

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.

III. Origins of Greek Drama:

Sixth Century BCE – According to legend, **Thespis** essentially invented acting by stepping in front of the chorus and reciting a monologue. The word “thespian,” derived from Thespis’ name, has come to mean “actor.”

Fifth Century BCE – Athens made tremendous advances in philosophy, rhetoric, literature, science, architecture, and the visual arts. Tragedies were performed in an annual competition as a part of the Great Dionysia, one of Athens’ chief religious festivals, in honor of the god Dionysus.

Each playwright produced three tragedies and a satyr-play (a kind of farce intended to provide comic relief after the tragedies); all four plays were performed in a single day.

Sophocles won twenty competitions (Aeschylus thirteen, and Euripides four).

Sophocles’ “Theban plays,” *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*, while they are often anthologized together and in “chronological order,” are not a trilogy. In fact, *Antigone* was written first and *Oedipus at Colonus* last—about forty years later. Each play, therefore, should be considered a separate work, not merely episodes in a serial.

Aeschylus (525-456 BCE) – wrote the *Oresteia*, a tragic trilogy, and introduced the use of a second actor on stage, interacting with the first. He also began to develop a more complicated plot.

Sophocles (496-406 BCE) – wrote *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* and brought a third actor on stage.

IV. Conventions of the Greek Theater:

1. Use of dramatic irony – Since the audience was already familiar with the stories, taken from well-known myths, they always had more information about the action than the characters on stage did. The suspense, then, was in *how* the well-known events would transpire and in the audience’s actually watching the events unfold before their eyes in “real time.”
2. The plays were acted in the daytime, with minimal sets and props.
3. Actors were all male. They wore masks, wigs, and high-heeled boots, which increased their visibility to the audience and added to the formality of the experience.

4. To increase dramatic intensity, the plays observed three unities described by Aristotle:
 - **unity of time** – all the action of the play took place within twenty-four hours, in continuous time; dialogue and the Chorus provided background information
 - **unity of place** – all of the action was limited to a single setting
 - **unity of subject** – one single main plot focused on the main character. There were no sub-plots.
5. Due to the religious intent and dignified style, no violence was shown on stage. A messenger ran on stage and spoke to the audience of any deaths or killings.
6. A Chorus was used to present exposition and to provide commentary on the action and characters:
 - 15 to 20 men represented the citizens.
 - They were always on stage, and they frequently sang and danced.
 - They always had a leader who carried on a dialogue with the main characters or with the rest of the Chorus.

The function of the Chorus was to:

- set the tone
- give background information
- recall events of the past
- interpret and summarize events
- ask questions
- offer opinions
- give advice, if asked
- stay objective, in the sense that it did not disagree with the leading character
- act like a jury of elders or wise men who listened to the evidence in the play and reached a moralistic conclusion at the end.

The Chorus performed in song with a highly formal and stylized back-and-forth movement that heightened the emotion of their performance:

- **strophe** – the first part of a choral ode, during which the Chorus moves from left to right, or east to west, across the stage.
- **antistrophe** – the part of a choral ode that follows the strophe and during which the Chorus performs its return steps from right to left or west to east.
- **epode** – the third part of a choral ode, following the strophe and antistrophe and completing the Chorus's movement.

Often a character on stage (or characters on stage) will engage in dialogue with the Chorus. This would also be in a song called a *kommos*.

Tragedy – Greek tragedy focuses on the reversal of fortune (**peripeteia**) and downfall of the tragic hero and the events leading to that downfall. In *Antigone*, the title character experiences no peripeteia. When the play opens, she is weighted down with her family's curse and mourning the deaths of her brothers, and she never experiences a moment of good fortune or favor with the king. Creon, however, has become sole ruler of Thebes at the deaths of his nephews. Due to his stubborn insistence that *his* law be obeyed and his blindness to see that his law is in direct opposition to moral law, he loses his only surviving son and his wife and ends a broken man. This downfall is the peripeteia of the tragedy.

As Antigone refuses to compromise her moral duty to save her life, and Creon accepts the consequences of his errors, the audience learns some truth about life. The audience experiences a heightening of emotions, as they watch the hero suffer, and they identify with his problems. In the end, the audience has a **catharsis**, feeling purged or drained of their emotions, and better able to understand life.

The tragic condition is often the result of the tragic hero's **hamartia**. Often, the hamartia is defined simply as the tragic flaw, the character trait (like wrath or pride) that leads to the tragic hero's downfall. More accurately, however, the hamartia is an error in judgment or perception, the hero's inability to see his flaw or to accurately foresee the consequences of his decisions or actions. Often, the misperception is the result of a character flaw: the hero is blinded by his anger to who his friends really are; the hero's pride will not allow him to back down and avoid a fatal fight.

One common trait associated with hamartia is **hubris**.

Hubris, or **hybris**, is exaggerated self pride or self-confidence, which often results in fatal retribution.

