Oedipus the King Study Guide

Oedipus the King by Sophocles

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Introduction

Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* is probably the most famous tragedy ever written. It is known by a variety of title (the most common being *Oedipus Rex*), including *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Sophocles, first produced the play in Athens around 430 B.C. at the Great Dionysia, a religious and cultural festival held in honor of the god Dionysus, where it won second prize. In the play Oedipus, King of Thebes, upon hearing that his city is being ravaged by fire and plague, sends his brother-in-law Creon to find a remedy from the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi. When Creon returns Oedipus begins investigating the death of his predecessor, Laius, and discovers through various means that he himself was the one who had unknowingly killed Laius and then married his own mother, Jocasta. Jocasta commits suicide, Oedipus blinds himself, takes leave of his children, and is led away. Aristotle praises the play in his *Poetics* for having an exemplary, well- constructed plot, one which is capable of inspiring fear and pity not only in its audience but especially in those who have merely heard of the story. Following Aristotle's appraisal, many prominent authors including Voltaire, Fredench Nietzsche, and Sidmund Freud reacted at length to the play's themes of incest and patricide. In the twentieth century, the most influential of these thinkers, Freud, showed that Oedipus's fate is that of every man; the "Oedipus Complex" is the definitive parent-child relationship. Throughout history, writers have drawn upon the myth of Oedipus, and dramatists, composers, and poets, including Pierre Corneille, Frednch von Schiller, Heinrich von Kleist, William Butler Yeats, *Ezra* Pound, Igor Stravinsky, and Jean Cocteau, have both written on, translated, and staged the tragedy; contemporary filmmakers such as Pier Paolo Pasolini and Woody Allen have directed self-consciously autobiographical versions of *Oedipus Rex*,

Author Biography

Sophocles was born in Colonus, Greece, c. 496 B.C. and died in Athens c. 406 B.C. The son of an armor manufacturer, he was a member of a family of considerable rank, was well-educated, and held a number of significant political positions in addition to being one of the best dramatists in his age an age in which his dramatic peers included the famed playwrights Euripides and Aeschylus. Sophocles studied under the musician Lampras and under Aeschylus, later becoming his rival. He lived and wrote during an era known as the Golden Age of Athens (480-406 B.C.); in 480 and 479 B.C. the city had won the battles of Salamis and Plataea against Persian invaders, thereby inaugurating what would become a definitive period in the history of Western literature and society, famed for its flourishing political and cultural life. The Golden Age lasted until Athens's humiliating defeat to Sparta in 404 B.C., after 27 years of war between the two city-states (commonly referred to as the Peloponnesian War),

In many ways, the dramatic arts stood at the center of the cultural achievements of the Golden Age, and the popularity and success of the plays of Sophocles were evident in his own day. His works were produced at the Great Dionysia in Athens, an annual festival honoring (he god Dionysus and culminating in the famous dramatic competitions, Sophocles won first prize over twenty times in the competition, beginning with *Triptolemos* in 468 B.C., the first year that Aeschylus lost the contest to him. Euripides lost to Sophocles in 438 B.C. Unfortunately, *Triptolemos* is one among many of Sopho-cles's lost plays. He is purported 10 have written over one hundred tragedies yet only seven have survived to the modern era: *Ajox* (c. 450 B.C.); *Antigone* (c. 442 B.C.); *Ichneutai* (translated as *The Trackers*,, c. 440 B.C.); *The Trachiniae* (c. 440-430 B.C.); *Oedipus The King* (c. 430-426 B.C.); *Electro*(c. 425-510 B.C.); *Philoctetes* (409 B.C.); and *Oedipus at Colonus* (c. 405 B.C.),

While there is some dispute among scholars as to their actual relationship, three of Sophocles's surviving works are thought to comprise a trilogy. Known as the Theban Trilogy the plays are *Antigone*, *Oedipus The King*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. All of these plays draw upon the ancient story of Oedipus, King of Thebes.
The sources for Sopho-cles's version of this legendary tale are thought to include Book XI of Homer's *Odyssey,* two ancient epic poems entitled the *Oedipodeia* and the *Thebais*, and four plays by Aeschylus, including *Seven against Thebes*,

In addition to being a dramatist and a public official, Sophocles also was a priest of the god Amynos, a healer, He married a woman named Nicostrata and had two sons, lophon and Agathon.

Plot Summary

Prologue

Oedipus Rex begins outside King Oedipus's palace, where despondent beggars and a priest have gathered and brought branches and wreaths of olive leaves. Oedipus enters and asks the people ofThebes why they pray and lament, since apparently they have come together to petition him with an unknown request. The Priest speaks on their behalf, and Oedipus assures them that he will help them. The Priest reports that Thebes has been beset with horrible calamities famine, fires, and plague have all caused widespread suffering and death among their families and animals, and their crops have all been destroyed. He beseeches Oedipus, whom he praises for having solved the riddle of the Sphinx (an action which justified his succession to King Laws, as Jocasta's husband and as king) to cure the city of its woes. Oedipus expresses his profound sympathy and announces that he sent Creon, the Queen's brother, to Delphi to receive the Oracle of Apollo, in order to gain some much-needed guidance.

Creon arrives and Oedipus demands, against Creon's wishes, that he report the news in front of the gathered public. Creon reports that the gods caused the plague as a reaction against the murder of their previous king, Laius, and that they want the Thebans to "drive out pollution sheltered in our land"; in other words, to find the murderer and either kill or exile him (Laius had been killed on the roadside by a highwayman). Oedipus vows to root out this evil. In the next scene, the chorus of Theban elders calls upon the gods Apollo, Athena, and Artemis to save them from the disaster,

Act I

Declaring his commitment to finding and punishing Laius's murderer, Oedipus says that he has sent for Teiresias, the blind prophet. After much pleading and mutual antagonism, Oedipus makes Teiresias say what he knows: that it was Oedipus who killed Laius. Outraged at the accusations Oedipus calls him a "fortuneteller" and a "deceitful beggar-priest." Both are displaying what in Greek is called *orge*, or anger, towards each other. Oedipus suspects the seer of working on Creon's behalf (Creon, as Laius's brother, was and still is a potential successor to the throne). Teiresias thinks the king mad for not believing him and for being blind to his fate (not to mention ignorant of his true parentage). Oedipus then realizes that he does not know who his real mother is. Teiresias is led out while saying that Oedipus will be discovered to be a brother as well as a father to his children, a son as well as a husband to the same woman, and the killer of his father. He exits and the Chorus enters, warning of the implications of the decisive, oracular charges against Oedipus.

Act II

Creon expresses great desire to prove his innocence to Oedipus, who is continues to assert that Creon has been plotting to usurp the throne. Creon denies the accusations, saying he is quite content and would not want the cares and responsibilities that come with being king. Oedipus calls for his death. Jocasta, having heard their quarrel, enters and tries to pacify them, and the Chorus calls for proof of Creon's guilt before Oedipus punishes him. Jocasta reminds Oedipus of Apollo's oracle and also of the way Laius died. She recounts the story as it was told to her by a servant who was there at the crossroads where a charioteer and an old man attacked a man who in turn killed them. Hearing the tale, Oedipus realizes that he was the murderer and asks to consult the witness, the shepherd, who is sent for. The Chorus expresses its trust in the gods and prays to Heaven for a restoration of faith in the oracle.

Act III

Jocasta prays to Apollo to restore Oedipus's sanity, since he has been acting strange since hearing the manner in which Laius's died. A messenger tells her that King Polybos (the man Oedipus believes to be his father) has died and that the people of Isthmus want Oedipus to rule over them. Oedipus hopes this news means that the oracle is false (he hasn't killed his father since Polybos has died of old age), but he still fears that he is destined marry his mother. The messenger tells him that Polybos was not his father and that he, a shepherd, had been handed the child Oedipus by another shepherd, one of Laius's men. Jocasta tries to intervene and stop the revelations, but Oedipus welcomes the news.

Act IV

The shepherd enters and tells Oedipus, after a great deal of resistance, that he is Laius's son and that he had had him taken away to his own country by the messenger so as to avoid his fate. The chorus bewails the change in Oedipus from revered and fortunate ruler to one who has plunged into the depths of wretchedness.

ActV

A second messenger reports that Jocasta has just committed suicide, having realized that she was married to her son and thus had given birth to his children. He also reports that the king, suffering intensely upon hearing the news of his identity, blinded himself with the Queen's brooches. Oedipus has also requested that he be shown to the people of Thebes and then exiled; he comes out, bewildered and crying, asking for shelter from his painful memory, which cannot be removed as easily his eyes could be.

In the darkness of his blindness he wishes he were dead and feels the prophetic weight of the oracle. His blindness will allow him to avoid the sight of those whom he was

destined to wrong and toward whom he feels immense sorrow and guilt. He asks Creon to lead him out of the country, to give Jocasta a proper burial, and to take care of his young daughters, Antigone (who comes to play a central role in the play named after he) and Ismene. In an extremely moving final moment with his children (who, he reminds himself, are also his siblings), Oedipus hears them and asks to hold their hands for the last time. He tells them they will have difficult lives and will be punished by men for sins they did not commit; for this reason he implores Thebes to pity them. He asks Creon again to exile him, and in his last speech he expresses regret at having to depart from his beloved children. The Chorus ends the play by using Oedipus's story to illustrate the famous moral that one should not judge a man's life until it is over.

Scene 1

Scene 1 Summary

The scene opens in Thebes in front of the palace of Oedipus. A priest leads a group of worshipers by the altar at the palace doors. Oedipus, the king, enters and asks the worshipers why they are there, and why they are grieving. He asks the priest to be the spokesman and tell him what is wrong.

The priest tells Oedipus that the young and the old have come to him. Others are praying to the shrines of Pallas. The kingdom is undergoing disaster. The crops and herds are dying, and the people are suffering from plague.

The people have come to the palace of their beloved king, hoping that he can find some way to free them of the plague on the kingdom. Oedipus has saved the kingdom before, by answering the riddle of the Sphinx, and they call on him to save them again.

Oedipus replies, saying that his pain is greater than the pain of his suffering people, since each man has his own pain but as king, Oedipus suffers for them all. Oedipus longs to help his people, and he has sent Creon, his brother-in-law, to the oracle of Delphi, Pythian Phoebus, in the hopes that the oracle will tell him how to save the kingdom. Creon has been gone two days, and Oedipus wonders why he is not back already.

The priest sees Creon approaching as Oedipus speaks, and Creon looks cheerful. When Creon enters, Oedipus asks him for the news. Creon asks if Oedipus wants to hear the news in private, but Oedipus begs him to speak before the citizens. Creon tells the news that the plague is caused by a wrong that has happened in the kingdom. It must be avenged before the plague will stop.

Oedipus asks what wrong needs to be avenged, and Creon relates that before Oedipus became king, the king of the land was Laius, whom Oedipus says he never met. The gods command that the murderer of Laius must be punished, and then the plague will be lifted.

When Oedipus asks for specifics about how to find the murderer, Creon tells him that Laius was on his way to Delphi, when he was killed. One man fled the scene, and he said that a band of robbers attacked and murdered Laius. Oedipus suggests that the bandits might have been paid by someone, to be so bold as to kill the king, and Creon says that some troubles came up that prevented a full investigation.

Creon relates that, after Laius's death, the people were too upset by the Sphinx, which would kill and eat anyone entering Thebes, because no one could answer its riddle, to fully investigate. Oedipus promises that he will start the investigation and avenge Laius's death. Oedipus and Creon leave, and the priest takes the worshipers off.

The chorus calls on the oracle, daughter of Zeus, asking fearfully what is being brought upon them and then calls on the gods Athena and Artemis to save the city and defend them from the plague. The people are suffering, dying, and losing hope, and they call on the gods for help.

Scene 1 Analysis

Oedipus, like other plays from ancient Greece, is not formally divided into scenes. The scenes in Sophocles's drama take place in one setting and are only separated by interludes from the chorus, which represents the people and provides commentary on the action of the play.

The first scene of *Oedipus* sets up the action and some of the back-story. Oedipus became king of Thebes after answering the riddle of the Sphinx and saving the city from the monster. Thebes was without a king at the time, because Laius had been murdered. Now, many years later, there is a great plague on Thebes.

Creon comes back from the oracle with the news of how to stop the plague. He tells Oedipus that he must find and kill the murderer of the former king, Laius, in order to stop the plague. Although Creon and Oedipus are pleased that they know how to stop the plague, the audiences of the time would already be familiar with the story of Oedipus. They would know that the man who killed Laius is, in reality, Oedipus, although Oedipus does not yet realize it. As the audience knows more than the characters themselves, this causes dramatic irony throughout the play and creates a buildup of tension.

Prophecies from the gods play an important role in the drama of *Oedipus*. The prophets are always right, and defying the prophets always leads to tragedy. The first prophecy in the play appears in this scene, when Creon brings back the news that the plague will be abated, when the murder of Laius is avenged. Natural forces do not cause plague. Instead, everything is controlled by the gods, and disasters like plague are caused, when the gods' moral law has been broken.

