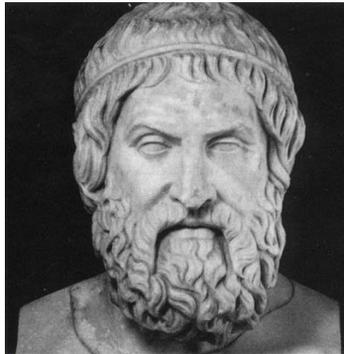


ANTIGONE

by Sophocles



THE AUTHOR

Athens in the fifth century B.C. boasted three great tragic playwrights, Aeschylus (c.525-c.455 B.C.), Sophocles (c.496-406 B.C.), and Euripides (480-406 B.C.), along with the comic playwright and satirist Aristophanes (446-c.386 B.C.). Sophocles was the son of a military man, but showed little interest in following in his father's footsteps. He at first sought to imitate Aeschylus, and his earliest plays, performed in 468 B.C., actually won the coveted Dionysian prize over those of his mentor. He wrote more than 120 plays, many of which won first place in Athenian dramatic competitions, but only seven of these have survived. One of his greatest contributions to the development of the Greek theater was the introduction of a third character on the stage; prior to his writing, no more than two characters ever appeared on the stage at the same time. He was a friend of the great Pericles, and despite his lack of interest in politics, he was twice elected to high office, several times led armies into battle, and was for many years in charge of the Athenian treasury. He lived a full and active life for nine decades and was honored by the citizens of Athens after his death. Aristotle considered him the greatest of all Greek tragedians.

Antigone (c.442 B.C.) was the first of three surviving plays Sophocles wrote about Oedipus, though chronologically it is the last; the others were *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, the latter written in the year of his death when he was ninety years old. After discovering that he had killed his father and married his mother, Oedipus blinded himself and his wife/mother Jocasta committed suicide. The two sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices, fought for control of Thebes and wound up killing each other. At that point, Jocasta's brother Creon assumes control of the city and forbids anyone to bury the body of the traitor Polynices, which was a horrible affront. The desire of his sister Antigone to treat the body of her brother with respect drives the plot of this play. The story deals with important themes such as conflicting loyalties between the state on the one hand and family and the gods on the other, the consequences of tyranny, and the relationship between fate and free will.

This study guide is based on a 1906 verse translation by Sir George Young, which was not divided into acts or scenes. I have located quotations by treating each segment of the play as a scene, separated by interludes by the Chorus. Page numbers are taken from the Dover edition of 1993.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Antigone - The central character is the daughter of Oedipus, who by this time is dead. She, contrary to her uncle Creon's order, seeks to bury the body of her brother Polynices, who has been killed attempting to take the throne of Thebes from his brother. Creon sentences her to be walled up in a cave, where she hangs herself.
- Ismene - Antigone's sister, she refuses to take part in Antigone's bold venture, but later sides with her sister against the king.
- Creon - The brother of Jocasta has succeeded to the throne of Thebes after the deaths of Eteocles and Polynices. He sentences Antigone to death for trying to bury the body of the traitor Polynices, but at the end is sent into exile because of the carnage caused by his prideful stubbornness.
- Eurydice - The wife of Creon, she stabs herself on the family altar when she hears of the death of her son.
- Haemon - The son of Creon is betrothed to Antigone. He seeks to defend her before Creon, then falls on his sword after she hangs herself.
- Tiresias - A blind seer, he warns Creon to yield to the will of the people and rescind his decree, which he does, but too late to prevent the deaths of all close to him.
- Chorus - Made up of the Senators of Thebes, they periodically comment on the action of the play.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“We must remember we are women born,
Unapt to cope with men; and, being ruled
By mightier than ourselves, we have to hear
These things - and worse.” (Ismene, scene 1, p.3)

“Far longer is there need I satisfy
Those nether Powers, than powers on earth.” (Antigone, scene 1, p.3)

“None loves the messenger who brings bad news.” (Sentinel, scene 2, p.11)

