FOR USE IN SCHOOLS AND LIBRARIES ONLY. Disaster follows when Creon, King of Thebes, forbids Antigone to bury her brother whom he has declared a traitor.

My Personal Review:
Antigone is that kind of literary work that invites opposing views. The state and the individual, the duties to family and country, the boundaries of legitimate government and the extent of personal choice, are all elements that find a voice in this play, an extraordinary gift of Western culture to the world. The young and stubborn Antigone finds herself breaking the law that her uncle, the old and stubborn Kreon, has enacted. This is Oedipus family, so there must be bloodshed. The conflict develops out of the vengeful and, ultimately foolish law that Kreon has come up with, which denies burial rituals to one of Antigones brothers (Polyneices) because he had sided with foreigners and made war against his city. Antigone claims that Justice (diké) tells her to care for her brothers body in spite of his treason. This is what Kreon, blind with hatred, cannot see. Just as Oedipus, and even worse, Kreon imagines conspiracies where there are none, and is convinced that the entire city is seething with traitors waiting for a signal to bring him down. With such a state of mind, he charges against Antigone, and she is very much her fathers daughter: she will not bow before her uncle although the consequences are grave. Kreon represents the state, but a state whose laws are capricious at best, and simply bad and hurtful at worst. Antigone is not easy to love or like: she is bent on following a path that will lead to her death, welcoming such a release from the terrible burden of being who she is: daughter of her brother Oedipus and granddaughter of her mother Jocasta. But Antigones own prickly character makes her struggle all the more admirable, since it is so difficult to like her. It would have been relatively easy to create a soft, misunderstood heroine who dies for her convictions. Antigone is a strong woman who knows perfectly well what she is doing, but feels she has a duty to do it. She is harsh toward the timid Ismene, and unsparing of Kreon, the ruler who seems to be a far better warrior than a governor. I know there are readings of this play that see Kreon as representing democracy (he asks the chorus to lead him when they go after Antigone, attempting to prevent her death), while Antigone would represent the corrupt values of the reactionary aristocracy that puts family before civic duty. I think this is a serious misreading of a very important play: Kreon is
no more democratic than Antigone; they are both immersed in a power play: she from an apparent position of weakness, although she is strong, and he from an apparent position of strength which he tries to reinforce with harsh measures and words toward those who dare violate his laws. Antigone is no reactionary. Her father had been Tyranos (ruler without the negative connotations of tyrant) in Thebes, which is exactly the same position that Kreon holds now. If Antigone is an aristocrat, so is Kreon, Jocasta’s brother. If Antigone only sees duty toward her family (she actually sees duty mostly towards her family), Kreon is deranged in power, believing that vast conspiracies are at work and that only he stands between order and utter chaos, a common feature of dictators great and petty. His law regarding the body of Polyneices violates the sphere of female duty (women were in charge of the rituals for the dead), and spills into the netherworld, ruling against a dead man who has paid with his life for his acts. This law also punishes Antigone and Ismene just for being family: they cannot even mourn Polyneices. Clearly this is not the working of democracy in our modern sense of the word, but neither it is the faulty, deeply troubled democracy of the Greek city-states. The chorus tells Kreon that he can enact such laws and condemn people to death because he is the ruler, but it does not tell him that he is right. To see Kreon as defender of democracy and Antigone as a reactionary woman who has no civic duty is to find obscure meanings where there are none. Sophocles is quite clear at the plays end regarding what was right and who was wrong. This is a political play, written and produced in a highly sophisticated and political society 2500 years ago. It is obvious that Antigone has lost none of its power and ability to make us debate, ponder, and discuss laws, government, individuals, and those who rule over them.

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