

ANTIGONE SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS LINES 1 - 525

BACKGROUND TO ANTIGONE

Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus, Greek drama's most infamous figure.

Oedipus was a king who married his own mother after killing his own father - not knowing that either were his parents. The story of *Oedipus The King*, Sophocles' most renowned work, is useful for giving us insight into Antigone's doomed lineage and should be understood prior to reading *Antigone*.

Oedipus is born of Laius and Jocasta, rulers of Thebes. Warned in a prophecy that Oedipus will grow up to murder his father and marry his mother, Laius and Jocasta arrange for his death - instructing a herdsman to kill the child. But the herdsman pities little Oedipus, and instead of killing him, passes him on to another herdsman

from a neighboring kingdom, where Oedipus is raised by the king and queen as their own.

Later in his life, Oedipus himself hears the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. He flees the new kingdom, thinking he can avoid his fate. Along the way, however, he kills a stranger, who turns out to be his father Laius, and also solves the riddle of the Sphinx, saving Thebes and becoming her king (as well as Jocasta's new husband). The terms of the prophecy are thus fulfilled. Oedipus learns this only after he has been in power in Thebes for some time. A plague begins to kill the Theban citizens, and an oracle informs the king that Thebes is being punished because Laius' murderer dwells among them. Oedipus sets out to learn the culprit's identity, and soon discovers that Laius was the stranger he killed, and worse, that Jocasta and Laius were his true parents. Jocasta is able to put the pieces of the puzzle together some time before her husband-son, and in despair she hangs herself. Oedipus, upon discovering her body, blinds himself with her broaches and leaves the city, entrusting his daughters, Antigone and Ismene, to the care of Creon (Jocasta's brother).

In the days preceding the start of the action of *Antigone*, Thebes has been torn apart by war. When Oedipus fell from grace, his sons Polyneices and Eteocles were too young to ascend to rule, and so the kingdom was entrusted to Creon, the brother of Jocasta. The brothers soon reach the suitable age to take over, but they continue to entrust rule to Creon, knowing that a curse seems to follow their family. But soon enough, they begin fighting over who will rule Thebes - Polyneices, as the older brother, believes he has the birthright, but Eteocles ousts him, which sends Polyneices looking for refuge in Argos. There he raises a powerful army, which he uses to invade Thebes -- leading to his own death and that of Eteocles. Creon ascends to the throne once more. It is at this point that the play begins...

Summary and Analysis of Lines 001-241

Antigone and **Ismene** meet at night in front of the city gates. Antigone has called her sister out for a secret meeting: she bewails their fate as daughters of a doomed mother and father and sisters of two men who have slain each other. She then informs Ismene that Creon has declared that Eteocles shall be given a full and honorable funeral, while the body of Polyneices will be left to the vultures. Anyone who tries to perform the proper funeral rites for Polyneices will be killed by public stoning.

Antigone asks Ismene to help her bury Polyneices, even though to do so would ensure both their deaths. Creon has "no right to keep me from my own" (l. 47). Ismene refuses because she says that they are women and must not fight with men - men are stronger and therefore must

be obeyed. It is not her responsibility as a woman to "aim too high, too far" (l. 67). Antigone is furious with her sister and says she would no longer welcome her help even if Ismene granted it. She also says that she will die willingly for her brother and ensure he is given a proper burial.

Ismene cannot dissuade Antigone, and she leaves to perform the burial. Antigone encourages Ismene to proclaim her flouting of Creon's action to the world - she is not afraid of death, and believes she will die with nobility. Ismene is afraid for her sister, and cannot condone her actions...but she also understands that there is something to what Antigone wants to do: "Know this; that though you are wrong to go, your friends / are right to love you" (ll. 116-7). The Chorus of Theban Elders celebrates the Theban victory over Polyneices, praising Zeus for destroying the arrogant Polyneices and ensuring that the "savage pair" dies so that the "sacred precincts" of Thebes can be free.

