














Oedipus Rex

Study Guide by Course Hero



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Book Basics

AUTHOR

Sophocles

FIRST PERFORMED

c. 430–426 BCE

GENRE

Tragedy

PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR

In this typical Greek tragedy, a chorus introduces and comments on the story in *Oedipus Rex* and converses with the characters.

ABOUT THE TITLE

Oedipus Rex is Latin and means "Oedipus the King," which is the title of later translations of the play.

In Context

Culture and Society in Ancient Greece

At the time Sophocles was alive, Greece was split into *poleis*, or city-states. These states were walled cities that included the countryside around them for the purposes of government, economy, military organization, and participation in community life. Athens was one of the major city-states. It is in Athens that Sophocles became an extremely active citizen in politics and the military. All citizens were part of the military at some point in their lives. They were also part of committees that ran the government, establishing the beginnings of a democratic society.

Women, children, and slaves were not considered citizens. They were, therefore, not allowed to participate in Athenian public life. The female character in *Oedipus Rex*, however, holds a fair amount of power. Jocasta is central to the plot in that she plans the murder of her own child to avoid her fate. She, along with the Chorus, is also able to stop Oedipus from being unreasonable with Creon and tries to protect Oedipus from knowledge of his fate. When these attempts fail, she takes her own life. Antigone and Ismene, Oedipus's daughters, are taken away from him in *Oedipus Rex*. However, in a later play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, they are the two of his four children who act on the principle of kindness, duty, and care for their father in his blindness and self-imposed banishment. In addition, although women had no power in Athens, two of Sophocles's plays, *Electra* and *Antigone*, focus on stories with

strong female characters. Both characters try to tread the path of virtue, attempting to do the right thing as they take matters into their own hands. They are both thwarted by male characters who either disappear or refuse to allow them to follow the rules of decency. However, they clearly take on the roles of heroes, regardless of the failings of other characters.

Religious life also played a central role in the lives of Athenians. Sophocles was the only one of the three major tragic playwrights (the other two being Aeschylus and Euripides) who unquestioningly accepted the power of the gods in his plays. He was more interested in the human perception of right and wrong and the experience of fate and suffering than he was in discussing matters of religious theory. Sophocles felt that human suffering served to create a focal point for mortals (beings who die as opposed to gods), showing them who controlled fate: the gods. *Oedipus Rex* is a powerful example of the role that prophecy played in people's lives. It also shows what can happen when human beings do not pay attention to what the gods tell them to do.

Ancient Greek Theater

Theater in ancient Greece took place during festivals that celebrated the wine god Dionysus. The festivals became the place for playwrights to win not only the approval of the audience but also prizes in competitions for the best dramatic performances. Tragic playwrights Aeschylus and Euripides won prizes for many of their plays, but it was Sophocles who most often won first prize. It is even said that he never won less than second prize for any of his plays performed at the festivals.

Tragedies were not the only type of play performed onstage in ancient Greece. By the middle of the 5th century BCE, Athenian audiences were treated to comedies, mostly written by Aristophanes. Aristophanes often wrote parodies featuring characters from other plays. Because most plays centered on myths that were familiar to the Athenian people, it was common for playwrights to address the same myth in different ways. They wrote from different story angles, changed parts of the plots, or switched characters' perspectives on the myths. Athenians also enjoyed performances of *satyr* plays, which many playwrights, including Sophocles, wrote in addition to their main genres. Satyr plays were performances of tragic stories. However, the choruses were satyrs, combinations of men and horses. The satyrs danced, used foul language, drank

too much, and gave the audience comic contrast to the seriousness of the story lines.

Plays were performed in outdoor theaters that could hold thousands of spectators. They had stone seats arranged in semicircles, angled up the sides of hills. Spectators could look down onto the stage and see all of the action. However, actors had to project their voices quite loudly. They also had to use huge gestures to transmit the action of the play to audience members sitting in the upper-level seats. Actors were male, and they wore masks with obvious expressions and costumes that could be seen from far away. In Sophocles's time plays included a chorus of 12 to 15 singers and dancers. The chorus interpreted the story for the audience after each episode and often interacted with characters to elaborate on ideas. Playwrights before Sophocles used only two actors onstage at a time. Sophocles introduced the use of three actors at a time, expanding the possibilities for dramatic expression.

Influence

Sophocles's influence extends far beyond *Oedipus Rex*. Aristotle's *Poetics*, a theory of drama and poetry written almost a century after *Oedipus Rex*, cites Sophocles's technique of creating a strong yet deeply flawed central character as the very definition of dramatic tragedy. It is the basis on which many tragedies have since been written. But *Oedipus Rex* in particular has captured the attention of audiences in a compelling and persistent way. Although Sophocles was certainly not the first person to write about this myth, people tend to think of his play when they think of the Oedipus story.

Oedipus Rex and the Oedipus myth have inspired many works of literature since Sophocles's time. Both British writer John Dryden (1631–1700) and French philosopher and author Voltaire (1694–1778) wrote plays based on the Oedipus story, but the influence of the myth has gone beyond literature. In music Russian composer Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) wrote an oratorio—a longer musical composition for solo vocalists, a chorus, and an orchestra—using the Oedipus myth in 1927. In 1899 Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) named a psychological state after the main character—"Oedipus complex"—which is sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex and rivalry with the parent of the same sex. It is a twist on the myth that does not mirror the emotions expressed in *Oedipus Rex*. It does, however, show that the story itself has become part of the language of the

human psyche.

Author Biography

As is true of other ancient Greek playwrights, there are many stories but few reliable details available about the life of the great tragedian Sophocles. Ancient sources disagree not only on his exact birth date but also on his family's social status. Sophocles was born in Colonus around 496 BCE. Some contemporary texts say that his father owned a business that produced armor. Others claim he was only a tradesman in that business.

Regardless of his social background, everyone who knew Sophocles agrees that he was quite a charmer. He was a handsome, likable man who was successful not only as a prizewinning tragic playwright but also as a military commander and financial strategist for Athens. Sophocles had several sons, both legitimate and illegitimate. One son from his marriage, Lophon, became a successful playwright as well. When Sophocles was quite old, his sons tried to claim in court that he suffered from dementia. They wanted to take over his finances, but Sophocles won the case by reciting a part of one of his plays from memory. Sophocles lived to be 90 years old, dying in 406 BCE.

Sophocles wrote 123 plays, but only 7 of them have survived in their entirety, including:

- *Electra* (c. 410 BCE)
- *Oedipus at Colonus* (401 BCE)
- *Antigone* (c. 442-441 BCE)

He was by far the most successful of the major tragic playwrights in ancient Greece. He won more first prizes at the annual Dionysian dramatic festival than any other playwright. Sophocles was also the first playwright to introduce a third actor on stage. Earlier plays had two actors who could play two different characters each, if needed. However, three actors gave Sophocles the freedom to make his story lines more complex. He also created backdrops for his plays, which added richness and detail to the performances. *Oedipus Rex* was his most popular play. It was mentioned by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) in his writings.

