Stage 2 Ancient Studies

Assessment Type 1: Skills and Applications

Topic 6: Literature – prose, narrative, or epic

Task: Greek Tragedy

*Please note: This task was designed against the assessment design criteria of 2017 and has been remarked against the criteria for 2018.*

## *Aristotle believed that tragedy had to present "thoughts": themes of a serious magnitude. How does Antigone present themes that would resonate with, and challenge, and Athenian audience?*

Greek tragedy is an action driven by "*thoughts":* diametrically opposed *agones1* engaged in a struggle of philosophical *nature. According to Aristotle, "the end (of the tragedy] is the chief thing of all"2* in which the ultimate *catastrophe3,* echoingthe Dionysic scapegoat sacrifice of previous ages*4* - embodies the society's propitiation for the hero's *hamartia5'.* Likely written during 441 BC*6*, Sophocles' *'Antigone'* is a drama crafted to both resonate with, and challenge, the playwright's Athenian audience, manoeuvring through Athens' history of tyranny, challenging the perception of God's law vs man's law, and both resonating with and challenging the audience's notions of wisdom.

Underlying Sophocles' dialogue on the nature of tyranny is the figure of Creon, whose *hubris7* both embodies the quintessential Greek *tyrannos8,* and resonates with Athens' rich history of despotism. Having experienced the benevolence and malevolence of tyranny firsthand - from the reign of Pisistratus to the unrelenting incursions of Xerxes - the ''faithful[*ness*]"(p.132) and *"fool[ish] [...] self will'* (p.153) with which Creon governs Thebes are no surprise to the Athenian audience*.* Endorsing the notion that *"no other touchstone can test the heart of a man [better than] [...] the practice of authority and rule"* (p.130), Sophocles' utilisation of Creon as a representation of tyranny is fundamental to Sophocles' argument: that the instinctual driveof the king, and, by extension, man himself, is to *"twist the law to [his] own pleasure"* (p.144) and thus *"seek gain unrighteously"* (p.154). While Creon's devotion to the state intends only to provide for the safety of Thebes, Sophocles explicitly contends that the nature of man is predisposed towards despotism, and the true *"temper of his mind and spirit"* (p.130) can only be evidenced by political office. Threatening his citizens with *"rack[...] and torture[...]"* (p.134), Creon rules by the whims of human insecurities. Ultimately *"unwilling to seek advice [and thus] damn[ed]" (p.130) "by the unalterable laws/Of God and heaven"* (p.138). Creon resonates with Sophocles' audience by personifying the absolutism Athens actively *strove* to prevent*. "Trampl[ing] on all that is holy"* (p.146), it is the *hubris* of Creon which empowers him above the 'Justice/That dwells with the [chthonic} gods below" (p.138), and in challenging *"the throne of Zeus"* with his tyrannical authority (p.154), commits the *"sacrilege"* (p.154) which results in his ultimate peripeteia*9*, and the destruction of Thebes rather than its protection. Being the overarching

demise of Hippias from an Athenian historical perspective, of Creon's tyrannical *hubris*

resonates exquisitely with Sophocles' audience when presenting the theme of despotism.

Sophocles' principle instrument for delivering his contention on the law of God, and its ascendancy over the law of mortal man, is Antigone, a figure wholly dissonant with the perceptions of his entirely male audience. Educated on the prudence of motherhood and the duties of the household*10*, social etiquette in Sophocles world demanded that women be distinguished only on, *‘good management in domestic affairs and a noble and comely manner of life*.” It is these notions of the woman's "*proper place*" (p.142) that Antigone's "*proud spirit*'' (p.139) defies. Sophocles, however, utilizes a woman not as a device confronting Greek gender norms, but as an intentional basis for reflection on state laws in conflict with moral absolutes. Ultimately, Antigone embodies an *agon* bent against passivity shaming the Chorus with the thought that such *''fear*" (p.140) and blind obedience "*def[ies] the holiest laws of Heaven*" (p.128). The most challenging facet of Antigone, however, is not the ideals she embodies, but Sophocles' ability to position his audience towards pity for her *pathos12* Instancing a complete shift in outlook during her *exodos13* Sophocles Juxtaposes Antigone's initial resolution for her own demise with the "piteous death" (p.148) she is doomed to suffer, revealing her as little more than an ordinary woman, mourning for the loss of her "wedding-day" (p.148). Moved to pity for an otherwise unacceptable challenge of social norms, and an unjust punishment as a result of "honour[ing]/Those things to which honour truly belongs" (p.151), Sophocles' Athenian audience is challenged to consider the overarching importance of obeying the "Law of heaven" (p.150), which even someone as lowly as a woman would "*die for*" (p.128).

At the crux of Ancient Greek civic life was the relationship between father and son*14*, an archetype by which Sophocles both resonates with and challenges his Athenian audience on presupposed notions of wisdom. Entrusted with the obligation of educating his boy on good citizenship and public life*15*, the archetypal Athenian father draws various parallels with Creon. "*Hav[ing] [Haemon's] heart's first place*" (p.143), Creon is characterised by Sophocles as possessing something no ''father/Could desire more from his son" (p.145): the value of his "*good guidance*" (p.143). Revealed to be "*obedient, loyal, [and} ready to strike down/[His] father's enemies'*' (p,143), Haemon personifies the essential traits of the *"[...]profitable [Athenian] son*" (p.143). It is via an otherwise ideal partnership of father and son that Sophocles delivers the most deeply tragic of all his *agones*: the need to listen to advice. "*No wound strikes*

(Sophocles' audience] *deeper than*" (p.144) Creon's *hamartia*, his "*unwilling{ness} to seek advice*" (p.130), which ultimately drives devastation within his and his son's relationship. Creon's inability to "*think if there cannot be some other way*" (p.145) ravages the bond between father and son, and within the most distressing scenes of the play, drives Haemon to madness and suicide, which, according to Sophocles "*follows of necessity/From*" (p.155) Creon's lack of wisdom. Encapsulated within the play's *exodos*, and final Choric ode, the neglect of advice inhibits true wisdom, and challenges the audience by leaving little but broken relationships and "*stricken heart[s*]" between father and son (p.162).

