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Oedipus Rex (*Oedipus Tyrannos*) or *Oedipus the King*

by

Sophocles

428 BC



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The entire action of this classical tragedy by Sophocles is set in the ancient city of Thebes. This setting does not change because unity of place was one of the most important characteristics of Greek tragedies. Thebes is presented as a city in the grip of a crisis. A deadly plague has transformed.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

King Oedipus - the king of Thebes. A man ruled by a fate, according to which he is to murder his father and marry his own mother. Oedipus is unaware of the fact that he has already.....

Jocasta - the queen of Thebes. She is Oedipus' wife as well as his mother but is as ignorant about.....

Creon - Jocasta's brother. He is a responsible and loyal Theban citizen. Judicious, rational, and.....

Tiresias - The blind prophet of Thebes, Tiresias has been blessed with immortality. He is.....

Chorus - The Chorus plays a very important role in Greek tragedies by providing background information, commenting on the action of the play and revealing the psychological and emotional.....

Minor Characters

A Corinthian Shepherd - An old man from Corinth, who brings the news of the Corinthian king's death. He is also the man who had presented the infant Oedipus to the Corinthian ruler after.....

A Theban Shepherd - another old man who was a confidante of King Laius. He is.....

Although both these shepherds are minor characters in the tragedy, they do play a

The two daughters of Oedipus - *Antigone* and *Ismene* make an appearance in the play although

A messenger, priests, attendants are the other minor characters.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - Oedipus, the king of Thebes, is the protagonist of the play. Oedipus is born with a terrible prophecy to kill his own father and marry his mother. To prevent this from happening, Oedipus' father orders the baby to be killed but instead he is given to a childless king and queen who raise.....

Antagonist - The antagonist in this classical Greek tragedy is Fate. The awful fate with which Oedipus is born is his greatest enemy. Despite attempting to flee his fate, Oedipus ends up doing exactly what.....

Climax - The character flaws of the protagonist Oedipus work in tandem with fate to take the tragedy to its climax. Oedipus, in his eagerness to solve the mystery of Laius' murder and later in order to find the facts about his birth carries out an investigation. His wife and others advise him not to do.....

Outcome - The outcome of this climax is that Jocasta, Oedipus' mother/wife commits suicide, as she is unable to bear the burden of her abhorrent existence. Oedipus is devastated and blinds himself as a punishment. He only wants to be exiled from Thebes, destroyed and vanquished. Through his.....

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The entire action of the play is set in the city of Thebes, which is in the grip of a deadly plague at the start of the play. The reason for the plague is that Laius' murderer has not been punished. Laius was the ruler of Thebes before the present King (Oedipus) and was supposedly killed during a journey by a group of robbers. The gods at Delphi threaten that unless the murderer is caught and tried, Thebes will continue to suffer. This is the background against which the entire drama unfolds. The present king of Thebes, Oedipus, firmly resolves to find the murderer and prosecute him. He prohibits his people from withholding any information about the man in question. He himself curses the murderer.

The old prophet Tiresias is also summoned by Oedipus to be consulted over the matter, but his meeting with Tiresias takes an ugly turn. Tiresias refuses to reveal anything to Oedipus because he is aware of the dreadful fact that it is the ignorant Oedipus himself who has murdered Laius and that Laius was Oedipus' father and that he is married to his own mother. He prefers to keep silent as he does not want to be the cause of Oedipus' ruin. Oedipus, on the other hand, interprets Tiresias' silence as treachery. He labels him a villain and a conspirator along with Creon. Later, the angry Tiresias leaves, warning that Oedipus will cause his own ruin.

A confrontation between Oedipus and Creon erupts. Creon is distraught by Oedipus' impulsive behavior. As the investigations into Laius' murder proceed, the fact that a sole witness is alive comes to light. Oedipus sends for this man, who is an old shepherd.

Meanwhile, the plot takes a new turn when a messenger from Corinth brings the news that the Corinthian king Polybus is dead. He asks Oedipus to take up the kingship of Corinth. But, Oedipus expresses his reluctance, as he fears his fate according to which he will marry his own mother. The Corinthian shepherd tries.....

THEMES

Major Theme

The major theme explored in *Oedipus Rex* is that fate and character are intertwined. Oedipus is not only fated to perform such detestable acts but his very behavior (which leads him to doing these) determines his fate. The crimes that he committed against his father and mother were repugnant but not as detestable as that of ignoring the very signs, which could have averted the tragedy. By not paying heed to.....

