

# The enduring entertainment and moral applications of myths in Antigone and The Magic Lotus Lantern

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## Author Biography

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## Abstract

Myths are more than just entertainment; they serve as vehicles for moral education and cultural connection. This study examines the enduring relevance of myths by analyzing Sophocles' Greek tragedy *Antigone* alongside the Chinese folktale "The Magic Lotus Lantern." Although rooted in distinct historical and cultural contexts, these myths share universal themes, such as the tension between natural and civic laws, the importance of filial piety, and the resilience of their protagonists in confronting moral dilemmas. The article explores how myths engage audiences across mediums, fostering collective joy, emotional resonance, and cultural engagement while providing a foundation for moral reflection. Additionally, it highlights how the universal values embedded in these myths—such as courage, justice, and love—bridge cultural divides, promoting empathy and cross-cultural understanding. By comparing *Antigone* and "The Magic Lotus Lantern," this study reveals the multifaceted roles of myths as both sources of entertainment and moral exemplars. These timeless stories continue to shape human behavior and ethical reasoning, imparting lessons that resonate across generations and societies.

*Keywords: Mythology, Entertainment applications, Moral principle, Antigone, Magic Lotus Lantern, emotional connection, cultural engagement, collective joy, personal integrity, moral education, cross-cultural moral understanding.*

## Introduction

For millennia, myths have been regarded as a form of entertainment, serving to unite communities through storytelling. Myths have historically brought people together, fostering a sense of shared identity and cultural heritage. Whether gathered around a fire in ancient times or assembled in modern theaters and lecture halls, individuals have long sought out these narratives, often delivered by skilled storytellers or scholars who interpret the deeper meanings behind the tales.

Despite the significant temporal and cultural gaps between ancient and modern societies, myths continue to hold relevance today. They serve not only as a bridge to our past but also as a conduit for conveying universal values that resonate across different epochs and cultures. This paper explores the enduring importance of myths in contemporary contexts, arguing that these ancient stories can still provide valuable insights into human behavior, social norms, and ethical dilemmas, thereby reinforcing their role in shaping modern society.

In order to demonstrate my thesis, I will use one tragedy from Classical Greece and one folk tale from modern China as case studies: Sophocles's famous tragedy *Antigone* and the ancient Chinese tale "The Magic Lotus Lantern." The tragedy tells the story of *Antigone*, a princess of the Greek city-state Thebes, and her conflict with her king and uncle Creon. A central theme of the play is the contrast between natural law, which *Antigone* represents, and civic law, embodied by Creon. The tragedy focuses on the events following the civil war between the twins Eteocles and Polynices, sons of Oedipus and brothers of *Antigone*, narrated by Aeschylus. After the death of the twins Eteocles and Polynices, Creon forbids anyone to bury the body of Polynices, whom he considers a traitor. On the contrary, *Antigone* believes that the king's decision contravenes natural law. Asserting that the laws of the gods are above those of man, she decides to secretly perform the funeral rites for her brother Polynices. Ultimately, when her actions are discovered, she is sentenced to be buried alive. In the end, the young woman commits suicide by hanging herself.

"The Magic Lotus Lantern" is a tale from ancient Chinese folklore. It tells the adventures of Chenxiang who saves his mother, San Shengmu, who has been imprisoned under the Mountain Hua by his uncle Divine Erlang. The imprisonment of San Shengmu is the punishment that Divine Erlang has inflicted upon her for marrying a mortal man. Divine Erlang sees the marriage as a violation of heavenly rules. Chenxiang sets out to save his mother and diligently practices martial arts and faces many trials from a young age to prepare for the battle against his enemy. With the guidance of Lingzhi, the maidservant of San Shengmu, and the Firebolt Immortal, a Daoist priest, Chenxiang uses the power of the Magic Lotus Lantern and the magic ax to defeat Divine Erlang and successfully rescues his mother, thus reuniting their family.

The analysis of these two works will reflect upon the multifaceted roles that myths play in human cultures, exploring their significance beyond mere storytelling. This paper will first demonstrate that myths serve as a form of entertainment that encourages moral development in the audience. Then, this paper will show how myths convey ideals that transcend time, imparting values that continue to resonate with modern generations. Finally, this paper will argue that, in the contemporary world, where a vast array of myths have become available to all kinds of audiences, these stories play a role in fostering cross-cultural understanding among people from different backgrounds.

