Antigone Study Guide

Antigone by Sophocles

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The play begins with a conversation between Antigone and her sister Ismene, daughters of the former ruler of the Greek city of Thebes and nieces to its current ruler. Antigone considers the suffering she has endured as the result of the centuries-old curse on her family, and then tells Ismene of its latest manifestation. Their brother Polyneices, killed in battle while fighting for an army attacking the family's home city of Thebes, is to remain unburied, , according to law, with his body to be left for the animals as the result of what is regarded as the betrayal of the state. She also reveals her intention to go against the will of the law and bury him. Ismene urges her to follow the law and leave the body alone. Antigone refuses, saying her greater loyalty is to the bonds of love and family than to the state.

After Antigone and Ismene go into the palace that is their home, the Chorus of Theban Elders appears, discusses the situation, and suggests that Antigone is ultimately mistaken. Antigone's uncle, the Theban ruler Creon, appears, reminds them of Polyneices' betrayal and of the punishment his body is to receive and urges them to work with him to uphold the law. A Guard brings news that Polyneices' body has been buried, and Creon sends him in search of the people who did the deed. The Guard returns with Antigone, who argues fiercely with Creon about which loyalty is greater, to the family or to the state. Creon eventually shouts Antigone down and calls for Ismene, who he says is aiding her sister. Ismene comes out and at first says she is in fact planning to join Antigone in her plan, but Antigone sharply tells her not to lie. Ismene pleads with Creon to change his mind, arguing that to execute Antigone will ultimately hurt his son, Haemon, to whom Antigone is engaged. Creon is unmoved and banishes Antigone and Ismene into the house to prepare for their executions.

Haemon then appears, and while professing his loyalty to his father (Creon), also tells him that the people of Thebes are unhappy with his decision and are urging him to pardon Antigone. Creon accuses Haemon of refusing to obey the law out of love for Antigone. Haemon tells him there are greater truths at work than the law, and goes. The Chorus suggests to Creon that Haemon might be right, but Creon continues to disagree, although he does pardon Ismene. Antigone is then brought from the palace under guard, lamenting the fact that she will die unmarried and unloved as she is led to the cave in which Creon plans to imprison her.

After she goes, the blind seer Tereisias appears, warning Creon that if he persists in punishing Antigone, he will face tragedy. After Tereisias goes, the Chorus convinces Creon to believe what he said and pardon Antigone. As he is preparing to fetch her, however, Creon hears a cry of suffering and rushes out. Shortly afterwards, a Messenger returns with news that Antigone and Haemon have both killed themselves. As Creon returns with Haemon's body, Haemon's mother Eurydice, who overheard the Messenger's news, kills herself, adding to Creon's suffering. As Creon goes into the palace to continue what's left of his life, the Chorus speaks a brief ode on the subject of too much pride leading to suffering.

Part 1, Lines 1-222

Summary

Antigone and Ismene enter from the palace. After Antigone comments on the suffering with which she has lived since the death of her father Oedipus, she tells Ismene that there is new suffering ahead. The bodies of their two brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices each dead by the other's hand in battle, are to be treated differently. Eteocles, who fought on the home side (i.e., of Thebes) is to be given a hero's burial, while Polyneices, who fought on the opposing side, is to be treated like a traitor – that is, his body is to be abandoned to the elements and to wild animals. Antigone also reveals that Creon, the Theban governor and uncle to the two young women, has decreed that anyone who tries to give Polyneices a decent burial is to be executed by public stoning.

As Ismene expresses her shock and dismay, the angry Antigone reveals her determination to go against the wishes of her uncle and the will of the law, retrieve Polyneices' body, and honor it with burial. Ismene tries to talk her out of it, reminding her of the family's cursed history and saying they have responsibilities, as both citizens and women, to obey the law. Antigone sharply says that for her it's more important to do what's right, as defined by loyalty to and love for family. When Ismene says that she, out of concern for Antigone's safety, will keep quiet about what she (Antigone) plans to do, Antigone scoffs, saying she, and the dead, will hate Ismene even more for staying quiet. Ismene returns to the palace, saying that no matter what happens, Antigone is loved. Antigone goes off in another direction.

The Chorus of Theban Elders enters, recounting the story of the battle between Eteocles and Polyneices that ended in the deaths of the two brother warriors. As their ode concludes, Creon enters. The Chorus wonders why he called them together. As Creon meets the Chorus, he proclaims that as the result of the deaths of the sons of Oedipus, he (Creon) is now the ruler of Thebes. He speaks of his intent to follow the rule and intent of government and the law before anything else, refers to the deaths of Eteocles and Polyneices, and confirms what Antigone has already said – that anyone who attempts to bury Polyneices, whom Creon views as a traitor of the worst sort, will be executed. He then urges the Chorus to be "sentinels of the decree" – that is, to monitor the citizenry and make sure the rule of law is followed, and to not take sides with anyone who attempts to break it.

Analysis

This opening section quickly and clearly establishes the play's central conflicts, with dramatic and thematic tension built around the same fundamental question – will Antigone go against the law of the land, as embodied and defined by her autocratic uncle, and give her brother the burial that she believes he deserves? There are several important points to note here – the powerfully, vividly drawn positions of the two central

characters, the way those positions actively embody and dramatize the play's central themes, and the portrayal of the sensitive Ismene. She is a strongly sketched-in secondary character who in many ways embodies what Antigone despises and, simultaneously, Creon requires – devotion, under any circumstances, to the rule and law of government. In other words, Ismene is caught between two powerful and opposing personalities and expectations, does her best to navigate the demands of both and, perhaps tragically, fails to fully and successfully please either.

Classical Greek plays in general, and the tragedies in particular, often commented upon social and/or political circumstances of the time in which they were written and produced. "Antigone" is no exception, and while an in-depth consideration of the circumstances that gave rise to this particular play is outside the scope of this analysis, it's important to note that one of the play's essential purposes was to trigger in its audience consideration of the principles, policies and practices of the government of the time. This is one reason why Classical Greek plays in general, and this play in particular, can be seen as relevant in contemporary culture.

