

# THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

# LIVING LITERATURE SERIES

SOPHOCLES

A PERMA-BOUND PRODUCTION

TEACHER'S GUIDE

GUIDE WRITTEN BY MARY ELLEN SNODGRASS

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## SYNOPSIS

### Oedipus the King

*Oedipus the King*, the first play of the trilogy narrates the struggle of Oedipus, king of Thebes, against a mysterious pestilence which kills his subjects and robs their harvests. The priest of Zeus calls on the king for a solution. The puzzling answer which Oedipus's brother-in-law Creon brings from the oracle of Apollo speaks of expelling defilement from the land by driving out a cherished person.

As Oedipus seeks to root out the person who taints the city with blood-guilt, he begins to investigate the death of Laios, the former king, whom Oedipus declares he has never met. The chorus urges Oedipus to question Tiresias, the blind prophet, but Tiresias delays in answering the king's summons. When the prophet arrives in Thebes, Oedipus is annoyed at his tardiness, antagonizing the old man into delivering a blatant accusation—the king himself is the guilty man, a man who sees but is blind to the truth of his two crimes, incest and murder.

When Oedipus and Creon squabble over pointless accusations of envy and jealousy, Iocasta urges both men to control their evil tempers. She reveals to them an oracle that caused her first husband to fear the destiny of a son who would murder him at a crossroads. Fastening their infant's ankles together, Iocasta took her doomed child to be abandoned on a hillside so the kingdom might not suffer the fate that was prophesied. Oedipus's eyes gradually open to his crime as details fall into place—the crossing of the roads from Delphi and Daulia in Phocis, the tall white-haired man, and the time of the killing.

Oedipus reviews his own heritage: the son of Polybus of Doria and Merope of Corinth, he left home after hearing Apollo's oracle at Delphi predict incest and murder as his destiny. As Oedipus and Iocasta await the corroborating testimony of a herdsman who witnessed Laios's murder, they receive the unexpected news of Polybus's death. The messenger eagerly soothes Oedipus's troubled mind with information which ironically assures the king's downfall—Polybus adopted Oedipus, an abandoned child, after a shepherd found him. The shepherd who nurtured the foundling comes forward to complete the tragic tale. Thus, Oedipus knows the entire story of his past.

The conclusion takes place offstage, where Iocasta hangs herself. Oedipus, now knowing the truth, removes the golden pins from his wife/mother's dress and spears the pupils of his eyes. He begs Creon for a speedy death to end his troubles or else exile from the disgrace of his catastrophic crimes. Oedipus does not worry about the safety of his grown sons, but he requests that Creon provide a home for Ismene and Antigone, Oedipus's small daughters. The tragic hero, devoid of all hope and grieving for his daughters, resigns himself to his fate.

### Oedipus at Colonus

In early April at Colonus, a mile northwest of the Acropolis, Oedipus, now old and feeble, has wandered two decades after blinding himself. He leans on his daughter Antigone as he

enters the sanctuary of the Eumenides, the place where, according to Apollo, the old man will die. A stranger courteously asks him to leave holy turf. Oedipus insists he will never go. He begs an audience with Theseus, King of Athens. The stranger departs to tell citizens Oedipus has arrived.

Oedipus prays to the Furies and asks their compassion. He seeks a place to rest from his wandering, a place to die. The chorus sizes up the intruder and guarantees his safety in the sacred grove. Oedipus reveals to them he is the pariah. The chorus recoils and demands he vacate the grove. Antigone intervenes; the chorus is courteous, but insists that the old man go. Seeking justice, Oedipus summarizes his tragic life. The chorus refers him to the authorities.

Ismene, Oedipus's younger daughter, gallops up to report news of her two brothers: Eteocles has seized power and banished Polyneices. According to the most recent oracle, the Thebans will embrace Oedipus in his last days. His grave will bless others. She alerts Oedipus to expect Creon, who wants to bring fortune to Thebes by fulfilling the oracle himself.

Oedipus regrets that his sons carry on the doomed struggle for the throne he abdicated. The chorus pities the old man and explains how to pour holy libations and pray to propitiate the Eumenides. To spare her father the effort, Ismene carries out the ritual.

The chorus continues probing Oedipus's wretched life. He sighs and recounts the ill fortune that led him to slay Laios and marry his wife, who was Oedipus's mother. Without suspecting the enormity of his crime, Oedipus sired four children by incest, but assures his listeners he sinned without knowing of his relationship to Laios.

The noble Theseus, accompanied by troops, arrives and ponders Oedipus. Having wandered far and faced danger and mortality, Theseus can comfort the old man. Oedipus thanks him for his compassion and vows to bless Athens, but declines to explain how he can make such a magnanimous promise. For himself, Oedipus requests burial.

Oedipus explains to Theseus how Polyneices has traduced the state. Theseus confers citizenship on Oedipus and extends an invitation to his home. Oedipus declines; Theseus offers to shield him from Creon. The chorus intones a paean to Colonus.

When Creon enters, he reassures the nervous citizens and urges his brother-in-law to return to Thebes to assuage his former subjects. On behalf of Antigone, Creon stresses that Oedipus should end his wanderings. Oedipus accuses Creon of deception and warns him that Apollo's prophecy is unshakable.

Creon retorts that he has taken Ismene into custody and will do likewise to Antigone. The chorus is outraged at his high-handedness. Creon threatens to attack the city if he comes to harm. Theseus stirs the citizens to action and scolds Creon for disgracing his city. Creon makes excuses and displaces blame onto the sinful Oedipus. Oedipus justifies his actions as the work of fate. Theseus arrests Creon. The chorus raises a victory song.

## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

Theseus restores the two daughters to Oedipus and reports that a stranger from Argos who prays before Poseidon's altar claims to be Oedipus's kin. The old man deduces that the newcomer is Polyneices. Antigone begs her father to forego judgment and receive him. The chorus sympathizes with the elderly man's dilemma.

Polyneices regrets the squalor that degrades Oedipus and his daughters. He summarizes his own tragic position and declares he will lead Argos's soldiers against Thebes to reclaim the throne. Oedipus declares him a reprobate and predicts that his cabal will fail. After he curses his son, Antigone advises Polyneices to abandon the grand plan to retrieve Thebes. Polyneices departs with the prediction that his family will never see him again.

Anticipating a new turn in Oedipus's multiple sufferings, the chorus awaits new events. Oedipus quivers at the sound of thunder, the preface to his death. Quickened by the presence of God, he summons his daughters and Theseus. The chorus prays for the old man as death approaches.

A messenger reports the daughters purified their father with holy water. At the second peal of thunder, he consoles them. God's voice encourages the old man to accept the end. He leaves his girls in Theseus's hands and disappears. Antigone longs for the comfort of home. She and Ismene implore Theseus to reveal their father's burial site, but Theseus is bound by an oath of secrecy. Antigone concerns herself with Polyneices's threat of war on Thebes.

### Antigone

The forthright daughter of Oedipus, the self-blinded king of Thebes, and of Iocasta, who hanged herself when she learned of her sin of incest, Antigone is a proud princess. She values godliness over the pratings of her uncle Creon, a shallow man newly arrived on the throne. Polyneices, killed when his twin Eteocles attacked with seven enemy kings, is denied burial by Creon. Before the citizens of Thebes, Creon declares that Polyneices intended to burn the city and temples and kill and enslave its citizens.

When a tremulous guard reports that someone has disobeyed his edict by performing burial purification over Polyneices' remains, Creon threatens them with public flogging if they don't name the culprit. Creon declares a law-breaker is an outlaw and a stateless person. The guard returns with Antigone, Creon's niece. He confronts her; she admits guilt. He charges her with a capital crime. She replies that God established laws of burial.