Sophocles is known for his ability to change his style of language depending on the emotional weight of each scene.

He is also recognized for his clear depictions of the painful struggles his main characters endure as they face their tragic situations. Sophocles often employed dramatic irony in his plays, a literary innovation in which the audience understands the significance of certain actions that the characters do not. In *Oedipus Rex* Sophocles treats the mythical character Oedipus's suffering with sympathy. He also shows that tragedy brings into focus the power of the gods. Both ideas are emblematic of his personal style and his view of the human condition.

Characters

Oedipus

Oedipus leaves his home city of Corinth believing he will escape Apollo's prophecy that he will kill his father and sleep with his mother. While on the road, he kills a traveler and most of the traveler's servants. When Oedipus arrives in Thebes, he is a stranger, but Oedipus eventually becomes king of the city after saving it from the Sphinx. He marries Jocasta, King Laius's widow, and has four children with her by the beginning of the play. Now the city is suffering from a plague, and Oedipus discovers that it is his actions that brought the pestilence upon it. He blinds himself when he realizes the horrible prophecy he originally tried to escape has come true.

Jocasta

Jocasta is as eager as Oedipus to avoid the prophecy that her son will sleep with her and kill his father. To ensure that the prophecy will not come true, she orders the shepherd who left her baby boy, bound at the ankles, to kill him before leaving him. She tries to keep Oedipus from acting in anger. She is steadfast in her certainty that oracles are silly and not to be believed, but she prays to the gods at their altars anyway. Her public beliefs do not match her private ones, and when she discovers what she has done by marrying Oedipus and having children with him, she hangs herself.

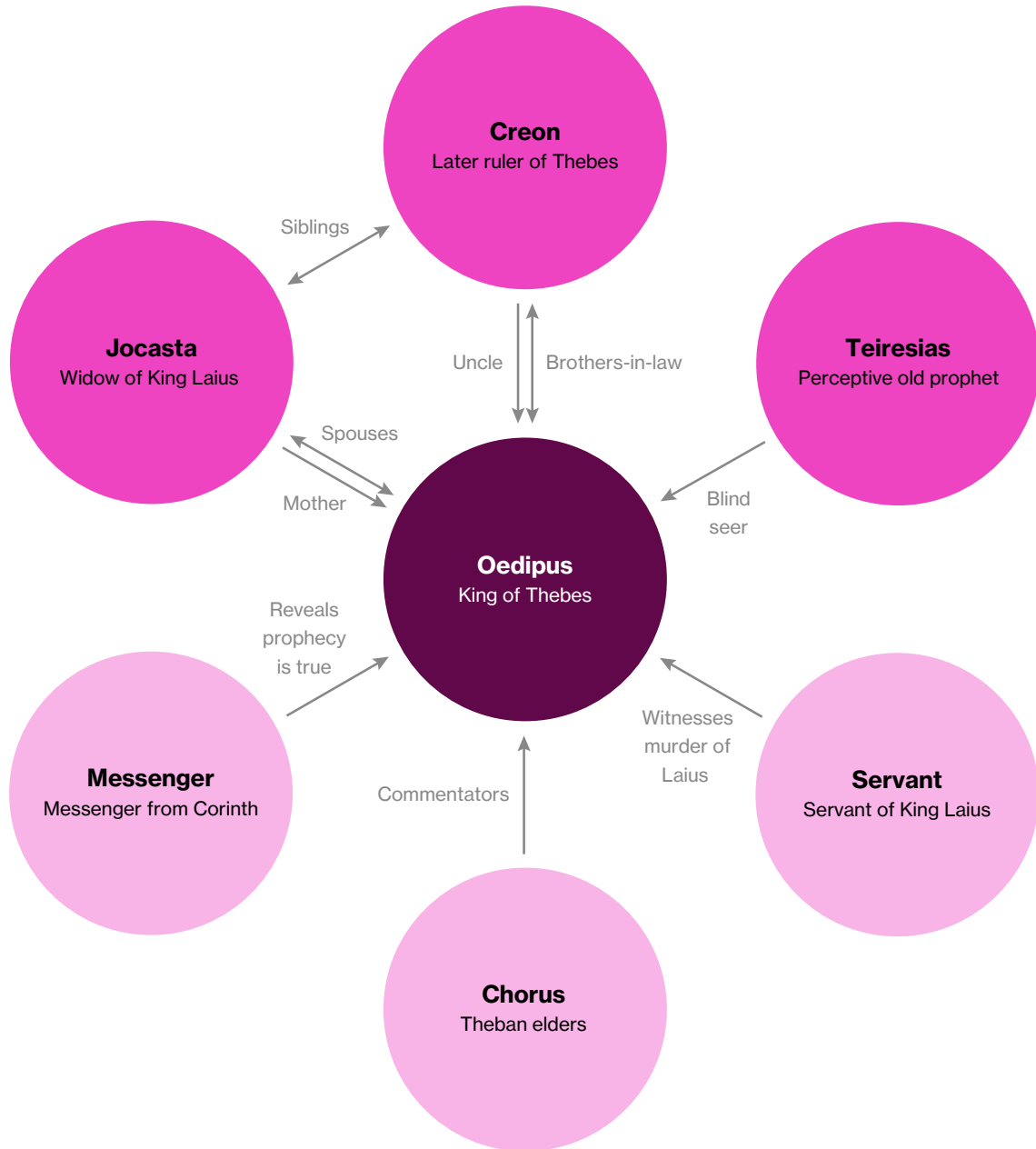
Creon

Creon is sent to the oracle when Oedipus cannot figure out what to do about the plague, and he willingly goes because he believes that the gods are the ones who direct the fate of human beings. When Oedipus accuses him of wanting the throne and plotting with Teiresias, Creon explains that he most certainly does not want to rule Thebes and is loyal to Oedipus. When the terrible prophecy about Jocasta and Oedipus comes true, Creon wants to keep Oedipus at the palace, regardless of the horrible things he has done, and he tries to comfort him by bringing his children to see him. Creon does end up taking the throne and the responsibility for the children only because Oedipus can no longer rule. Creon is the moral center of the play.

Teiresias

Teiresias, according to the Chorus, is on the same level as the god Apollo when it comes to seeing the truth. Teiresias does not want to tell Oedipus what he knows because he immediately sees that it is the fulfillment of the prophecy that has caused the pestilence in Thebes. However, when pressed, he tells what he knows and is sent away by an angry Oedipus.

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Oedipus	Oedipus is the current king of Thebes, who initially arrived as a stranger and saved the city from the Sphinx.
Jocasta	Jocasta is the widow of King Laius of Thebes, and she is married to Oedipus.
Creon	Creon is Jocasta's brother.
Teiresias	Teiresias is an old, blind prophet who is consulted regarding the reason for the plague that torments the city of Thebes.
Antigone	Antigone is the young daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta.
Boy	The boy is a guide for the blind prophet Teiresias.
Chorus	The Chorus provides commentary that helps the audience interpret the play and interacts with characters to clarify events.
Ismene	Ismene is the young daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta.
Messenger	The messenger, who brings news of Polybus's death, freed the baby Oedipus from his ankle binding and gave him to Polybus and Merope.
Second Messenger	The second messenger reports the death of Jocasta and the self-blinding of Oedipus.
Servant	The servant is an old shepherd, a former slave of Laius, who is the one murder witness left alive and who was supposed to have killed the baby Oedipus but could not bring himself to do it.