Another reason the play can be seen as relevant, not to mention another way in which the portrayal of the central conflict is so effective, is in the humanity of the characters. Antigone, Ismene, Creon, even the Messenger and the Guard, are all characterized with fundamental, recognizable human traits – determination and defiance, fear and caution, pride and arrogance, reluctance, and self-preservation respectively. In other words, the playwright skillfully portrays them, within the extravagance and formality of the play's language, quite realistically and empathically, shaping conversations and language in such a way as to trigger the audience's identification with, understanding of, and recognition of, all of the characters. Everyone knows a Creon … an Antigone … an Ismene, making this play, literally thousands of years old, on a fundamental level completely contemporary in its sensibilities.

Vocabulary

accomplish, denounce, radiance, headlong, dubious, shrill, crest (n.), insolent, clangor, conquest, brazen, surge, descendant, defile, exile (n.), gorge (v.), reject (v.), sentinel, decree, shrine, fatherland, enlarge

Part 2, Lines 223-526

Summary

A Guard hurries on, apologizing for taking his time but adding that he paused several times on his journey to consider the story he has to tell – that he and other guards have discovered that the body of Polyneices has been buried. He says that there are no indications of who had done it or how/when it had been done, that it was agreed that someone had to tell Creon, and that he was chosen by lot to do so. The Chorus suggests that the burial may have been the work of the gods, but Creon angrily tells them it's simply not possible. He then suggests that there are wealthy men in Thebes who resisted his lawgiving in general and this law in particular, who are ultimately responsible for the burial, and who will all be punished with death. He orders the Guard to search for those responsible. The Guard wishes to say something more, but Creon tells him to hurry up and start his search. The Guard goes, realizing he's had a lucky escape from Creon's temper. Creon, meanwhile, returns to the palace.

The Chorus muses on how "many the wonders but nothing walks stranger than man", commenting on humanity's courage, determination, desire for power and control, and its capacity to learn and communicate. At the same time, the Chorus then says "there's only death that he cannot find an escape from", adding that the only honorable death comes at the end of a life that has honored the city and the state.

The Guard returns with Antigone. The Chorus reacts with shock and surprise, doubting that it can truly be she who is accused of "breaking the royal law, caught in open shame". Creon comes back out of the palace, sees Antigone, and insists that the reluctant Guard give him as many details as he can about what happened. The Guard explains that he and his fellow guards returned to where Polyneices was buried, pulled the body out of the sand, re-exposed it to the sun, and then withdrew to a nearby hilltop to see what happened. Shortly afterwards, he says, Antigone came, saw what happened, cried out to the gods, and began performing burial rituals. At that, the Guard says, he and the other guards raced down, captured her, and brought her to Creon.

Creon then dismisses him and confronts Antigone, who freely and proudly admits what she did, saying she was obeying the laws of the gods rather than the laws of man. She adds that she has suffered so much as the result of the curse on her family, that she continues to suffer, and that she willingly embraces the death that is to be her punishment. Creon angrily calls her insolent and accuses Ismene of being involved in Antigone's plan. Antigone taunts him, saying he should hurry up and end her life if he's going to, adding that she is driven by love, rather than hatred. This leads her and Creon into a fast-paced argument about the nature of justice and death, an argument which ends with Creon telling her that she can go "down there" and join the dead, adding that "no woman rules me while I live."

Analysis

In the first part of this section, the appearance of the Guard and his recounting of what happened is an example of a common practice in Classical Greek theatre, the describing of events that take place offstage. The device is most commonly used to narrate acts of violence, and is used again twice in this play – in the descriptions of the deaths of Haemon and Eurydice. Another common practice in Classical Greek theatre, used here and throughout the play, is the use of the Chorus, a group of individuals speaking with one voice and one essential identity – in this case, a group of Theban elders. The members of Classical Greek choruses were rarely given separate personalities or identities, although in some cases there were Chorus Leaders. The Chorus in “Antigone”, though, is what might be described as a “basic” Chorus – no individuality, one thematic and or narrative perspective, and one voice, serving (again, as Choruses traditionally did) to comment on the action, offer background information and/or thematic insight, and/or encourage and/or confront the main characters. A third commonly used device involves aspects of structure and language – in the case of the former, the alternating of scenes with choral commentary, in the case of the latter the rapid fire confrontation.

Meanwhile, the thematic and narrative movement of the play builds in this section, as the opposing aspects of the play’s central themes come into direct, dramatic conflict. In other words, the dialogue between Antigone and Creon, as they debate the question of which loyalty supersedes the other (loyalty to the state or loyalty to family), gives dramatic voice to the play’s main thematic question. An additional level of feeling is added to the debate when Antigone introduces the element of love – specifically, her love for her brother. This motif, or repeated image, occurs several times throughout the play, most often referred to by Antigone as a defense and/or motivation for her actions, but also by Creon, who views love as a negative. He implies several times that feelings of love are in fact a weakness undermining an individual’s capacity for acting on what he believes should be the truer loyalty – to the state and the law. This aspect of his argument clearly suggests not only that the playwright’s social, political and personal sympathies lie with Antigone, but that he (the playwright) thinks the audience’s experience of those same sympathies should lie in the same direction. Meanwhile, Creon’s view of love manifests most painfully and tellingly in the sequence that follows – specifically, in his confrontation with his son, Haemon.

Vocabulary

sleuth (v.), forethought, yoke, currency, infamy, hireling, revere, allocate, contrive, refuge, inventive, clearance, circumstance, adequate, smear, endure, libation, rigid, insolence

Part 3, Lines 527-800

Summary

Ismene comes out from the palace and is accused by Creon of conspiring with Antigone. Ismene says she was involved and is prepared to die with her sister, but Antigone tells her to not be foolish and confess to something she did not do. Ismene argues that for her, to remain behind while Antigone dies is a kind of torturous living death, but Antigone says that Ismene should continue to live even if she (Antigone) dies. When Creon accuses her of being foolish, Ismene responds by challenging him to think about his son, Haemon, betrothed to Antigone. Creon insists he will not have his son marry a lawbreaker, and orders both Antigone and Ismene back into the house to prepare for death. After they've gone, and as Creon remains, the Chorus laments how the generations of suffering caused by the actions of one man (i.e., Oedipus) cannot be escaped, commenting on the unavoidable power of Zeus, and on how dangerous a guide false hope can be.

