

Opposing viewpoints
destroy the bond
between antigone
and ismene



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In Sophocles' play *Antigone*, the two sisters, Antigone and Ismene, have opposing opinions concerning which to value more – the dead or the living. Antigone places greater emphasis on her duty to honor her dead brother, Polynices, while Ismene feels that it is more important to obey the laws of the living. Their views remain unchanged throughout most of the play, and this causes tension to increase between them. Eventually, their sisterly bond is damaged by their unyielding viewpoints. Antigone feels very strongly about burying Polynices, who, because he fought against Thebes, was not given the right to a burial. Antigone's desire to bury her brother becomes an obsession that blinds her from acknowledging any other viewpoint but her own. She tries to push her sister Ismene into joining her in a secret burial by demanding, "Decide. Will you share the labor, share the work (61)?" By calling the burial practice "labor" and "work," Antigone reveals that she truly considers the burial of her brother an arduous task. She takes on the job, but only because she feels that it is the living's duty to serve the dead. When Antigone tries to convince her sister to go on with her life, although Antigone has been captured, Antigone states, "I gave myself to death, long ago, so I might serve the dead (88)." Antigone feels obligated to take care of the dead, because she views herself as a servant to them. Therefore, she was prepared to disobey the state's law and risk her own life, just to fulfill her duties to Polynices. To Antigone, burying Polynices is the most important task before her. When she finds out that Ismene has a different opinion, she accuses her sister of making "excuses (63)." Ismene's reasons for holding back from burying Polynices do not appeal to Antigone; she thinks that Ismene is simply finding any justification to discharge herself from her duties to their dead brother. Antigone's inflexibility and her disregard for her

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sister's viewpoint chip away at the relationship between the two sisters.

Ismene, in contrast to Antigone, feels an obligation to the living. She focuses more on her role in society rather than her role to Polynices. Ismene tries to talk some sense into Antigone when she states, " I, for one, I'll beg the dead to forgive me – I'm forced, I have no choice – I must obey the ones who stand in power (62)." Ismene feels a sense of responsibility to follow the rules of the living, since she is currently residing in their world. However, her subordination to the living causes her to overlook the importance of honoring the dead. It is easier for her to obey the state's authority and ask the dead for their forgiveness, because the laws of the living have more effect on her present life. She assumes that the dead will be more likely to show her mercy than those who have forbidden the burial of her brother, so she chooses to honor her duties to the living first. In trying to explain her decisions to Antigone, Ismene reasons, " Think what a death we'll die, the worst of all if we violate the laws and override the fixed decree of the throne, its power – we must be sensible (62)." Ismene knows that she will be sentenced to death if she defies the king. She fears the state's authority and the living more than the dead, since her life is at risk. She is more afraid of the consequences of defying the mortal law than the consequences of denying the dead a burial. She views her sister as irrational, because Antigone would risk her own life to honor the dead. Because of this, she does not help Antigone bury Polynices, and thus she sacrifices their sisterly bond. As the play nears its end, Antigone and Ismene begin to understand each other's separate viewpoints. Antigone openly acknowledges her sister's opinion when she tells Ismene, " Your wisdom appealed to one world – mine, another (88)." She finally realizes the value that Ismene places on life.

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Ismene, acknowledging her wrong-doings to Antigone, tells Creon, “ I share the guilt, the consequences too (86).” She finally realizes that her obligations to the living, perhaps, should not have superceded her obligations to her own sister. Both Antigone and Ismene are guilty of breaking up their bond with their separate beliefs. Their reconciliation comes too late, however, to rejoin the bonds between them or even to save Antigone from death. The two sisters’ relationship suffers, because they each are unyielding in their opinions. Antigone is more obligated to the dead and fulfilling her duties to them, because she believes that the dead have more power over her than the state’s law. Ismene believes the opposite and values the ways in which the living can affect her. Sadly, the relationship that they once shared is destroyed in the end by their opposing viewpoints and cannot be pieced back together.