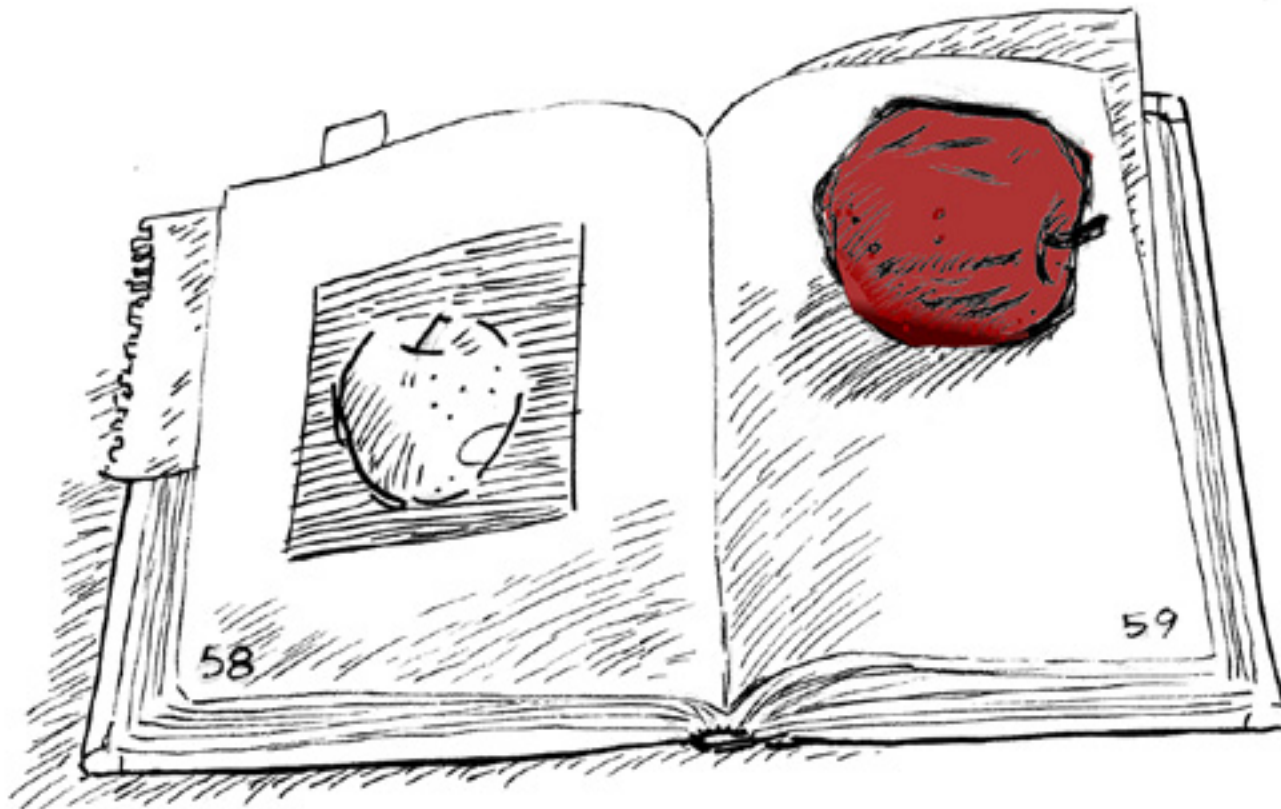


Sophocles and Greek Drama



Sophocles (c. 497 BCE – 406 BCE)

Sophocles remains a strong influence even today.

It has been said that he wrote over 100 plays in his career.

- only a handful of full form remain in existence
- over twenty fragments of plays do exist as well; the rest are lost
- from these limited numbers of plays he still manages to influence the development of drama
- he shifted the focus off the chorus by reducing its numbers, plus creating a third actor to participate on stage with the principal actors
- living to the age of early nineties, he experienced the glory days of Athenian drama— and the decline of the city’s power during the Peloponnesian War

Antigone as a Tragic Hero

The play *Antigone* is considered one of the perfect Greek dramas.

Like *Oedipus Rex*, another work by Sophocles, this play shows a well-crafted tragedy and establishes a strong formula for future tragic character development.

