Antigone

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SOPHOCLES

Considered one of the three greatest playwrights of the classical Greek theater, Sophocles was a friend of Pericles and Herodotus, and a respected citizen who held political and military offices in fifth-century B.C.E. Athens. He won fame by defeating the playwright Aeschylus for a prize in tragic drama at Athens in 468 B.C.E. Only seven of his complete plays have reached the modern era, but he wrote more than 100 and won first prize in 24 contests. Best known are his three Theban plays, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Sophocles's other complete surviving works are *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, and *Trachinian Women*. He is credited with changing Greek drama by adding a third actor, reducing the role of the chorus, and paying greater attention than playwrights before him to character development.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Antigone was performed sometime around the year 441 B.C.E., just before Athens fought a campaign against the revolt of Samos. Sophocles was selected to be one of nine generals in that campaign. These historical events are relevant because some of the play's central issues are the appropriate use of power by the state, the possibility of justifiable rebellion, and the duties of citizens to obey the laws of their government. A long-held tradition suggests that the popularity of *Antigone* lead directly to Sophocles's election as a general.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Of Sophocles's surviving dramatic works, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* treat different episodes of the same legend, using many of the same characters. Sophocles's writing career overlapped with that of Aeschylus and Euripedes, the other great tragic playwrights of fifth-century Athens. Among Aeschylus's best-known tragedies are *Seven Against Thebes*, *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. Euripedes's most influential works include *Medea*, *Electra*, and *The Bacchae*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Antigone
- **When Written:** Circa 442 B.C.E.
- **Where Written:** Athens, Greece
- **Literary Period:** Classical
- **Genre:** Tragic drama
- **Setting:** The royal house of Thebes
- **Climax:** The suicides of Antigone and Haemon
- **Antagonist:** Creon

EXTRA CREDIT

World War II Antigone: In 1944, when Paris was occupied by the Nazis, Jean Anouilh produced a version of *Antigone* in which the audience was able to identify Antigone with the French Resistance fighters and Creon with the occupying forces.

World War II Antigone 2: The German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht produced a version of the play in German, in 1948, which had even more obvious references to the Nazis. Brecht's version of the play begins in a Berlin air-raid shelter.

PLOT SUMMARY

As the play begins, the invading army of Argos has been driven from Thebes, but in the course of the battle, two sons of Oedipus (Eteocles and Polynices) have died fighting for opposing sides. Their uncle, Creon, is now king of Thebes. He decrees that the body of Polynices, who fought against his native city, will not be given burial rites but will be left to rot, as a warning to traitors. Creon further decrees that anyone who does try to bury Polynices will be punished with death.

Oedipus's daughters, Antigone and Ismene, are grieving for the loss of their two brothers, but Antigone is also defiant. She declares that the burial traditions are the unwritten laws of the gods, and are more important than the decrees of one man. She vows to give Polynices the proper burial rites. Ismene begs Antigone not defy the laws of the city and add to their family's tragedy. Antigone will not yield.

Antigone is caught in the act of performing funereal rites for her brother. Creon is furious, and has Antigone brought before him. She remains defiant, and says that she will not break the laws of the gods just to follow Creon's unjust law. Creon responds that she will die for her disobedience to the laws of the city. Ismene pleads with Creon to spare her sister's life. Antigone is engaged to Creon's son, Haemon, and the two of them are very much in love. But Creon is as unyielding in his allegiance to the rule of law as Antigone is to the unwritten traditional rules of the gods.

Haemon comes to Creon to ask him to reconsider. The citizens of Thebes are sympathetic to Antigone's desire to bury her brother, but are too afraid of Creon to speak up. Creon grows angry at his son's attempt to offer him advice. Their exchange grows heated. Haemon insists he is trying to prevent his father

from pursuing an injustice. Creon accuses his son of siding with a reckless traitorous woman over his own father, to whom he owes obedience. Haemon threatens that the death of Antigone will lead to another death, and then rushes away, saying that Creon will never see him again.

Antigone laments her approaching death and all that she is giving up in refusing to bend to Creon's law. Guards lead her away to be sealed up (alive) in a tomb. Tiresias, the blind prophet, warns Creon that he is about to make a terrible mistake in killing Antigone, and that he should not leave the body of Polynices unburied. Creon flies into another rage and accuses Tiresias of false prophecy and of accepting bribes. Upset, Tiresias tells Creon that as punishment for killing Antigone, the gods will soon take the life of Creon's child. Creon is shaken by this, and eventually decides to relent. He rushes off to free Antigone from the tomb.

After Creon has left, a messenger arrives at the palace with the news that Haemon has killed himself. Eurydice, Haemon's mother and Creon's wife, asks to know what happened. The messenger says that Haemon went to Antigone and found that she had hanged herself. When Creon arrived, Haemon lunged at him with his sword, then used the weapon to kill himself. Eurydice leaves without a word. Creon returns, overcome with grief, carrying the body of his son. He cries out and blames himself for driving his son to suicide. A messenger enters with the news that Eurydice has killed herself while cursing Creon for murdering their son. Creon is left a broken man.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Antigone – Daughter (and half-sister) of Oedipus, sister of Ismene, niece of Creon, and fiancée of Haemon. When her brother Polynices dies attacking Thebes, Antigone defies Creon's order that no citizen of Thebes can give Polynices's body a proper burial, under penalty of death. She believes the burial rituals are the unwritten rules of the gods, and must be obeyed regardless of a ruler's political whims. She is bold in her defiance, believes firmly that she is right, and at times seems eager to die for the cause of burying her brother.

Ismene – Sister of Antigone. Ismene pleads with Antigone not to defy the laws of the city and not to bring more misfortune to their ill-fated family. When Creon sentences Antigone to death, Ismene first tries to share the guilt, and then pleads with Creon to change his mind and be merciful toward Antigone.

Creon – Brother-in-law of Oedipus, Creon becomes king of Thebes when Oedipus's two sons die while battling each other for control of the city. Creon believes in the rule of law and the authority of the state above all else. Bending the rules leads to anarchy, in his opinion, and anarchy is worse than anything. Creon's stubborn refusal to honor Antigone's desire to bury her slain brother and to acknowledge the opinions of the Theban people, his son Haemon, and the seer Tiresias, leads to the deaths of his wife Eurydice, Haemon, and Antigone.

