**Antigone Theme Descriptions**

**Natural Law:**

Creon, as head of state and lawgiver in Thebes, believes in obedience to man-made laws. But in defying Creon's command that no one bury Polynices, Antigone appeals to a different set of guidelines—what is often called "natural law." Whether its source is in nature or in divine order, natural law states that there are standards for right and wrong that are more fundamental and universal than the laws of any particular society. Antigone believes that the gods have commanded people to give the dead a proper burial. She also believes she has a greater loyalty to her brother in performing his burial rites than she does to the law of the city of Thebes that bans her from doing so. The wishes of the gods and her sense of duty to her brother are both examples of natural law. To Antigone, these outweigh any human laws.

**Civil Disobedience:**

Creon says that the laws enacted by the leader of the city "must be obeyed, large and small, / right and wrong." In other words, Creon is arguing that the law is the basis for justice, so there can be no such thing as an unjust law. Antigone, on the other hand, believes that there are unjust laws, and that she has a moral duty to disobey a law that contradicts what she thinks is right. This is particularly the case when the law of the city contradicts the customs of the people and the traditional laws of the gods.

**Fate vs. Free Will:**

The ancient Greeks believed that their gods could see the future, and that certain people could access this information. Independent prophets called "seers" saw visions of things to come. Oracles, priests who resided at the temples of gods—such as the oracle to Apollo at Delphi—were also believed to be able to interpret the gods' visions and give prophecies to people who sought to know the future. Oracles were an accepted part of Greek life—famous leaders and common people alike consulted them for help with making all kinds of decisions. Long before the beginning of Antigone, Oedipus, Antigone's father, fulfilled one of the most famous prophecies in world literature—that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Despite his efforts to avoid this terrible fate, it came to pass. When Oedipus learned what he had inadvertently done, he gouged out his own eyes and was banished from Thebes. Before dying, he prophesied that his two sons, Polynices and Eteocles, would kill each other in the battle for Thebes. This, too, comes to pass. Yet when the prophet Tiresias visits Creon in Antigone, he comes to deliver a warning, not an unavoidable prophecy. He says that Creon has made a bad decision, but that he can redeem himself. "Once the wrong is done," Tiresias says, "a man can turn his back on folly, misfortune, too, if he tries to make amends, however low he's fallen, and stops his bullnecked ways." While Oedipus never has a choice—his fate was sealed—in this case Creon seems to have more free will. He chooses to remain stubborn, however, until it's too late and he is caught in the grip of a terrible fate that he can't escape.

**Citizenship vs. Family Loyalty:**

The concept of citizenship and the duties that citizens owe to the state were subjects of huge importance and debate in fifth-century BCE. Athens, where Sophocles lived and where Antigone was first performed. Antigone and Creon represent the extreme opposite political views regarding where a citizen of a city should place his or her loyalties. In the play, Creon has a strict idea of citizenship that calls for the state to come first: "...whoever places a friend / above the good of his country, he is nothing: / I have no use for him." From Creon's perspective, Polynices has forfeited the right to a proper burial as a citizen of Thebes because he has attacked the city. In attacking Thebes, he has shown his disloyalty to the state and has ceased to be a citizen. In fact, Creon is more devoted to his laws than he is to even his own son Haemon's happiness, refusing to pardon Antigone for burying Polynices even though she is Haemon's fiancée. Antigone, on the other hand, places long held traditions and loyalty to her family above obedience to the city or to its ruler. In doing so, she makes the case that there are loyalties to both the gods and one's own family that outweigh one's loyalty to a city.

**Blindness vs. Sight:**

In Oedipus Rex, Oedipus mocks the blindness of the seer Tiresias, who responds by telling Oedipus that he (Oedipus) is blind to the corruption in his own life, and soon will be literally blind, too. Issues of blindness and sight aren't quite as obvious in Antigone, but the same basic tension is there. Tiresias gives the current king, Creon, a warning, and the king is unable to see the wisdom of the seer's words. Creon is blinded by pride—his unwillingness to compromise, to listen to the opinions of his people, or to appear to be defeated by a woman. The blind Tiresias can see that the gods are angry and that tragedy will strike if Creon doesn't rethink his decision and change his mind. Creon lacks the insight to see this. In that sense, he is blind. And although he does eventually change his mind, and come to see the error of his stubbornness, it is too late—events have spiraled out of his control, and he now must witness the destruction of his family.