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Teacher Guide

# DRAMA AND THEATRE

H459 For first teaching in 2016





### Antigone

by Jean Anouilh

### Summary

The opening scene (set in the royal palace in the city of Thebes) depicts all twelve characters on stage. The Chorus (played by an individual) addresses the audience, firstly introducing Antigone and predicting her fate. Antigone is described as a 'tense, sallow, wilful girl' who is going to die. He/she then proceeds to present the character of Ismene (Antigone's sister) as 'gay and beautiful' in contrast to her sister. Then the Chorus introduces Haemon (Creon's son and engaged to Antigone). Creon (the King) is described as a conscientious but weary man and Eurydice (Creon's wife) sits endlessly knitting until she dies. The Messenger and the three indifferent Guards are introduced. We are told that the Messenger 'has a premonition of catastrophe' and thus keeps apart from the others.

The Chorus then proceeds to provide the back story to the plot of the play. Oedipus had four children: Antigone, Ismene and their two brothers Eteocles and Polynices. It was agreed that when Oedipus died, the two brothers would alternate ruling over the city a year at a time. However, Eteocles refused to hand the throne over to his younger brother after a year. So Polynices attacked the city creating a state of civil war and the two brothers met in battle and killed each other in single combat. Creon then issued a decree that Eteocles should be buried with full military honours whilst the body of Polynices should be left unburied without mourning. The decree also states that anyone attempting to bury his body will be put to death.

The Chorus exits. It is dawn and Antigone enters to meet with the Nurse. The Nurse asks her where she has been as she did not sleep in her bed last night. Antigone tells her she has been out wandering and the Nurse chides her, telling her she will tell Creon. Antigone teases her by telling her she has a secret lover, but eventually she confesses that she has no other lover than Haemon.

Ismene enters looking for her sister. Antigone sends the Nurse away to make coffee. Ismene accuses Antigone of evading the point and admits they cannot bury their brother otherwise Creon will put them to death. Their confrontation sees Antigone stating it is their duty to bury Polynices but Ismene admits she is a coward. She

also reminds Antigone about Haemon and Antigone states she will go and see him. Before she leaves, Ismene promises to discuss this again with Antigone.

The Nurse re-enters and Antigone asks her to keep her 'warm and safe' and to care for her dog Puff, but if Puff mourns for Antigone then the Nurse must put her to sleep.

Haemon arrives and Antigone apologises for their argument the previous evening. He forgives her and they warmly embrace. Antigone asks him if it was a mistake on the night he chose her to marry him instead of Ismene. Haemon reassures her by telling her, 'I love you exactly as you love me. With all of myself.' Antigone tells him that she would have been very proud to have been his wife but he must walk away instantly without turning back because she will never be able to marry him. She orders him to leave her if he still loves her. There is a pause as Haemeon stares at her then he leaves.

Ismene returns, saying she cannot sleep as she is terrified that Antigone will bury Polynices. Antigone flatly replies

saying that when they met earlier, she had returned from already having burying him.

The stage is now bathed in early morning sunshine. Creon and his Page enter. The Page informs Creon that one of the Guards standing watch over the body of Polynices has arrived at the palace. The First Guard is duly summoned. In an evasive and long winded fashion, the Guard relates how, with the other two Guards, during their watch over the body, they discovered that Polynices had been covered with dirt. Creon is furious and he demands that the Guards are sworn to secrecy and must return to uncover the body. If there is another attempt to bury the body, the Guards must arrest the perpetrators and bring them straight to him. They exit.

The Chorus returns, informing the audience that, 'The spring is wound up tight.'The tragedy has begun its inevitable and irrevocable course. 'The play is on. Antigone has been caught. For the first time in her life, little Antigone is going to be able to be herself.'

The struggling Antigone is dragged on stage by the three Guards. Antigone defiantly demands that the Guards do not touch her. In turn, the Guards are in celebratory mood having caught the perpetrator.

Creon enters and reacts with surprise seeing Antigone, his niece, handcuffed to the Third Guard. He demands that she is released from her chains. Creon then proceeds to interrogate the three Guards and the First Guard tells him they witnessed Antigone frantically covering her brother's body with the earth. Creon dismisses the Guards and tells them to wait outside.

Creon questions Antigone, asking her if anyone else saw her under arrest. She replies that no one saw her. Creon informs her she will go straight to her room and he will get rid of the three Guards. Antigone tells him he is going to a lot of trouble for nothing and she will repeat her actions that very evening. Creon is taken aback and asks her why she did it. She replies that she owed it to her brother. Creon sees him as a traitor but Antigone regards him as her brother nevertheless. Creon accuses

her of regarding herself as being above the law due to her status as Oedipus' daughter. She states this is not true. She would have acted the same whatever her status and she knows that he will have to kill her.

