

Reading Guide for Sophocles' *Antigone*

notes & questions adapted from
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Setting

The drama begins at dawn, after a night in which there has been a war in Thebes between armies led by the two sons of Oedipus. Keep in mind that the Greek theater was in the open air, and that the first performances of the day would begin at daybreak. Thus, imagine that the time of day of the setting would be identical to the performance time.

Scene before the Royal Palace (1-4)

As you read the first scene, consider the gravity of the city's condition and how aware Antigone seems of it.

1. Throughout the play, Antigone and Creon will talk much about friends and enemies. Think about what each means by these terms. In general, Antigone and Creon tend to use the same words but mean different things by them. For example, consider Antigone's reference to being a "traitor." This is a political term: does Antigone mean a traitor to the city or to something else?
2. Why does Antigone assume that Creon's order is directed against her and Ismene? When Creon appears later, consider whether his conduct and language in fact supports her assumption.
3. Do you sympathize at all with Ismene's caution? Does Antigone treat her fairly?
4. Why is Antigone so concerned with glory? Should she be?
5. How old do you think Antigone is?

Chorus (5-7)

After the initial dialogue the Chorus emerges for their first choral ode (*stasimon*), which concerns the previous night's battle.

1. Contrast the picture of Polynices drawn there with Antigone's earlier discussion of her brother; does your opinion of him, and of Antigone's position, change at all?
2. The chorus evokes Bacchus, the first of several times this god is mentioned. Why should the chorus call upon Bacchus?

Enter Creon (7- 13)

It is crucial that you do not project Creon's later conduct back into his first speech. Read this speech carefully, consider his values and beliefs, and ask yourself whether there is anything wrong with his principles, whether in Greek terms or your own. Later, compare Creon's subsequent actions with the principles he articulates here. Throughout this scene, pay close attention to the assumptions Creon makes about gender.

1. When Creon talks about the gods and the law, is he talking about the same types of gods as Antigone does?

Chorus (13-15)

Second *stasimon*, perhaps the most famous choral ode in Greek tragedy.

1. What image of man does this ode present? In this vision, what is human greatness? What are the limits of human ability and action? When can a daring man get into trouble?
2. Choral odes often generalize a given problem specific to the play's action into a statement about human life as a whole. Is that the case here? If so, then is the chorus alluding to Antigone, or to Creon, or to both?

Enter Sentinel with Antigone (15-22)

1. Why is Creon so surprised when the Sentry brings in Antigone?
2. Antigone is compared to a mother bird, not the last time she is referred to as maternal in this play. Is there anything strange or ironic about Antigone being represented as a mother?
3. Antigone's defense to Creon is important, so read it carefully. How does she state her beliefs? What strategies does she employ?
4. Ismene defends Antigone and asks Creon how he could kill his own son's bride. Has there been any reference to this relationship before?

Chorus (23-24)

Contrast this *stasimon* with the previous one.

1. Is this ode's thought and tone similar or different? What, if anything, has changed?

Enter Haemon (25-29)

1. Compare the Creon in this scene with the one who first entered the play. Has he changed at all in language or conduct?
2. To what does Haemon appeal in his attempt to save Antigone?
3. Does Haemon threaten his father, as Creon thinks?
4. Why does Creon chose the particular method of execution that he does? What does it say about him?

Chorus (29-30)

The ancient Greeks had two words for "love"; *philia*, meaning something like "friendship", and *eros*, which has more to do with passion.

1. When the chorus talks about "love" in the ode, which of the two do they mean?
2. And why is the chorus generalizing about love here?

Enter Antigone (30-35)

- Note the chorus' reference to Antigone's "bridal vault." What do they mean by referring to a wedding chamber? This will be an important image in the last part of the play. Antigone becomes a "Bride of Death" (or "Bride of Hades"). To understand the importance of this metaphor, you might benefit from reading the Hymn to Demeter, which tells the story of Demeter and Persephone.
 - Strangely, the maternal imagery continues with Antigone as well, as she tries to compare herself with Niobe. After reading about Niobe, consider what Antigone does and does not share with that mythical figure.
1. How would you characterize the chorus's exchange with Antigone here?
 2. Consider Antigone's speech (33-34). Is this speech consistent with what she has argued before?
 3. Is Antigone's faith in the gods wavering here?

Chorus (35-37)

1. Consider what these myths have in common with each other and with the play at this point.

Enter Tiresias (37-41)

1. What does the failure of Tiresias's sacrifice have to do with Polynices and Antigone?
2. What, specifically, in Tiresias's warnings leads Creon to change his mind?

Chorus (42-43)

1. Why does the chorus call on Bacchus in this ode?
2. Compare this scene to earlier references to the god.

Enter Messenger & Eurydice (44-52)

1. Why does Antigone chose to commit suicide? Does it suggest her mother's death, or is there an important difference?
2. Creon's wife is only on stage momentarily, yet she plays a key role in Creon's disaster. What does her suicide mean to him?
3. Is Creon a tragic figure? Do you feel sympathy for him at the end as someone who initially tried to do good yet was overwhelmed by circumstance, or do you believe that he is a bullying, misogynistic control-freak who gets what he deserves? Try to develop arguments for both sides. Could the play have been called *Creon*, instead?
4. Conversely, what, specifically, makes Antigone a tragic figure? Think about what, exactly, you mean by such words as "tragedy" and "tragic".