

Antigone

Sophocles

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Before the beginning of the story, two brothers leading opposite sides in Thebes' civil war die fighting each other for the throne. Creon, the new ruler of Thebes, has decided that Eteocles will be honored and Polyneices will be in public shame, his body not be buried and left for the vultures. Antigone and Ismene are sisters of dead Polyneices and Eteocles. Antigone wants to bury Polyneices' body, in defiance of Creon's edict yet Ismene refuses to help her, fearing the death penalty. Antigone disowns her, going and burying Polyneices herself. Creon seeks the support of the Chorus of Theban Elders in the days to come, in particular his edict regarding Polyneices' body. The Chorus of Elders pledges their support. A sentry enters, reporting that the body has been buried, a furious Creon ordering the sentry to find the culprit or face death himself. The sentry brings in Antigone and she does not deny her misdemeanor, arguing about the morality of the edict and the morality of her actions. Creon becomes furious, and, thinking Ismene must have helped her as he saw her upset, summons her as well. Ismene tries to confess to the crime, wishing to die alongside her sister but Antigone does not have it. Creon orders the two women be temporarily imprisoned. Haemon, Creon's son, gently tries to persuade his father to spare Antigone, claiming that under cover of darkness the city mourns for the girl, the discussion deteriorating and the two men are bitterly insulting each other. Haemon leaves, vowing never to see his father again.

Creon decides to spare Ismene and bury Antigone alive in a cave. She is brought out of the prison and she bewails her fate and defends her actions one last time before being taken away to her living tomb. Tiresias, the blind prophet, enters, warning Creon that Polyneices should be buried quickly. Creon accuses Tiresias of being corrupt, Tiresias responding that because of Creon's mistakes, he will lose "a son of [his] own loins" for the crimes of leaving Polyneices unburied and putting Antigone into the earth. All of Greece will despise him, and the gods will not accept the sacrificial offerings of Thebes. Creon concedes leaving with a group of men to help him right his mistakes. A messenger enters to tell them that Haemon has killed himself and Eurydice, Creon's wife and Haemon's mother, enters and asks the Messenger to tell her everything. The messenger says that Haemon and Antigone have both committed suicide, Antigone hanging herself and Haemon stabbing himself after finding the body. Eurydice disappears as Creon enters carrying Haemon's body. He understands that his own actions have caused these events as a second messenger arrives informing them that Eurydice has killed herself. Creon blames himself for everything that has happened, and, a broken man, asks his servants to help him inside. The order he valued so much had been protected but he had acted against the gods and lost his child and his wife as a result. The Chorus closes by saying that although the gods punish the proud, punishment brings wisdom.

Antigone is considered by many to be the first sample of a strong female character. Her role through Antigone dons that of a staunch feminist, going around "burning bras" in the name of fighting against the crown's orders. Yet this Theban play does not play to feminists as much as it does to answering the two following questions:

1. Should Polyneices have a proper burial ceremony?
2. Should someone who defies the law and gives Polyneices a burial be punished?

The first question is not pondered heavily as Antigone buries Polynices' body early in the plays. Yet that what is more debatable is to whom is the allegiance of Antigone, God or her family. Antigone's adamantness on burying Polynices is rooted in a wish to restore and preserve the honor of her family, not just to the gods. She feverishly declares to Ismene that she must act to please "those that are dead" as they hold more physical and metaphysical weight than any ruler. In the opening scenes as well she makes her appeal to her sister saying that they must protect their brother out of the love between kin, regardless of the decimation of their state. Antigone makes little to no references to the pantheon of Greek gods, thus it is very simple to interpret much of her reasoning for honoring higher laws as those referencing laws of family honor, not divine laws. Though he rejects Antigone's actions based on the reason of family honor, Creon also appears to value family heavily himself as well, one of the few areas where the values of Creon and Antigone seem to align. For example when talking to Haemon Creon demands of him not only obedience as a citizen of the state, but as a son. He goes so far as to say "everything else shall be second to your father's decision". An extremist's stance, especially in lieu of the fact that he (Creon) advocates obedience to the state above all else, it is not clear how he handles these two moral values when in such dire conflict. It is clear that even for Creon, his fidelity towards family lies close if not equal to that of the state.

With question number two, the main topic for discussion is state control. It is a well-established theme in Antigone for the right of an individual to reject society's infringement on a freedom to perform a personal obligation, obvious in Antigone's refusal of Creon's decree towards Polynices. She says of this to Ismene, "He has no right to keep me from my own." In this lies the contrasting view of Creon and Antigone with regard to laws higher than those of state. Creon demands obedience to the law above all else, be it right or wrong in its hedonistic approach. He proclaims "there is nothing worse than disobedience to authority", Antigone responding with the idea that state law is not absolute, and that it may be broken with civil disobedience in extreme cases. To her these cases are defined by examples such as honoring the gods, whose rule and authority outweighs Creon's tenfold. Antigone deals with many different topics great for any feminist. Strong women and even some men should read this to see what truly can happen once someone dares defy the normal chain of authority that nature offers.

Recommended Titles:

Oedipus the King

Oedipus at Colonus

Jane Eyre