Creon charges Antigone with the same hubric qualities as her father. He has his feet firmly planted on the ground and takes his role as King very seriously. Once again, Creon tells Antigone that she must go to her room and he will deal with things and that she will marry Haemon. She is more important as Haemon's wife.

As Antigone is leaving, he asks her where she is going. She replies telling him he knows very well where she is going. Creon tries to persuade her that if anyone, apart from the Guards finds out what she has done, it will be impossible for him to protect her. Creon accuses her of casting herself as the heroine and himself as the villain as he grabs her by the wrist. He proceeds to tell her what it is like being King and that someone had to take on the role after the death of her brothers.



Creon then earnestly tells Antigone about the story of her brothers. How they were unruly, insolent and making her parents unhappy. He relates how Polynices struck her father when he refused to pay for Polynices' gambling debts, which made Oedipus weep with anguish. He continues telling her that Polynices (as well as Eteocles) was the instigator of many assassination attempts upon her father's life. He admits the Ecteocles was as rotten as his brother but he had to make a martyr out of one of them. He also goes on to tell her that when her brothers' crushed bodies were brought in off the battlefield, he could not tell which was which so he chose the prettier of the two to have the State funeral.

Dazed by this news, Antigone gets up to go to her room, but Creon tells her to find Haemon and get married soon, so she can be happy. In return, Antigone questions the very notion of happiness, telling Creon that her inheritance as the daughter of Oedipus is to ask questions, 'to the bitter end' and she will not life her life in mediocracy.

As Creon is shouting at Antigone to shut up, Ismene enters. She now wants to help her sister bury their brother and she is prepared to die for it. Antigone refuses her and challenges Creon to call for the Guards which he does so. She cries out, 'At last, Creon!' Antigone is taken away by the Guards and Ismene leaves the stage in the opposite direction.

The Chorus demands that Antigone shall not die but Creon replies that she is determined to reject life and to die. Haemon enters, demanding that Creon stops the Guards. The Chorus tells Creon he should lock up Antigone, saying that she is mad. However, Creon replies that everyone will know that if he makes an exception in Antigone's case, it is because Haemon loves her. Creon tells his son that he must live and Antigone must die. As he leaves, Haemon tells him he cannot live without her.

The three Guards re-enter with Antigone, telling Creon that the crowds from the city are entering the palace. Antigone begs Creon to let her die and to be alone until it is all over. Creon thus orders the palace to be emptied. Antigone is left alone with the First Guard.

Antigone tells the Guard that she knows his face will be the last that she sees. She then proceeds to ask him a few personal questions about his life and he starts to tell her what it is like being a professional guard. She asks him how she is going to die and he tells her she shall be immured in a cave. Antigone asks him if she can write a letter to be handed to someone after her death but he is reluctant to do so in case he is found out. He agrees to write down the letter in his own handwriting in his notebook as Antigone dictates. He starts to write the letter but as he asks who the letter is for, a sudden roll of drums is heard and the other two Guards enter to take Antigone away.

The Chorus enters, announcing that it is now Creon's turn. However, the Messenger rushes on stage, asking where the Queen is. The Messenger then proceeds to tell the heart-breaking news. With Antigone in the cave, the final stones were being heaved into place to block up the entrance when a moaning was from heard from inside. Creon ordered for the stones to be removed and they were greeted with a piteous sight. Antigone had hanged herself and Haemon was kneeling, holding her body in his arms. As Creon entered, Haemon stood to face with his father and then struck him across the face. He then drew his sword. With father and son standing staring at each other, Haemon finally turned his sword on himself.

Creon enters stating he has laid out the two bodies of the brothers side by side. The Chorus reminds Creon of Eurydice, the Queen, his wife. He then proceeds to inform Creon that when news of her son's death reached her, she put down her knitting calmly and went to her room. There she slit her throat. The Chorus concludes that one might think she was asleep.

Creon replies saying that it must be good to sleep. The Chorus reminds him that he is now alone. Creon tells his Page never to grow up if he can help it. The clock chimes reminding them that it is five o'clock. The Page tells Creon that he has a cabinet meeting and Creon replies, 'Then we had better go along to it.'

The Chorus concludes the play addressing the audience again. He states that all those who were meant to die have died and those who survived will 'now begin to quietly to forget the dead.' He affirms that the reason for Antigone's 'fever' will never be known. The three Guards re-enter and sit on the steps playing cards. The Chorus concludes by declaring that Creon has begun to wait for his own death in the empty palace. 'Only the guards are left, and none of this matters to them. It's no skin off their noses. They go on playing cards.'



