Age of Sophocles
496 - 406
Sophocles born 6 years before Marathon.
"In the sixth and fifth centuries before the birth of Christ an ancient civilization reached such heights of intellectual and artistic achievement that every succeeding period of Western culture, from the Roman Empire to the twenty first century, has been heavily in its debt, whether acknowledged or not. Those momentous years saw the beginnings of history and political theory (as well as political democracy) and the development of philosophical thought. In those years architects designed the temples which have dominated our concept of civic building ever since, and sculptors imposed on us an ideal vision of the human form which remains the point of reference even for those artists who turn against it. Not least among the achievements of this great age was the invention and perfection of an artistic medium which we take so unthinkingly for granted that we cannot imagine civilized life without it—the theater." Bernard Knox
"The central idea of a Sophoclean tragedy is that through suffering a man learns to be modest before the gods . . . When [the characters] are finally forced to see the truth, we know that the gods have prevailed and that men must accept their insignificance [their limited powers]." C. M. Bowra

Sir Cecil Maurice Bowra, 1898 – 1971 was an English classical scholar, literary critic and academic, known for his wit. He was Warden of Wadham College, Oxford, from 1938 to 1970, and served as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford from 1951 to 1954.
Religion    Hesiod: *The Theogony*
most thoroughly anthropomorphic mythology ever.
whole pantheon = human behavior/often poor behavior.
1. no system
2. begins at no fixed time/point/origin.
3. roots stretch back into unchronicled past.
4. no principle prophet or lawgiver (like Moses).
5. no sacred books.
6. no central organized priestly hierarchy (local.many. EX: Delphi).
7. no revealed cosmology (many conflicting).
8. no national religious practices (localized / many ancient mystery)
9. no orthodoxy. just stories, many gods, be careful you dont make them mad at you.
10. no scheme of redemption.( in general afterlife is bad / drab / dull)
11. no divine model for human behavior.( Imitatio Christo).
religion in decline by time of Plato and Aristotle.
The social, economic, and political changes occasioned by Alexander’s expeditions and the wars and policies of his successors brought changes also to religious traditions and practices, but the extent of these changes varied greatly for Greeks living in different parts of the Hellenistic world and in different kinds of cities. Athenians, for example, very conservatively preserved their centuries old religious cults, practices, and festivals, and a fifth-century BC Athenian finding himself in second century BC Athens would have found the religious environment quite familiar, with only a few new and disturbing elements. In Alexandria of the same period, by contrast, there was a most unclassical heterogeneity of Greek, pseudo-Greek, Egyptian, and Jewish deities and religious practices, all in a multiethnic and multicultural cosmopolitan environment more like that of a modern metropolis than that of the Classical Greek city-state. The changes characteristic of Hellenistic Greek religion largely emanated from this religious multiculturalism in Alexandria and other similar metropolitan centers and did eventually affect all parts of the Greek world but some more so than others, some earlier than others, and some differently from others, all to the extent that it is erroneous to imagine a single form of Hellenistic religion that was practised by all of Greeks at any one time.
THIS PLAY, it is generally agreed, was produced before and fairly close to the year 441 B.C.

Sophocles, as we know from a reliable contemporary source, was one of the nine generals elected, with Pericles, for a campaign against the revolt of Samos in that year. The ancient introduction to the play, found in most of the manuscripts, records a tradition that Sophocles owed his election to office to the popularity of Antigone. True or false, this story could only have been based on a widely accepted belief that the play was produced before the year 441.
Characters