Ismene, the older sister, confesses complicity with Antigone and urges Creon to relent. Even though Antigone is betrothed to Creon's son Haemon, Creon stubbornly refuses any concessions to members of the family. Haemon intercedes for Antigone, but Creon vows he will keep his relatives in check as an example to other rebellious citizens. Haemon angrily rushes away, vowing never to see his father again.

Creon is unmoved and ghoulishly describes how Antigone will be buried alive in a stone dugout. Antigone considers herself friendless in the face of death caused by an unjust law. After threatening any who refuse his commands, Creon encounters Teiresias, the blind prophet, who reports a terrible omen of screaming, clawing birds picking Polyneices's corpse. He implores the king to free Antigone before it is too late, but Creon sneers at the prophecy. Teiresias angrily departs from the king's rudeness.

After the leading citizen adds his voice to the growing cry for clemency, Creon relents and hurries to set Antigone free. A messenger reports how Haemon rushed to his love, who had already hanged herself with a linen noose. Unable to endure his loss, he menaces his father with a sword, then drives it into his

own body. Without a word, Eurydice, his mother, departs and, bewailing the death of Megareus, her first son, plunges a dagger into her body at the altar. A chastened Creon ends the play in shock that his pride has doomed both family and rule. A wreck of his former self, he asks to be led away.

### TIME LINE

- ca. 535 B. C. Thespis becomes the first actor in the Western world.
- c. 530 B. C. Pythagoras theorizes the Earth is a sphere.
- c. 525 B. C. Pythagorean Theorem is developed.
- 525-460 B. C. Athenian political and military leader Themistocles lives.
- 520 B. C. The sundial is introduced into Greece.
- 508 B. C. Athens becomes a democracy.
- 500-429 B. C. Athenian political leader Pericles lives.
- ca. 496 B. C. Sophocles is born.
- 490 B. C. Greeks defeat Persian invasion at Marathon.
- 484-420 B. C. Greek historian Herodotus lives.
- 480 B. C. Greeks defeat Persians at Salamis.
- 477 B. C. Work begins on the Parthenon.
- 468 B. C. Sophocles beats out Aeschylus for the top prize in playwriting.
- ca. 468-467 B. C. Aeschylus writes *The Seven Against Thebes*.
- ca. 456 B. C. Aeschylus writes *Prometheus Unbound*.
- 441 B. C. Sophocles writes *Antigone*.
- 435 B. C. Pericles builds the Theater of Dionysus at Athens.
- 431 B. C. Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta begins.
- ca. 429 B. C. Sophocles writes *Oedipus Rex*.
- 415 B. C. Euripides writes *The Trojan Women*.
- 413 B. C. Athenian force of 200 ships and 40,000 men is destroyed at Syracuse.
- ca. 406 B. C. Sophocles dies.
- 405 B. C. Spartans destroy Athenian fleet.
- 404 B. C. Sparta captures Athens.

### AUTHOR SKETCH

Second in importance of the three great Athenian tragedians, Sophocles won his audiences through craftsmanship and creative genius. Born around 496 B. C. in Greece's golden age, he was the handsome, poised son of Sophilus, a successful armorer and native of Colonus, a suburb of Athens. Possessed of winning qualities, the playwright—optimistic, athletically gifted, and sociable—earned respect for his appearances on the stage.

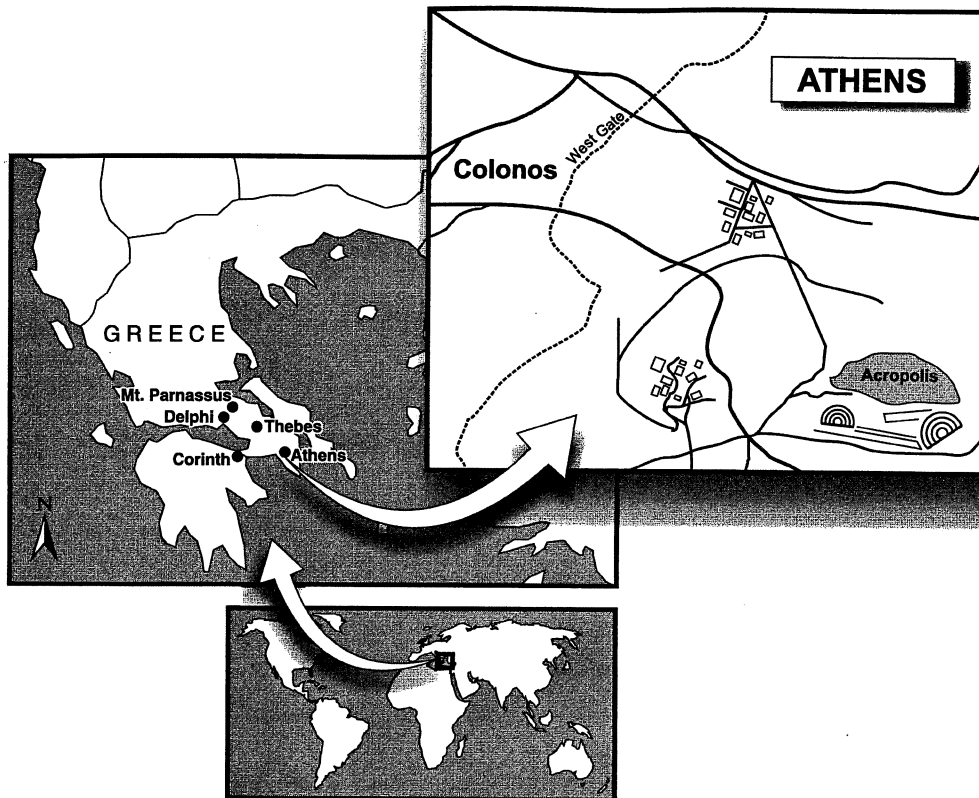
Sophocles was well read in Homer and Greek myth. He studied music under Lamprus and, at age 16, led the chorus in celebration of Greek victory at Salamis. At age 28, the playwright defeated Aeschylus to win the first prize in tragedy, and from that day on never took a prize lower than second place.

In addition to his literary acumen, Sophocles appears to have remained active most of his 90 years. He earned the rank of general the same year he wrote *Antigone*, the third of the Theban Trilogy. He served under his friend Pericles in the Samnian War from 440 to 439 B.C.. Returned to civilian life, he was elected imperial treasurer, served as Aesclepius's priest at healing rituals, and represented his state on foreign embassies. His nickname, the Attic Bee, captures the nature of his talent, for it was the honey from his words that earned him a place among the greatest classical authors.

### CRITIC'S CORNER

Although never as forceful or poetic as Aeschylus, Sophocles won fame and honor for his graceful, mellifluous lyrics and wise, sensible analysis of human failings. His chief desire was to reveal moral dilemma and the workings of fate. The shaping of destiny was to him a product of the individual's character and the

## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE



whims of chance. Despite the lack of religious themes and divinities in his plays, his belief in an earthly punishment for the sin of excessive pride undergirds his outlook. For his beliefs, Edith Hamilton called him the "quintessence of the Greek."

The most notable of Sophocles's innovations was the addition of a third actor to Greek drama and the increase of the chorus from 12 to 15. He produced significant change in theater by pioneering scene painting and realistic tragic masks, abandoning the controlling theme for the tetralogy, and introducing the heroic maiden and the ingenuous young male. His innovations offered a new flexibility not found in older, more conservative stylists. Also, he was the first to write plays to suit talents of individual actors. Out of some 125 plays attached to his name, only seven survive, all from his most mature work. From citations and critiques, literary historians surmise he also wrote *Epigoni*, *Eriphyle*, *Mysians*, *Aleada*, *Odysseus*, *The Deaf Satyrs*, and *The Capture of Troy*.