### The author and his influences

Jean Anouilh (1910–1987) was one of France's leading playwrights of the twentieth century. He was a dramatist whose writing career spanned fifty years. As well as a playwright, he also wrote theory and criticism as well as writing for the cinema and television. His writing took him away from the conventions of naturalism and realism, as he explored more artistic means of expression within his plays. He was interested in the role of the individual in society and the clash of idealism and realism within the individual. In his later plays, he was moving towards the absurdist and more existential notions of the human predicament.

Amongst his vast output of work over five decades, it is perhaps his play 'Antigone' (1942), adapted from Sophocles' classical Greek tragedy, that he is best known for. French Theatre and its many writers have consistently shown an interest in classical drama, especially Cocteau and Giraudoux.

During the German occupation of France, Anouilh continued to write in Paris but he did not take an active part in the French Resistance, unlike Camus and Satre. 'Antigone' was first performed in Paris on 6 February 1944.

At the time, the play was regarded as a contemporary political parable with Creon representing the Nazis and Antigone's rebellion the French Resistance. However, Anouilh refused to comment on this.

It is interesting to note that his plays from this period increasingly focus upon death as an idealistic possibility. Dramatic focus turns to a condemnation of life without meaning. It is also important to consider that his three plays from this period are based on classical Greek tragedies. The audience is thus placed in a position of foreknowledge, as we watch the unfolding predestination of the characters' fates. With the burden of the past hanging over his characters' lives whilst existing in a world that is far from perfect, Anouilh concerned himself with exploring the notions of moral purpose and integrity in tandem with the sense of a failure of idealism in life.

We are also able to view the characters as mythological which is often expressed with a poetic dimension and placed within a theatrical artificiality. He named these plays his 'Black Plays', where the protagonist will choose death as an active choice due to their idealism as they exist in an absurd and meaningless world.



### Exploring the play

Students will explore the creative possibilities of directing and staging Antigone. This will be assessed through a written exam but the play needs to be explored practically in lessons. Focusing on the role of the director, students will analyse and deconstruct the text and explore how any of its scenes can be staged and performed for an audience. They will analyse and interpret this performance text in depth, making decisions about which theatrical methods/devices could be used, together with the study of the relationships between the characters and how they could be realised in performance.

If time constraints permit, it might be pertinent to also explore aspects of the original version of the text by Sophocles, together with a study of classical Greek theatre conventions, many of which this modern version does not adhere to. Although it does retain allegiance to the notion of the Three Unities: Time, Place and Action.

This BBC version of Sophocles' play is an excellent interpretation with Juliet Stevenson as Antigone: It might provide a useful resource for students to watch.

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLjAYlUiAhOZ5xJhxtxojgCKFnZs5-lzCh

### Key themes

### **Tragedy**

(This theme is also linked to metatheatre and predestination.)

If we refer to Aristotle and his rules for the construction of a tragedy, is the notion of discovery present in the unfolding plot, seeing as we are told of Antigone's fate at the start of the play by the Chorus? Does this version of 'Antigone' provide us with the necessary sense of catharsis at the end of the play? Do we really feel fear and pity at the end? These points aside, it is the metatheatrical Chorus who actively promotes this theme as he/she confides with the audience about the inexorable tragedy that is now inevitably unfolding before our eyes.

In fact Antigone has sealed her fate even before the play begins as she has already committed her act of rebellion and the wheels of the tragedy machine are already beginning to slowly turn. There is no escape. It is the speech about tragedy uttered by the Chorus that provides us with the sense of the unnerving, irrevocable, 'clean and flawless' force that is leading to the inevitable death of Antigone. 'In a tragedy, nothing is in doubt and

everyone's destiny is known. That makes for tranquility.'
This is her tragedy and Anouilh has provided us with a theatrical premise that gives her ownership of her story rather than it being played out along more classical Greek conventions.

#### Metatheatre

(This theatrical premise or device is also linked to the theme of tragedy and predestination.)

Similar to conventions used by Pirandello, the Chorus presents us with the assertion that we are watching a play from the very opening. 'Well, here we are. These people are about to act out for you the story of Antigone.' So from the start, we are in a very different world to Sophocles' Antigone. The metatheatre notions are present in the dialogue throughout the play. Creon himself says to Antigone, 'You have cast me the villain in this little play of yours, and yourself the heroine.'

