The conflict between Creon and Antigone is usually considered in thematic terms, as a contest between the claims of the state and those of family, religion, and conscience. Creon prohibits the burial of Polynoeices because, in his view, enemies of the state are wicked and should not receive honors that belong to its friends. Antigone believes that she has a duty to bury her brother which takes precedence over the dictates of a ruler. The play vindicates Antigone and teaches Creon the error of his ways, but too late to prevent a tragic outcome.

The play is not just about thematic issues, however. In addition to being illustrative, Creon and Antigone are also mimetic characters whose behavior can be understood in motivational terms. Creon’s forbidding the burial of Polynoeices has psychological sources, as does Antigone’s ready embrace of her martyrdom. Creon and Antigone have complementary needs. He provokes her defiance in order to establish his authority, while she welcomes his edict because it allows her to escape her despair and achieve a glorious end.

Creon deserves as much attention as Antigone, for he precipitates the action and is undone by his mistakes, like the typical tragic hero. He has all and loses everything. From a thematic point of view he illustrates certain failings a ruler should avoid, and from a psychological perspective his neurotic behavior brings about the destruction of all the major characters.

We must distinguish between Creon’s philosophy of government, which receives some support from the chorus, and his edict concerning Polynoeices, which is criticized throughout the play. Creon argues that since the welfare of the individual requires order in the state, the ruler should have absolute power: “The man the state has put in place must have / obedient hearing to his least command / when it is right, and even when it’s not”\(^1\) (665–67). Only those who accept this can be trusted.
The greatest wrong is disobedience, which “ruins cities,” “tears down our homes,” and “breaks the battle-front in panic-rout” (673–74).

Creon’s edict forbidding the burial of Polynices does not necessarily follow from the value he places on order and obedience, but is justified on the grounds that the wicked and the good should not “draw equal shares” (526). Only those who are “well-minded to the state” should have “honor” in “death and life” (209–10). Eteocles, who died defending Thebes, deserves “all holy rites we give the noble dead” (198), but Polynices should be left “disgraced, / a dinner for the birds and for the dogs” (206–7). Antigone contends that Creon’s conception of justice does not correspond to that of the gods, who prescribe “equal law for all the dead” (519). The rhetoric of the play clearly supports Antigone. Since Creon’s edict is out of keeping with the prevailing religious beliefs, we must ask why he issues such a divisive command.

Thematically, Creon is presented as being guilty of hubris, since he, “a mortal man,” tries to “over-run / the gods’ unwritten and unfailing laws” (454–55). These are Antigone’s words, but they are echoed by Haemon (“You tred down the gods’ due”—745) and by Tiresias (“You rob the nether gods of what is theirs”—1074). The final chorus drives the point home: “The gods must have their due. / Great words by men of pride / bring greater blows upon them” (1349–51). Filled with the pride of being king, Creon exceeds his authority, trying to rule where he should obey.

This view of his behavior is supported by mimetic detail. When he is named ruler of Thebes on the death of the sons of Oedipus, Creon becomes obsessed with power and command. He himself says that we “cannot learn of any man the soul, / the mind, and the intent until he shows / his practice of the government and law” (175–77). His practice of government reveals a grandiosity that may never have emerged had he not become king. He makes the state supreme in the lives of its citizens and himself supreme in the state. He wants to be unquestioningly obeyed and will not take advice, even from Tiresias. When the latter calls him tyrant, he haughtily replies, “Do you realize you are talking to a king?” (1058). Haemon warns him that “No city is the property of a single man,” but Creon insists that “custom gives possession to the ruler” (737–38). Intoxicated by the loftiness of his position, Creon fails to recognize his human fallibility and the limits of his authority. Hungry for glory, he makes irrational claims.
A closer look at Creon reveals, however, that accompanying his grandiosity is an insecurity about his ability to govern. We do not know exactly why Creon is insecure. He has just ascended the throne (in this version of the story) and may fear that he will not be deemed a worthy successor to Laius and Oedipus—Antigone reminds the citizens that she is the “last of your royal line” (941). He may have doubts about his capacity to fulfill the responsibilities of his office and to exercise regal authority. Or he may be insecure because he is pursuing an impossible dream of glory and fears that his illusory grandeur will be punctured by reality. Creon seems caught in a vicious circle in which his grandiosity and insecurity heighten each other, it being impossible to say which comes first. Whatever the reason for Creon’s insecurity, his irrational behavior throughout the play indicates that he expects opposition, fears his own weakness, and needs to assert himself forcefully as a way of gaining reassurance. Although he insists on absolute power, he is afraid that others will not accede to his demands, and he feels extremely vulnerable.