Haemon comes. Creon asks whether he has heard what Antigone did and whether he agrees with her punishment. Haemon says he shall always agree with his father's judgment and leadership. Creon speaks of Antigone's evil, warns Haemon not to compromise his beliefs and attitudes out of love for her or any woman, and proclaims his fairness in dealing justly with wrongdoing, adding that his absolute correctness has been conferred upon him by his position within the state. He concludes with another reference to his determination to never be beaten by a woman.

While the Chorus agrees, Haemon respectfully suggests that the people of Thebes are, for the most part, siding with Antigone. He suggests that Creon should at least listen to, and consider, the views of others while making his, adding that "it can be no dishonor to learn from others when they speak good sense". Creon angrily says that he resents being lectured to by someone as young as Haemon, who reminds him that "no city is property of a single man". Creon then suggests that Haemon is only saying what he is because he desires and loves Antigone, but Haemon denies it, in turn accusing Creon of wishing to speak but never to hear. Creon then calls for Antigone to be brought out, saying that she is to be executed while Haemon watches. Haemon, however, leaves, saying that Creon will never see him again.

The Chorus comments on Haemon's anger, but Creon dismisses them, saying Haemon's feelings mean nothing. He then reveals his plans for Ismene and Antigone. The former is to be released, but the latter is to be locked up in a cave with "just so much to eat as clears the city from the guilt of death". There, he says, she is to pray and consider her actions, her life ending in either death or remorse. He then goes into the palace. The Chorus comments poetically on the power of love, suggesting that it is love for her brother that is driving Antigone's actions.

Analysis

The first points to note about this section relate to the position taken by Ismene – specifically, her initial attempt to align herself with and support Antigone, which can be seen as a manifestation of one of the play's secondary thematic subjects, the nature of loyalty. In other words, Ismene, in spite of her previously glimpsed (and strongly felt) reluctance to go against the law, does what she does out of loyalty to her sister – not necessarily, it must be noted, to her traitor brother. Her actions can also be viewed as a reiteration of Antigone's argument in support of the prioritizing power of love – Ismene places love (for her sister) above fear of/loyalty to the law, in exactly the same way as Antigone is doing. Here again the playwright's intention is clear – to suggest that love and chosen loyalty, entwined as they are, are more powerful than enforced loyalty to the law.

The second point to note can be seen as an ironic, or dark, mirror to the more positive point about love discussed above. This is Creon's denial of love and its power, denial manifest in his essential rejection of Haemon, accused by his father of weakening in his devotion to law and authority because of his love for Antigone. Haemon is, according to his father, less of a man, deepening the portrayal of Creon as essentially misogynist (i.e., hating of women) and making his position (i.e., on law and loyalty) even more untenable, or unsupportable. A related point is brought up by the Chorus, whose supportive commentary on Haemon's wisdom can be seen as an indirect suggestion that Creon is fundamentally unwise, or that his judgment has been clouded by power and pride, a thematically relevant suggestion reiterated in the play's closing moments. It's interesting to note, however, that at no time does the Chorus regard Antigone as also being wise, for her youth or not, even though she and Haemon are essentially arguing the same point.

Finally, there is Creon's comment on the nature of Antigone's imprisonment, and on how the circumstances of imprisonment are to be viewed as freeing the government from responsibility for her death. This is a vivid portrayal of / commentary on the entwined demands of politics, denial and rationalization, an entwining all too often apparent in cultures both historical and contemporary. In other words, here again Creon has all the hallmarks of an archetype, or universally recognizable character – the power-motivated, self-serving, near-inhumane political animal.

Vocabulary

viper, accessory, kinsman, furrow (n.), quarry, beget, dutiful, obedient, kindred, discontent, eloquence, resistant, revile

Part 4, Lines 801-1151

Summary

The Chorus laments what is about to happen as Antigone comes out of the palace, prepared for her journey to the cave and speaking of her regret at not being supported. The Chorus reminds her that she is dying with dignity, but Antigone again cries out that she is dying “with no friend’s mourning … alive to the place of corpses … never at home with the living nor with the dead.” The Chorus suggests that she might, in fact, be living through another manifestation of the curse that ended her father’s life, and Antigone admits that this is her greatest fear. The Chorus praises her independence, but reminds her that, in not obeying the law, she has brought about her own death.

As Antigone prepares to leave, Creon comes out of the palace, suggesting that Antigone is trying to talk her way into a delay of her sentence and ordering that she be taken away immediately. Antigone refers to her tomb as a marriage chamber, speaks of her hope that she will be greeted in death by those in her family who have preceded her, and speaks again of her conviction that what she did was right, adding that she wouldn’t have done what she did for anyone but a brother. She refers again to having followed a greater law than that imposed by Creon, adding that if Justice decides that those who punish her are themselves to be punished, she wishes them no worse punishment than hers. As she is led away, she cries out to the people of Thebes to see how she is being punished because she “respected the right”. As she goes, the Chorus speaks a lament about others who had raged at the gods but whose lives had ended in disgrace nonetheless.

The blind prophet Teiresias, appears, led by a small boy. He is greeted by Creon, who acknowledges that Teiresias has given him good counsel in the past. Teiresias, however, tells Creon that he is troubled by omens – in particular shrieking, murderous birds who, Teiresias says, have fed on Polyneices’ corpse and have been driven mad as a result. He says the gods have forgotten Thebes, and suggests that there is no shame in repenting of a. Creon angrily accuses him of simply being after money, and insists that Polyneices will never be buried. Tereisias warns Creon that he has more to say, and after taunting him again about being after money, Creon demands that he say what he has to say. Teresias then warns him that unless Creon takes action to transform his mistake, Haemon will die and the city will be attacked . He then turns to leave, hinting that Creon should calm down and think more clearly. After he’s gone, Creon consults with the Chorus, who remind him of how Teresias and his prophecies have always proven correct and suggest that he hurry to release Antigone. Creon is reluctant to back down, but eventually realizes he has no choice and hurries off, determined to free Antigone himself. After he’s gone, the Chorus speaks an ode of prayer to the gods, asking for their blessing on Thebes.