The primary theme of Oedipus is fate versus free will. As the story develops, it will become clear that defying the gods' will is the worst action a man can take. Oedipus and his parents try to assert free will by defying the gods and trying to avoid the prophecies of the oracle. This leads eventually to the tragic fulfillment of these prophecies.

The individual versus society is a subtler theme of this drama. The idea that one cannot escape one's fate means that a person is inevitably punished for any crime against the will of the gods (and moral law.) The plague on society is the harm caused to society by Oedipus's ultimately selfish attempt to defy the prophecies and will of the gods. One cannot righteously act merely for one's own benefit. One must succumb to the will of the gods.

As king of Thebes, Oedipus is of course concerned about the society, his kingdom. The plague on Thebes is literally harm to society caused indirectly by the actions of an individual. Oedipus learns in the first scene that an individual, the murderer of Laius, has harmed the society. Breaking a moral law causes this harm, even though Oedipus does not know he is the law-breaker and murderer.

Oedipus says to the people that as king, he suffers for all of the people, and his pain is greater than any other man's pain. Ironically, Oedipus, who suffers for all the people, is the cause of his people's pain. There are two sides to Oedipus. There is Oedipus the individual, who acts for himself, trying to avoid the will of the gods, and there is Oedipus the king, who takes on the responsibility of society and of the people. Ultimately, Oedipus the individual must be punished to fulfill the duties of Oedipus the king.

Scene 2

Scene 2 Summary

Oedipus enters and tells the people that while praying is good, they should seek to avenge the death of Laius as the oracle directed in order to alleviate their suffering. Oedipus knows nothing of the murder or how to find the murderer, since he was not a citizen of Thebes until after Laius's death.

He appeals to the citizens, asking that if anyone knows who killed Laius, they should come forward and tell Oedipus what they know. If someone is afraid to come forward, Oedipus says that whoever comes forward and confesses will not be punished by death, but will be banished from the kingdom with no harm to them. If a foreigner is known as the murderer, Oedipus offers a reward to anyone who turns him in. He warns people not to shield or protect the killer, since it is against both the gods and the murdered king. He curses both the murderer and any who protects him - himself included.

Oedipus is Laius's heir. He has taken over the throne of Thebes and also married Laius's wife, and he feels compelled to avenge Laius as if Laius were his father. He calls on the gods to punish any who disobey him by making their crops and wives barren. Then, Oedipus says that justice and all the gods should bless the loyal people of the kingdom.

The chorus, representing the people of Thebes, answers Oedipus by taking on his oath. They deny killing Laius, and they say that they do not know who killed him. They say that Phoebus, the oracle, should reveal who the murderer is.

Oedipus replies that the gods cannot be forced to speak, and the chorus suggests that the blind prophet Teiresias might be able to tell who the murderer is. Oedipus, it turns out, has already sent for Teiresias, and he is not sure why the prophet has not yet arrived.

The chorus then says that there were rumors that travelers killed Laius, but Oedipus says that no one saw the man who killed him. When the chorus replies that the murderer must be struck with fear by Oedipus's curses, Oedipus replies, "Words scare not him who blenches not at deeds."

Teiresias enters, led by a boy. Oedipus asks the prophet for his help, saying that the messenger has probably told Teiresias that they must find the murderer or Laius in order to lift the curse on their land. Teiresias responds that wisdom does no good, and it is miserable to be wise. Oedipus asks him what is wrong, and Teiresias asks to be released and go home. Oedipus scolds him that he is not a patriot if he would rather let the kingdom suffer than reveal through prophecy who the murderer is.

Oedipus continues to implore Teiresias to speak, but Teiresias refuses, hinting that his prophecy would reveal some sorrow for Oedipus. The king reminds Teiresias that by not speaking, he is dooming the land to suffer from plague and pestilence, but Teiresias remains steadfast. Oedipus calls him a monster and asks if nothing will make him talk, and Teiresias says that Oedipus doesn't know what he is asking. They continue to argue, but Teiresias will not reveal his prophecy.

Oedipus has grown increasingly angry, and he refuses to control his tongue. He says that Teiresias must be the man who both planned the crime and carried it out, except for the actual murder. If Teiresias weren't blind, Oedipus would think he was the murderer, too, without an accomplice.

Oedipus's accusation pushes Teiresias over the edge. He is finally compelled to speak. Teiresias says that Oedipus is the murderer and must now abide by his promise to avenge Laius's death. Oedipus is shocked and calls Teiresias a slanderer, but Teiresias maintains that it is the truth.

Oedipus asks who told Teiresias to accuse him of murder, and Teiresias responds that it was Oedipus, goading him into telling the truth. Oedipus still doesn't believe what he's heard, and Teiresias repeats that Oedipus himself is the murderer that he is trying to find.

Then Teiresias says that Oedipus is unwittingly committing incest, and Oedipus asks if Teiresias thinks he can get away with such accusations. Teiresias repeats that it is the truth. Oedipus refuses to believe him, insulting the prophet.

Oedipus still imagines that Teiresias is in some plot against him, and he asks if Creon is behind the accusations. Teiresias continues to put the blame on Oedipus for his actions. Then Oedipus cries out his misery, saying that the crown, which he did not seek, has caused his friend Creon to turn against him. He questions whether Teiresias is really a prophet, asking him why he did not reveal the answer to the Sphinx's riddle, when the country was plagued with that monster.

The chorus intervenes, saying that both Teiresias and Oedipus seem to be speaking in anger and ignoring the real issue of how to alleviate the blight and plague. Teiresias says that Oedipus may be king, but he can still speak freely. He denies being in league with Creon. Since Oedipus has insulted Teiresias for his blindness, calling him blind in his wits as well as in his eyes, Teiresias turns the insult around. Oedipus has eyes, but he does not see his true situation. He tells Oedipus that he does not know his true ancestry nor whom he is living with as husband and wife. Without knowing it, Oedipus is the enemy of his relatives, living and dead.

Teiresias prophesies that one day, the curse of Oedipus's mother and father will drive him out of Thebes and cause him to blind himself. Oedipus will cry out with misery and there will be no comfort for him. No one will be punished worse than Oedipus, the prophet predicts.

Oedipus tells Teiresias to leave and never come back, and Teiresias argues that he only came, because Oedipus called for him. When Teiresias mentions that Oedipus's parents knew him to be wise, Oedipus immediately questions the prophet. Who were his parents? When Teiresias says that today will be Oedipus's birthday and his death, Oedipus says he is speaking in riddles. Teiresias alludes to the fact that Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinxes, asking who else is as good at understanding riddles? Teiresias says that Oedipus's skill with riddles was both his gift and his curse, and prepares to depart.

Before Teiresias leaves, he wants to tell Oedipus why he came. He doesn't fear the king's wrath, and he tells Oedipus that the murderer he seeks is in Thebes. Everyone thinks that the man is a foreigner, but he will soon be proven to be a native Thebian. Teiresias predicts that the man will soon be blind, impoverished and exiled from Thebes. The murderer will be revealed as both the brother and father of his own children, both son and husband of his wife, and the murderer of his father. He tells Oedipus to consider his prophesy, and if Teiresias is incorrect, then Oedipus may say that the prophet has no wit or prophetic ability. Teiresias and Oedipus leave.

The chorus asks who the murderer Teiresias described could be and says that fate is pursuing him for his deeds. The chorus is troubled by Teiresias's prophecy, wondering whether the prophet spoke the truth. The people do not know of any reason why Oedipus would murder Laius, and Oedipus saved the city from the Sphinx. The people do not want to believe that Oedipus could be the murderer.

Scene 2 Analysis

Unbeknownst to himself, Oedipus condemns himself to death or banishment in this second scene. In his role as king, he curses the murderer and any who help him. Oedipus, speaking for society, ironically and unknowingly places this curse on himself, the individual.

This scene also introduces the blind prophet Teiresias. Blindness is an important motif in the play. Ironically, it is the blind man who can see the truth clearly, while Oedipus cannot see that he fulfills the qualifications of Teiresias's prophecy. Teiresias initially refuses to reveal what he knows, because Oedipus will not accept Teiresias's prophecy, as becomes clear, when Oedipus finally goads the prophet into speech. Oedipus himself relentlessly pursues a truth that he doesn't want to know and cannot accept.

One can say that Oedipus is willfully blind to his actions. As Oedipus searches for the truth, he cannot see that it is right in front of him. He does not want to acknowledge that he has killed his father and married his own mother. He knows the prophecy about himself, but he refuses to relate it to Teiresias's words.

Both Oedipus and Jocasta have heard similar prophecies about themselves, which will be further revealed as the story progresses, and eventually the weight of evidence will grow to great to counter Oedipus's denial. In the meantime, Oedipus would rather

believe that he is being betrayed by his close relation and confidant Creon than that he has fulfilled the prophecy by committing patricide and incest.

In Teiresias the blind prophet, the ideas of blindness and prophecy are closely linked, and one interpretation of Teiresias's blindness is that to see what affects the "all," a person needs to lack the ability to see what affects him or her personally. Teiresias's blindness can be interpreted as a giving up of self in order to achieve something greater than self (society or community.) Teiresias does not see his own personal world. Instead, he sees the world as the gods see it. He sees the truth clearly, because he is not "blinded" by his own personal vision.

Oedipus, on the other hand, has his own personal point of view. He sees what is in his own best interests. Oedipus wants the outcome to be good for him (i.e. he doesn't want to be the murderer,) and this causes him to embrace the conspiracy theory about Creon and Teiresias. It is better that Creon should betray him than that he should have fulfilled the prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother.

Oedipus is as obstinate in not listening to Teiresias's prophecy as he is in demanding to hear it. His own self-vision blinds him to overarching truth. Only with blindness to self comes true vision.

Scene 3

Scene 3 Summary

Creon enters, protesting that Oedipus has charged him with conspiring with Teiresias against the king, and the chorus tells him that Oedipus's words were spoken in anger, thoughtlessly. Creon asks if Oedipus said he'd told Teiresias to lie and whether the king was out of his mind. The chorus does not know what was in Oedipus's mind, saying that they were "blind" to his meanings.

Oedipus enters. He asks what Creon is doing there and accuses him of seeking Oedipus's crown. Does Creon think that Oedipus is a fool or a coward, to try to usurp his position this way? Creon responds that he is not plotting against Oedipus and says that Oedipus is being stubborn and unreasonable.

Creon asks Oedipus to tell him exactly what Oedipus is accusing him of, and Oedipus notes that Creon was the one who asked him to call Teiresias. Then Oedipus asks Creon to recall how long ago Laius was murdered, which Creon says was years ago. Then, Creon admits, at Oedipus's prompting, that Teiresias was acting as a prophet, when Laius was killed. Creon also admits, at Oedipus's prompting, that the prophet never seemed to accuse Oedipus at the time of Laius's death, and the prophet did not reveal at that time who murdered Laius.

Creon does not know why Teiresias would wait until now to give his prophecy, but Oedipus doesn't believe him. Creon then asks to question Oedipus. He first asks if Oedipus married Creon's sister, and Oedipus says that clearly he did. Then Creon confirms that as the queen, his sister shares Oedipus's throne, and Creon as well shares in the ruling of the kingdom.

Creon reasons that no man would choose a troubled reign rather than a secure one, and he denies having any desire for the title of king, since he has the power of shared rule with Oedipus. His current situation, where Oedipus fulfills all his needs, is much better than taking on the responsibility of rule. He tells Oedipus that, if he doesn't believe Creon, the king should go to Delphi to find out if Creon's report from the oracle was accurate. Then Oedipus should investigate to find out if Creon has conspired with Teiresias, and if he discovers that Creon is lying, Oedipus can condemn him to death. Creon asks that Teiresias not condemn him only on his suspicion, though.

The chorus agrees with Creon that quick judgements are not the best, but Oedipus says that he must act quickly to counter the one who is plotting against him. Creon asks what Oedipus plans, and Oedipus says that Creon must die. The two argue, but Oedipus will not listen to Creon, saying that he must defend himself and trust his own judgement as king. The chorus calls on them to stop arguing, and Jocasta, Oedipus's wife, comes from the palace.

Jocasta appeals to Creon and Oedipus to stop their fight, especially considering the plague that is on the land, and Creon reveals that Oedipus has given him the option of death or exile. Oedipus maintains that Creon is conspiring against him, and Creon denies it. Jocasta defends Creon, not believing that he would conspire against Oedipus. The chorus joins her in asking Oedipus to reconsider and not condemn Creon.

The chorus swears by the sun that they wish no ill on Oedipus. The trouble between Creon and Oedipus is, they consider, a further blight on the already troubled kingdom. Oedipus reluctantly consents to let Creon go, for the sake of the people. Creon leaves, still in Oedipus's bad graces.

Jocasta asks how the fight between Creon and Oedipus came about, but the chorus will only say that rumors caused the suspicion and that both were at fault. The chorus begs the rulers to put the issue behind them and maintains that the people support Oedipus and wish him no harm. Jocasta then begs Oedipus to tell her what caused the disagreement.

Oedipus tells Jocasta that Creon is plotting against him, and Jocasta asks him to tell her exactly what caused the fight. Then Oedipus says that Creon accused him of murdering Laius. When Jocasta questions Oedipus further, Oedipus says that Creon delivered the story through the words of the prophet.