Creon’s edict concerning Polyneices seems devised as a test of his subjects’ loyalty and obedience. His council (the chorus) has been chosen from people who had been “constant” (165) to Laius and Oedipus, and Creon wants them to show their constancy to him by assenting to his controversial decision. Intimidated, they give him what he wants by saying that he “can make such rulings as [he] will / about the living and about the dead” (213–14). However, when they hear that the corpse has been buried, they wonder if this action is not “possibly a god’s” (279). Creon reacts with rage, calling them “insane” (281), because this response questions his edict and shows that they really feel it to have been wrong. He is convinced that the deed has been done by those who “growled against” his command but “hid the fact that they were rearing back, / not rightly in the yoke, no way my friends” (291–93). In Creon’s mind, people are either friends or enemies, good or wicked, obedient or rebellious, and his edict may be intended in part to sort them out. In order to determine who is “rightly in the yoke,” it is necessary to impose it. He confirms his own anxieties by provoking disobedience and then tries to quiet them by exercising his power.

Creon’s behavior throughout the play is that of an emotionally unstable man who fears external opposition and internal weakness. In his desperate need to assure himself and others of his potency, he reacts defensively in every situation and makes a series of terrible mistakes.
After he recognizes his errors, Creon says that “it was a god” who drove him “to wild / strange ways” (1271–73), and the chorus observes that the “‘bad becomes the good / to him a god would doom’” (621–22). From a modern perspective, it is not the gods but Creon’s fears and compulsions that doom him.

When the guard arrives with word that Polynieces has been buried, Creon immediately jumps to the conclusion that his enemies have bribed the sentinels to disobey his order, thus assimilating the event into his paranoid scenario. He accuses the guard of having sold his “mind for money” (322) and shows his power by threatening him with a terrible fate. This is not an isolated incident. Just before the guard arrived, he had warned the chorus “not to take sides with any who disobey” his edict (219), risking their lives for “hope of profit” (222). He later accuses Tiresias of pleading “a shameful case . . . in hope of profit” (1047). Creon is prone to believe that people are conspiring against him, and he defends himself against feelings of personal inadequacy by attributing their behavior to greed. His complaint against Tiresias is absurd, but he can ignore the seer’s criticisms by calling him “money-mad” (1055).

When Antigone is brought back a captive, Creon dismisses her charge that he has proudly ignored the law of the gods and accuses her and Ismene of being “secret plotters” (494) against the throne.

Creon is compulsively driven to condemn Antigone to death, an act that will destroy his family and his reign. He must prove that he places the state above bonds of kinship, as he has required others to do, and fears that he will lose face if he does not carry out his threat to execute anyone who disobeys his edict. His need to punish Antigone’s “insolence” (480) is all the greater because she is a woman: “I am no man and she the man instead / if she can have this conquest without pain” (485–86). Creon has a profound fear of being perceived as weak. He has an idealized image of himself as a masterful leader who can easily “bring raging horses back to terms” (478) and a despised image of himself as an impotent man who is not respected and cannot impose his rule. To allow Antigone to get the better of him would expose him to unbearable self-hate: “No woman rules me while I live” (526). To be ruled by Antigone is to be weaker even than a female.

The long speech to Haemon (639–80) in which Creon presents the most impressive arguments for his philosophy of government ends on a similar note of personal anxiety and defensiveness:
I must guard the men who yield to order,
not let myself be beaten by a woman.
Better, if it must happen, that a man
should overset me.
I won't be called weaker than womankind.

(675–80)

Haemon responds by defending Antigone’s behavior (“Isn’t her real
desert a golden prize? — 699) and warning his father not to be rigid, but
Creon’s pride will not allow him to be counseled by a youth, and given
his fear of being weaker than a woman, nothing Haemon can say could
change his father’s mind. When Haemon tells him that he is treading
“down the gods’ due,” Creon calls him “weaker than a woman” (745–
46), and when he describes his father as mad, Creon calls him a “wom-
an’s slave” (756). He orders Antigone to be brought out so that she may
die in Haemon’s “sight, close at her bridegroom’s side” (760), but
Haemon storms off, telling Creon that he will never see his face again.
Creon is so obsessed with his need to maintain his idealized image that
he is ready to sacrifice his son.

