



Antigone

A Greek Drama by Sophocles

Background

- Set in the Palace of Thebes
- The sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices, originally agreed to share their father's kingship over Thebes, but soon afterwards Eteocles claimed sole power and drove Polynices into exile. Polynices found sanctuary and support in the powerful city of Argos, so much so that the king of Argos betrothed his daughter to Polynices. Raising an Argive army led by himself and six other famous heroes, Polynices marched on Thebes, where each of the city's seven gates was attacked by one of the heroes, who were slain there by a Theban hero, but Polynices and Eteocles fought and slew each other. On the morning our play opens, the Argive army has just left Theban territory; the city is filled with relief. Creon, brother to Oedipus' queen, has taken the kingship without controversy.

Characters:

- ANTIGONE, a young woman; daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta; betrothed to Haemon; niece of Creon; sister of Polynices, Eteocles, and Ismene
- ISMENE, Antigone's sister
- CHORUS of the old men of Thebes
- CREON, king of Thebes; father of Haemon; uncle of Antigone & Ismene through his sister Jocasta, mother and wife of Oedipus
- GUARD of the body of Polynices
- HAEMON, son of Creon, betrothed to Antigone
- TIRESIAS, blind prophet and priest of Apollo
- MESSENGER
- EURYDICE, wife of Creon
- A Sentry

Themes to Explore

- families torn apart by political differences
- gender bias; interlocking conflicts between men and women
- the death penalty
- suicide
- society and the individual
- conflict between civic responsibility and personal duty
- human justice and divine law
- the obligations we owe to the living and the dead

Lesson by Leia Fixel, Intern '09



Greek Drama Background Information

*Greek tragedies are all set outside, so this background usually depicted the exterior of the main characters' residence—in *Antigone's* case, the palace of Thebes. Changes of scene are rare in Greek tragedy, and props are kept to a minimum. The action of the drama takes place over a single day.

The Chorus in Greek Dramas

Since Greek tragedy grew out of the performances of lyric poetry sung by large choruses, it is only natural that the chorus should remain a large part of Greek tragedy. Every play's chorus took on an identity appropriate to the play. For example, in *Antigone*, they are old men of Thebes.

The word chorus in Greek means “dance,” and the chorus' main function was to sing and dance lyric odes in between dramatic episodes. These odes comment on the action of the preceding episode. An ode (also called a stasimon) usually consists of alternating stanzas, the strophe and antistrophe, which are in the same meter. Since odes are composed in lyric meters (as opposed to chanted iambic trimeters of the dialogue), these stanzas would be very complicated. Additionally, the main character(s) of a play could join the chorus in a kommos, a lyric song sung by both character and chorus at a point of heightened emotion.

The chorus could act as a character; one chorus member would be designated leader and speak lines of dialogue, interacting with the other characters on stage. They react as their characters should—in *Antigone*, the Chorus are concerned with both religious and civic obligations; thus, they can see the good and bad sides to both *Antigone's* and *Creon's* arguments. They feel pity for both *Antigone* and *Creon* when they suffer, but they are not emotionally involved in the play's outcome the way the individual characters are.

The Role of Women in Greece

Women of well-born families were expected to stay at home in specially designated women's quarters at all times except during certain religious festivals. Marriages were arranged by a girl's father or guardian. Women were not true citizens of the democracy and could not speak or vote in the assembly. They were not even allowed to speak in court, a basic right for Athenian men.

The Importance of Burial in Greek Religion

For the most part, the Greeks did not believe in a different afterlife for the good or bad—i.e., no heaven or hell. The important detail for the dead was whether they were buried or unburied. Those who did not receive proper funeral rites were doomed to wander by the river Styx, the entrance to the Underworld (Hades), for eternity. Denying burial to a corpse not only insulted the body, but also damned his soul for all time.

In order for the dead to gain access to Hades, a complicated ritual had to be performed. There were few ‘professional’ undertakers, so a man's funeral fell to his family, especially the women of the family. They prepared the body for cremation, oversaw the collection of the bones and ashes and burial of the urn, provided the tomb with liquid offerings (libations), and led the mourning, a loud and violent process in which women tore their cheeks with their fingernails, ripped out their hair, and poured dirt over the heads and clothing. Mourning the dead was one of the few things women were allowed to do in ancient Greece, especially Athens.

Burying and mourning their dead relatives gave women an opportunity to do something important for their families. It brought women to the fore and gave them a role to play. When *Creon* forbids burial of *Polynices*, he denies *Antigone* the chance to do one of the few important things society allowed women to do. Thus, he is attacking her identity, and that is a large part of the reason she opposes his orders.