Tiresias – The blind prophet, or seer, who warns Creon not to execute Antigone and not to stick so rigidly to his decision to disallow the burial of Polynices. When Creon insults Tiresias, the seer prophesies that the gods will punish Creon for Antigone's death by taking the life of his child.

The Chorus – In *Antigone*, the chorus represents the elder citizens of Thebes. Sophocles's choruses react to the events of the play. The chorus speaks as one voice, or sometimes through the voice of its leader. It praises, damns, cowers in fear, asks or offers advice, and generally helps the audience interpret the play.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Haemon – Son of Creon and fiancé of Antigone. Haemon tries to convince his father to be compassionate toward Antigone and to heed the will of the people of Thebes, who don't want to see her executed. He attacks his father and then kills himself when he finds Antigone dead.

Eurydice – Wife of Creon and mother of Haemon. She blames her husband for their son's suicide and kills herself, while cursing Creon's name.

A Sentry – The sentry brings Creon the news of Polynices's illegal burial and later catches Antigone in the act of performing funereal rites for Polynices's body.

A Messenger – The messenger gives an account of the suicides of Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

BLINDNESS VS. SIGHT

In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus mocks the blindness of the seer Tiresias, who responds by telling Oedipus that he (Oedipus) is blind to the corruption in his own life, and soon will be literally blind, too. Issues of blindness and sight aren't quite as obvious in *Antigone*, but the same basic tension is there. Tiresias gives the current king, Creon, a warning, and the king is unable to see the wisdom of the seer's words. Creon is blinded by pride—his unwillingness to compromise, to listen to the opinions of his people, or to appear to be defeated by a woman. The blind Tiresias can see that the gods are angry and that tragedy will strike if Creon doesn't

rethink his decision and change his mind. Creon lacks the insight to see this. In that sense, he is blind. And although he does eventually change his mind, and come to see the error of his stubbornness, it is too late—events have spiraled out of his control, and he now must witness the destruction of his family.

NATURAL LAW

Creon, as head of state and lawgiver in Thebes, believes in obedience to man-made laws. But in defying Creon's command that no one bury Polynices, Antigone appeals to a different set of guidelines—what is often called "natural law." Whether its source is in nature or in divine order, natural law states that there are standards for right and wrong that are more fundamental and universal than the laws of any particular society.

Antigone believes that the gods have commanded people to give the dead a proper burial. She also believes she has a greater loyalty to her brother in performing his burial rites than she does to the law of the city of Thebes that bans her from doing so. The wishes of the gods and her sense of duty to her brother are both examples of natural law. To Antigone, these outweigh any human laws. In *Antigone*, Sophocles explores this tension and seems to suggest—through Antigone's martyrdom, the people's sympathy, and Creon's downfall—that the laws of the state should not contradict natural laws.

CITIZENSHIP VS. FAMILY LOYALTY

The concept of citizenship and the duties that citizens owe to the state were subjects of huge importance and debate in fifth-century B.C.E. Athens, where Sophocles lived and where *Antigone* was first performed. Antigone and Creon represent the extreme opposite political views regarding where a citizen of a city should place his or her loyalties.

In the play, Creon has a strict definition of citizenship that calls for the state to come first: "...whoever places a friend / above the good of his country, he is nothing: / I have no use for him." From Creon's perspective, Polynices has forfeited the right to a proper burial as a citizen of Thebes because he has attacked the city. In attacking Thebes, he has shown his disloyalty to the state and has ceased to be a citizen. In fact, Creon is more devoted to his laws than he is to even his own son Haemon's happiness, refusing to pardon Antigone for burying Polynices even though she is Haemon's fiancée. Antigone, on the other hand, places long held traditions and loyalty to her family above obedience to the city or to its ruler. In doing so, she makes the case that there are loyalties to both the gods and one's own family that outweigh one's loyalty to a city.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Creon says that the laws enacted by the leader of the city "must be obeyed, large and small, / right and wrong." In other words, Creon is arguing that the law is the basis for justice, so there can be no such thing as an unjust law. Antigone, on the other hand, believes that there are unjust laws, and that she has a moral duty to disobey a law that contradicts what she thinks is right. This is particularly the case when the law of the city contradicts the customs of the people and the traditional laws of the gods. Antigone's decision not to follow Creon's decree against giving Polynices a proper burial is therefore an example of civil disobedience, or a refusal to obey the law on moral grounds.

FATE VS. FREE WILL

The ancient Greeks believed that their gods could see the future, and that certain people could access this information. Independent prophets called "seers" saw visions of things to come. Oracles, priests who resided at the temples of gods—such as the oracle to Apollo at Delphi—were also believed to be able to interpret the gods' visions and give prophecies to people who sought to know the future. Oracles were an accepted part of Greek life—famous leaders and common people alike consulted them for help with making all kinds of decisions. Long before the beginning of *Antigone*, Oedipus, Antigone's father, fulfilled one of the most famous prophecies in world literature—that he would kill his father and marry his mother (these events are covered in detail in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*). Despite his efforts to avoid this terrible fate, it came to pass. When Oedipus learned what he had inadvertently done, he gouged out his own eyes and was banished from Thebes. Before dying, he prophesied that his two sons, Polynices and Eteocles, would kill each other in the battle for Thebes (see *Oedipus at Colonus*). This, too, comes to pass.

Yet when the prophet Tiresias visits Creon in *Antigone*, he comes to deliver a warning, not an unavoidable prophecy. He says that Creon has made a bad decision, but that he can redeem himself. "Once the wrong is done," Tiresias says, "a man can turn his back on folly, misfortune, too, if he tries to make amends, however low he's fallen, and stops his bullnecked ways." While Oedipus never has a choice—his fate was sealed—in this case Creon seems to have more free will. He chooses to remain stubborn, however, until it's too late and he is caught in the grip of a terrible fate that he can't escape.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

ANTIGONE'S TOMB

Creon chooses to execute Antigone by sealing her in a tomb alive. As Tiresias points out, Creon has ordered that a dead body (Polynices's) be left above ground *and* has ordered the entombment of a live person. Antigone's live entombment is a symbol of Creon's perversion of the natural order of things, which violate the social and religious customs of death and meddles with the affairs of the underworld.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Three Theban Plays* published in 1984.

Lines 1-416 Quotes

I have longer
to please the dead than please the living here:
in the kingdom down below I'll lie forever.

