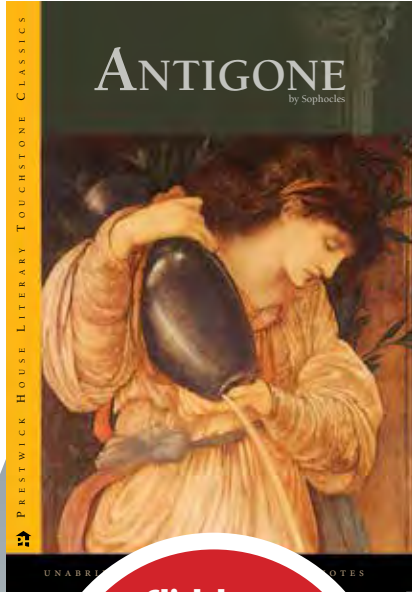




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ANTIGONE

by Sophocles



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

ANTIGONE



S o p h o c l e s



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Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Antigone has been read and performed for so many years because it raises questions that are pertinent in every age: How much power should the government have? What responsibility does a person have to act in accordance with his or her conscience? And, can the answers to both of these questions coexist with one another?

Antigone also asks what we owe to our families. Complex relationships exist between Antigone and Ismene and between Creon and Haemon. Then, too, Antigone has a relationship with the dead brother she insists on burying; she feels that Ismene betrays this dead man.

Finally, it could be said that Antigone represents feeling, even intuition, while Ismene represents reason and caution. Seen in one light, Ismene is rational and Antigone is insane; on the other hand, Ismene is weak and Antigone is strong. Whether you support one sister or the other, you will find that this is a problem with no easy solution.



Pointers

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

As you read *Antigone*, be aware of the following:

1. The conflict between civic responsibility and personal duty:

- Creon focuses exclusively on civic responsibility. He believes that a citizen's commitment to his city comes before all else; as ruler, his duty to the city is especially sacred. He says,

“...my country is
safety itself, and only when she is upright
can our sailing find friends. With laws like these
I will make our city grow.”

In the interest of Thebes, therefore, he declares that Eteocles will be buried, while Polynices will be left unburied.

- Antigone ignores civic responsibility and thinks only of the obligations to family sanctioned by traditional religion. She sees her duty to Polynices as a requirement of the gods. She breaks Creon's rule in the name of divine law, and even anticipates gaining the reputation of a “holy outlaw”:

“...could my fame be more gloriously
established than by placing my brother
in a tomb?”

2. The difficulty of resolving this conflict:

- Neither Creon nor Antigone is the hero of this play; both are inflexible, and both cause suffering by their stubbornness. Both, however, are noble characters driven by principle towards goals the Greek audience would recognize as morally good.

- Moreover, the character who advises compromise, Ismene, is no more heroic; in fact, she seems weak in comparison to her sister.

How does the conflict between two good characters with reasonable explanations for their actions make the plot more complicated than a play with a clear hero and villain?

Setting

The play begins in front of the palace of Thebes, exactly as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices, originally agreed to share their father's kingship over Thebes, but soon afterwards Eteocles claimed sole power and drove Polynices into exile. Polynices found sanctuary and support in the powerful city of Argos, so much so that the king of Argos betrothed his daughter to Polynices. After raising an Argive army which he led with six other famous heroes, Polynices marched on Thebes. Each of the city's seven gates was attacked by one of the heroes who were slain by a Theban warrior, but Polynices and Eteocles, a Theban hero, fought and slew each other. On the morning the play opens, the Argive army has just left Theban territory; the city is filled with relief. Creon, brother of Oedipus' queen, has taken the kingship without controversy.



