

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Characters in Sophocles

**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.

**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.

**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?

### **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?