Jocasta, trying to calm Oedipus, tells him that all prophets are false. As example, she tells him of an oracle who came to Laius and prophesied that Laius would be killed by his own son, a child that Laius would bear with Jocasta. However, highwaymen, at a crossroads where three roads meet, killed Laius instead, it is reported, on the rod. Laius and Jocasta had a child, but when it was three days old, Laius pinned its ankles together and sent it to be abandoned on the mountain.

Jocasta ends her tale by restating that the child was not the murderer of its father, Laius, and the prophecy was not fulfilled. She tells Oedipus to disregard what the prophet Teiresias said, since there are no true prophets.

Oedipus exclaims that Jocasta's story has caused him great distress, and Jocasta asks him what is wrong. Then Oedipus confirms that Laius was killed where three roads meet. He questions her to find out where exactly the murder occurred. Jocasta tells her that the area is called Phocis, and the intersection is where roads from Delphi and from Daulis meet. Oedipus then asks how long ago Laius was killed, and Jocasta says that it was shortly before Oedipus was made the king of Thebes.

Oedipus exclaims to Zeus, and Jocasta asks again what is the matter. Then Oedipus begs Jocasta to tell him what Laius looked like, and Jocasta describes him as tall, with some gray in his hair, and with a build similar to Oedipus.

Oedipus again wails, and he says that he fears the prophet will prove right. Then he asks Jocasta one more question. Did Laius have only a few attendants, or did he have a train of armed guards? Jocasta responds that there were only five men with Laius, and

one of them was a herald. Laius was riding in a mule-car. Finally, Oedipus says that all is clear to him.

He asks who brought the report of Laius's death to Thebes, and Jocasta says that it was a serf, the only one who survived. When Oedipus asks if this serf is around, Jocasta says that, when the man returned and found Oedipus as king, he begged her to send him as far away from Thebes as possible. Since he was an honest man, Jocasta sent him away as he wished.

Oedipus says that he must see the man, but he refuses to tell Jocasta why until he talks to the witness. Jocasta asks him to share his burden, even if he may be wrong, and Oedipus consents.

Oedipus's father, he tells Jocasta, was Polybus of Corinth and his mother was a Dorian named Merope. He was honored in his home until at a banquet, a drunk man yelled out that Oedipus was not his father's son. Oedipus was annoyed and spoke to his mother and father about it the next day. They tried to reassure him, but the rumor spread.

Oedipus went to the oracle at Delphi, but the gods would not answer his question. Instead, the oracle told him dark prophecies, that Oedipus would sleep with his mother and father her children and that Oedipus would kill his father.

As Oedipus approached the intersection of the three roads on his way back from Delphi, he met a herald and a man in a car, just as Jocasta described. The party threatened to drive Oedipus off the road, and Oedipus struck the chariot driver in anger. The man in the car in retaliation hit Oedipus in the head with a goad, a pointed rod. Oedipus hit the man with his staff, flinging him out of the car. Then, he killed the whole party.

Oedipus bemoans his fate if this man turns out to have been Laius. If it turns out that Oedipus killed Laius, then he has cursed himself. He has slept with the wife of the man he killed, and he is doomed to banishment, away from all those he loves. He says that he cannot go back to his home, for fear that he will marry his mother and kill his father, Polybus, as prophesied by the oracle.

The chorus joins Oedipus in fearing the worst, but they plead with him to hold onto hope until he is able to question the survivor. Oedipus has little hope, but still he will wait and talk to the surviving serf.

When Jocasta asks what Oedipus hopes to learn from the survivor, he replies that if the man's tale is the same as Jocasta's, then the man Oedipus killed cannot be Laius. Jocasta asks what point in her tale differed from Oedipus's experience, and Oedipus points out that in Jocasta's report, the serf said that robbers killed Laius. If the serf still claims that robbers killed Laius, then Oedipus cannot be the murderer, since he did not attempt to rob the king and since he is only one man, not the band of men the serf reported. However, if the serf changes his story and admits that one traveler killed them all, then Oedipus must be guilty.

Jocasta reassures Oedipus that the serf's story will remain the same. Everyone in the town heard the story. Besides, Jocasta again clings to the idea that prophets are false, since his son did not kill Laius, as was prophesied. Oedipus admires Jocasta's reasoning, but asks her to send for the serf nevertheless. Jocasta promises to do as Oedipus wishes, and the two exit.

The chorus reflects that they must still obey the laws of the gods and maintain their morality. The man who turns his back on the gods becomes a tyrant and a usurper of wealth, and then ruins himself. The chorus condemns the proud sinner who will not obey justice or honor the gods. The gods will punish one who attains fortune through greed or through denying the gods. The chorus cries out to the gods to reveal the truth behind Laius's death.

Scene 3 Analysis

In the beginning of this scene, the theme of individual versus society appears again. When Creon refutes the idea that he's trying to take over the throne by having Tiresias accuse Oedipus of the murder, he emphasizes all the troubles of being king. Being king is a kind of sacrifice, a selfless act for the good of the people. Why would any man want to take on the role of the king, which is subservient to the society?

In blindly pursuing his theory that Creon and Teiresias are conspiring to overthrow him, Oedipus is not acting as a true king. It is Oedipus the individual, not Oedipus the king, who pursues a personal battle against Creon. Jocasta and the chorus remind Oedipus of this, asking him to focus on the plague that is troubling the kingdom instead of focusing on Creon's alleged treason. Oedipus, however, does not want to shift his focus back to the issue of the plague and Laius's death. When he does, he finds that the circumstances of Laius's death are uncomfortably similar to the circumstances under which he killed a party of men after he fled his native kingdom.

This scene reveals much more of Oedipus and Jocasta's stories. The complete prophecies come out, and the audience is completely convinced that Oedipus has killed his father and married his mother, fulfilling all the prophecies that have been given.

Ironically, Jocasta presents Oedipus with the prophecy that the child she had with Laius would kill Laius and marry her as evidence that all prophets are false. Jocasta also seems willfully blind, and neither she nor Oedipus seems to recognize the bizarre coincidence of the two similar prophesies. The simple solution that fulfills the prophecy to Jocasta, the prophecy to Oedipus, and Teiresias's prophecy is that Jocasta and Laius are Oedipus's parents. The audience knows it, but Oedipus and Jocasta are reluctant to see it.

Note that if Oedipus had not fled from the prophecy, he would not have killed Laius, his true father, and married Jocasta, his true mother. Oedipus fleeing from the prophecy is a selfish act that leads him into the very thing he fears. He wants to save himself, and so he defies the will of the gods. Oedipus's selfishness and his value of his individual

wellbeing over the will of the gods (representing the good of society) lead to disaster for him as well as for the people of Thebes.

Jocasta and Laius also defy the will of the gods, when they attempt to escape the prophecy that their son will kill Laius and marry Jocasta. In their attempt to avoid fate, they unwittingly create the circumstances that allow the fate that has been laid out for them to unfold. In the story of Oedipus, there seems to be no true free will. Everything is governed by fate and by the desires of the gods.

When Oedipus kills his father, it's a selfish (individual-centered) act, because Oedipus is only responding to his own need for vengeance after being almost run down. The play seems to promote acting for the good of the society over the good of the self. Ultimately, Oedipus must sacrifice himself to save Thebes. His pledge to ostracize or kill the murderer becomes a pledge to ostracize or kill himself. His role as king ultimately demands self-sacrifice for the society/community.

The play brings up interesting questions about leadership and the individual versus society. When do people have a tendency to only "see" what's best for them, like Oedipus, and to be blinded to what they don't want to see? When does a leader need to put aside his own needs and desires for the good of society? What does a leader need to sacrifice?

Since Oedipus is the king, the issues of individual versus society in *Oedipus the King* can be related to government today. When government leaders break the law, is this selfish or selfless? Are individuals merely trying to maintain power? (And what about Oedipus? Is he merely trying to maintain power?) Can it be good for the community? When and why? Who is asked to sacrifice for society and when? When do today's leaders make sacrifices like Oedipus did?

Scene 4

Scene 4 Summary

Jocasta enters and says that the people seem surprised to see her. She explains that she is on her way to visit the shrines, since Oedipus is so distressed that she could not comfort him. She prays to Apollo for help.

A messenger from Corinth enters and asks where Oedipus's palace is, and the chorus reveals that they are in front of the castle and that Oedipus is inside. The chorus explains that Jocasta is the queen, and the messenger greets her with blessings. Jocasta asks the messenger why he is there, and the messenger tells her that the Isthmians have decided to make Oedipus their king. When Jocasta inquires, she learns that Polybus, Oedipus's father and the former king, is dead.

Jocasta believes that this news proves that oracles, who predicted that Oedipus would kill his father, are false. She sends a woman to summon Oedipus, and Oedipus enters. He questions the messenger and learns that his father has died of old age. Oedipus begins to agree with Jocasta. The oracles predicted that Oedipus would slay his father, and yet Polybus is dead from old age. He declares the oracles just as dead as Polybus.

Jocasta is pleased that Oedipus has come to agree with her stance on oracles. Oedipus wonders whether he should still fear marrying his mother, as the oracle predicted, but Jocasta puts down this idea. Oedipus is still unsure, but his father's death has somewhat relieved his fears.

The messenger, listening to their conversation, asks why Oedipus is afraid of his mother, and Oedipus explains the prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. The messenger asks if he has not alleviated Oedipus's fear, and Oedipus says that he cannot come back to Corinth, because he will never go near his parents again.

The messenger tells Oedipus that his fears are baseless, and when Oedipus questions him, the messenger reveals that Polybus was not related to Oedipus. The messenger tells that he was the one who gave Oedipus to the childless Polybus, and that Polybus came to love Oedipus as a son.

The messenger continues that he found Oedipus in Cithaeron's wooded glens, where he was tending livestock in the mountains. He saved the baby Oedipus, whose ankles were pinned. Oedipus still feels the soreness of his injured ankles. When Oedipus asks who pinned his ankles, the messenger can't answer. He says that the man who gave him Oedipus, another shepherd, may know more.

When Oedipus questions the messenger about the other shepherd, the messenger says that he was from Laius's house. The messenger does not know if he is still alive. Oedipus asks if anyone knows the shepherd, and the chorus believes it is the same

man that Oedipus wants to see, the witness to Laius's death. Oedipus asks Jocasta to confirm this, but Jocasta asks Oedipus to leave the matter alone, not to inquire into it.

Oedipus, though, wants to know the secret of his birth, although Jocasta objects passionately. Oedipus misunderstands her objections, thinking that she is afraid he is of low birth, perhaps a slave. Jocasta begs him not to look into it further, but Oedipus refuses. They argue, and Jocasta finally exits, with Oedipus still resolved to find out the truth. The chorus expresses fear at the queen's reaction, but Oedipus is convinced that Jocasta is merely acting out of pride.

The shepherd enters, and Oedipus confirms with the Corinthian messenger that it is the same man who delivered Oedipus to him as a baby. Oedipus asks the messenger if he was a servant of Laius, and the man verifies it. The shepherd also confirms that he tended livestock in the mountains. Oedipus asks if he knows the messenger, but the shepherd says that he doesn't remember.

The messenger reminds the shepherd of their days together in the mountains, and the shepherd remembers. Then, the messenger questions him about the baby. When the herdsman asks why the messenger is asking about the baby, the messenger reveals that Oedipus is the grown child.

The shepherd responds with horror and swears at the messenger, then says that the messenger's question is the babbling of a fool. Oedipus threatens to arrest the man if he does not tell what he knows. Then, the shepherd admits that he gave the child to the messenger.

Reluctantly, the shepherd confesses that the baby was a child of Laius's house. When further questioned, the shepherd hesitates again. Finally, he tells Oedipus that the child was supposed to be Laius's own son and that he must ask Jocasta to confirm this. She gave the shepherd the child.

The shepherd was to kill the child, since it was foretold that the baby would grow up to kill his father. Out of pity, the shepherd gave the baby to the messenger, thinking that the baby would be out of the country and could not fulfill the prophecy. The shepherd realizes, though, that if Oedipus was the baby, the prophecy has been fulfilled. Oedipus realizes that he has, after all, lived the horrible prophecy he has worked so hard to avoid. He has, without knowing it, killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus exits.

The chorus bemoans the fate of Oedipus and the tenuous position of mankind, since good fortune can be wrecked in an instant. Oedipus, beyond all other men, was the beloved king, and now he is more disgraced and destroyed than any other man, with the sins of patricide and incest. The chorus wishes they had never seen him.

Scene 4 Analysis

In this scene, the news comes that Oedipus's stepfather, Polybus, is dead. This is welcome news to Oedipus. Although he suspects that he unwittingly killed Laius, he does not yet suspect that he was actually Laius's son.

Jocasta clings to her belief that all oracles are false, taking Polybus's death as proof that the prophecy about Oedipus is false instead of recognizing that Polybus's death means that Polybus was not truly Oedipus's father. Since the prophecy that she would marry her own son is so horrible, Jocasta cannot accept that prophecies are the true will of the gods.