The title character Antigone is a tragic character for numerous reasons. Selecting from the definition supplied to you earlier in the course:

- Heroes are neither 100% good nor 100% evil.

Antigone does not have malicious intentions; she is not a corrupt force.

Furthermore her stubbornness could be considered a flaw; she wants her brother Polyneices honored, if only with a simple burial.

- They are fated to cause grief to individuals or to the community.

Specifically through her reactions towards Creon's own flaw in logic and pride, Antigone's dispute impact numerous people.

Antigone as a Tragic Hero

- Driven and obsessed with past deeds or by fate.

Particular to her story, Antigone is driven by a current event— Creon’s lack of honor towards Polyneices, his own nephew.

- The hero is often a king or leader in the community, head of family.

In this case her family is of noble lineage— her bloodline represents authority.

- They symbolize the community or the family unit.

Antigone represents the voice of the city, the people who quietly disapprove of Creon’s approach to leadership.

- The heros’ downfall is caused by their flaws.

- The heros fight to the death due to flawed belief system.

Antigone’s unwillingness to compromise is a flaw in her character. This shows she fails to work through a mutual discourse with Creon.

Antigone as a Tragic Hero

- Tragic heroes understand they are doomed.

From the beginning of the play, Antigone mentions that she understands the consequences of her actions. At the opening scene of the play she tells Ismene that:

Leave me my foolish plan:

I am not afraid of the danger; if it means death,

It will not be the worst of deaths—death without

honor. (1028, ll 86-89)

- The heroes' downfall should arouse pity and/or terror in the reader.

Although both characters act irrationally and with strong stubborn attitudes—even though sympathy does lie with Antigone, she is equally at fault. What is unique here, since Creon himself is a tragic hero, he takes on the role of producing terror in the audience; Antigone produces a feeling of pity.

Antigone, the play

Sophocles' play sparks much discussion even in the modern world:

He addresses various ongoing situations still relevant in our culture.

- gender politics *and*
- general attitudes towards women
- divine right of kings
- rights of an individual under developing dictatorship/totalitarian government

Antigone and Ismene

Considering the first topic, throughout the play, the audience is reminded that the main argument lies between a male authority figure and a female dissident.

- Ismene brings up the issue first, acting as a foil to Antigone, in the opening scene where the two sisters discuss the new law created by their uncle Creon.

“Think how much more terrible than these / Our own death would be if we should go against Creon / And do what he has forbidden! We are only women, / We cannot fight with men, Antigone! / The law is strong.”

(1027, ll 45-49).

- Antigone however is too wrapped up in her ideologies to let attitudes towards her own gender limit her actions; her conviction is strong, even knowing the consequences.
- Antigone is shown a strong-willed creature; Ismene obedient and submissive.

Antigone and Ismene

The opening discussion establishes important details to the audience.

- Antigone is shown as a defiant female even when confronted by a close family member's contradictory feelings.
- She is shown with a resolve and individualistic sense of independence
- Anyone opposing her views would be considered a traitor to the family—ironically, just as Creon's views label opposition to his laws as a treachery to the state.
- Antigone's reactions to Ismene show the title character steadfast in her positions within the developing conflict—
- and shows she will not be shift from her opinions, even when she knows the consequences: “if I must die, / I say that this crime is holy: I shall lie down / With him in death, and I shall be as dear / To him as he is to me” (1028, 157-60).
- Her characterization confirms at the beginning of the play she is a tragic figure.

Ismene

Even in the background, Ismene provides a strong part in the play.

Her speech confirms her ideals as a cultural expectation of women, to remain meek and obedient.

- This also shows she is the weaker of the two sisters.
- Ismene is also shown as an obedient citizen unwilling to fight back at obvious failures by the monarchy:

I am helpless: I must yield / to those in authority. And I think it is a dangerous business / To be always meddling. (1028, ll 52-54)

- She also states:

“I have no strength for / To break the laws that were made for the public good” (1028, ll 66-67).

which implies she believes the city’s laws are absolute and unquestionable.

- Her speeches confirm her status as a foil character.