- **Antigone** - Oedipus’s daughter
- **Creon** - Oedipus’s brother-in-law, king of Thebes
- **Ismene** - Oedipus’s daughter
- **Polynices** - Oedipus’s son
- **Eteocles** - Oedipus’s son
- **Haemon** - Creon’s son, Antigones betrothed
- **Tiresias** - The blind soothsayer of Thebes
- **Eurydice** - Creon’s wife
- **Sentry**
- **Messenger**
Antigone is the subject of a story in which she attempts to secure a respectable burial for her brother Polynices. Oedipus's sons, Eteocles and Polynices, had shared the rule of Thebes jointly until they quarrelled, and Eteocles expelled his brother. In Sophocles' account, the two brothers agreed to alternate rule each year, but Eteocles decided not to share power with his brother after his tenure expired. Polynices left the kingdom, gathered an army and attacked the city of Thebes in a conflict called the Seven Against Thebes. Both brothers were killed in the battle. King Creon, who has ascended to the throne of Thebes after the death of the brothers, decrees that Polynices is not to be buried or even mourned, on pain of death by stoning. Antigone, Polynices' sister, defies the king's order but is caught.
Antigone is brought before Creon, and admits that she knew of Creon's law forbidding mourning for Polynices but chose to break it, claiming the superiority of divine over human law, and she defies Creon's cruelty with courage, passion and determination. Sophocles' Antigone ends in disaster. Creon orders Antigone buried alive in a tomb. Although Creon has a change of heart and tries to release Antigone, he finds she has hanged herself. Creon's son Haemon, who was in love with Antigone commits suicide with a knife, and his mother Queen Eurydice, also kills herself in despair over her son's death. She has been forced to weave throughout the entire story, and her death alludes to The Fates. Sophocles' play is a typical Greek tragedy, in which inherent flaws of the characters lead to irrevocable disaster. Antigone and Creon are prototypical tragic figures in an Aristotelian sense (written after with Sophocles plays in mind), as they struggle towards their end.
The story also, by setting Antigone in a political context, draws attention to the political content of the play, its concern with the problems of the polis, the city-state.

Antigone resurfaces in a highly political context once again in the fourth century, some sixty years after Sophocles’ death; it had by that time become a classic. The orator and statesman Demosthenes had the clerk of the court read out Creon’s speech on the proper loyalties of a citizen (lines 194-214 of the translation) as a lesson in patriotism to his political opponent Aeschines (who had once been a professional actor and had played the part of Creon). And in that same century Aristotle quoted the play repeatedly in his treatise the Politics.
Do the Gods control everything?
Or do they not?
Do they exist?
Thus all of the Sophoclean plays reflect this century-long search. The search climaxes in the tragic execution of Socrates (399). That execution signals the temporary end of the search and the triumph of the conservatives who do not want any more doubt.

This philosophical search parallels similar searches and innovations in:
architecture
sculpture
literature
politics
economics
What is the intellectual reality of 5thC Athens

450BC Time of rigorous rational critique of traditional religion

Specific attack: on prophecy and its implication that gods know future.

This attack is in pursuit of the human freedom that was at center of 5thC Athens Credo. (Pericles)

Athens moving away from the old piety of Aeschylus toward scepticism of Thucydides and Euripedes

Protagoras: "the individual man is the measure of all things, of the existence of what exists and the nonexistence of what does not..."
Sophocles living through this radical intellectual change with its drive toward total freedom of man. He senses and expresses the dangers in this play.

The play is about man who tries to avoid prophecy and can't!

The play is a warning about human pride seeking total freedom.

Play is filled with warnings about human drive to total freedom/lack of humility.
TIME AND SCENE:
The royal house of Thebes.
It is still night, and the invading armies of Argos have just been driven from the city. Fighting on opposite sides, the sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices, have killed each other in combat.

Their uncle, CREON, is now king of Thebes.

Enter ANTIGONE, slipping through the central doors of the palace. She motions to her sister, ISMENE, who follows her cautiously toward an altar at the center of the stage.
Enter CREON
from the palace, attended by his guard.