Minor Theme

A minor theme is that of self-knowledge as being a key to understanding one's place in the universe. It is only through Oedipus' inquiry into his heritage that he discovers the painful truth of who he is and what it means to be human. Although he must abdicate the throne, abandon his family, and.....

MOOD

The mood of the play from the beginning to the end is of devastation, destruction and gloom. The play opens with Thebes suffering from a severe plague due to an unresolved murder. This mood of suffering and pollution is emphasized as the play proceeds. That the whole kingdom must suffer for the.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - SOPHOCLES BIOGRAPHY

Chronologically, Sophocles was the second in the triumvirate of great Greek playwrights, the others being Aeschylus and Euripides. Born in 496 B.C. in the rural suburb of Colonus near Athens, he lived there through most of the fifth century B.C. dying in 406 B.C. Though his father, Sophilius, owned an arms factory in Athens, Sophocles showed little or no interest in political and military affairs. Instead, he became well-versed in the competitive rites of Athenian culture, and, as a youth, won prizes in wrestling and music. At age fifteen, he led the Choral paean to celebrate the famous Greek victory over the Persians at Salamis.

Sophocles produced his first set of plays in 468 B.C. They were immediately successful, and he was awarded the coveted first place at the Dionysian festival that took place every spring, winning over his own mentor, Aeschylus. He went on to win the first prize on at least 18 to 20 occasions and ranked second several other times. Ironically, his greatest play, *Oedipus the King*, managed only a second place, perhaps due to biased judging. Sophocles also staged his plays at the “henaea”, the annual feast of the wine-vats held each January in Athens after 450 B.C. The feast included elaborate processions, rituals, and dramatic contests.

Sophocles learned much of his art from Aeschylus, the “father of Greek tragedy,” but developed his own innovations to Greek drama. He increased the chorus strength from 12 to 15, included the.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Greek Tragedy - Although originally stemming from the “Dionysia” or religious festivals dedicated to Dionysius, the God of Wine, Greek tragedy was solemn, poetic, and philosophic in tone. Plays such as the ones about Oedipus often told the tale of a central character/protagonist who was an admirable but, not necessarily, a perfect person. This individual was often confronted by hostile forces from both outside (the fates or gods) and within (individual free will, pride, etc.). The protagonist often had to make difficult moral/ethical choices in order to resolve these conflicts. If the protagonist’s struggle ended in defeat or death, the play was labeled a tragedy. Most Greek tragedies were based on myths and, as Aristotle says, were “an imitation of an action” that was both serious and complete in itself.

Tragedies were marked by certain common elements. They consisted of a series of dramatic episodes linked by choral odes, chanted by an on-stage chorus of 12 -15 persons. This chorus often commented on the dramatic action or analyzed, in their own fashion, the pattern of events and the behavior of the central character/characters. They sang, danced, and recited the choral odes and lyrics.....

Aristotle’s View of Tragedy - In his *Poetics*, Aristotle claims that comedy shows man to be worse than what he is in real life. In tragedy, however, man is represented as better than he is in actual life. He defines tragedy as “an *imitation of an action* that is *serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in a language embellished* with each kind of artistic ornament . . . in *the form of action*, not narrative; with incidents *arousing pity and fear*, and has as its goal a *catharsis of emotions*. Thus, he identifies six major features of tragic drama: Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, and Melody.

For Aristotle the most important part of tragedy is the *Plot or Action*, which is the structure of the incidents. Plot is the very life-blood of tragic drama. Without action, there can be no.....

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PLAY

Towards the close of Sophocles’ life, the glory and power of the great Athenian state was beginning to show the first signs of decay. A ten-year war broke out in 431 B.C. between Athens and Sparta. After it ended in a stalemate, it dragged on for 27 years in all, either in open or barely contained hostilities. In 428 B.C., there was a devastating plague that decimated the Athenian population and claimed the life

THE LEGEND OF OEDIPUS

Three of Sophocles’ plays, *Oedipus, the King*, *Oedipus At Colonus*, and *Antigone*, are based on the old Greek legends about Oedipus and his family. Each of these plays can be better read and more fully understood when one understands the tragic consequences that dogged the ruling family of Thebes from the times of its founding father, Cadmus. Although essentially regarded as myths, the incidents in the three plays may have had some basis in facts drawn from ancient Greek history many centuries before Sophocles’ time. Such facts, however, are often distorted by the passage of time and the oral tradition by which they were.....