Oedipus, however, cannot truly give up his belief in prophecies. He still fears marrying his mother and does not want to go back to his homeland. Although Oedipus fears the prophecy, he cannot succumb to its inevitability. He still believes in free will over fate. He is blind to the fact that the prophecy has already been fulfilled.

In another instance of irony, the messenger who hopes to alleviate Oedipus's fear actually provides the last clue to the puzzle of the prophecies. Jocasta's passionate objection to Oedipus delving into the mystery of his birth shows that she has begun to realize the truth. She pleads with Oedipus, as Teiresias did, to live blissfully in ignorance. "Ignorance is bliss" is perhaps a good statement of a third theme in *Oedipus the King*.

If Laius, Jocasta, and Oedipus never sought the truth through prophecies, perhaps they would have all lived together as a happy family of Thebes. Although Oedipus has committed horrible crimes, he is happy, wealthy, and lucky when he doesn't know the truth. Jocasta and Teiresias both beg Oedipus not to seek the truth, and Oedipus's desire for truth is ultimately his downfall. When the truth is finally revealed, Oedipus is a completely broken man.

Scene 5

Scene 5 Summary

A second messenger enters with the news that Jocasta has committed suicide. He relates that she came inside, pulling at her hair and calling to her dead husband Laius. She was horrified that her son had killed her husband, and that she had married him and bore unnatural children by him. She locked herself in her room. Then, Oedipus came in looking for Jocasta, also horrified over the tragedy. He broke down her door and found that Jocasta had hanged herself.

The messenger continues telling the story of how Oedipus cut down Jocasta's body and lay her on the ground. He took the golden brooches from her robes and stabbed out his own eyes with them, so that he could no longer see suffering. Oedipus has vowed to banish himself from Thebes.

The blinded Oedipus enters, and the chorus cries out how horrible Oedipus is, both in his deeds and in his self-punishment. Oedipus himself bemoans his tragedy, saying that darkness wraps him like a shroud, and that the pains of memory trouble him. The chorus says that it is no wonder that Oedipus feels the weight of suffering, both from his memory and from his current state.

Oedipus speaks kindly of the chorus, and the chorus questions why he would stab out his own eyes. Oedipus answers that it was the god Apollo who brought about the events, but that it was his own hand that struck him blind. He asks how he could stand to see, when sight only brought horror.

Oedipus asks the chorus to take him away into his banishment and curses whoever saved him as a baby, dooming him to fulfill the prophecy that has brought him and Thebes such pain. The chorus suggests that Oedipus is better off dead than blind, but Oedipus says that if he were dead, he would have to meet his father and mother in the land of the dead. He could not face them. He can never enjoy the sight of his father and mother, nor of his city, nor of the people of Thebes. By destroying his sight, he has banished himself from the sorrow of his life. He again bemoans that he was allowed to live and the horror of his life.

Creon, now the king of Thebes, enters. He does not condemn Oedipus but berates the crowd for letting Oedipus stand out in the open for all to witness. Oedipus asks Creon to guide him away from Thebes into the desert. Creon says that he must confirm with the gods what to do, saying that now Oedipus would certainly believe the oracle's words.

Oedipus agrees that he cannot ever again doubt the truth of the prophets and asks Creon to bury Jocasta with the honors due her as Creon's sister. Oedipus himself wishes only to leave the city and wander alone in the wilderness. He believes that he is fated to some awful death for his misdeeds. He tells Creon not to worry about his sons,

who can take care of themselves, and he asks to touch his two daughters once more. The daughters, Antigone and Ismene, are led in, and Oedipus embraces them one last time. He cries for his two daughters, who will be scorned for being the product of incest. No one will dare marry them. He begs Creon to care for the two girls.

When Creon asks Oedipus to go, Oedipus again begs to be exiled. Creon refers the question to the gods again and tells Oedipus to let his children go. He counsels Oedipus not to try to control things, since that was how he ended up in his plight. The chorus ends the scene, marveling that this wretched, blind man is the great Oedipus, who solved the riddle of the Sphinx and who was the greatest man in Thebes, the envy of everyone. He has now become the lowest of all.

Scene 5 Analysis

The main action of this scene takes place offstage, as with most action in ancient Greek plays. The messenger relates the scene inside the palace after Jocasta and Oedipus exited. Jocasta is overwrought. The truth has destroyed her. Not only is Oedipus the murderer of her husband, but he is her own son and has shared her bed. Her children are the unnatural result of incest. The truth, now that Jocasta has finally seen it, is too horrible for her. She hangs herself to escape the truth that she has fought so hard to deny.

Inevitably, the prophecies that Jocasta has used as evidence that prophets are false came to pass. Neither Jocasta's actions in abandoning her son to death nor her beliefs in the falseness of prophets can stop the prophecies' fulfillment. This is just as true of Oedipus. Neither his actions nor his beliefs can stop the prophecies.

Oedipus, when he sees that Jocasta has hung herself, finally sees the totality of the truth. Not only has he fulfilled the prophecies by killing his father, marrying his mother, and bearing children through incest, but he has also brought a dishonorable death to his beloved wife Jocasta. Earlier in the play, Oedipus says that he gives Jocasta whatever she wants because of his love for her. Ultimately, though, it is Oedipus's love for Jocasta that destroys her.

The motif of blindness is completed in this scene as Oedipus stabs his eyes out with the pin from Jocasta's robe. The last straw for Oedipus, the final horror, is seeing that his wife has hanged herself. This is shown not only through the fact that Oedipus blinds himself after finding the body, but also through the fact that he blinds himself using her jewelry as a weapon.

Oedipus has finally uncovered the truth through his persistence, despite Jocasta's begging and Teiresias's pleas. He has been metaphorically blind, but when he finally can see, he no longer wants to. The truth is too horrible. By blinding himself, Oedipus is blocking out all the horror and sorrow of his life.

However, since Teiresias's blindness gives him the ability to see a greater truth, Oedipus's blindness must be carefully considered. By blinding himself, Oedipus is, in a

way, denying the individual Oedipus and blocking out his own personal concerns and desires, which have caused so much tragedy. At this moment, when Oedipus is finally dethroned and outcast through his own decree, he is also finally taking on the unselfish role of only Oedipus the king, not Oedipus the individual. He denies his individuality through blinding himself and banishing himself.

This is not an easy or a complete change for Oedipus. He asks to touch his two daughters once more, and Creon allows him to. Oedipus takes a tearful goodbye of his young daughters, and he bemoans the fate that he has left them to, since they will be unmarriable as children of an incestuous relationship. His goodbye is telling. Oedipus is still hanging on to things that he loved as an individual, as symbolized by the two little girls.

Oedipus also demands that Creon banish him from the kingdom. Creon shows his obedience to the gods by insisting on confirming Oedipus's punishment with the prophets before Oedipus is banished, but Oedipus demands that he be set loose to roam the countryside alone in his misery. Creon chastises the former ruler for his pride in demanding anything, even banishment. Oedipus must put himself completely in the hands of the gods. His fatal flaw has been pride in defying the gods and attempting to rule his own fate through free will.

In the final lines, the chorus wonders at how far the mighty Oedipus has fallen. Oedipus was beloved by all and the envy of everyone in the kingdom. He had power, respect, wealth and every happiness. He was intelligent and beloved. In the end of the play, though, he has nothing and is the most wretched man in the kingdom. The gods ultimately control the fate of all men and can destroy even the greatest man at any moment.

Characters

Chorus ofTheban Elders

Unlike the chorus in *Antigone*, whose Ode on Man historically has been regarded as a model expression of Athenian individualism, the chorus in this play has no famous statement, though its role is not insignificant. The Theban elders of the chorus are considered to be fairly representative men of Thebes who honor and respect the king and the gods; their odes reveal both a strong attachment to the king as well as a grounding in religious culture. In *The Idea of a Theater*, Francis Fergusson likens the chorus' role to that of a character who provides a broader context for the action of the play as awhole: "the chorus' action is not limited by the sharp, rationalized purposes of the protagonist; its mode of action, more patient, less sharply realized, is cognate with a wider, if less accurate, awareness of the scene of human life."

Creon

Creon is the brother of Laius. Before the play begins Oedipus sent him on a mission to receive the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, and he returns with its news during the prologue. With great hesitation he reports that "The god commands us to expel from the land of Thebes/An old defilement we are sheltering." He says that in order to rid the city of its woes, Oedipus must find the murderer of King Laius, his predecessor. Oedipus feels threatened by Creon and believes that he covets the throne (by some accounts Creon was to have been the next ruler following his brother's death, and he is thus filled with resentment).

When Teiresias tells the unbelieving Oedipus what he will come to know his true identity and responsibility for his father's murder, Oedipus immediately assumes that Teiresias is working for Creon, trying to get him the throne. Creon takes these accusations seriously and wishes to clear his name: "The fact is that I am being called disloyal/ To the State, to my fellow citizens, to my fnends." Creon defends himself to Oedipus in the next scene, saying that he has no desire to become king and that Oedipus harms himself and the state in leveling such accusations. Oedipus grows more incensed and calls for Creon's death; only the pleading of Jocasta and a member of the chorus prevent him from acting. At the end of the play, after Oedipus has blinded himself, Creon becomes king and acts with compassion towards the repentant Oedipus, leading him into the palace and then, as Oedipus requests and Apollo has ordained into exile.

Jocasta

Jocasta (also Iokaste) is Oedipus's wife and mother; she is also the mother of his children. Her first entrance onstage occurs when Oedipus and Creon are in the midst of arguing; Jocasta storms in and demands that they resolve their petty personal dispute because the country's troubles are far more urgent: "Poor foolish men, what wicked din

is this?/With Thebes sick to death, is it not shameful/That you should rake some private quarrel up?" She pleads with Oedipus to believe Creon's good intentions towards him and their hostilities momentarily abate. She assures Oedipus that the oracle proclaiming Laius's murder by his own son was false, since Laius was killed by highwaymen and his son had been left "to die on a lonely mountainside." Rather than placating Oedipus, her words haunt him, he recalls "a shadowy memory," and asks her to give details about Laius's death. The surviving witness to the crime, tells Jocasta, had come to her when Oedipus was made king and asked her if he could be sent far away; she granted him his wish and now is asked by Oedipus to recall this witness a shepherd to the palace to testify about the murder.

Jocasta tells Oedipus not to trust in the truth of oracles. When the messenger arrives to tell of Polybos's death, Jocasta is hopeful that she can allay Oedipus's fears about fulfilling the prophecy. Later in the same scene she tries to stop him from questioning the messenger regarding his true father: "May you never learn who you are!" In her final speech she calls Oedipus "miserable" and says she will have no other name for him. Towards the end of the play a second messenger reports that she has hanged herself, giving a moving account of her wailing and physical expressions of grief during her last moments. Thornton Wilder, the American playwright, eloquently described Sophocles's artistry in portraying Jocasta in *American Characteristics and Other Essays*: "The figure of the Queen is drawn with great precision, shielding her husband form the knowledge she foresees approaching; alternately condemning and upholding the authority of the oracles as best suits the direction of the argument at the moment, and finally giving up the struggle."

Messenger

The messenger enters in Scene III and tells Oedipus that King Polybos of Corinth, who Oedipus had believed to be his father is dead. Oedipus also learns from this messenger that Polybos was not his father; the messenger himself had been given Oedipus as an infant by one of Laius's men and that he had untied Oedipus's bound ankles He causes the shepherd who left Oedipus to die (having been given him by Jocasta, his mother) to come in and testify that Oedipus is Laius's son.

Messengers were common devices used in Greek drama. They were often used to relate action that occurred offstage or to summarize events that have taken place between acts or scenes.

Oedipus

Oedipus, the title character, is the protagonist of the play. His name means "swell-foot" or "swollen-foot." One of the most famous dramatic characters in the history of Western literature, he was singled out by Aristotle in his *Poetics* as the right kind of protagonist because he inspires the right combination of pity and fear. "This is the sort of man who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, and yet it is through no badness or villainy of his

own that he falls into the misfortune, but rather through some flaw in him; he being one of those who are in high station and good fortune, like Oedipus and Thyestes and the famous men of families such as these." Oedipus's fatal flaw, the technical Greek term for which is *hamartia*, can be thought of as a character fault or a mistake, or more like an Achilles heel rather than a flaw for which he can be held directly responsible. A hereditary curse has been placed on his family, and he unknowingly has fulfilled the terms of the prophecy that Laius's son would kill him and marry his wife.

The play's action is concerned with the gradual and delayed revelation of the fulfillment of this oracle. It specifically focuses on Oedipus's quest for knowledge, on the one hand, and, on the other, the other characters' resistance to discovering the truth; Jocasta tries to protect her husband/brother from the facts and the shepherd cannot be forced to speak until his life is at stake. Oedipus impatiently confronts Creon and Teiresias with their hesitation to answer his summons to the palace to share their knowledge with him and the public. Connected with this frustration is a feature of Oedipus's personality for which he is somewhat more responsible; Oedipus is also said to suffer from a character flaw known as *hubris*, or pride, and his cruel treatment of Creon and Teiresias in the aforementioned situations evidences this trait. He insists on hearing the truth, again and again, in the face of reluctant tellers who are scared for their lives, for his life, and for the future of Thebes.

