

ANTIGONE

Sophocles

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.

Story Sophocles' *Antigone* (441 B.C.E.) is set at the end of the Theban Civil War, and presents a classic moral dilemma. The new king of Thebes, Creon, has decreed that proper burials will be provided for all those killed on one side in the war—his victorious side, but no such burial will be available for the dead of the opposing side. This means that Eteocles will be given a proper burial, but not his brother Polyneices, who—because he fought on the opposite side—will be left as a corpse in no man's land, outside the city walls open to the depredations of worms and wolves. This state of affairs is intolerable for Antigone, one of the two sisters of the dead men. The two sisters meet at a late night rendez vous, outside the city walls, and in discussion learn that Ismene is afraid to perform the rebellious act of burying her brother, while Antigone is up for it.

In the following scene, Creon appears, reinforcing his edict, specifying that the Polyneices must not be given burial; but no sooner does he so proclaim than a sentry enters, announcing the forbidden act of burial has been performed—though no one has observing the act taking place. Not long after, the sentry returns with Antigone, and reports that she has been captured, in the act of burying her brother. Creon questions Antigone, to confirm the accuracy of this report, and having heard Antigone's fierce self-justification, Creon orders her to be imprisoned. Haemon, Creon's son, at first supports his father's decision, despite the fact that he, Haemon, is engaged to Antigone; but when Haemon urges his father to relent, Creon grows furious, and the son stalks out, determined never to see his father again. Creon decides to have Antigone buried alive in a cave, thus satisfying the displeasure of the gods, by not killing her directly; the girl is taken away, to the bitter laments of the chorus.

It is at this point that Teiresias—always sinister in Sophocles—enters the narrative with a warning to Creon—that he should see to the immediate burial of the rebel, Polyneices; the gods are displeased by the mistreatment of the corpse, and by the act of burying a living body under the earth—Creon's plan for Antigone. Teiresias adds, to Creon, that by insulting the gods he, Creon, will lose his son as well. (The doom awaiting Creon rapidly thickens!) Creon listens to this advice and to the terrified chorus, and starts to rescind his edicts and actions, but by now it is too late. A messenger enters to say that Antigone has killed herself, and not long after we learn that Haemon, discovering Antigone hanged, has stabbed himself to death. This dreadful event, further crushing Creon, is followed by the news that his wife, too has done away with herself. By this point Creon has given up entirely. He recognizes his own folly. He is still king, but in acting against the gods he has sacrificed everything, and infuriated the divine order. The Leader of the Chorus leaves us with the reflection that although pride, like Creon's, offends the gods, there is always room in the end for the wisdom that punishment brings.

Themes

Order Sophocles directs his attention in this play to the perennial Greek concern with the conflict between God's and men's laws. Performing the requisite rites is demanded by the gods, but not at the expense of human values.

Pride, like that of Creon when he issues his initial edict about Polyneices, is in Greek tragedy a sure sign of readiness for a fall. Oedipus displays the same weakness in *Oedipus Rex*.

Characters

Antigone is a high spirited and intrepid lover of justice and the gods who protect it. She refuses to play politics with the new king of Thebes, Creon, and though she must endure death by hanging herself, she remains true to her ideals.

Creon is the ruler of Thebes, a staunch defender of what he sees as law and order—that of the state, not of the gods. In the end he loses everything—Antigone, his own son, his wife. The folly of inflexibility wipes him out.

Ismene, the sister of Antigone, counsels against the forbidden burial of her brother, Polyneices. Once the burial has been performed, Ismene attempts to claim co-responsibility for it, but her sister refuses to let her.

Tiresias, the blind prophet Sophocles introduces also in *Oedipus Rex*, as a revealer of truths ordinary humans prefer to keep hidden.

MAIN CHARACTERS

ANTIGONE (conscientious)

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 Žižek, whose *Interrogating the Real* (2006) proves the significance of the *Antigone* for the most contemporary issues.

Illustrative moments

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.

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.

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.

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?