“Because it was not Zeus who ordered it,
Nor Justice, dweller with the Nether Gods,
Gave such a law to men; nor did I deem
Your ordinance of so much binding force,
As that a mortal man could overbear
The unchangeable unwritten code of Heaven.” (Antigone, scene 3, p.17)

“Whoso gets
Children unserviceable - what else could he
Be said to breed but troubles for himself,
And store of laughter for his enemies?” (Creon, scene 4, p.25)

“For he alone who is a man of worth
In his own household will appear upright
In the state also.” (Creon, scene 4, p.25-26)

“Better be outcast, if we must, of men,
Than have it said a woman worsted us.” (Creon, scene 4, p.26)

“Do not persist, then, to retain at heart
One sole idea, that the thing is right
Which your mouth utters, and nought else beside.
For all men who believe themselves alone
Wise, or that they possess a soul or speech
Such as none other, turn them inside out,
They are found empty; and though a man be wise,
It is no shame for him to live and learn,
And not to stretch a course too far.” (Haemon, scene 4, p.27)

“Am I not come
Through piety to be held impious? If
This is approved in Heaven, why let me suffer,
And own that I have sinned; but if the sin
Belong to these - O may their punishment
Be measured by the wrongfulness of mine!” (Antigone, scene 5, p.34)

“There is no respite
To mortals from the ills of destiny.” (Senator, 7th interlude, p.51)

NOTES

SCENE 1

The play begins with a conversation between the two daughters of Oedipus, Antigone and Ismene. Antigone tells her sister that Creon, now ruling Thebes, has decreed that their brother Polynices should remain unburied, and that any who so much as mourn for him should suffer death by stoning. Antigone intends to defy the law and bury her brother, but Ismene is afraid to join in her desperate venture. Antigone argues that she must do the will of Heaven in spite of what earthly powers may demand. Ismene promises to keep her sister's secret, but Antigone insists that she tell everyone what she plans to do.

FIRST INTERLUDE

At this point Theban senators, who make up the Chorus, enter and describe the battle in which seven bold warriors, led by Polynices, brought their armies against Thebes, one attacking each of the gates of the city, and were finally driven off. At the end, Polynices and Eteocles, the rightful king of Thebes, kill each other. They then announce the arrival of Creon, newly risen to the throne.

SCENE 2

Creon repeats his decree that the body of Polynices should be left to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field to devour. He has set a watch over the body to make sure that his order is obeyed. At that point a very nervous sentinel arrives to announce that someone has sprinkled dust over the body of Polynices contrary to the king's command. All the sentinels deny responsibility and insist that they have no idea who has defied Creon's decree. One of the senators suggests that the gods must have done the deed, but Creon will hear nothing of divine intervention. He is certain that citizens who despise his law have paid the sentinels to do it. He then threatens the sentinels with torture and death unless they discover the culprit.

SECOND INTERLUDE

The Chorus excoriates Creon for his unnatural decree and suspects that Antigone is the guilty party. Soon the sentinel leads her in a prisoner.

SCENE 3

The sentinel who leads Antigone in says that he caught her burying Polynices. He turns her over to Creon, who demands an explanation of the circumstances of her arrest. The sentinels had uncovered the body and stood watch, helping one another to stay awake. Suddenly a hurricane descended on them with fierce winds, and when they opened their eyes, Antigone was standing over the body, giving it the rites of burial. Antigone admits the deed. Creon then asks if she was aware of his decree. She insists that she was, but that the laws of Heaven overshadow those of men. She is willing to suffer death and sees it as an escape from the sorrows she and her family have known. Creon insists that she must suffer the ultimate penalty, and her sister along with her, who surely was a co-conspirator. When Ismene is brought before him, she admits to being party to Antigone's plot, though Antigone denies that she had any involvement and refuses to allow her to take credit for a deed she feared to perform. Ismene asks Creon if he will condemn his son's fiancée to death, but he is happy to deliver his son from such a foolish match. He then orders both women taken into custody.