Analysis

Antigone's conversation with the Chorus introduces a new element to her situation – specifically, the idea that she is dying unmarried. On first inspection, this perhaps seems like an unlikely concern for a woman who, to this point, has exhibited a significant, defining determination to resist both law and convention. In other words, for someone as independent as she is, the loss of a conventional, legal relationship such as marriage is (or, at least, is often perceived to be) seems to be something of a self-betrayal. If, however, the reader (and/or audience) remembers that one of Antigone's primary motivations is love, then her concerns here could also be seen as a grieving for the loss of the possibility of having what could be argued is the ultimate love, that which motivates and defines marriage. In either case, the core of her grieving here seems to be fear of/sadness at dying alone, uncomforted by either the legal or emotional support of marriage. Her comment about the cave being her marriage bed, in this context, can be seen as suggesting that death is to be her groom. On another level, however, it can also be seen as foreshadowing Haemon's upcoming, and accompanying, death.

In all this, however, it's important to note that Antigone remains defiant of Creon to the end, committed and loyal to her belief that love is, and should be, the primary motivator of action and the defining consideration when it comes to deciding which law, that of the gods or that of man, should be obeyed.

The character of Tereisias is a recurring one in the narratives of Antigone and her family – specifically, of her father Oedipus. It was Tereisias, according to the Oedipus myth and the plays based on that myth, who saw both the truth of Oedipus marriage and its tragic outcomes. Tereisias and his warnings function on two levels. Dramatically and narratively, they foreshadow upcoming events – specifically, the deaths of Haemon and Eurydice that, as Teresias implies, result from Creon's obsession with law over love. At the same time, they reinforce the narrative's thematic concern with the dangerous powers of pride, a concern referred to specifically in the Chorus's final words and implied throughout the play's narrative line.

Vocabulary

affront (v.), verge, sufficiency, dirge, impiety, pent, frenzy,attentive, augury, goad, inarticulate, gall, vapor, distinguish, hackneyed, reluctant, stench

Part 5, Lines 1152-1352

Summary

A Messenger arrives and speaks of how Creon once was envied for his power and sense of justice, but now is to be pitied, revealing to the Chorus that Haemon has committed suicide. As the Chorus realizes the truth of Teresias' prophecy, Eurydice (Creon's wife and Haemon's mother) enters from the palace, saying she heard what the Messenger said as she was coming out to make her morning prayers and asking him to say exactly what happened. The Messenger says that after he accompanied Creon to where Polyneices' body had been left, they discovered that it had been savaged by wild animals. As they were finishing burying it appropriately, they heard cries of grief coming from Antigone's cave. Creon, the Messenger says, recognized the voice as Haemon's and rushed to the cave, where he (Creon) discovered that Antigony had hung herself and that Haemon was clinging to her body as he wailed out his grief. Creon called for him to come out, the Messenger says, but instead Haemon drew his sword and stabbed himself, dying with his body on top of Antigone's.

As Eurydice returns silently to the palace, the Chorus wonders whether her silence means she is being discreet or whether she is disturbed in her mind. The Messenger goes into the house to find out. Meanwhile, Creon and his followers return, carrying Haemon's body. Creon cries out his guilt, saying he learned the lesson of justice too late. The Messenger returns with news that Eurydice is dead. As Creon expresses his disbelief, the doors to the palace open and reveal Eurydice's body. Creon cries out in grief, saying her and Haemon's death are both his responsibility. The Messenger describes how before she died, Eurydice cursed Creon for killing her children. Creon cries out for his own death, saying he can no longer live with what he has done. After he goes into the palace, the Chorus comments briefly on the dangers of pride and the value of wisdom.

Analysis

In the play's final narrative sequence, Creon faces the consequences of his actions – specifically, his determined focus to enact the rule of law, as he perceives and conceives it, as opposed to the rule of love, as perceived and conceived and acted upon by both Antigone and Haemon. Here again, the playwright's intention could not be clearer. The deaths of Antigone and Haemon are simultaneously tragic and heroic, in that they died too young and they died reviled, but they died continuing to believe in, and acting upon, what they believed to be morally right. The suffering of Creon, by contrast, is clearly portrayed as having been the result of his ignoring both his son and his niece, clinging obstinately to his determined, self-serving, self-aggrandizing perspectives on power and policy. In other words, the play is clearly saying that loyalty defined and motivated by love is preferable to, and more honorable than, loyalty defined and motivated by power.

Meanwhile, this section of the play again manifests several commonly practiced conventions of the Classical Greek Theatre. There is the Messenger, bringing news of offstage tragedy and violence … there is the Chorus, commenting on the action and, in its final words, summing up one of the play's key themes … and there is a new convention, the revealing of Eurydice's body. This practice of opening the doors of the set and displaying the (usually bloody) results of offstage violence, occurred in a substantial majority of Greek Tragedies, continuing the practice of keeping acts of violence offstage but graphically displaying the results of such violence, often defined by emotional as well as physical actions, for all to see. The intention here seems to be to warn the audience of the consequences of the morally violent perspectives thematically embedded within the narrative – in this case, Creon's self-corrupting, self-destroying obsession with power.

