

## **Sophocles: King Oedipus**



**Discipline Courses-I  
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**Paper: *Paper 1: European Classical Literature***

**Lesson: Sophocles: King Oedipus**

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## Sophocles: King Oedipus

### GREEK TRAGEDY

#### Form

Greek or Attic tragedy was an inherent part of the culture of ancient Athens. The form, originating from earlier ritualistic traditions was considered to be the most superior of dramatic forms. Apart from tragedy, the other forms of dramatic productions were comedy and satyr-plays but these were considered to be of lesser import. The city celebrated a five day annual festival in late March to honor Dionysius Eleuthereus, the god of wine and theatre. In this festival, three acclaimed writers each of whom presented a trilogy of tragic plays and a satyr drama competed for the prize. Earlier, all four plays were thematically tied and constituted a tetralogy but later Sophocles and Euripedes espoused a single play format. As for the subject, the playwrights used to modify and creatively present different versions of myths that were widely accepted.

*Do you know? Greek tragedy is also called Attic tragedy because it comes from the state of Attica, of which Athens was the principal city.*

The word tragedy is etymologically connected to a goat (*tragos*) and song (*oidos*). The earliest references to the performance of tragic plays at the annual festival are in the sixth century B.C. It developed out of a choral performance without actors. By the time of Sophocles, it has mostly three actors along with a chorus of twelve to fifteen, all of whom were masked men. The chorus sings and dances and the actors speak in verse. The audience was accustomed to using their imagination in making sense of the play with minimal markers

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in terms of stage and props. Even the word theatre is derived from the Greek *theatron* which implies seeing.



Attic red-figure volute-krater with a chorus of satyrs, Dionysos and Ariadne (center), Herakles (upper right). c. 400. Pronomos vase. (Museo Nazionale Archeologico, Naples. Inv. 3240.)

### Significance

Aristotle claims a philosophical status for tragedy and defines it as “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of those emotions” (6.2, trans. Butcher). The Greeks had a tragic view of life. In a world where every human effort must pass through suffering and must wind itself into the knot of death, all

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narrative and dramatic imitation of life has tragic potentialities. Fully developed tragedy is possible only when keen desire and high ability to understand human suffering unite with noble capacity to take pleasure in its artistic representation. The tragic artist is one who is as honestly concerned with the mystery of human suffering as others, but instead of accepting that mystery with simple reverence he soon begins to assault it with insistent questions.

Challenging the rightness of things as they are, through his drama, the dramatist is one dares to shape an order in the world.

Tragedy undertakes an extensive yet subtle scrutiny into the divergent, often contradictory roles which human beings perform and fail to perform in their lives. One of the characteristic things about the 'experience' which tragedy represents is that it increases man's capability to ask questions which appear to have no answers, or at least, no satisfactory answers.

The Greek artist is concerned with the moral view of art. The tragic protagonist in Greek plays progresses towards an extremity ("ep' eschaton"). The hero of tragedy is characterised by going too far within the traditional human (moral, political) or divine order. The tragic protagonists undertake valiant actions to comprehend the meaning of their existence. In entire Greek drama, Oedipus is the one who is most intently engrossed in introspection and evaluation. In *Oedipus the King*, the tragic protagonist is characterised by a compulsion to know the truth.

### SOPHOCLES: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

A work of art becomes a classic when it survives the test of time by dealing with issues which are timeless. Sophocles's plays, especially *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, have survived the test of time because of their timeless quality. Since there is a temporal gap of more than two millenniums between his milieu and ours, very little is known about him and even that is speculative. He is generally thought to have been born around 497/496 B.C. and