Related Characters: Antigone (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 88-90

Explanation and Analysis

Antigone and Ismene have discussed the grief they feel as a result of the death of their two brothers, Polynices and Eteocles, who killed each other in battle. Antigone has announced that she plans to give Polynices proper burial rites, despite the fact that her uncle Creon, the king of Thebes, has forbidden it and decreed that any person who attempts to do so will be killed. Ismene is shocked and frightened by her sister's words, and says she hopes the dead will forgive her, but she won't defy Creon. Antigone replies that honoring the dead is more important than the living, as life is only brief and temporary, whereas death lasts forever.

Antigone's words highlight the way in which the Ancient Greek belief in the afterlife could cause a conflicting sense of duty to the world of the gods versus the state. While Creon's status as King of Thebes means he has supreme authority in the world of the living, Antigone reminds her sister that this authority is ephemeral in comparison to the eternal power of the gods. Furthermore, Antigone's choice of words suggests she does not fear death; indeed, this lack of fear is arguably what allows her to behave so courageously over the course of the play. Note that Antigone views morality as an act of "pleasing," suggesting that the imperative to act in an ethical manner is less a matter of individual agency and more submission to the laws that the gods have determined.

I will suffer
nothing as great as death without glory.

Related Characters: Antigone (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 112-113

Explanation and Analysis

Ismene has told Antigone that she is terrified for her, and has promised not to tell anyone about Antigone's plan to bury Polynices. Antigone, however, dismisses Ismene's promise, exclaiming that Ismene should tell everyone. When Ismene expresses doubt that Antigone will be able to go through with her plan, Antigone declares that she is not afraid to carry it out, even if it means dying, because there is nothing worse than "death without glory."

Antigone's words here have a double significance. On one level, they refer to Polynices, who will suffer a "death without glory" unless Antigone intervenes and buries him properly. However, Antigone is also referring to herself, emphasizing that she does not fear death because if she is killed for burying Polynices she will die with glory because she is following the will of the Gods even at great person danger.

And speech and thought, quick as the wind
and the mood and mind for law that rules the city—
all these he has taught himself
and shelter from the arrows of the frost
when there's rough lodging under the cold clear sky
and the shafts of lashing rain—
ready, resourceful man!
Never without resources
never an impasse as he marches on the future—
only Death, from Death alone he will find no rescue
but from desperate plagues ha has plotted his escapes.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Creon

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 396-405

Explanation and Analysis

A nervous sentry has informed Creon that someone has begun giving Polynices' body proper burial rites, and Creon reacts furiously, threatening to torture the sentry unless he finds the man responsible. Creon and the sentry have exited, and the chorus remains onstage to deliver a chant about humanity. The chorus claims that mankind is the greatest of the world's wonders, with immense skill and "resources." According to the chorus, men can be stopped by no impasse except death––"from Death alone will he find no rescue." These words directly echo Antigone's claim about the transience of life in comparison to the permanence of death. As the chorus emphasizes, humans may possess impressive talents and abilities but these are rendered somewhat meaningless in the face of the inevitability of death.

By facing death without fear, Antigone displays a humble awareness and acceptance of the limitations of humanity's power. She knows that she may be killed, yet reasons that this is a worthwhile risk because in defying Creon she is honoring the importance of dignity in death, as well as obeying the will of the gods and natural law. Creon, meanwhile, is blind to the point made by the chorus in this passage that humanity is unable to escape death. Indeed, he is suffering from *hubris*, an excess of pride and lack of humility. Creon has forgotten that the world of death, the afterlife, and the gods is more powerful than he will ever be as a mortal king.

Lines 417-704 Quotes

❝ Like father like daughter,
passionate, wild...
she hasn't learned to bend before adversity.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Antigone

Related Themes:

Page Number: 525-527

Explanation and Analysis

The sentry has brought Antigone to Creon, explaining that it was she who gave Polynices burial rites. Creon, shocked, has asked Antigone if the sentry's claims are true and how she could have dared to break a law. Antigone replies that she does not fear death, and that it would be far worse to not give her brother a proper funeral than to die. Following this exchange, the chorus remarks that Antigone is strong-willed like her father, Oedipus. In some ways, this comparison is flattering to Antigone; despite his flaws and all that befell him, Oedipus was considered a great man. In behaving like him, Antigone is also exhibiting the masculine virtues of courage and honor that were thought to be rare in women at the time.

On the other hand, this comparison to Oedipus has negative connotations, and hints at the sinister events to come. Oedipus' refusal to "bend before adversity" led him to stubbornly ignore Tiresias' prophecy, thereby inadvertently fulfilling it. Antigone betrays more foresight than her father––she is already aware that she might die for breaking Creon's law. Indeed, this highlights another similarity between Antigone and Oedipus: they are both doomed to live lives dominated by suffering and tragedy.

❝ Blest, they are truly blest who all their lives
have never tasted devastation. For others, once
the gods have rocked a house to its foundations
the ruin will never cease, cresting on and on
from one generation on throughout the race—
like a great mounting tide
driven on by savage northern gales,
surging over the dead black depths
roiling up from the bottom dark heaves of sand
and the headlands, taking the storm's onslaught full-force,
roar, and the low moaning
echoes on and on

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 656-666

Explanation and Analysis

Creon has condemned Antigone to death for burying Polynices, also condemning Ismene despite Antigone's insistence that Ismene is not guilty and that her offer of solidarity came too late. Although Ismene has protested on the grounds that Creon's son, Haemon, is in love with Antigone, Creon has not relented.

After all the characters exit, the chorus delivers a chant about the fact that tragedy that has befallen the house of Oedipus "will never cease, cresting on and on." The chorus describes the pain and suffering of Oedipus' family in lyrical terms, comparing it to a powerful storm. Note that there is

no redemption at the end of this suffering; indeed, the only purpose of it is to demonstrate the irreproachable power of the gods.

Lines 705-1090 Quotes

Spit her out,
like a mortal enemy—let the girl go.
Let her find a husband down among the dead.

Related Characters: Creon (speaker), Antigone

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 728-730

Explanation and Analysis

Haemon has arrived, and Creon has checked if Haemon wishes to obey him, to which Haemon replies that he does. Relieved, Creon lectures his son about the importance of obedience, and tells him to reject Antigone and move on. Creon's words show that he takes submission to the authority of the patriarchal family and the state much more seriously than romantic love or the gods. Indeed, his callous statement "Let her find a husband down among the dead" conveys his dismissive attitude toward Antigone's claims about the power of death and the afterlife. Of course, this viewpoint ultimately proves to be foolish; while Creon's words suggest that he has grown cruel from power, this power is meaningless in the face of fate, death, and the gods.