Vocabulary

prophecy, readiness, necessity, purify, crevice, discretion

Characters

Antigone

Antigone is the play's central character, its protagonist. She is a daughter of Oedipus and, as one of his descendants, is a victim of the curse that has been placed on his family by the gods. In spite of knowing that she is on some level and in some way doomed, she nevertheless pursues a course of action, a way of living defined by both free will and a powerful sense of justice as defined by the will and way of the gods as opposed to the will and laws of man. The particular law she challenges is the law forbidding the burial of her brother Polyneices, and here it's important to note that while Antigone is strong-willed, defiant, and courageous, she is simultaneously loving and vulnerable, her actions triggered and motivated, as she herself admits, by love for Polyneices.

It's also important to note that, on a level perhaps concealed by the armor of her courage and defiance, Antigone also longs to be loved. This aspect of her character shows most clearly in the moments before she leaves Thebes forever, as she prepares to go to the cave of exile which she knows is in fact going to be her tomb. In lines 810-814 in particular, she makes clear that she longs for the emotional contentment and security of love and marriage … even though, interestingly enough, she never mentions her fiancé, Haemon, by name – does she long for love in general, or does she long for Haemon's love in particular?. In any case, this aspect of her character may seem at odds with her defiance of what is portrayed as societal norms (i.e., Creon's law about burying Polyneices). In other words, a reader might well ask why a woman so determined to challenge society in one area of its tyranny is so ready and/or willing to accept its tyranny in another (i.e., acceptance of the male-dominated convention of marriage). The play offers no clear answer, but instead presents the question within the context of the life and experience of one of the most dramatically and emotionally compelling female characters in the history of theater.

Ismene

Ismene is Antigone's younger sister and is a contrast to Antigone in just about every way. Where Antigone is strong willed and courageous, Ismene is hesitant and cautious. Where Antigone is persistent in terms of pursuing her arguments, particularly with Creon, Ismene is easily cowed. The one aspect of her character that Ismene shares with Antigone is a capacity for love and loyalty. In the same way that Antigone loyally loves her brother, and fights the fight she does as the result of that love, Ismene loves her sister so much, and so wants to demonstrate that love in a loyal, supportive way, that she lies to Creon and says that she too was part of the plan to illegally bury Polyneices. Ismene, however, lacks the courage to sustain and pursue the choice in the same way as Antigone sustains and pursues hers. As such, Ismene is a powerfully

effective contrasting character, one who, in technical terms, defines and emphasizes the dominant characteristics of the main character through contrast.

Creon

Creon is Antigone's uncle, the brother of her mother. As the result of this relationship, he inherited the kingship of Thebes as the result of the death of the previous king, Eteocles, who in his turn inherited it from King Oedipus. Creon is portrayed as controlling and domineering, insensitive to the feeling and will of anyone who doesn't share his near-fanatical belief in the authority and power of law. He is an autocrat and a dictator, something of a tyrant, refusing to allow any sort of love or compassion temper and/or challenge his absolute belief in his absolute power. By the end of the play, however, circumstances have brought about a change of heart in Creon, but too late. His single-mindedness has resulted in the death of both his son and his wife, thus teaching him the lesson (as the Chorus suggests as the play concludes) that law un-tempered by compassion is ultimately inhumane and destructive.

Haemon

Haemon is Creon's son and Antigone's cousin, and also her beloved and betrothed. He brings news of the discontent surging through the population of Thebes as the result of his insistence upon prosecuting, convicting, and executing Antigone. Haemon is a complex character, proclaiming his dutiful loyalty to his father while, at the same time, telling that same father (whom he knows is obsessive and has a violent temper) news he doesn't want to hear. The play is unclear just why he does this, or what is his primary.

Teiresias

Teiresias is the blind prophet who warns Creon of the dangers he and his power will face if Creon continues in his determination to punish Antigone. Tereisias has, in the history of Antigone and her family, played a similar role, having given her father Oedipus similar warnings. The fundamental irony associated with this character is that he is physically blind but more spiritually and/or morally sighted than any of the people around him.

Guard, Messenger

Early in the play, the Guard brings news that sets its main plot in motion – specifically, the revelation that the body of Polyneices has, in defiance of Creon's law, been buried. The tradition and/or practice of characters bringing in news of offstage events is a common one in Classical Greek theatre, and is repeated later in the play with the appearance of the Messenger, who brings news of the deaths of Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice. It's important to note, however, that unlike the Messenger in this play and

other, similarly functioning characters in other plays, the Guard is portrayed as having a degree of personality, characterized as an individual as opposed to someone who just brings bad news. He is something of a coward, at least when it comes to facing Creon's temper. Here again, the narrative includes a vivid, important contrast to the central character, in that the Guard's caution in confrontation is exactly opposite to Antigone's perhaps reckless courage. In other words, Antigone's defining characteristics are seen in an even clearer, stronger light because of the vivid presence of the opposite characteristic in another character.

The Chorus

Another tradition and/or practice common to Classical Greek theater was the use of a chorus, a group of individual actors speaking with the voice of a single character and perspective – in this case, the perspective of an elder of the city of Thebes. The Chorus commented on the action, provided exposition (e.g., information about what has gone on previously in the lives of the characters), at times confronted the play's main characters, and at other times supplied information and/or insight into themes. The Chorus in this play does all these things.

Oedipus

Oedipus is one of the most well known individuals in Greek mythology. In unconscious fulfillment of a prophecy made at his birth, he killed King Laius of Thebes during a quarrel triggered by Oedipus' arrogance, unaware that the king was in fact his father – Laius had abandoned Oedipus on a mountaintop after being warned in a prophecy that he would be murdered by his son. After Laius' death, Oedipus then married Jocasta, Laius' queen and Oedipus' own mother, considering her (as the widow and queen of the man he killed) part of the kingdom he won. After finding out the truth, Oedipus blinded himself and set himself to wandering in the desert. As a result of his actions, he caused a curse to be placed on his descendants, including his daughters Antigone and Ismene and his sons Eteocles and Polyneices.

Eteocles, Polyneices

These two characters are the dead brothers of Antigone and Ismene, each killed in battle by the other. Eteocles, who fought on the Theban (home) side, is buried with honor, while the body of Polyneices, who fought on the opposing side is abandoned on the battlefield, according to law. It is Antigone's desire to give Polyneices an appropriate burial that drives her to develop the attitudes and take the actions she does.