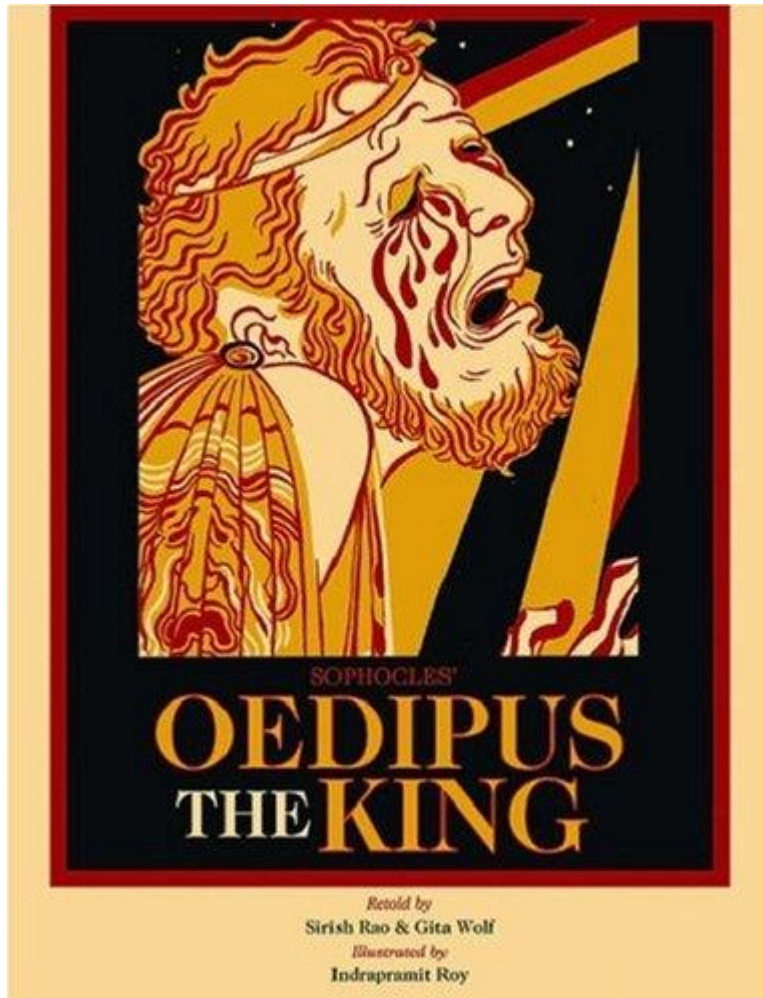
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died around 406 B.C. Colonus (a part of Athens), which is generally known to be the burial place of Oedipus, is considered to be Sophocles's birth place. He belonged to a wealthy family and was accomplished in music, dance, poetry and wrestling. Apart from being a renowned poet, he was also a bureaucrat who took various offices in the administration. He also served as a general under Pericles managing policy decisions and management of resources.

Seven plays written by him have survived out of more than 120 plays that he wrote, apart from two satyr-plays and other fragments. He was a famous artist throughout his career. He won the very first annual tragedy competition that he participated in by beating Aeschylus who was himself a very renowned artist of the time. He also won against the other great playwright of the time, Euripedes. In fact, it is said that he won twenty times and always secured either the first or the second position. Aristotle tells us that Sophocles introduced the third actor and scene painting in drama.

OEDIPUS TYRRANUS

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The play begins with a portrayal of Oedipus as a confident, intelligent and self-reliant ruler who became the king long since he solved the riddle posed by the sphinx. Unlike, the hamartia of an Aristotelian tragic hero, it is this desire for truth and knowledge that leads to the peripeteia in the play. Yet, what affects the audience most starkly is the ignorance of Oedipus as he is embroiled in a preordained scheme of events. Tragedy depicts the gulf between action and comprehension in real life. In so far as our being is composed of our actions, Oedipus' destiny makes us aware of the gaps between being and doing and understanding. Generally, one would believe in the hope or notion that understanding may come from or with experience. The experience of Sophocles' play does not shatter this belief but it demonstrates how vulnerable it is. The human condition necessarily constitutes lapses

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that fall between what is experienced and what is made of that experience. Oedipus, to use Coleridge's phrase, is a 'man of ideas' who wants to know the truth and believes in the power of reason. The play begins with Oedipus's question: "Oh my children, the new blood of ancient Thebes/ why are you here?" Each question leads to answers which in turn lead to further questions and after the final tragedy has occurred, the question lingers on: why Oedipus?

