

Senior English

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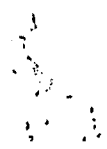
Graded Discussion # _____

In order to prepare for your graded discussion, please work to find critical quotes and craft discussion and clarification questions on the assigned reading for your graded discussion. You may use the back of this sheet if you need more space. Bring your completed prep sheet to your graded discussion. Be sure to include line numbers along with your quotes from *Antigone*.

A. Interpretive / Discussion Questions

B. Clarification Questions

C. Critical Quotes



Senior English

From "Antigone's Flaw" by Patricia M. Lines, *Humanitas*, Volume XII, November 1, 1999

Consider first the parallels between Antigone and Oedipus Rex. Both stories begin with a problem facing family and polis, and with the central character resolving to make things right. Antigone proceeds with unswerving resolution in her judgement of the situation. She possesses complete confidence in her ability to choose and execute a just action. She does not see the full situation; she is blind to key elements of the problem. She is like her father in most respects. Both Antigone and Oedipus claim to know justice with the certainty of a god. Oedipus believes most in his cunning and strength, Antigone in her goodness.

The flaw of hubris is easy to spot in Oedipus, but Antigone's brilliance is so dazzling that we overlook her flaw. After all, she has formulated a great and noble truth and maintains it with courage. She asserts God's law over man's law. Especially in our own time, where we formally recognize the superiority, within specified spheres, of individual right over the demands of overly broad laws, Antigone seems a genius beyond her time.

Creon, by contrast, understands the needs of the polis. Following a civil war, he has placed a premium on order. He will do whatever is necessary, including the stern enforcement of harsh rules. He faces another dilemma in his role as leader: he forbade the burial of Polyneices and decreed this harsh punishment before he was aware of Antigone's guilt. To pardon his future daughter-in-law as his first serious act as ruler of Thebes would compromise all future claims to fairness in his rule. Yet Creon listens to the chorus of old men; he listens to the blind seer. After struggling with the issue, he reconsiders his judgment; he determines to bury the body of Polyneices and to unbury Antigone with his own hands.

Antigone, on the other hand, recognizes the demands of true justice and champions it. She spurns Ismene, who initially hesitated to assist her but soon after wished to share in her sister's punishment and death. Antigone refuses the offer. When Ismene asks whether her sister has cast her aside, Antigone's answer ignores Ismene's change of heart: "Yes. For you chose to live when I chose death." Antigone seems to speak not to spare Ismene, but to wound her to the quick. Antigone leaves Haemon, her betrothed, in the cold, as she left Ismene. She never seeks him out, nor even mentions his name. Yet Haemon is ready to defy his father for Antigone's sake, and he refuses to live without her. Ironically, this may be what he must do to win her affection, for Antigone reveals no tenderness for anyone except those already dead.

Despite the solicitous love of Ismene and the fierce love of Haemon, Antigone complains of being alone and friendless:

I call upon Thebes' grove in the armored plain, to be my witnesses, how with no friend's mourning, by what decree I go to the fresh-made prison-tomb.

She compares her fate to Niobe's—alluding to the stone image weeping on a cliff near Thebes. Significantly, Antigone overlooks the fact that hubris destroyed Niobe. Niobe had boasted that

her six (in some versions seven) sons and six (or seven) daughters made her the equal of the goddess Leto, mother of Apollo and Artemis. Apollo and Artemis took offense on hearing of this interesting assertion of quantity over quality. They resolved the issue by killing the hapless children and turning Niobe to stone.

The chorus, often the truth-sayer for Sophocles, provides more clues. Of Antigone, they tell us:

The girl is bitter. She's her father's child.
She cannot yield to trouble; nor could he.

In perhaps the most revealing exchange, the chorus turns to Antigone and tells her, plainly:

You showed respect for the dead.
So we for you: but power
is not to be thwarted so.
Your self-sufficiency has brought you down.