Ismene

Likewise in the resulting scene between the three characters of Creon, Antigone, and Ismene:

- Ismene's weaker characterization is revealed in the resulting confrontation between Antigone and Creon; in this scene Ismene reacts emotionally to the judgment passed against Antigone; Ismene would be lost without her older sibling: "But how could I go on living without her?" (1039, l 172).
- Ismene will end up the last surviving family member of the Oedipus line having experienced the loss of mother, father, brothers, and sister.
- Notice she does abide by Creon's decision in the end; she meekly returns to the palace without further debate, without an act of rebellion; we no longer see her in the play.

Antigone

Antigone is always seen in opposition to Creon.

They are seen on opposite sides of an issue with no compromise.

- Antigone never weakens her position or shifts from her values of a family's worth over the worth of the state.
- Even with her suicide she gains the last word in the argument.
- She takes her own life on her own terms, not with an established judgement passed by Creon.
- Likewise this act confirms her characterization: she acts out of a logical approach, not out of a passion. *{ this may be a point of debate: is her suicide an act of emotional reasoning or cold indifferent logic?*
- Ironically her death echoes the suicide of her mother, Jacosta in the preceding story of Oedipus; in Jacosta's case, the act was out of horrific realization of how one cannot escape fate, no matter how hard one tries.

Creon

Creon likewise is a tragic hero.

He remains unchanged in his convictions until the last few moments of the play.

- In the discussion with his son Haimon and the chorus, Creon reveals his political beliefs when he states:

Whoever is chosen to govern should be obeyed—

Must be obeyed, in all things, great and small,

Just and unjust! [...]

The man who knows how to obey, and that man only,

Knows how to give commands when the time comes. (1041, ll 38-42)

- Creon sees the law as an absolute. Furthermore, a king's power represents the city's strength; with a strong ruler, the city will prosper.
- As a representative of his own power as a king, his control aims to repair the wrongs currently infecting Thebes— yet, in an ironic twist, his actions are merely continuations of a chain of failures and misjudgments from previous Theban rulers.

Antigone as Anarchy

- Creon also will state:

Anarchy, anarchy! Show me a greater evil! / This is why cities tumble
and great houses rain down, / This is what scatters armies! / No, no: good
lives are made do by discipline. We keep the laws then, and the lawmakers,
/ And no woman shall seduce us. If we must lose, / Let's lose to a man, at
least! is a woman stronger than we?

(1041, ll 45-51)

- Creon mentions Anarchy and personifies the element as a *female* figure.
- The word “anarchy” literally means “without government”—in Greek the word is specifically a feminine noun—so Creon’s personification of the element as a female is not unexpected.
- In addition, a connection is made between Antigone and Anarchy, both as defiant females through his analogy.

Antigone as Anarchy

Notice in Creon's statement how Anarchy, or disorder, destroys all aspects of civilization: political, domestic, and military.

- Anything within a civilization cannot survive against a movement of anarchy.
- *Any* disorder or disobedience against a law he has created therefore represents anarchy to Creon. He wants to maintain absolute, total control.
- Within the same exchange of dialogue, Creon further states how a man needs to control his wife and control his household.

Show me the man who keeps his house in hand,

He's fit for public authority. (1041, ll 34-35)

- In this manner Creon compares the average household to the average city.

Haimon and Creon

Another foil relationship is shown near the second half of the play.

Creon's son Haimon acts as an emotional foil in the same manner as Ismene.

- Ismene and Haimon are both average, moderate people.
- Ismene is an obedient female to the city, whereas Haimon seeks out a moderation, a resolution between the two oppositions.
- He has a minor character flaw: he is deeply in love with Antigone; his arguments become emotional and passionate, contradictory to Antigone's stoic nature.
- His main speech opens with a discourse on Reason— a counter argument to Creon's rant on political strength and government control. He states:

Reason is God's crowning gift to man, and you are right. (1042, l 55)

Haimon begins with a rational argument wanting his father to see reason.

Haimon and Creon

Haimon further states:

Your temper terrifies [the citizens]— everyone
Will tell you what you like to hear.

But I, at any rate, can listen; and i have heard them,
Muttering and whispering in the dark about this girl.