# Weaving masterfully through the historical and cultural heritage of ancient Athens, Sophocles constructs a tragedy which both resonates with, and challenges, his audience. Exploring man's inherent disposition towards tyranny, moral absolutism, and the constituent facets of wisdom, Sophocles' didactic purpose becomes evident. Colliding his universally human *agones*, a detailed image of the playwright's contention emerges, one both of humble devotion to the elemental forces of morality, and discerning acceptance of the opinions of others, in hopes that "*seeing [his protagonist's] stricken heart brought down" in their ultimate catharis16*", his audience "*can learn when [they] are old"* (p.162).

Word Count: 1023

**End notes**

1 *"contest of opposed wills"* Aristotle, *The Poetics,* trans. S. H. Butcher (1902) London, Macmillan and Co.

2 Aristotle, *The Poetics,* trans. S. H. Butcher (1902) London, Macmillan and Co.

' *"the disastrous finish of a drama"* Aristotle, *The Poetics,* trans. S. H. Butcher (1902) London, Macmillan and Co.

4 Burkert, W. (1966) 'Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual'. *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies, Vol.* 7, No. 2,

88.

5 *"error of judgement leading to the tragic hero's downfall"* Aristotle, *The Poetics,* trans. S. H. Butcher (1902) London, Macmillan and Co.

6Sophocles, *The Antigone,* trans. Robert Fagles (1984) London, Penguin, 13.

7*"excessive self-pride above the gods"* Aristotle, *The Poetics,* trans. S. H. Butcher (1902) London, Macmillan and Co.*"reversal of fortune"* Aristotle, *The Poetics,* trans. S. H. Butcher (1902) London, Macmillan and co.

8*Tyrant"reversal of fortune"* Aristotle, *The Poetics,* trans. S. H. Butcher (1902) London, Macmillan and co.

9*"reversal of fortune"* Aristotle, *The Poetics,* trans. S. H. Butcher (1902) London, Macmillan and co.

10 Kapparis, K. (2003) "Women and Family In Athenian Law," in A. Lanni, ed., "Athenian Law in Its Democratic Context''. *Center for Hellenic Studies On-Line Discussion Series.*

11 Aristotle, *The Economics,* trans. Edward Walford (1876) London, George Bell and Sons.

12*"suffering"* Aristotle, *The Poetics,* trans. S. H. Butcher (1902) London, Macmillan and Co.

13 *"final moments of the ploy"* Greek Tragic Terms. (2015), Greek Tragic Terms. [ONLINE] Available at: [http://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/greek.htm#Terms.](http://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/greek.htm#Terms) [Accessed 09 October 2015].

14 Kapparis, K. (2003) "Women and Family in Athenian Law," in A. Lanni, ed., "Athen·ran Law in its Democratic Context". *Center for Hellenic Studies On-line Discussion Serles.*

15 ICapparis, K. (2003) "Women and Family in Athenian Law," in A. Lanni, ed., "Athenian Law in its Democratic Context". *Center for Hellenic Studies On-line Discussion Series.*

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## Aristotle, *The Economics,* trans. Edward Walford (1876) London, George Bell and Sons. Aristotle, *The Poetics,* trans. S. H. Butcher (1902) London, Macmillan and Co.

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## Greek Tragic Terms. (2015). Greek Tragic Terms. [ONLINE] Available at; [http://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/greek.htm#Terms.](http://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/greek.htm#Terms) [Accessed 09 October 2015].

Kapparis, K. (2003) "Women and Family in Athenian Law," In A. Lanni, ed., "Athenian Law in Its Democratic Context". *Center for Hellenic Studies On-Line Discussion Series.*

Sophocles, *The Antigone,* trans. Robert Fagles (1984) London, Penguin.

**Overall grade decision**

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| KU1 | The student demonstrates in-depth knowledge and critical understanding of the ideas within *Antigone*, of Sophocles’ purpose working with his audience, of the cultural context within which Sophocles and his audience were operating |
| KU3 | Insightful knowledge and understanding of the concepts of Greek tragedy, of how Aristotelian elements are played out within *Antigone*. These are woven throughout the entirety of the paper and the student’s insight into their purpose reflected in the insightful final sentence. |
| RA1 | The student has researched comprehensively into the primary texts of *Antigone* and into the secondary texts and primary material on Aristotle. The student’s critical analysis of the secondary material and Aristotle has been applied back into *Antigone*. The student has analysed the perspective of Sophocles but not critiqued the perspective of the secondary sources. This is one piece in a folio and that skill would be looked for in another piece to confirm the grade band. |
| A1 | Comprehensive synthesis of research material and excellent footnoting and intertextual referencing.  This file has been adapted from a PDF and any errors in the footnoting formatting are due to the conversion and not the student. |
| A2 | Clear argument, precisely communicated through disciplined essay structure, precise use of terminology and persuasively illustrated. |
| **The overall grade decision is A+** | |