But look, the king of the realm is coming,

Creon, the new man for the new day,
whatever the gods are sending now ...
what new plan will he launch?
Why this, this special session?
Why this sudden call to the old men
summoned at one command?
CREON: My countrymen, the ship of state is safe. The gods who rocked her, after a long, merciless pounding in the storm, have righted her once more.
Out of the whole city I have called you here alone. Well I know, first, your undeviating respect for the throne and royal power of King Laius. Next, while Oedipus steered the land of Thebes, and even after he died, your loyalty was unshakable, you still stood by their children. Now then, since the two sons are dead—two blows of fate in the same day, cut down by each other’s hands, both killers, both brothers stained with blood—as I am next in kin to the dead,
CREON: I now possess the throne and all its powers. Of course you cannot know a man completely, his character, his principles, sense of judgment, not till he’s shown his colors, ruling the people, making laws. Experience, there’s the test. As I see it, whoever assumes the task, the awesome task of setting the city’s course, and refuses to adopt the soundest policies but fearing someone, keeps his lips locked tight, he’s utterly worthless. So I rate him now, I always have. And whoever places a friend above the good of his own country, he is nothing: I have no use for him. Zeus my witness, Zeus who sees all things, always— I could never stand by silent, watching destruction march against our city, putting safety to rout,
Nor could I ever make that man a friend of mine who menaces our country. Remember this: our country is our safety.

Only while she voyages true on course can we establish friendships, truer than blood itself. Such are my standards. They make our city great.
Closely akin to them I have proclaimed, just now, the following decree to our people concerning the two sons of Oedipus. Eteocles, who died fighting for Thebes, excelling all in arms: he shall be buried, crowned with a hero’s honors, the cups we pour to soak the earth and reach the famous dead. But as for his blood brother, Polynices, who returned from exile, home to his father-city and the gods of his race, consumed with one desire—to burn them roof to roots—who thirsted to drink his kinsmen’s blood and sell the rest to slavery: that man—a proclamation has forbidden the city to dignify him with burial, mourn him at all. No, he must be left unburied, his corpse carrion for the birds and dogs to tear, an obscenity for the citizens to behold! These are my principles. Never at my hands will the traitor be honored above the patriot.
Summary

- Antigone freely confesses her act to Creon and says that he himself defies the will of the gods by refusing Polynices burial.
CREON: Were you aware of the law?
ANTIGONE: Well aware. How could I avoid it? It was public.
CREON: And still you had the gall to break this law?
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.
CREON: No? Believe me, the stiffest stubborn wills fall the hardest; the toughest iron, tempered strong in the white-hot fire, you’ll see it crack and shatter first of all. And I’ve known spirited horses you can break with a light bit—proud, rebellious horses. There’s no room for pride, not in a slave, not with the lord and master standing by. This girl was an old hand at insolence when she overrode the edicts we made public. But once she had done it—the insolence, twice over—to glory in it, laughing, mocking us to our face with what she’d done.
I am not the man, not now: she is the man
if this victory goes to her and she goes free.
Never! Sister’s child or closer in blood
than all my family clustered at my altar
worshiping Guardian Zeus—she’ll never escape,
she and her blood sister, the most barbaric death.
Yes, I accuse her sister of an equal part
in scheming this, this burial.
To his attendants. Bring her here!
I just saw her inside, hysterical, gone to pieces.
It never fails: the mind convicts itself
in advance, when scoundrels are up to no good,
plotting in the dark. Oh but I hate it more
when a traitor, caught red-handed,
tries to glorify his crimes.
ANTIGONE: Creon, what more do you want
than my arrest and execution?
CREON: Nothing. Then I have it all.
ANTIGONE: Then why delay? Your moralizing repels me, every word you say—pray god it always will. So naturally all I say repels you too. Enough. Give me glory! What greater glory could I win than to give my own brother decent burial? These citizens here would all agree, To the CHORUS. they would praise me too if their lips weren’t locked in fear. Pointing to CREON. Lucky tyrants—the perquisites of power! Ruthless power to do and say whatever pleases them. CREON: You alone, of all the people in Thebes, see things that way. ANTIGONE: They see it just that way but defer to you and keep their tongues in leash.
TIRESIAS: The chariot of the sun will not race through so many circuits more, before you have surrendered one born of your own loins, your own flesh and blood, a corpse for corpses given in return, since you have thrust to the world below a child sprung for the world above, ruthlessly lodged a living soul within the grave—then you’ve robbed the gods below the earth, keeping a dead body here in the bright air, unburied, unsung, unhallowed by the rites. You, you have no business with the dead, nor do the gods above—this is violence you have forced upon the heavens. And so the avengers, the dark destroyers late but true to the mark, now lie in wait for you, the Furies sent by the gods and the god of death to strike you down with the pains that you perfected! There. Reflect on that, tell me I’ve been bribed. The day comes soon, no long test of time, not now, when the mourning cries for men and women break throughout your halls. Great hatred rises against you—cities in tumult, all whose mutilated sons the dogs have graced with burial, or the wild beasts or a wheeling crow that wings the ungodly stench of carrion