Perhaps it is Oedipus's pride which rounds him out and allows Aristotle to hold him up as a well-fashioned character, since without it he would seem too virtuous and the tragedy would be too "unlikely " Oedipus's speech is also given a good dose of irony in the play. For example, when he calls for an investigation of Laius's murder and says "then once more I must bring what is dark to light," he is also foreshadowing his future blinding, since his investigation will reveal the dark secret of his parentage, metaphorically enlightened by the truth but literally blinded by it as well. When he curses the murderer of Laius he is cursing himself and predicts his own exile and consequent life of "wretchedness." Oedipus is wise (he has solved the riddle of the Sphinx), revered by his subjects, and dedicated to the discovery of truth. He wants to rid Thebes of the plague (pollution, a common theme in Greek drama) that is decimating its population. Fate and the gods, however, have other things in store for Oedipus, and his helplessness and utter ruin at the play's conclusion are a painful spectacle.

Priest

After Oedipus's opening lines, the Priest of Zeus is the next character in the play to speak, and he does so as a religious leader and elder representative of the people of Thebes. Standing before the king's palace, surrounded by the Theban people, the priest informs Oedipus (and the audience) of the misery-laden condition of Thebes: a plague is killing many of the city's human and animal populations and fires are destroying the lands and its crops. He praises Oedipus, who has solved the riddle of the Sphinx, for his wisdom and ability to improve their lives, and asks of him, on behalf of the people, swiftly and decisively to act and end the suffering.

Second Messenger

The second messenger appears in the last scene to announce and describe Jocasta' s suicide. He also relates Oedipus's discovery of her body and his subsequent blinding. He predicts future sorrows for a people whose kings descend from this polluted line. The second messenger also announces Oedi-pus's entry onstage after his self-mutilation: "You will see a thing that would crush a heart of stone."

Shepherd ofLaius

The old shepherd is summoned by Oedipus so that he can discover his true parentage. The shepherd reveals his information only after Oedipus threatens his life if he remains silent. He admits to receiving the infant he gave to Polybos's messenger fromLaius and Jocasta. Oedipus realizes his identity and his crimes of patricide and incest after hearing the shepherd's story.

Teiresias

Teiresias, a blind prophet and servant of Apollo, twice was asked by Oedipus to come to the palace to discuss the crisis in Thebes. In the first act of the play he finally appears, revealing the reasons for the city's devastation, knowledge that he is reluctant to reveal to Oedipus for fear of making him miserable. Oedipus, feeling himself to be betrayed by the prophet's resistance, verbally abuses Teiresias ("You sightless, witless, senseless, mad old man!") and accuses him of working on behalf of the "usurper" Creon.

Reluctantly, Teiresias tells Oedipus that he should not mock him so quickly; in a famous moment of foreshadowing, he tells the king that it is he who is blind: "But I say that you, with both your eyes, are blind:/You cannot see the wretchedness of your life,/Nor in whose house you live, no, nor with whom." Significantly, Teiresias is also the first character in the play to question Oedipus's assumption that he knows his parentage and to tell him that he has committed atrocities that he does not yet know are his own. He tells Oedipus that he will become blind and poor, that Oedipus is himself Laius's murderer, and that he will learn that he has fathered children with his mother. While Teiresias's presence on stage is brief, as a prophet representing the god Apollo he remains one of the most powerful characters in the play; in addition, the Athenian audience would have recognized him from Homeric mythology (in *The Odyssey* the title character must go down into the underworld to gain information from the dead prophet).

Themes

Knowledge and Ignorance

Oedipus's desire to gain knowledge that will help to rid Thebes of its pollution is evident from the beginning of the play. When the priest comes to him to ask for help, Oedipus has already begun the process of searching for solutions; he has sent Creon to Delphi to learn from Apollo what measures should be taken. When Creon enters, Oedipus begins questioning him intensely, declares a search for Laius's murderer, and asks for Teiresias's assistance as well as that of others; when a member of the chorus offers information Oedipus says "tell me. I am interested in all reports." His strong belief that the search for the truth will lead to a successful cleansing of Thebes is juxtaposed with the reluctance on the part of other characters to deliver their knowledge. Most fear retribution, since their knowledge points to Oedipus as the source of Thebes's troubles. This belief should also be understood in the context of Oedipus's ignorance and final, tragic discovery of his identity; by demanding that others tell him all they know he is forced to confront the hideous facts of his patricide and incest.

Choices and Consequences

Another theme m the play is the distinction between the truthfulness of oracles and prophecies of the gods (fate), as opposed to man's ability to influence his life's trajectory through his own actions (free will or self-determinism). While argu- ments exist regarding the predominance of these schools of thought, *Oedipus Rex* emphasizes the eventual and tragic triumph of the former over the latter. Despite his best efforts to be a good and wise king and to substantiate his claims about the evil machinations of Creon and Teiresias, fate works against him and finally shows that he was wrong to believe in a conspiracy. For example, when Oedipus wishes to punish Creon, he expresses to a member of the chorus his intention to shape his policy in forcefully self-determining language: "Would you have me stand still, hold my peace, and let this man win everything, through my inaction?" Again, Oedipus struggles against the oracle that predicts his hand in his father's death and boldly asserts that it is wrong when Polybos's death is reported: "Polybos/ Has packed the oracles off with him underground./ They are empty words." But the oracle remains true, and Oedipus is helpless in the face of its powerful prophecy.

Public vs. Private Life

The extent to which Oedipus desires public disclosure of information is particularly striking in the play's first scenes. He asks the priest and Creon to speak publicly about the troubles of Thebes and to offer possible clues and solutions in front of his subjects, in spite of their reservations. Creon asks: "Is it your pleasure to hear me with all these/ Gathered around us? I am prepared to speak/But should we not go in?" Oedipus

consistently refuses to hide any knowledge he will receive and wants his informers to adopt a similar attitude. When Teiresias refuses to answer Oedipus's call and later resists revealing the king's dark truth, Oedipus grows impatient, hostile, and abusive. Teiresias would like to keep his information to himself, as will the shepherd in a later scene, but Oedipus will hear nothing of it. In addition, Jocasta is inclined to evade or gloss over the truth as it is about to be revealed from various people. She views the matter a private one and tries to protect Oedipus from the disastrous disclosures. Oedipus, however, refuses to tolerate a world in which secrets exist. He publicly learns the truth at the expense of his sanity and happiness. His desire for a Theban society that fosters truth and openess is an admirable one, one that albeit contributes to his demise.

Style

The Genre of Greek Tragic Drama

Ever since Aristotle's high praise regarding its structure and characterization in his *Poetics, Oedipus Rex* has been considered one of the most outstanding examples of tragic drama. In tragedy, a protagonist inspires in bis audience the twin emotions of pity and fear. Usually a person of virtue and status, the tragic hero can be a scapegoat of the gods or a victim of circumstances. Their fate (often death or exile) establishes a new and better social order. Not only does it make the viewer aware of human suffering, tragedy illustrates the manner in which pride (*hubris*) can topple even the strongest of characters. It is part of the playwright's intention that audiences will identify with these fallen heroes-and possibly rethink the manner in which they live their lives. Theorists of tragedy, beginning with Aristotle, have used the term *catharsis* to capture the sense of purgation and purification that watching a tragedy yield in a viewer: relief that they are not in the position of the protagonist and awareness that one slip of fate could place them in such circumstances.

Structure

The dramatic structure of Greek drama is helpfully outlined by Aristotle in the twelfth book of *Poetics*. In this classical tragedy, a Prologue shows Oedipus consulting the priest who speaks for the Theban elders, the first choral ode or Parados is performed, four acts are presented and followed by odes called *stasimons*, and in the *Exodos*, or final act, the fate of Oedipus is revealed.

Staging

Tragedies in fifth-century Athens were performed in the marketplace, known in Greek as the *agora*. The dramatic competitions of the Great Dionysia, Athens's annual cultural and religious festival, were held in a structure made of wood near the Acropolis. The chorus performed on a raised stage. There were no female actors, and it is still unknown (though much speculated upon) whether women attended these performances. It is also noteworthy that the performance space was near the Pnyx, the area in which the century's increasingly heated and rhetorically sophisticated political debates took place a feature of Athenian cultural life that suggests the pervasive nature of spectacles of polished and persuasive verbal expression.

The Chorus

The Greek chorus, like the genre of tragedy itself, is reputed to be a remnant of the ritualistic and ceremonial origins of Greek tragedy. Sophocles added three members of the chorus to Aeschylus's twelve. In terms of form, the choral ode has a tripartite

structure which bears traces of its use as a song and dance pattern. The three parts are called, respectively, the strophe, the antistrophe, and the epode; their metrical structures vary and are usually very complex. If the strophe established the dance pattern, in the antistrophe the dancers trace backwards the same steps, ending the ode in a different way with the epode.

With respect to content, the choral odes bring an additional viewpoint to the play, and often this perspective is broader and more socio-rehgious than those offered by individual characters; it is also conservative and traditional at times, potentially in an effort to reflect the views of its society rather than the protagonist. The Chorus's first set of lyrics in *Oedipus Rex*, for example, express a curiosity about Apollo's oracle and describes the ruinous landscape of Thebes. Its second utterance reminds the audience of the newness of Teiresias's report: "And never until now has any man brought word/Of Laius's dark death staining Oedipus the King." The chorus reiterates some of the action, expressing varying degrees of hope and despair with respect to it; one of its members delivers the play's final lines, much like the Shakespearean epilogue. Sometimes the chorus sings a dirge with one or more characters, as when it suggests to Oedipus not to disbelieve Creon's protestations of innocence.

Setting

The play's action occurs outside Oedipus's palace in Thebes. Thebes had been founded, according to the myth, by Cadmus (a son of Agenor, King of Phoenicia) while searching for his sister Europa, who had been abducted by Zeus in the form of a bull. A direct line of descent can be traced from Cadmus to Oedpius; between them are Polydorus, Labdacus, and, of course, Laius.

Imagery and Foreshadowing

Associated with knowledge and ignorance are the recurring images of darkness and light in the play, and these images work as examples of a kind of foreshadowing for which the play is justly famous. When the play begins, the priest uses this set of contrasts to describe the curreni condition of Thebes: "And all the house of Kadmos is laid waste/All emptied, and all darkened." Shortly after this moment, Oedipus promises Creon: "Then once more I must bring what is dark to light," that is, the murder of Laius will out and Oedipus will be responsible for finding and exposing the culprit(s). Metaphorical and literal uses of darkness and light also provide foreshadowing, since it is Oedipus's desire to bring the truth to light that leads him to a self-knowledge ruinous and evil enough to cause him to blind himself. After the shepherd reveals his birth he declares, "O Light, may I look on you for the last time!" In saying this he sets up for the audience, who are, presumably, familiar with the legend of Oedipus, his subsequent actions. The second messenger describes his command to himself as he proceeds to perform the gruesome task: "From this hour, go in darkness!" thereby enacting both a literal and metaphorical fall into the dark consequences of his unbearable knowledge. These are but a few examples of how imagery and foreshadowing as techniques can

meet, overlap, and mutually inform one another in the play; through subjective interpretation, many more may be found.

Historical Context

Sophocles lived and worked in a time of great cultural significance, not only in the history of Athens but the greater sense of Western democratic culture. Wars with Persia and Sparta, the development of democratic culture, public architectural projects, and theatrical entertainments, as well as the rise of a distinctively rhetorical culture (a culture based on the strength of language and writing) are important features of the Athens during Sophocles's life, known as the Golden Age of Athens.

Soon after Cleisthenes established democracy in Athens in 507 B.C., Athens was threatened by outside enemies. At the beginning of the fifth century B.C., the Persians, led by Darius, crossed the Aegean to conquer Athens. After its triumph over Miletos in 494, the Persian army began to be defeated, with Athens winning the decisive victory at Marathon in 490, The battles of Salamis, Platea, and Mycale in 480-79 were also won by Athens, and the Persian forces (led by Xerxes I) finally lost the war. The Athenians prided themselves on their victory over Xerxes; roughly fifteen years after Sophocles's birth, Athens had become an Empire in its own right, forming the Delian League in 478-77. From 492-60 the city-state was led by Pericles, a populist leader who is famous today for his military skill, his rhetorical prowess, and his public building projects including the Parthenon. Sophocles himself took part in some of Pericles's projects and in the city's military life, aiding Pericles in the Samian war (441-39), becoming an ambassador some years later, and joining the ruling council in 413.

Although the Persian threat had subsided, a new threat arose: the Peloponnesian War with Sparta and other states under their leadership began in 432. Thucydides, an Athenian general and historian noted for his impartiality and accuracy, tells the story of this war in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Athens, defeated in Sicily in 413, surrendered to Sparta (which was being supported by Persia) in 404, the year after Sophocles died.

