

Antigone



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *Antigone*, *Oedipus, the King*, and *Medea*, the authors convey very similar messages about the importance of maintaining a balance between passion and reason. The three selections all have a general overarching theme which illustrates that allowing passion to outweigh reason results in the execution of poor judgment. Although the characters in each selection allow passion to outweigh reason in their decision-making, the characters in each situation have a moment at which they are made aware of their overly passionate response, and they are given a chance to correct the poor decisions they have made.

Finally, in each scenario the characters fail to make amends for their passionate acts, and each story ends in tragedy. *Antigone* opens by explaining in the exposition that Polynices and Eteocles, Antigone's brothers and the sons of Oedipus, have killed each other while fighting on opposite sides in a battle. We also learned that Creon, Antigone's uncle, is king (*Antigone* 633). A very upset Antigone reveals to her sister that Creon has declared that Polynices, their brother who fought against Thebes, shall not be buried because he was a traitor.

Creon has also declared that if anyone attempts to give Polynices a proper burial, that person shall be punished by death. Distraught over the thought of her brother not receiving proper burial rites, Antigone proclaims to a reluctant Ismene that she will disobey Creon's order and bury their brother—even if she has to lose her life as a result. Ismene cautions her sister against behaving so irrationally (*Antigone* 654-55). In the opening scene of *Antigone*, it is Ismene who conveys the message that to Antigone, the protagonist that

though she is upset, she must maintain a balance between passion and reason.

Ismene warns Antigone against her vehement hubris as she tries to convince Antigone not to go on her quest to defy the king's orders. At the opening of *Oedipus, the King*, the reader learns that Thebes is under a great plague. Determined to find a way to save the land, Oedipus sends Creon to an oracle to find out what he can do to save Thebes. Creon returns and reveals to Oedipus that he must find the person who killed Laius, the former king of Thebes. Determined to save his people, Oedipus vows to find the killer. However, Creon cautions Oedipus against behaving irrationally and going on a quest to find the murderer.

Instead, Creon tells Oedipus that he should focus on the problem that is at hand. Despite Creon's warning, Oedipus is determined to continue on his quest until he finds the answer (*Oedipus* 614-17). Like Antigone, Oedipus starts out on a mission that seems noble on its surface, but he becomes overwhelmed by hubris, which leads him to become preoccupied by the potential greatness he may attain if he is able to save Thebes once again by ending the plague. As a result, Oedipus begins a passionate, prideful quest to solve the great mystery of who killed Laius.

At the beginning of *Medea*, the nurse reveals in her soliloquy that Medea betrayed her father's country and helped her husband Jason bring the golden fleece back to Corinth, where she, along with her husband and their children have lived since. Jason has now taken another wife, leaving Medea feeling betrayed and distraught. She has turned away from her children and has

become violent (Medea 690-91). Medea eventually crafts a plan to kill the husband's new wife and her own children. The chorus warns Medea that she will ultimately be unhappy if she carries out her plan and kills her children (Medea 706-07).

Both the chorus and the nurse try to stress the importance of the virtue of *sophrosyne* to Medea. They show compassion and understanding for her sadness and anger, but they also try to convince her that her plans for revenge are based solely on passion, and that her thoughts are not reasonable, therefore, she should not pursue the violent desires of her impassioned heart. In each story, the protagonist refuses the wise counsel of those who warn them against acting on their excessive passion. When Antigone buries her brother, Creon eventually learns that she has disobeyed his law.

Consumed by his own passionate *hubris*, Creon is furious that Antigone has defied his authority as king, and he swears that she must die (Antigone 664-66). Here, Antigone and Creon mirror each other in their exercises of passion and pride. Though Antigone is made aware of her pride by Ismene, she nevertheless decides to disobey the law, despite her knowing that the law requires that violators be put to death. When faced by Creon, instead of seeming apologetic, or attempting to make a more humble appeal to Creon, she calls him a fool (Antigone 665).

Likewise, instead of empathizing with his niece and understanding her desire to see her brother buried, Creon insists on protecting his pride and authority, and he vows to execute Antigone. Haemon, Creon's son and Antigone's

fiance, learns that his father will execute Antigone, and he becomes furious with Creon. Despite his son's angry words, Creon refuses to rethink his decision to put Antigone to death. Both Antigone and Creon are in direct conflict with each another simply because they refuse to listen to the wise word of others and let reason outweigh passion in their thoughts and actions.

Like Antigone and Creon, Oedipus has a similar response as he is met with the benevolent pleadings of others who wish that he would abandon his prideful search. Although Creon, Jocasta, and Tiresias all attempt to make Oedipus aware of his passionate ambition by warning him to behave more reasonably, Oedipus continues to search for the person who killed Laius. His search for the killer eventually becomes a search for the truth about his parentage. Finally, Jocasta pleads with Oedipus to end his search for information that could only be detrimental to his interests.

