

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

ANTIGONE*Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Antigone** (in Sophocles, *Antigone*) **conscientious**

Overview The *Antigone* was first performed in 441 B.C., at a moment of temporary break for Athens between major conflicts. Having defeated the Persians in 479, Athens found itself newly prosperous and confident. The Peloponnesian Wars (431-404), which were to rip apart the growing confederacy of Greece, were already on the horizon. In this *entre deux guerres* environment, the Athenians had reason to reflect on the meaning of conflict, the values around civic pride, and the claims of traditional religion. In this setting Sophocles wrote the present play, which dealt with all those value questions current events were forcing on the Greeks.

Character Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus—whom Sophocles portrays in two tragedies which, in plot terms, lead into the *Antigone*—is a tragic heroine of wartime crisis. Her two brothers, in the mythical play interpreted by Sophocles, have fought on opposite sides of battle, have in fact fought one another, and both have been killed.; both equally precious to Antigone, who cares with all her soul for them. Creon, the uncle of Antigone and ruler of the city of Thebes, orders one of the brothers—who fought *against* Thebes--to be left unburied, outside the city walls. **Antigone disobeys and buries her brother against the orders of Creon. This heroism of conscientious familial caring is the heart of Sophocles' play.**

Parallels Sophocles' *Antigone* has provided the yeast for many types of interpretation. For Jean Anouilh, *Antigone* (1944) is the springboard for a savage underground attack on the Fascist occupiers of Paris. Jean Cocteau's *Antigone*, 1922, written twenty years earlier, hangs much more closely on the moral than on the political issues raised by Sophocles. The composer Carl Orff created an *Antigone* opera (1949) which emphasized the archaic ritual qualities of the drama—moving it with Gregorian chant. Femi Osofisan, in *Tegonni, an African Antigone* (2007), moves the play into gender and power issues, taking off on the huffy-puffy administrative manners of Creon. Any number of thinkers have gone into the conceptual implications of the play, from Hegel to Zizek, whose *Interrogating the Real* (2006) proves the significance of the *Antigone* for the most contemporary issues.

Illustrative moments

1 **Lamenting** Scarred by the loss of his son Haemon, who has sided with his fiancée Antigone, in supporting her rebellion, Creon decides to have Antigone buried alive in a cave, where she will have just enough nourishment to keep her alive. Antigone takes this decision as a death sentence, and proudly goes off to her defiant marriage to the Lord of Death. 'My husband is to be the Lord of Death,' she proclaims, as she goes to her imprisonment lamenting the fact that she will not have had a full life. She remains absolutely defiant of Creon.

2 **Isolated** Antigone reflects, as she prepares for her own destiny, on the world she is losing. 'I shall never again be suffered to look on the holy eye of the day.' She realizes that no one has come forth openly to support her brother-burying action, and that she has only her ideals—and the slightly shaky devotion of her fiancé, Haemon--to support her. The richness of her personality is heightened by the pathos of her isolation; she has deep feeling for this world, as well as for the next world, where her determination is leading her.

3 **Doomed** Antigone enters her prison and thereby, she feels certain, prepares to rejoin the dead, especially the family dead who have preceded her. 'I am the last of them, and I go down in the worst death of all...' She has both a strong sense of the curse on her family, and of her own credentials for salvation, for she, after all, first saw Oedipus destroyed by an intricate fate, and then led him, blinded, to his apotheosis in the neighboring deme of Colonus. To the end she feels herself maimed by the incompleteness of her own life; no chance for marriage or progeny.

4 Tragic As is customary in Greek tragedy, the description of the fatal events, which do away with the tragic figure, are reported by a messenger, not shown on stage. The messenger gives a thorough account of Antigone's last hours. I have, the messenger says, just heard the report that Antigone has hanged herself. *Her fiancé Haemon was clasping her in his arms, the dying woman was wailing, and then she passed away.* On hearing this report Creon is overwhelmed once more, as he had been at the self-blinding of Oedipus, by the desperate sufferings of the House of Labdacus. Antigone has followed her father into a dark fate.

Discussion questions

What about the *Antigone* makes it so fertile for various interpretations? Why is it meaningful for revolutionaries, feminists, anarchists, and religious believers?

The conventional interpretation of this play comes down hard on Creon, the eternal bureaucrat. But Anouilh's *Antigone*, written for Occupied France in 1944, shows sympathy for the problems and responsibilities of Creon? Do you feel that sympathy?

Are Antigone's motives religious, political, or familial?