

# English Literature

## PHASE TWO: Exploring Tragedy

You're hopefully aware that the English Literature course revolves around exploring texts from two different genres, and that Year 12 focuses on **TRAGEDY**: probably the most influential genre in the history of Literature and one that has its origins in the drama and religious customs of Ancient Greece. For the next phase of your induction work, we're going to study a Greek tragedy to get you thinking about the origins of this genre. So, togas at the ready as we dive into the past and take a look at one of the surviving tales from this time period: Sophocles' *Antigone*. (Pro-tip: pronounce it an-ti-go-neigh rather than anti-gone in case you're chatting about this play with your friends...)

### How to get the most from your induction work:

- Don't be afraid to put a digital hand up. Treat these activities as if you were in a classroom. If there's a word or idea that you don't understand, please e-mail Mrs Cummins ([fxc@hardenhuish.wilts.sch.uk](mailto:fxc@hardenhuish.wilts.sch.uk)) to start a conversation.
- Take notes! There's lots of valuable material here and we expect our A Level students to have well-organised notes on various topics.
- This induction work has three tasks to work through and a final task to submit to Mrs Cummins via e-mail for some feedback. Don't skip the tasks! The reading, watching and thinking are needed for a decent response to that final activity.

### What work is being set?

- There are three tasks and a final outcome to complete here. You'll be watching the play *Antigone* by Sophocles, reflecting on its characters and themes as well as considering what this work can teach us about tragic stories. You'll then be asked to use your thoughts on *Antigone* to write about the tragic genre.

### How long should I spend on this work?

- It is expected that you spend five hours on this second phase of work.

### Who should I send this work to and / or who should I contact with any questions?

- Mrs Cummins – [fxc@hardenhuish.wilts.sch.uk](mailto:fxc@hardenhuish.wilts.sch.uk)

### How and when to submit

- Your work should be submitted in person on your Induction Day on Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> July. Failing that, it should be e-mailed to Mrs Cummins by the above date.

## TASK ONE: What you need to know before you watch

We're going to be watching a play called *Antigone* by a Greek dramatist called Sophocles in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Only 32 of these plays survived by only 3 playwrights, out of as many as 1,000 that we know about!

Things to know about Greek tragedies:

- They were based on the lives of mythical rulers and their families, stories that had been handed down orally through generations.
- They were written in **trilogies** that would be performed back-to-back. *Antigone* is the third and final part of probably the most important surviving trilogy, the Theban plays (we'll definitely talk about the slightly mad story of Oedipus during our course)

That means that having a useful overview of the Theban myth and the action of the play will be a useful starting point for understanding what comes next with *Antigone*.

*Here's John Green (the same guy who wrote Fault in Our Stars) discussing Tragedy and Oedipus, the first play in the trilogy and focusing on the character of Antigone's father, Oedipus. He talks at 200mph, so don't worry if you need to slow it down. If anything, it captures the chaos and wild plot twists of Greek tragedy. Have a watch of this before settling down for Antigone...*



## TASK TWO: Watching the play

To watch the play, you'll need access to the National Theatre Drama Library. In order to access this, you'll need to e-mail Mrs Cummins for a username and password (as we can't put it on the school website for hopefully obvious reasons). Once there, search for Antigone, grab some popcorn and watch the tragedy unfold. It's a 1hr 30 minute production, and it's probably best to watch it all in one go. (Side note: yes, it does feature two Doctor Whos squaring off against each other)



### AFTER YOUR FIRST WATCH...

Please answer the following questions after you've finished the play:

*How do you feel having watched the play?*

*What do you believe that Sophocles was trying to accomplish with his work? What does he want his audience to consider?*

*How do you feel towards the main characters, Antigone and Creon?*

*Could the tragedy have been avoided? How?*

*Does Creon deserve what happens at the end of the play?*

### TASK THREE: Analysing in more detail

This task asks you to look at the play in more detail, answering some questions in your notes about the specific scenes and events you've witnessed. I would watch the scenes, pause and make your notes to track your response through the play!



**Scene 1: (1.45)** *Antigone and Ismene, two daughters of Oedipus, have a secret meeting outside of the palace gates. Both of their brothers (Eteocles and Polynices) have died, leading opposite sides of the civil war that has consumed the city of Thebes.*

What does Antigone want? Do you believe she has a right to want this?

What do you admire about Antigone in this scene?

How does Ismene characterise the role of women in this scene? What does Antigone think of her position?

“Why begin when you know you can’t possibly succeed?” – that’s a good point from Ismene. Why does Antigone begin?

**Scene 2: (7.30)** *we meet the man who has made the decree that Polynices cannot receive a full religious and military burial: the new king of Thebes (and Antigone’s uncle in the rather complex Theban family tree). That’s not very Polynices, is it?*

What are your first impressions of Creon? What’s the first thing he talks about?

What does Creon see as the qualities of a good ruler?

So Creon isn’t going to allow Polynices a full and proper burial, and instead wants to make an example of him by leaving his body to rot outside the city walls. Do you agree with his perspective? Remember, his city has just been ravaged by civil war and it’s his job to reunite it.

At this stage, do you support Creon or Antigone? Does family come before your obligation to your country?



**Scene 3 (14 minutes)** *A soldier brings the news that Creon’s orders have been disobeyed and that Polynices has been buried.*

How would you characterise Creon’s reaction?

How does Creon respond to the suggestion from the Chorus that this burial may be a sign from the Gods?

Who does Creon believe buried the body, and why did they do it?