THIRD INTERLUDE

The Chorus speaks of the misery the gods have brought down on the family of Oedipus and on mankind in general, then introduce Haemon, the son of Creon, who at this point enters.

SCENE 4

Creon wonders whether his son is angry with him for condemning his fiancée to death, but Haemon answers that he trusts his father's wisdom in all things. Creon insists that to yield to Antigone would destroy the authority of the state, but Haemon encourages him to listen to what the people are saying. Many sympathize with what Antigone has done, and he warns his father that a wise man is willing to listen to the words of others. Creon, however, is unwilling to yield, either to his son's youthful opinions or to the voice of the masses. The king threatens to kill Antigone before Haemon's eyes, but the son leaves in a rage, telling his father that he will never see him again. When a senator asks Creon what he intends to do, he relents with regard to Ismene, but decrees that Antigone should be taken into the wilderness and walled up in a cave with only enough food sufficient for her to realize her folly.

FOURTH INTERLUDE

The fourth interlude involves interaction between Antigone and the Chorus. The Chorus begins by praising Love, strong above all things, then mourns the coming fate of Antigone. When she appears under guard, she speaks of the punishment she is to suffer, and they suggest that it stems from a family curse; after all, her mother was also her grandmother. She is unrepentant as she goes to face her doom.

SCENE 5

Creon then enters and repeats her sentence; he will not shed her blood, but will wall her up in a cave forever. As she prepares to enter the underworld, she only wishes to earn the approval of her parents and brother. She again affirms the rightness of her action and calls for the punishment of those who have wickedly condemned her. She is then led away by the guards.

FIFTH INTERLUDE

The Chorus speaks of past heroes and heroines who were justly punished for their horrible misdeeds.

SCENE 6

Tiresias, the blind seer, approaches Creon led by a small boy. He tells the king that, while sitting on his augur's bench, he heard birds of prey tearing one another apart in the air, and when he offered sacrifices, the omens of the entrails pointed toward impending disaster. Tiresias tells Creon that these horrors are the result of his willfulness. The gods are not listening to them because dogs have devoured the corpse of Polynices. Creon must turn from his stubbornness if he hopes for the favor of the gods. Creon refuses to listen and accuses Tiresias of speaking treason for the sake of gain. The old man then prophesies that Creon will be dead in a matter of days, that Thebes will suffer the consequences of his impiety, and promptly leaves the king's presence. Tiresias has never been guilty of false prophecy, so the senators beg Creon to yield. He, too, is distressed by the words of the ancient seer and decides to give in. He goes to free Antigone and permits Polynices to be buried.

SIXTH INTERLUDE

The Chorus sings a hymn to Bacchus, the patron deity of Thebes, begging him to deliver their fair city.

SCENE 7

A messenger enters to announce that Haemon, out of grief for Antigone, has taken his own life. Soon his mother Eurydice arrives and asks the messenger for his news. He had accompanied Creon to the hill where the body of Polynices was exposed. The king ordered him to be buried with all proper rites, then hurried to the cave where Antigone had been confined. There he heard a horrible wail and entered to find that Antigone had hanged herself. Clinging to her dead body was Haemon, who pulled his sword and struck at his father, who fled. Haemon then fell on his own sword and died with the body of Antigone in his arms. After hearing this news, Eurydice leaves without a word.

SEVENTH INTERLUDE

The final choral interlude involves interaction between the Chorus and Creon. Creon enters with the body of Haemon. Too late, he realizes that all this death and destruction are his fault. More is yet to come, as the messenger reenters and tells Creon that his wife Eurydice has pierced her own heart with a dagger and died on the family altar in the palace. Creon begs someone to kill him, but when no one obliges, he willingly goes into exile.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. When Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin and ordered to stop preaching in the name of Jesus, they responded, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Antigone, the protagonist of Sophocles’ play of the same name, when faced with a similar choice, said, “Nor did I deem / Your ordinance of so much binding force, / As that a mortal man could overbear / The unchangeable unwritten code of Heaven.” Compare and contrast the two situations. Was Antigone similarly justified in her behavior as was the case with Peter and John? Why or why not? Be sure to cite specifics from both sources to support your arguments.
2. The two strongest characters in the Oedipus plays of Sophocles are Oedipus and his daughter Antigone. Using the two plays that feature them, *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, evaluate their respective strengths and weaknesses. Is Antigone really a “chip off the old block,” more like her father than she is willing to admit?
3. Compare the roles played by the blind seer Tiresias in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. Consider the prophecies he utters and the ways that Oedipus and Creon respond to them. Why is he an important part of the plot in both plays?