Plot Summary

Oedipus Rex begins with Oedipus, king of Thebes. He had arrived years before as a stranger after the death of King Laius. He was given the crown because he saved the city from the Sphinx, a mythological creature with a human head, a lion's body, and wings. He speaks with the high priest about the plague that has spread throughout the city and asks what he can do to help. The priest suggests he send someone to consult Apollo, and Oedipus replies that he has already sent Creon, his brother-in-law. Creon returns and reports that Oedipus must find Laius's killer and avenge his death in order to save his people from this pestilence.

The Chorus fearfully sings to Zeus, asking what he has in store for the people of Thebes. They call on several gods to alleviate the suffering that is sweeping the city.

Oedipus then asks his people to tell him what they know about Laius's killer. He warns them to bring forth the killer if they find him. To aid in the search, the Chorus suggests to Oedipus that he consult the old, blind prophet Teiresias to find out what he knows.

A boy leads Teiresias to the king, but at first the prophet refuses to say what he knows. Oedipus is furious and presses Teiresias, who finally relents and says that Oedipus himself is the cause of the pestilence. Oedipus flies into a rage and accuses Teiresias of plotting with Creon to take over the throne. He orders Teiresias to leave, but before the prophet does he tells Oedipus that the killer is in Thebes, will become blind, and will turn out to be both the son and the husband of his mother.

The Chorus sings of its confusion regarding Teiresias's prophecy and insists that it sides with Oedipus no matter what he did because he saved the city from the Sphinx. Still, the Chorus is afraid that the prophecy may be true.

Creon is horrified that Oedipus has accused him of getting Teiresias to lie so that he can grab the throne. He insists he does not want the throne and does not know what Teiresias is talking about. He suggests consulting the oracle at Delphi if Oedipus thinks he is lying. Oedipus wants to either kill him or banish him from the city for treason.

Along with the Chorus, Jocasta, Oedipus's wife, comes in and begs Oedipus to trust Creon's oath before heaven. Oedipus

reluctantly agrees and sends Creon out of the palace without punishing him. Jocasta then tells Oedipus of a prophecy that a son of hers with Laius would kill his father. She and Laius pinned the child's ankles together and had a shepherd put him in the wilderness to avoid the prophecy. Nonetheless, Laius was killed at a place where three roads meet.

Oedipus recognizes this place and the circumstances of Laius's death. He asks Jocasta to send for the remaining witness of Laius's death, a slave. He also tells Jocasta about his parents in Corinth but says he has been told they are not his real parents. Years ago he received the same prophecy—that he would bed his mother and kill his father. Oedipus ran away from Corinth to escape the prophecy, never to return. Along the way he met with travelers, one of whom hit him. Oedipus struck back and ended up killing them all. Jocasta sends for the slave but insists that everything will be fine because she and Laius got rid of their son.

The Chorus sings of the power of prophecy and the foolishness of men who try to avoid their fates. They say that, if the prophecy is not actually true, then their religious faith is in danger of dying.

Jocasta comes to the altar of Apollo and places an offering there. A messenger comes to tell her that Polybus, who is supposedly Oedipus's father, has died of natural causes. This news gives her hope that the prophecy is not true because Polybus was not killed by his son. Oedipus pronounces oracles worthless but says there is still one thing that bothers him: his mother, Merope, is still alive, and the other part of the prophecy claims that he will sleep with his mother. Jocasta tells him not to worry about it.

The messenger then says that there is no reason for Oedipus to avoid going back to Corinth because he is not, in fact, the real son of Polybus and Merope. Oedipus was a gift from a shepherd who found him on a rock with his ankles bound. It turns out that the shepherd, who gave the child to the messenger to give to Polybus and Merope, was a servant of Laius, the very servant they have called to come explain what he witnessed when Laius was killed. Jocasta suddenly realizes who Oedipus is and tells him she hopes he never figures this out and pleads with him not to seek the truth. She runs into the palace, frantic.

The Chorus sings about the questions of who fathered whom. They also sing about the gods and their parentage. The Chorus worries about Jocasta's grief over Oedipus, but Oedipus

dismisses Jocasta's feelings.

The shepherd is called in and tells Oedipus of the child he brought to the messenger. He does not want to say where he got the child because he was supposed to have left the child on a rock to die. The messenger is present at the scene and serves as a witness. He coaxes the shepherd to confess his role in keeping the infant alive. Oedipus was the son of Laius whom the shepherd gave to the messenger. Jocasta had, in fact, ordered him to kill the child to avoid the prophecy, but the shepherd took pity on the child. Now the shepherd and Oedipus both know that Oedipus was that child, and the prophecy has come true.

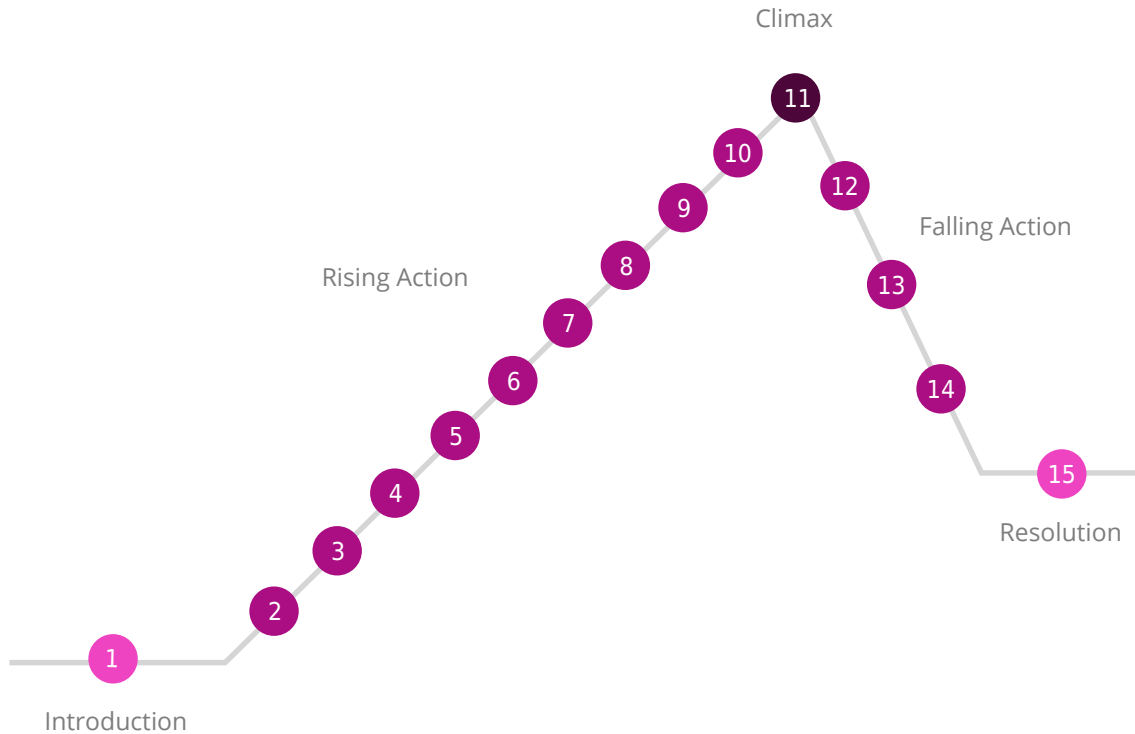
The Chorus sings of the prophecy and its horrors. They wish they had never seen Oedipus, even though he saved the city of Thebes.

