

Analysis of burial at thebes



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The opening events of the play quickly establish the central conflict. Creon has decreed that the traitor Polynices must not be given proper burial, and Antigone is the only one who will speak against this decree and insist on the sacredness of family. Whereas Antigone sees no validity in a law that disregards the duty family members owe one another, Creon's point of view is exactly opposite.

He has no use for anyone who places private ties above the common good, as he proclaims firmly to the Chorus and the audience as he revels in his victory over Polynices. Creon's first speech, which is dominated by words such as "principle," "law," "policy," and "decree," shows the extent to which Creon fixates on government and law as the supreme authority. Between Antigone and Creon there can be no compromise—they both find absolute validity in the respective loyalties they uphold.

In the struggle between Creon and Antigone, Sophocles' audience would have recognized a genuine conflict of duties and values. In their ethical philosophy, the ancient Athenians clearly recognized that conflicts can arise between two separate but valid principles, and that such situations call for practical judgment and deliberation. From the Greek point of view, both Creon's and Antigone's positions are flawed, because both oversimplify ethical life by recognizing only one kind of "good" or duty.

By oversimplifying, each ignores the fact that a conflict exists at all, or that deliberation is necessary. Moreover, both Creon and Antigone display the dangerous flaw of pride in the way they justify and carry out their decisions. Antigone admits right from the beginning that she wants to carry out the

burial because the action is “ glorious. ” Creon’s pride is that of a tyrant. He is inflexible and unyielding, unwilling throughout the play to listen to advice.

The danger of pride is that it leads both these characters to overlook their own human finitude—the limitations of their own powers. Oddly enough, the comical, lower-class messenger is the only character to exhibit the uncertainty and careful weighing of alternatives required by practical judgment. The sentry has no fixed idea of an appropriate course of action. He says that as he was coming to deliver his message, he was lost in thought, turning back and forth, pondering the consequences of what he might say and do.

The sentry’s comic wavering seems, at this point, like the only sensible way of acting in this society: unlike Creon or Antigone or even Ismene, the sentry considers the possible alternatives to his present situation. As a comic character, the sentry offsets the brutal force of Creon’s will. Whereas the conflict between Creon and Antigone is a violent clash of two opposing, forceful wills, Creon’s injustice is clearest when he promises to kill the sentry if the person responsible for Polynices’ burial is not found.

The two times the Chorus speaks in this section, it seems to side with Creon and the established power of Thebes. The Chorus’s first speech (117–179) describes the thwarted pride of the invading enemy: Zeus hates bravado and bragging. Yet this paean to the victory of Thebes through the graces of Zeus has a subtly critical edge. The Chorus’s focus on pride and the fall of the prideful comments underhandedly on the willfulness we have just seen in Antigone and will see in Creon.

Few speeches in the Oedipus plays are more swollen with self-importance than Creon's first speech, where he assumes the "awesome task of setting the city's course" and reiterates his decree against the traitor Polynices (199). The second choral ode begins on an optimistic note but becomes darker toward the end. This ode celebrates the "wonder" of man, but the Greek word for wonderful (*deinon*) has already been used twice in the play with the connotation of "horrible" or "frightening" (the messenger and Chorus use it to describe the mysterious burial of the body).

The Chorus seems to praise man for being able to accomplish whatever goal he sets his sights on—crossing the sea in winter, snaring birds and beasts, taming wild horses. But the point of the ode is that while man may be able to master nature by developing techniques to achieve his goals, man should formulate those goals by taking into consideration the "mood and mind for law," justice, and the common good. Otherwise, man becomes a monster.

In his first speech, Creon also uses imagery of mastery to describe the way he governs—he holds the "ship of state" on course (180). The logical problem with Creon's rhetoric is that maintaining the ship cannot be the ultimate good or goal in life, as he seems to think. Ships travel with some further end in mind, not for the sake of traveling. Similarly, the stability of the state may be important, but only because that stability enables the pursuit of other human goals, such as honoring family, gods, and loved ones.