

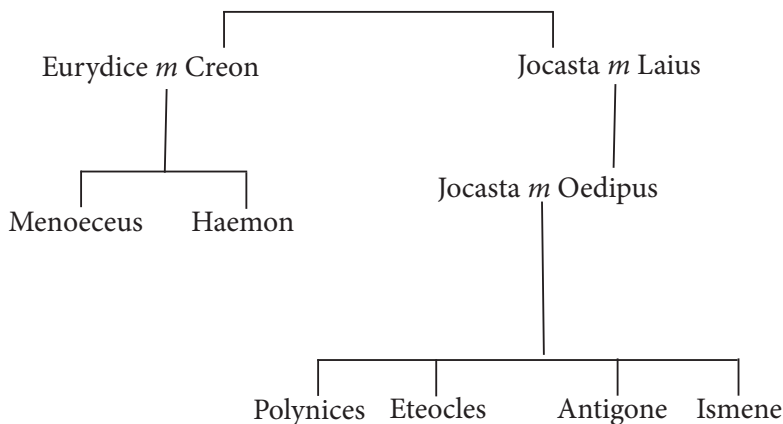
The Story of Antigone

The back story – Antigone’s father and mother and two brothers

The back story to *Antigone*, a Greek play, is deeply troubling and packed with family drama.

The story starts with Oedipus, a figure from Greek myth and one-time king of Thebes, a city in Greece. At birth Oedipus became separated from his parents, Laius and Jocasta, King and Queen of Thebes. This meant he grew up with no knowledge of either of them, a situation with bizarre and horrifying consequences. First, Oedipus unwittingly killed Laius; second, he married Jocasta. Let’s put that another way: he killed his own father and married his own mother.

Family Tree



Oedipus and his mother, Jocasta, produced four children from their incestuous marriage: the sisters, Antigone and Ismene, and their brothers, Polynices and Eteocles. When Jocasta finally learned that she had married her own son, she was horrified and killed herself.

Oedipus was expelled from Thebes and his sons, Polynices and Eteocles, were put in charge instead. The plan was for them to take turns ruling the city. Each would hold power for a year before handing over control to the other. A good solution, you might think, but destined to end in tragedy thanks to a curse placed on the brothers by

their father Oedipus, who was angry with his sons for allowing him to be disgraced and exiled as a beggar. Eteocles, the first to take charge, refused to hand over the throne at the end of his year. Polynices was so furious that his rightful turn at ruling had been denied to him that he formed an army and laid siege to Thebes. The Thebans fought hard, holding back Polynices' army. Finally, the two brothers decided on a face-off against each other. They met at the gates of the city and ended up killing each other.

The play starts – Creon refuses a burial for Polynices

At the start of Sophocles' play, Antigone's uncle (and Jocasta's brother), Creon, has taken over the throne of Thebes. Creon allows for Eteocles to be buried according to the expected rituals, with full honours.

But he views Polynices as a traitor for waging war on Thebes. He declares that Polynices should receive no honours, or even a burial at all. This means that Polynices is denied the right to one of the most important religious rituals of ancient Greek society. The gods themselves would expect it. Failing to bury him does not just dishonour Polynices and his family but also infuriates the gods, bringing certain trouble to the ruling family of Thebes and its people.

Antigone is determined to bury Polynices' body

Where do Oedipus' remaining children, Antigone and Ismene stand on their Uncle Creon's decision? What do they think should be done? As two young girls, perhaps they should just stay silent as might be expected and obey Creon's orders. But this does not happen. Antigone refuses to obey Creon, and instead decides to bury the body of her brother herself. Twice, she visits Polynices' corpse, which is lying out on the open ground, where crows can pick at it. She cannot bury the body properly, so instead she gives Polynices a symbolic burial, scattering handfuls of earth over him. On a second visit to repeat this symbolic act, Antigone is caught by Creon's guards who forcibly take her away and drag her in front of Creon, telling him how she has been disobeying his decree.

Antigone is resolute, despite her sister Ismene's pleas

Creon is furious and insists that she must give up her attempts to bury her brother. She is just a young girl but rather than caving in, she stands up to him, refusing to apologise or change her mind. She tells him that if he releases her, she will go straight back to Polynices' corpse and once again try to give him a symbolic burial. Creon's anger increases but she resists his threats and his fury. Her sister Ismene is afraid for her, and intimidated by Creon. She pleads with Antigone to obey their uncle, but Antigone won't back down. Creon is equally uncompromising. Though Antigone is his niece, and is also engaged to be married to his own son, Haemon, he won't change his mind, or show leniency. She must obey him, or face the consequences.

Haemon appeals to his father; Creon shuts Antigone in a cave to die

Haemon pleads desperately with his father on behalf of Antigone but he gets nowhere – Creon remains unmoved. It's a stalemate – Creon and Antigone are both quite determined not to budge. In the end, Creon orders that Antigone should be shut up inside a cave and left there until she dies of starvation. The entrance to the cave is covered with a large stone. Antigone's fate looks sealed.

The prophet Tiresias warns Creon to change his mind

Creon has made his decision; he has acted as a firm and determined ruler who won't stand for any rebellion or resistance. But soon after he has ordered that Antigone be shut in the cave, he receives a visit from Tiresias, an old blind prophet, who is able to predict the future. He warns Creon of dreadful omens from the gods, who have been angered by his actions. He urges Creon to reconsider his decision on the burial of Polynices and the incarceration of Antigone. His words hit home hard. Finally, Creon realises that he's made a terrible mistake and hurries to bury the body of Polynices, before going on to the cave to free Antigone.

Too late! Only Creon and Ismene survive

He is too late! By the time the cave door is opened Antigone has hung herself with her own garments. Haemon, who had been waiting by the cave entrance, so that he could be reunited with Antigone, is beside himself with grief, and kills himself with his sword, in front of his father. To make things even worse, Creon's wife Eurydice also commits suicide, when news is brought to her at the palace that Haemon, her son, is dead.

Too late, Creon realises what he has done. By his actions, he has brought about the deaths, not only of his niece, Antigone, but also his own wife and son. Ismene lives on, the only survivor out of the four siblings. Oedipus and Jocasta's children, it seems, have been punished terribly for the historic wrongs springing from their parents' incestuous marriage.