Creon encounters a series of challenges to his wrong-headedness, first
from Antigone, then from Haemon, and finally from Tiresias. Each
challenge offers him an opportunity to recant and save himself, but
instead he becomes more determined to carry out his will. Thematically
he is presented as a rigid ruler who will not listen to counsel: “You wish
to speak,” says Haemon, “but never wish to hear” (757). Mimetically
Sophocles shows that Creon’s fears and compulsions prevent him from
heeding what anyone else has to say.

Creon dismisses Antigone’s words because she is his enemy and
Haemon’s because he is his son, but Tiresias is a seer whose counsel he
should respect. He tells Creon that he has made mistakes, confirmed by
many bad omens, but that “he’s no fool / nor yet unfortunate, who gives
up his stiffness / and cures the trouble he has fallen in” (1025–27). If
Creon will “yield to the dead” (1029), there is still time to save the
situation, but instead he accuses Tiresias of greed and wickedness. He
vows never to “cover up that corpse. / Not if the very eagles tear their
food / from him, and leave it at the throne of Zeus” (1040–41). Creon
submits after Tiresias predicts the “horrors” that “lie in wait” for him
(1075), but even then only with great difficulty, for “To yield is dreadful”
(1095).
Yielding is so dreadful to Creon because it means giving up his claims and becoming his despised self. In his effort to defend himself against the fears of inadequacy that have haunted him, he has externalized his self-hate (hating others instead and feeling hated by them), has arrogated to himself powers that were not rightfully his, and has insisted on his absolute rightness in the face of all opposition. In this tragedy, as in life, defenses ironically bring about the very things that are feared. When Creon finally yields, it is too late. Antigone has hanged herself, Haemon kills himself after trying to murder his father, and Creon is flooded with self-condemnation: “O crimes of my wicked heart, / harshness bringing death. / You see the killer, you see the kin he killed” (1261–63). After his wife commits suicide, cursing him “as the killer of her children” (1307), Creon asks to be taken “out of the sight of men. / I who am nothing more than nothing now” (1321). His aspiration to be all has led him to be nothing; his efforts to ward off self-doubt have plunged him into self-hate. He feels that his “life is warped past cure” (1342) and wishes that someone would kill him.

Creon’s story has an education pattern in which he learns that “it’s best to hold the laws / of old tradition to the end of life” (1113–14) and that “to reject good counsel is a crime” (1244). The pattern is tragic in that he achieves wisdom too late to save him from the consequences of his errors. Antigone’s story has a tragic vindication pattern in which even Creon comes to recognize that she was right, but too late to prevent her destruction. At the beginning of the play, Antigone is alone in her determination to bury Polyneices. The chorus would approve her act, she says, “did fear not mute them” (505). As the play progresses Antigone’s virtue is increasingly recognized and celebrated. Ismene regrets not having joined her, Haemon calls her action “glorious” (693), the townspeople feel that she really deserves “a golden prize” (699), Tiresias supports her position, and the chorus celebrates her as godlike. Whereas Creon begins as everything and ends as nothing, Antigone is apotheosized.

We had to ask why Creon issued an edict that was so out of keeping with prevailing religious beliefs. Since Antigone’s behavior accords with those beliefs, it may seem unnecessary to look for other motives, but there is something “wild” and “strange” about Antigone as well as about Creon. When Ismene says that although she is afraid to assist in
the act of burial she will keep it hidden, Antigone becomes enraged and urges her sister to “denounce” her: “I shall hate you more / if silent, not proclaiming this to all” (86–87). She does not simply want to bury Polynoeices; she wants to be put to death in the process. Life seems a burden from which she is eager to escape:

If I die
before my time, I say it is a gain.
Who lives in sorrows many as are mine
how shall he not be glad to gain his death?
And so for me to meet this fate, no grief.

(461–65)

The question we have to ask about Antigone is not why she “dare[s] the crime of piety” (75) but why she feels that “For me, the doer, death is best” (72).

At the end of the play, Creon feels that his “life is warped past cure” (1342); this seems to be Antigone’s condition from the beginning. In her very first speech, she dwells on the suffering sprung from her father: “There’s nothing grievous, nothing free from doom, / not shameful, not dishonored, I’ve not seen” (4–5). She feels that she cannot escape “the doom that haunts . . . the royal house of Thebes” (860–61), a sentiment echoed by the chorus: “No generation can free the next. / One of the gods will strike. There is no escape” (594–95). Her sorrows include the past sufferings of her family, which have weighed heavily on her as Oedipus’s caretaker, and also the sufferings to come, unknown but inescapable. Her life is bound to turn out unhappily.

Antigone feels not only doomed but dishonored, tainted by the guilt of her parents and her status as the offspring of their incestuous marriage:

My mother’s marriage-bed.
Destruction where she lay with her husband-son,
my father. These were my parents and I their child.