Creon enters and addresses the Chorus, announcing that the city is safe once again. He tells the elders that they were loyal to Laius, loyal to Oedipus, and loyal to Oedipus' sons, and that he can only hope they will be loyal to him as well.

Creon says that a ruler must not be afraid to say what's right - no matter how unpopular his views may make him. He says he will never call a man a friend who is hostile to Thebes, and that the city is their lifeboat. Thebes has no friends, but he will make sure that the city is raised high. He further explains his edict that Polyneices is not to be buried or mourned, and rather left for the birds and dogs as a spectacle of shame. Creon orders the Chorus not to side with anyone who disobeys him. The Chorus believes that no one is foolish enough to ask for death, but Creon says that hope - and bribery - have often led men to destruction.

Analysis

In her very first speech, Antigone only briefly alludes to her and her sister's circumstances, but a Greek audience would have quickly filled in the gaps created by this 'in media res' device (meaning that Sophocles begins the story 'in the middle of things'). Antigone believes that they are the final victims of the curse that follows all the members of Oedipus' family. Oedipus, Jocasta, Laius, Polyneices and Eteocles have all paid their price - and now they suffer with shame and dishonor. Sophocles, then, sets up Antigone as an 'Oedipal' hero - meaning that she is structurally the protagonist, but cursed with a tragic fate. The question, of course, is whether we as readers can determine her **tragic flaw** - that element of her character that will send her to her doom - and whether we can successfully identify her antagonist.

Summary and Analysis of Lines 242-525

The watchman arrives, clearly nervous about being the bearer of bad news to Creon. Indeed, he says that he almost didn't come for fear that Creon would project his anger about the news onto him - but then realized that if Creon heard the news from another man, he might be even more angry. Creon tells the watchman to spit it out, and the watchman says that Polyneices' body has been properly buried. The guards discovered the body - buried completely, with attention to ceremony, leaving no marks behind. There was no sign of wild animals, he says, and no dogs sniffing or tugging at the corpse. The guards began to blame each other before realizing that the only way to find the culprit would be to inform Creon. They held a lottery as to who would be the messenger of bad news, and the watchman lost.

The Chorus of Elders wonders aloud whether the gods are behind the burial. Creon is outraged, suggesting that the Elders are as stupid as they are old. He says that the gods would never have a caring thought for Polyneices - they know he is a traitor, and criminals are never honored by the gods. Creon says that money must be involved as a motivation for the burial and tells the watchman that unless he and his fellow sentries find the person who buried Polyneices, he will hang them all. The watchman insists that it is unjust to hold him responsible for the burial and soon leaves, declaring that he will flee, never to return.

The Chorus extols the nature of humans - their ability to master all beasts, to conquer land, sea, and air, to take advantage of language and mind, and to live in cities under law. The Chorus believes that man has the means to handle every need and never take steps towards the future without having the means to do so. The only thing man cannot master is Death.

The watchman enters, leading Antigone. The Chorus is aghast at the possibility that Antigone completed the burial of Polyneices, but the sentry confirms it. Creon returns, and the watchman informs him of Antigone's guilt. Creon demands details, and the watchman says that the guards uncovered the previously buried body and left it in the sun. Soon enough, they caught Antigone by her brother's side, renewing the burial. The guards caught her, and she didn't even put up a fight.

Creon asks Antigone if she did the deed, and Antigone says she will never deny her guilt. Creon dismisses the watchman and then asks Antigone, in a move that would likely spare her life, if she even knew that burying the body was forbidden. Antigone says that she did know, but she didn't believe it was a viable law. She says that she answers to Zeus, not to Creon. She further states that the gods didn't lay down these laws for human use and manipulation, and that she will endure the god's judgment of the burial, not Creon's, no matter how dire his punishment may be. Antigone adds that people who live in misery like her are better off dead.

The Chorus declares that Antigone is as unhinged as her father, but Creon says she is merely stubborn, arrogant, and boastful. If he does not punish her, then he is not a man - and indeed, Antigone would come across as the more "manly." He says that he doesn't care if Antigone is his sister's child - she and Ismene must pay for the burial. The Chorus is surprised that Creon would indict Ismene, but Creon says that they are both guilty, as they connived together over the act.