From classical Greek, the trilogy has gone through frequent translation into modern European languages, in particular, Robert Fitzgerald's version of *Oedipus at Colonos* in 1941 and David Grene's translation of *Oedipus the King* in 1942. The most successful include an Italian version of *Antigone* by Luigi Alamanni in 1533, a French version by Jean-Antoine de Baif in 1573, and another resetting by German playwright Friedrich Hölderlin in the late eighteenth century. English lyric poet Thomas Watson published an English translation in 1581.

*Antigone* suited the tenor of the 1940s, when the German playwright Bertold Brecht and the French playwright Jean Anouilh both used the tragic princess as a model of resistance to the fascism that caused World War II. Paris audiences interpreted the tragic heroine as a symbol of the French Resistance, brave patriots who refused to accept Nazi occupation forces. In 1962, Greek actress Irene Papas gave a stunning performance as *Antigone* in a Greek film, currently available with English subtitles.

### SOPHOCLES'S SURVIVING WORKS

- Ajax* (ca. 451)
- Antigone* (442-441 B. C.)
- Electra* (ca. 409)
- Oedipus at Colonos* (410 B. C.)
- Oedipus the King* (ca. 429 B. C.)
- Philoctetes* (409 B. C.)
- The Trachinian Women* (ca. 409)

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### GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To experience and read aloud from a Greek tragedy
2. To identify and explain dramatic conventions, particularly prologue and chorus
3. To place drama in the canon of world literature
4. To envision the staging of contrasting scenes and moods
5. To enumerate varied images of fate
6. To isolate and explain examples of classic situations and attitudes
7. To set the play in its social, mythological, and geographical context
8. To comprehend vengeance and power as motivators
9. To evaluate constraints on women in classical times
10. To discuss the use of supernatural intervention

### SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To place *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* in the canon of Greek tragedies
2. To explain the roles of priest, sentry, and messenger
3. To account for Antigone's decision to break the law
4. To determine why Ismene and Antigone lack guidance
5. To analyze the anarchy that costs Eteocles and Polyneices their lives
6. To explain why Creon chooses to dishonor his rebellious nephew's body
7. To contrast Creon's relationships with nieces, son, wife, guard, prophet, Theseus, Polyneices, future daughter-in-law, and citizens
8. To analyze reactions to Apollo's oracles and predictions of catastrophe
9. To characterize Iocasta's and Eurydice's sufferings
10. To assess Oedipus's struggle with opposing forces
11. To determine the significance of Oedipus's sufferings and death as a blessing on Athens
12. To follow the sequence of events in the tragic destruction of Oedipus's family, beginning with Oedipus's great grandparents and ending with Antigone
13. To characterize Sophocles's moral purpose
14. To contrast kingship in Oedipus, Creon, Polybos, Laios, and Theseus

### LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

For a better understanding of Sophocles's style, present the following terms and applications to the play:

**character name** a method of displaying or revealing character traits, attributes, or attitudes through the choice of symbolic names, which may contain a descriptive term, for example, "Swollen Foot," the translation of Oedipus's name to indicate the

fearful situation of the exposed baby whose ankles had been pierced and tied together. Other translatable names in the play include Iocasta (Shining Moon), Creon (ruler), Tiresias (he who delights in sights), Ismene (knowledgeable), Antigone (in the mother's place), and Laios (cattleman).

**dilemma** a plot that depicts human characters in dire predicaments which they must resolve by making some sacrifice. Oedipus must save his adoptive parents by leaving home; Antigone must choose between breaking the law of Thebes on obeying a divine injunction. Creon must choose whether to bend his edict against the burial or enforce a law that will set the tone of social order. For selfish reasons, he chooses to quell anarchy, the political situation that caused Eteocles to kill Polyneices.

**foil** a character whose presence in a literary work offsets or enhances the contrasting traits of another character, for example, Tiresias and Creon or Creon and Theseus. The foil serves as an opposite or as a standard by which another character is measured, a situation found in *Antigone*. Unlike Eteocles and Polyneices, Antigone must play the role of the dutiful sister, which she debates with Ismene. Unlike Creon, Antigone knows the cost of law-breaking, which she has observed from the death of her mother and self-blinding of her father for committing incest. Surrounded by foils, she truly stands alone.

**hamartia** the missing of the mark, a Greek archery term that applies to the weakness or character flaw in the prominent, noble, or royal protagonist of a tragedy. Because of King Creon's stodgy insistence on retribution to the disobedient, he robs himself of family and of respect from his son and subjects.

**irony** an implied discrepancy between what is said or done and what is meant, as in Oedipus's hunt for a killer and his discovery that the killer is himself. Also ironic is his belief he has escaped prophecy and eluded killing his father by leaving the two people he has always assumed were his natural parents. A physical irony is his demand to see the truth and his deliberate blinding when he finally knows the details of Laios's death.

**tragedy** a serious drama in which the main character, usually a prominent, noble, or royal person, loses status or dies as a result of some human failing, which the Greeks called by the archery term hamartia, a missing of the mark. In the case of Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, human failing applies to the central character's wicked display of temper, his arrogance in thinking he can escape fate, and the resulting murder of Laios over a trivial matter. The overtones of Oedipus's downfall affect the entire family, particularly his suicidal wife and their two motherless girls.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTING

The setting of *Oedipus the King* is difficult to re-create for modern audiences. In the era Sophocles is depicting, Greece was not a nation, but a collection of small, disconnected kingdoms. The relationships of neighboring royalty were significant to people who lived largely isolated from each other. Long journeys were necessary, but perilous. Trips to Delphi were important to people who wanted to know the future. The distance from Oedipus's home north over the Isthmus of Corinth to Thebes covered rocky terrain and out-of-the-way spots where danger lurked. On the day of the murder at the crossroads, Oedipus's reaction to Laios was not uncommon in a time when people had to be prepared for danger while traversing an unknown land. Another factor in the killing, identity, would have been obscured by the fact that royalty was not as different from ordinary people as it has been in more recent times.

The action of the play itself, like most Greek drama, is more psychological than physical. The characters stay at the court of Thebes while determining how to solve the murder of Laios and rid the area of suffering from plague. Playgoers must imagine the setting in which the infant Oedipus lay pierced with a thong

## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

through his ankles and abandoned to die. Likewise, during the first play's denouement, Iocasta's suicide and Oedipus's blinding take place out of the audience's sight to preserve the decorum of the stage. Thus, there is little movement about the setting as the characters act out the consequences of serious tragedy.

The rule of decorum and the emphasis on royal characters limit settings in the remaining two plays. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles deliberately conceals the supernatural events surrounding Oedipus's death and burial and forces Theseus to keep it all secret except from subsequent heirs to the throne. By revealing Creon threatening the aged wanderers and, in *Antigone*, at his royal palace interacting with two motherless nieces, Antigone and Ismene, the playwright particularizes the callousness of a king who ignores how others feel. The arrival of the sentry and his hesitance to explain how the law was broken derive more meaning from the intimidating trappings of a kingly palace, a place where guards must use caution in word and deed, just as a shepherd might hesitate to tell how a queen abandoned her baby boy on a hillside.

Sophocles makes language substitute for the offstage events. Polyneices summarizes in few words how he allies with Argos by a royal marriage and how he collects armies to march against Thebes. The sentry's testimony characterizes the setting in the field, where a sandstorm overwhelms the guards, who cluster on a hill away from the smell of the rotting corpse. Their dismay on finding the corpse illegally buried suggests that they fear reporting a broken law to Creon.

When Antigone returns from her traditional task of anointing her brother's putrefying remains, she leaves the bleak environment, stench of carrion, and stony-faced guards and returns to a heartless king, her uncle. His pomposity and annoyance grow out of a lordly setting that reminds him that he alone must rule Thebes and prevent lawlessness. To hang onto power, he must prevent further anarchy, starting with Antigone herself and extending to all his family, including Ismene and Haimon.

