

Preparing for A105: *The Island*

From Book 3, *Cultural Encounters*, Chapter 6 Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes*, Resources, pp.221-2.

Reading 6.1

A Greek tragedy for our times

A sister defies the law to bury an outlawed brother denied burial by official decree. The king sees no humanity in her act, only betrayal. The chorus, society, looks on, compromised by the need to comply with a ruler intent on revenge.

Sounds familiar? Sounds contemporary? Of course it does: by such ruthlessness is power maintained. Or is it? The story is not a new one. The Greek tragedian Sophocles of Athens, who lived in the fifth century BC, wrote *Antigone*, the first of his Theban plays, as a study of conflict. Antigone mourns her dead brother and breaks the law. King Creon exceeds the dictates of power, a dangerous overreaching. His son, Haemon, instead of marrying Antigone, must reject his father; he chooses to die with his bride-to-be.

It is a chilling tale and a timeless one. Antigone's dilemma is a fundamental issue of honour. The play remains a foundation text of European theatre. Brecht was drawn to it. As was Anouilh. The French playwright revisited the play for his version, which was performed in 1942 during the German occupation. Initially reacting to the drama as theatre, audiences were to slowly grasp that Creon, a plausible enough characterisation, personified Vichy compromise, while Antigone was none other than France at its most idealistic. The politics of *Antigone* would never be lost on an artist as politically alert as Seamus Heaney, the Nobel laureate in literature.

An autobiographical but never confessional writer, Heaney the poet – who has always remained a teacher in the most honourable and generous sense of the word – is at once direct and complex; his response to the political remains shrewdly subtle.

'I taught *Antigone* to college students in a Belfast teacher-training college in 1963. I talked about it in relation to Aristotle and Greek tragedy. Five years later, in October 1968, I read Conor Cruise O'Brien in the *Listener* using *Antigone* to illuminate the conflict in Northern Ireland – the conflict that is within individuals as well as within the society. Antigone and her sister, Ismene, represent two opposing impulses that often co-exist: the impulse to protect and rebel and the impulse to conform for the sake of a quiet life. From that moment on Antigone was more than a piece of the academic syllabus: it was a lens that helped to inspect reality more clearly.'

[...]

Antigone is a play that has endured, while Antigone as a character continues to impress and inspire as a heroine of conscience as well as courage. And it is that conscience, even more than the courage, that has inspired other writers to observe her, and the play, again and again.

[...]

Source: Eileen Battersby (2004) 'A Greek tragedy for our times', *The Irish Times*, 3 April (City Edition; Weekend), p. 55.