(862–64)

At the end of Oedipus the King, Oedipus grieves for the plight of his daughters:

I weep when I think of the bitterness
there will be in your lives, how you must live
before the world. At what assemblages
of citizens will you make one? to what
gay company will you go and not come home
in tears instead of sharing in the holiday?
And when you're ripe for marriage, who will he be,
the man who'll risk to take such infamy
as shall cling to my children, to bring hurt
on them and those that marry with them? What
curse is not there? “Your father killed his father
and sowed seed where he had sprung himself
and begot you out of the womb that held him.”
These insults you will hear. Then who will marry you?
No one, my children; clearly you are doomed
to waste away in barrenness unmarried.²

This is a later play, to be sure, but in Antigone Sophocles seems to have
conceived of his heroine as having the feelings about herself that would
have been induced by the life experiences Oedipus describes. Despite her
betrothal to Haemon, about which Creon is unenthusiastic, Antigone
appears to feel unmarried, doomed “to die unwed” (869). She may
feel that infamy clings to her, as Oedipus’s speech suggests, and that she
would be a source of contamination to her husband and children.

Antigone resembles Shakespeare’s Antonio, who calls himself “a
tainted wether of the flock, / Meetest for death” (Merchant of Venice,
4.1.114–15). Her tainted origin and the curse upon her house separate
her from others, whose life she cannot share. Antonio escapes his iso-
lation when he is taken into the Bassanio-Portia relationship, but nothing
can restore Antigone to the human community. When Creon condemns
her to be shut up in a tomb with just enough food to sustain her,
Antigone laments, “Alive to the place of corpses, an alien still, / never at
home with the living nor with the dead” (850–51). Because of her sense
of immitigable alienation Antigone feels that her “life died long ago”
and that this has made her “fit to help the dead” (559–60).

Antigone anticipates being more at home with the dead than she has
been with the living. She feels entirely alone on earth, but when she dies
she will go to her “own people” (893), to whom she will “come as a
dear friend,” since she has “dressed them for the grave” (900–901).
There is no one alive with whom she feels a sense of community, but in
death she will be with her kind once more, with those who have shared
her doom. She has devoted herself to the service of her family, and life
seems to have no meaning for her outside of this activity. The burial of Polyneices is her final service, after which she no longer desires to live.

It is striking that Antigone regards herself as alone despite the existence of Ismene. When she contemplates going to her own people, she describes herself as “last of them all” (895), and she asks the leaders of Thebes to pity the suffering of the “last of your royal line” (941). She seems to have forgotten her sister completely. At the beginning of the play, she speaks to Ismene of the suffering of “us survivors” (3) and asks her to assist in the burial of Polyneices. When the fearful Ismene tells her that she is “wrong from the start, to chase what cannot be” (92), Antigone turns upon her with savage contempt: “If that’s your saying, I shall hate you first, / and next the dead will hate you in all justice” (93–94). After Antigone is caught, Ismene wants to share her sister’s fate, but Antigone will not allow it: “You did not / wish for a part, nor did I give you one” (538–39). Ismene begs her not to “fence me out from honor” (544), but Antigone is unrelenting, leaving her sister to feel as isolated and empty as she: “What life is there for me to live without her?” (566).

In order to understand Antigone’s behavior toward Ismene, we must delve more deeply into her psychology. Antigone seeks to compensate for her sense of contamination by pursuing a course of absolute rectitude. Creon’s edict forbidding the burial of Polyneices gives her an opportunity to prove herself, to live up to her standard of moral perfection, no matter the cost. After telling Ismene that anyone who defies the edict “will die by public stoning in the town,” she says “you soon will show / if you are noble, or fallen from your descent” (36–38). Afraid of crossing royal power, Ismene says that they must submit to “these orders, or any that may be worse” (64), asking forgiveness from those beneath the earth. Such a course is unthinkable to Antigone, who feels toward Ismene the contempt she would feel toward herself should she thus fall from her noble descent and be a “traitor” to her brother (46).

Whereas Ismene sees herself as a weak, helpless woman who has no choice but to capitulate, Antigone seeks to master her fate by maintaining her virtue. She can do nothing about the taint she has inherited from her family, but she can gain recognition from her fellow Thebans, the dead, and the gods for her righteousness. Creon insists on obedience to his commands even if they are wrong, but Antigone would be overwhelmed with self-hate if she acceded to this demand. The price of defiance is death, but she has no wish to live, and for her there could be no greater suffering than “dying with a lack of grace” (97). By burying
Polyneices she avoids self-hate and actualizes her idealized image: “what greater glory could I find / than giving my own brother funeral” (502–3). She is so unrelenting toward Ismene in part because she does not want to share her glory: “Death and the dead, they know whose act it was” (542). Ismene is afraid of temporal power, but Antigone pleases “those whom I most should please” (89), those whose recognition will be eternal.