**Scene 4 (20 minutes)** *The Chorus (the group of characters often in the background) begin to offer their views. Antigone is brought before Creon to explain her actions in burying Polynices.*

OK, this is a bit weird. Now there's somebody banging on about the human condition in the middle of all of this. Welcome to **THE CHORUS!** What points do they make about man?

After this, Antigone is brought before Creon. How does she react when Creon interrogates her?

How does Antigone justify her actions?

Ismene is brought in. Why do you think she confesses to something she didn't do?

What do we learn about Creon's attitudes to women in this scene?

We learn that Antigone is betrothed to Haemon, Creon's son. How will this complicate matters further?

The scene finishes with the chorus discussing the uneasy relationship between arrogance, ambition and hope. Do you believe Antigone is an arrogant character? Is Creon?

#### **Scene 5 (37 minutes)**



*Haemon, Creon's son, enters the scene. Creon and Haemon discuss Creon's decision to condemn Antigone to death. Haemon pledges allegiance to his father despite being engaged to Antigone, but slowly tries to persuade Creon to spare Antigone. Their relationship breaks down as the scene progresses.*

"Unquestioning obedience to whomsoever the state appoints to be its ruler is the law, as far as I'm concerned. And that applies to small things as well as great ones, just or unjust, right or wrong." Creon's position seems quite extreme: is it ever OK to disobey the law? Is Creon's position too black and white?

Haemon claims to speak for the people – what does he claim that the people of Thebes think? How does he try and convince Creon to think again?

We get a really good example in this scene of **stichomythia** – rapid fire dialogue between characters (Creon and Haemon here) that often repeats words and phrases from the other. A sort of verbal tennis match or tit for tat. What does it reveal about the characters here?

What opinions do Creon and Haemon have about what the state is? Who do you side with?

Haemon leaves: should he have stayed and obeyed his father?

Creon makes his decision about the fate of Antigone: what does he choose, and why do you think he chooses this?



## Scene 6 (50 minutes)

*Antigone is brought in. She delivers a final speech proclaiming that she broke no moral law before being dragged away to her punishment: to be buried alive in a cave.*



The chorus suggest that Antigone is “free”. Do you think this is a good description of her position?

We get a key speech from Antigone, railing against her fate. Why does she ask so many questions in this speech? Why is her brother so important to her?

The chorus reflect on a key tragic concept: **fate**. They state that “man’s fate is determined, and cannot be denied.” How much of this situation is the fault of Antigone and her actions, and how much of it seems to be beyond her control and set up by the Gods?

## Scene 7 (1 hour)

*OK – this scene introduces an important character in the Theban story: Teiresias. Teiresias is a blind prophet, famous for being able to see the future.*

Teiresias has a message for Creon: what has he seen?

So Creon has had warnings from the Chorus, Antigone, Haemon and now the prophet of the Gods Teiresias. Why doesn’t he listen?

After Creon provokes him and accuses him of being in the fortune telling game for the money, Teiresias offers a prophecy: what is that prophecy? What will be the consequences of Creon disobeying religious custom?

What do the chorus advise Creon to do? What’s his response?



## Scene 8 (1 hour 15) *The terrible climax of the play unfolds.*

A messenger comes in: what has taken place in the play?

It’s a common feature of Greek drama to not depict the violence on stage – does this blunt the impact of the ending?

Aristotle (a Greek philosopher) said concerning tragedy “that the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place.” – do we feel horror and pity when we hear what has become of Haemon, Antigone and Creon?

Creon enters with the corpse of Haemon: how has his attitude changed? What has he learned, if anything?

The chorus leaves us with a message: what is it?

The National Theatre has also produced a wonderful selection of YouTube videos on the production that can further enhance your understanding of both this production and the genre of tragedy as a whole. They're embedded below!

*Here's an introduction to some of the choices made in the production you've watched...*



*Here's a video exploring the relationship between Antigone and Creon in the play.*



*Here's a video looking at the conflict between Family and State in the production...*



*And this final one looks at 'heightened language' – this is an idea that you came across in the canon work, that language in texts that are considered 'classic' or 'important' in some ways is elevated beyond our normal conversation.*



There are plenty others that could help your understanding of the play too – just typing 'Antigone National Theatre' into YouTube will get you there...



## FINAL OUTCOME: Your response to tragedy

I'd like you to write a short essay in response to one of these statements below, drawing on your experiences of watching *Antigone*. I will be looking at how well you **argue your points** (i.e. have a clear point of view and support your ideas carefully) and how well you **structure your essay** (an intro that sets out your main thoughts is a must!). I'm not looking for masses of writing from you at this stage! Aim for between one and two sides for this task. Pick one of the questions below!



1) "*Antigone* depicts a society from thousands of years ago, tied up in religious customs, outdated gender roles and a monarchy rather than a democracy. It has nothing to say to modern audiences."

To what extent do you agree?

2) "Greek drama offers little agency or power for female characters."

To what extent do you agree?

3) "There are no winners in a tragedy, only losers."

To what extent do you agree?

4) "The fact is you're both in the right, and there's a good deal to be said for either." Tragedy isn't really about who is right and who is wrong, but shows us what happens when two different types of right clash together.

To what extent do you agree?

*Antigone* is a widely studied play and as such there are lots and lots of resources that can support you if you're finding this tricky! [www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com) is a good starting place, but read around the text if you are bamboozled by all the Greek shouting. And, if you're still finding it tough, please do e-mail Mrs Cummins – he'll happily help with some planning and discussion of the play to help you generate ideas for your response. The only pity and fear you should be experiencing is from watching a tragedy, not from putting your thoughts on the page.

**Thanks all! Next up we'll be extending our work on tragedy with you selecting a text to read independently over the summer and with you tackling an extract from a tragic novel.**