## Myths as entertainment

Throughout history, various cultures have recognized myths not just as stories but as a vital form of entertainment that fosters community and emotional connection. Myths encourage active participation between audiences and performers, evoke positive emotions, and create opportunities for family gatherings, thus strengthening family bonds.

In the ancient Greek tragedy *Antigone*, the audience is not a passive observer; rather, they are invited to engage emotionally with the performance. This dynamic is pivotal to the power of live theater, where actors bring fictional situations and characters to life as if they were real. This engagement renders

the performance “strongly infectious and authentic” (Sangkyu, 2012, p.387). Performers evoke profound emotions, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in the narrative and share in the joys and sorrows of the characters, thereby creating a collective emotional experience. Modern Chinese theater exemplifies this interaction through the use of techniques such as breaking the “fourth wall.” By acknowledging the audience, actors create an “illusion of reality” (Stevenson, 1995, p.5) that fosters a sense of inclusion, compelling viewers to feel as if they are a part of the unfolding story. This immersive approach enhances the emotional depth of the performance, drawing audiences closer to the characters and their struggles, which is evident in Antigone's challenge to the royal power, and Chenxiang's firm belief in the assiduous rescue of his mother.

Although myths presented in TV series or animated films, such as “The Magic Lotus Lantern,” lack the immediacy of live performances, they still have a transformative impact. These adaptations stimulate curiosity and a sense of participation through innovative character design and complex plot development. While the fictional worlds in movies do not align with the audience's reality, viewers can access these realms through rich visual and auditory experiences. This fosters emotional engagement and allows audiences to momentarily escape their daily lives (Na Wang, 2022, p.468).

Whether engaging with the live performance of classic literary works like Antigone or enjoying theatrical and cinematographic adaptations of modern tales like “The Magic Lotus Lantern,” audiences experience enjoyment and connection. These narratives, filled with imaginative elements and captivating plots, serve as conversation starters in social settings (Xu, 2021, p.104). Indeed, the stories of “The Magic Lotus Lantern” and Antigone are illusory and either involve a visional creation of God like the Divine Erlang or contain the elements of divine laws, but it is because of such an imaginative base of the myth that it transports viewers to alternative worlds, offering a much-needed reprieve from real-life troubles. This form of escapism not only entertains but also provides spiritual comfort and tranquility amid the chaos of everyday life

(Longeway, 1990, p.1). In essence, myths, whether experienced through live performance or screen adaptations, remain a powerful tool for emotional connection, cultural engagement, and collective joy.

## Myths as examples of moral principles

Myths are not merely means of entertainment, but can provide valuable examples of educational principles. For instance, an engaging and instructive story like “The Magic Lotus Lantern” often conveys numerous moral lessons and societal values, enabling parents to engage in meaningful discussions with their children and fostering stronger parent-child relationships. Furthermore, watching and discussing these narratives enhances family interactions, promoting mutual understanding and connection. As noted by Elaine Reese, “parents who tell and read stories in a rich and responsive way” (...) “have adolescents with a healthy sense of identity and well-being” (2013, p.14). More intricate works, such as Antigone, can stimulate conversations among adolescents and their parents regarding themes of justice, law, and personal responsibility, thereby deepening intellectual exchanges within the family. Although Antigone and “The Magic Lotus Lantern” come from the different cultural backgrounds of ancient Greece and ancient China, they share similar values. The main characters in both stories demonstrate remarkable bravery in the face of adversity, a strong sense of justice, and a deep commitment to family values.

Both protagonists, Antigone and Chenxiang, exhibit extraordinary moral courage in their respective narratives. Antigone, faced with the severe punishment imposed by Creon, stands firm in her convictions, asserting the supremacy of the divine laws over human edicts. As she boldly challenges Creon, stating, “no man could frighten me into taking on the gods' penalty for breaking such a law” (Sophocles, p.19, line 459), she embodies the pursuit of justice and truth. Similarly, Chenxiang demonstrates remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. Confronted by the formidable Divine Erlang, he refuses to succumb to despair. Instead, he battles the colossal flood dragon, exhausting it until

he retrieves a shiny magic ax. Armed with this newfound power, Chenxiang defeats Divine Erlang's magic dog, the guardian of the Magic Lotus Lantern. Ultimately, with the ax and lantern in hand, he overcomes Divine Erlang and his army. Through relentless effort, wisdom, and unwavering determination, both Antigone and Chenxiang achieve their goals, showcasing a perseverance that is truly admirable.