In the midst of all this war, Athenian democracy flourished during Sophocles's lifetime, its commercial enterprises along the eastern Mediterranean coastline were successful and its cultural life enjoyed immense nourishment and development. Greek religious life centered around the shrines frequented by worshippers of Apollo at Delphi, Apollo and Artemis at Delos, and Zeus at Olympia. Festivals were often held at the shrines and athletic competitions, dance, song, and theatrical performances also took place. Intellectually, Athens was thriving its mathematicians and scientists, after the work of Pythagoras and Xenophanes during the previous century, began to make new discoveries in arithmetic and geology; Pericles, who studied sophistry with Zeno, brought the skill of oratory to new, unprecedented heights, and his support of the plastic and literary arts allowed Athenians to enjoy the lasting achievements of then-contemporaries. While public building was interrupted by the Persian war, it resumed with vigor in the latter half of the fifth century, with the Temple of Zeus at Olympia and, in Athens, the Temple of Athena Nike, as well as the Parthenon, Propylaea, and the Erechtheum. Pericles saw to it that elaborate public building projects motivated artists of his time to achieve greatness for their city.

Greek drama also flourished. Pericles provided entertainments and pageantry, granting allowances for public festivals so that all men could attend them. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were the three great dramatists of the age; Sophocles competed successfully with both his teacher Aeschylus and with his contemporary, Euripides, in the annual tragic competitions of the Great Dionysia. Some of the drama of this period concerned specific political issues, such as Phrynichos's *Capture of Mileros* (493) and *Aeschylus's Persians* (472). Other plays, like Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and *Oedipus Rex* address broader questions about mythological leaders and their relationships to the gods, fate, and their native Greek cultural heritage. While critics have argued that readers are not meant to draw any parallels between the plague-ridden Thebes in which *Oedipus Rex* takes place and the plague in Athens in 430-29 B.C., it is not difficult to surmise that an audience for whom the experience of such devastation was familiar would have felt particular connections with their own situation.

Critical Overview

The history of the critical reception to *Oedipus Rex* begins with Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), who in his *Poetics* inaugurated the history of formalist and structural analysis of literature, two important cornerstones for the enterprise of the critical interpretation of literature. In some ways it can be regarded as the first book of literary criticism, and its significance for the subsequent study of the works of Sophocles in general and *Oedipus Rex* in particular is enormous, due to the exemplary status he granted the play, as the greatest tragedy ever written. He gave it high praise for its outstanding fulfillment of the requirements he set out for tragedy, including reversal of situation, characterization, well-constructed plot, and rationality of action.

Oedipus Rex contains an excellent moment of "reversal" in the scene in which the messenger comes to tell Oedipus of the death of Polybos, whom he believes to be Oedipus's father. According to Aristotle, because Oedipus learns from him inadvertently that Polybos is not his father, "by revealing who he is, he produces the opposite effect." Aristotle also praised the play for its characterization of the hero, who causes the audience to feel the right mixture of "pity and fear" while observing his actions. The hero should not be too virtuous, nor should he be evil: "there remains, then, the character between these two extremes that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families."

The plot receives commendation by Aristotle for its ability to stir the emotions of not only its audience members but, even more significantly, those who merely hear the story: "he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place." In addition, *Oedipus Rex* succeeds in shaping the action in such a way that its ramifications are unknown until after the event itself occurs: "the deed of horror may be done, but done in ignorance, and the tie of kinship or friendship be discovered afterwards ... here, indeed, the incident is outside the drama proper." Lastly, Aristotle remarks that he prefers the role of the chorus in Sophocles to that of Euripides, and that the *Oedipus Rex* excludes from the play proper any irrational elements, such as Oedipus's ignorance of the mode of Laius's death. This last point is taken up by Voltaire, who subjected the play to intense questioning on the basis of the improbability of aspects such as this one.

After Aristotle, the major figures who have analyzed the play include those dramatists, from antiquity to the present, such as Seneca, Corneille, Dryden, and Hofsmannsthal, who respectively translated the play into Latin, French, English, and German. Poets and dramatists are themselves acting as critics when they embark on projects of translation, even if they have not given explicit accounts of how and why they have proceeded. Implicitly, these works ask their readers to attempt to answer these questions for themselves, and a short list of the variations on Sophocles's play should begin to generate such study. In 50 A.D, the Roman writer Seneca, for instance, decided to add

an unseen episode narrated by Creon in which the ghost of Laius identifies his murderer to Teiresias.

In the 1580s in England the Tudor university dramatist William Gager sketched out five scenes for an unfinished version of the play, combining elements of Seneca's *Oedipus* and his *Phonecian Women* with scenes of his own creation; the first original scene is a lament of a Theban citizen for his dead father and son, to whom he seeks to give a proper burial in the midst of the plague-ridden city. His Jocasta kills herself because of her sons' fratricidal straggle for power. In 1659 Corneille prefaced his neo-Classical version of the play with a notice that he has reduced the number of oracles, left out the graphic description of Oedipus's blinding because of the presence of ladies in the audience, and added the happy love story of Theseus and Dirce in order to satisfy all attendees. He keeps Seneca's additional scene but makes Laius's speech more vague. Dryden, two decades later, self-consciously drew upon Corneille's subplot but changing its ending to an unhappy one. Like Corneille he laments the fact that audiences demand such light entertainment accompanying their experience of great tragic drama.

In the next century, translators and commentators in England and France beginning with Voltaire and including Pierre Brumoy, Thomas Maurice, and R. Potter brought unique perspectives to the play. Voltaire believed the play to be defective in ways that many scholars expected from the Enlightenment thinker. Following Aristotle and going much further in his skeptical stance, in 1716 Voltaire criticized the lack of plausibility in Oedipus's ignorance of the manner of Laius's death: "that he did not even know whether it was in the country or in town that this murder was committed, and that he should give neither the least reason nor the least excuse for his ignorance, I confess that I do not know any terms to express such an absurdity," Another famous criticism of his concerns the fact that Oedipus, upon learning that the shepherd who knows his origins is still alive, chooses to consult the oracle "without giving the command to bring before him the only man who could throw light on the mystery." In contradistinction to Voltaire, in the middle of the eighteenth century Brumoy movingly expressed his satisfaction with the play. Of the opening scene he wrote:' "This is a speaking spectacle, and a picture so beautifully disposed, that even the attitudes of the priests and of Oedipus express, without the help of words, that one relates the calamities with which the people are afflicted, and the other, melted at the melancholy sight, declares his impatience and concern for the long delay of Creon, whom he had sent to consult the Oracle." Brumoy also recognizes that the play's values are pagan rather than Christian, and specifically he emphasizes the influential classical notion of destiny; after him, the English translators Thomas Maurice (1779) and R. Potter (1788) did the same.

German authors, including Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, dominate the reception history of *Oedipus* in the nineteenth century.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

In this essay Lewin argues that the story of Oedipus qualifies as the greatest of all tragedies.

Oedipus Rex is arguably the most important tragedy m all of classical literature. Ever since Aristotle used it in his Poetics in order to define the qualities of a successful tragedy, its strengths have been emphasized again and again by countless notable authors whose remarks illuminate the play' s historical reception as much as they help us to understand the broader critical climate in which they wrote. When Freud, for example, helped to shape the direction of twentieth-century thought with his 1900 *The Interpretation of Dreams*, his coinage of the term "Oedipal Complex" was an integral part of his definition of dreams and imaginative literature as representations of wishes that usually remain hidden during normal social interaction. For Freud, then, Oedipus's predicament dramatizes the desire of every man to marry his mother and kill his father, but whereas most people tend to harbor or hide these feelings, Oedipus unknowingly acts them out. While still remaining extremely controversial, his theory's suggestive placement of Oedipus m closer psychological proximity to his readers throughout history raises fundamental questions about possible relationships between literature and reality. Other twentieth century scholars have occupied themselves less with these issues than with local readings of the play's characters, its plot, structure, and, finally, what it can teach its readers about religious values and human knowledge m fifth-century Athenian culture, a moment of great historical importance for its artistic achievements as well as its political culture.

The character of Oedipus has historically inspired a combination of fascination and repulsion. It is generally acknowledged, however, that he is to be admired for many reasons, and especially for demonstrating, as a responsible leader, his desire from the very opening lines of the play for honesty and directness in approaching the problem of Thebes's plague. In the Prologue, when he asks the priest to speak for the petitioners before him, he does so with majestic generosity: "Tell me, and never doubt that I will help you/In every way I can; I should be heartless/Were I not moved to find you suppliant here." The Priest responds to him with equal magnanimity, praising Oedipus for his past achievements (he solved the riddle of the Sphinx, sent to Thebes as divine punishment for Laius's sins) and pleading for the help that the capable Oedipus has proven he can provide. Oedipus's position of power in relation to the Priest is extraordinary; as C. H. Whitman pointed out in *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism*, pagan culture customarily reversed those roles: "The appeal of the priest, with its moving yet dignified description of the general suffering, is especially remarkable in that it is an inversion of the usual situation, in which the secular ruler consults the priest or seer about divine things, as Oedipus later consults Teiresias."

The scene establishes Oedipus as a ruler not with divine intuition (the Priest also says "You are not one of the immortal gods, we know") but with the intellectual prowess to ameliorate Thebes's grave situation. A later exchange between Creon and Oedipus and the first scene's dialogue between Teiresias and Oedipus, in which Oedipus presses

both figures publicly to utter the oracular knowledge they possess (but are extremely reluctant to offer) show Oedipus as extremely eager to gain the knowledge that will help to rid Thebes of its ills. In her recent study of Sophocles, *Prophesying Tragedy Tragedy: Sight and Voice in Sophocles's Theban Plays*, Rebecca Bushnell agrees that the play establishes Oedipus as someone "who believes in speaking freely ... but he is not content merely to speak himself; he also forces others to speak." Oedipus shows fearlessness in the face of turmoil, and his unstoppable quest for public utterance of the truth of the oracle leads him, tragically, to the knowledge that he has fulfilled its terms. His perception of his responsibilities as king, however, have led him to be compared to Pericles, the ruler when Sophocles lived and wrote, remembered for heroically facing the most famous epoch of war and civil strife in Athenian history.

Oedipus has also been noted for possessing a less desirable quality related to his desire for disclosure, and that quality, *hamartia*, is an ancient Greek concept that E. R, Dodds, in *Greece and Rome*, classified as "sometimes applied to false moral judgments, sometimes to purely intellectual error." *Hamartia* can be understood to refer to the all too human limitations possessed by the tragic hero, his faults that make him less than perfect but not blameworthy in any moral sense. While he may have flaws (like the heel of Achilles), we cannot attribute his downfall to them. Oedipus's impatience with Teiresias's attempt to withhold the contents of the oracle, for example, led him to suspect the prophet of conspiring against him on behalf of Creon. He calls Teiresias a "sightless, witless, senseless, mad old man."

A. J. A. Waldock related Oedipus's *hamartia* to his approach to oracular knowledge. In his *Sophocles the Dramatist*, Waldock wrote: "he was in fault for not perceiving the truth, now he is in fault because he is too urgent to see it." In other words, Oedipus's eagerness to use his mind to act upon and thereby to solve every problem he encounters, when taken to its logical extreme, leaves no room for the gods' influence over the fate of man, an idea considered somewhat heretical in a culture which places much emphasis on and had faith in the role of the gods in shaping man's destiny. Readers such as W. P. Winnington-Ingram, in *Sophocles: An Interpretation*, have criticized Oedipus because he "trusts his intellect too much and must learn how fallible it is."

Ultimately, while we can regard Oedipus as both admirable for his leadership skills and noble intentions and imperfect for his overconfidence and harsh treatment of others, he is a figure whose fate inspires pity and terror because of his ability to endure misfortune. He blinds himself in an act of self-punishment and self-protection, since he is deeply horrified by his own crimes and unwilling to face others' gazes: "After exposing the rankness of my own guilt,/How could I look men frankly in the eyes?" Rather than ending his life, Oedipus lives to bear the weight of two curses, one imposed on his family line by the gods and the other self-imposed when he announces his intention to send Laius's murderer into exile. Dodds nicely captured the pathos of his suffering: "Oedipus is great, not in virtue of a great worldly position for his worldly position is an illusion which will vanish like a dream but in virtue of his inner strength: strength to pursue the truth at whatever personal cost, and strength to accept and endure it when found."

Notably, the end of the play does not show Oedipus leaving Thebes; although we see him ask Creon again and again to lead him into exile, the play ends with him being led into the palace, into a private space and away from a public domain polluted by his presence. In a detailed discussion of the last scene, M. Davies wrote in an issue of *Hermes* that it leaves our vision of Oedipus as a commanding figure very much intact: it "shows him still acting spontaneously like a king, in the old imperious manner, although the once equivalent temporal power has now fallen away."

In order to understand both the protagonist and the play itself in the larger context of fifth-century Greece, it is important to consider the conflicting roles of oracular knowledge and Athenian self-confidence in their culture's perception of man's place in the universe. At the time of the Peloponnesian War, oracular knowledge was often doubted because the oracles came from Apollo's shrine at pro-Spartan Delphi; the messages often reflected an anti-Athenian bias. In an essay on *Oedipus Rex in Homer to Brecht: The European Epic and Dramatic Traditions*, Paul Fry noted that "around 427 B.C., when the play was first acted, the priests of Apollo were out of favor because Apollo's oracles considering the Peloponnesian War were all pro-Spartan."