CREON (closed)

Overview Sophocles' *Antigone* is one of the greatest tragedies to target the issue of morality within family loyalty. The ruler of Thebes, Creon, has just seen his city-state conquer its chief rival, in war; an edict has been passed, in Thebes, that from among the corpses lying outside the city gates, none of the enemy cadavers should be buried or treated with respect; Creon's niece, Antigone, defies the edict by sneaking into no man's land at night, and covering the corpse of her brother, Polyneices, who fought for the enemy. The tragedy involves the subsequent behaviors of Antigone and her uncle, Creon, and the calamitous deaths that ensue.

Character Creon, as we see him in Sophocles' *Antigone*—he is quite different in another play of Sophocles, *Oedipus*—is on the one hand a thoroughgoing bureaucrat. He has a state to govern, and he wants to require absolute fidelity to it; furthermore, he has issued an ultimatum, about corpse burial, and he wants to enforce it. As a bureaucratic actor his rigidity of enforcement is excessive, and in the end he loses (through death) all that he values. On the other hand, there is a touch of humanity in Creon. By the end of the play, when it is too late, he has agreed with Teiresias that it better to avoid destructive actions, for in the end they come back to bite you in the seat of the pants.

Parallels Harsh and even megalomaniac rulers abound both in life and great literature—often lodging in the same person. Major literature has grown, from the fascination with such dictatorial addiction as one sees in the Roman Emperor Claudius (who becomes a 'god,' and whom Robert Graves reimagined powerfully), in Richard II (whom Shakespeare delighted even in worsening), and in Idi Amin, the Ugandan dictator known for savage purges and capricious fantasies (and around whom a vast literature proliferated, much of it carefully not published until after his death.) Can we note, as a special mark of the Greek genius, that Sophocles inter-shades the bad and 'potential' in Creon, with a subtlety rarely found even in great literature?

Illustrative moments

Severe Antigone opens with a pronouncement by the ruler of Thebes, Creon, concerning the brother of his niece Antigone. Polyneices, her brother, has been killed in recent battle, fighting for the enemy of Thebes, and Creon forbids any last rites to be paid to enemy corpses. Antigone disobeys this order—her responsiveness to family burial traditions in absolute—creeping out at night and covering the corpse of her brother. Creon responds: 'Is it not arrant folly to pretend that gods would have a thought for this dead man?' Creon has issued a penalty of death for any Theban contravening his edict, and now must live with his situation.

Conflict Creon clearly comes into headlong conflict with Antigone, on the issue of the burial of Polyneices. To Creon's insistence that the slain Polyneices was a 'villain,' Antigone insists that the slain man was above all a brother and demands the respect due all family members. Creon enters into dialogue with the 'headstrong young lady,' urging her to see that 'the patriot perished by the outlaw's brand,' that good men (faithful Thebans) were themselves killed by such family kin as Polyneices. The conflict of state with individual values could not be more sharply formulated, though the ultimate power seemingly lies in the hands of the state.

Relenting Creon is a complex character, who increasingly senses, as the drama of Antigone and Polyneices unfolds, that he has not done the right thing in holding to his pronouncement, and condemning Antigone to death. (Her close relation to him makes this decision harder.) In consultation with Teiresias, the mysterious wise man who figures as a deep insight here, Creon rethinks his decision, realizing that he has made the gods turn against Thebes. But by this time it is too late. Antigone, has been imprisoned 'under the earth,' and kills herself, while her lover and fiancé Haemon (Creon's son!) becomes furious with his father, fights with him, and is killed. Creon's efforts to change course are too little too late, and he is personally destroyed.

Closed We have labeled Creon a **closed** character. Had his attitude toward his niece been subtler from the start, he could have given her the slack necessary to keep her quiet. As it was he refused to yield at all. Even when convinced by Teiresias, that he should back off on Antigone and make a gesture toward the funeral rites for Polyneices, he confines his response first and above all to the formalities of the funeral rites; in other words, Creon is unable to grow to the level of the human dimensions of the tragedy forming around him. The ultimate close-up, the death of his wife who now hates him, is required before the Chorus will come on stage, and chant the wisdom of moderation.

Discussion questions

Sophocles is willing to show us that Creon makes some (tardy) efforts at relenting. What is Sophocles' attitude toward Antigone? Is he critical of her behavior?

What does Teiresias help Creon to see, that he was unable to see by himself?

What 'moral' do you take away from this play? If Creon is in some sense the 'villain,' what should he have done, to maintain the order and harmony of civil rule in Thebes?