Antigone is enacting a scenario similar to that which Sophocles later gave to her father in Oedipus at Colonus. She is transformed from a creature who is tainted and doomed into a transcendentally glorious being. She achieves her transformation partly through her virtue and partly, like Oedipus, through the magnitude of her suffering. Creon’s edict makes it possible for her to achieve a grand fate despite, indeed because of, the curse on her house. The fact that she is being punished for her virtue, “because I respected the right” (943), heightens the injustice of her fate and makes it all the more poignant. She refuses to be reconciled with her sister in part because she wishes to cling to her sense of abandonment, which increases her suffering. She portrays herself as not only the last of them all but “ill-fated past the rest” (895). The more she suffers, the greater her distinction.

Creon mocks Antigone for singing the “dirge” for her own death “ahead of time” (881–82), but his remark is not entirely inappropriate, since Antigone is histrionically self-pitying. Although she welcomes death, she bewails the fact that she is descending “before my course is run” (896). Some critics feel that the “death-devoted maiden” of the first part of the play shows herself to be attached to life after all. She laments again and again that there will be “no marriage bed” or “marriage-song” for her and “since no wedding, so no child to rear” (917–18). Are we to see this as genuine grief that she will be deprived of marriage and motherhood, or as an effort to embellish her image as a martyr? I lean toward the latter interpretation. My reading of Antigone is that she felt herself to be cut off from marriage and motherhood by the taint that attaches to her as the child of Oedipus and Jocasta. As she says, her life died long ago. She can achieve meaning through death, however, and the greater her suffering, the more grandeur is attached to her end. Thus she repeatedly laments that she has “No friend to bewail my fate” (881). What about Haemon, Ismene, and the chorus? Haemon says that “the whole town is grieving for this girl, / unjustly doomed” (693–94). Antigone glories in her fate and seeks to portray it as more
terrible than that of anyone else in her spectacularly ill-fated family: “Look what I suffer” (942).

The chorus empathizes with Antigone’s suffering and even more with her self-glorification. She will go “in fame to the vault of the dead” (816). When Antigone compares herself to Niobe, saying that “My own putting to sleep a god has planned like hers” (831), the chorus assents: “Yet even in death you will have your fame, / to have gone like a god to your fate” (834–36). The play strikes down the arrogant Creon, whose pride must be crushed, but Antigone’s bargain with fate succeeds: she lives up to her shoulders and the world honors her claims. She does not receive justice on earth, but the play affirms the higher justice in which she believes.

From a Horneyan perspective, Creon and Antigone are both destructively engaged in a search for glory. Creon’s fate is typical of the hero in Greek tragedy who arouses the enmity of the gods by seeking more mastery than is granted to human beings. As the chorus observes, “any greatness in human life brings doom” (613). Antigone also seeks to master her fate, but through rectitude rather than power. A rebel in relation to Creon, she is submissive to the gods and scrupulously performs her religious and familial duties. She is not caught between the demands of temporal and eternal authority, like Ismene and the chorus, because she is ready to die. Although submissive to the gods, Antigone is not self-effacing. She takes pride in her righteousness, despises the timidity of others, and overtly engages in self-exaltation. Although those who pursue glory are usually destroyed in Greek tragedy, Antigone succeeds because she plays by the rules of the gods. While condemning the over-stepping Creon, the play endorses Antigone’s perfectionistic solution.

Creon and Antigone are not as fully drawn as most of the other characters discussed here, but they have a mimetic dimension that contributes to the richness and dramatic intensity of the play, which would be a much lesser work if they were merely illustrative figures. Although their attitudes and behaviors are products of a culture very different from our own, there are some enduring features of human psychology beneath all the differences. We have seen Creon’s combination of insecurity, grandiosity, and the assertion of arbitrary authority in dictatorial leaders through the ages and in such literary figures as Captain Queeg of *The Caine Mutiny*. Antigone’s sense that her life died long ago has specific sources in her culture, but her hopelessness, alienation, and
despair are familiar emotions, as is her longing for vindication. Her combination of suicidal impulses with a search for glory is one we have already seen a number of times in this study, and her strategy of coping with a feeling of worthlessness through absolute rectitude is one we shall see again.