Oedipus is furious with Jocasta and wants to kill her, but Oedipus finds her after she has already hung herself. He uses the brooches from her clothes to put out his eyes so that he will no longer see the horror that is his life. A second messenger reveals to the Chorus what has taken place. Oedipus then enters the scene to engage directly with the Chorus, which tell him he should have also killed himself rather than live blind. His children are brought to him by Creon, and Oedipus tells them that he is their brother as well as their father.

Oedipus begs Creon to take care of his daughters so that their lives will not be as horrible as his and tells Creon to send him away. Creon takes pity on him and wants to keep him at the palace, but Oedipus says he wants to live in the mountains. Creon agrees to let him go but tells him he must leave his children behind for he now has no power over them.

The Chorus sings of the unhappy tale: how a powerful man has fallen and how death is the only thing that will bring happiness to mortals.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Oedipus saves Thebes from the Sphinx.

Rising Action

2. Oedipus becomes king, marries Jocasta, has children.
3. Years later a plague infects the city of Thebes.
4. Oedipus sends Creon to Apollo's shrine for help.
5. Apollo wants Oedipus to find Laius's killer.
6. Oedipus consults the old prophet, Teiresias, for help.
7. Teiresias says Oedipus killed Laius; Jocasta is his mother.
8. Jocasta and Oedipus swap stories about similar prophecies.

9. A messenger reveals who Oedipus's true parents are.

10. Laius's former servant confirms the story.

Climax

11. Oedipus realizes Teiresias was right about him.

Falling Action

12. Jocasta realizes Oedipus is her son and kills herself.
13. Oedipus blinds himself.
14. Oedipus decides to exile himself from Thebes.

Resolution

15. Oedipus makes Creon king and asks him to guard his children.

Timeline of Events

A few days later

Shepherd ordered to kill Oedipus gives him to another shepherd, who takes him to Polybus and Merope.

A few days later

On the road Oedipus kills men who threaten him without knowing one is his real father.

Years later

Creon tells Oedipus that Apollo wants Oedipus to avenge Laius's death to stop a plague in Thebes.

Later that day

A messenger tells Oedipus that Polybus is not his real father; Jocasta realizes who Oedipus is.

Later that day

Years earlier

Oedipus is born, and his parents order him killed to avoid fulfilling a dreadful prophecy.

About 20 years later

Oedipus hears a prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother, so he leaves town.

A few days later

In Thebes Oedipus defeats the Sphinx, becomes king, and marries Jocasta.

Later that day

Teiresias says Oedipus caused the plague by killing Laius and marrying Jocasta, his own mother.

Later that day

A shepherd admits he gave the infant Oedipus to Polybus.

Jocasta hangs herself; Oedipus gouges his eyes out and gives the kingship and his children to Creon.

Chapter Summaries

Greek tragedies have a unique structure. They are broken into parts, and each part has a specific purpose:

1. **Prologos:** the introduction to the play that sets the scene for the story and gives background
2. **Parados:** introduces the audience to the Chorus and its role in explaining the story
3. **Episode(s):** during which the plot takes place
4. **Stasimon(s):** the Chorus's response to the episode that precedes it
5. **Exodos:** the Chorus's final chant, focusing on the moral of the play

Prologos

Summary

Oedipus, king of Thebes, had arrived in the city as a stranger after the death of King Laius. He was given the crown because he saved the city from the Sphinx, a mythological creature with the body of a lion and the head of a human. Oedipus comes out of the palace to speak with the high priest about the plague that has spread throughout the city, and he asks what he can do to help. Grieving for the loss of so many people, he says he is willing to put himself at risk to help them. His life is less important than the well-being of his city, and he would be "hard-hearted" if he did not do everything he could to alleviate their suffering. The priest begs him to "restore our city" and suggests he send someone to consult Apollo for advice. Oedipus replies that he has already sent Creon, his brother-in-law, to ask for assistance. Creon returns and reports that Apollo said the plague is caused by the unavenged death of King Laius. Oedipus must find Laius's killer and avenge his death in order to save his people from the pestilence destroying their crops, making women infertile, and killing men, women, and children. Oedipus promises he will find the killer and punish him.

Analysis

The Prologos, the introduction to the play, sets the scene for the story and gives background. When Oedipus arrived at Thebes, he saved the city from the Sphinx, so he has already established himself as a hero to the people. He makes quite a grand entrance, stating, "I, Oedipus, whose fame all men acknowledge." From his first appearance onstage, Oedipus already displays his overreaching pride in his own ability to save the city from the plague.

When Creon returns from consulting the oracle, Oedipus tells him that "the grief I feel for these citizens is even greater than any pain I feel for my own life." This statement of feeling for others shows that Oedipus is not entirely driven by pride, and he genuinely wants to help his people. He questions Creon about Laius's death and does not stop until he has all of the information he can possibly glean. He promises to "once again shed light on darkness." He is, however, afraid the killer will come after him, so his zeal to find the culprit is not entirely unselfish, and he admits as much.

Parados

Summary

The Chorus fearfully sings to Zeus, wondering whether the solution is going to be revealed as some awful thing that has been hidden all along or has come back to haunt the city. It describes the horrible plague and its effects, including the diseases that are further spread by all of the dead bodies lying around the city. The Chorus asks what Zeus has in store for the tormented people of Thebes, and in its fear it calls on several gods to step in to protect the people and alleviate the suffering sweeping the city.

Analysis

The Parados introduces the audience to the Chorus and its role in explaining the story. The Chorus provides the first explanation of the incredible power of the gods as well as the horror the gods can create if they are not happy with human beings. The Chorus also offers an example of what reverence for the deities looks like: certainty that it is the gods who are in

control and a belief that the only way to alleviate their anger is to do exactly what they ask. The Chorus does not ask Oedipus to be its savior again. Instead, it appeals to Athena, Artemis, and Phoebus, saying, "O you three guardians against death, appear to me!" in the hope that these gods will protect the people from Zeus's anger.

