SOPHOCLES’ TRAGIC VISION OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

- Origins of drama: religious festivals and Homeric epics
- Tragedy, Thespis, Athens 534 B.C.: Golden Age of Pericles
- Aeschylus (Oresteia), Sophocles (496-406 B.C.), Euripides; Aristophanes (comedy)
- Democracy: Acropolis, Parthenon, Athena: Dionysus
- Amphitheatre: orchestra (dancing-place), actors, Chorus: masks, ceremonial costumes, music, dance, poetry (“total” theatre)

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1. HOMER’S COSMOS: Order/Beauty: aesthetic/primacy of Art (Odyssey, 8:579-580)
   - impersonal: not made for human fulfillment
   - three dimensions: inextricably intertwined: cosmic, political, private (family and individual) (63)
   - ambiguity: the Order is never easy for humans to comprehend (aletheia/true reality/appearance…) (119)
   - given: just ‘there’, ‘the way things are;’ no attempt to justify it rationally: ‘lots’
   - ultimate principle: the Moirai (the ‘fates’, ‘lots’, ‘shares’) that no one, not even Zeus, can transcend
   - the gods: immaterial, powerful; not perfect, benevolent
     - Zeus is identified with ‘justice’ by Sophocles’ time; but ‘justice’ is merely the given (established) order of things (65,71,91-92)
     - Zeus like all the gods is seen as the source of many of the miseries of human existence (59,92,101)
   - human excellence (arête/virtue) resides in heroism, enhanced precisely when achieved within this particular view of a harsh, ambiguous, threatening universe
   - morality is primarily a function of observing the ‘given order’: aesthetic (Odysseus is ultimately a hero of this vision of things; ‘homecoming’ (nostos) elevated to an ultimate principle and not merely a private goal)

2. THE POLIS: for the Athenian more than just a ‘city-state’: the necessary condition for living a truly human life
   - At one level: Creon is presented as the upholder/guardian of authentic humanity; Antigone as threatening the order of the Polis (67-8,94)

3. APOLLO: ‘know thyself’ and ‘balance is best’ (virtue/excellence): the human ideal

---

1 Three sisters who operated according to an inflexible law that not even the gods could transgress.
THE ANTIGONE (OEDIPUS, OEDIPUS AT COLONUS)²

1. The story (Antigone, Ismene, Eteocles, Polyneices, Creon, Euridice, Haemon; Teiresias, Messenger, Sentry, Chorus)
2. Many interpretations: Sophocles’ originality (not just retelling the ancient legend)
3. Homer’s rival offspring: tragic poets versus rationalist philosophers: two primal aspects of our humanity?
4. Rationalistic interpretations of Antigone stress specific character ‘flaws’, ‘errors’ in reasoning, claiming to find a comprehensive rational meaning for the play.
5. Others insist on the very crucial, real, irreducible ambiguity that is being presented, which precludes any satisfying rationalistic comprehension.
6. What lies beneath and beyond, the aletheia that lurks in the ambiguous realm, is impenetrable to human reasoning. Only Teiresias (not human: apolis) can ‘see’ it conclusively.
7. The three dimensions: cosmic, political, private
   - Creon claims to be the champion of the Polis (66-68).
   - Antigone claims to be the champion of the cosmic order (the laws of the gods-82).
8. An interpretation for your consideration
   - Creon is not presented as a hero pure and simple, of the Polis or otherwise. Sophocles seems to rob him of any heroism; he is exposed as a tyrant - suspicious, cruel, misogynous (73,75,83,89,97)
   - Ismene (62), Chorus (69,82,84), Sentry (79,81) are not heroic but ordinary humans; Teiresias is not truly human.
   - Antigone clearly is presented as heroic. (Heroism is not perfection.) Sophocles presents her as consistently ready to suffer for her convictions (64, 81). Creon succumbs only when personally threatened by Teiresias (117).
   - Creon, in terms of ‘know thyself’ is quite blind to his true position in the fabric of things. His role as ruler blinds him to his identity as a human with all its limitations. He mocks and challenges the gods, even Zeus. He is arrogant in his overconfidence in human reasoning (a main theme of the tragic poets: rationalistic reductionism (73, 93-6, 99). This is his basic weakness - other faults are symptoms:
     - Neither does he embody ‘balance is best’ (do things in the most excellent way). He consults with no one, follows a course of narrow, rigid rationalistic investigation (84,99), and simply imposes his power (97), not exercising true authority with any

² Sophocles wrote 126 plays; only a very few remain. The 3 plays are not a trilogy. Written at ages (ca) 55, 70, and 85. Creon is very different in each play.
collegiality\(^3\). In terms of ‘balance’ he is narrowly political at the expense of both the cosmic and the private.