Eurydice

Creon's wife appears only briefly, overhearing the news of the death of her son Haemon and then, shortly afterwards, killing herself out of grief and shock. Her death is a

manifestation of / trigger for the suffering that Tereisias told Creon that he (Creon) would be facing if he continued to prosecute Antigone. In other words, Eurydice's death is the consequence Creon faces for his actions.

Objects/Places

Thebes

This city/state was one of the dominant military/political forces in Ancient Greece and is the setting for the play's action.

The Oedipus Curse

As the result of his having (unknowingly) killing his father and marrying his mother, Oedipus caused a curse to be placed on his descendants, resulting in their living unhappy lives and dying violent deaths. His four children – Antigone, Ismene, Eteocles and Polyneices – all, as revealed here, fell victim to that curse.

The Palace

The action of the play takes place in the courtyard of the main palace of Thebes, the home of the royal family. This setting, a courtyard and central square with a large, imposing building as a main backdrop, was a common one in Classical Greek theatre.

Libations

In Classical Greek religious tradition and practice, ceremonies marking the burial of the dead included the pouring out of libations to the gods, rare and valuable liquids like wine or oil. The libations were poured into the ground to the sound of prayers and hymns, all of which were intended to sanctify and / or bless the ground into which the body of the deceased was to be buried.

Antigone's Cave

As punishment for breaking the law forbidding the burial of Polyneices, but aware that to publicly execute her would cause outrage in the city, Creon sentences Antigone to be imprisoned in a cave, where she would be given enough food to survive for a while and which, he believes, would give her time to realize her mistake and repent. The cave, however, becomes the site of Antigone's and Haemon's suicides.

Hades

In Classical Greek mythology, Hades is the name given to the underworld, the place to which the souls of the dead travel and remain.

Prophecy

Ancient Greek society and culture placed a great deal of faith in, and value on, prophecy. Seers, or prophets, were widely believed to be speaking the word of the gods, who could perceive events outside the boundaries of time and space – in other words, the future. It was generally believed that if a prophet foretold an event, nothing could be done to avoid that event – which, of course, never stopped people trying.

Birds

In the play, the strange behavior of birds during the time when Creon is prosecuting Antigone is a clue to the prophet Tereisias that all is not well in Thebes, and in particular with Creon's actions. The actions of the birds trigger in him (Tereisias) further contemplations and/or realizations of Creon's future.

Blindness

Blindness, both physical and moral, is an important presence in the play.

Themes

Challenging Authority

The play's action, its plot or narrative line, is driven by this central thematic impulse. This is the issue at the core of the debate between protagonist Antigone, who essentially argues that authority should be challenged when the human condition demands it, and antagonist Creon, who represents and embodies absolute authority and who argues against challenges such as those made by the more humane Antigone. It's important to note, however, that the debate between the two has somewhat different individual significance. For Antigone, the issue is very personal, in that her positions are defined by the particular question of what is to happen to the body of her brother, "authority" having decreed that the body is to be left unburied. Her arguments are therefore so issue specific that it is difficult to know whether she advocates challenging authority in general, or whether she is simply advocating challenge to this particular authority. Creon, by contrast, argues in more absolute terms, saying firmly that any/all law, imposed and/or practiced by the state, must be obeyed unquestioningly.

Unlike Antigone, Creon is unaffected by the specific circumstances – the law is the law and must be obeyed, full stop. This, in turn, can be seen as an important indication that the play as a whole is arguing against the power of authority. In his sweeping, absolute condemnation of anything that challenges the established law, Creon comes across as unreasonable and inhumane, not to mention suffering profoundly as the result of his immutability. In other words, the play suggests that Creon, and by extension any/all who advocate and/or practice the sort of totalitarianism he advocates/practices, ought to be perceived as and/or treated as tyrants and challenged, as Antigone does, however and whenever possible.

The Laws of God Versus the Laws of Man

A related thematic question, often discussed within the context of the challenges to authority dramatized throughout the play, is the question of which law takes precedence, the laws of the gods (i.e., of human nature and relationship) or the laws of man. The former, as defined in the arguments and actions of Antigone and Haemon, are defined by love and compassion, emotions transcendent of circumstance. Laws of man, on the other hand, as defined in the arguments on both sides of the question, are defined by concepts like loyalty and status. It's interesting to consider, in this context, a situation that the play doesn't really address – how the laws of man are defined by concepts of justice originally laid down by the gods and shaped/interpreted (Antigone would say corrupted) by man.

In any case, it's important to note that the use of the term "man" in this analysis is deliberate. Greek politics and government of the time were entirely governed by men, and a particular class of men at that (upper, wealthy, military minded). Women, as

frequently indicated by Creon in the text, had no place and no value in the decision making process. Thus is Antigone not only defying the law, she is also, in Creon's mind, defying the natural order (i.e., women doing as men tell them to do). In her mind, however, she is applying the natural order, she and Haemon and, to a lesser degree, Ismene. All act out of love, their beliefs are defined and motivated by love, and while the play portrays their lives as coming to an end, it also portrays their love, the ultimate law of the gods, as transcending the punishment allotted to them by the laws of man. In other words, in the deaths of Antigone and Haemon, the play is making the thematic suggestion that while the laws of man may triumph temporarily, the laws of the gods will ultimately have the final say on the fate of souls.