The last line is key. The above quotation is from Wyckoff's translation. But all translations seem to head in the same direction: "A self-determined impulse hath undone thee" (Campbell). "You were self-willed. That has been your undoing" (Townsend). "And thee, thy stubborn mood, self-chosen, layeth low" (students of the University of Notre Dame, 1983). In any translation, it seems the chorus has identified Antigone's flaw. She follows a truth that springs only from her self. She will not consult with others. We could call it self-certainty or, perhaps even better, self-righteousness. It is a form of hubris.

At another point, the chorus tells Antigone she is "autonomos." Literally, this means "a law unto yourself." The English word autonomy does not convey quite the right meaning, as individual autonomy was a condition the Greeks viewed with discomfort and suspicion. The autonomous being is either beast or god, living only within the horizons of its own laws. Most English translators of *Antigone* do not choose to place unfavorable connotations on the word. They tend to choose softer terms to describe the self-certain heroine. The best rendering is probably from Wyckoff, who translates it as "of your own motion you go." Antigone is the lone individual, refusing to sway or be swayed by any in the community. She is *autognotos* and *autonomos*. For Antigone, both knowledge and judgment are an individual affair.

Rather than see any flaw or limitation in her own understanding, Antigone only becomes more extreme in her certainty. Those who would make her a saint should reconsider her lack of perspective:

And yet the wise will know my choice was right.
Had I had children or their father dead,
I'd let them moulder. I should not have chosen
in such a case to cross the state's decree.
What is the law that lies behind these words?
One husband gone, I might have found another,
or a child from a new man in the first child's place,

but with my parents hid away in death,
no brother, ever, could spring-up for me.

Antigone has a single mission which excludes all else. She is also fully self-centered:

Look, leaders of Thebes,
I am the last of your royal line.

These final words deny the existence of the still-living Ismene.

The movement of the drama follows that of Oedipus Rex with respect to most elements of the Aristotelian formulae. It deviates only in the continued blindness of Antigone. The stage shifts to Creon, who also suffers from hubris, or self-certainty, but who sees his error: It is difficult to identify any such clear moment of truth for Antigone. Or perhaps hamartia is not a key element of the Greek tragedy. Aristotle spoke of it only rarely (book 13: 1453a, 10, 16); nor did he emphasize the discovery of the error. On the other hand, the lyrical playwright Maxwell Anderson believes the notion is essentially correct; he believes one can find a recognition scene, if ever so subtle, "in the plays we choose to remember." Perhaps the Aristotelian formula can encompass a shift from one character to another. Or perhaps Antigone's moment comes in these words as she nears her end:

No marriage-bed, no marriage song for me,
and since no wedding, so no child to rear.

She begins to understand that she has fallen victim to her own hubris. She hints at the possibility that she may be wrong in some way.

One must acknowledge, however, that she dismisses the idea at once. She ends on a harsh and vengeful note:

But if it is the others who are wrong
I wish them no greater punishment than mine.

Our last view of her on stage comes as her guards lead her away. The chorus reminds her of three examples in which those imprisoned within the earth forbore and ultimately survived their rocky prisons. She will pay no attention to their advice. Neither forbearance nor the ability to take advice is among her virtues.

Sophocles has told the story of both father and daughter, and more than once the chorus compares the two, in particular, their temper, their stubbornness, and their individuality. Both are strong; both self-certain. Both stories construct similar tensions—between rival claims of justice; between individual and familial claims and the needs of the polis; between human striving and human weakness; between human individual conscience and human communal judgment; between seeing and blindness.

Sophocles created works that balance tensions in many dimensions. Each drama is different, of course. The tragedy of Oedipus seems unavoidable. Political deliberation would not have helped him much; the drama serves only to reveal the extent to which hubris can blind one to the truth. Antigone, on the other hand, might have avoided her tragic fate had she paid attention to and entered into discussion with others. To remain tragic, her story depended on a weak and inadequate recognition of her own failing.

