

"ANTIGONE" BY SOPHOCLES

We are going to read the prologue of Antigone together. In a normal taster session we would usually read perhaps two pages together, but because we have time, and the joys of technology my students and I thought it would be really nice to read the whole of the prologue together to really get our teeth into the text. They are very excited about sharing their ideas and discussion with you.

We really hope you will find this scene really interesting and engaging, but more than that we wanted to show you how we might debate this passage in class [face to face or virtually] and how after only one year of A-Level you can pick up the skills, knowledge, confidence and enthusiasm for texts such as these.

As you watch the clip on the PowerPoint, or read through the pages following here, we think you should think about the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between Antigone and Ismene?
2. Who is Creon? And what has he done?
3. How persuasive is Antigone? Would you like her in real life?
4. Is Ismene brave or cowardly? Should Antigone ignore her advice?
5. What would you risk your life for? What sort of people do you know in the media who have risked their lives recently? Why might they be celebrated?

PROLOGUE

ANTIGONE:

My own flesh and blood – dear sister, dear Ismene,
how many griefs our father Oedipus handed down!
Do you know one, I ask you, one grief
that Zeus will not perfect for the two of us
while we still live and breathe? There's nothing, 5
no pain – our lives are pain – no private shame,
no public disgrace, nothing I haven't seen
in your griefs and mine. And now this:
an emergency decree, they say, the Commander
has just now declared for all of Thebes. 10
What, haven't you heard? Don't you see?
The doom reserved for enemies
marches on the ones we love the most.

ISMENE:

Not I, I haven't heard a word, Antigone.
Nothing of loved ones, 15
no joy or pain has come my way, not since
the two of us were robbed of our two brothers,
both gone in a day, a double blow –
not since the armies of Argos vanished,
just this very night. I know nothing more,
whether our luck's improved or ruin's still to come. 20

ANTIGONE:

I thought so. That's why I brought you out here,
past the gates, so you could hear in private.

ISMENE:

What's the matter? Trouble, clearly ...
you sound so dark, so grim. 25

ANTIGONE:

Why not? Our own brothers' burial!
Hasn't Creon graced one with all the rites,
disgraced the other? Eteocles, they say,

has been given full military honours,
rightly so—Creon has laid him in the earth 30
and he goes with glory down among the dead.
But the body of Polynices, who died miserably –
why, a city-wide proclamation, rumour has it,
forbids anyone to bury him, even mourn him.
He's to be left unwept, unburied, a lovely treasure 35
for birds that scan the field and feast to their heart's content.

Such, I hear, is the martial law our good Creon
lays down for you and me – yes, me, I tell you –
and he's coming here to alert the uninformed
in no uncertain terms, 40
and he won't treat the matter lightly
Whoever disobeys in the least will die, his doom is sealed:
stoning to death inside the city walls!
There you have it. You'll soon show what you are,
worth your breeding, Ismene, or a coward – 45
for all your royal blood.

ISMENE:

My poor sister, if things have come to this,
who am I to make or mend them, tell me,
what good am I to you?

ANTIGONE:

Decide.
Will you share the labour, share the work? 50

ISMENE:

What work, what's the risk? What do you mean?

ANTIGONE:

Will you lift up his body with these bare hands
and lower it with me?

Raising her hands.

ISMENE:

What? You'd bury him—
when a law forbids the city?

ANTIGONE:

Yes!

He is my brother and—deny it as you will—

55

your brother too.

No one will ever convict me for a traitor.

ISMENE:

So desperate, and Creon has expressly—

ANTIGONE:

No,

he has no right to keep me from my own.

ISMENE:

Oh my sister, think—

60

think how our own father died, hated,

his reputation in ruins, driven on

by the crimes he brought to light himself

to gouge out his eyes with his own hands—

then mother. . . his mother and wife, both in one,

65

mutilating her life in the twisted noose—

and last, our two brothers dead in a single day,

both shedding their own blood, poor suffering boys,

battling out their common destiny hand-to-hand.

Now look at the two of us, left so alone . . .

70

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. Remember we are women,

we're not born to contend with men. Then too,

75

we're underlings, ruled by much stronger hands,

so we must submit in this, and things still worse.

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. Why rush to extremes?

80

It's madness, madness.

ANTIGONE:

I won't insist,
no, even if you should have a change of heart,
I'd never welcome you in the labour, not with me.
So, do as you like, whatever suits you best—
I will bury him myself.

85

And even if I die in the act, that death will be a glory.
I will lie with the one I love and loved by him—
an outrage sacred to the gods! I have longer
to please the dead than please the living here:
in the kingdom down below I'll lie forever.

90

Do as you like, dishonour the laws
the gods hold in honour.

ISMENE:

I'd do them no dishonour ...
but defy the city? I have no strength for that.

ANTIGONE:

You have your excuses. I am on my way,
I will raise a mound for him, for my dear brother.

95

ISMENE:

Oh Antigone, you're so rash—I'm so afraid for you!

ANTIGONE:

Don't fear for me. Set your own life in order.

ISMENE:

Then don't, at least, blurt this out to anyone.
Keep it a secret. I'll join you in that, I promise.

ANTIGONE:

Dear god, shout it from the rooftops. I'll hate you
all the more for silence—tell the world!

100

ISMENE:

So fiery—and it ought to chill your heart.

ANTIGONE:

I know I please where I must please the most.

ISMENE:

Yes, if you can, but you're in love with impossibility.

ANTIGONE:

Very well then, once my strength gives out 105
I will be done at last.

ISMENE:

You're wrong from the start, you're off on a hopeless quest.

ANTIGONE:

If you say so, you will make me hate you,
and the hatred of the dead, by all rights,
will haunt you night and day. 110
But leave me to my own absurdity, leave me
to suffer this—dreadful thing. I will suffer
nothing as great as death without glory.

Exit to the side.

ISMENE:

Then go if you must, but rest assured,
wild, irrational as you are, my sister, 115
you are truly dear to the ones who love you.

Withdrawing to the palace.