

# Individual Learning Packet

## Teaching Unit

# Antigone

by Sophocles

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# Antigone

## Notes

Written in approximately 442/441 BC, Sophocles' *Antigone* dramatizes the battle of wills between Antigone and her uncle Creon, the king of Thebes. The play centers on the major conflict of what should be done with the dead body of Polynices, Antigone's brother who was killed while attacking Thebes. Creon firmly believes that Polynices should not be given burial rites because he was a traitor to Thebes, and he places an edict over the city forbidding the act, and threatens the death penalty for anyone who disobeys his order. Antigone believes that her brother deserves to be properly buried, no matter what he did. Her decision to disobey Creon's edict unleashes a dramatic series of events, leading to tragic consequences.

*Antigone* explores complex moral, religious, and political themes, such as:

- Is the safety and protection of a city more important than the basic rights of its citizens?
- Does loyalty to one's family outweigh loyalty to one's country, when the two are in conflict?
- How much control should the government have over its citizens?
- What happens when government law conflicts with religious law or moral law?
- When is civil disobedience the right course of action?

Such questions are as relevant today as they were nearly 2,500 years ago, when *Antigone* was first performed.

Along with Aeschylus and Euripides, Sophocles was one of the three major playwrights of Classical Athens. Born in approximately 496 BC, he is believed to have written over 120 plays, only seven of which are still in existence today. As well as being a dramatist, Sophocles also served as a priest, a general, and a city treasurer. He won his first dramatic competition in 468 BC, and proceeded to compete in approximately thirty more major competitions throughout his career, winning first place in about twenty-four of them. His most famous surviving plays involve the legendary tragedies of Oedipus and his family. Sometimes referred to as the Theban Plays, these three include *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. It should be noted that the three plays are not a trilogy, as many people mistakenly characterize them. They were written separately over a span of forty years, *Antigone* being the earliest one written. As a dramatist, Sophocles was concerned primarily with the suffering and tragedy of humankind. Scholars have noted that his plays are driven more by tragic characters than by tragic situations, a thought to keep in mind as you read *Antigone*.

All references come from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone edition of *Antigone*, copyright 2005.

# Antigone

## Objectives

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

1. identify the main conflict of the play and elaborate on its moral complexities.
2. compare and contrast the following characters, assessing such aspects as personality traits, behavior, motivations, values, and beliefs:
  - Antigone
  - Creon
  - Ismene
  - Haemon
  - the Chorus
3. define the role of the Chorus, and cite examples of Choral odes that expand on some of the play's themes.
4. discuss the main arguments of both Creon and Antigone, weighing the strengths and weaknesses of each one.
5. discuss Antigone's views on life and death, and explain why she is not afraid to die for her disobedience of Creon's order.
6. track Creon's progression from a reasonable man motivated by good intentions, to an irrational and stubborn man motivated by pride.
7. discuss the question of whether a compromise could be possible between Antigone and Creon, and identify a shared character trait which might impede any hope of compromise.
8. identify and discuss the ways in which Creon has violated the natural order by essentially burying a live person while, at the same time, refusing burial to a dead man.
9. identify the signs in the natural world that act as indicators that order has been upset and the gods are angry about it.
10. explain what the ancient Greeks meant by pollution, and cite images from the text which make it clear that the city has been polluted as a result of Creon's edict.
11. discuss the role of fate as it applies to Antigone and her family, as well as to Creon and his family.

# Antigone

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Explain Creon's reasons for forbidding the burial of Polynices. In your opinion, does Creon have valid reasons for the edict?
2. What reasons does Antigone give for disobeying the edict? Do you think she is justified in breaking the law? What would you have done if you were in her situation?
3. Explain Ismene's reasons for refusing to help Antigone with the burial. Why does she later decide to claim responsibility for it?
4. According to Antigone, is it more important to please the world of the living, or the world of the dead? What reasons does she give for her beliefs? Why does the threat of the death penalty fail to have an effect on her?
5. Creon and Antigone disagree about the issue of whether Polynices should receive burial rites. Can you think of a compromise that would satisfy both parties? If not, explain why a compromise between the two is impossible.
6. Although Creon and Antigone are in conflict with one another over the issue of Polynices' burial, they are similar to one another in many ways. What character traits do they share? Which shared character trait prevents each one from understanding the other's point of view?
7. Throughout the play, Antigone is often called "foolish," and, at times, she is described as "insane." Do you think that Antigone acted foolishly? Do you believe that she is insane? Why or why not?
8. What is the cause of Creon's downfall? Do you think he deserves the fate he receives? What, if anything, would you do differently if you were in Creon's position?
9. What type of people make up the Chorus? Why do you think Sophocles chose this particular group of people? In what ways might the play have been different if the Chorus had been comprised of young Theban women?
10. Throughout the play, several characters accuse Creon of tyranny—a type of government in which a single ruler holds absolute power, often suppressing the rights of the citizens. In what ways is Creon like a tyrant? Do you think he originally intended to govern like a tyrant?

**summoning** – sending for; calling upon  
**suppliant** – a beggar  
**talons** – claws  
**thrice** – three times  
**transgression** – a crime or wrongdoing  
**treading** – walking  
**tyranny** – a form of government in which a single ruler holds absolute power  
**tyrants** – cruel and oppressive rulers  
**unhallowed** – unholy; evil  
**unlamented** – not mourned over  
**unperplexed** – not confused; clear-headed  
**unswerving** – straight; direct  
**uprightly** – virtuously, morally  
**uttered** – voiced, expressed  
**valor** – courage, bravery  
**vengeance** – revenge, punishment  
**venture** – an endeavor; a task  
**villainous** – wicked  
**viper** – a snake  
**whither** – where  
**yoke** – a burden

1. As the play opens, Antigone tells her sister, Ismene, that an edict has been placed over the city of Thebes. What is this edict, and who has commanded it?

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2. What is the punishment for disobeying the edict?

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3. During her first speaking part, Ismene reveals that she and Antigone have been “robbed of our two brothers.” She says that both brothers died on the same day “by doubled hand.” What does she mean by the phrase, “by doubled hand”?

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45. Haemon tells his father that people in the city are secretly talking about Creon's treatment of Antigone. According to Haemon, what are the people saying?

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46. Haemon uses two metaphors to explain to his father that being stubborn is irrational and often harmful. What are these two metaphors? Note that one of these metaphors was used previously in the play to describe another character's stubbornness. Which other character did the metaphor refer to?

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47. During his heated argument with Haemon, Creon angrily shouts,

"Should I rule this land for myself or for others?"

What is Creon implying, and why are his words shocking and infuriating to Haemon?

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48. At one point during their exchange, Haemon uses sarcasm in a bitter response to his father, saying, "You'd be a good monarch for a desert." What does Haemon mean?

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49. Near the end of their argument, Creon forbids Haemon to marry Antigone, declaring, "You cannot marry her while alive." Haemon replies with an ominous statement, which hints at something to come later in the plot. What does Haemon say, and what literary device does his statement demonstrate?

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