Episode 1

Summary

Oedipus orders his people to tell him what they know about Laius's killer. He warns them to bring forth the killer if they find him, and he admonishes them not to shelter the murderer. To aid in the search, the Chorus suggests to Oedipus that he consult the old, blind prophet, Teiresias, to find out what he knows. The Chorus informs Oedipus that Teiresias, a godlike seer, is the closest connection to Apollo it has. Apollo is the god of healing and prophecy, and Teiresias's prophetic abilities may help find the way to stop the city's suffering from the plague.

A young boy leads Teiresias to the king, and Oedipus is gracious to him at first. However, when Teiresias meets Oedipus, he immediately recognizes the king's true identity and repeatedly refuses to say what he knows because it will ruin lives if he does. Oedipus is furious and presses Teiresias, who finally relents and says Oedipus himself is the cause of the plague. Oedipus flies into a rage and accuses Teiresias of plotting with Creon to take over the throne. Teiresias says it is Oedipus's fault for forcing him to tell the truth. Oedipus is certain Teiresias is spreading lies and orders him to leave. Before he does Teiresias tells Oedipus that the killer is not originally from Thebes but is now in the city. The killer will become blind and will turn out to be both the son and the husband of his mother.

Analysis

Oedipus appeals to his people to do the right thing, and he admonishes them for not having searched for the murderer of their king before. He says, "Even if a god were not urging us, it would not be right for you to simply leave things as they are." Still, he recognizes he is the person who currently has the most

power, so he orders the people to find the killer, and he promises to "do everything I can to find him, the man who spilled his blood." It is admirable that Oedipus is willing to "fight on [Laius's] behalf," although he has no idea what really happened in Thebes before he arrived. He is also willing to take the Chorus leader's advice and consult Teiresias.

His flaws, however, get in the way as soon as Teiresias arrives. Rather than accept Teiresias's divine authority when he says he cannot tell Oedipus what is wrong, Oedipus becomes angry, revealing his pride. Understandably he thinks Teiresias is not being forthcoming, and he desperately wants to save his people from the plague. Once Teiresias is finally forced to say he knows Oedipus himself is Laius's killer, Oedipus flares up again with pride and anger and insists Teiresias must be lying. Instead of accepting the word of an esteemed prophet, Oedipus believes he knows better and could not have possibly done what Teiresias claims, though in fact he killed several people before he arrived in Thebes.

Stasimon 1

Summary

The Stasimon is the Chorus's response to the episode that precedes it. The Chorus sings of its confusion about Teiresias's prophecy. Although it knows that Apollo and Zeus see everything that humans do, it is now unsure that human beings can serve as prophets because Teiresias has accused the man who is the savior of the people of Thebes. The Chorus says it sides with Oedipus no matter what he did because he saved its city from the Sphinx. Still, the Chorus is afraid that this prophecy might be true.

Analysis

The Chorus says that, for the killer, "that fatal oracle still lives, hovering above his head forever." This suggests that there may be a connection between the "fatal oracle" and the plague that has swept the city. The Chorus does not, however, question the gods or their power. It only questions the power of human beings. While the Chorus is referring to Teiresias as a prophet who transmits the word of the oracle, it foreshadows the inability of human beings, notably Oedipus and Jocasta, to

outwit the gods.

Episode 2

Summary

Creon, who is at heart a decent and kind man, is horrified that Oedipus has accused him of getting Teiresias to lie so he can grab the throne. He insists that he does not want the throne or the responsibilities that come with it. He is happy to have the benefits of being part of the royal family without having to make the decisions that go along with ruling a city. He asserts that he does not know what Teiresias is talking about. He challenges Oedipus to consult the oracle at Delphi to prove his innocence, but Oedipus wants to either kill him or banish him from the city for treason. Creon offers to die if he is lying, but he stands by his oath that he had nothing to do with Teiresias's claims.

Jocasta, Oedipus's wife, comes in and begs Oedipus to trust Creon's oath before heaven, admonishing both men for stupidly arguing when there are people in the city dying from the plague. Oedipus reluctantly agrees with her and sends Creon out of the palace without punishing him. To comfort her husband, Jocasta tells Oedipus that prophecies are not always true, and she offers an example. She tells Oedipus of a prophecy that a son of hers with Laius would kill his father and marry his mother. She says Laius pinned the child's ankles together and put him in the wilderness to avoid the prophecy coming true. Therefore, she assures him, the child is dead. She also says Laius was killed at a place where three roads meet by a band of robbers, not by his son, so the prophecy never came true.

Oedipus is nervous and upset as he recognizes the description of the crossroads and the circumstances of Laius's death. He asks Jocasta to send for the remaining witness of Laius's death, a slave. He tells Jocasta about his parents in Corinth, but he says a drunk man told him they are not his real parents and he could not live with that knowledge. He relates how he crept away from his home to visit the oracle without his parents knowing about it, but he did not receive an answer about them. Instead, Oedipus received the same prophecy Jocasta has revealed: that he would bed his mother and kill his father. Oedipus ran away from Corinth to escape the

prophecy, never to return to his parents.

On the way to Thebes, Oedipus says he met with a guide and a man riding in a carriage, and the guide tried to run him off the road. The old man in the carriage hit him, and he struck back with a vengeance, killing the old man as well as almost all of the others in the entourage. Oedipus asks Jocasta whether there are any remaining witnesses to Laius's murder, and Jocasta tells him of the slave who was also a shepherd. Jocasta sends for the slave but insists that everything will be fine because the slave said it was a band of robbers who killed Laius, and she and Laius also got rid of their son.

Analysis

This episode reveals how unreasonable and quick-tempered Oedipus can be, a flaw that has caused him to make bad decisions in the past. Incapable of self-examination, he throws the blame on a man who is known to be noble and honest, a man whom he calls brother and friend. He even accuses Creon of the murder, asking him how he can be so bold as to show up at the palace, "you who are obviously the murderer of the man whose house it was, a thief who clearly wants to steal my throne?" Creon shows that, although he is noble, honest, and kind, he is also a man who would rather lead a comfortable life without the stresses of kingship. Oedipus stubbornly refuses to listen until his wife steps in and objects to their argument, chastening Oedipus. Jocasta has the power to stop Oedipus from being unreasonable.

There are also a number of clues in this episode that Oedipus and Jocasta are in serious trouble. The fact that Oedipus is nervous and upset tells the audience that he suspects he has done something awful, but he does not catch on that this is the first part of the prophecy he received from the oracle. He simply worries that he has killed Laius and then married Laius's widow, which he rightly believes was immoral. If this murder is what has caused the plague in the city, and if he is the murderer, he is the cause of the plague. His determination to uncover the truth shows that, although he is a proud man, he is also capable of trying to act morally.

Stasimon 2

Summary

The Chorus sings of the power of prophecy and the foolishness of men who try to avoid their fates. It says that, if the prophecy is not actually true, then its religious faith is in danger of dying. The Chorus notes that people are not listening to the gods anymore or worshipping Apollo in the right way.

Analysis

This stasimon foreshadows the revelation that Oedipus has not avoided his fate, nor has Jocasta. It also shows the audience that, when religious faith is not adhered to and Apollo is not completely trusted, terrible things happen. People are only praying to the god when it serves them and when they need to be saved from their own actions.