The Perils of Pride

At the conclusion of the play, following the deaths of Haemon and Eurydice and Creon's realization that their deaths are at least in part a result of his arrogant determination to see the law obeyed, the Chorus comments that "great words by men of pride bring greater blows upon them". In other words, they are reiterating what Creon has already realized, and commented upon in his lament to the gods. This is the idea that arrogance and pride, particularly when they become the defining forces in a misguided sense and/or practice of justice, create suffering not only for those who become the targets for that justice (i.e., Antigone and Haemon), but also for those who practice that justice (i.e., Creon). This theme is common not only in Classical Greek tragedy (in characters such as Agamemnon in "The Oresteia", Jason in "Medea", Oedipus, and many others) but also in Shakespearean tragedy (where characters like Othello, Macbeth, Lear, Antony and Cleopatra, and Julius Caesar) all lose, albeit to differing degrees, both authority and respect as the result of their arrogance. It could also be argued, in fact, that the theme can be found in contemporary narratives, not just in theatre (although it does appear in modern classics like "Death of a Salesman" and "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and in contemporary plays like "Enron") but in society at large. After all, what is the cause of the downfall and/or troubles of larger-than-life characters like Bernie Madoff or Silvio Berlusconi if not, on some level, the feeling of self-righteous invincibility triggered by arrogance … the feeling of invincibility so evident in Creon, in a play first written over two thousand years ago. The more things change, it seems, the more things stay the same.

Style

Point of View

There are several important components of this play's point of view. The first relates to the time, place, and culture in which it was first written and produced – specifically, Ancient Greece, circa 440 BC. The culture at the time was in some ways very sophisticated (it practiced, for example, a form of democracy) while in other ways somewhat primitive, particularly in terms of its religious/spiritual practices – its belief in several gods, for example, and its overwhelming faith in prophecy. The culture's sophistication and primitiveness are both evident in the play, in that Antigone's defiance of Creon's law can be seen as a form of democracy at work, while the responses of Creon and the Chorus to Tereisias, as well as Antigone's invocation of the gods, can be seen as manifestations of the spiritual/religious beliefs of the time.

Another important aspect of the play's point of view is its implied (i.e., metaphoric) commentary on the political circumstances of the time. As discussed in the analysis of Part 1, such commentary was a common component of Classical Greek theatre, which often used mythological subject matter as a vehicle for discussing very real, very contemporary events and situations. The final, and perhaps most important, aspect of the play's point of view is related, in that the narrative seems to be manifesting a very clear perspective against the kind of autocratic lawgiving enacted by Creon. In other words, it is operating from a clear thematic point of view as evident in both its plot, as enacted by the central characters, and in the commentary on that plot, as offered by the Chorus.

Setting

There are several important elements to note when considering the play's setting. The first is related to "Point of View" above, in that a great deal of the play (the events it portrays, the thematic perspective defining that portrayal, the underlying socio-political outlook defining that perspective) is defined by its being taken place in Classical/Ancient Greece. It's important to note, however, that as previously discussed, while the play's setting defines much of its content, the meaning and implications of that content are not restricted because of that setting. Its story, characters and themes are, in many ways, archetypal and universal. Another important element related to setting is the actual physical setting of the play which is the courtyard of the royal palace of Thebes. Here, with the actual physical presence of powerful earthly authority in the background (i.e., the palace), the confrontation between a lowly, insistent human being (Antigone) against that authority (represented by Creon) carries that much more weight. She is literally in the physical shadow of that authority, struggling (in metaphorical terms) to bring light into the darkness of autocracy cast by that shadow. Finally, there is the city of Thebes itself, haunted as it is by a history of rulers (Lauis, Oedipus, Eteocles, now Creon) who have, for various reasons and in various ways, encountered profound tragedy in their

lives and in their governance. This gives the shadows cast by the palace an even deeper symbolic darkness – even while Antigone is struggling against present authority, she is also struggling against the future defined for her by her past … the darkness in the souls of others defining the darkness in which she finds herself, and into which she is about to be pushed.

Language and Meaning

The first point to note about this particular work is that it is a translation from the original Ancient Greek, with the result that the text, perhaps even more than translations of more contemporary works, is subject to uncertainties of meaning and, therefore, inconsistencies of interpretation. Footnotes, for example, indicate at times that the original manuscripts are occasionally unclear about the speakers of certain lines, with the implication that meaning changes completely as the result of who speaks. A particularly interesting example of this is line 572 – “Dear Haemon, your father robs you of your rights” which, according to a footnote, is spoken by Ismene in most manuscripts but which leaves Antigone making no reference whatsoever to her fiancé (Haemon) by name.

Another important point to note about the language used in the play is that it is both heightened and poetic, intense in feeling and in intellectual depth. It’s important to remember that when originally produced, the dialogue and speeches were delivered in a way that was as much sung as spoken, in many ways making the original presentations similar to what contemporary society would call opera. Finally, and as previously discussed, the language of the characters, the words they use to define and deliver their arguments, is ultimately universal. Poetic and musical sensibilities aside, issues of translation aside, the language of the play communicates the characters’ positions and contentions with stark clarity and, ultimately, archetypal resonance. There is, in fact, the strong sense that no matter what choices were made in translation, or what language the original Greek was translated into, the passions of both Antigone and Creon would be clear, their characters and personalities apparent, and the fundamental truths over which they argue empathically identifiable to audiences. It is, in short, the language of human beings fighting for what they believe to be the issues of their lives.

Structure

Greek theatre – of time, place and action. That is to say, the events of the play all take place in what is now called “real time” – there are no jumps, transitions, intermissions or breaks. Those events also take place in the same location – there are no scene changes. Adherence to this unity is one reason why characters like the Messenger and the Guard were essential – rather than taking the audience to the scene of bloodshed (which the Classical Greeks wanted to avoid seeing anyway, on principle), the playwright brought the scene to the audience, in the words and experiences of Messengers. The additional benefit to this theatrical practice was to allow room for audiences to fill in the details, emotional or physical, of the event with their own

imagination (it being a long standing truth that nothing is more frightening, fulfilling, or evocative than what an individual can conjure up in his or her mind). The third unity is of action – that is, events of a plot follow a single line of rising action, event triggering event, from beginning to end, exposition to climax and denouement.

Employment of the unities functions to create a sense of immediacy (i.e., drawing the audience into the emotional world of the characters without a chance for an emotional and/or physical "breather") and of inevitability (i.e., that once the events of the play are set in motion, nothing can stop them). This latter is particularly important, given that the plays were written in, and about, a culture in which fate, the future and destiny were all regarded as inevitable and inescapable.