The play is seen as an epitome of the "tragedy of destiny". Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, comments in his *Interpretation of Dreams*: "*Oedipus Rex* is what is known as a tragedy of destiny. Its tragic effect is said to lie in the contrast between the supreme will of the gods and the vain attempts of mankind to escape the evil that threatens them. The lesson which, it is said, the deeply moved spectator should learn from the tragedy is submission to the divine will and realisation of his own impotence" (Trans. James Strachey). One cannot help but wonder if Oedipus was a victim of destiny which Apollo prophesied or did Apollo foretell what Oedipus was to do in his life. In other words, does Oedipus have any freewill or is he just a puppet who acts the wishes of Gods. Oedipus has tried to avert the tragic turn of events by running away from his destiny but fails and yet the oracle of Apollo commands to root out this corruption from Thebes (110-111). Oedipus is one with his kingdom which is why his moral "corruption" of the filial bonds has led to the corruption of the generative sources of life in Thebes. According to Bernard Knox, as compared to previous ages "our own more anxious age has seen in the situation of Oedipus an image of its own fears" (132).

Living in a condition where life is continually assaulted by the ravages of war (Athens had lost the Peloponnesian war in 404 B.C.) and fatal diseases (a plague spread in Athens in 430 B.C.), the Greek imagination was always overwhelmed by the idea of death. In the mythic world of Homer, the Greeks fought against the inexorable onslaught of death by following the heroic code; Achilles being the sublime example of this desire to outdo mortality by

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achieving *kleos aphthiton* (eternal fame). On the other hand, Odysseus is the one who is the most successful in offering a challenge to death, not by opposing it through his *bie* (strength), but by the use of his *metis* (mind). Similarly, Oedipus has also saved the state of Thebes from the danger of death posed by Sphinx through his knowledge. The world of Sophocles is not Homeric, in fact, far from it, but even here the threat of death lurks around symbolised the Sphinx in the past and the plague in the present. It is the peril of death that will haunt the entire house of Oedipus.



The Sphinx posed a riddle to anyone who challenged her and would kill anyone who tried and failed to answer correctly. The question she asks is to name the being who, sometimes walks on four feet, sometimes on two and sometimes on three; speaks with a single voice; and is weakest when it has the most. Oedipus tells that the answer of this riddle is man. Oedipus had come from Corinth to avoid his fate prophesied by an oracle. Once he frees Thebes of the threat of Sphinx, he is offered the crown of the king Creon and the hand of his widowed sister, Jocasta. The mythic figure of Sphinx, with its lion's body and human head



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and wings, is itself emblematic of a force that exists as a threat to mortality. The citizens of Thebes think that this threat of death by disease can again be averted by Oedipus. But in this post-heroic world, there are no unambiguous questions and simple solutions. The citizens' and Oedipus's hope of a dramatic rescue will not fructify. Harold Bloom comments on the meaning of Oedipus's name: "The Greek *oida* meaning "I know" or "I have seen" is appropriate for one who solves a great riddle but does not know his own identity and ends up unable to see" (41). This is not a world where following the injunction 'know thyself', inscribed at the shrine of the Apollo, the god of healing, archery and prophesy would lead to victory. Instead, the process of self discovery would be an excruciating journey at the end of which lies tragedy and death. For Sophocles, there is a world order created by the gods which has to be acknowledged and respected but it can never be entirely comprehended.

