

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:

[L]eave me

to suffer [the consequences,] this— dreadful thing. I'll suffer nothing as great as death without glory. (725-726, ll 111-113)

- 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. Ismene says: “[T]hink what a death we’ll die, the worst of all / if we violate the laws and override the fixed decree of the throne, its power— /we must be sensible. Remember we are women, we’re not born to contend with men” (725, ll 71-75).
- 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: “And even if I die in the act, that death will be a glory” (725,186).
- 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 must obey / the ones who stand in power. Why rush to extremes? /

It's madness, madness. (725, 79-81)

- She also states: “[B]ut defy the city? I have no strength for that” (725, 194). 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: "How can I live alone, without her?" (738, 1638).
- 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 Haemon and the chorus, Creon reveals his political beliefs when he states:

[T]he man

the city places in authority, his orders must be obeyed,

large and small

right and wrong. (740, ll748-751)

- 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—/show me a greater crime in all the earth! / She, she destroys
cities, rips up houses, / breaks the ranks of spearmen into headlong rout /
[...] Therefore / we must defend the men who live by law, / never let some
woman triumph over us. / Better to fall from power, if fall we must, / at
the hands of a man— never be rated / inferior to a woman, never.

(740, ll 752-761)

- 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 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 rules his household well: / I'll show you someone fit to rule the state. / The good man, my son, / I have every confidence he and he alone / can give commands and take them too. Staunch / in the storm of spears he'll stand his ground, / a loyal, unflinching comrade at your side. (740, ll 739-745)

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

Haemon and Creon

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

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

- Ismene and Haemon are both average, moderate people.
- Ismene is an obedient female to the city, whereas Haemon 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:

Father, only the gods endow a man with reason,
the finest of all their gifts, a treasure. (741, ll 64-65)

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

Haemon and Creon

Haemon further states:

The man in the street, you know, dreads your glance,

he'd never say anything displeasing to your face.

But it's for me to catch the murmurs in the dark,

the way the city mourns for this young girl.

'No woman,' they say, 'ever deserved death less,

and such a brutal death for such a glorious action [...]

Death? She deserves a glowing crown of gold!'

So they say, and the rumor spreads in secret,

darkly... (741, ll 773-784)

- 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.

Haemon and Creon

In the resulting debate, Haemon 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.
- Haemon replies: “It’s no city at all, owned by one man alone” (742, l 824).
- 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:
 "Stubbornness / brands you for stupidity— pride is a crime" (749, 1136-7).
- 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 Haemon 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.

[T]he guilt is all mine—

can never be fixed on another man,

no escape for me. I killed you,

I, god help me, I admit it all! [...]

I don't even exist— I am no one. Nothing. (757, ll 1441-6)

- This results in a final gesture on his part, acting as a prayer to the gods, asking for them to end his life. 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.
- From this point forward, the Chorus of Elderly Men speak with more authority.

They declare to Creon his final lesson:

For mortal men

there is no escape from the doom we must endure. (757, ll 1457-8)

The Chorus of Elderly Men

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

They deliver the final word, directed towards the audience.

- Once Creon exits the stage a broken man, they speak in unison:

Wisdom is by far the greatest part of joy,
and reverence toward the gods must be safeguarded.

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. (757, ll 1466-70)