There is, however, a problem with employment of the unities – things tend to happen too quickly to be entirely realistic. Things like Antigone's imprisonment, her and Haemon's suicides, and the reportage of both events happen too closely together to be entirely accurate in terms of time (there is no way that a Messenger could travel to and from Antigone's cave, some miles from the palace, as quickly as he does, twice). There are two points to note here. The first is that the Greeks (like many theatre goers) were less interested in absolute realism than they were in a kind of metaphor for realism. The second is that telescoping time in this way supported a sense of building momentum about the story, a sense of speeding towards that previously mentioned (and culturally ingrained) inevitability that gives the play's themes even more power and weight.

Quotes

My sister, my Ismene, do you know of any suffering from our father sprung that Zeus does not achieve for us survivors? There's nothing grievous, nothing free from doom, not shameful, not dishonored, I've not seen.
-- Antigone (Lines 1-5)

We must remember that we two are women so not to fight with men. And that since we are subject to strong power we must hear these orders, or any that may be worse.
-- Ismene (Lines 61-64)

For me, the doer, death is best. Friend shall I lie with him, yes friend with friend, when I have dared the crime of piety. Longer the time in which to please the dead than that for those up here.
-- Antigone (Lines 72-76)

The boasts of a proud tongue are for Zeus to hate.
-- Chorus (Line 123)

You cannot learn of any man the soul, the mind, and the intent until he shows his practice of the government and law. For I believe that who controls the state and does not hold to the best plans of all … that he is worst of all who are or were. And he who counts another greater friend than his own fatherland, I put him nowhere.
-- Creon (Lines 178-183)

Would it be they had hidden him away, honoring his good service, his who came to burn their pillared temples and their wealth, even their land, and break apart their laws? Or have you seen them honor wicked men? It isn't so.
-- Creon

One's own escape from trouble makes one glad; but bringing friends to trouble is hard grief. Still, I care less for all these second thoughts than for the fact that I myself am safe.
-- Guard (Lines 437-440)

For me it was not Zeus who made the order. Nor did that Justice who lives with the gods below mark out such laws to hold among mankind. Nor did I think your orders were so strong that you, a mortal man, could over-run the gods unwritten and unfailing laws. Not now, nor yesterday's, they always live, and no-one owns their origin in time.
-- Antigone (Lines 449-456)

Take heart. You live. My life died long ago. And that has made me fit to help the dead.
-- Antigone (Lines 559-560)

The man the state has put in place must have obedient hearing to his least command when it is right, and even when it's not.
-- Creon (Lines 665-667)

Whoever thinks that he alone is wise, his eloquence, his mind above the rest, come the unfolding, shows his emptiness. A man, though wise, should never be ashamed of learning more, and must unbend his mind.
-- Haemon (Lines 707-711)

Death who brings all to sleep takes me alive to the shore of the river underground. Not for me was the marriage-hymn, nor will anyone start the song at a wedding of mine.
-- Antigone (Lines 810-814)

What divine justice have I disobeyed? Why, in my misery, look to the gods for help? Can I call any of them my ally? I stand convicted of impiety, the evidence my pious duty done.
-- Antigone (Lines 921-925)

Fate has terrible power. You cannot escape it by wealth or war. No fort will keep it out, no ships outrun it.
-- Chorus (Lines 951-953)

All men may err but error once committed, he's no fool nor yet unfortunate who gives up his stiffness and cures the trouble he has fallen in. Stubbornness and stupidity are twins.
-- Tereisias (Lines 1023-1026)

And all the cities that you fought in war whose sons had burial from wild beasts, or dogs, or birds that brought the stengh of your great wrong back to each hearth, they move against you now.
-- Tereisias (Lines 1080-1083)

Yes, when a man has lost all happiness, he's not alive. Call him a breathing corpse. Be very rich at home. Live as a king. But once your joy has gone, though these are left, they are smoke's shadow to lost happiness.
-- Messenger (Lines 1166-1170)

Corpse on corpse he lies. He found his marriage. Its celebration in the halls of Hades. So he has made it very clear to men that to reject good counsel is a crime.
-- Messenger (Lines 1240-1244)

Our happiness depends on wisdom all the way. The gods must have their due. Great words by men of pride bring greater blows upon them. So wisdom comes to the old.
-- Chorus (Lines 1347-1352)

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Which side of the play's central debate (loyalty to the law versus loyalty to the heart) do you side with? Who do you agree with more, Creon or Antigone? Explain your answer.

Topic 2

In what ways are the play's central thematic considerations relevant to contemporary society? In what ways, for example, is contemporary governmental authority viewed and enacted in the same autocratic way as Creon views and enacts it? In what ways is such authority challenged and/or questioned in contemporary circumstances in the same determined way as Antigone challenges and questions it? Who are the modern Creons? Who are the modern Antigones?

Topic 3

Do you side with Antigone or with Creon when it comes to the question of how, or even whether, love should affect and/or define relationship with the law? Is Antigone right in suggesting that love should be the primary defining consideration? Or is Creon right, when he suggests that no matter what, the rule of law and government should be primary?

Topic 4

In traditional, classical theatre, the term "tragic hero" describes a noble character brought to destruction by a personal flaw – Hamlet's death results from indecision, Oedipus' death results from arrogance. In this context, would you classify Antigone as a "tragic hero"? If yes, what would you say is her personal flaw? If no, why not?

Topic 5

What do you think is the reason why Haemon stands up to his father? Is it a personal desire for justice? Is it a young man's rebellion against authority? Is it love for Antigone? Is it some combination of all these factors, or none of them? Explain your answer, relating it to the play's primary themes.

Topic 6

While the character of Tereisias is physically blind, there are other sorts of blindness present in the other characters. What kinds of blindness (moral? emotional? spiritual?) are evident in other characters? Consider particularly Creon and Antigone.

Topic 7

Do you think Antigone's challenge to Creon indicates a general disrespect for authority on her part? Or does she only challenge him in the way that she does because of the particular circumstances in which she finds herself? Explain your answer.