Creon, who has already been sent by Oedipus to the shrine of Apollo at Delphi, the most sacred place for Greeks, returns with the message that the murderer of the old king Laius still lives in Thebes which is the cause of the plague. Being a proactive and fearless ruler he asks the entire city to share any information regarding the killer and makes a decree that upon identification the criminal will be banished from the city. He unwittingly curses the mysterious murderer: "Whoever he is,/...let that man drag out/his life in agony, step by painful step" (280-283). To the audience, who is already familiar with the myth, the eagerness of the king in fulfilling his duty combined with his tragic unawareness, these lines are profoundly painful and ironic.

Interspersed with the action of the play, there is the chorus which makes its own distinct deliberations regarding the situation. The chorus is not an alternate voice for the playwright. Harold Bloom says that "It is reflective and well informed and functions like a group of well-respected consultants that considers possibilities and consequences" (34). It is representative of the democratic spirit of Athens and the pride it bears on its democratic institutions.

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Oedipus consults the chorus and even solicits their help in ensuring justice: “But you, loyal men of Thebes who approve my actions,/may our champion, Justice, may all the gods/ be with us, fight beside us to the end” (312-314). According to Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, the chorus fulfilled multiple purposes as it could articulate the general truths of the culture and take on an individualised role as well (27).

The leader advises Oedipus to call Tiresias, the blind prophet, to uncover the mystery and Oedipus, being the proactive ruler that he is, has already summoned him. Tiresias, is a blind seer who has the special gift of foreseeing future events. His initial denial to disclose the truth and the consequent heated exchange between the two raises the momentum of the scene until the final outburst of the seer when, referring to Oedipus, he divulges: “*You* are the curse, the corruption of the land!” (401). Oedipus is known for his ability to solve riddles and this altercation between the two points to the very irony in the fact as he does not know his very origins. When Tiresias refers to Oedipus’s parents, he is alarmed and anxiously asks about their identity. But, it is not for Tiresias to disclose all the secrets. The dramatic action necessitates that the truth comes out only after Oedipus is entirely frustrated in his effort to seek it.

The conversation between the two leads to the reversal in their initial roles; from being an investigator who has summoned Tiresias, Oedipus himself becomes the investigated. Perhaps, this exchange also offers the audience the possibility of a possible *hamartia* (flaw) in the protagonist. Chided by Oedipus for his implacability, Tiresias cries: “You criticise my temper...unaware/ of the one *you* live with, you revile me” (384-385). Oedipus is known for being proactive and eager but he goes to extremes in his readiness. He is too eager to judge and act. Oedipus himself confesses to his insecurity during his squabble with Creon. When the leader of the chorus intervenes with the good advice of being patient in the pursuit of

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truth as “Those who jump to conclusions may go wrong” (692), Oedipus apprehensively replies:

When my enemy moves against me quickly,  
plots in secret, I move quickly too, I must,  
I plot and pay him back. Relax my guard a moment,  
waiting his next move-he wins his objective,  
I lose mine. (693-696)

Oedipus’s frustration at the continuous failure to find the truth and the resulting descent into insanity is evident here. While returning from Delphi, when Oedipus met the train of Laius and his men on the triple crossroad, their effort to throw him, a lone wanderer, off the road merely to make way for the king is retaliated with Oedipus’s striking “with interest” and killing all but one members of the company, something he describes as “Short work” (895). Moreover, after solving the riddle posed by Sphinx when he is offered the hand of Jocasta along with the crown, he marries a woman his mother’s age in spite of having heard the prophesy that he will marry his mother. One cannot help but wonder at the immoderation and impetuosity with which he makes these decisions. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz remarks that Oedipus did not have to realize the oracle literally: “If he were not so decisive, so secure in his own knowledge, he could perhaps have avoided fulfilling the terms of the prophecy” (172).