Anarchy!—
show me a greater crime in all the earth!

Related Characters: Creon (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 751-752

Explanation and Analysis

Creon, still lecturing Haemon, has anticipated that Antigone might object to being killed on the grounds of family. But Creon is resolute in his decision to execute her, because, in his mind, to do otherwise would be like inviting anarchy into Thebes. In this quotation, he exclaims that there is no "greater crime" than anarchy. We can interpret Creon's intense hatred of anarchy in two ways. It's possible that he is simply a tyrannical, dictatorial character obsessed with preserving his own power. Antigone threatens this power, and thus no amount of pity will provoke him to spare her.

On the other hand, it is possible to read view the presentation of Creon's beliefs in a more sympathetic, nuanced way. Rather than being invested in the power of the state for personal gain, perhaps Creon truly does believe that strict adherence to the laws of the state is the only way to maintain fairness, justice, and harmony. While Creon's treatment of Antigone may be harsh, pardoning her because she is his niece and soon-to-be daughter-in-law could constitute preferential treatment. Of course, while this is a more sympathetic account of Creon's motives, it does not excuse his lack of respect for the dead and the gods.

Whoever thinks that he alone possesses intelligence,
the gift of eloquence, he and no one else,
and character too...such men, I tell you,
spread them open—you will find them empty.

Related Characters: Haemon (speaker), Creon

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 791-794

Explanation and Analysis

Creon has demanded obedience from Haemon, before launching into a lecture about the importance of law, order, and submission to the rule of the state. When Haemon has a chance to speak, he begins in a tentative and deferential way, stressing his loyalty to his father. However, in this passage he notes that it is foolish for any man to think "that he alone possess intelligence." Haemon goes on to tell Creon that the people of Thebes are siding with Antigone, and his warning against hubris can be seen as a rhetorical strategy designed to persuade Creon to take public opinion seriously.

In this scene Haemon is shown to be diplomatic, humble, and dutiful. His words in this passage are perceptive, and cohere with the overall moral message of the play. Like the men Haemon describes, Creon is blinded by his confidence in his own knowledge and power. Haemon's comment that the men are "empty" highlights the fact that––despite his superficial glory––Creon remains spiritually hollow because he cares more about power than morality and does not respect the gods.

Am I to rule this land for others—or myself?

Related Characters: Creon (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 823

Explanation and Analysis

Despite Haemon's careful and submissive manner, Creon has grown furious at Haemon's suggestion that he should spare Antigone's life. He has accused Haemon of behaving in a ludicrous and immoral way, causing Haemon to grow more defensive. Yet Creon refuses to acknowledge that he should take into account the opinion of the people, asking if he should rule "for others" or for himself.

This question is a quintessential example of Creon's corrupt and selfish attitude toward political rule. His statement suggests that adjusting laws based on public opinion would be irresponsible––however, this is the guiding principle of democracy. Clearly, Creon's unswerving belief in the power of the state is self-serving and megalomaniacal, given that he is the leader of the state. Although he insists on strict adherence to the rule of law, he has little interest in actual morality.

What a splendid king you'd make of a desert island—you and you alone.

Related Characters: Haemon (speaker), Creon

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 826

Explanation and Analysis

Creon and Haemon have continued to argue, with Creon objecting to the suggestion that he should pardon Antigone because the people are sympathetic to her. When Creon asks rhetorically if he should "rule this land for others" or for himself, Haemon replies that he would make a "splendid king" of "a desert island."

With this sardonic comment, Haemon criticizes Creon for his selfish, tyrranical mode of rule. The image of the desert island also raises the point that Creon isolates himself by refusing to acknowledge the will of the people or to pardon Antigone because she is his niece. As a cruel, dictatorial king, Creon essentially positions himself on a metaphorical desert island, cut off from the rest of the City and only interested in pleasing himself.

Love, you mock us for your sport.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Antigone, Haemon

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 894

Explanation and Analysis

Haemon has exited, telling his father they will never see each other again. Creon has announced that he will spare Ismene, but will exile Antigone to the desert, leaving her food so that the state cannot technically be held responsible for her death. Creon exits, and the chorus delivers a chant about love, which begins by accusing love of mocking humanity. Once again, the Chrous reminds the audience that people, even while they may be convinced and even obsessed by their own power, are in fact controlled by larger forces such as death, the gods, and in this case, love.

This is true even of Creon, who is rigid in his refusal to sympathize with his niece, listen to his son, or otherwise take into account the views of other people. Yet while at this point Creon behaves as if he is immune to the influence of love, by the end of the play the suicides of Antigone, Haemon, and Creon's wife, Eurydice, will leave him a broken man.

I go to wed the lord of the dark waters.

Related Characters: Antigone (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 908

Explanation and Analysis

Antigone has entered, accompanied by guards. She converses with the chorus, who express pity at the sight of her; Antigone, too, laments her own fate, expressing sadness at the fact that she will never marry. Instead, she will "wed the lord of the dark waters," meaning Hades, god of the underworld. This statement reflects Creon's earlier statement that Antigone's fate would cure her of her love of death.

While Antigone's passionate insistence on honoring the dead and the gods is admirable, it has robbed her of the chance to live a normal life, including getting married. Yet it is also unsurprising that Antigone feels closer to the afterlife than the world of the living, considering most of her parents and brothers are all dead.

> You went too far, the last limits of daring—
> smashing against the high throne of Justice!
> Your life's in ruins, child—I wonder...
> do you pay for your father's terrible ordeal?

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Antigone

Related Themes:

Page Number: 943-946

Explanation and Analysis

The chorus have been speaking with Antigone about her tragic fate, implying that she is both noble and that she has defied the natural boundaries of behavior for a mortal woman. In this passage, the chorus tell Antigone that she "went too far," and that her suffering and death could be a kind of retribution for her "father's terrible ordeal." This conversation is important, as it reveals the limitations in the sympathy that the chorus feel for Antigone. Although her intentions to honor her brother and please the gods were good, the chorus emphasize that it is nonetheless inexcusable to defy "the high throne of Justice."

The suggestion that she is "paying" for Oedipus' sins is significant on multiple levels. It coheres with the overall idea that the house of Oedipus is cursed, and that his relatives will continue to suffer for many generations. Indeed, this suffering is shown to breed even more suffering––after all, Antigone's fate is the result of an earlier familial tragedy, the fact that her brothers fought for opposite sides in the Trojan-Theban war and ended up killing each other. Although Antigone is not personally responsible for the actions of her father or brothers, her life is "ruined" by the terrible consequences.