They say no woman has ever, so unreasonably,
Died so shameful a death for a generous act:

“She covered her brother’s body. Is this indecent?

She kept him from dogs and vultures. Is this a crime?

Death?—She should have all the honor that we can give her (1042, ll 62-70)

- As a foil, he is attempting to change the firm-resolve of another character, and at the same time show the audience how devoted he is to Antigone as well. His discourse only succeeds in angering Creon further.

Haimon and Creon

In the resulting debate, Haimon shows the city is against the king.

Creon is basically blind to outside opinions and holds fast to his philosophy of the divine right of kings. He feels the gods put him in control, which confirms that his reactionary views are in control.

- In his mind, the voice of the people do not make the laws.
- Haimon replies: “It is no City if it takes orders from one voice” (1043, l 110).
- To the ancient Athenians, with their democratic state, this line in particular confirms their political philosophies.
- A monarchy is a flawed system of government.

Tiresias and Creon

Tiresias soon enters the stage to begin a new debate with Creon.

Tiresias is a blind prophet who appears in numerous plays and myth-cycles.

- He represents the archetype of a wise old man; he lived through seven generations of Thebean kings, starting with Cadmus.
- His prophecies derive from practices of augury, an ancient belief that bird flight patterns and songs can predict the future. In Tiresias' case, the young boy acts as walking guide and as a set of eyes to tell him what the birds do.
- Despite his disability, he has a stronger grasp on the situation due to his acute foresight. He likewise exposes Creon's fatal flaw:

Think: all men make mistakes,

But a good man yields when he knows his course is wrong,

And repairs the evil— the only crime is pride (1049, ll 34-36).

- Creon ironically is blind to the logic Tiresias proposes and only reacts with more anger.

Tiresias and Creon

This discussion results in the climax of the play.

The audience sees the moment as a point where Creon could resolve the conflict with Antigone and end with a positive resolution.

- However, this is a tragedy and the end will not be uplifting for any character.

Creon

Despite the fact Creon is a tragic hero, he does not die at the closing.

His fate is left as a horrific ending in an undisclosed interval, not discussed in this play. Antigone is after all the main focus.

- As with most Greek dramas, the scenes of suicide and death all occur offstage, out of sight of the audience. A minor character often delivers the news of the fatal events to allow the audience to catch up with the plot.
- The death of Antigone and Haimon are such examples with a Messenger delivering the bad news to the Chorus.
- Eurydice, Creon's wife, also commits suicide upon hearing of the fate of her son; before she dies she utters a curse directed at Creon.
- Creon's tragic circumstance is to live on with guilt, knowing he committed erroneous judgments at the consequence of his family's lives.

Creon

The final scene shows Creon receiving word of his wife's death.

With the final blows of loss of both wife and son, he admits his failings.

I alone am guilty.

I know it, and I say it. Lead me in [the palace]

Quickly friends.

I have neither life nor substance. (1056, ll 131-134)

- What results is a final gesture on his part, acting as a prayer to the gods, asking for them to end his life: “Let it come / Let death come quickly, and be kind to me. / I would not ever see the sun again” (1056 ll 137-139).
- Notice that Creon cannot, or will not, kill himself.
- To some extent, the Ancient Greeks believed suicide was a form of heroism. Since there was no return after death, such an act permitted a manner for rectifying a failure in one's life. Honor could be restored to an individual.

Creon and the Chorus of Elderly Men

Two trains of thought can be derived from Creon's lack of "initiative" in this matter:

- Sophocles may be implying that Creon is too cowardly to kill himself, that his flawed personality includes pride *and* cowardice. His early statements of bravery and strength were all false declarations; since suicide is an act of free-will, Creon may be showing himself to be a weak individual.
- *Or* Creon decides to remain a victim-king, setting himself as an example for possible future rulers of Thebes not to follow his rash laws.

The Chorus of Elderly Men

Likewise, before the full closing of the play, the Chorus Leader utters the moral of the story.

He delivers the final word, directed towards the audience.

- Only once Creon exits the stage a broken man, the chorus leader speaks:

There is no happiness where there is no wisdom;

No wisdom but in submission to the gods.

Big words are always punished,

And proud men in old age learn to be wise. (1056, ll 149-152)