*Do you know? Aristotle believed that happiness resided in the idea of a ‘Golden mean’ where a person should avoid extremes of everything.*

This scene also highlights the various aspects of ‘seeing’ as a significant theme of the play. Seeing and light are traditional motifs for truth and knowledge. On the other hand, darkness stands for ignorance and evil in the traditional thought. But these conventional

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motifs are complicated in the play. Tiresias is physically blind yet the reverence he commands comes from the fact that his vision extends beyond the mere sight of ordinary humans. He is physically devoid of light and so needs the help of an escort to guide him but he can fore-see the light of the truth and guide others as in the case of Odysseus. This is set in contrast with Oedipus, who is proud of his ability to see. He is introduced in the play as concerned yet confident of his intelligence and ability to see. He repeatedly assures the priests with phrases like “I know...I wasn’t asleep...you must know that...After a painful search I found one cure:” (71-80). Yet, ironically, it is he who cannot see things in true light. When Tiresias accuses him of murdering Laius, Oedipus mocks his blindness to which Tiresias retorts:

You with your precious eyes,  
you are blind to the corruption of your life,  
to the house you live in, those you live with-  
who *are* your parents? Do you know? All unknowing  
... their footfall  
treading you down in terror, darkness shrouding  
your eyes that now can see the light! (470-479)

This is the greatest humiliation for Oedipus- he knows nothing. Oedipus has now replaced the Sphinx and has himself become the corruption of Thebes. Moreover, as a seer Tiresias also suggests, seeing the truth is also not an easy task. It is only when one shuns the light of the world that one enters the farther realms of truth. Already aware of what the future holds for Oedipus, he enunciates: “How terrible-to see the truth/ when the truth is only pain to him who sees!” (359-360). After all the truths are revealed to Oedipus, he realises how blind he was and in his fury repeatedly pierces his eyes with dead Jocasta’s brooches. In fact, in the Sophoclean vision, it is only after becoming blind that he can regain his equanimity and

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begin to see things clearly for himself and others, and move towards his end in the play *Oedipus at Colonus*.

The same theme continues in the argument between Creon and Oedipus in the succeeding scene. The audience has already seen how Oedipus's initial identification with the *polis* and its interests has now given way to an irrational desire to retain his power. Oedipus's absurdity in accusing Creon and Tiresias of conspiracy and treason without seeking any evidence is retorted by Creon with: "Was his glance steady, his mind right..." (590). He urges Oedipus, in vain, to "see things calmly, rationally" (652). But, Oedipus has become entirely tyrannical and self-centred by now. He is not open to even the possibility of his going wrong anywhere. Having lost the power to discern between right and wrong, he adamantly says: "No matter-I must rule" (703). Harold Bloom says that this marks a significant shift in his attitude; he wants to save the *polis* so that he can rule it (45). This squabble is resolved by the entry of Jocasta who reprimands them for their trivial insecurities and redirects their attention to the communal suffering. Creon swears a solemn oath to prove his innocence and convinces Jocasta and the chorus. Here, it is noteworthy Creon's oath symbolises that for him the moral order of both the human and immortal world still stands firm. As opposed to this, not only has Oedipus broken the moral order by his unwitting crimes but he has also, exhibiting his hubris, abused the prophet, Tiresias and gods (449-450). One could read it as the upshot of blind rage or subconscious guilt that Oedipus does not believe in Creon's oath.

The discussion that ensues between Oedipus and Jocasta after Creon's exit will lead to unraveling of the mystery in the play. She tries to reassure Oedipus by proving that the oracles are not always true and tells him the story of Laius, her husband who was told that he would be slain by his son but was actually murdered by a band of thieves. But, instead of regaining his composure, he becomes more and more anxious. By now, the entire atmosphere of the play suggests a rupture in their lives. Even a possibility that suggests that the oracles

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which communicate the word of gods may be untrue leads to an existential crisis in the chorus, who represent the elders and the citizens of Thebes, as they lament: “the gods, the gods go down” (997). H.D.F. Kitto comments that “the Greeks[s] believed, as if by instinct, that the universe was not chaotic and ‘irrational’, but was based on a *logos*, obeyed Law. The Ionian philosophers did not discover, but rather postulated, this *logos*” (143). Now that their faith in the credibility of gods and justice is being questioned, there is no centre and meaning in life: “No footing helps, all foothold lost and gone” (968).