As the scene shifts to a description of the rocky vault where Antigone hangs herself and Haimon chooses suicide over living without his beloved, the brief appearance of Eurydice softens the kingly setting with a mother's perspective. For good reason, she chooses to commit suicide by the altar, as though offering herself as propitiation of gods angry at Creon's arrogance. As Creon realizes his loss of wife, son, and niece/future daughter-in-law, the setting becomes a prison of inflexible law from which he asks to be led.

### CROSS-CURRICULAR SOURCES

#### Plays

Jean Anouilh, *Andromache* and *Antigon*  
Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* and *The Birds*  
Euripides, *Medea*  
William Shakespeare, *King Lear*  
James Goldman, *The Lion in Winter*  
Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House* and *An Enemy of the People*  
Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*  
Archibald Macleish, *J. B.*

#### Poetry

George, Lord Byron, "The Destruction of Sennacherib"  
Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ozymandias"  
Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses"

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Albin Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature*  
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"Coping with Guilt," <[www.soon.org.uk/problems/guilt.htm](http://www.soon.org.uk/problems/guilt.htm)>  
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*The Lion in Winter* (1968)  
*Oedipus the King* (1967)  
*The Trojan Women* (1971)

### THEMES AND MOTIFS

#### Themes

- suffering
- prophecy
- puzzles
- family
- fate
- contention
- arrogance
- patriarchy
- dilemma
- audacity
- disobedience
- loss
- regret

#### Motifs

- civic peace disrupted by a plague
- respect for a royal family
- the use of supernatural powers to solve a crime
- a family tragedy that has no solution
- self-imposed punishment
- civil war and its aftermath
- performing ancient family ritual
- a pattern of family disintegration
- discounting of prophecy

### MEANING STUDY

Below are significant words, phrases, or sentences from the plays. Explain each in context. Play titles, sections, and page numbers pinpoint each entry so that you can re-read the passage in which it appears.

1. What was the oracle? These vague words

Leave me still hanging between hope and fear. (*Oedipus Rex*, Prologue, p. 7)

(Typically, the oracles of the ancient world were nebulous, often ambiguous in wording or reference. The reader of Apollo's visions was the pythia, a priestess who sat over a fissure in the rock at Delphi and babbled comments to questions posed by suppliants at the temple. Ironically, Oedipus hangs between hope and fear much as the ordinary mortal grasps at answers to dilemmas from clues extracted from normal events. He later demands, "Why should a man respect the Pythian hearth, or give heed to the birds that jangle above his head?" Thus, petitioning the Pythia for answers produces no satisfying end to a worrisome question, notably, what causes the plague at Thebes.)

## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

2. You would betray us all and wreck the State? (*Oedipus Rex*, Scene I, p. 18)

*(In bandying words with Teiresias, Oedipus grows testy and accuses the old seer of betraying his country and forcing it into ruin. Teiresias tries to guide Oedipus toward his own feelings as the source of the mystery, but must dodge accusations that the prophet is unfeeling and arrogant. When Oedipus becomes petulant, Teiresias urges him to go on raging. In an odd twist of logic, Oedipus assumes that it was Teiresias who committed the act of regicide.)*

3. If you are what this man says you are, No man living is more wretched than Oedipus. (*Oedipus Rex*, Scene IV, p. 64)

*(Sophocles stresses noble or royal characters in his plays, but he places in the mouth of a lowly shepherd a sincere regret that Oedipus has doomed himself. In summarizing events, the shepherd implies that he is happy with his lot and glad he isn't a king facing so convoluted a wrongdoing.)*

4. What use is reputation then? What good Comes of a noble name? A noble fiction! (*Oedipus at Colonus*, Scene II, p. 99)

*(The humbling of Oedipus forces him to see his place in all humanity as neither higher nor lower in terms of rank or importance. In old age, bereft of home and comfort, he takes refuge in God. The old man's burden imbues him with grace, a gift he intends to confer on Athens. He promises to "bring advantage to this race, as you may learn more fully when some lord of yours is here.")*

5. I too was an exile. I grew up abroad, And in strange lands. (*Oedipus at Colonus*, Scene III, p. 116)

*(Like Oedipus, Theseus had lived a life of wandering, murder at the crossroads, loss of a parent, and righting of old wrongs before settling into the throne of Athens. Because the two men have much in common, Theseus is able to commiserate with Oedipus and to offer succor and protection to an old man obviously facing death.)*

6. Shall it be plain that time Brings you no wisdom? that you shame your age? (*Oedipus at Colonus*, Scene IV, p. 128)

*(Heavy with irony is the clash in the middle tragedy in which Creon looks down on Oedipus as an old man who has acquired no wisdom. The irony carries over into the third play, in which Creon himself manifests a lack of wisdom in condemning his niece to death for carrying out an age-old obligation to bury the family's dead.)*

7. You must decide whether you will help me or not. (*Antigone*, Prologue, p. 191)

*(In an either/or ultimatum, Antigone places her sister Ismene in the same hot seat that Creon made for Antigone—there are no alternatives to burying or not burying a dead brother. Drunk on the power of her disobedience, Antigone enlarges her sin of pride by declaring, "Creon is not strong enough to stand in my way.")*

8. Numberless are the world's wonders, but none More wonderful than man. (*Antigone*, Ode I, p. 203)

*(With multiple ironies, Sophocles places in the mouth of the chorus a paean to humankind and his pride in conquering the sea and earth. The chorus concludes that the one opponent that humanity can never defeat is "the late wind of death [against which] he cannot stand." In concert with Creon, the chorus declares that there exist in the universe paired opposites—good and evil, laws and anarchy. The singers offer no gray area between dark and light.)*

9. Yet I always say There is nothing so comfortable as your own safe skin! (*Antigone*, Scene II, p. 207)

*(In contrast to the nobility of Antigone's speeches, the cautious sentry carefully protects himself against the angry king. The guard acknowledges that, upon arrest, Antigone showed no fear and denied nothing. Seeking an end to involvement in law-breaking, the ignoble guard remarks, "It is a good thing to escape from death.")*

10. Our hearths and altars

Are stained with the corruption of dogs and carrion birds That glut themselves on the corpse of Oedipus' son. (*Antigone*, Scene V, p. 231)

*(Teiresias brings home to Creon the consequence of defiling the earth with unburied corpses. Because dogs and birds gnaw and peck at a former royal prince, defilement angers the gods, who accept no burnt offering by refusing to let altar fires burn. Teiresias inveighs against the king, "These are no trifles! Think: all men make mistakes.")*

### COMPREHENSION STUDY

#### Plot

1. Explain why Oedipus needs supernatural help.

*(In Oedipus Rex, as the priest of Zeus describes, Thebes suffers a pestilence that threatens the citizens. Oedipus, like other leaders of his time, seeks the aid of Apollo, the god of prophecy, by sending Creon to Delphi to petition the Pythia for a solution to the disease that saps the kingdom. When Oedipus learns that someone in the kingdom must be banished to rid the land of blood guilt for Laios' death, the king presses for answers from Teiresias, the blind seer.*

*The role of prophet and diviner was standard in ancient times. Kings often kept men like Teiresias on retainer to read and interpret natural signs, such as patterns in the flights of birds or unusual peals of thunder. After receiving information about the future, Oedipus discovers that he must look to the past for a way to cleanse Thebes. In examining his destiny, he discovers that both he and Iocasta tried to flee an ill fate. Iocasta failed to rid herself of a son doomed to kill his father; Oedipus, who faced the likelihood that he would murder his father, fled loving adoptive parents. In all innocence, he committed the crime that caused the pestilence, then set about reconstructing his infancy and childhood to fill in the blanks.)*