SCENE SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

The play *Oedipus Rex*, is not divided into Acts or Scenes. Therefore it becomes important to show some kind of division in the action for convenience in analysis. On the basis of how the action unfolds and also noting the structural format prescribed in ancient texts, *Oedipus Rex* can be divided into a Prologue; an Exposition (First Episode); Rise of Action (Second Episode); Climax (Third Episode) and Exodus (Fourth Episode). Each episode ends with a stasimon, or a choral ode.

PROLOGUE AND PARODOS

Summary

The 'Prologue' of *Oedipus Rex*, extends from the opening of the play to the opening Choral ode or Parodos (Line 151). In the 'Prologue,' Oedipus comes out of his palace to find a crowd gathered. An old priest gives Oedipus an account of the sufferings of the Thebans and puts forward the request that Oedipus, who had saved them once from the deadly Sphinx, should again rescue Thebes from the clutches of a disastrous plague. Oedipus reassures the Priest, saying that he has already sent his brother-in-law Creon to Delphi to inquire of the oracle what the cause and remedy of this catastrophe is.

At this moment, Creon returns with the news that the gods are angry with Thebes as the murderer of Laius, the previous king of Thebes, is still at large and has not been punished for his crime. When Oedipus questions the Thebans about the details of the murder, they tell him that the former ruler, Laius was murdered on a journey by a band of robbers. Oedipus swears to find the murderer in his kingdom and prosecute him since doing this may also save himself from danger. Therefore, "serving Laius, I serve myself." In this manner, he hopes to save his land.

The opening Choral ode, the Parodos, follows the Prologue. The Parodos is a prayer to the Olympian gods to save Thebes and is chanted by the elders. Not only does it ask the gods to release Thebes from the pestilence but it also expresses a fear that Oedipus' investigation may bring to light information which will be even more destructive.

Notes

In the tradition of Greek tragedy, every play often begins with a prologue. In Sophoclean tragedies, the prologues are usually in the form of dialogues. In the Prologue, Sophocles prepares the audience for the action of the play by providing background information necessary for the reader to understand the tragedy. Oedipus, the ruler of Thebes, has saved the city before by answering the riddle of the Sphinx and therefore removed a terrible plague. He is again in the same position to save his people from an evil plague, only this time he must figure out what has caused the plague. This investigation will lead to self-knowledge as Oedipus' understanding of who he is and where he came from unravels concurrently with the discovery of who killed Laius, the previous king.

The setting of the play is also presented in the Prologue. In *Oedipus Rex*, the city of Thebes acts as the background for the action. The desolate and the devastated city, which is in the grip of a deadly plague, is described as a ship which is:

"Storm - tossed, and can no longer raise its head
Above the waves and angry surge of death."

This description of the city foreshadows the turmoil that will soon take over Oedipus as he begins to investigate who killed Laius. The mood of the play is set up when Thebes is also compared with Hades, the kingdom of dead. Thus, in the prologue itself, death, destruction and devastation as the leitmotif of the play are presented to the reader as well as suffering which both Oedipus feels for his people's torments.

Another important aspect brought to light in the Prologue is an insight into the character of the play's protagonist, Oedipus. Although he is highly intelligent, Oedipus carries the seeds of his destruction within himself. Character flaws, a necessary ingredient for the tragic hero, are termed as 'hamartia.' In the case of Oedipus, his impulsiveness, explosive temper and arrogance form his character flaws and act as an agent to his tragic downfall. Also, his intelligence and obsession with solving riddles such as who murdered Laius results ironically in the discovery of himself as the murderer. Therefore, his 'hamartia' which is revealed in the prologue when he publicly swears to find and punish Laius' murderer later assists his tragic fall as he lacks the prudence to wait and see who the murderer is.

It is interesting to note that the identity of the actual murderer of the former king, Laius has not yet been ascertained. The explanation offered is that during the time of the assassination, Thebes had been in the midst of another crisis: that of the Sphinx. Therefore the people and everyone concerned had been too occupied to investigate.

One finds that Oedipus is portrayed as a responsible king. The readers learn that he had previously saved his kingdom from the torture of the Sphinx (after which he had been crowned) and now he is completely absorbed in finding the public criminal. He is determined to punish him severely as soon as he will be discovered, as indeed he does later in the play. Without any delay, he has already dispatched Creon for the oracle in order to find a solution to the problem.