While this historical fact does not mean that the Priest and Teiresias would have been ridiculous figures for the play's first audiences, it does mean that Oedipus's skepticism would have been understood and sympathized with. In the context of the very different times of turmoil that the play depicts, however, Oedipus's disbelief may have appeared slightly more threatening, since, as Bushnell argued, Oedipus has no system of belief other than his own intellectual power with which to replace oracular knowledge:' Tiresias's arrival initiates the conflict between Apollo's signs and Oedipus's voice a conflict that strikes at the roots of the city's order, which is based on the cooperation between sacred and secular interests ... Oedipus seems to threaten directly the stability that the fulfillment of oracles represents, without establishing any new structure." In the plot thus conceived, Apollo's oracle is truth and Oedipus chastises himself for having believed otherwise: "Oedipus, damned in his birth, in his marriage damned,/Damned in the blood he shed with his own hand!" As an efficacious tool by which to shape human destiny, the power of oracular knowledge is retained by the gods, while Oedipus is able to reach lyrical heights in expressing the tragic consequences of being confined in such a world.

In ancient Athens, dissatisfaction with oracular knowledge was coupled with a growing sense that, in the words of Protagoras, "man is the measure of all things." Self-confidence in man's ability to order and rule his world reached even new heights under the leadership of Pericles, whose extensive training in sophistry and lack of fear in the gods led him to be a highly persuasive thinker who inspired in his subjects a sense of man's ability to accomplish limitless goals. For Sophocles's contemporaries, Oedipus's intellectual prowess was probably strongly reminiscent of Pericles his eloquence and devotion to his country in a time of upheaval were legendary, and his investment in public building projects (the Parthenon among them) employed laborers and inspired artists to create beautiful memorials to their epoch.

While Oedipus's affection for Thebes is of a very different nature, his expression of care is moving: "Let me purge my father's Thebes of the pollution/Of my living here, and go out to the wild hills/To Kithairon, that has won such fame with me,/The tomb my mother and father appointed for me/And let me die there, as they willed I should." His desire to "purge [his] father's Thebes" and move mentally and physically towards death provides a powerfully cathartic closure for the play. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the philosopher Nietzsche wrote of the spirituality of this final scene, its ability to leave audiences with a sense of rejuvenation: "Sophocles understood the most sorrowful figure of the Greek stage, the unfortunate Oedipus, as the noble human being who, in spite of his wisdom, is destined to error and misery but who eventually, through his tremendous suffering, spreads a magical power of blessing that remains effective even beyond his disease."

Source: Jennifer Lewm, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In this essay, educator and critic Green discusses symbolism in Oedipus Rex and offers her interpretation of the play's climactic scene.

In the fall 1992 issue of *The Explicator*, Bernhard Frank presented an unusual interpretation of the dramatic climax of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* In the scene, reported by the Second Messenger, Oedipus, horrified by the truth and distraught by his discovery that Jocasta has hanged herself, first lowers his queen/mother/wife to the ground and then plunges the long pins of her robe's brooches into his eyes. Professor Frank suggests that Jocasta's rope is an umbilical cord, that here we have a "role reversal," in which Jocasta becomes "the dead infant Oedipus should have been, if the tragedy was to have been averted." Then, in "another stage of the role reversal," he blinds himself. He is not castrating himself a Freudian theory that Frank rightly rejects but in the persona of Jocasta he "rapes his own eyes with her 'phalluses'."

It is sometimes tempting in literary criticism to seek in a thrusting instrument a sexual parallel, but one should carefully base such a parallel on hints and statements in the text. I do not find suggestions in *Oedipus Rex* for Frank's interpretation of the blinding scene, which raises several difficulties. For example, there are many nonsexual references to "eyes" and "sight" in the play. In fact, "seeing" could be called a unifying metaphor. Why should this passage, with no hint from the translators, be read as having such powerful sexual meaning? Oedipus's beard, into which the blood gushes, is identified as "the pubic region, as it were, of his pierced eyes. It is Jocasta's twofold revenge, reciprocating his off repeated coital act." This reading poses considerable anatomical difficulties. Then, too, how can Jocasta at one moment represent her dead son and at the next a raging rapist? What is one to make of the blood that gushes forth? (Herman Melville symbolizes a bloody beard successfully in his poem, "The Portent," about the mutilation of John Brown's corpse.)

The Frank essay also considers the use of the brooches highly significant, inasmuch as Oedipus could have used "any nearby object for the purpose." But not just "any nearby object" is agreeable for blinding oneself, and probably weapons did not lie scattered about a queen's apartment as part of the decor. When Oedipus asks the Chorus for a sword with which to pursue Jocasta, the Frank essay concludes that in his frenzy, Oedipus "intends to thrust his sword into her offending womb, which ironically would emulate the sexual act one last time." What the text really says, however, is this: "From one to another of us he went, begging a sword, / Hunting the wife who was not his wife, the mother / Whose womb had carried his own children and himself."

Across the fiery enthusiasms of Professor Frank fall the long and soothing shadows of Aristotle and Sophocles. Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy, in *The Poetics*, stresses that pity and fear will be evoked by action of "a certain magnitude." His frequent praise of *Oedipus Rex* proves that Sophocles' masterpiece met his highest standards. We can therefore safely conclude that the emotions Aristotle thought that the play produced

were pity and fear not disgust and revulsion, which would be our more likely reactions to the interpretation that Professor Frank suggests.

Sophocles' treatment of blindness in the drama accords with Aristotle's reading of the play. It has far greater meaning than that of a symbolically achieved sexual act. Spiritual blindness is equated with obduracy and arrogance hubris and towards the end of *Oedipus Rex*, the physical blinding is already encouraging new insight, awareness, and compassion. When Oedipus could see, he beheld the piercing light of Greece, but he had then less understanding of his fate, less inner vision, and less humility than he is beginning to achieve after he loses that flooding, outer light. The resemblance between Oedipus and the blinded Gloucester in *King Lear* often comes to mind. Gloucester says, "I stumbled when I saw." And when Lear observes, "[Y]et you see how this world goes," Gloucester answers, "I see it feelingly."

Light, to the ancient Greeks, was beauty, intellect, virtue, indeed represented life itself. The Choragos asks Oedipus, "What god was it drove you to rake black / Night across your eyes?" And Oedipus replies in anguish:

Apollo, Apollo, Dear
Children, the god was Apollo
He brought ray sick, sick fate upon me.
But the blinding hand was my own!
How could I bear to see
When all my sight was horror everywhere'

We have in the drama, then, not just bitter irony played out by incredible coincidence, nor the story of a proud man nghtly humbled. We have a powerful statement that the inscrutable gods exert extreme power over the unjust and the just, who suffer alike from their mysteriously random power. We do not need to make Oedipus's self-blinding into a sexual symbol or allegory to feel his baffled woe. Surely, enough sorrow is here to achieve the effect that Aristotle underlines so often and Sophocles creates with such skill.

Source: Janet M. Green, review of *Oedipus Rex*, in the Exphcator, Vol. 52, no. 1, Fall, 1993, pp 2-3

Critical Essay #3

In this excerpt, Kallich explains the myth of Oedipus and haw it is represented in Sophocles's dramatic work.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus {Oedipus Rex*](c. 427 B.C.) ... the supernatural agency that dominates the action is Apollo. Unfortunately, however, there is no certainty concerning meaning of the role of the Apollonian god in Sophocles' work. Apollo appears to use a man of noble, innocent, and pious nature to undermine social and religious values, despite his horror of sinning against them. But it is obvious that interpretations of this fundamental conflict between the irresistible power of destiny and the sacredness of natural ties will vary, depending upon what tone is read into the richly human and i ambiguous lines. Here a representative selection from the vast resources of Sophoclean scholarship, particularly the work of modern American and English scholars, will made in order to illustrate the diversity of interpretation and provide a basis for understanding the adaptations of the creative writers.

Sir Richard Jebb, taking the traditional position in the nineteenth century, sees in Oedipus a symbol of modern man facing a religious dilemma. Both Oedipus and Jocasta, he points out, do not reject the gods both are reverent, both believe in the wise omnipotence of the gods. But, on the other hand, both also reject the gods' moral ministers Oedipus the prophet Tiresias, and Jocasta the priests at Delphi. Oedipus, Jebb states, is a rationalist, intellectually self-reliant; Jocasta, likewise, is a sceptic who questions the reliability of the oracles. Considering their views, Jebb feels that they represent a "spiritual anarchy" that not only unbalances the "self-centered calm" of Sophocles' mind but also endangers "the cohesion of society." Thus, through their experience, "a note of solemn warning, addressed to Athens and Greece, is meant to be heard." But Jebb concludes by reading into the drama the nineteenth-century problem of adjusting religious faith to the findings of science: "It is as a study of the human heart, true to every age, not as a protest against tendencies of the poet's own, that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* illustrates the relation of faith to reason." Jebb's view is interesting because it illustrates in scholarship the possibility of accommodating the myth to changing life in general, the attitude of the later imaginative critics of the myth. The modern trend in Sophoclean scholarship, however, is historical in orientation, for the scholars look at Sophocles' work not in the light of universal values but in the light of the ancient Greek past, particularly that of Sophocles himself in the Pericle-an Athens of the fifth century.

For example, Sir John Sheppard, the first to demonstrate carefully the possibility of presenting Sophocles' opinions in fifth-century terms, relates ancient Greek meanings given to the maxims of the Delphic oracle, "Know Thyself and "Nothing Too Much," to an understanding of Oedipus' character, and concludes that they provide the final moral of the play. Sheppard interprets the philosophical theme of Sophocles' play as a mild agnosticism or neutral fatalism. Oedipus, he declares, behaves normally, commits an error in ignorance, and brings suffering upon himself. "Sophocles justifies nothing.... His Oedipus stands for human suffering. His gods ... stand for the universe of

circumstances as it is.... He bids his audience face the facts.... Oedipus suffers not because of his guilt, but in spite of his goodness."

Sir Maurice Bowra also synthesizes the two Delphic maxims, his point being that Oedipus has learned that he must do what the gods demand, and in his life illustrates what the Platonic Socrates means when he says the commands "Know Thyself and "Be Modest" are the same. Oedipus finds modesty because he has learned to know himself: "So the central idea of a Sophoclean tragedy is that through suffering a man learns to be modest before the gods." Bowra argues that Sophocles' *Oedipus*,, reflecting such tragic contemporary events (noted by Thucydides) as a catastrophic plague in Athens and an unsuccessful war with Sparta, as well as a current disbelief in the oracles, dramatizes a conflict between gods and men. He concludes that "Sophocles allows no doubts, no criticism of the gods-----If divine ways seem wrong, ignorance is to blame----- For this conflict the gods have a reason. They wish to teach a lesson, to make men learn their moral limitations and accept them" (*Sophoclean Tragedy*, [Oxford], 1944). But Bowra appears to be too committed to supporting the religious establishment, and as a result misses the subtle and humane questioning suggested in the dramatic situation. For example, is not a very critical irony intended by the dramatist when Jocasta's offering at the altar of Apollo on center stage is seen still smoking at the time the messenger inform us of her suicide by hanging? Another such irony may be intended in the *epilogos* when Oedipus, blind and polluted, craves to be sent out of the land as an outcast only to have Creon reply that Apollo must first pronounce. This need not only suggest respect for the power of the god; it may also suggest the god's failure at empathy. For it is as if the dramatist were asking Apollo to show a little charity, love, and forbearance towards erring man.

On the basis of such evidence, Cednc H. Whitman takes issue with Bowra. He states that the picture of a pure and pious Sophocles never questioning the oracles and serenely supporting the traditional belief in the Greek theodicy is completely wrong. Sophocles, Whitman believes, appears in the *Tyrannus* to have suffered a loss of faith; he is bitter, ironic, and pessimistic because of the irrational evil perpetrated by unjust gods on a morally upright man who wishes to be and do good. Whitman's point is that the ancient Greeks used the gods to explain where evil came from, especially that irrational evil which seemed to have no cause or moral meaning. Thus Sophocles was doubting the moral trustworthiness of the Greek gods: "The simple fact is that for Sophocles, the gods, whoever they are, no longer stand within the moral picture. Morality is man's possession, and the cosmos or chaos may be what it will." Sophocles dramatizes the theodicy "with a kind of agnostic aloofness. Sophocles was religious rather than pious" (*Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism*, [Cambridge], 1951).

Such, briefly, are a few of the more significant prevailing views in American and English scholarship concerning Sophocles' handling of the myth in his masterpiece. They demonstrate, despite differences of opinion about Athenian life and Sophocles' character, that the meaning of the myth in the *Tyrannus* derives from the society and culture of Athens during the fifth century, and that Sophocles accommodates the basic story not only to his own time but also to his personal ideological and spiritual needs. So, depending upon how critic reads the complexities and ambiguities of Athenian

culture and the author's tenuous character, Sophocles, in this play about King Oedipus, is impious or pious. But whatever the stand on Apollo and his oracles that Sophocles has really taken, there is no doubt about the depth, conviction, and art with which he expresses his credo. These qualities have always been admired, and, as a result, the form in which Sophocles has cast the myth has often been imitated.

