

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Antigone

by Sophocles

written by Tom Zolpar

Copyright © 2008 by Prestwick House Inc., P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938. 1-800-932-4593.
www.prestwickhouse.com Permission to copy this unit for classroom use is extended to purchaser for his or her
personal use. This material, in whole or part, may not be copied for resale.

ISBN 978-1-60389-317-6

Item No. 303294

Antigone

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, students will be able to:

1. analyze the use of Aristotle's three unities in the play
2. analyze the role of dramatic irony in the play
3. analyze roles of free will and fate in the hero's downfall
4. examine how Sophocles builds suspense in the play
5. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam
6. respond to free response questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam

Antigone

Lecture

I. Social and Political—Athens 5th century BCE:

Sophocles was born in Athens, Greece, in 497 BCE and was the best-known of the ancient Greek playwrights. The Athenian government was an “exclusionary democracy,” run by elected officials in the form of an open assembly. Only about ten percent of the population was eligible to participate. Women, slaves, and other “non-citizens” were excluded. Although he was a member of the ruling class, Sophocles was aware of the social inequalities in Athenian society. His plays include repeated attempts to warn his fellow Greeks of the divine retribution that would come to them as a result of their prejudices and injustice to the poor.

II. Religious Ideas:

Contrary to common misconceptions, the Greek pantheon consisted of hundreds of deities in a complex hierarchy. The most familiar “Olympian” gods, perhaps the closest to humans, were a relatively small part of the overall scheme.

The gods, while immortal and powerful, were not *all*-powerful in the sense of our modern concept of God. They were themselves subject to fate and to each other’s will. They were also subject to—and bound to enforce—a body of laws and traditions so ancient that their origins lay beyond even the oldest myths. Among those laws and traditions were laws governing the treatment of blood relations. The entire conflict in *Antigone* stems from the “unnatural” occurrence of two brothers waging war against one another and killing one another. This conflict is further compounded by another blood relation’s—their uncle Creon’s—refusal to grant one proper funeral rites. Antigone’s point against Creon is that *his* prohibition of a funeral for Polynices is a human law, and she *must* obey the older, stronger divine law.

The Greeks believed, to a limited extent, in free will, always accepting that a person would eventually have to face the human and cosmic consequences of his or her own actions and decisions. Still, free will was not more powerful than Destiny. While *Oedipus Rex* is an example of an individual’s inability to avoid his destiny, *Antigone* portrays the suffering that comes as a consequence of a person’s own actions.

Still, as Antigone’s life and death are so clearly shaped by the curses visited upon her father and grandfather (see Section V. Antigone’s Backstory), destiny cannot be completely dismissed either.

Antigone

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Who is the tragic hero in this play?
2. What role does the Chorus play in *Antigone*?
3. Trace the development of each of the following themes:
 - A. Any excess, even an excessive devotion to state or religion, is a fault and leads to misfortune.
 - B. Pride and stubbornness give rise to tyranny and are character flaws that cause suffering and—invariably—tragedy.
 - C. In any conflict between the divine and human law, divine laws take precedence.
 - D. One is personally responsible for one's own suffering, but suffering produces wisdom.
4. Identify and explain the instances of irony in the play.
5. What are Creon's contradictory opinions on loyalty? How do they contribute to his downfall?
6. Discuss Antigone's refusal to compromise and her decision not to allow Ismene to assume any part of the blame for burying Polynices.

Antigone

1. What is the setting of the play?

2. Why, according to Antigone, is Zeus tormenting her and her sister?

3. To whom does Antigone refer as general? Why does she use that term?

4. What exposition does Ismene provide in her opening speech?

5. What new suffering must Antigone and Ismene, endure?

6. What does Antigone plan to do? Why? What will be the consequence of this act?

7. What further exposition does Ismene provide?

28. What does the Chorus's ode—after Creon and the Guard both exit—seem to celebrate? What is the effect of this ode?

29. When the Guard returns with Antigone, what makes the reader feel that the Chorus cares for her? What are the sources of the Chorus's sympathy?

30. In what ways is the Guard a comic character?

31. Why must the Guard narrate the circumstances of Antigone's discovery and arrest? Why doesn't Sophocles dramatize them?

32. What does the Guard's description of the windstorm suggest?

33. What is Antigone's tone when she admits to being the one who buried Polynices?

34. Explain the essence of Antigone's response to Creon.

56. To whom else does Antigone compare herself? What is the basis of this comparison?

57. Does Sophocles seem to suggest that fate or free will is at the root of Antigone's suffering and death?

58. How does Antigone justify her disobedience? Would she have done the same thing for her husband or her children?

59. What is the intent of the Chorus's response to Antigone's comparison of herself with Niobe?

60. What is Antigone's attitude toward the decree of Creon? What is her only regret?

61. To what is Antigone referring when she says, "Alas, too, for my brother Polynices, who made a fatal marriage and then died—and with that death killed me while still alive"?

62. According to the Chorus, what is Antigone's downfall? How is she actually quite similar to Creon?

84. Who was Megareos?

85. What did Eurydice's do with her last breath?

86. Does Sophocles agree with Creon's assessment: "on my head fate climbs up with its overwhelming load"? Why or why not?