> If a man could wail his own dirge before he dies,
> he'd never finish.

Related Characters: Creon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 970-971

Explanation and Analysis

Antigone and the chorus have reached the conclusion that her terrible fate is indeed the result of her father's misdeeds, and Antigone has ended her lamentation by saying that at her death she will not allow for any love to be shown or words to be spoken. At this moment, Creon enters, heartlessly declaring that if they could, men about to die would continue lamenting forever. Creon's words are exceedingly harsh, highlighting his absolute lack of sympathy for Antigone.

On the other hand, Creon's comment also points to the fact that people tend to indulge in lamentations because it is only at the point of death that they are able to fully understand (and likely regret) their actions. This observation is both perceptive and ironic, considering that at this point Creon still cannot foresee the extent to which he will regret his own actions. This irony suggests that people's judgment of others is usually hypocritical.

> But if these men are wrong, let them suffer
> nothing worse than they mete out to me—
> these masters of injustice!

Related Characters: Antigone (speaker), Creon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1019-1021

Explanation and Analysis

Creon has instructed the guards to build Antigone a tomb and place her in it. Antigone mourns her fate, but has stated that she would not have done anything differently. As she is led away, she exclaims that she is being punished for honoring the gods, and asks the gods to punish those responsible for her death. She calls Creon and his men "masters of injustice," though asks that the gods do nothing worse to them than has been done to her. Antigone's plea to the gods highlights her strong sense of fairness and fundamental belief that she has made the right decision. Despite breaking the law, she feels confident that she is on the side of divine justice.

This paradox illustrates the importance of natural law versus the law of the state. While particular rulers and regimes can be unjust, the law of the gods is eternal and always correct. Indeed, as Antigone's case proves, the laws of a particular mortal political regime may in fact violate the will of the gods; yet, as the play shows, this violation will not go unpunished.

> Still the same rough winds, the wild passion raging through the girl.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Antigone

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1022-1023

Explanation and Analysis

Antigone has been taken away by the guards to be sealed in her tomb. The chorus delivers a chant about all the people in different myths who were killed by being buried alive in a tomb. All were royalty or the children of gods, but none of them survived their fate.

In this passage, the chorus describes how Antigone's "wild passion" was inherited from her father, and that the intensity of this passion is akin to "rough winds." However, this wild and free spirit contrasts with the way in which Antigone is doomed to die: trapped within a tomb from which there is no hope of escape. This contrast again highlights the powerlessness of any mortal human in the face of the forces of fate, while also again connecting Antigone's fate to the previous sins of her father.

Lines 1091-1470 Quotes

> Then reflect, my son: you are poised, once more, on the razor-edge of fate.

Related Characters: Tiresias (speaker), Creon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1099-1100

Explanation and Analysis

Tiresias the seer has entered, led by a young boy. He addresses Creon, who seems tentatively willing to listen. In this passage, Tiresias warns Creon that he is at a pivotal juncture, "poised... on the razor-edge of fate." Tiresias' clarity here is key––although in Greek tragedy the advice of seers is often presented as difficult to comprehend, in this instance Tiresias is exceptionally direct. This makes it all the less excusable that Creon ultimately chooses to ignore him.

Note that Tiresias' words stress the intermingling of free will and fate. The events that have led up to this moment were doomed to take place, and Tiresias' vision of the future illustrates that the events to come are similarly predetermined. On the other hand, Tiresias stresses that the decision facing Creon is his to make, thereby placing responsibility on him for the consequences of his choice.

> These arrows for your heart! Since you've raked me
> I loose them like an archer in my anger,
> arrows deadly true. You'll never escape their burning, searing force.

Related Characters: Tiresias (speaker), Creon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1206-1209

Explanation and Analysis

Creon has reacted furiously to Tiresias' advice, accusing Tiresias of being a false prophet who has accepted bribes. In response, Tiresias responds by informing Creon that he will pay for Antigone's death by losing a child of his own. Before he exits, he tells Creon that Creon has angered him, and that as a result he is releasing metaphorical arrows aimed at Creon's heart. Tiresias warns that Creon will "never escape their burning, searing force." This is a climactic moment in which it is clear that Creon has sealed his own terrible, tragic fate. However, the fact that Creon had so many chances to redeem himself proves that this fate has come about as a result of his own free will.

Tiresias' words also confirm the long-lasting nature of his curse. Creon will be punished not only with one terrible event, but an eternal legacy from which he will never be able to escape. This emphasizes the theme of curses and suffering living on through many generations, and children paying for their parents' wrongdoing.

> Take me away, quickly, out of sight.
> I don't even exist—I'm no one. Nothing.

Related Characters: Creon (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1445-1446

Explanation and Analysis

Creon, terrified by Tiresias' curse, has decided to free Antigone and bury Polynices. However, this decision has come too late, and not only Antigone but also Haemon have both killed themselves. Creon has entered, carrying Haemon's body and cursing himself; moments later, a messenger informs him that Creon's wife, Eurydice, has also killed herself after hearing of Haemon's death. At this point, Creon is mad with grief and longs to die, and in this passage asks to be taken away, saying that he is "nothing." Despite Creon's foolish mistakes and cruel behavior, his terrible ordeal at the end of the play is likely to elicit pity. Having spent the majority of the play "blind" to the consequences of his actions, Creon is now able to fully comprehend what he has done.

Creon's longing for death is ironic, as up until this point he has mocked Antigone for her willingness to die. Indeed, Creon's statement "I don't even exist––I'm no one. Nothing" suggests that living with the knowledge that his pride led to the suicides of his wife, son, and niece is a fate far worse than death. Finally, Creon's fate shows that the gods vindicated Antigone as she requested, forcing Creon to lose his family members just as Antigone experienced the death of her parents and brothers.

> 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.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Creon

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1468-1470

Explanation and Analysis

Creon has been led offstage by his attendants, destroyed by grief and guilt over the suicides of his wife and son. Alone onstage, the chorus speak directly to the audience, explaining that proud people are punished by fate and thereby taught wisdom. This statement makes the moral message of the tragedy clear: Creon was consumed by hubris – a too-great confidence in his own knowledge and power – and because of this was punished in order to restore the natural order.