- **Antigone** would seem to embody both of Apollo’s injunctions. ‘Know thyself’ meant primarily that as a human, one must give **priority to the cosmic dimension** (82), which she does. No threat of suffering causes her to divert or protect herself. Sophocles is consistent, nonetheless, in **not portraying her as perfect**. Even the hero is radically limited in this fundamentally ambiguous cosmos. He presents her as steadfast, resolute to the last. She makes no pompous claims to be the **perfect selfless** champion of the cosmic order, but admits that her motivation includes a strong dose of **family** concern as well, at times **almost superceding** her cosmic concern (81, 105).

- ‘**Balance**’ means giving due consideration to all **three** dimensions with priority to the cosmic. **Antigone** balances this with the private. Is she, however, **remiss in not giving sufficient place to the political**? Moreover, is **Creon** actually a **hero who is merely blind to the cosmic dimension**?

- Perhaps the search for **answers** will take us back to the basic fabric of Homer’s universe still operative for Sophocles: radical ambiguity, the **practical impossibility**, given human limitation, to penetrate to any conclusive ‘balance’. Perhaps what the poet is telling us is that this is an **irreducible aspect of our existential human condition**.

- Consider the celebrated ‘**Ode to Man**’ (76-7. See 92 as context for this ode). Man does awesome things/ has awesome powers, but inevitably hits upon the wall of his radical limitation. Man is the **strange**, the **terrible**, the **awesome** (not the **wonderful**: Heidegger: deinon; deinotaton), who flushes out (aletheia) basic aspects of the Cosmos, but is radically limited in the final analysis. **Ambiguity is inescapable, woven into the very fabric of human life. How might this apply to Antigone / Creon?**

- **Antigone** is vindicated by **Teiresias** as the true benefactor of the Polis (she simply refuses Creon’s abusive ‘law’:84). Her heroism is “as good as it gets.”

- **Creon** is the ‘villain’ and yet Sophocles contextualizes this within the framework of **tragic ambiguity**. He has been a hero of the polis but has not been able to ‘see’ all **three dimensions**. **Blindness not wickedness** is his existential condition (119, 123, 127-129).

**Conclusion:** what is human life all about in this ‘**tragic**’ perspective?

- **A dramatic and challenging quest for excellence in the face of mediocrity**: to be a ‘somebody’ and not a ‘nobody’: both Antigone and Creon are ‘heroic’ in this sense

- **This does not guarantee ‘success’**: on the contrary, both end up in misery

---

\(^3\) Compare **Oedipus** who consults Apollo, Creon, Teiresias, Iocasta, the Chorus (he yields to them), and the two shepherds.
• Creon has protected the polis in the past (119); his downfall is not a simple moralistic one but aesthetic: a failure to ‘see’ the balance, the aletheia; he has been ‘one-eyed’, readily admits it, and assumes responsibility on that basis - not on grounds of wickedness (126-127 and 123, line1372)
• Antigone has better ‘sight’ but this is not sufficient to secure a ‘happy ending’
• The human seeks excellence and rationality but the universe is perceived as anything but that: the play is replete with somber (macabre) reference to the malevolent, irrational forces that govern human life (59,91,92,106-7)
• We are to seek excellence but not to expect reward or success (extrinsic)
• ‘Heroism’ is its own reward (intrinsic); the worst is to die without glory (64)
• In such a vision of things human potential for ‘heroism’ (excellence) assumes elevated status: the price of human dignity / grandeur is staggering
• This is the stuff of some enduring philosophies of life ( Nietzsche/modern atheistic existentialism…Prometheus, Sisyphus as icons of heroes who are not rewarded…)
• Is this just romantic idealism, is it the substance of whatever greatness and progress the human species have achieved throughout history, or… (what do you think) …?

FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE ‘TRAGIC’

  o With respect to the ‘comic’ in human life: no hope/ no despair: dignity/ grandeur  
  o Through Suffering Insight: the centrality and importance of suffering (for the characters and the audience): maturity, humanization, wisdom (128)  
  o Man: free and determined: ambiguity as complexity/ richness (126-7)  
  o Tragic choice: no-win situations/decisions (both Antigone and Creon)  
  o The Peloponnesian War as context: two radical responses: Homer’s rival offspring
    • The philosophers: a question of social reform and education: virtue is knowledge (Socrates): rational justice is possible
    • The tragic interpretation: war, human misery, corruption, injustice… are inevitable because of the very nature of things, including (Thucydides) human nature itself (lust for power, greed, envy…)
  o POETIC INSIGHT versus RATIONALISTIC ANALYSIS: need we choose?