#### Character

2. How does Oedipus reveal the hardships of his life?

*(According to Theseus, Oedipus does not have to recount his life story. The wandering blind man is already a known figure in ancient Greece for the sorrows that have dogged his existence. Already deprived of his wife/mother and kingdom, he has deliberately blinded himself, upon facing the truth about his crime of killing Laios. Doomed to exile, he wanders the land, led by the two sisters/daughters whom his crime deprives of a normal life.*

*When Oedipus arrives in the sacred grove of the Eumenides, he awaits an easeful death and the end of his earthly wretchedness. In revealing the hardships of his life to Theseus, Oedipus gains a friend and supporter who promises to be his shield and protector. However, there is nothing more to threaten Oedipus. The peal of thunder that calls him to death is a welcome sign that the gods have ended their multiple torments. Embracing the summons, Oedipus leads Theseus to the secret place where the old man's life and troubles end.)*

#### Conflict

3. Why does Creon choose to execute his niece?

*(Creon has survived a threat to kingship. Apparently insecure on the throne that he seized after Oedipus went into exile, Creon feared for his realm when Polyneices and Eteocles mustered the Seven against Thebes in a doomed*

## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

rebellion. With the two sons of Oedipus dead, the king/uncle turns his attention to the remaining two family members, two girls who have already suffered an unusual amount of ill fortune for girls so young in years. He is shocked and outraged to learn that the deliberate disobedience against his edict concerning burial for Polyneices comes from a girl, Antigone, who is both his niece and future daughter-in-law.

Antigone's strength and character infuse Ismene with the courage to confess that she, too, helped to break the law by sprinkling holy wine and dust over Polyneices's remains. The defiance of the remaining two children of Oedipus and Iocasta press Creon over his unshakable edict requiring death for the two lawbreakers. In a partial softening of the law, the king exonerates Ismene, but preserves his command, setting an example before his subjects of even-handed laws that affect both royalty and his subjects. In view of her royal birth, he rescinds the order for public stoning by having Antigone immured in a stone vault, a death that will arrive naturally when she starves or suffocates.)

### Action

4. Describe how Haimon faces his adamant father.  
(Haimon appears to delight Creon as an obedient son willing to observe his father's example to learn the course of law issued from an autocratic ruler to the people of Thebes. As events turn lethal, Haimon realizes that unbending royal power can have devastating results. He abandons his dream of marriage to Antigone and, instead, follows her to their mutual death chamber.

Too late to rescue his beloved, Haimon turns to face Creon, the hard-handed father and king who forced Antigone into a capital crime. Angered to the point of madness, Haimon menaces his father with a sword, thus threatening to commit both regicide and patricide, the crimes that doomed Oedipus. A pathetic character with no viable options, Haimon chooses to stab himself in the side and die clasping his lost love in a final embrace.)

### Character Development

5. Describe the change in Oedipus from king to homeless old man.

(In his first appearance in the trilogy, Oedipus is a strong, self-important king, strutting about in his efforts to rid the kingdom of the impurity that causes a pestilence. Iocasta urges him to cease probing, but his curiosity about the past is overwhelming. As the light shines more fully on the abandoned infant with heels bound together, Oedipus plays out the additional details and determines how his departure from Merope and Polybos placed him directly in the way of ill fate.

In full realization of his crime, Oedipus blinds himself, as though ending his view of a terrible past. Blind and helpless, he falls into the care of his two pathetic sisters/daughters, the former princesses of Thebes, who are condemned to wander with their despised father in a pathless exile. When Oedipus returns to the stage in Oedipus at Colonus, he has rid his heart of some of the ardor and vengefulness of his youth. More content with a grievous destiny, he longs for an end to earthly trials. With a touch of grace, he promises a blessing on Theseus in exchange for a secret burial on holy ground. In his final moments, Oedipus speaks the words of an old man who has lived through unspeakable horror and loss and wants only the peace of the grave as his lot.)

### Structure

6. Explain how Teiresias alters the execution scene of Antigone.  
(At the trilogy's end, Creon persists in his plan to execute Antigone for breaking his law. Teiresias, the blind seer led

by a boy, wanders onto the stage in Scene V, "two heads lit by the eyes of one." Unbidden, Teiresias offers advice about "[standing] once more on the edge of fate." He identifies screaming birds at the altar as a disturbance in nature similar to the pestilence that once threatened Thebes. As a royal prince lies rotting on the plain, the putrefaction spread by dogs and carrion birds defiles gifts to the gods. For this reason, Teiresias believes that the gods turn deaf ears on humankind.

Teiresias is in a position to offer advice. In a climate of heavenly disorder, he reminds Creon that a king is no different from other men who err. The old seer puts into strong terms the law concerning burial: "What glory is it to kill a man who is dead?" Creon wraps himself in pious rage and accuses Teiresias of selling his prophecies. When the king lords rank over the seer, Teiresias retorts, "You are a king because of me." Pressured to the extent of his patience, Teiresias foretells the suffering, "corpse for corpse, flesh of your own flesh," that Creon must face.

Teiresias's metaphor phrases Creon's double crime against Oedipus's children in stark terms: "The one [Antigone] in a grave before her death, the other [Polyneices], dead, denied the grave." Warning that the Furies stand ready to punish Creon with the powers of hell, Teiresias embroiders the scenario with terrifying details—days of wailing and curses hurled at the king. As the elderly seer wanders on his way, the chorus echoes their unease that Creon may have gone too far in exercising kingly power.)

### Motivation

7. Explain why Theseus intervenes for Oedipus.

(The powerless old Theban who arrives at the sacred grove in Colonus lures Theseus, a pious, humanistic king who knows the stories about Oedipus's blindness that circulate through Hellas. Before the newcomer can ask for aid, Theseus extends agape—the Greek term for grace, the gift that doesn't have to be earned or deserved. He states, "I am sorry for you" and asks how he can be of service. A surprising contrast to Creon, who hugs power like precious goods, Theseus is faithful to the Greek concept of the host-guest relationship, which requires charity and good will.

Like a generous host, Theseus humbles himself as "only a man" and offers full attention to Oedipus's inexplicable offering of "lasting grace." To Theseus, it seems odd that a man so bereft of worldly goods and power can benefit the king of Athens. As Oedipus states his situation—"Earth wastes away; the body wastes away; faith dies; distrust is born"—he impresses on Theseus the divine command that the king of Attica give refuge to the old man and keep his promise about an honorable burial. Moved to accept the arrangement, Theseus immediately confers citizenship on the stateless nomad, making him a permanent charge to shield and protect. In answer to Oedipus's qualms, Theseus displays his piety and altruism in a single rhetorical question, "Did not Apollo send and guide you here?")

### Interpretation

8. Explain why the Oedipus cycle has survived as a cornerstone of world literature.

(Greater than tragedy or classic drama, Sophocles's Oedipus cycle brings to a close the harrowing destiny of an ill-fated man, Oedipus Rex. Once king by chance, he loses all to that same destiny and wanders sightless and dependent for the rest of his days. To the playgoer or reader, the story of Oedipus's twisted life is a pattern against which to compare other literary sufferings, from the trials of Job to Thomas Hardy's wretched Tess of the d'Urbervilles and

## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

Jude the Obscure, from Shakespeare's *King Lear* to Thornton Wilder's *Willy Loman*. As a touchstone, the life story of Oedipus and his doomed family sets in stark terms how easily the slide from power drops the proud king to the pit of despair.

If Oedipus's story had ended with suffering, it would never have gained its place among other world dramas. Sophocles carefully delineates the old man's death and his wise acceptance of suffering as a lot not to be avoided but embraced as Apollo's will. Acknowledging that all life recedes into a frail corpse in a grave, Oedipus takes on the glory of martyrdom as he extends to Theseus and the kingdom of Athens a touch of blessing.