The Prologue ends with the opening Choral ode, also called the Parodos. In this Parodos, a prayer is being sent to Apollo, Athena, Atriums, Zeus and Bacchus, asking them to rescue Thebes and drive Laius' murderer out of it. In general, the Parodos expresses the general opinion of the citizens of Thebes. This section also marks a passage of time. While the audience sees Oedipus asking the citizens to assemble, the following section records the moment when they have already assembled to listen to the king.

EXPOSITION (Lines 216-462) and FIRST STASIMON (Lines 463-512)

Summary

This section opens with Oedipus' speech in which he clarifies his intentions to find Laius' murderer and forbids the people of Thebes to shelter the murderer in their houses or support him in any way. He commands his people to drive out the sinner from their doors. He then curses the murderer and his family to live and die in wretchedness and also pledges to avenge Laius' death, as if it were his own father's. When the elders suggest that Teresias, the prophet be summoned, Oedipus replies that he has already sent for him.

Soon the blind prophet Tiresias is led in by a servant. After extolling his talents, Oedipus asks him to reveal the name of the person in question. When Tiresias refuses to do so, Oedipus begins to insult him and accuses him that he must be involved in the crime. Tiresias continues to be silent and Oedipus becomes increasingly antagonistic until finally Tiresias says that the murderer is none other than Oedipus himself.

Oedipus does not believe him and accuses Tiresias of conspiring against him, in association with his brother-in-law, Creon. He constantly decries Tiresias as being involved in the murder and scoffs at him, claiming that the wise man had not been able to answer the Sphinx, whereas he had accomplished this task. He taunts him for being blind and says that only his age has prevented him from being punished. A furious Tiresias predicts Oedipus' future fall, claiming "Misery shall grind no man as it will you." An enraged Oedipus throws Teresias out of the palace.

This section ends with Stasimon I. In this ode, the Chorus invokes Apollo to guide them and help them find the murderer. At the same time, they express their faith in Oedipus' innocence.

Notes

In classical Greek tradition, the normal construct of the expositional act consisted of the protagonist's first speech, which records the development and explains the ideas from the Prologue. This is clearly evident in Oedipus' opening speech, in which he proclaims his intention to track Laius' murderer. His persistence in trying to uncover the murderer could be perceived as an unconscious attempt to discover his true origins, of where he came from. The riddle that he must solve, who is the murderer of Laius, in fact is the riddle of his own existence.

This first episode is also significant for Sophocles' use of dramatic irony. When Oedipus curses Laius' murderer in his opening speech, the ill-fated monarch is hopelessly unaware that he is in fact cursing himself. The audience, on the other hand, is aware of the truth and can understand the horror of Oedipus' threat.

The arrival of Tiresias adds a new dimension to the plot and further adds to the dramatic irony in this episode. Tiresias is the only man who is aware that Oedipus is the murderer of Laius, his own father. Tiresias also knows that the ignorant Oedipus has married his own mother. He speaks the truth yet it is only the audience who knows that he is right.

According to Greek mythology, Tiresias was a prophet who had been granted powers of prediction by the Greek god, Apollo. However, his gift was limited by another god who proclaimed that his prophecies would not be believed. This is very well exemplified in Oedipus' adamant refusal to believe what Tiresias says. Instead he responds by denouncing Tiresias' abilities.

Tiresias is reluctant to reveal the dreadful secret that the murderer, whom Oedipus is seeking so desperately, is none other than Oedipus yet Oedipus' hounding forces him to speak. An angry and arrogant Oedipus does not believe Tiresias and instead brands him a traitor. Nonetheless, these revelations by Tiresias introduce a new aspect of the play: Oedipus' origins. When Tiresias says, "This day will

OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Major Characters

Oedipus - Oedipus, the protagonist of this classical tragedy, is a character ruled by fate and conflict. Oedipus is destined to kill his father and marry his own mother. As this fact comes to light, his father Laius, the king of Thebes, orders a shepherd to kill the infant. The shepherd instead hands him over to the shepherd of the neighboring kingdom of Corinth. The Corinthian shepherd gives the child to his childless king. The queen and king of Corinth raise Oedipus as their own child.

A young Oedipus hears about his dreadful fate from the Delphic oracle and flees from Corinth. But instead of fleeing from his fate he runs into it when he kills Laius in an altercation at a crossroads. Later he saves Thebes from the riddle of the Sphinx and marries the widowed queen Jocasta who in reality is his own mother.