Analysis

The figure of the Watchman is something of an absurd figure here. For all the philosophizing and melodrama associated with justice and idealism, here we have a sentry who is concerned with nothing else but preserving his life - even going so far as to continually interrupt Creon to ensure that he is going to escape unscathed and that things "won't be any worse than they have to be" (236). Though at times the watchman comes across as a bit buffoonish, he does serve a very clear purpose - to remind us that the danger facing Antigone is real, and that this is not a matter of simple bargaining over principles, but rather a dire battle over a person's right to live and die in accordance with divine or mundane law.

A number of scholars argue that Creon's tragic flaw is his obstinacy - his unwillingness to change his point of view once he sets upon it, but in this section we begin to see that his flaw runs deeper. He is afflicted with a sense of self-righteousness and the idea that man is meant to interpret the gods' will through law. In other words, he believes that human-imposed law is divine, and that a citizen who serves him is, in turn, serving the gods themselves. Upon hearing

of the burial, the Chorus suggests that "the gods are behind this piece of work" (279), but Creon lashes out, demanding to know whether a criminal has ever been "honored by the gods" (287). There is, of course, circular logic in this argument, for who determines who is criminal? As the ruler of the kingdom, of course, Creon is the arbiter of who is criminal and who is not - and therefore reserves divine right for himself. Creon reserves his deepest disdain for money, which he believes is the "nastiest weed to sprout in human soil."

It seems a bit off-topic to go after money, even though he believes deeply that it is the source of bribery and therefore at the heart of the mystery of the burial, but Creon's diatribe about money gives us deeper insight into his tragic flaw. Indeed, money is ungovernable, for it falls outside the province of human law. In other words, Creon has full power over the lives of the citizens in his kingdom - the power to determine who is happy and who is not - but his power does not extend to the institution of money, which is beyond his control. Money allows for free will - and free will in turn, says Creon, ravages a city.

The Chorus' extolling of the human race is an extraordinary and quite famous passage in Greek drama. It is written as a Stasimon, and is known as the "Ode to Man." It is a fascinating piece of choral poetry that warrants analysis on its own terms - particularly its brand of implied philosophy about the evolution of man. Here Sophocles endorses a theory that says that man found his own means of survival apart from the gods - finding ways to tackle all sorts of beasts, weather, and terrain. This was a popular humanist theory of the time supported by several philosophers, but we're not quite sure of the Chorus' attitude towards it, because they seem possessed by both pride and fear. While man may have "taught himself" to handle every need through civilization, he has not conquered death - leaving him vulnerable to a mystery beyond himself. Furthermore, by allowing that man has found the means to survive and to transcend initial limitations, this theory also allows for man's potential downfall, since they are living entirely as a consequence of free will. As a result, man can "slither into wickedness" (367), or 'turn shameless' (372)...and can ultimately go wrong.

Antigone and Creon's debate has a number of fascinating implications. Antigone's argument is a rebuttal of the Chorus' "Ode to Man." She implies that man has no power over the rites to life and death - that these are functions of the gods, and that since Zeus made no announcement about the burial of Polyneices, she is free to bury him as she likes. The gods' laws live for all time, and no man can suddenly change them or manipulate the penalties surrounding them. Creon, meanwhile, sees such an attitude not as relating to the debate over the powers between man vs. god, but rather in terms of the mundane, mortal struggle between man and woman. For as long as Antigone claims to serve a higher power than Creon, according to Creon she "would be the man." Creon believes that Antigone must be killed to right the balance and ensure that no woman will ever best a man.

Indeed, he believes that as long as he stamps out this woman who serves a higher power than himself, he will ensure that man's established laws always reign supreme. Ultimately, then, the battle between Creon and Antigone can be distilled to Creon's tragic flaw: his belief in the absolute supremacy of man's law. Ultimately, he will pay the price by seeing how little control he wields over both the will of the people and the will of the gods.