Ancient Greek burial practices were highly regulated and the Greek funerary ritual consisted of three parts: the prothesis, the ekphora and the perideipnon. The funeral allowed for the surviving relatives to show the depth of their familial pride and the strength of their kinship ties. It also provided an opportunity for families to display their wealth and prove their status by staging elaborate funerals and mourning in a public fashion. Ultimately, the ancient Greek funeral can reveal much about the Greeks’ attitudes towards things like the importance of family and the nature of the afterlife.

The Prothesis
The prothesis refers to the laying out and display of the body. First, the deceased’s closest relative closed the eyes and mouth, sometimes placing a coin either between the teeth or on the mouth as payment for Charon to take him across the River Styx. Next, the body was washed, usually by female relatives. It was then dressed in the type of clothing that befitted the deceased’s status in life. For example, if a person was recently married, he or she wore wedding attire in death. If the deceased was a soldier, he was buried in his armor. After the body was properly dressed, it was placed on a bed and displayed so that loved ones could come and pay their final respects.

Formal Mourning
The formal mourning period thus began during the prothesis. In general, there was a distinction between the way men and women mourned. Men typically did not show emotion and behaved in a formal and detached manner. In artistic representations of the prothesis, the male head of the family often waited to greet guests some distance from the body. The female relatives, in contrast, stood near the body, wailing and gesturing wildly, including pulling at their hair. The chief mourner was the mother or the wife of the deceased. She stood near the head and often held it in her hands in grief.

The Ekphora
Following the prothesis, the body was then transferred to the place of interment in a funerary procession called the ekphora. The procession took place at night and included multiple stops at intersections so that the mourners could attract a large amount of public attention (and therefore honor for the deceased). Initially, these mourners were family members but later they were replaced by professional mourners and performers, including musicians and singers. Once at the grave, both inhumation and cremation were practiced with varying levels of popularity, depending on the time period and the geographic location. Unfortunately, very little is known about the actual interment, as it is rarely represented in art or literature of the ancient period.

The Perideipnon and Beyond
The interment was followed by a funerary banquet called the perideipnon. Typically performed in the home of the deceased, the perideipnon was similar to any other banquet except for the fact that it was held in honor of the dead. Unlike later Roman tradition, the Greeks did not imagine the dead partaking in the feast either with them or in the afterlife; rather, the feast was meant simply as commemoration. After the funeral, offerings were made at the tomb on the third, ninth and 30th days after death, on the one-year anniversary and during certain universal festivals. As with the funeral, the type and structure of these offerings were highly regulated. Offerings included the sacrifice of animals, the donation of food and valuables and a reprise of mourning by female family members.
Introduction to the Theban Plays (adapted from Cummings Study Guide)

......The Theban Plays retell a mythological tale already familiar to the Greeks. Why, then, would Athenians attend the performance of a play with a plot well known to them? The answer, of course, is that they wanted to see how the events unfolded and how they affected the principal characters. If you saw the movie Titanic or Pearl Harbor, you were probably aware ahead of time that the Titanic sank and that Pearl Harbor was left in smoking ruins. Nevertheless, you saw these movies anyway because you wanted to see the persons involved and the events leading up to the tragedies. Athenians approached Sophocles' plays in the same way: They wanted to see how Sophocles told the story with his extraordinary writing and interpretive talents.

......The three Theban plays tell the continuing story of Oedipus and his daughter Antigone in the following order: (1) Oedipus Rex (also called Oedipus the King and Oedipus Tyrannus), (2) Oedipus at Colonus, and (3) Antigone. Because each play can stand alone as a separate dramatic unit and because Sophocles wrote the plays years apart and out of sequence, they technically do not make up a trilogy, although some writers refer to them as such. Most writers refer to them instead as ‘The Theban Plays.’ However, even this name is a misnomer, since the second play takes place at Colonus.

Dates Completed

......The probable date for the completion of Antigone was 441 B.C. and for Oedipus the King, 430 B.C. Oedipus at Colonus was produced posthumously in 401 B.C. However, as stated under ‘Sequence and Classification,’ the story Sophocles tells begins with Oedipus the King, continues with Oedipus at Colonus, and ends with Antigone.

Sophoclean Tragedy

......A tragedy of Sophocles, as well as another Greek playwright, is a verse drama written in elevated language in which a noble protagonist falls to ruin during a struggle caused by a flaw (hamartia) in his character, such as pride (hubris), or an error in his rulings or judgments. A Greek tragedy has the following characteristics:

- It is based on events that already took place. The audience is familiar with these events.
- The protagonist (main character) is a person of noble birth and stature.
- The protagonist has a weakness and, because of it, becomes isolated and suffers a downfall.
- Because the protagonist’s fall is not entirely his or her own fault, the audience may end up pitying him or her.
- The fallen protagonist gains self-knowledge. He has a deeper insight into himself and understands his weakness.
- The audience undergoes catharsis, a purging of emotions, after experiencing pity, fear, shock and other strong feelings. The people go away feeling better.
- The drama usually unfolds in one place in a short period of time, generally about one day.

Difference Between Tragedy and Comedy

......A Greek tragedy focuses on a great and noble character—such as Oedipus, a king—but a Greek comedy usually does not. Also, in a comedy, the author usually pokes fun at the characters. Finally, a comedy does not end tragically. An example of a classic Greek comedy is Lysistrata, by Aristophanes.

Role of the Chorus

......The chorus generally had the following roles in the plays of Sophocles:

- To explain the action
- To interpret the action in relation to the law of the state and the law of the Olympian gods
- To foreshadow the future
- To serve as an actor in the play
- To sing and/or dance
- To present the author’s views.

In some ways, the chorus is like the narrator of a modern film or like the background music accompanying the action of the film. In addition, it is like text on the film screen that provides background information or identifies the time and place of the action.

Pride (Hubris or Hybris) as a Character Flaw

......Pride was considered a grave sin because it placed too much emphasis on individual will, thereby downplaying the will of the state and endangering the community as a whole. Because pride makes people unwilling to accept wise counsel, they act rashly and make bad decisions. Great pride, such as that of Oedipus (Oedipus Rex) or Creon (Antigone), is referred to as hybris or hubris.