A Few Notes on *Antigone*

Antigone has been read and performed for so many years because it raises questions that are pertinent in every age: How much power should the government have? What responsibility does a person have to act in accordance with his or her conscience? And can the answers to both of these questions coexist with one another?

Antigone also asks what we owe to our families. Complex relationships exist between Antigone and Ismene and between Creon and Haemon. Then, too, Antigone has a relationship with the dead brother she insists on burying; she feels that Ismene betrays this dead man.

Finally, it could be said that Antigone represents feeling, even intuition, while Ismene represents reason and caution. Seen in one light, Ismene is rational and Antigone is insane; on the other hand, Ismene is weak and Antigone is strong. Whether you support one sister or the other, you will find that this is a problem with no easy solution.

Food for Thought - Questions to Consider:

- Does Antigone's choice betray a tragic pride and inflexibility or demonstrate heroic dedication to virtue?
- How is this play relevant to contemporary life? When in recent history have individuals been forced to choose between the law and human rights? When in your own life have you faced a choice like Antigone's, a choice between obedience to authority and remaining true to your conscience?
- Why does Antigone feel it is her duty to bury Polyneices? Why doesn't Ismene?
- What does Ismene mean when she says, "We are only women; we can't fight with men?" How does this statement relate to Antigone's saying her crime is holy? What is the implication?
- Ismene says, "Impossible things should not be tried at all." If this were so, how would the world be different?
- Why does Creon refuse to bury Polyneices? What does his fear indicate? Creon threatens to torture the sentry before killing him if his order is disobeyed. What does this indicate about his ability to govern?
- Why does the sentry bring Antigone to Creon despite knowing she will be executed? Is the death penalty a fitting punishment for Antigone's crime? Explain. How does she defend herself?
- How does gender bias affect Creon's decision to stand by his original decree? Why does he include Ismene in the sentence?
- What does family loyalty have to do with Creon's insistence on carrying out the sentence? What does he hope to prove?
- Haemon says that Creon is surrounded by men afraid to speak the truth. Do "yes men" influence business and politics today? Do you ever find yourself saying what people expect to hear, not what you really think? Explain.
- Creon argues that it's not right for a man "to go to school to a boy." What's inherently wrong with this reasoning? Have you ever learned a valuable lesson from someone younger than you? Explain.
- Teiresias tells Creon, "The only crime is pride." What does he mean by this? How can pride lead to faulty judgment? Can poor decisions be rectified? How?
- Explain the deaths of Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice. Why did they consider suicide a viable "out"? What measures could each have taken to effectively deal with their situations?
- What lessons learned from this drama can be applied to your life? Explain
- How much power should the government have? What responsibility does a person have to act in accordance with his or her conscience? And can the answers to both of these questions coexist with one another?

Quotes from *Antigone*

"I intend to give my brother burial. I'll be glad to die in the attempt,-- if it's a crime, then it's a crime that God commands." -Antigone, defending her decision

"Don't kill the messenger/Nobody likes the man who brings bad news." – Messenger

"God and the government ordain just laws; the citizen who rules his life by them is worthy of acclaim. But he that presumes to set the law at naught is like a stateless person, outlawed, beyond the pale." - Chorus, here siding with Creon

"Isn't a man's right to burial decreed by divine justice? I don't consider your pronouncements so important that they can just overrule the unwritten laws of heaven." -Antigone, speaking to Creon

"Look now at the last sunlight that sustains the one surviving root of Oedipus' tree,-- the sword of death is drawn to hack it down." - Chorus, sensing Antigone's future

"The greater your arrogance, the heavier God's revenge." - Chorus, underscoring the play's theme

"No other touchstone can test the heart of a man, the temper of his mind and spirit, till he be tried in the practice of authority and rule." - Creon

"When I have *tried* and failed, I shall have failed." - Antigone

"Nothing so evil as money ever grew to be current among men. This lays cities low, this drives men from their homes, this trains and warps honest souls till they set themselves to works of shame; this still teaches folk to practice villainies, and to know every godless deed. But all the men who wrought this thing for hire have made it sure that, soon or late, they shall pay the price." - Creon

"Can't fight against what's destined. I must personally undo what I have done. I shouldn't have tried being unorthodox. I'll stick by the established laws in the future." – Creon (reversing his decision)

"Whoever thinks that he alone possesses intelligence, the gift of eloquence, he and no one else, and character too...such men, I tell you, spread them open – you will find them empty." - Haemon

"It is no weakness for the wisest man to learn when he is wrong." – Haemon

"The mighty words of the proud are paid in full with mighty blows of fate, and at long last those blows will teach us wisdom." – Chorus

"Wisdom is the supreme part of happiness; and reverence towards the gods must be inviolate. Great words of prideful men are ever punished with great blows, and, in old age, teach the chastened to be wise." – Leader of Chorus, closing lines of the play