The trilogy can't end with the old king's demise. The failings of his offspring extend into one more generation the unwise choices that lead one son to exile his older brother and Polyneices's decision to lead an army against Thebes to reclaim the doomed dynasty vacated by his father. In death, the two boys leave two sisters to live out the remaining sufferings of the cycle. With some of the spunk of her father and her uncle, Antigone chooses her battle by defying Creon and performing basic sprinklings and prayers over Polyneices's remains. A simple ceremony, yet unlawful, it nets her a death sentence—public stoning, the same execution exacted against thieves and criminals. Too late, Ismene opts to join Antigone in open defiance of the over-proud Creon, but by that point, no one takes Ismene seriously. The family of Oedipus and Iocasta wind down to three dead children and one survivor who lacks the character of her forebears to make the family line great once more.)

### Comparative Literature

9. How does Oedipus's death parallel that of Moses?

(Just as Oedipus walks with divinity in his final hours in the sacred grove at Colonus, Moses, the biblical leader of his people, climbs the mountain to talk face to face with God. Like Oedipus, Moses, the outsider from Ur, is a failed leader who has displayed pride, arrogance, disobedience, and a decline in faith while leading the Hebrews out of bondage in Egypt. Significant to the comparison of leaders is Moses's fateful sin, cited in Numbers 20:1, when he raises his rod to strike a rock.

Punishment for the two sinners is similar. Oedipus, denied the kingdom of Thebes that he besmirches with impurity, must wander the earth until death calls him. For Moses, failure to comply with divine command costs him the Promised Land, to which he has led his followers but cannot himself enter. Robbed of earthly glory, both men look grimly toward death as the end that awaits all humankind. In both stories, the power of god and fate ends dramatic stories of men who rise high and suffer a precipitous descent back to common soil in token of their failings.)

### Language

10. Discuss the sermon that Haimon delivers to the older generation.

(Sophocles puts into the mouth of Haimon a suitable come-uppance for Creon. At first, the boy vows that "nothing is closer to me than your happiness." He implores his father to bend enough to express his humanity. In Haimon's words, "Do not believe that you alone can be right." With some gift for words, the young prince describes the fate of trees that refuse to bend to the flood and are ripped from their moorings "roots and all." With some intuition about his father's faults, Haimon urges, "Forget you are angry! Let yourself be moved."

The wisdom of young Haimon presages a king in the making, a boy who has observed his father's failings long

enough to identify the fate that awaits a man who refuses to listen to reason. Creon, who is angry that his own son schools him in decision-making, rejects Haimon's insistence that the city of Thebes bears no grudge against Antigone for her actions. The argument develops heat as Creon refuses to be catechized by a boy. In reference to Antigone's threat to Thebes, Haimon retorts, "It is no City if it takes orders from one voice."

When Haimon ends their public brawl with the simple statement "You have no right to trample on God's right," Creon is beyond patience. He tongue-lashes Haimon as a "girlstruck fool." The king works himself into such a frenzy that he threatens to kill Antigone before Haimon's eyes. The face-off ends with Haimon in control of his emotions and Creon beside himself. By the end, three deaths reduce the king to self-abasement. He declares, "My own blind heart has brought me from darkness to final darkness.")

### HOW LANGUAGE WORKS

Sophocles generates appropriate and self-revelatory comments for his characters in dramatic situations.

1. In a controlling metaphor of sight and blindness, Teiresias confronts Oedipus for mocking the old seer's handicap: "You, with both your eyes, are blind: You can not see the wretchedness of your life . . . You do not know the blind wrongs that you have done them."
2. The chorus of *Oedipus Rex*, noting the fall of a great man, describes the downfall that accompanies tragedy: "That mind was a strong bow. Deep, how deep you drew it then, hard archer, at a dim fearful range and brought dear glory down!"
3. In total abasement, Oedipus finds the strength in *Oedipus at Colonus* to confront Creon with a confession: "Whose age do you think you are insulting, mine or yours? The bloody death, the incest, the calamities you speak so glibly of: I suffered them. By fate, against my will! It was God's pleasure."
4. Antigone, over-proud of her decision to smash Creon's edict, lords over her sister the sanctity of the crime: "You may do as you like, since apparently the laws of the gods mean nothing to you."
5. When Creon faces Eurydice's death, he speaks simple lines devoid of his previous bombast: "I alone am guilty. I know, and I say it. Lead me in."

### ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

#### Art, Costume Design, and Music

1. Create a handbill that will catch the eye of prospective audiences of a current reproduction of *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, or *Antigone*. Use an illustration that intrigues the reader to see the play and learn how it ends, such as tragic masks. Emphasize action, emotion, and contrast in your drawing.
2. Propose scenes for a mural to illustrate the trilogy's interconnected plots. Begin with the search for a cure to the pestilence and end with Creon's loss of wife, son, and future daughter-in-law along with his self-confidence.
3. Sketch masks to be used by the actors at a high point of one of Sophocles's plays. Emphasize emotional response of each character in the facial expressions.

#### Drama and Speech

1. Compose an extended definition of drama in which you explain the following terms: character, setting, plot, theme, tone, mood, aside, strophe, epilogue, soliloquy, monologue, climax, chorus, dilemma, conflict, literary foils, motivation, tragedy, rising action, and denouement.
2. Explain how Greek drama grew out of the worship of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility, and added masks,



## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

scenery, dance, subplots, and choral odes to speaking parts.

3. Compose a short scene in which Oedipus returns from visiting the oracle at Delphi and bids farewell to Polybos and Merope or a scene in which Creon and Ismene console each other after the deaths of the rest of their family. Try to maintain the dignified verse style of Sophocles.
4. Draw a floorplan of the theatre at Epidaurus. Label the seats of the priests, altar, theatron, orchestra, skene, proskene, eccyclema, and parados. Place actors for the final scene of *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, or *Antigone*.
5. Lead a debate on the value of interlinking plots in the trilogy. Explain how the mounting tragedies in one family impact Ismene, the remaining princess, and how they dismay Creon, the ruler who survives his family's losses.
6. Use historical data to determine the height, width, and depth of the Theater of Dionysus in Athens. Include figures on how many people could sit to view a play. Contrast these figures with those for other theaters throughout the ancient world, particularly in Epidaurus, Syracuse, Taormina, Rome, Arles, Antioch, Leptis Magna, and Pompeii.

### Education

1. Compose an introduction to Greek drama for use in the classrooms of Plato or Aristotle. Explain why the addition of a third actor altered the interaction onstage and allowed more flexibility in dramatic scenes.
2. Suggest methods of preparing Ismene for a position as reigning monarch in Thebes. Include the study of religion, geography, literature, foreign language, economics, and Greek history.

### Geography

1. With a group, design a brochure, web site, frieze, or poster series detailing the distances between Thebes, Corinth, Athens, Argos, Delphi, Parnassus/Parnassos, and Colonus/Colonus. Use estimated speeds of foot and sea travel to determine how long it took messengers and other travelers to reach their destinations over rocky terrain and open seas.
2. Create a bulletin board contrasting settings described or mentioned in the text.
3. Compose a list of Greek plays and epics and their settings. Note whether the places are real or imaginary. Locate real settings on a map along with the literary titles. Place a star on Athens, Sophocles's birthplace.
3. Compose a guided tour of contrasting settings in the plays. Include commentary on the terrain and landmarks.

### History and Social Studies

1. List difficulties and dangers for a messenger in ancient Greece.
2. Summarize capital crimes and methods of execution in the days of Sophocles. List countries that presently outlaw the death penalty. Explain why many nations have abandoned such punishments.
3. View art forms typifying the lives of Greeks of the classical period. Comment on the interplay of people of different social, educational, and professional backgrounds at a variety of activities.
4. Illustrate class differences in royalty, messengers, prophets, the sentry, ladies-in-waiting, the priest, boy aiding Teiresias, and servant classes as well as wanderers, warriors, and shepherds. How do stage roles dignify nobles?
5. Lead a panel discussion of the significance of the term "king" in the time of Laïos, Oedipus, Creon, Polybos, and Theseus. Determine why Apollo, Zeus, a priest, oracle, and Teiresias possess a form of power greater than royalty.
6. Make a comparative chart of monies used in ancient

Greece. Propose a two-sided coin to honor Antigone, Creon, Haimon, Teiresias, or Theseus. Suggest reasons why Athena and her owl are common figures, but few mortal women appear on coins from the period. Propose one coin with Oedipus's sons or daughters on opposite sides.

