

What Makes A Book A Classic?
(And Why Sophocles Never Goes Out of Style!)

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Written in 442 BCE, Sophocles' *Antigone*, the last play in the Greek playwright's Oedipus trilogy, offers us the wisdom that "the best of all possessions is good counsel" (Sophocles, 1050). Classic texts, like this one, have served as our 'counsel' for centuries, as a reminder of the universality of the human experience. Generational distance from the reader is also crucial as this serves as evidence that the piece can 'stand the test of time' and that the social commentary that the text provides may be applied to a society in any given time or place. In this way, the play chronicles the conflict between a young woman attempting to bury her brother and an authoritarian leader enforcing an edict forbidding her from doing so. *Antigone* exemplifies the quintessential 'classic' text because it offers enduring counsel about human nature and its failings, and while being over two thousand years old, the play's counsel may be easily applied to any given situation, generation after generation.

As a classic text, *Antigone* offers the reader universally applicable wisdom. In the case of this play, as the titular heroine disobeys an edict set by tyrannical King Creon, we are warned against the consequences of corruption, hubris, and ignorance. Within any political or social sphere, the mistakes that our tragic hero, Creon, makes can be considered as a guide of 'what not to do' in order to govern effectively. We can refer to Sophocles' counsel time and time again, with each reading of the play. Take for instance, Antigone's description of her fellow

citizens' reaction to Creon's dictatorial leadership, "they see, and they do not say. You have them cowed" (509). Antigone was the only citizen brave enough to defy Creon's authoritarian rule, because the other citizens were 'cowed', and thus forced into submission by Creon's tyrannical ways. Sophocles is sending a foreboding and enduring message; a democracy ceases to exist when civil dissent is no longer valued. In this vein, Haemon, Creon's son, also attempts to remind him that, "no city is property of a single man" (737). To which Creon argues, "but custom gives possession to the ruler" (736). In response, Haemon cleverly quips, "you'd rule a desert beautifully alone" (739). In this passage, Sophocles appeals to the Athenian sense of democracy, as Haemon attempts to emphasize that despite the fact that Creon holds immense power, in order to govern effectively, he must be able to consider the perspective of his citizens as well. His self-centered and stubborn attitude could only lead a nation of one— himself. Through his illustration of Creon's tyranny, Sophocles warns us against the consequences of holding one's office above the needs of one's people. Over time, our collective understanding of what makes an effective leader has governed our perception of ourselves and others, thus rendering the thematic ideas of *Antigone* continuously meaningful. While it derives from an age-old text, the guidance that this play offers is universally applicable— cementing its status as an exemplary classic text.

Generation after generation has been able to interpret and interact with this two-thousand-year-old classic text, thus suggesting that not only does it offer universal counsel, but also commentary that may be readily applied to any society. It is possible that Sophocles wrote his tragedy as an allegorical criticism of the leadership in Ancient Greece, and in doing so he was encouraging audience members to actively question the structure and governance of their

community. In being a classic text, his societal commentary can actually be applied to any given community or group. Take for instance, when the play's all-knowing seer, Teiresias attempts to remind Creon that his immoral actions are a violation of natural law, as he suggests: "why has this sickness struck against the state? / Through your decision." (1015-1015). In this case, 'sickness' is symbolic of the unrest in the state because of Creon's edict and decision to punish Antigone for going against it, a suggestion that Creon later brushes off as incorrect, despite the seer's steadfast credibility in the past. Throughout history, leaders have brushed off the advice of educated experts in favour of maintaining a continuity of their own power— take for instance, decisions that have been made during our current health crisis, as a quite literal sickness has struck our state. Similarly, Creon describes his stubborn mindset in regard to his political decisions: "If I allow disorder in my house/ I'll surely have to license it abroad" (659-660). Our stubborn king is of the belief that once he makes a decision, he cannot go back on his word because this would be perceived as weakness. Creon's understanding of leadership is so misguided that he is unwilling to be open to the perspectives of anyone other than himself. Through Creon's poor example, Sophocles emphasizes an important element of leadership; being open-minded and willing to grow and listen to the voice of others. The strongest leaders are willing to be flexible, humble, and even openly vulnerable. If certain world leaders today chose to read *Antigone*, they could learn a thing or two about how *not* to lead during a crisis. *Antigone* exemplifies a classic text rather perfectly, as Sophocles' allegorical commentary regarding the leadership in his own community lends itself well to the dysfunction in any society, in any place or time.

With each reading, classic texts, like *Antigone*, offer us counsel that is both universal and timeless. Even though the play was written over two millennia ago, its guidance about leadership feels painfully relevant today, as Sophocles reminds us upon the play's denouement: "great words by men of pride bring greater blows upon them" (1350-1351). Despite the text's chronological distance from us, as a classic, its wisdom hits close to home within contemporary context as well.

Work Cited

Sophocles. *Antigone*. Translated by Elizabeth Wyckoff. *Greek Tragedies Volume 1*, edited by Mark Griffith and Glenn W. Most, University of Chicago Press, 2013, pp. 187-240.