While Creon has suffered one of the worst fates imaginable and considers himself a broken man, the chorus emphasizes that this suffering is not meaningless. Rather, like his brother-in-law Oedipus (Oedipus was married to Creon's sister), Creon will eventually be able to grow wiser as a result of his experience – as will the audience.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LINES 1-416

It is nighttime in Thebes. The Thebans have defeated an invading army from Argos. During the fighting, the two sons of Oedipus, Polynices and Eteocles, have died, each killing the other as they fought for opposing sides. Polynices, the older brother, led the army from Argos in an effort to try to regain the throne of Thebes, which he lost years earlier when Eteocles overthrew him. Now that both brothers have died, the brothers' uncle, Creon, is king of Thebes.

This battle, one of the most famous in Greek mythology, grew out of Oedipus's terrible fate (detailed in Sophocles's Oedipus Rex) as well as the fates to which Oedipus later sentenced his sons in Sophocles's Oedipus at Colonus.

Oedipus's two daughters, Antigone and Ismene, discuss their grief in the palace. The outraged Antigone tells Ismene that Creon has decreed that the slain attackers will not be given proper burial rites. Eteocles, who defended Thebes, will be buried with military honors, but Creon has ordered that Polynices's body will be left unburied, for animals to eat. In addition, Creon has commanded that anyone who attempts to bury Polynices's body will be put to death.

Creon grants or denies burial rights based on the individual's relationship to the city. Anyone he sees as a traitor is denied burial. Antigone's outrage that proper burial has been denied to one of her brothers shows that she does not use the same standard. For her, loyalty to family is more important than Polynices's disloyalty to Thebes.

Angry and defiant, Antigone challenges Ismene to help her bury their brother Polynices. Ismene is frightened, both of Creon's decree and of her sister's rash words. She begs Antigone to think of all of the tragedy that has already befallen their family and to recognize that they are women with less power than men—particularly the king. She says that they must obey Creon's law.

Ismene's resistance to burying Polynices comes not from a belief that Antigone is wrong, but from a fear of the punishment she will receive for breaking Creon's law. Ismene also knows how her family members tend to act in ways that end in destructive fates.

Antigone responds that she won't let Ismene join in the glory of burying their brother even if Ismene changes her mind. Though Ismene reminds Antigone that she would be defying the laws of the city by burying Polynices, Antigone argues that burying Polynices is obeying the laws of the *gods*, which demand that her brother be given a proper burial.

Antigone and Ismene establish one of the play's major themes. Ismene points out that Creon's decree is the law of the land. But Antigone feels that the laws of the gods are more important than the laws of men.

Ismene continues to plead with Antigone, but Antigone only grows angrier with her and more determined to defy Creon's decree. Antigone challenges Ismene to tell the world what Antigone is about to do, and then she exits. Ismene says that though she thinks her sister is irrational, she loves her, and exits.

Ismene is clearly not Antigone's enemy, but rage makes Antigone see the world in black and white. She is working herself up to the point of defying Creon's law and earning a death sentence.

The chorus enters. They are elder citizens of Thebes. They offer a chant to the rising sun and tell of the battle in which Thebes defeated Polynices and his attacking army from Argos. They speak of Zeus, who they believe helped to defend Thebes, of the goddess Victory, and then call on Dionysus, god of the dance, to celebrate their victory.

Antigone refers to a higher law—the laws of the gods—and the chorus here indicates how important the gods were to the people of Thebes. The chorus attributes the successful defense of the city to the gods' protection.

Creon enters and addresses the chorus. Creon explains that, after the death of Oedipus's two sons, *he* is now king, and the "ship of state is safe." He gives a speech about the character of a leader—a leader must make the soundest policies and put nothing above the good of the state. He declares that Eteocles will receive a burial with military honors, but that the body of the traitorous Polynices will not be dignified with a burial, but will instead be left out to rot, "an obscenity for the citizens to behold!"

Creon uses his first speech as king to explain his ideas of leadership and citizenship. He sees the state as more important than any individual, and thinks that as leader his most important job is to preserve the state's safety. Any action taken against the state he sees as an "obscenity" that must be punished and destroyed.

A sentry enters. He's afraid to speak because he brings bad news and is afraid of Creon's reaction, but is at last persuaded to say what he knows. The sentries have discovered that someone has given Polynices's body burial rites. The body isn't fully buried, but it is covered with a sprinkling of dry earth.

Creon's authority is immediately tested. The sentry, as the bearer of bad news, guesses that he'll be blamed for what has happened—not an unusual occurrence, apparently.

The leader of the chorus suggests that this might be the work of the gods. This idea sets Creon into a rage. He accuses the sentry of having been bribed to allow the burial rites to take place. He threatens to torture the sentry if the sentry doesn't find the man who buried Polynices. Creon exits. The sentry considers he's had a lucky escape, and swears he'll never come back to Thebes.

Creon, who sees the state as more important than the individual, can't fathom that the gods might not agree with him. He sees the laws of the state as so important that he would be willing to torture the sentry, who is just a messenger, in order to uphold them.

Alone on the stage, the chorus offers a chant on the nature of man. With their capacity for hard work and their ingenuity, humans can conquer every obstacle—except death. When a man makes laws and combines them with the justice of the gods, his city will prosper and he will become great. But when he strays from the laws of the land and the laws of the gods, he will become an outcast.

Some critics refer to the Chorus's speech as Sophocles's "Ode to Man." It is a celebration of the awesome capacities of human beings. The condemnation of men who stray from the proper laws is aimed at Polynices, who attacked the city of his birth. But note how the chorus seems to think, as Creon does, that the laws of men and god are always aligned. The events of Antigone will prove otherwise, to Creon's horror.

LINES 417-704

The sentry returns, escorting Antigone. He calls for Creon and presents Antigone as the culprit who defied the law and gave burial rites to Polynices. Creon is doubtful. The sentry tells the story of how he and his colleagues removed the dirt from the body and then sat in wait. As they watched, a sudden whirlwind lifted a cloud of dust. When the dust settled, they saw Antigone standing over the body, screaming because she saw that it was bare. She then poured handfuls of dirt on the body as the sentries came down and seized her.

Many critics have asked why Antigone returns to the body, and why she feels the need to cover it with dirt again. If she has already performed the funereal rites, shouldn't the gods be appeased? These critics argue that she seems to want to be caught in the act. The whirlwind suggests the presence of the gods, and that perhaps the gods do care about what happens to Polynices's body.