Source: Martin Kallich, "Oedipus: From Man to Archetype" in *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 3, no. 1,1966, pp 33-35

Adaptations

There is an outstanding sound recording from 1974 of the opera-oratorio adaptation of *Oedipus Rex* by Igor Stravinsky and Jean Cocteau; the text is translated by e. e. cummings. It is available from Columbia Music.

Oedipus Rex was adapted as a film by Tyrone Guthrie, starring Douglas Campbell, Donald Davis, Eleanor Stuart, and Douglas Rain, Motion Pictures, 1957. The translation is by poet William Butler Yeats.

The play was also adapted for film by Pier Paolo Pasolini, starring Franco Citti, Silvano Mangano, Julian Beck, and Pasolini himself as the High Priest, Euro International Films, 1967. This epic film was shot in Morocco. Its interpretation of the Oedipus story is bleak, emotionally demanding, and self-consciously autobiographical.

Another film version from the 1960s is that of Philip Saville, starring Christopher Plummer, Lilli Palmer, Orson Welles, and Donald Sutherland, Universal, 1968.

Rainer Simon, a German filmmaker, directed *Der Fall Dipus, or The Oedipus Case*. Set in summertime Greece when a foreign military detachment camp out near Thebes and film the Oedipus story, the film stars Sebastian Hartmann, Tatiana Lygari, and Jan-Josef Liefers, 1990, Toro Film.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) adapted the play for film, starring Michael Pennington, Claire Bloom, and John Gielgud, 1991, Films for the Humanities, British Broadcasting Corporation. Excellent performances from the principal actors as well as from the chorus; staging is minimal but sufficient.

Oedipus Rex was adapted as a film for the *Living Literature: The Classics and You series*, Lesson No. 5., 1994, available from RMI Media Productions.

Two half-hour, made-for-video stage performances of the play are available from Children's Television International (The Play Series, volume 2) and Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation (The EBE Humanities Program, Drama Series).

Far from a literal translation of the play is Woody Allen's *Oedipus Wrecks*, a short comedy about a Jewish New York attorney, Sheldon Mills, who is constantly being nagged, followed, and publicly humiliated by his overbearing mother, Sadie Millstem. The film stars Allen, Julie Kavner, Mia Farrow, and Mae Questel, 1989, Touchstone Pictures; it is the third segment in an anthology film entitled *New York Stories*.

Topics for Further Study

Li his *Third Letter on Oedipus*, Voltaire, a French Enlightenment philosopher and writer, expressed incredulity at the fact that Oedipus, upon discovering that the shepherd who witnessed Laius's murder was still alive, decides to consult an oracle rather than actively to seek the testimony of this witness. How does Voltaire's questioning of Oedipus's decision-making reveal the differences in religious belief between Athenian society in the fifth century B.C. and the Enlightenment? Research the status of belief in oracles in Athenian culture and compare it to the debates between the Jesuits and Jansemsts in Voltaire's France. Discuss this difference in the context of *Oedipus Rex*.

During the fifth century in Athens, the skill of *sophistry* the ability to be a rhetorically persuasive public speaker, and to gain political power through the effectiveness of one's speech performances was becoming an increasingly important aspect of civic culture. One of the most famous sophists, Protagoras, is famous for saying "Man is the measure of all things," and this statement is indicative of the sophists' attitude toward man's potential to learn to excel at rhetoric and thereby win court cases, for example, even if their causes are unjust. Research this aspect of Athenian society, and juxtapose the powers of rhetorical persuasion with the treatment of fate in *Oedipus Rex*. You might wish to start by looking at the well-known first choral ode in *Antigone*, which warns against the kind of over-confidence in man's abilities that Athens was famous for. How does Sophocles use oracular knowledge to comment on man's belief that he can master the universe through knowledge?

Oedipus Rex was written in Athens shortly after its war with Sparta commonly referred to as the Peloponnesian War broke out in 431 B.C. Investigate the war-torn environment in Athens during Sophocles's day by reading Book II of Thucydides'sffiftory of the *Peloponnesian War*, paying close attention to Pericles's funeral oration in the middle of the book. Imagine what it would have been like to have been an audience member for opening night, 426 B.C., of *Oedipus Rex*, and write a journal entry from the perspective of such a person.

Were a person in contemporary America to unwittingly commit the crimes of Oedipus, to what kind of moral scrutiny would they be subjected? Do you think it's fair that aperson is punished for a crime they did not realize they were committing? How might contemporary society (as opposed to Athenian culture) deal differently with this issue?

Compare and Contrast

Fifth Century B.C.: The development of trial by jury in the law courts and the art of sophistry as practiced by philosophers such as Zeno, led to the creation of the first hired lawyers. The ability to persuade a public audience was an important feature of cultural life, and philosophers tutored leaders such as Pericles in oratorical skills.

Today: Rhetorical efficacy remains the chief attribute of today's courtroom lawyers. The public has limited access to these trials unless they garner media attention, as, for example, did the infamous trial of former football star O. J. Simpson, who was accused of murdering his ex-wife Nicole Simpson and her acquaintance Ronald Goldman.

Fifth Century B.C.: In one of many bids for popularity, Athens ruler Pericles spent extraordinary sums of money to support the arts through pageants, processions, public banquets, and monetary allowances for theatrical performances. The theater was associated with the cultural and religious festivals of the Great Dionysia, in whose annual competitions Sophocles won over twenty first-place awards.

Today: Public funding for the arts constitutes less than one percent of the federal budget, and the Republican leaders in Congress have proposed to eliminate this public source of support in favor of a privatized system of grants generated by donations from actors and other private citizens. While the theater continues to be a popular form of entertainment, the festivals surrounding public performances are rarely state-funded.

Fifth Century B.C.: There was a great conflict leading to a long war between Athens and Sparta, the most powerful city-states, and the two supported radically different governmental structures Athens was a democracy; Sparta, an oligarchy (absolute rule fay a committee).

Today: Until the early 1990s, the two largest global powers, the capitalist, democratic United States and the communist U.S.S.R., were fighting the Cold War, with both sides building up conventional weaponry and nuclear arms. The U.S.S.R. fell because of inner strife, and the Cold War mentality gave way to an understanding of the potential for global peace, on the one hand, and the escalation of more localized, civil strife, on the other.

Fifth Century B.C.: Scientific advancement and great progress in mathematics coincided with a belief, in the words of Protagoras, that "man is the measure of all things," and that people can control their own destinies, mastering the universe through the power of knowledge.

Today: Developments in artificial intelligence and bioengmeering lead to difficult, controversial issues about the potential for computers and robots to "think," and about the ethics of such techniques as cloning.

What Do I Read Next?

Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, produced posthumously by his grandson in 401 B.C., tells the story of Oedipus's wanderings after going into exile. He was attended by Antigone, his daughter, to Colonus, and there Theseus protected him until he died. Before he died he cursed his sons Eteocles and Polyneices that they should kill each other, and after Eteocles had ruled for a time he refused to surrender the throne to his brother, who gathered seven champions known as the Seven against Thebes. They attacked the city at each of its seven gates. The brothers died in battle. *Oedipus at Colonus* is the second play in the trilogy of Theban plays, which also includes *Antigone* (the final play) and *Oedipus Rex*.

In *Antigone*, the title character (Oedipus's daughter) and her uncle, Creon the king of Thebes, quarrel because the king will not permit the burial rite to be performed for her brother, Polyneices, who was condemned as a traitor, Creon punishes Antigone for her attempts to bury her brother by sealing her alive inside a stone tomb. She hangs herself, and her husband-to-be Haemon, Creon's son, stabs himself next to her body.

The History of the Peloponnesian War, by the Athenian citizen and general Thucydides (c. 460-400 B.C.), is a careful, compelling, and often first-hand account of the war between Athens and Sparta (431-404 B.C.), which occurred during the heyday of Sophocles's career.

Written in the first century A.D., the lives of Athenian leaders presented in Plutarch's *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives include Theseus*, Pericles, Alcibiades, and Lysander;these last three figures played key roles in Athens during the Peloponnesian War, and their lives provide an instructive political and cultural context for Sophoclean drama.

Democracy, Ancient and Modern (1973), by M. I. Finley, traces the history of democratic culture from fifth-century Athens to the present day. It compares the political, social, and economic structures as well as the role of the arts and literature in different historically significant democracies.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, written c, 1600, recounts the story of a young man whose father has died and his brother Claudius has assumed the throne, marrying his widow Gertrude. The ghost of king appears to his son, Hamlet, and urges him to avenge his death; Hamlet is obsessed with the memory of his father's death and is repulsed at the thought and sight of his mother's hasty remarriage; he wants to kill his uncle, Claudius, but does not succeed in finding the right opportunity until the final scene, when most of the main characters die in the tragedy's final blood bath. Since Freud, the mother-son relationship in the play has been historically considered to be driven by the son's Oedipus complex.

My Oedipus Complex, a short story by Frank O'Connor (published in 1956), sets the Oedipus story in Ireland during World War I. While his father is away fighting in the war,

a young boy, the first-person narrator, develops a misunderstood attraction toward his mother, a situation which becomes complicated by his father's return home and the parents' decision to have another child. An ironic but very touching version of the myth, complete with a happy ending.

Further Study

Aristotle *The Poetics*, translation by W Hamilton Fyfe, Hememann (London), 1927.

Aristotle's important discussion of effective tragic form includes many references to the exemplarity of Sophocles's play, and provides a useful understanding of classical poetic theory.

Bates, William Nickerson *Sophocles. Poet and Dramatist*, Oxford University Press (London), 1940.

In a chapter on Oedipus, Bates summarizes the plot and offers general, laudatory remarks on Sophoclean tragedy, followed by discussions of the protagonist and Jocasta

Bowra, C. M. *Sophoclean Tragedy*, Clarendon Press (Oxford), 1944.

Bowra's focus is on the role of Apollo and the gods in the play, offering a historical reading that contextual-izes the oracle in Athenian society.

Bushnell, Rebecca W *Prophesying Tragedy: Sight and Voice in Sophocles's Theban Plays*, Cornell University Press, 1988

Bushnell compellingly argues that Oedipus's desire to speak and his aversion to silence together create a character whose faith in the efficacy of human words unsuccessfully challenges oracular knowledge.

Davies.M. "The End of Sophocles's O.T." in *Hermes*, Vol 110,1982, pp. 268-77.

Davies argues that the last scene of the play, in which Creon ushers Oedipus into the palace but does not send him into exile as some have assumed, shows us that neither character has changed psychologically as a result of the reversals of fortune in the play. Oedipus still understands himself m the majestic terms of a king, and Creon remains cautious and concerned.

Dawe, R. D., editor *Sophocles: The Classical Heritage*, Garland (New York), 1996.

This collection of criticism of the play includes excerpts for the works of Aristotle, Corneille, Voltaire, and modern theorists as well. Also contains a few discussions of performances of the play from the Italian Renaissance to the present day

Dodds, E. R "On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex" in *Greece and Rome,* Vol. 13,1966, pp.37-49

Dodds's famous and generous account of three popular but misguided undergraduate interpretations of the play is extremely useful in helping to sort out the play's attitudes towards oracular knowledge and human culpability.

O'Brien, Michael J, editor. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Oedipus Rex*, Prentice-Hall, 1968.

O'Brien's indispensible collection of essays includes notable excerpts from the work of Francis Fergusson, Bernard Knox, Richard Lattimore, and Victor Ehrenberg, as well as a smattering of quotations from Plutarch, Longmus, Freud, and Marshall McLuhan.

Fry, Paul H. *Homer to Brecht: The European Epic and Dramatic Traditions*, edited by Michael Seidel and Edward Mendelson, Yale University Press, 1977, pp 171-90.

Fry's introductory lecture for undergraduates focuses on the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus, and the problem of knowledge, and the pathos generated by the punishment of the gods,

Sophocles. *Oedipus Rex*, translation by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, [New York], 1949.

This volume also contains *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*; all three translations are considered standard ones.

Waldock, A. J A *Sophocles the Dramatist*, Cambridge University Press, 1951.

Waldock challenges Bowra's discussion of the play, claiming that its plot does not center around the role of the gods in human life but rather the consequential pain of ambitious desires to gain knowledge.

Whitman, C. H. *Sophocles- A Study of Heroic Humanism*, Harvard University Press, 1951.

Whitman compares Oedipus to Pericles, the Athenian leader and general, and also discusses the play in general terms A balanced though dry antidote to the polemical tones of Bowra and Waldock

Wilder, Thornton. *American Characteristics and Other Essays*, Harper and Row (New York), 1979

Wilder provides learned reflections on the play's treatment of the oracle and discusses the attractiveness of myth-making for Western writers

Winnington-Ingram, W P. *Sophocles An Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

Offers detailed account of the second choral ode, or second "stasimon," in order to demonstrate the usefulness of close attention to commonly neglected aspects of the play.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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