Episode 3

Summary

Jocasta comes to the altar of Apollo and places an offering there, hoping to stop her husband from thinking about the past and listening to the prophecies. A messenger comes to tell her that Polybus, who is supposedly Oedipus's father, has died of natural causes. This news gives Jocasta hope that the prophecy is not true because Polybus was not killed by his son. Oedipus hesitantly pronounces oracles worthless but says there is still one thing that bothers him: his mother, Merope, is still alive, and the other part of the prophecy claims he will marry his mother and have children with her. Jocasta tells him not to worry about it.

The messenger then says that the good news is that there is no reason for Oedipus to fear going back to Corinth. This is because Oedipus is not, in fact, the real son of Polybus and Merope. Oedipus was a gift from a shepherd who found him on a rock, with his ankles bound, as a child. The messenger took pity on the child and removed the pin from his ankles, bringing the baby to Polybus and Merope, who did not have children of their own. But the messenger was not the person who found the baby. Oedipus asks the messenger who gave the child to him, and the messenger says it was another shepherd, a

servant of King Laius. The Chorus leader says the shepherd they are looking for is the very servant they have called to come explain what he witnessed when Laius was killed. Jocasta suddenly realizes who Oedipus is, and she tries to convince him to stop asking questions. He, however, is determined to know more about his birth. She says it is enough for her to suffer, and Oedipus assumes she is worried about his lineage. Jocasta tells him she is trying to protect him and begs him not to seek the truth. Frantic and unable to stop him from learning the truth, she runs into the palace and says she will never speak again.

Analysis

Jocasta prefers to use reason and logic to counsel Oedipus, but her methods fail as she tries to stop him from learning the truth about himself. The woman who thinks oracles and prophecy are useless and untrue resorts to praying at Apollo's altar to get Oedipus to stop torturing himself. Oedipus, however, has to know what has happened, and, when the messenger tells him his parents really are not his biological parents, he cannot stop asking questions. The messenger's admission that he removed a pin from Oedipus's ankles when he found him and he received him from Laius's shepherd opens up the truth to Jocasta in a way she can no longer avoid.

Jocasta is willing to bear her shame alone to keep Oedipus in the dark about what she has done, whom he has killed, and how they have fulfilled the prophecy together. But Oedipus will not stop asking questions: "I cannot prove false to my own nature, nor can I ever cease from seeking out the facts of my own birth." He wants to speak with the shepherd who is Laius's servant, the one who is the witness to the murder, because he knows this last piece of information will reveal the whole truth.

Oedipus is unwilling to let the truth remain hidden or let his people suffer for his actions, while Jocasta will not sacrifice her husband's mental stability for the sake of the truth. She realizes she cannot stop him, though, and she no longer has a reason to speak. Her statement, "Alas, you poor miserable man! There's nothing more that I can say to you" is the literal truth. She cannot remain alive knowing he, too, must bear the shame of their relationship.

Stasimon 3

Summary

The Chorus sings of the questions of parentage and birth. It also sings about the gods and who their fathers might have been.

Analysis

Just as it is not certain who fathered some of the gods, and for what reasons, it is not clear to Oedipus that Laius is his father. The Chorus seems to have figured out that Oedipus was found in the land where Jocasta says she and Laius told the shepherd to place their baby. Again, the members of the Chorus are the voice of trust in the gods, and it is to the gods, not to human beings, that they direct their questions.

Episode 4

Summary

The shepherd is called in and tells Oedipus he is a former slave of Laius. He was a shepherd in Cithaeron, where Oedipus was found. He claims not to remember Oedipus, and, when the messenger reminds him of the baby he found, the servant tries to get him to remain silent about it and calls the messenger a "busybody." Oedipus threatens to hurt him if he will not talk, and he has the shepherd's hands tied. The shepherd admits that he gave the child to the messenger, but he does not want to say where he got the child. He begs Oedipus to stop asking him questions, and Oedipus threatens to kill him. The shepherd then admits that the baby was born in Laius's house and that the child was Laius and Jocasta's son. He was supposed to have left the child on a rock to die, but Jocasta ordered him to kill the child. The shepherd told Oedipus she did it to avoid the prophecy that her son would kill his father, but the shepherd took pity on the child. Now the shepherd and Oedipus both know that Oedipus was the child and that the prophecy has come true.

Analysis

The shepherd's testimony is the final link in the chain of events that brings Oedipus down. Now Oedipus knows Jocasta was not afraid he would lose his noble lineage. Rather, she knew he was her son because the curse he received at the oracle has come true. When the shepherd says, "Alas, what I'm about to say now ... it's horrible," Oedipus replies, "but nonetheless I have to hear it." His reply shows how determined he is to discover the truth, no matter how it affects him, and to keep his promise to his people.

Stasimon 4

Summary

The Chorus sings that fate is unavoidable and mortals are doomed. It wishes it had never seen Oedipus, even though he saved the city of Thebes, because now he has brought darkness where he had brought life to the city.

Analysis

The Chorus states what Sophocles has written about in so many of his tragedies: human suffering is the only way people can figure out who really has power. The true power is not in their hands but in the hands of the gods, and they ignore this at their peril. Happiness is not possible for long, as suffering must come to prove to human beings how powerless they really are: "no mortal man is ever blessed."

Episode 5

Summary

A second messenger comes out from the palace to tell the people, represented by the Chorus, that Jocasta, crying out to Laius, has hanged herself. Oedipus, who raged through the palace looking for Jocasta and asking for a sword, broke down her door and found her dead. The messenger reports that Oedipus then used the brooches from her clothes to gouge out

his eyes so he would no longer see the horror in his life. The messenger says Oedipus continued to strike his eyes with the brooches to make sure they would be completely obliterated, and he now wants to have the gates opened so he can be revealed to the people as Laius's killer and his mother's husband. The Chorus tells Oedipus he should have also killed himself rather than live blind, but the Chorus leader pities him. Oedipus recognizes the Chorus leader's voice, and he blames Apollo for his fate but takes full responsibility for his blindness. He does not understand why the gods would allow this to happen.

Oedipus's daughters are brought to him by the kindly Creon, who knows Oedipus has always been comforted by them. Oedipus tells them he is their brother and begs Creon to take care of the girls because no one else will want them. Then he begs Creon to send him away. Creon takes pity on Oedipus and tries to keep him at the palace, but Oedipus says he wants to banish himself and live far from their sight. Creon agrees to let him go but tells him he must leave his children behind, for he now has no power over them.

Analysis

Jocasta, claiming she can no longer say a word, has silenced herself for good, as predicted. Oedipus does not take his life but gouges his eyes out to plunge himself into total darkness. It is possible he is punishing himself for his blindness to both the truth and the prophecy.

