Contents

Introduction

After two and a half millennia, Sophocles's *Antigone* still speaks to the world. It reminds us that while laws are essential to preserve social order, those laws must be just and reasonable. Sophocles pointed this out in ancient Athenian society. The story line is fairly simple. Oedipus has died and left behind two daughters and two sons. The daughters—Ismene and Antigone—are in the care of King Creon, their uncle. The sons—Eteocles and Polyneices—killed each other in a war over the throne, and Creon had Eteocles buried with full honors. Polyneices, however, by royal edict, is not to be buried at all. Antigone objects to this and rebels.

French playwright Jean Anouilh echoed this message in the context of Nazi-occupied France. His *Antigone* asks each person to consider what principles, if any, he or she is willing to stand up and perhaps die for. Socrates spoke words of truth and died rather than retract that truth. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. practiced nonviolent civil disobedience to achieve reform of unjust laws. The world has had many Antigones, and they have made a difference.

Both versions of *Antigone* also teach that all choices have consequences, that persons need to acknowledge their limitations, that the old can learn from the young, and that the strong have no right to force their will on the weak.

The Greek play's chorus extols humanity and its accomplishments. People have reason to be proud, but it is best not to be too proud; as the chorus acknowledges, humanity is powerless in the face of death. Vulnerable yet great, free yet destined, virtuous yet guilty—a human being is a paradox.

Antigone is a great choice for high school and college classrooms. Students can easily relate to the characters and issues, and the play gives rise to thoughtful discussions about relationships, laws, and individual conscience.

Teacher Notes

This unit focuses on Sophocles's *Antigone,* which is available in numerous translations, both verse and prose. The lessons do not hinge on any one version and therefore avoid direct quotations from the play. When you ask students for textual evidence to support ideas, it will necessarily be in the words in your edition of the play. Because the tragedy is so short, these references are usually not too difficult to locate. The final lesson invites comparison and contrast with Jean Anouilh's adaptation, which is set in Nazi-occupied France.

Antigone can be taught in many contexts: as a Greek play reflective of the style and literary form of the period; as a character study; as part of a theme study focusing on law and conscience; as a tragedy. It is a play with many faces and with the power to appeal to a variety of audiences, including teenagers.

The unit recommends taking time to read the play aloud in class. Lesson 1 and most of Lesson 2 are introductory; Lesson 2 also includes reading and discussion of the prologue, an encounter between the sisters Ismene and Antigone. Lesson 3 includes a discussion of structure and the parodos, after which students read the rest of the play. Subsequent lessons require an understanding of the play as a whole.

The supplementary materials include a quiz on Greek theater, useful after Lesson 1, as well as a quiz on characters and events that can help you to check comprehension after students have finished reading the play. A short-answer essay test is intended for summative evaluation, and a list of selected writing topics is also included.

Lessons address standards involving use of textual support, analysis of structure and themes, characterization, figurative language, and comparative literary studies. Answers to handouts will vary unless otherwise indicated. Students may need additional paper to complete some handouts.

Lesson 1

Introduction to Greek Theater

Objective

- To learn the origin, structure, and conventions of Greek theater

Notes to the Teacher

Depending upon the context in which you are teaching *Antigone*, you may choose to treat this lesson in a cursory manner or in detail. If the play is part of a unit on Greek literature or on the development of theater, emphasis on background may be desirable. If the play is part of a thematic unit on choice and consequence or on women in literature, then a simpler presentation would be in order.

Greek tragedy originated in religious festivals in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility, who was also associated with cycles of death and rebirth. Every spring in Athens a great festival was held in his honor, and a large group of men danced and recited poetry. Around 534 BCE, a performer named Thespis stepped out of the chorus to achieve an individual role. Gradually, the size of the chorus was reduced. The Greek tragedian Aeschylus added a second actor, and Sophocles used a third one.

Thousands of people attended theater performances. Probably at first, audiences simply sat on hillsides surrounding the performance area. Later, seating was added. For these audiences, a day at the theater was not an experience of lighthearted entertainment. It was a serious duty and an honor.

For the first procedure, you will need a picture of the Greek theater at Epidaurus, which is available at many websites and also in books about classical theater. Students research and report on background information. They then closely examine the physical structure of a Greek theater. The Teacher Resource Page provides a summary of information. The quiz on Greek theater (see the supplementary materials) can be administered after students have learned the material in this lesson.

Procedure

1. Use the Internet or a print source to show students a picture of the theater at Epidaurus. Point out the huge outdoor seating area that rises in tiers above the circular stage area. Explain that during the classical period both comedies and tragedies were performed in theaters similar to this one. Knowledge about the background can help in understanding the co

Name:

Episode 2	Ode 2
Episode 3	Ode 3
Episode 4	Ode 4
Episode 5	Ode 5
Exodos	Exodos (last line)

- **Episode 4:** Antigone, chorus, and Creon
  Antigone recounts her misfortunes; the chorus pities her but reminds her she brought ruin on herself; Creon orders her immediate entombment.
- **Episode 5:** Teiresias and Creon
  Teiresias warns of the gods' anger; Creon resists but finally reverses his decision.
- **Exodos:** Creon, chorus, Eurydice, and messengers
  A messenger tells of the deaths of Antigone and Haemon; a second messenger announces the death of Eurydice; Creon is alone and recognizes his folly. The chorus speaks last lines warning about the consequences of human arrogance.

2. Ask students the following questions.
   - Why was the guard so reluctant to tell Creon that someone buried Polyneices?

     The guard feared that he would be held responsible and punished. He seems to see Creon as a harsh taskmaster.

   - What is the relationship between Antigone and Haemon?

     They are cousins, and they are engaged to be married.

   - What seems to be Creon's main motivation until the final catastrophe?

     Creon, newly installed as king, is determined to maintain control and to be obeyed. He is full of the hubris or arrogance that the chorus mentions in their entry poem.

3. Have students complete the odes section of **Handout 6.**

Suggested Responses

- **Ode 1:** Nothing is greater than humanity; its accomplishments are many, but it cannot control death; humanity can work for good or evil; the law must be obeyed. (Note: The next lesson features an in-depth analysis of this ode.)
- **Ode 2:** Fate has cursed the House of Oedipus; pride and foolishness lead to disaster.
- **Ode 3:** The chorus sings of the power of love; father and son have been divided by love.
- **Ode 4:** The chorus sings of those who have been imprisoned; Antigone is raised to the level of heroine.
- **Ode 5:** Chorus praises Dionysus in a joyful paean.
- **Exodos:** The chorus cautions humanity to submit to the gods because pride is always punished.

6. How and to what extent does Antigone arouse pity and fear in the viewer or reader?

7. How does the metaphor of the ship of state function in the play?

8. Before her death, what does Antigone lament?

9. Teiresias and Creon are parallel characters in that both are blind. Explain their types of blindness.

10. Why do all of the deaths in the play occur offstage?