

Discussion Questions for Antigone

Questions for Close Reading, Classroom Conversation, and Seminar Discussion

ANTIGONE • DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions are designed to help students move beyond plot recall and examine the choices, conflicts, and competing obligations that make Sophocles' *Antigone* difficult and enduring. They may be used in sequence while reading the play or selected individually for class discussion, small-group work, seminar preparation, or short written responses.

For the Educator

Not every question needs to be used. A productive discussion will usually benefit from choosing a smaller number and allowing students time to support their responses with details from the play.

- Before discussion, ask students to mark one or two moments in the text that influenced their answer.
- For small groups, assign different questions and have each group report both its conclusion and the strongest disagreement within the group.
- For a seminar, require students to respond to one another rather than treating each question as a separate prompt from the teacher.
- Return to an earlier question after a major turning point and ask whether students would now answer differently.

Before Reading

1. When, if ever, is a person justified in disobeying a law? What would make such disobedience responsible rather than merely rebellious?
2. If a government regards someone as an enemy or traitor, should that judgment affect the person's right to ordinary burial or funeral rites?
3. Which obligation should normally come first when they conflict: duty to family, duty to the community, religious or moral duty, or obedience to law? Can there be a fixed rule?
4. Is changing one's mind a sign of weakness, strength, or neither? What circumstances should make a leader reconsider a decision?

The Opening Conflict: Antigone and Ismene

5. Antigone tells Ismene about Creon's decree after she has already decided what she will do. Why does she involve Ismene? Is she asking for help, testing her sister, seeking approval, or doing something else?
6. Ismene refuses to help with the burial. What seems to motivate her most: fear, realism, respect for authority, concern for Antigone, or a belief that resistance is futile?
7. How does Antigone respond to Ismene's refusal? What does that response reveal about Antigone before she ever confronts Creon?
8. Both sisters have experienced the destruction of their family. Why might the same history lead them to such different choices?
9. At this early point, which sister seems to understand their situation more clearly? What evidence supports your judgment?

Creon, the City, and the Decree

10. Creon has inherited a city just emerging from civil war. How should that situation affect our judgment of his concern with loyalty and order?
11. Why does Creon distinguish so sharply between Eteocles and Polyneices after both brothers are dead? What does he hope the different treatment of their bodies will accomplish?
12. What is the strongest argument in favor of Creon's decree? What is the strongest argument against it?
13. When the Sentry reports that someone has buried Polyneices, why is Creon so quick to suspect bribery or conspiracy? What does his reaction reveal about the way he understands opposition?
14. At what point, if any, does Creon's defense of public order begin to look more like a defense of his own authority?

Antigone and Creon Face to Face

15. Antigone admits what she has done rather than attempting to escape responsibility. How does her willingness to confess affect your judgment of her act?
16. Antigone and Creon both speak with great certainty. Are they equally inflexible, or are there important differences between their kinds of certainty?
17. Does Antigone appear to want only to fulfill an obligation to Polyneices, or does public defiance of Creon become important to her as well?

18. Creon is especially disturbed by being defied by a woman. How does this concern affect his judgment of the actual offense?
19. If Antigone had performed the burial secretly and had never been caught, would the meaning of her action be different? Why or why not?

Ismene Returns

20. Why does Ismene later try to share Antigone's guilt and punishment? Has she changed her mind, or is she responding to a new situation?
21. Why does Antigone refuse to let Ismene share responsibility? Is that refusal fair?
22. What does this second encounter between the sisters reveal about different forms of loyalty?

Haemon and Creon

23. Haemon begins his conversation with Creon respectfully. Why might Sophocles have him approach disagreement this way rather than immediately defending Antigone?
24. Haemon reports that people in Thebes sympathize with Antigone. Why is information about public opinion difficult for Creon to hear?
25. What is Haemon really arguing when he says, in effect, that a person should know how to bend? Is flexibility always wise?
26. Creon treats disagreement from his son partly as a challenge to paternal authority. How does the father-son relationship complicate what might otherwise be a political debate?
27. At what moment does their conversation stop being an attempt at persuasion and become a rupture? Could either man have prevented it?

Antigone Facing Death

28. As Antigone is led toward death, does she sound exactly like the Antigone of the opening scene? What, if anything, has changed?
29. How does Antigone understand the relationship between her suffering and her loyalty to her family?
30. Does the Chorus offer Antigone comfort, criticism, or both? How does its response affect the way we view her?
31. Does Antigone ever doubt the rightness of what she has done, or does she instead grieve the price she must pay? Why does the distinction matter?

Tiresias and the Turning Point

32. Creon has already heard objections from Antigone, Haemon, and the Chorus. Why does Tiresias succeed where the others have failed?
33. Creon initially accuses Tiresias of corruption. How does this resemble his earlier responses to unwelcome information?
34. When Creon finally decides to reverse course, has he become wiser, frightened, persuaded, or some combination of the three?
35. Why does Sophocles allow Creon to recognize his error before the final disasters occur, yet too late to prevent them?

Crisis and Consequences

36. Creon attempts to repair both parts of his decision: the treatment of Polyneices and the punishment of Antigone. What does the sequence of events suggest about whether wrong decisions can always be corrected?
37. Haemon's death transforms Creon's political decision into a personal catastrophe. Does this make Creon understand something he should have understood earlier?
38. Eurydice speaks very little, yet her death has enormous force. Why might Sophocles give her so little public argument before her final action?
39. By the end of the play, what has Creon lost besides members of his family?
40. Is Creon's suffering a punishment, a consequence, a lesson, or all three?

After Reading: Looking Back at the Whole Play

41. Who changes most over the course of the play? Who changes least? Why does that matter?
42. Which character listens most effectively to other people? Which listens least effectively?
43. Does the play ultimately vindicate Antigone, or does it leave important questions about her choices unresolved?
44. Creon is often described as the tragic figure of the play because he survives to recognize what he has done. Does that description fit your reading, or does Antigone remain the tragedy's central figure?
45. Which death in the play most clearly exposes the consequences of Creon's decision? Explain your choice.
46. If Creon had changed his decree immediately after Antigone was caught, what would have been preserved—and what conflicts would still remain unresolved?

47. What does the ending suggest about the difference between having power and having wisdom?

Synthesis and Seminar Questions

48. The play places legitimate obligations into conflict: law, family, religion, civic order, personal conscience, and political authority. Which conflict is hardest to resolve, and why?

49. Is *Antigone* primarily a play about resistance to unjust authority, or is that description too simple? What does it leave out?

50. Compare *Antigone* and Creon as people who refuse to yield. Where does the comparison illuminate the play, and where does it become misleading?

51. How much responsibility should a leader bear for consequences that he or she did not intend but was warned might occur?

52. What role does listening play in the tragedy? Identify a moment when genuine listening might have changed the outcome.

53. Sophocles gives no character complete control over events. What does the play suggest about the limits of human judgment?

54. Which question raised by *Antigone* remains most relevant outside the world of the play? Explain why.

A Closing Challenge

Choose one judgment you made about a character near the beginning of the play. Reconsider it after the ending. What changed in your judgment—and was the change caused by something the character did, something another character revealed, or a consequence you did not initially foresee?

Primary text: *Sophocles, Antigone, translated by Ian Johnston, Richer Resources Publications.*