Oedipus' character is controlled by his fate yet at the same time his impetuous and short-tempered nature contributes to his fate. Oedipus possesses the impulse and intelligence to unravel and solve every mystery. It is this very impulse which takes him to Delphi to seek the truth about his parentage yet rather than.....

Jocasta - Jocasta is the queen of Thebes and wife of Oedipus. She is also Oedipus' mother but in her ignorance of this fact she marries him and even bears four children.

Jocasta's character is introduced in the play when there is a confrontation between Oedipus and Creon in the second episode. She rebukes both men for fighting in public and persuades them to act rationally. Thus, from

the beginning she comes across as a strong woman. She is a woman who is ready to speak out her mind and attempts to pacify conflict.

Her character is presented as that of a person who does not hesitate to shake off the.....

Creon - Creon is Jocasta's brother and a loyal Theban citizen. His character epitomizes the nationalistic and patriotic sentiments of the ancient Greek society. Creon is completely dedicated to his city-state and also to his king Oedipus. He is rational, honest, and logical. These aspects of his character come to light when he has a confrontation with Oedipus. Oedipus blames him on conspiracy to gain kingship and.....

Tiresias - Tiresias is a major character in many of Sophocles' tragedies. He is the old seer of Thebes who has been given immortality. In *Oedipus*, he is the only man who is aware of the fact that Oedipus has killed his father and married his mother. He is a man of great learning and self-respect. He retorts back in anger when Oedipus calls him a traitor and a villain. He warns Oedipus to be careful, as he himself will be responsible for his own ruin.

In Sophoclean tragedies, Tiresias represents ancient wisdom and knowledge. He is endowed with immortality that symbolizes the eternal nature of wisdom and knowledge. Through him, Sophocles states.....

Minor Characters

The Corinthian shepherd and the Theban shepherd are two important minor characters in the play. Both these shepherds are presented as being kindhearted in attempting to shield Oedipus from the.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

In classical Greek tradition, it was considered important to maintain the unity of time, space and action, which meant that the plot did not alter in time but followed a linear pattern. The place of action did not change with the development of the plot and neither did the action alter. If the action of the play was serious and tragic, comic interludes were excluded from the play.

Plot in the Greek tragedies had a set pattern, which can be seen in *Oedipus Rex*. The play opens with a Prologue, which is in the form of a dialogue. In the Prologue, the protagonist lays down the statement for the rest of the play to proceed. In *Oedipus Rex*, in the prologue all the necessary details about Laius' murder are presented. These work as premises for the further development of the plot. The prologue ends with a choral ode called the Parodos.

The prologue is followed by the Exposition. In this act the protagonist repeats the statement from the prologue. This statement is developed and explained by him in the speech. With the introduction of a new character, the plot takes on a different turn. In *Oedipus Rex*, the old prophet Tiresias' arrival and his revelations about Oedipus' birth and life serve this purpose. This is where the conflict in the plot is presented. Besides, other important themes such as the importance of prophecies and qualities of an ideal ruler are.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Major Theme

Fate, divine laws, and pre-ordination were issues that deeply concerned the ancient Greeks as it was a developing civilization where its faith in the supernatural was constantly examined and re-examined. In the cosmic order of Sophocles' plays, fate is the overruling order. This does not mean that characters do not have free will but that they cannot go beyond the cosmic order that rules the universe. In.....

Minor Themes

Oedipus' wish to unravel the mystery of his birth is another theme explored in the play. Who one is and where one comes from are questions which every individual shares, whether king or peasant. Although it is assumed that Oedipus comes from noble birth, the mystery of who he is reveals that this

OTHER ELEMENTS

Dramatic Irony - The success of *Oedipus Rex* as one of the greatest Sophoclean tragedies is largely due to the brilliant interplay of dramatic irony in the play. From the beginning of the play Oedipus is ignorant of the dreadful acts he has committed: the murder of his father and marrying his mother. But the audience watching the play is well aware of these facts. Therefore every word, every reaction of Oedipus' with regards to the murder lends itself to dramatic irony.

Oedipus' speech demanding the people to reveal the murderer in the initial part of the play is an important instance of dramatic irony. Little does he realize that in cursing Laius' murderer to.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the role of fate and free will as addressed in *Oedipus Rex*. In other words, is Oedipus always determined by his fate or are there particular instances where he could have prevented his tragic downfall?
2. 'Fate is character.' Discuss this theme in reference to the play.....

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