Both stories delve into the conflicts between law and morality, presenting characters who grapple with significant dilemmas. Antigone is faced with the choice between abiding by human laws and adhering to her own moral convictions. Similarly, Chenxiang seeks to find a balance between the authority of heaven and his deep familial affection. These conflicts illustrate not only the individual's powerlessness against institutional oppression but also the enduring struggle for higher ideals and values. Through these narratives, we witness the profound challenges individuals face when their personal beliefs clash with societal expectations.

Both stories powerfully emphasize the importance of family. In *Antigone*, the protagonist's actions stem not only from her love for her brother but also from her desire to uphold the honor of her entire family. As she states in the play, "I'll heap the earth upon my dearest brother's grave" (Sophocles, p.4), and "what could be more glorious than giving my true brother his burial" (Sophocles, p.21). These lines underscore her commitment to mutual support and loyalty within familial bonds. Similarly, in the tale of Chenxiang, his quest to rescue his mother is driven by a deep longing to restore the wholeness of his family. This theme of kinship infuses his adventures with warmth and strength, culminating in a poignant moment at the story's end when "Chenxiang threw himself into his mother's open arms" and "the father was particularly happy to meet his heroic son for the first time" (Yuan, 2006, p.85). Together, these narratives illustrate the profound connections that bind family members and the sacrifices they are willing to make for one another.

Although *Antigone* and "The Magic Lotus Lantern" originate from different cultural backgrounds and historical periods, they convey

comparable values that are universal and foundational to personal integrity. These values are essential in both ancient and modern societies, as they play a vital role in building community and strengthening family bonds. The moral teachings within these stories emphasize fundamental principles that serve as a guide for individuals in their lives. By reading *Antigone* alongside "The Magic Lotus Lantern," one finds that themes such as courage, the pursuit of justice, and the love of family transcend time and cultural boundaries. These shared values contribute to the timeless nature of these stories, allowing them to resonate deeply with diverse audiences. Ultimately, they evoke the warmest and most noble aspects of humanity, ensuring their status as classics within their respective cultures.

*Antigone* and "The Magic Lotus Lantern" reveal how myths are tools for moral education. *Antigone's* defense of her brother's burial against Creon's order prompts discussions about the nature of justice and the limits of authority. Through *Antigone's* defiance of Creon's decree, one can explore themes of familial loyalty versus state obedience or discuss about the divide that sometimes intercuts between civil law and divine law, "with *Antigone* on the side of the family and the gods, *Creon* on the side of the state and the land" (Roselli, 2006, p.135). "The Magic Lotus Lantern" offers a tale of the triumph of good over evil, teaching virtues like perseverance, bravery, and the importance of familial bonds. Both stories provide rich material for educators to facilitate conversations about right and wrong, encouraging critical thinking and ethical reasoning among learners.

Furthermore, myths facilitate cross-cultural moral understanding by exposing individuals to different cultural perspectives on ethics and morality. Myths also facilitate cross-cultural moral understanding by exposing individuals to various cultural perspectives on ethics. *Antigone* is rooted in Western literature, reflecting Greco-Roman views on civil disobedience and the individual's role in society. In this narrative, civil disobedience is expressed through the tension between *Antigone* and *Creon*, culminating in *Antigone's* act of defiance, which challenges legal structures in Thebes (Tiefenbrun, 1999, p.35). In contrast, "The Magic Lotus Lantern"

draws from Chinese folklore, showcasing Eastern values of filial piety and harmony in conflict resolution. Exploring both myths provides insight into how diverse cultures tackle similar moral issues, fostering empathy and respect for differing moral frameworks.

## Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that both *Antigone* and “The Magic Lotus Lantern” are not only engaging narratives that captivate and unite audiences, providing enjoyable experiences and strengthening family bonds, but they also serve as rich sources of moral and cultural insight. Mythological stories such as these are invaluable for moral education, as they impart enduring lessons and foster cross-cultural understanding of ethics. These tales enhance educational discourse through their timeless messages and promote a deeper appreciation of diverse moral frameworks, contributing to a more empathetic and ethically aware global community.

Both stories maintain their relevance and significance in entertainment and educational contexts through their compelling plots and profound themes. Whether through the emotional gravity of a Greek tragedy or the enchanting nature of a Chinese folk tale, they are enjoyed as entertainment pieces while also providing valuable educational insights. Ultimately, these narratives continue to enrich our lives and deepen our understanding of the human experience.

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