

# Antigone the protagonists

Literature



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The widely held view is that Creon and Antigone represent the “ Will of man” and “ Will of God” as opposing forces. I think that there is certainly more, subtle layering to these characters than this simplistic summation. In order to fully understand this one needs to look at both the setting and background as the play unfolds. This adds entirely new dimensions to the confrontations between Antigone and Creon.

Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta. Jocasta is also her grandmother, a tale told in Oedipus Rex. Judith Butler states in her book “ Antigones claim: Kinship between Life and Death” that “ Antigone has already departed from kinship, herself the daughter of an incestuous bond, herself devoted to an impossible and death-bent incestuous love of her brother”.

Already there is new layer to Antigone. According to modern medical thinking the offspring of incestuous relationships are more likely to be born with either mental or physical defects. From what we can establish, Antigone was not physically defective but zealotry is present that perhaps indicates psychosis. Nine out of ten Anthropologists will state that the one constant social norm over the ages was the abhorrence of incestuous relationships. I am however of the opinion that Polynices actually wasn't the motivating factor but rather Antigone's desire to be free of her shackles.

Creon is the new ruler, brought about by the death of the brothers Eteocles and Polynices. He is also the guardian of Antigone and Ismene as appointed by Oedipus upon his death. Add to this that he is also Antigone's future father-in-law. He felt the need to flex his ‘ muscle’ in order to immediately

solidify his position. One wonders though why there was no feeling of kinship between himself and Antigone considering the intertwining of their lives?

One imagines the setting of the opening of the play. The sisters are still reeling from the death of their brothers.

The first eight lines conjure up a feeling that Antigone bears a lot of general resentment. Line 2 'Is there, of all the ills of Oedipus,' indicates the long-suffering nature of their lives.

Interesting to note here that she seems to attach no mortal blame but assigns it the Gods as example of their wrath or disapproval. Polytheism meant to the Greeks that there was a constellation of Gods watching them and to whom they were directly responsible. Line 8 'Our ruler has enjoined on all the state', she does not refer to him by name but rather scornfully as an entity. We already get the sense that she is less than enamored of him.

Having not persuaded Ismene to join her in burying Polynices, Antigone rejects her and sets off to do it herself. Whether she means to be caught right away or if she was planning to step forward and defy Creon openly, the intent was certainly the same. She

Wanted that opportunity to stand before him and challenge his authority.

Their first confrontation takes place when she is discovered by the guards to be burying Polynices and then is brought before Creon. He does give her a chance to either redeem herself by saying that she knew not about the edict or that she did not understand in line 488 'Didst thou not know the edicts which forbade the things thou ownest?'

She replies in an almost belligerent manner that perhaps indicates that she was ready for this moment, almost relishing the prospect of the confrontation. He asks her how dare she disobey the law and she responds with the line ‘ Yes, it was not Zeus that made the proclamation’.

Her subsequent response covers various aspects such as the supremacy of God’s law, ‘ unwritten and secure’, and then she says that she welcomes death because she has lived amongst great troubles. The tone of her speech is fierce and unyielding and evinces disapproval from the chorus who supposedly represent the society they live in. Creon is enraged and states that her boasting of the deed is another offence in itself.

Creon’s response to this is that ‘ he will never be mastered by a woman’ and in his rage summons Ismene because he is convinced that Antigone could not have done it alone.

The confrontation degenerates to a more personal level where Antigone accuses Creon of being a tyrant, which he counters with the statement that only she believes so. She then counters this with the charge that his tyranny keeps the others in fear of speaking their minds. Creon bitterly attacks Antigone and defends his manhood: line 577 “ Go then to the world below, yourself, if you/ must love. Love them. When I am alive no woman shall rule”.

In her argument with Creon, Antigone also shows more of her morbid longing for death, saying that for one who has lived as she has, death is welcome. This does not speak of an exceptionally strong person but of one that has found a purpose and now will fight until this is done. She wants to escape her life but she obviously did not want to slip into obscurity so she chose the

most inflammatory and quick way of doing so. She also provided herself with a scapegoat for all her resentments.

A cynical view perhaps but a more realistic one if we are to view Antigone as a whole person. As with any normal person our resentments are expressed in many ways, Antigone spoke of the injustice of the society she lived, the injustice of the deaths of her family and the final indignity of not even being allowed to bury a brother.

Ismene is led in and Creon accuses her of helping Antigone bury Polynices. She does try to take some of the blame but Antigone is not having any of it. Aside from not wanting her glory to be shared she does not actually want her sister to die. This shows the first real feeling she has towards anyone else. Ismene's innocence becomes clear although she is still trying to share blame. She turns to Creon and asks him if he is really willing to kill his son's wife-to-be, and Creon replies that he wants no bad wife for his child. Haemon can find another bride.

Haemon enters and at first, seems willing to submit to his father's will. I think that perhaps he thought that he could win his father over gently without loss of face on his father's part. Creon however is now in the part of tyrant and talks about the importance of having loyal sons, the foolishness of taking an evil wife, the relationship between being a good patriarch and a good ruler, the inviolability of law, the horror of disobedience to law and the need for order and discipline. All the signs of a good autocrat.

Haemon tells Creon that the people of Thebes are sympathizing with Antigone. He tries to put this forward as having Creon's best interests at

heart then suggesting that Antigone should be honored. Creon of course is now furious, not only is he being challenged by a woman but now by his own son.

He asks if his young son should advise a man Creon's age, and if the King should reward a wicked rebel. Haemon replies that the people of Thebes do not think she is wicked. Creon responds imperiously in line 794 'Should the city tell me how I am to rule them?'

Their argument becomes more heated and Haemon accuses his father of foolishness and Creon defends his rule imperiously. It gets to the stage where Creon orders that Antigone be brought out and killed in front of Haemon. Haemon says that she will not die by his side and that Creon will never see him again. Creon is at his most barbaric at this time, his love of order and state carried to an immoral extreme. He tries to use Antigone's death to hurt his own son, abusing his authority for the sake of gratuitous cruelty.