Dramatis Personae

Dramatis Personae

ANTIGONE, *a young woman; daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta; betrothed to Haemon; niece of Creon; sister of Polynices, Eteocles, and Ismene*

ISMENE, *sister of Antigone*

CHORUS *of the old men of Thebes*

CREON, *king of Thebes; father of Haemon; uncle of Antigone and Ismene through his sister Jocasta, mother and wife of Oedipus*

GUARD *of the body of Polynices*

HAEMON, *son of Creon; betrothed to Antigone*

TIRESIAS, *blind prophet and priest of Apollo*

MESSENGER

EURYDICE, *wife of Creon*

2nd MESSENGER



Antigone

A N T I G O N E

Enter ANTIGONE and ISMENE from the palace.

ANTIGONE:

Ismene, my dear sister through common blood,
do you know of any evil from Oedipus
Zeus¹ will not perform on us who still live? ²
For I have seen nothing—nothing painful,
5 nothing mad or shameful or dishonorable—
that is not among your or my sorrows.
And now what do they say? The general³
has just put an edict over the whole city.
Have you heard it? Or have you avoided
10 learning how our friends suffer the fate of foes?

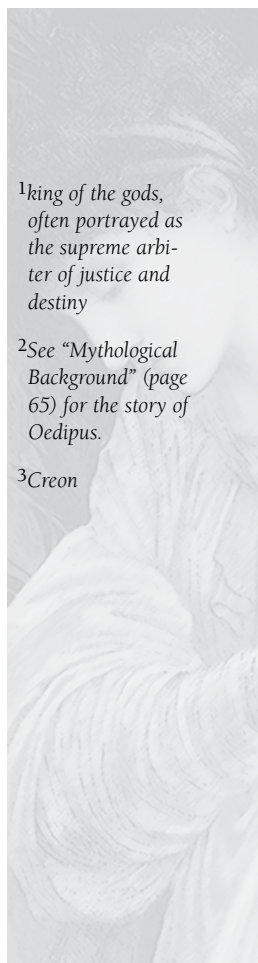
ISMENE:

No word of friends, Antigone, either
sweet or painful, has come to me since we
two sisters were robbed of our two brothers,
both dying the same day by doubled hand.
15 But since the army of the Argives
departed last night, I've seen nothing else,
either to cause me to rejoice or to weep.

¹king of the gods,
often portrayed as
the supreme arbi-
ter of justice and
destiny

²See "Mythological
Background" (page
65) for the story of
Oedipus.

³Creon



ANTIGONE:

I knew it! For this reason I brought you
outside the gates, that you alone might hear.

ISMENE:

20 What? You seem to ponder something deeply.

ANTIGONE:

Indeed! For of our two brothers, Creon
gives honorable burial to one,
but dishonors the other. They say that
he hid Eteocles beneath the earth
25 with well-deserved pomp and circumstance,
as one honored among the dead below;
but the corpse of Polynices, who died
so sadly, they say it has been declared
to the citizens that no one may bury
30 or mourn him, but must see him unlamented,
unburied, a sweet find for birds to feast upon. ⁴
Such things they say our good Creon decreed
for you and me—for me, I say!
And he is coming here to announce it
35 clearly to anyone who hasn't heard,
for he considers it no small matter,
but for the one who does any of it,
the penalty is death by public stoning.
There you have it, and soon you will show
40 how nobly you honor your noble birth.

ISMENE:

But what more, my poor girl, in times like these,
could I do that would not tangle the knot further?

ANTIGONE:

Will you share in the labor and the deed?

ISMENE:

What is the venture? Where have your thoughts
gone?

⁴See "The Importance of Burial in Greek Religion" (page 67) for information on Greek burial practices and the role of women in them.

ANTIGONE:

45 Will you lift the corpse with this very hand? ⁵

⁵Greek has many words that indicate pointing. At this point, Antigone would take Ismene's hand.

ISMENE:

You want to bury him, although it's forbidden in the city!

ANTIGONE:

I'll bury my brother—your brother, too,
though you refuse! I'll not be found a traitor.

ISMENE:

Madwoman, even when Creon forbids it?