[A final note: some scholars have attempted to interpret Antigone and other tragedies within the context solely of the Persian and Peloponnesian wars. Interesting as that may be, this is open to the similar criticism that like the philosophers, this misses the ‘tragic vision’ at the poetic heart of the plays. Great literature reflects the times but is not reducible to the concerns of the scholar / historian.]

Note: numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers in your text (Sophocles, The Three Theban Plays, translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin Books)
SOURCE TEXTS

1. ANTIGONE:
My own flesh and blood- dear sister, dear Ismene, how many griefs our father Oedipus handed down! Do you know one, I ask you, one grief that Zeus will not perfect for the two of us while we still live and breathe? There’s nothing, no pain-our lives are pain- no private shame, no public disgrace, nothing I haven’t seen in your griefs and mine. And now this: an emergency decree, they say, the Commander has just now declared for all of Thebes. What, haven’t you heard? Don’t you see? The doom reserved for enemies marches on the ones we love the most. (p59)

2. CHORUS:
Blest, they are the truly blest who all their lives have never tasted devastation. For others, once the gods have rocked a house to its foundations the ruin will never cease, cresting on and on form one generation on throughout the race…

…and one generation cannot free the next- some god will bring them crashing down, the race finds no release. And now the light, the hope springing up from the late last root in the house of Oedipus, the hope’s cut down in turn by the long, bloody knife swung by the gods of death by a senseless word by fury at the heart. (p91)

3. (Zeus) your law prevails: no towering form of greatness enters into the lives of mortals free and clear of ruin. True, our dreams, our high hopes voyaging far and wide bring sheer delight to many, to many others delusion, blithe, mindless lusts and the fraud steals on one slowly… unaware till he trips and puts his foot in the fire. He was a wise old man who coined the famous saying: “Sooner or later foul is fair, fair is foul to the man the gods will ruin”- He goes his way for a moment only free of blinding ruin. (p92)

4. ANTIGONE:
Of course I did. It wasn’t Zeus, not in the least, who made this proclamation- not to me. Nor did that Justice, dwelling with the gods beneath the earth, ordain such laws for men. Nor did I think your edict had such force that you, a mere mortal, could override the gods, the great unwritten, unshakable traditions. They are alive, not just today or yesterday: they live forever, from the first of time, and no one knows when they first saw the light.

These laws- I was not about to break them, not out of fear of some man’s wounded pride, and face the retribution of the gods. Die I must, I’ve known it all my life- how could I keep from knowing?- even without your death-sentence ringing in my ears. And if I am to die before my time I consider that a gain. Who on earth, alive in the midst of so much grief as I, could fail to
find his death a rich reward? So for me, at least, to meet this doom of yours is precious little pain. But if I had allowed my own mother’s son to rot, an unburied corpse—that would have been an agony! This is nothing. And if my present actions strike you as foolish, let’s just say I’ve been accused of folly by a fool. (p82)

5. ANTIGONE:
And now he leads me off, a captive in his hands, with no part in the bridal-song, the bridal-bed, denied all joy of marriage, raising children—deserted so by loved ones, struck by fate, I descend alive to the caverns of the dead.

What law of the mighty gods have I transgressed? Why look to the heavens any more, tormented as I am? Whom to call, what comrades now? Just think, my reverence only brands me for irreverence! Very well: if this is the pleasure of the gods, once I suffer I will know that I was wrong. But if these men are wrong, let them suffer nothing worse than they mete out to me—these masters if injustice! (p106)

6. CREON:
And the guilt is all mine…

LEADER:
No more prayers now. For mortal men there is no escape from the doom we must endure.

CREON:
Take me away, I beg you, out of sight. A rash, indiscriminate fool! I murdered you, my son, against my will— you too, my wife… Wailing wreck of a man, whom to look to? Where to lean for support?

Desperately turning from HAEMON to EURYDICE on their biers.

Whatever I touch goes wrong—once more a crushing fate’s come down upon my head!

The MESSENGER and attendants lead CREON into the palace.

(pp126-127)

7. MESSENGER: Neighbors, friends of the house of Cadmus and the kings, there is not a thing in this mortal life of ours I’d praise or blame as settled once for all. Fortune lifts and Fortunes fells the lucky and unlucky every day. No prophet on earth can tell a man his fate. Take Creon: there was a man to rouse your envy once, and I see it. He saved the realm from enemies, taking power, he alone, the lord of the fatherland, he set us true on course— he flourished like a tree with a noble line of sons he bred and reared and now it’s lost, all gone. (p119)