Nevertheless, Oedipus requests that the shepherd tell him who his true parents are (Oedipus 641-43). Driven by his passionate quest to seek the answers, Oedipus refuses to listen to the sound advice and pleadings of those who wish to help him. In the beginning, of Medea, Medea is warned against her violent thoughts by the nurse, who foreshadows that something will happen to Medea's children (Medea 693). After Medea crafts her plan to kill her husband's new wife and ultimately her own children, the women of the chorus also urge Medea not to enact the evil plan, warning her that its execution will cause her even more unhappiness.

Although Medea is warned many times by others, she is determined to poison her children and her husband's new wife, so that she can ultimately

hurt her husband. Though she seems somewhat conflicted by the idea of harming her children, Medea's thoughts are overpowered by passion, and she follows through with the plan (Medea 712, 717). Another theme that spans all three reading selections is that passionate, irrational actions ultimately lead to tragedy. After the leader of the chorus makes a final plea with Creon, Creon finally recognizes that he should abide by reason over passion, and he decides to free Antigone from the burial tomb.

However, upon his arrival at the gravesite, Creon discovers that his anagnorisis has come too late as both Antigone and Haemon are found dead (Antigone 682-84). The play continues to the point of its falling action when the queen learns of what has happened to Antigone and Haemon. She quietly enters the palace, and moments later the messenger finds that she has killed herself (Antigone 686).

In the last scene, the chorus summarizes the lesson that Creon learns about pride and passion: " Wisdom is by far the greatest part of joy... The mighty words of the proud are paid in full with the mighty blows of fate and at long last will teach us wisdom. (Antigone 688). " Despite Jocasta's attempt to urge Oedipus to stop seeking information about his parentage, Oedipus calls for the shepherd to verify what he has been told about his birth. At the climax of Oedipus, Oedipus learns from the messenger that it is not only true that he killed Laius, but Oedipus also that he married his mother and had children with her. In the falling action, Jocasta kills herself, and Oedipus blinds himself.

Once the a great king who solved the Sphinx's riddle and saved Thebes, Oedipus experiences great shame in the final scene, and he declares that he wished to be driven out of Thebes (Oedipus 647). In the last scene of the play, the chorus has a final word on the outcome of Oedipus' passionate, overly ambitious quest to find all the answers: "... He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance, he rose to power, a man beyond all power. Who could behold his greatness without envy? Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him... Oedipus 632)"

Oedipus, who once had everything, lost his entire kingdom, his wife, and his children as a result of his passionate quest for yet more fame and greatness. Despite the urging of the women of the chorus and the nurse, Medea decides to execute her plan, and she kills her children. During the point of rising action, Medea calls for Jason, and she pretends to make peace with him. When Medea gives the poisoned dress to the children and tells them to present it to Jason's new wife, Jason refuses the gift. After Medea insists, the children are allowed to bring the gift into the palace, and the new wife accepts it.

The play reaches its climax when the new wife suddenly collapses after trying the dress on, and she dies instantly. In the falling action, Medea tells the chorus that she does not want the children to be punished for the murder she committed, and she rushes into the palace and kills her children with a sword. Medea ends in a scene that is very unique to the final scenes of the other two plays. After a heated confrontation with Jason, Medea rides off with the children's bodies in a chariot that is pulled by dragons.

Instead of proclaiming the tragic end to a passion-filled story, the chorus instead marvels at what has taken place: " Zeus in Olympus is the overseer of many doings. Many things the gods achieve beyond our judgment. What we thought is not confirmed and what we thought not god contrives. And so it happens in this story (Medea 720). " The authors in Antigone, Oedipus, Rex, and Medea all strive to teach a powerful lesson about letting the voice of reason prevail and the folly of continuing to be led solely by passion. In each story, the supporting characters appear to have sympathy for the protagonists in their given situations.

However, because the supporting characters all seem to have a genuine desire to help the protagonist in each story, they caution the main character against letting emotion cloud their judgment. Antigone is unique in that not only is the protagonist being led by passion, but Creon and arguably Haemon both also have a very passionate response to the conflict in the play. Like Antigone, Creon is also urged by other characters to abandon his pride and to behave reasonably. Oedipus differs from the other protagonists because his pride and passion are not his response to a wrongful act that has been committed by someone else.

Antigone's passionate response is elicited by Creon's decree against burying her brother, and Medea's vengeful act was her response to being betrayed by her husband. Oedipus, however, is reminiscent of the triumph he experiences when he solved the riddle of the Sphinx, and his passion motivates him to seek further greatness by finding Laius' killer, thereby ending the plague. Despite differences between the circumstances of each

selection, all of the plays are united by the recurring theme that excessive passion leads to pandemonium and sheer destruction.