While they plainly ask "what is justice?," the tragedies of Sophocles also ask the yet more difficult question, "how do we know it?" If Sophocles is right, there is something to learn from Antigone's fate. When it comes to seeing the issues surrounding our understanding of justice, Creon may have something to offer after all. He believes justice requires him to give priority to the order of the polis, overruling individual judgments based on conscience. He believes in equal application of the laws, with no exceptions for the royal family. He is at least partly wrong, by the judgment of most. Yet, he is ready to discuss the issue, to listen, to question, to entertain self-doubt. Although he believes that in a time of emergency the order of the polis may require harsh punishment for those who create disturbance, he is willing to reconsider. He listens to the chorus, to Teiresias, to others; and, although he seems adamant at times, he changes his mind. With his own hands he will unearth Antigone and bury the body of Polyneices.

Antigone, on the other hand, has found a higher justice. Most commentators agree that she is right. But she will not discuss her judgment; she remains unyielding. She never doubts the wisdom of her course. She isolates herself. She acts under the illusion that only she is able to grasp the meaning of higher justice. She can only conclude that she does not belong in this world, which so misunderstands the nature of right action.

Antigone's self-certainty and self-isolation cut short all possibilities for full deliberation. Yet full deliberation was needed to persuade Creon to change his mind. Had Antigone not isolated herself from her sister, Ismene would have stood by her side. Had she sought out Haemon, she would have had another ally. It seems likely that Eurydice, Haemon's mother and Creon's wife, would have joined the children's revolt. She did register her objection to events in the end, through suicide. Had Antigone been ready to engage in politics, Creon would find himself facing the open opposition of all whom he loved. He has the capacity, as we know from his actions in the play, to yield.

Antigone's belief that she and only she understood justice and how it must apply in the particular situation before her left her with no choice but martyrdom. If she had only some portion of self-doubt, she may have waited just a few moments before her suicide. In that event, Haemon would have rescued her. Had she waited a few moments more, Creon would have done so. A happy ending required her to consider the position of others, to adjust to their views, and to hold her individual judgment of justice with some humility. It required an Antigone who could anticipate the gradual acceptance of her position by those around her. Her self-certainty brought her down.

If all human beings suffer from short-sightedness, there is no certain source for a human grasp of truth. The best humans can do is to share insights in the hope of gaining a larger view of truth. The search for truth requires each

to talk and consult with others, even such as come short . . . in capacity, quickness and penetration; for . . . no one sees all and we generally have different prospects of the same thing according to our different . . . positions to it.

It is no accident that the author of these words, John Locke, was a leading advocate of government by consent. His remarks formalize the idea that mutual consultation is needed before formulating a vision of justice and choosing the right action for each particular case.

Antigone's flaw—the flaw of self-certainty—is the chief obstacle to this kind of deliberation. I probably do not need to draw attention to the fact that politics in our time suffers from the same flaw. True believers, religious or secular, seek to replace deliberative politics with eternal principles. Such persons admit of just one right answer. Premises are beyond questioning. Defining political questions as exclusively governed by immutable principles of right eliminates all need for further, often troublesome debate. Only the process of arriving at conclusions—whether the right principle was applied—can be questioned.

It is easy to spot Antigone's flaw in the character of an antagonist one believes to be dead wrong. The rational mind easily identifies religious fundamentalists as blinded by self-righteousness. This same rational thinker may fail to perceive his own blind spots. Antigone's flaw has a subtle quality. She has indeed discovered a great truth. We must agree with her. We must admire her. We identify with her.

Her story reminds us, however, of how difficult it is to recognize hubris in our heroes or in ourselves. Upon the discovery of a certain truth, there is a great temptation to believe one has access to all truth. To say it in traditional religious terms, it is a weakness of human beings to believe that, once they have access to one of God's truths, they know the full mind of God. From here it becomes ever so easy to mistake one's own will for the will of God.