Creon did not want to be king but is forced now to take on that power. He pities Oedipus and shows his kindness by trying to comfort him and keep him at the palace. Oedipus wonders why Creon is making requests from the gods for him when he is "so depraved," and Creon states what Sophocles intends as the moral: "For even you must now trust in the gods." Oedipus replies, "Yes, I do," showing how his suffering has convinced him of the power of the gods. He is also amazed at Creon's kindness, especially considering Oedipus had distrusted Creon's devotion to family. However, he knows he cannot stay at Thebes. He tries to keep his children, but he must lose them, too, as he has lost everything else, because in his hubris he believed that he could challenge the gods.

Exodos

Summary

The Chorus sings of the unhappy tale, telling the citizens of Thebes how a powerful man has fallen and how death is the only thing that will bring happiness to mortals because all life is filled with pain.

Analysis

The Chorus repeats the lesson that Sophocles gave in the last episode, that human suffering is part of life's destiny. This is how humans discover they are not truly powerful. Only death can alleviate the pain of being human.

“” Quotes

"And so you'll see how I will work with you, as is right, seeking vengeance for this land, as well as for the god."

— Oedipus, Prologos

These lines in the Prologos, the introduction to the play, foreshadow just how far Oedipus will go to seek the truth even if it is painful for him. At this point in the play, he is trying to find Laius's killer to stop the plague that is tormenting the people of his city. He does not know yet that the gods will have their vengeance for his unwillingness to accept a prophecy long ago.

"O Delian healer, for whom we cry aloud in holy awe, what obligation will you demand from me, a thing unknown or now renewed with the

revolving years?"

— Chorus, Parados

In the Parados the Chorus comes in for the first time, chanting to the gods about the plague in Thebes and the destruction of its people. The Chorus calls on Apollo, the "Delian healer," to ask whether the plague is a form of punishment or whether they must pay some sort of debt to the god. The Chorus is terrified and wonders whether the cause of the plague is unknown or if it will prove to be something that has happened in the past and will come back. This idea foreshadows information about Oedipus's identity that will be revealed later in the play.

"You have your eyesight, and you do not see how miserable you are."

— Teiresias, Episode 1

Teiresias, a prophet, may be blind, but he can see that Oedipus is the cause of the plague. His admonition to Oedipus that he cannot see how miserable he is shows that Oedipus is in greater trouble than he can imagine. Oedipus thinks he has escaped his fate, but Teiresias's statement tells the audience otherwise.

"And he will turn out to be the brother of the children in his house—their father, too, both at once, and the husband and the son of the very woman who gave birth to him."

— Teiresias, Episode 1

This is the first time the audience hears the prophecy that both

Oedipus and Jocasta have tried to escape. Unfortunately, Oedipus cannot understand that the prophecy is the same one he heard years ago. This is yet another example of Oedipus attempting to avoid his fate.

"Listen to me, and ease your mind with this—no human being has skill in prophecy."

— Jocasta, Episode 2

Jocasta is trying to calm Oedipus down by convincing him that Teiresias's prophecy cannot be true. She uses the prophecy given to her and King Laius about their son killing his father and sleeping with his mother as an example because she believes her son is now dead. She explains how Laius made sure that their son would die by sending him out into the wilderness with his ankles pinned. To Jocasta, this means that Laius was not killed by his son and, thus, that prophecies are useless. Jocasta displays her hubris here in doubting a prophecy. This is an example of dramatic irony, a literary technique used to great effect by Sophocles, where the audience can see or understand something that the characters in the play cannot.

"In shape he was not all that unlike you."

— Jocasta, Episode 2

The resemblance between Laius and Oedipus terrifies Oedipus. It is a clue that he is Laius's killer, but he does not yet realize just how pertinent this clue is. Oedipus has never seen a family resemblance between himself and Laius and Jocasta, but, now that Jocasta mentions it, the audience knows exactly where the story is going.

"What man could be more hateful to the gods?"

— Oedipus, Episode 2

Oedipus is saying that any man who would kill someone and then take his crown and his wife is evil. He believes that, if he is that person, he is, in fact, hateful to the gods. In another example of dramatic irony, he does not yet realize that this is his own fate.

"What man is there who does such things who can still claim he will ward off the arrow of the gods aimed at his heart?"

— Chorus, Stasimon 2

The Chorus sings of human arrogance and irreverence for the gods, which is exactly what Oedipus has shown in his efforts to avoid Apollo's prophecy. It is certain such a person will get his just rewards in the end, and it proves to be right.

"I'll never speak another word again."

— Jocasta, Episode 3

Oedipus thinks Jocasta is ashamed of him for not being of the lineage he claimed, and he brushes off her reaction. She is actually saying she knows that Oedipus is her son, the baby Laius sent off with the shepherd. She is planning to kill herself, thus never speaking a word again.

"O light, let me look at you one final time, a man who stands revealed as cursed by birth."

— Oedipus, Episode 4

Oedipus now knows he has fulfilled the prophecy he tried to escape years before—the same prophecy Jocasta tried to avoid. He also knows Jocasta tried to kill her own child. His

statement that he is looking at light one final time both shows how the darkness toward Jocasta has filled his heart and foreshadows his self-inflicted blindness.

"Why should I have eyes when there was nothing sweet for me to see?"

— Oedipus, Episode 5

Oedipus is saying he blinded himself because Apollo's intentions for him were so horrible that there was nothing in his life worth seeing. His wife and his children, who were the sweetness in his life, now represent the awful prophecy the gods have forced him to fulfill.

Symbols

Crossroads

A major symbol in *Oedipus Rex* is that of the crossroads, the place where the three roads meet in Phocis. When people are said to be at a crossroads, they are about to make decisions that will influence the rest of their lives in major ways. At this crossroads Oedipus kills his father. He does not realize he has fulfilled part of his fate, but the crossroads, as a symbol of a life-altering decision, tells the audience otherwise before Oedipus himself realizes what he has done.

Swollen Feet

Oedipus's name means "swollen feet" or "knowledge of one's feet." His feet were pierced and bound when he was an infant and his parents abandoned him. He was rescued by a messenger, but his feet were scarred as a result. The scars symbolize the crippling fate destined for him from his birth. It is

an example of situational irony that neither Oedipus nor Jocasta connect his scars with the story of his birth.

Themes

Self-Discovery

The play is full of self-discovery, but, as is often the case in a tragedy, the self-discovery is painful if not deadly. As a younger man, Oedipus wants to know his true identity at the expense of his presumed parents, Polybus and Merope. In Episode 2 Oedipus tells Jocasta that years ago, in his home of Corinth, a drunken man accused him of not really being his parents' son. Although his parents reassured him that this information was not true, the story spread. He says, "But nonetheless, the accusation always troubled me—the story had become known everywhere. And so I went in secret off to Delphi." Oedipus reacts with selfish pride to the way people are talking about him. He does not find out whether he is really adopted, but Apollo gives him the terrible prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. He leaves Corinth forever to avoid his fate, but by doing so he unwittingly brings this fate upon himself. Oedipus's desire to seek out his real parents and true identity is not a sign of selfish pride but simply natural curiosity. His pride lies in his personal conviction that he can defy the oracle and change the course of his fate.