If we acknowledge the premise of the presence of metatheatre in the play, then Antigone's destiny is settled before the play even begins. She must die simply because she is Antigone. This is the role she has been cast in. Here she dies to be herself. She dies because Antigone has to die. That is her story. 'The play is on. Antigone has been caught. For the first time in her life, little Antigone is going to be able to be herself.'

#### Predestination

(This theme is also linked to tragedy and metatheatre.)

The visual personification of Destiny in the play is represented by Eurydice as she sits endlessly knitting. She represents a type of Clotho figure, one of the three fates who spun the threads of human lives. In the original version by Sophocles, Antigone is driven by unnerving love for her brother and due respect for the Gods. Her high moral principles will take her to her death but she will not be moved. She does not actively seek her own death but is willing to pay this price for her noble act of burying her brother as a sacred duty. Here Anouilh and the Chorus present us with the fact that Antigone is actively seeking her own death within this play. In fact, as the play progresses, she loses the credible reasoning and justifications for her act of burying her brother and is left with the admittance of the absurdity of her life itself. She does not seek divine justice unlike her classical predecessor. In fact, she confesses to the Guard that she does not know why she is dying. Antigone is seen as a character in a story, trapped within it. She cannot escape from her inevitable destiny.

#### Childhood

This theme is crucial to the understanding of Anouilh's version of the play. He introduces the character of the Nurse who is not in the original version by Sophocles. This is a major difference between the two plays. The Nurse serves to constantly remind Antigone of the lost world of her childhood, which is depicted as a happy, possibly rather sentimental world, but nevertheless an idealised world of security and innocence.

It is then significant that in order to bury her brother, Antigone used Polynices' toy shovel that they used to take to the seaside when they were children.

Creon himself harks back to Antigone's childhood but he seeks to smash her perfect and romanticised view of this old world as he presents her with the truth about her brothers when she was a little girl. 'And I imagine tormented you – pulled your pigtails, broke your dolls, whispered secrets to each other to put you in a rage.' And at the end of the play, Creon tells the Page, 'Never grow up if you can help it.'

Childhood is seen as a world of an idealised existence and Antigone has become an adult in a meaningless realm of lost innocence. She will not live her life in mediocracy. Antigone desires to assert herself in a world without meaning as she seeks her own death. I want to be sure of everything this very day; sure that everything will be as beautiful as when I was a little girl. If not, I want to die!'

## Themes as oppositions: individual versus the State, family versus the State, life versus death, youth versus old age

These themes are linked in pairs as opposites which create the dynamic tension both in the telling of the plot on stage, but also link to the interactions between the characters. Antigone is the individual who strives to stand up in opposition to the State. The theme of youth versus old age harks back to the importance of childhood as a key theme in the play. These themes relate to the differing functions of Antigone and Creon. Creon is presented as the leader whose civil duty is to restore order. His arguments against Antigone may be regarded as plausible. But Antigone's struggle to exist in an imperfect and flawed world sets herself up against him through the dynamics of these themes. Antigone is a play in which the timeless confrontation between the idealism of youth and the pragmatism of age is stated in balanced, essential and universal terms.' (H.G. McIntyre)1

As Camus stated, 'Antigone is right, but Creon is not wrong.'

McIntyre, H. G. (1981) The Theatre of Jean Anouilh. Barnes and Noble. ISBN: 978-0389201823. P51.

## Performance characteristics and staging requirements of the text

In terms of performance characteristics, the play offers a scope of choices. The play could be performed in a true naturalistic style within a naturalistic setting or students might wish to explore an epic theatre approach which would work well considering the context of when the play was first written and performed. Maybe more up to date parallels with war and occupation could be explored. The play also lends itself to more expressionistic, abstract, or stylised interpretations.

These styles can also be reflected in the staging of the play. Anouilh is fairly precise about the stage setting and groupings of the characters at the start of the play, with a grey cyclorama, semi-circular in shape which is located upstage, together with the two archways and the three tiered steps. He identifies the setting of the table, two chairs and small stool. It may be argued that this stage setting with the distinctive steps and arches is part of the play's iconic theatrical identity.

Despite this, there are many choices in the dramatic realisation and staging of this play. Two of Anouilh's plays were produced by the actor and stage manager Lugne-Poe who favoured the style to reflect the mood and the dialogue of the play.

In the original production, this abstract and simple setting was visually counterpointed by the costumes. The high status male roles wore dinner suits with white ties, whilst the female roles wore long black evening gowns apart from Ismene who wore a white evening gown. The three Guards wore black leather coats

These notions could be starting points for students to begin to develop their own ideas for their own interpretation of the play, its

performance characteristics and staging.