Oedipus summons the lone survivor in king Laius's entourage when he was killed, to ascertain the truth. Any other man may have stopped asking any further questions at such a shocking revelation but it is in the nature of Oedipus to relentlessly travel towards the truth even if he knows that it is going to have disastrous results. In fact, throughout the play there is a persistent emphasis on avoiding the truth. The chorus attempts to check Jocasta's enquiry into the cause of quarrel between her brother and husband after Creon leaves. Tiresias urges Oedipus not to force him to reveal the truth. Later, even Jocasta would exhort Oedipus to stop his pursuit of truth as the results may be devastating for all of them. But, Oedipus cannot yield to her beseeching: “Fail to solve the mystery of my birth?/ Not for all the world!” (1161-1162). His descent into irrationality is accompanied by surrender to his inner need to find the truth. He is in thrall of, to use a Freudian term, the death drive, that is to say, an instinct towards chaos.

In the meanwhile, a messenger arrives from Corinth to convey the apparently good news of the offer of the crown of Corinth to Oedipus after the death of Polybus. But, this messenger is the dramatic key to the climax. For a brief moment Oedipus exults at the failure of the prophesy of parricide as he can no longer kill his dead father. But, his

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show of hubris is checked by the messenger's revelation of the fact that Polybus was not his real father. Sadly, for him, the survivor he summoned arrives at the same time. Coincidentally, he is the same shepherd who was entrusted with the task of disposing the son destined to kill Laius. The fateful encounter of this old shepherd and the messenger from Corinth, who also happens to be the man who took the child from the shepherd and handed it to Polybus years ago, brings the terrible truth to light that Oedipus is the son of Laius and Jocasta.

*Did you know? Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the father of psychoanalysis, developed his theory of Oedipus complex from this myth.*

*Many modern literary works like D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* were influenced from his theory.*

O god-

all come true, all burst to light!

O light-now let me look my last on you!

I stand revealed at last-

cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage,

cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands! (1305-1310)

This is the moment of recognition or *anagnorisis*. The dreadful reality that he really is the murderer of Laius, who is his father, strikes him. Yet, this is just the beginning of a series of revelations, each of which would be worse than the preceding ones.

Jocasta is the first one to know the truth. A messenger comes on stage and describes the audience all that transpired with Jocasta and Oedipus behind the scene. Jocasta commits suicide by hanging herself. Greek tragedies never enacted the violence that was such an inherent part of their narrative on stage. So, the audience is informed of the events behind the scenes by the messenger speech. This helped the playwright in avoiding violence as well as in reflecting and directing the emotional response of the audience. The sight of all these events

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is too much for Oedipus to endure that he goes berserk and blinds himself. The gruesome act abhors the audience and yet, it can understand the fact of the unreliability of our senses and limitations of our knowledge.

The fate that Oedipus endures evokes terror and pity as this dreadful horror could be the fate of any other person. Finally, all the prophecies of the oracle have come true; providence has vindicated itself. Commenting on the Sophoclean vision, H.D.F. Kitto observes that “‘Call no man happy until he is dead,’ for the chances of life are incalculable. But this does not mean that they are chaotic; if so they seem to us, it is because we are unable to see the whole pattern” (143). Like Icarus, who flew high into the sky only to fall down to his death, Oedipus is “the name for the ages”, who represents the soaring of the human spirit yet his tenuous life is bound by the limitations of fate and mortality.