Creon asks Antigone if she denies this charge. She does not. Creon dismisses the sentry and asks Antigone if she was aware of his decree that no one should bury Polynices. She says that she was fully aware.

Antigone gives straight answers and doesn't hesitate in proclaiming her guilt. She wants to challenge Creon's law head-on.

Creon asks why she would dare to break the law. Antigone says that Creon's law was not the law of the gods of the underworld—the gods of death and burial whose laws form unwritten, ancient traditions. She was not going to break the laws of the gods to appease a man.

Antigone heeds the laws of custom and religion, not the laws of men like Creon. She believes she is obeying a higher power than Creon's imperfect man-made legislation.

Antigone says she knows she must die. Since she has already known so much sadness in her life, she says, she welcomes death and is not afraid of it. But she could not bear to leave her brother to rot. And if Creon thinks she is acting stupidly, she says, that's because Creon is a fool.

Antigone remains unwavering, even aggressive in her defiance. By insulting the king she is almost backing him into a corner so that his pride will force him to carry out the sentence.

The leader of the chorus notes that Antigone is as passionate and stubborn as her father. Creon responds that he will break her stubbornness, and that he refuses to let her go free, which would make it appear that he had been defeated by a woman. He declares that Antigone and her sister, whom he also believes is guilty, will suffer a terrible death.

Creon does not keep a cool head, as a wise leader should, or look for a way to compromise. He is as stubborn as Antigone. As if this were a street fight, he feels he can't back down without losing face.

Antigone is unfazed, and says that to die for the act of bringing honor to her brother will bring her glory. She adds that the citizens of Thebes support her actions, and would speak up in her favor if they weren't afraid of Creon. She calls him a tyrant.

Antigone again references the higher law that she follows. She suggests that Creon rules by fear, which calls into question the justice of his burial decree.

Creon asks how Antigone can honor Polynices, who killed her other brother, the patriotic Eteocles. Antigone responds that all people must be given the same death rites—it's what the gods command. To Creon's argument that the patriot and the traitor should be treated differently, Antigone says that, because they were her brothers, she loved both equally. Creon says she can love them in Hades.

Creon and Antigone debate whether Antigone should be loyal to the state and its laws—including its distinction of citizen and traitor—or to the gods. By Creon's logic, Antigone's refusal to follow his laws makes Antigone a threat to the state's safety that must be eliminated.

Ismene enters, weeping, and says that she will share Antigone's guilt, but Antigone furiously refuses to let Ismene share in the glory of dying for this cause. Ismene begs Antigone to let them die together. Antigone—harshly at first, and then more gently—continues to refuse to let Ismene claim guilt for defying Creon.

At first, Antigone won't let Ismene join her out of pride—Ismene didn't do the deed, why should she share the glory? But Antigone eventually softens. It would be pointless for Ismene to die for something of which she wasn't responsible.

Ismene turns to Creon and asks him if he'd really kill his son Haemon's intended bride (Antigone is Haemon's fiancée). Creon says his son can find someone new. Ismene pleads that the two are in love. Creon says that the thought of his son in love with a traitor repels him. He breaks off the marriage. Ismene continues to plead for Antigone. Creon tells the leader of the chorus that Antigone must die. Guards take Antigone and Ismene away.

Creon remains committed to the supremacy of his laws. If Antigone can't escape the law just because she wants to bury her brother, then Creon also won't make an exception just because his son is in love with Antigone. Rules are rules, to Creon, and a leader is judged by his ability to enforce them.

The chorus delivers a lyrical chant about the tragedy and ruin of the house of Oedipus. The chant then turns to the power of Zeus (king of the gods) to lay waste to fortunes and ruin the lives of great mortals. Though humans strive and strive, they but remain subject to the whim of the gods. The chant ends when Haemon, son of Creon, enters, weeping.

Fate seems to have it in for Oedipus and his descendents. They went from the height of power when Oedipus was king of Thebes to patricide, incest, fratricide, and now a sister dying for the right to bury her brother. Yet the chorus fails to see that it is now Creon who is on the verge of sentencing himself to a terrible fate. Just as Oedipus tried to fight against the fate given to him by the gods, now Creon holds up his own man-made laws as more important than the laws of the gods. In Greek literature and myth, things never turn out well for people who try to lift themselves above the gods.

LINES 705-1090

Creon asks Haemon if he comes in anger or obedience. Haemon says he will obey Creon. Creon is pleased, and delivers a lecture on a son's obedience to his father and the importance of not losing one's head over a bad woman. He tells Creon to let Antigone go.

Here Creon seems particularly rigid and heartless. Even if he believes he is right and his son should obey him, he doesn't show an ounce of sympathy for Haemon, who loves Antigone.

Creon says that had he not punished Antigone's defiance of the rule of law, it would be like inviting anarchy to destroy the city. The fact that Antigone is a woman, Creon adds, is a further reason why she must not be allowed to defy him. The leader of the chorus says that this sounds sensible.

Creon details his thoughts on the importance of the rule of law over other loyalties, and his belief that to allow any anarchy (or, seemingly, freedom) would threaten the state.

Haemon tells Creon that it's not his place to correct the king, but that the rumors in the street are that the people are sympathetic to Antigone. The people are afraid of Creon, but they believe Antigone should be allowed to bury her brother. Haemon asks his father to realize that he may have made a mistake. He pleads with his father not to be so rigid.

If Creon is a fair king who truly represents and defends his people, as he seems to believe himself to be, then he should pay attention to his people. If they don't think Antigone should be punished, then perhaps Creon should reconsider.

Creon reacts with anger at his son's offering of advice. Again he calls Antigone a traitor. Haemon says the people of Thebes do not see it that way. Creon responds, "And is Thebes about to tell me how to rule? ... Am I to rule this land for others—or myself?"

Creon thinks reconsidering would invite anarchy and threaten the state. But if he rules for himself only, ignoring his people, then how can he claim that his laws are just?

The king and his son continue to argue. Creon accuses Haemon of supporting Antigone against his father. Haemon responds that he is trying to keep his father from committing an injustice. The argument grows more heated and Creon hurls stronger and stronger insults at his son. Haemon threatens that Antigone's death will cause another death. At last, Haemon rushes away, saying that Creon will never see him again.

Creon's blind pride has made him fail to understand Haemon's threat. It also makes him fail to recognize that his devotion to the safety of the state has made him a tyrant whose laws defy the wishes of his people and the laws of the gods.