4. Historians have often argued that revolutionaries all too often wind up wearing the robes of those they have dethroned. Is this the case in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*? Compare and contrast Oedipus in the former play with Creon in the latter one. Consider the ways in which they rule, the extent to which they become tyrants, and their unwillingness to listen to the advice of others. Be sure to use details from both plays to support your arguments.
5. Discuss the role played by the Chorus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. How do they contribute to the progress of the two plays? To what extent do they help the audience interpret the action? Are they reliable interpreters? Why or why not?
6. Near the end of Sophocles' *Antigone*, the First Senator says, "There is no respite to mortals from the ills of destiny." Discuss the role played by fate, both in this play and in the same playwright's *Oedipus Rex*. Does Sophocles believe that humans have free will, or are they inevitably victims of predetermined destiny? Evaluate his handling of this familiar paradox in the light of what the Bible has to say about divine sovereignty and human responsibility.
7. In John 9:41, Jesus speaks to the Pharisees about their unwillingness to admit their blindness by saying, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt, but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains." Blindness and sight are frequent metaphors in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. How do these metaphors give insight into the characters of Oedipus, Creon, and Tiresias? Who is really blind and who really is able to see, and why? Is the metaphorical blindness of Oedipus and Creon similar to that of the Pharisees? To what extent?
8. Compare and contrast the romances of Haemon and Antigone in Sophocles' *Antigone* and Romeo and Juliet in William Shakespeare's play of the same name. Discuss the relationships between the two characters, their relationships to their parents, and the reasons for their tragic fates in your analysis. Be sure to support your answer with specifics from both plays.
9. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the title character objects, not only to his father's murder, but also to the way in which it occurred, allowing him no opportunity to repent of his sins and thus dooming him to an eternity of wandering the earth as a ghost. Similarly, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, the title character insists that her brother receive a proper burial so that he can enter the afterlife rather than his soul being left to roam the earth. Compare and contrast the ways that Hamlet and Antigone pursue justice for their dead relatives. Be sure to consider not only their actions, but also the theological principles underlying them.
10. British nobleman Lord Acton once said, "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." To what extent is this true of Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*? Why does the fact that he has no real check on his exercise of power lead to his corruption and ultimate fall?
11. Moral dilemmas often arise when people are subject to competing authorities. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the protagonist must choose whether to put the authority of the state above the loyalty she owes to her family. Did she make the right choice? Why or why not?

12. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Creon commits two horrible offenses - he leaves the dead body of Polynices unburied while ordering that Antigone be entombed alive. Why does the playwright view these decrees on the part of the king as unforgivable? To what extent does the just condemnation of Creon for these acts reach beyond the good of the state to the value of human nature as a whole?
13. Discuss the attitude toward suicide demonstrated in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Like most classic tragedies, many characters die at the end, but in this case, most of them die by their own hands. Does the playwright view suicide as a noble response to intolerable conditions, or is it the ultimate admission of failure at the end of a person's life? Support your analysis with specifics from the play.
14. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, both the title character and Creon are consumed by pride, yet their manifestations of pride are of a very different sort. Compare and contrast the two characters in this regard. Is the pride of either one justifiable? What are the consequences of their *hubris* in each case, both for themselves and for those around them?
15. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, when Creon is faced with the stubbornness of Antigone, he refuses to yield to her, arguing that, "Truly if here / She wield such powers uncensured, she is man / I woman!" Ismene earlier had argued, "We must remember we are women born, / Unapt to cope with men; and, being ruled / By mightier than ourselves, we have to hear / These things - and worse." Discuss the playwright's conception of gender roles in Greek society. What did he see as the proper roles of men and women, and what were the consequences of violating those designated roles?
16. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the playwright has very clear ideas of the roles that men and women should play in society and foresees dire consequences should either refuse to play the parts intended for them. Compare and contrast the way gender roles are portrayed in the play with the way they are set forth in Scripture. To what extent does Sophocles see this matter correctly and in what ways does he get it wrong?
17. In the confrontation between Creon and Haemon over the fate of Antigone in Sophocles' *Antigone*, both use reasoned arguments, yet both to a large extent are motivated by passion in their refusal to consider each other's arguments. What does the playwright suggest are the appropriate places of reason and emotions in an individual's life? Which one ought to predominate? Why are both important?
18. Sophocles' *Antigone* is a tragedy that, rare for the literature of the age, has a woman as the tragic hero, defined as a noble figure who comes to an unhappy end because of a flaw in [her] character. What is Antigone's tragic flaw, and how does it lead to her downfall?
19. Foils are characters who are such opposites that their contrasting personalities serve to bring out the chief qualities of one another. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, to what extent are Antigone and her sister Ismene foils? What are the most important qualities in which they differ, and how are these differences important for bringing out the major themes of the play?

20. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the two central characters, Antigone and Creon, are antagonists with regard to their ideas and values, yet are in some ways very similar in their personalities. Discuss the similarities between the two central characters and explain why these similarities contribute to the conflict between them.
21. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Creon states, "For he alone who is a man of worth / In his own household will appear upright / In the state also." In I Timothy 3:4-5, the Apostle Paul, speaking of elders, says, "He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" Why is a man's management of his family an important indicator of how he will function when asked to take on larger responsibilities? Evaluate Creon on the basis of this standard. Be sure to cite specifics from the play.
22. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the title character and Creon are both flawed figures, holding stubbornly to their conflicting views of human responsibility to the detriment of both. G.W.F. Hegel, whose dialectical view of history argued that humanity moves forward by the synthesizing of opposing ideas, saw Sophocles' play as a demonstration of his thesis. He argued that neither Antigone nor Creon was completely in the right, but that the truth was found only in the synthesis of their two positions. Evaluate Hegel's analysis of the play. To what extent is his conclusion valuable? To what extent does it conform to the message of the playwright?
23. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the title character and Creon are both flawed figures, holding stubbornly to their conflicting views of human responsibility to the detriment of both. G.W.F. Hegel, whose dialectical view of history argued that humanity moves forward by the synthesizing of opposing ideas, saw Sophocles' play as a demonstration of his thesis. He argued that neither Antigone nor Creon was completely in the right, but that the truth was found only in the synthesis of their two positions. Postmodern critics, however, accept Hegel's analysis while rejecting his conclusion, arguing instead that the play demonstrates that human experience involves living with irreconcilable contradictions where no synthesis is possible. To what extent is this postmodern interpretation faithful to the message of the playwright?
24. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the fourth choral interlude praises Love, beginning with the words, "O Love, thou art victor in fight." The Greek word translated "love" here is *eros*, which describes romantic or physical love. Contrast the qualities of love described in the speech by the Chorus with Paul's description of *agape* love in I Corinthians 13. Why does Scripture require *agape* while never mentioning *eros*?
25. The Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that ethical living could be found in the Golden Mean, i.e., that virtues existed in the center between two opposing vices. Sophocles, who lived a century before Aristotle, promoted the same idea in his plays. To what extent does Sophocles' *Antigone* advocate living according to the Golden Mean? Does he intend Antigone and Creon to represent two extremes, both of which are harmful to man and society? If so, what are the qualities of the mean between their respective positions?

26. Near the end of Sophocles' *Antigone*, the title character hangs herself rather than suffering the punishment of being walled into a cave alive to die slowly by starvation and dehydration. Is her death noble or cowardly? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
27. Analyze the character of Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*. What does the playwright consider the qualities of a good ruler? Support your arguments with events and quotations from the play.