Creon's crime.
The Tragic Ending

Summary

- They went in and saw Antigone hanging from a noose, and Haemon raving. Creon’s son then took a sword and thrust it at his father. Missing, he turned the sword against himself and died embracing Antigone’s body.
The Tragic Ending

Summary

• Creon’s wife, Eurydice, hears this terrible news and rushes away into the palace.
MESSENGER: Neighbors, 
friends of the house of Cadmus and the kings, 
there’s not a thing in this mortal life of ours 
I’d praise or blame as settled once for all.

Fortune lifts and Fortune 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, 
as 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 the noble line of sons he bred and reared ...
What is Sophocles' philosophy of life?

Does he believe in a order to the universe? 
(think of both Oedipus and Antigone) Yes.

a) has an intellectual faith that there is a LOGOS to the universe as did all his friends and all of his Periclean Athens. All of 5thC Athens lived by this faith in an Order to Nature and Universe.

b) the individual needs balance/ a kind of wisdom
   need know who you are
   need know where you are in universe
   need wisdom/balance/proportion
   (all go together=Athena=Parthenon)

c) believes in the essential DIGNITY OF MAN
   See closing speech. Oedipus at Colonus.
   Oedipus contending is heroic=seeks truth no matter what

and THE WONDER OF MAN
   See Chorus, pp. 76-77, the wonder of man(in Antigone)
   (compare this conception of man in Genesis and Lao Tzu)
CHORUS: Numberless wonders
terrible wonders walk the world but none the match for man—
that great wonder crossing the heaving gray sea,
driven on by the blasts of winter
on through breakers crashing left and right,
holds his steady course
and the oldest of the gods he wears away—
the Earth, the immortal, the inexhaustible—
as his plows go back and forth, year in, year out
with the breed of stallions turning up the furrows.
And the blithe, lightheaded race of birds he snares,
the tribes of savage beasts, the life that swarms the depths—
with one fling of his nets
woven and coiled tight, he takes them all,
man the skilled, the brilliant!
He conquers all, taming with his techniques
the prey that roams the cliffs and wild lairs,
training the stallion, clamping the yoke across
his shaggy neck, and the tireless mountain bull.
And speech and thought, quick as the wind
and the mood and mind for law that rules the city—
Wonders of Man

all these he has taught himself
and shelter from the arrows of the frost
when there’s rough lodging under the cold clear sky
and the shafts of lashing rain—
ready, resourceful man! Never without resources
never an impasse as he marches on the future—
only Death, from Death alone he will find no rescue
but from desperate plagues he has plotted his escapes.
Man the master, ingenious past all measure
past all dreams, the skills within his grasp—
he forges on, now to destruction
now again to greatness. When he weaves in
the laws of the land, and the justice of the gods
that binds his oaths together
he and his city rise high—
but the city casts out
that man who weds himself to inhumanity
thanks to reckless daring.
Never share my hearth
never think my thoughts,
whoever does such things.
What is the nature of Sophoclean tragedy?

that man so great, man so powerful, man so brilliant still fails.

thus the tragedy is his tragic contending against his own imperfect self. Not against gods and gods powers.

thus Sophocles' TRAGEDY

reflects perfectly the high ideals of Periclean Athens at mid-century

the balanced power of the figure of the Artemision Zeus: Man contending with self and own limitations.

Tragedy of life for Sophocles is that man is imperfect not that he is evil. (compare to Genesis)

Thus Sophocles dramatic method and his phil message are the same.
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496 - 406
Sophocles born 6 years before Marathon.