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### SUMMARY

Oedipus, the son of Polybus, king of Corinth is accused of not being his true son. When he goes to seek answers from the oracle at Delphi the oracle prophesies that he will kill his father and marry his mother. In order to avoid this fate, he leaves his parents and city. On the way back from Delphi he meets a troop of people who try to throw him away from the road and Oedipus kills them all in the fight that ensues. When he reaches Thebes, he saves the city from the terror of the Sphinx by answering her riddle and as a reward is made the king and offered Jocasta, the widow of the old king, in marriage.

As the play begins, Thebes is suffering from a plague which they think is the act of a god. Creon, who is the brother-in-law of Oedipus reports the prophesy made by the oracle at Delphi that bids them to purge the city of the unknown murderer of the previous king, Laius. Oedipus curses the criminal whose act has brought this suffering upon the city and resolves to find him. He summons the blind prophet Tiresias to find the murderer. Oedipus gets angry at the refusal of the prophet to find the murderer and insults him at which point Tiresias blurts out that Oedipus himself is the perpetrator of the said crime. Oedipus thinks that Tiresias and Creon are conspiring against him to usurp his throne.

When Jocasta enters the scene she tells him that oracles are not always true as it was prophesied to her last husband Laius that he would be killed by his son but he was actually murdered by a band of thieves. The details of the murder and the testimony of the lone survivor of the event gradually brings the truth to light that Oedipus is the actual murderer of the king whom he killed while returning from Delphi. Moreover, a messenger from Corinth tells him that he was not the real son of Polybus which leads to the dreadful truth that Oedipus is actually the son of Laius and Jocasta. Thus, the dreadful prophesy of parricide and incest has come true. When Jocasta realises that she married her son and bore children with him, she is so horrified and ashamed that she commits suicide and when Oedipus witnesses

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this terrible episode he blinds himself in a fit of rage. The play ends with Oedipus telling the people to exile him from the city, the fate he himself had decreed for Laius's murderer.



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### IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

- Do you think Oedipus is merely a victim of fate or is he responsible for his own tragedy? Discuss with respect to Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*?
- Discuss what Apollo and the references to light represent symbolically for the characters in the play?
- Analyze how the character of Oedipus develops/changes through the play and what specific incidents cause these changes?
- Comment on the role of the chorus in the play?
- Discuss the use of dramatic irony in the play?



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### GLOSSARY

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Apollo                 | The Greek god of medicine, music and prophesy   |
| <i>Anagnorisis</i>     | According to Aristotle, the point in the plot of a tragedy where the protagonist recognizes his or someone else's true identity           |
| Dionysius              | Thracian god of wine, theatre and revelry   |
| <i>Hamartia</i>        | Tragic flaw (Aristotle)   |
| <i>Hubris</i>          | Pride   |
| <i>Kleos Aphthiton</i> | Eternal fame  |
| <i>Logos</i>           | The controlling principle of the universe according to ancient Greek thought.   |
| <i>Peripeteia</i>      | According to Aristotle, sudden or unexpected reversal in the circumstances, that is the essential requirement of a good plot in a tragedy |
| <i>Polis</i>           | A Greek city-state  |
| Satyr                  | Mythical figures having an animal tail, a phallus and pointed ears that were seen following the god, Dionysius                            |
| Satyr Drama            | A playful and light-hearted form of drama   |
| Sphinx                 | A winged female monster in Greek mythology with a lion's body and a woman's head  |

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### VIDEOS/ MOVIES

Oedipus Rex - The Short Version! (Animated)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXyek9Ddus4>

Oedipus the King (1968). Dir. Philip Saville

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwqYGo1QAds>

Comics Illustrated: Oedipus Rex

<http://benjaminfrisch.me/2010/11/18/comics-illustrated-oedipus-rex/>

Oedipus Rex - Choral ode

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BD8rmXwG9ZQ>

Oedipus Rex – Theatre production

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKE8QaZAJsU>

## **Sophocles: King Oedipus**

Greek tragedy lecture

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-n7I9aFmAcE>

Actors in Greek Theatre-lecture

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVDeCsFn\\_9U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVDeCsFn_9U)