ANTIGONE:

50 He has no right to keep me from my own.

ISMENE:

No, no! Think, my sister, how our father
died hated and infamous from offenses
self-detected, smiting both his eyes with
his very own hands. His wife and mother—
55 both words at once!—took her life with twisted noose;
then, third, our two brothers in just one day
slew each other, poor wretches, achieving
a common doom at one another's hands.
And now the two of us, left all alone—
60 think how very horribly we will die
if we go against the king's decree and strength
outside the law. Rather, consider that we
were born women, proving we should not fight with
men,
and that we are ruled by more powerful people
65 and must obey them, even in more painful things.
Therefore I ask forgiveness from those below,
as I am forced to in these matters, and yield
to those who walk with authority.
For to do excessive things is nonsense.

ANTIGONE:

70 I would not order you; and if you change your mind

Glossary

Argos – an important city in the Peloponnese (southern part) of Greece; in the 6th century BCE, Argos was one of the greatest cities in Greece. It is often considered the home of the legendary king Agamemnon, who led the Greeks in the Trojan War. By the 5th century BCE, when this play was written, Argos had faded from its leading position. It was still valuable to the Athenians, though, because it was a rival of their principal enemy, Sparta.

Birds – The Greeks thought that the gods communicated to mortals through birds. Different birds indicated different things, as did the actions of those birds. Since Tiresias is blind, he listens to the birds' cries for hints about the future, but Tiresias is an especially powerful seer and could prophesy just as well without birds.

Danae – a mortal woman beloved of Zeus; her father locked her in a room, which Zeus entered by assuming the form of a golden rain. The result of their union was the hero Perseus.

Ekkyklema – One of Athenian theatre's two 'special effects;' the *ekkyklema* was a wheeled platform which could roll out from behind the *scaena* (stage front), from inside the house that served as backdrop of the play. It was usually used to roll out bodies of characters who had died in the house (since violence was almost never shown onstage). For instance, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra, having murdered her husband Agamemnon in the bath, declares her rule of the city of Argos while the *ekkyklema* rolls out to reveal the bloody corpse of the dead king.

Eleusinian mysteries – one of the most important cults in Greece; Dionysus, along with Demeter and Persephone, was worshipped in these mysteries. Unlike standard Greek religion, the cult promised its believers salvation and paradise after death.

Gods and goddesses – Greek religion was polytheistic; the Greeks worshipped many gods. The most powerful was Zeus, the sky god, who was thought to have taken power when he overthrew his father, Cronus. After Zeus came the other Olympian deities, including Zeus' queen, Hera; his brother, Poseidon; and his children, Athena, Ares, Artemis, and Apollo. There were also other gods, older deities from the reign of Cronus who remained powerful and were considered irrational. Among these were the Furies, dread goddesses

Vocabulary

- accursed** – cursed, damned
adorned – ornamented, decorated
affirm – to confirm; to acknowledge
ally – a helper or supporter
alternative – an option or choice
anarchists – people who revolt against laws or the government; rebels
animated – active; alive
aphorism – a wise saying
appease – to satisfy or soothe
assert – to state with force
assuredly – surely, certainly
avenging – seeking revenge
barbaric – savage; hostile
barter – to trade goods or services as a method of payment
base – dishonorable; immoral
benefactor – a supporter or savior
bereft – deprived
bewailing – grieving; expressing sorrow
bile – digestive fluid
blights – plagues; diseases
blithe – carefree; unconcerned
bode – to predict or foretell
brandished – held or waved (an object) in a threatening or showy way
brood – offspring
carcass – a dead body
carion – decaying flesh
circumstance – formal display; ceremony
coadjutor – a helper or accomplice
concubine – a mistress
consistent – reliable, dependable; unchanging
contentious – belligerent, argumentative
culprit – a person guilty of a crime or wrongdoing
decreed – commanded, ordered
defiled – violated; contaminated
denounce – to condemn or criticize
descending – coming down
deviate – to stray or turn away from the norm