This trailer for a production of Antigone might be a useful stimulus for the students to consider in terms of the staging of the play:

### https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4Ou3Jl4uR4

This version of the opening speech by The Chorus (French with English subtitles) might also be useful as a visual stimulus:

https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=kCva9z0bSKw

## Common misconceptions or difficulties students may have

The main misconception is that a set text is merely regarded as a story on the page. Students will need to be able to analyse the play and be able to offer an analysis as well as a potential dramatic realisation of the play in performance. Antigone offers an imaginative challenge and many opportunities for originality of response.

Students will need to be given exploratory tasks (practical and research-based) to develop their own imaginative vision of the play in performance. Students will need to be able to undertake independent research as well as being able to work with others as they study the play. The ability to verbally communicate their ideas in response to the play and translate this understanding into writing will be a vital aspect. Students also need to be given opportunities to develop their writing to articulate their response to the text.

## How to approach essay questions in the exam

The exam paper will be asking questions about directorial decisions for the text. Students will be assessed through their knowledge and understanding of how theatre is created on stage.

A specific and accurate application of technical/specialist vocabulary will be vital together with well justified directorial realisations of the play in performance.

Students will need to have in depth knowledge of the complete text and be able to provide directorial suggestions for design as well as performance skills.



#### **Activities**

## Activity 1: Exploring the dramatic focus of the episodes in the play

The play does not follow Sophocles' original structure of the story with its prologue, episodes, stasimons and epilogue. So, for ease when studying the play, students can first break up the text into episodes which are defined by the entrances and exits of the characters.

Ask the students to give each episode a title which encapsulates the dramatic focus of the episode.

Identify three key moments (or less depending on the length) in the episode and then ask the students to create a storyboard comprising of three tableaus depicting these key moments.

Pay attention to the physical expression of the characters and their spatial relationships. Captions or a quote from a key line in the episode can be given.

This task can then be developed by using five (or more) tableaus with quotations to show the dramatic progress of the episode.

## Activity 2: Exploring non-verbal dynamics in the play

This activity works best when students are familiar with a chosen episode.

For a particular episode, have students for each character standing on the edge of the stage setting. These students will read the dialogue out loud.

Other students will play the roles in the episode but only use non-verbal expression to reflect what they are saying and how they are reacting to what the other characters in the scene are saying.

This allows us to focus on the spoken word and non-verbal expression of the episode as two separate but co-existing elements. Focus can be given to vocal range and delivery and then in turn the range of physical expression, proxemics and levels.

This work can then be refined and developed through evaluation and assessment of the effectiveness of the choices made by the students.

### Activity 3: Creation of before time scenes

Page references are from the Methuen Drama Edition of the play.

There are many references to significant events in the play that happened before the play begins. Create these scenes as improvisations which may then be rehearsed and performed. The creation of these scenes allows students to use close reference to the text to inform and justify choices/reactions, whilst their response to the text can be deepened and their interpretation of the characters be fully justified.

- Pages 10 and 26: Create the ball scene where Ismene is wearing a new evening frock and Haemon proposes to Antigone.
- Pages 25 to 28: Create the argument that Antigone and Haemon had the evening before the plays starts, when she wore Ismene's dress and rouge.

#### **Extension task:**

 Pages 15, 16, 17, 40, 52, 53: Create a scene when Antigone, Ismene, Polynices and Eteocles were children. Include the Nurse and possibly Jocasta, their mother. On the pages stated there is a range of textual evidence to be drawn upon. For example, Polynices and his toy shovel on page 40.

#### **Extension task:**

When performing these before time scenes, ask the students to freeze at key moments to ask them questions about what their character is feeling/thinking. They can be asked questions about what they are doing and why. Also ask them how they are feeling towards the other characters in the scene. Is what they are showing outwardly a true reflection of their internal attitude?

### Activity 4: Exploring staging and the actor/audience relationship in the play

Allocate each group a different staging form which allows scope for different actor/audience relationships. For example, in the round, iraverse staging, thrust staging, end-on staging and promenade staging.

The group have to plan, rehearse and perform a dramatic realisation of an episode using their given staging. This also gives students scope to explore the actor/audience relationship within the conventions of their staging using the notion of direct address.

Apart from the role of the Chorus, what opportunities are there for other characters to directly address the audience? Where are there lines of dialogue that could be delivered to the audience as a narrative commentary on the action or plot?

They need to consider:

- Entrances and exits
- Sightlines and the blocking of the episode
- Actor/audience relationships
- Direct address

After performances using these different stagings, students are asked to evaluate the potential success of the performances.

- What is the effect created by using direct address?
- What were the advantages/ disadvantages of each staging form and which might be most appropriate for a production of the play?

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