
Choragus. You must go yourself. You cannot leave it to Others  
Creon: I will go.  
-Bring axes, servants:  
Come with me to the tomb. I buried her, I  
Will set her free. (96-106)



First refusing what Teiresias predicts, and then realizing the certainty of Teiresias' prediction, Creon changes his mind and hurries to save her. Such a change in opinion and retreat from what he has ordered distance Creon from the beautiful soul, which elevated Antigone as a perfect heroine. Lacking in the Beautiful Soul is not the only fault which Lacan finds in Creon. Lacan argues that that Hegel's notion of fight between equally justified forces in tragedy is not practical to Creon, and any comparison between Antigone and Creon is fundamentally abortive and wrong.

One note-worthy point regarding Creon and Ismene is that they seem to have Lacan on their side due to the fact that they are hesitant and uncertain in what they do and think about. The hesitancy is indeed one of the predominant properties featuring the Lacanian subject, connoting the subject's split and linguistic alienation within the symbolic order. Accordingly, free will, independent deduction, and certainty of consciousness seem to be lacking in what Lacan delineates in his subject. The reason for such a fundamental *hamartia* appertains to the fact that Lacan considers certitude and confidence as two elements that Descartes uses to boast of in his proper subject. Appropriately, throughout his works, Lacan evidently expresses his contempt for the Cartesian cogito as an impossible because, as Lacan anticipates, the subject himself is a product of the symbolic Order, a constituent employed in the game of the Other, rather than an influential rule-maker in the field of facts surrounding him.

Whereas the Cartesian subject believed in the coherence, certainty, and centrality of himself, the Lacanian subject is a split and decentered subject that is driven by the contradictory parts, orders and drives of his/her unconscious. The Lacanian subject [involves] mental fragmentariness and instability... While Descartes considered self in terms of its free and decision-making character, the Lacanian subject is not free; he/she is subject to Symbolic, and thus subject to language he/she learns in the phallic phase. (Sadjadi 145)

Emerging as a political critic and moralist, Lacan states that "the behavior of Creon is marked by *hamartia*: he makes a mistake in judgment. Still more, he commits stupidity" (Harasym 111). Lacan points out the seemingly voiceless protest of the community in whose name Creon sentences Antigone to death. Lacan adds that Creon has forgotten that his political power is applicable just to the living, not the dead. Refusing the burial ceremony to Polyneices, Creon has outstepped the territory



that is governed by the gods of the nether world. Nobody expects Creon to bring his rule over the dead. Likewise, Ismene cannot own the certainty that her sister enjoys; consequently, throughout the play she is conscious of the rules and disciplines of the state, as the supreme phallic and symbolic Other that has defined her as an obedient subject rather than an autonomous unruly agitator that would use her falsified sense of certitude to destabilize the big Other's reign.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper took assistance from Hegel to present an image of the Greek classical tragedy, and chose Sophocles' *Antigone* as a play that can demonstrate Hegel's ethical consideration concerning tragedy. Doing so, this essay revealed that, based on Hegel, a thorough tragedy should be centered on a tragic conflict that is triggered when two equally justifiable powers and their respective ethical substances insert their claims into the subject. While Hegel finds the tragic character divided between the external ethical substances of the Olympus' gods, Lacan contends that the essence of tragedy as the subject's ethical deadlock lies in his inability to express or touch the long-sought Thing. Lacan also reveals that the subject's exploration of the Thing is essentially involved with a death drive that takes the subject to the inferno of the *Ate* or *lamella* where both the subject and the symbolic world disintegrate. Furthermore, this essay tried to shed light on the motif of funeral and the synthetic role of death, along with the significance of the family bonds that associate the universality of the ethical substances with the particularity of human beings. The last part of this essay concentrates on the motif of ideal heroism from Hegel's and Lacan's perspectives where they agree that a true hero should be responsive to the consequences of his action including those done consciously and unconsciously.



## References

- De Beistegui, Miguel, and Sparks, Simon. *Tragedy and Philosophy*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1969. PDF File.
- Draper, Roland. Ed. *Tragedy, Development in Criticism*. London: Macmillan, 1980. PDF File.
- Fink, Bruce. *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*. Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1999. PDF File.
- . *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995. PDF File.
- Harasym, Sarah. Ed. *Levinas and Lacan: The Missed Encounter*. New York: New York, 1998. PDF File.
- Hegel, Georg. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. 2 vols. Trans. T. M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon, 1975. PDF File.
- . *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford, Clarendon, 1998. PDF File.
- Houlgate, Stephen. *Freedom, Truth and History, An Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1991. PDF File.
- Inwood, Michael. *A Hegel Dictionary*. Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1992. PDF File
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. James Creed Meredith. New York: Oxford UP, 2007. PDF file.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or*, vol. I, Trans. D. Swenson and L. Swenson. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979. PDF FILE.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Encore: Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-73*. New York: Norton, 1999. PDF File.
- . *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. D. Porter. New York: Norton, 1992. PDF. File
- Lemaire, Anika. *Jacques Lacan*. Trans. David Macy. London: Routledge, 1994. PDF File.



- Nussbaum, Martha. *The Fragility of Goodness*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986. PDF File.
- Paolucci, Anne and Henri. *Hegel on Tragedy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. PDF File
- Rabate, Jean- Michel. *Jacques Lacan, Psychoanalysis and the Subject of literature*. New York, Palgrave, 2001. PDF File.
- Roche, Mark William. *Tragedy and Comedy: A Systematic Study and a Critique of Hegel*. New York: New York UP, 1998. PDF File.
- Sadjadi, Bakhtiar. *The Lacanian-Althusserian Dialectic: Theoretical Problems and Premises in Investigating the Subject's Identity*. Saarbruchen: Lambert, 2010.
- Sedgwick, Peter. *Descartes to Derrida, An Introduction to European Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. PDF File.
- Smith, Joseph H. *Arguing with Lacan, Ego Psychology and Language*. Yale: Yale UP, 1991. PDF File.
- Sophocles. *Antigone*, in *The Theban Plays*. Transl. B. F. Watling. Baltimore: Penguin, 1968. PDF File
- Stace, Walter Terence, *The Philosophy of Hegel*. Trans. Hamid Enayat. Tehran: Amirkabir Publication 2001. PDF File.
- Wenzel, Christian Helmut. *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics*. Malden: Blackwell, 2005. PDF file.
- Williams, Robert R. *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012. PDF File.
- Young, Julian. *The Philosophy of Tragedy from Plato to Žižek*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2013. Pdf File.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. New York: Routledge, 1992. PDF File.
- . *For They Know Not What They Do*. London: Verso, 2002. PDF File.
- . *How to Read Lacan*. London: Granta, 2006. PDF File.
- . *In Defence of Lost Causes*. London: Verso, 2008. PDF File.



- . *Less than Nothing: Hegel and Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. New York: Verso, 2012. PDF File.
- . *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1994. PDF File.
- . *The Most Sublime Hysteric*. Trans. Thomas Scott-Railton. Cambridge UK.: Polity, 2014. PDF File.
- . *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. Cambridge MA: MIT P, 2003. PDF File.
- . *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. New York: Verso, 1999. PDF File.

### Suggested Citation

Khoshkalam Pour, Mehdi. and Rostam Pour, Mohammad. "From Hegelian Ethical Substance to Lacanian Impossible Thing: An Ethical-Psychoanalytic Study of Sophocles' *Antigone*." *Critical Literary Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2020, pp. 5-37.