One extremely well-known example of hubris is Achilles' dragging Hector's corpse around the wall of Troy in Homer's *Iliad*. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra hopes to bring about her husband's destruction by seducing Agamemnon to commit the act of hubris and walk a purple carpet. Of course, the most pertinent example is Creon, who first imposes a law contrary to the laws of nature and then insists on absolute and total obedience. When warned by his niece, the Chorus, and the blind prophet, Creon still refuses to yield to divine authority until it is too late.

Hubris against the gods is often the character flaw of the heroes in Greek tragedy and the cause of their destruction.

V. The Aristotelian Tragic Hero:

In his section on Tragedy in *Poetics*, Aristotle pays a good deal attention to the Tragic Hero. Aristotle's assertions formed the basis of literary thought and criticism for thousands of years afterwards, affecting how even playwrights like Shakespeare and Arthur Miller would be read. The following is a summary of Aristotle's basic ideas about the tragic hero:

1. The tragic hero is a character of noble status and greatness of character. Usually a man, the hero occupies a position of wealth, status, and power in his society, AND he must exemplify the traits of nobility and virtue as part of his innate character.
2. Though the tragic hero is great, he is not perfect. The audience must be able to sympathize with the tragic hero as a person like them, although elevated to a higher position in society.
3. The hero's downfall is partially his own fault, the result of free will. The downfall is not simply the result of accident, unfortunate fate, or another's villainy. Rather, the tragedy is triggered by some error in judgment or character flaw that is integral to the hero's imperfection. This error in judgment or character flaw is known as *hamartia*. Often the character's *hamartia* involves hubris.
4. The hero's misfortune is not wholly deserved. The punishment exceeds the crime.
5. The hero's fall, however, is not pure loss. There is some increase in awareness, some gain in self-knowledge, some discovery on the part of the tragic hero (*anagnorisis*).
6. Though it arouses solemn emotion, tragedy does not leave its audience emotionally devastated. According to Aristotle, one function of tragedy is to evoke pity and fear in the audience and, through a *catharsis* (which comes from watching the tragic hero's utter destruction), purge the audience of those emotions.

Remember that Greek drama was not considered merely entertainment but was part of community celebration and religious ritual.

VI. Antigone's Backstory:

Sophocles' audience would most likely already have known the events leading to the curse of Laius and his descendants that resulted in the tragedies of the Oedipus plays; and the playwright's intent was clearly to illustrate the conflict between fate and free will and natural and human law rather than chronicle the family saga, so he does not share the backstory with us.

Antigone's parents were the infamous and ill-fated Oedipus and Jocasta.

Oedipus' birth father (and, thus, Antigone's grandfather) was Laius.

Laius was the son of Labdacus, the King of Thebes. When Labdacus died, Laius was raised by his mother, who ruled Thebes as his regent. Two cousins (Amphion and Zethus) usurped the throne and plotted to kill young Laius, so he was smuggled out of Thebes and given to Pelops, King of Pisa, to raise.

Laius eventually became the tutor of Pelops' favorite son, Chrysippus, whom he abducted and took back to Thebes. Amphion and Zethus having died, Laius claimed his throne and kept Chrysippus captive. Pelops raised an army to demand the return of his son, but it was discovered that Chrysippus was already dead.

Because of his poor treatment of his host and his host's son, Laius and his house were cursed. When he married Jocasta, he was warned not to have children by her because his son by Jocasta would one day kill him. One night, while drunk, Laius imprudently disregarded the prophecy—some sources say Jocasta intentionally got Laius drunk—and Oedipus was conceived.

Despite all attempts to avoid the prophecy's coming true, Oedipus did eventually kill his father. He then married the widowed queen of Thebes and had several children by her. She, Oedipus, and her brother Creon ruled Thebes as a triumverate. No one knew that Oedipus was the queen's son until a famine plagued Thebes, and Oedipus sought advice from the Oracle.

In addition to Laius' curse that was fulfilled through Oedipus, an ancient Greek epic, of which only fragments survive, explains that Oedipus' sons, Polynices and Eteocles, were cursed by their father for twice showing him disrespect. On the first occasion, the brothers served Oedipus a feast using a silver table and golden goblet that had belonged to Laius, and which Oedipus had forbidden ever be used. The second occasion was the sons' presenting their father with the hip-joint of a sacrificed animal instead of the shoulder, which his status as king and father deserved. Enraged by their disrespect, Oedipus cursed the brothers that each would be killed by the other. This curse is fulfilled, of course, immediately before *Antigone* begins.

When Oedipus learned that he had indeed killed his father and married his mother, he put out his own eyes, and Jocasta killed herself. Polynices and Eteocles agreed to alternate as king. Eteocles, however, refused to give up power at the end of his year, so Polynices raised an army in the city of Argos and attacked Thebes. The Thebans successfully defended themselves against the invading forces, but the two brothers killed each other.

Eteocles was remembered as the defender of the city while Polynices was remembered as the attacker—the traitor. *Antigone* begins shortly after this battle. Ismene even comments early in the play that the Argive army has just retreated.

Creon, because he is Jocasta's brother, is the uncle of Antigone, Ismene, Eteocles, and Polynices. With his brother-in-law, sister, and nephews all dead, he is left to rule Thebes alone.