Excerpt from *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill (3-4)

The struggle between liberty and authority is the most conspicuous feature in the portions of history with which we are earliest familiar, particularly in that of Greece, Rome, and England. But in old times this contest was between subjects, or some classes of subjects, and the government. By liberty was meant protection against the tyranny of the political rulers. The rulers were conceived (except in some of the popular governments of Greece) as in a necessarily antagonistic position to the people whom they ruled. They consisted of a governing One, or a tribe or a caste, who derived their authority from inheritance or conquest, who at all events, did not hold it at the pleasure of the governed, and whose supremacy men did not venture, perhaps did not desire, to contest, whatever precautions might be taken against its oppressive exercise. Their power was regarded as necessary, but also as highly dangerous; as a weapon which they would attempt to use against their subject, no less than against external enemies. To prevent the weaker members of the community from being preyed upon by innumerable vultures, it was needful that there should be an animal of prey stronger than the rest, commissioned to keep them down. But as the king of the vultures would be not less bent upon preying on the flock than any of the minor harpies, it was indispensable to be in a perpetual attitude of defense against his beak and claws. The aim, therefore, of patriots was to set limits to the power which the ruler should be suffered to exercise over the community; and this limitation was what they meant by liberty. It was attempted in two ways. First by obtaining a recognition of certain immunities, called political liberties or rights, which it was to be regarded as a breach of duty in the ruler to infringe, and which if he did infringe, specific resistance or general rebellion was held to be justifiable. A second and generally a later expedient was the establishment of constitutional checks by which the consent of the community, or a body of some sort, supposed to represent its interest, was made a necessary condition to some of the more important acts of the governing power. To the first of these modes of limitation, the ruling power, in most European countries, was compelled, more or less, to submit. It was not so with the second; and, to attain this, or when already in some degree possessed, to attain it more completely, became everywhere the principal object of the lovers of liberty. And so long as mankind were content to combat one enemy by another, and to be ruled by a master on condition of being guaranteed more or less efficaciously against his tyranny, they did not carry their aspirations beyond this point.

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Excerpt from Plato's *Republic*, Book I

And the different forms of government make laws democratical, aristocratical, tyrannical, with a view to their several interests; and these laws, which are made by them for their own interests, are the justice which they deliver to their subjects, and him who transgresses them they punish as a breaker of the law, and unjust. And that is what I mean when I say that in all States there is the same principle of justice, which is the interest of the government; and as the government must be supposed to have power, the only reasonable conclusion is that everywhere there is one principle of justice, which is the interest of the stronger.

Now I understand you, I said; and whether you are right or not I will try to discover. But let me remark that in defining justice you have yourself used the word "interest," which you forbade me to use. It is true, however, that in your definition of the words "of the stronger" are added.

A small addition, you must allow, he said.

Great or small, never mind about that: we must first inquire whether what you are saying is the truth. Now we are both agreed that justice is interest of some sort, but you go on to say "of the stronger"; about this addition I am not so sure, and must therefore consider further.

Proceed.

I will; and first tell me: Do you admit that it is just for subjects to obey their rulers?

I do.

But are the rulers of States absolutely infallible, or are they sometimes liable to err?

To be sure, he replied, they are liable to err.

Then in making their laws they may sometimes make them rightly, and sometime not?

True.

When they make them rightly, they make them agreeably to their interest; when they are mistaken, contrary to their interest; you admit that?

Yes.

And the laws which they make must be obeyed by their subject—and that is what you call justice?

Doubtless.

Then justice, according to your argument, is not only obedience to the interest of the stronger, but the reverse?

What is that you are saying? He asked:

I am only repeating what you are saying, I believe. . . But let us consider: Have we not admitted that the rulers may be mistaken about their own interest in what they command, and also that to obey them is justice? Has not that been admitted?

Yes.

Then you must also have acknowledged justice not to be for the interest of the stronger, when the rulers unintentionally command things to be done which are to their own injury. For it, as you say, justice is the obedience which the subject renders to their commands, in that case, O wisest or men, is there any escape from the conclusion that the weaker are commanded to do, not what is for the interest, but what is for the injury of the stronger?

Second Inaugural Address of Abraham Lincoln

SATURDAY, MARCH 4, 1865

Fellow-Countrymen:

At this second appearing to take the oath of the Presidential office there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement somewhat in detail of a course to be pursued seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself, and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it, all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to saving the Union without war, insurgent agents were in the city seeking to destroy it without war--seeking to dissolve the Union and divide effects by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war, but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish, and the war came.

One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war, while the Government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.