Oedipus is persistent in that he sends Creon to the oracle to find out why his people are ill and is also willing to consult Teiresias. However, he cannot handle the answers he gets, and his pride flares again. He accuses Creon of plotting with Teiresias to overtake the throne. But, when he questions Jocasta about the death of Laius, both he and Jocasta begin to see parallels in their pasts, notably the same prophecy. Jocasta attempts to remain blind to her real identity and insists oracles are silly, but she continues to pray at the altar, revealing her budding self-knowledge to the audience. By the time the messenger says that the shepherd was the one who gave him a baby bound at its ankles, Jocasta knows the truth but still refuses to face it, and she tries to protect Oedipus from knowing how disastrous the situation really is. When Oedipus persists and says, "I cannot end this now. I must

reveal the details of my birth," Jocasta replies, "In the name of the gods, no! If you have some concern for your own life, then stop! Do not keep on investigating this." Jocasta knows that Oedipus will suffer once he discovers his true identity: "O you unhappy man! May you never find out who you really are!" But the shepherd's story confirms Oedipus's lineage, and he discovers he is Jocasta and Laius's son.

Fate versus Free Will

A major theme in Sophocles's plays is the idea that the gods, not human beings, determine the fate of an individual. Sophocles was a religious man who did not question who was in control. His plays reflect his belief that suffering serves as a way to clarify the power of the gods and their intentions for humanity. In *Oedipus Rex* fate is unavoidable, no matter what lies the characters tell others and themselves and no matter what they do to ensure that they escape their destinies. In fact, the attempt to escape fate seems to be the very thing that ensures that fate is inescapable. Trying to avoid, rather than accept, one's fate increases one's suffering even more. This idea does not, however, eradicate free will and the choices characters make over the courses of their lives. A clear tension exists between fate and free will in Greek tragedy, illustrated by the perpetual conflict between humans and the gods.

Jocasta also tries to control events to avoid the same prophecy in an unimaginably awful way. She and Laius put a pin through the ankles of their own son, causing him to be lame and scarred for life, and order a shepherd to leave him exposed on a rock in the wilderness, which will surely mean his death. But Jocasta is so determined to avoid her fate that she goes one step further and tells the shepherd to kill the baby instead. The shepherd cannot go through with such a horrible, heartless order and disobeys Jocasta, handing the baby over to a messenger to give to Polybus and Merope. That baby is, of course, Oedipus. Jocasta's attempt to orchestrate infanticide secures her fate: the gods are not happy with that shameful act. Jocasta even tries to stop Oedipus from knowing the full story, and she is willing to accept her fate and suffer in silence as long as Oedipus does not know he is the one she tried to have killed. However, neither one can avoid fate nor the knowledge they have come face to face with.

Blindness

Sophocles builds the theme of blindness by having all of the characters in *Oedipus Rex* either start off as blind, become blind, refuse to see the truth, or wish they had never seen it. Blindness symbolizes the characters' ignorance. By extension this theme includes sight as well, and in *Oedipus Rex* none of the characters want to see what is finally revealed to be a terrible misjudgment of the power of the god Apollo. However, once they acquire the knowledge or understanding that leads to the truth, their vision becomes clear.

The first instance of blindness is Teiresias, the old, blind prophet. Interestingly, this type of blindness occurs in a character who is the first representation of the truth behind Oedipus's birth and life story. Willful blindness is something that both Creon and Jocasta have in common, to differing degrees. Creon, when accused of wanting the throne, says he does not want to deal with all of the problems that come with running a city. He would rather be blind to all of that and enjoy his life as the brother of a king and queen.

Jocasta, however, blinds herself to the power of the gods by trying to avoid her fate, and, when she discovers the truth about Oedipus, she adopts a willful blindness to the facts: "Why should a man whose life seems ruled by chance live in fear—a man who never looks ahead, who has no certain vision of his future?" She encourages Oedipus to join her in her blindness, and she keeps it up until she can no longer deny the facts. At that point Jocasta runs from the room. In the next episode, she kills herself rather than face what is before her.

After the shepherd admits that he disobeyed Jocasta's order to kill her son, everyone listening knows who Oedipus is and that the prophecy has come true. The Chorus wishes they were blind, singing, "O child of Laius, how I wish I'd never seen you."

Oedipus, having discovered that he has murdered his father and fathered children with his own mother, also has to witness the suicide of the woman who is both his wife and mother. He is the one who finds her hanging in their room, and her death raises his level of suffering to a degree that he cannot stand. He takes the brooches from her clothing and uses the pins to gouge out his eyes, blinding himself permanently. When the second messenger describes the agony of both Jocasta and

Oedipus, the Chorus wishes they had never seen Oedipus.

Pride

Pride figures prominently in many Greek tragedies. It is closely related to the Greek idea of *hubris*, a character trait that leads a person to disregard the limits of human potential preordained by the gods. Oedipus is an intelligent man, but his pride gets the best of him.

Oedipus's pride ultimately leads to his downfall. *Hamartia*, often referred to as the tragic flaw, is one of the key aspects of Greek tragedy. The main characters in many tragedies are nearly superhuman but burdened with tragic flaws that prevent them from becoming godlike. Oedipus's tragic flaw is his pride. By attempting to escape the prophecy dictated by the gods, he ends up fulfilling it. In doing so, Oedipus becomes guilty of *hubris* as he tries to overcome his human limitations and rescind the prophecy.

Like Oedipus, Jocasta is guilty of pride and *hubris* in her attempt to alter fate and later deny it at various points. She sends Oedipus to die as an infant hoping to escape the prophecy. Many years later, when Oedipus reveals to her the prophecy he had heard, she denies it, yet she continues to pray at the altar of Apollo. When she realizes the prophecy has been fulfilled, she tries to shield Oedipus from the truth. Incapable of coping with the prophecy's fulfillment, she commits suicide.

Motifs

Sophocles uses *motifs*, or dominant ideas woven throughout a literary work, to support his themes. A willingness to accept fate as represented by the oracle allows characters to live in the light. In contrast, the denial of fate forces characters to live in literal and figurative darkness.

Oracle

The most important motif in *Oedipus Rex* is that of the oracle, which appears several times throughout the play to help the characters determine the truth even if it is not what they want to hear. The oracle, as well as Teiresias the prophet (who serves the purpose of the oracle), represents the fate of human beings as determined by the gods.

Light versus Darkness

Another motif is that of light versus darkness. This motif helps to reinforce the theme of blindness. At the start of the play, Oedipus says that, to avenge Laius, he will "shed light on darkness" and that "with the gods' help this will all come to light successfully, or else will prove our common ruin." His words link the concept of light with the revelation of knowledge and suggest that without knowledge darkness will prevail in the form of ignorance of the reason for the plague, causing "common ruin." Later the angry Oedipus tells Teiresias he lives in "endless darkness of the night" and thus cannot really affect someone who "can glimpse daylight." By the end of the play, when Oedipus discovers Teiresias has been right all along, he says, "O light, let me look at you one final time," meaning he will either die or blind himself, plunging into permanent darkness.

Suggested Reading

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