The leader of the chorus worries that Haemon may do something violent. Creon doesn't care. He decides to spare Ismene, but says that he will take Antigone into the wilderness and enclose her in a vault with just a bit of food. Either the god she seems to love—Death—will save her, or "she may learn at last... what a waste of breath it is to worship Death."

Creon's method of executing Antigone is interesting. By entombing a living person (Antigone) and denying burial to a dead person (Polynices), Creon's laws seem to go against common sense, tradition, and nature itself.

The chorus offers a chant about love, a force that can't be conquered, that taunts people and makes them do crazy things. Guards bring Antigone from the palace. The chorus is heartbroken at the sight of her.

She has been stubborn, but Antigone now gains the audience's pity for what she has become: a person about to die unjustly.

Antigone laments her fate, and the fact that she will never experience the joys of marriage. She further laments the horror of her coming death. The chorus tells her she went too far in her protests, and wonders if she is continuing to suffer for the sins of her father, Oedipus. The mention of her father and his fate stirs Antigone to more intense mourning. The chorus tells Antigone, "Your own blind will, your passion has destroyed you." Creon enters, and tells the guards to interrupt her lament, to take her away, build a **tomb**, and place her in it.

Antigone come to terms with the consequences of her decision, and sadness has at least for the moment replaced defiance. The chorus is sympathetic, but points out that Antigone kept pushing when she could have given up. In Oedipus Rex, Oedipus insists on uncovering the truth about his past, even when others have warned him that doing so will destroy him. Like her father, Antigone brings on her own demise.

Antigone continues to mourn her life and death. She says that she would not have done what she did—disobey the laws to bury her brother—for a husband or a child, because one may find another husband or have another child. But because her parents are dead, she'll never have another brother.

Antigone here seems to go against her earlier claim that all the dead must be treated equally. Her shift suggests that Antigone may be softening, giving Creon an opportunity to show mercy.

As she's led away, Antigone calls out that she is being punished for her devotion to the gods. She then begs the gods to punish Creon as terribly as he is punishing her if they agree with her that Creon has defied their laws.

Creon shows no mercy. Antigone calls out to the gods because she believes that their power and laws take precedence over Creon's.

The chorus chants about other figures of mythology who were entombed alive. All of them were kings or children of gods, yet even they could not escape their fates, just as Antigone cannot escape hers.

By referencing other mythical Greek figures, the chorus seems to suggest that Antigone has been fated since long ago to die like this, just as her father Oedipus was fated to kill his own father and marry his mother.

LINES 1091-1470

Tiresias, the blind prophet, enters, led by a young boy. Creon greets him and agrees to follow Tiresias's advice. Tiresias warns Creon that he is at a turning point, and that Polynices's body must be buried to appease the gods and protect Thebes from their wrath. Tiresias tells Creon not to be stubborn in his decision to refuse to bury Polynices. Instead, he should see himself as only human and capable of making mistakes.

In Oedipus Rex, Tiresias at first doesn't want to tell Oedipus his fate. Here Tiresias warns Creon boldly that he is acting against the gods. Unlike Oedipus, whose fate was already sealed when his prophecy was told, Creon can course and avoid terrible consequences.

Creon flies into a rage, cursing Tiresias and swearing that the body will never be buried. He accuses Tiresias of false prophecy and of accepting bribes. He curses all prophets as power-hungry.

Creon reacts to Tiresias with outrage and insults, just as Oedipus did in Oedipus Rex. His pride and rage seal his fate.

Tiresias now reveals the full secret he knows. He says that the gods alone hold sway over the dead, and that mortals may rule over the living. He says that as punishment for burying Antigone alive, the gods and the Furies will soon take the life of Creon's own child. In addition, the hatred of all those whose dead loved ones have not been buried will rise against Creon. Tiresias exits.

Creon's window of opportunity to avoid disaster has now closed. Moments earlier he might still have been able to undo what he had done, but now Tiresias predicts a tragic and violent outcome.

Creon is shaken by the prophet's words, but is reluctant to undo his decree. He asks the leader of the chorus for advice. The leader tells him to free Antigone and bury Polynices quickly. Fearful, Creon gives in. He rushes off to free Antigone himself.

Unlike Oedipus, once Creon is shaken by the words of Tiresias, he asks people around him for advice. Creon might still try to defy his terrible fate.

The chorus prays to the god Dionysus, asking him to protect and heal the people of Thebes.

The chorus turns to the gods, the higher power, to save Thebes.

A messenger arrives with terrible news: Haemon has killed himself. Eurydice, Haemon's mother, overhears the commotion and asks the messenger to tell her what happened. The messenger says that he and Creon first went to bury Polynices. Just as they were finishing, they heard a cry at **Antigone's tomb** that sounded like Haemon's voice, and rushed over. At the tomb, they found Antigone hanged and Haemon hysterical with grief for her. When Haemon saw them, he lunged at Creon with his sword, missed, and then used the sword to kill himself. Eurydice exits without a word, followed by the messenger.

As in most Greek tragedies, the climactic action takes place offstage and the audience (as well as some of the onstage characters) hear the news from a messenger. Frightened into changing his mind by the prophecy of Tiresias, Creon has tried to make up for his earlier stubbornness. But in Greek myth, once a fate is set in motion, remorse won't stop it. The fated person must suffer.

Creon and his attendants enter. Creon is carrying Haemon's body, and is almost mad with grief. He berates himself, calling himself his son's killer, and his son the victim of Creon's stupidity.

Terrible grief and suffering has made Creon realize that he has indeed angered the gods and brought this fate on himself and his family.

As Creon weeps, the messenger returns with the news that Eurydice, the queen, has killed herself. The messenger says she killed herself at an altar, while cursing Creon and his pride for causing the death of their son.

Now Creon's entire family has committed suicide. Even worse, they committed suicide because of Creon's stubborn pride.

Creon calls for his attendants to take him away. He says, "I don't even exist—I'm no one. Nothing." He prays for death. The leader of the chorus tells Creon that he must endure his suffering. Creon says that he has murdered his son and his wife. He's led offstage by his attendants. The chorus ends by remarking that the proud are laid low by fate, and wisdom is gained through suffering.

Too late, Creon realizes that his family defines him, not his position in the state. Without his family, he is "nothing." Creon's fate has turned out to be similar to Oedipus's—stubbornness led them both to fulfill a fate that results in the suicides of their loved ones. The chorus suggests that, like Oedipus, Creon will live with his suffering and gain wisdom from it.

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