### Language Arts

1. With a small group, discuss the ancient philosophy of the golden mean, which the Romans stated as "Nothing in excess." How does the stage tragedy of Creon demonstrate the wisdom of the aphorism?
2. List and explain mythological, literary, historical, and geographical allusions in the three plays. To simplify searches in reference books and on the Internet, make a list of alternate spellings, e. g., Kadmos/Cadmus and Phoibos/Phoebus.
3. Using Teiresias as a model, create an extended definition of seer. Explain how his knowledge of the past and future increased his value to kings and their subjects. Account for the importance to his prophecy of living part of his life as a woman.
4. Write extended definitions of ode, strophe, parados, myth, legend, antiphony, comedy, dithyramb, prologue, scene, and tragedy. Include examples of each genre from ancient and modern literature. Refer to *A Multicultural Dictionary of Literary Terms* for assistance in defining and illustrating each term.
5. Summarize the general and specific meanings of "plague" over time. Explain the common fear of contagion hurled down from heaven by an angry deity.
6. Arrange an interview with Teiresias. Have someone assume the role of the blind prophet; have another person be a reporter. Discuss with Teiresias how he feels about his part in predicting the future and tragic downfall of Oedipus's family.
7. Write a newspaper review of the City Dionysia, the great drama festival of ancient Athens. Describe the arrangement of presentations as well as rituals and prizes for outstanding plays.
8. Write a letter in which you assume the identity of an ordinary Greek citizen of the fifth century, B. C. Express your feelings about a day you spent at the outdoor theatre. Describe the play you saw, its meaning, and the audience response to it. Comment on the role of the chorus in differentiating between right and wrong behavior.
9. Explain Creon's last speech. Why does he consider himself "rash and foolish" and declare that "Whatever my hands have touched has come to nothing"? Why does the chorus consider such humbling essential to a person who lives unwisely up to old age? Explain in what way Creon is now wise.
10. Apply the term "coming to knowledge" to the final scene of each tragedy. Explain the price paid by two queens, the princesses Ismene and Antigone, kings Oedipus and Creon, Creon's son Haimon, and Oedipus's sons Eteocles and Polyneices, all of whom were of royal families.
11. Outline a history of Teiresias's experiences. Discuss how he lost his vision and why blindness and absence of light become controlling metaphors and themes in the *Oedipus Cycle*.
12. Using *Oedipus Rex* as an example, compose an extended definition of tragedy or tragic hero. Characterize the importance of a character flaw to catastrophes.
13. Choose a series of lines from the plays to illustrate Sophocles skill with poetry and aphorism, as with "I, Oedipus, Oedipus, damned in his birth, in his marriage damned, damned in the blood he shed with his own hand!"

## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

14. Contrast the rhythm and impact of various styles of rhetoric, including ode, paean, exodos, dialogue, lament, debate, report, and speech. Determine how the chorus contrasts the other actors' lines and why these poetic remarks are important moral messages in Greek drama.
15. Contrast several translations of a major speech in one of the plays. Note how line length, rhythm, diction, and stress vary in the different versions.
16. Read *The Birds*, *Frogs*, *Lysistrata*, or another of Aristophanes's comedies. Analyze how his subject matter, style, tone, and purpose differ from those of Sophocles's tragedies. Suggest reasons for Aristophanes's ridicule of, yet obvious admiration for great tragic drama.
17. Compose wills for Haimon, Oedipus, Eteocles, Antigone, Eurydice, Iocasta, Laios, and Polyneices. Suggest how they would have left their worldly goods to express changes of heart toward family and loyalty to the realm.

### Music

1. Select instrumental, choral, or solo vocal music to delineate the contrast between hopeful scenes, condemnation, prophecy, regret, suffering, triumph, terror, boasting, and threats. Select flutes, harps, and other instruments similar to those used in ancient times.
2. List recordings of music to substitute for the sounds of the whirlwind in *Antigone*, arguing and an encounter with the divine in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and a sad abdication and departure in *Oedipus Rex*.

### Philosophy and Logic

1. Discuss the moral implications of *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*. Express what playgoers might learn from viewing the plays and thinking about human arrogance, violence, vengeance, injustice, lawlessness, treachery, and fate.
2. Summarize the philosophy in ancient times that, like Polyneices, the losers of a war must accept total loss, degradation, and possible enslavement or death.
3. Comment on the boldness of Sophocles's humanistic sayings, which he works through Teiresias's discussions with two kings. Use as a model Teiresias's prophecy to Oedipus, "How dreadful knowledge of the truth can be when there's no help in truth!" Also consider the seer's caustic remark that "Maybe [Creon] will learn at last to control a wiser tongue in a better head."
4. Determine the evolving relationship between Creon and his two young nieces, Ismene and Antigone. Summarize how this strained kinship develops into additional suffering and tragedy.

### Psychology

1. Propose personality types for the roles of Iocasta, the shepherd, Teiresias, Ismene, Haimon, Theseus, Oedipus, Polyneices, the sentry, and Creon. Explain why temperament and demeanor enhance the drama of a royal family in disastrous times. Propose body language to display innocence, determination, resignation, hatred, rebuke, suspicion, and vengeance.
2. Define hero as it applies to Antigone. Why does she suffer despite her piety, courage, and good intentions toward a dead brother? How does she cow and manipulate Ismene? Why does Antigone seem nobler than her sister?
3. Discuss the psychological problems faced by ambitious couples in royal marriages, particularly Iocasta and Oedipus. Compose advice to Creon concerning his predecessor's difficulty in eradicating the plague from Thebes. Discuss how such problems require self-knowledge as well as familiarity with events in the kingdom.

4. Write an encyclopedia entry on prophecy. Add details that explain why Teiresias faces accusations of fakery and accepting bribes.
5. Lead a discussion of suicide. Explain why Iocasta, Eurydice, Antigone, and Haimon choose to end their lives at crucial points in the action. Contrast their deaths with those of Polyneices, Eteocles, Laios, Polybos, and Oedipus.
6. Compose a lecture on emotional disturbance as characterized by the Eumenides. List home diagnosis, complications, and treatment for severe traumas like those that Ismene and Creon suffer.

### Cinema

1. Make a list of dramatic scenes from the plays that would require intense use of lighting, costume, makeup, music, props, and stunts, particularly the unusual death of Oedipus, Haimon's final moments, the ritual burial in a whirlwind, Eurydice's despair, and Oedipus's sightless eyes.
2. Draw a storyboard following one character through an entire life.
3. Read or view a more modern tragedy, for example, Henrik Ibsen's *A Man of the People*. In an oral composition, compare modern methods of playwriting with those of Sophocles.
4. Give reasons why Sophocles's plays adapt well to opera and dramatic spectacle but not to film. Explain why modern settings violate the convention of decorum to show violence and suffering onstage.

### Science and Health

1. List, define, and illustrate references to nature.
2. Explain in a theme how a hasty blinding with a sharp brooch pin could endanger Oedipus's life. Note the adaptation necessary to sudden loss of vision, particularly use of aural and tactile clues and the need for a guide to a homeless and deeply traumatized blind man.
3. Give an oral report on the genetic weaknesses of daughters and sons born to Oedipus and his mother Iocasta. Consult classical handbooks to determine if Ismene, the only survivor, produced normal children.

### ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. List in chronological order and describe significant events connected with the two troubled families.
2. List events from the plays that express strong attitudes toward kinship, love, vengeance, obedience, piety, law, women, anarchy, power, and loss. Indicate what you think is Sophocles's personal philosophy on each subject.
3. Compose brief definitions of drama, tragedy, and decorum as they apply to *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*. What changes in the story would end multiple sufferings?
4. Summarize scenes that depict familial conflict.

## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

### VOCABULARY TEST

Match the underlined words in each phrase at left with a synonym from the list at right. Place the letter of your response in the blank.

- |       |  |                     |
|-------|--|---------------------|
| _____ | 1. Cronos' <u>briny</u> son                    | A. stumbled         |
| _____ | 2. nothing in the world so <u>demoralizing</u> | B. hiding place     |
| _____ | 3. once I <u>faltered</u>                      | C. coronas/wreaths  |
| _____ | 4. I <u>retaliated</u>                         | D. in secret        |
| _____ | 5. <u>chaplets</u> of olive leaves             | E. cheer            |
| _____ | 6. before these altars in <u>supplication</u>  | F. sea-soaked       |
| _____ | 7. a <u>covert</u> for nightingales            | G. earnest request  |
| _____ | 8. I <u>accede</u> to them                     | H. sought vengeance |
| _____ | 9. do not want your <u>amiability</u>          | I. unharmed         |
| _____ | 10. for <u>carrion</u> birds                   | J. yield            |
| _____ | 11. sucking my blood <u>stealthily</u>         | K. coast            |
| _____ | 12. and walked <u>untrammelled</u>             | L. decay-eating     |
| _____ | 13. on her pure <u>littoral</u>                | M. privileges       |
| _____ | 14. I am their <u>emissary</u>                 | N. degrading        |
| _____ | 15. the <u>perquisites</u> I now have          | O. agent            |

## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Matching (20 points)

Match parts of quotations. Place the letter of your response in the blank at left.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I am the one who puts
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I dunno who darned done it neither
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Who would choose uneasy dreams to don a crown
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I come with a gift:
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Such a pregnant rush of light
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Creon is burying one
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Oh, she's the man, not I
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Home at last,
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. And I myself unhelped shall walk before you there
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Well, there was a murder, yes,

- A. when all the kingly sway can be enjoyed without?
- B. and I make do with less.
- C. if she can flout authority and walk away unscathed.
- D. this fearless Argos in the field against the state of Thebes.
- E. in accents that will bring him little joy.
- F. never comes without some meaning.
- G. distress to bring it on a friend.
- H. that place you must not tell to any living being.
- I. where Polyneices lay abandoned still—all mauled by dogs.
- J. so it in't fair to make me take the rap.
- K. but done by brigands in another land.
- L. to find myself called traitor; traitor to my town, to you, and to my friends.
- M. this my battered body.
- N. not wed, no broken spell.
- O. to desecrate the other.

#### Part II: Identification (30 points)

Identify the following characters.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. regrets Megareus's death.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. clutches the corpse of Antigone.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. forbids the burial of a traitor.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. hangs herself while wearing gold brooches.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. accuses Haemon of supporting Antigone's rebellion.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. calls on Bacchus to rid Thebes of its disease.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. tries to take part of the blame for Antigone's crime.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. calls for tools and speed to save Antigone.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. welcomes an exile to Athens.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. kills Eteocles.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. recognizes the stranger at Poseidon's altar.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. faces Oedipus at the crossroads.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. locates an abandoned child.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. blames Oedipus for making his daughter a spinster.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. welcomes thunder.

## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

### Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either **T** for true or **F** if any part is false.

- 1. Tiresias responds to the omen of screaming birds.
- 2. Creon comes to Colonus to force Oedipus back to Thebes.
- 3. Creon promises stoning to anyone who breaks the law.
- 4. Ismene gallops to Colonus to warn her father of Creon's law .
- 5. A messenger reports the death of Polybus at Corinth.
- 6. Eurydice is not in favor of Haemon's engagement to a rebel.
- 7. Haemon offers to accompany Antigone to the execution site.
- 8. Tiresias tells Oedipus how to answer the riddle of the Sphinx.
- 9. Oedipus violates a sacred sanctuary.
- 10. Iocasta regrets that her daughters will wander with a blind father.

### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Account for multiple deaths in the household of Laios, Oedipus, and Creon.
2. Defend Antigone's decision to break a law.
3. Compare Creon, Oedipus, Iocasta, and Eurydice in their response to bad news.
4. Express the play's attitude toward prophecy.
5. Describe the circumstances that precede Oedipus's arrival at the sacred sanctuary.

## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Multiple Choice (30 points)

Choose the answer that best completes each statement below. Place the letter of your response in the blank at left.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. After Antigone confesses,  
A. Creon chooses to ignore Ismene's role in the crime.  
B. Creon charges Ismene with being an accomplice.  
C. the guard claims he did not see the girl at the burial site.  
D. Haemon pleads for her dismissal.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. A messenger announces that  
A. Iocasta committed suicide in front of the king.  
B. a whirlwind has hidden the corpse in dust.  
C. Polybus is dead.  
D. Creon killed Polyneices and Eteocles in battle.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Creon doubts the guard's words and blames him for  
A. taking a bribe.  
B. siding with Antigone.  
C. covering the corpse with dust.  
D. disobeying the decree.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Ismene reveals  
A. danger to Thebes.  
B. doubts that the stranger is her brother.  
C. sympathy for Iocasta and Oedipus.  
D. Theseus's reason for welcoming Oedipus to Colonus.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Antigone explains to her sister that  
A. She can never marry as long as her father lives.  
B. no one can defy the gods without punishment.  
C. Polyneices is not allowed a decent burial.  
D. their uncle has threatened to stone Oedipus if he returns to Thebes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. The token that indicates Oedipus's death is  
A. the oracle at Delphi.  
B. bird sounds.  
C. lack of fire on the sacrifices.  
D. thunder.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Tiresias predicts that  
A. no one will locate Oedipus's grave.  
B. Megareus must die.  
C. Ismene and Antigone will wander with the blind father.  
D. the Furies will repay Creon for his acts.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Creon declares that  
A. Tiresias is lying about the Eumenides.  
B. women must be forced to obey.  
C. Theseus has no right welcoming the exile to Colonus.  
D. the chorus is overstating the case for Polyneices's burial.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Creon brags to Thebans that  
A. he has killed the seven who warred on the city.  
B. he will allow no one to be an exception before the law.  
C. Haemon is a loyal son and heir to the throne.  
D. he has ousted the man who brought pestilence to Thebes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Oedipus worries that  
A. thunder indicates his approaching death.  
B. his daughters will remain unmarried and childless.  
C. Polyneices will inherit the throne of Argos.  
D. Creon does not honor his dead sister.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Before his death, Haemon  
A. accuses his father of making a mistake.  
B. tries to stop Antigone from confessing her disobedience.  
C. bids farewell to Eurydice.  
D. apologizes to his father for disrespect.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. In the tomb, Creon sees  
A. how Eurydice killed herself.  
B. Haemon embracing Antigone's body.  
C. the guard cremating the corpse.  
D. Ismene begging Antigone to change her mind.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Before Eurydice dies,  
A. she begs Creon to pardon his nieces.  
B. Creon orders her to say no more about Megareus.  
C. her slave women report that she accuses Creon of being a weak king.  
D. she blames Creon for two deaths.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. The chorus reminds the audience that  
A. human law comes before oracles and prophecies.  
B. Tiresias deserves respect and obedience.  
C. Creon must stop rebellion in Thebes to protect its citizens.  
D. arrogance is a sin.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Creon declares that there is no more evil institution than  
A. fortunetelling.  
B. his own family.  
C. money.  
D. royalty.

## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

### Part II: Fill-in (20 points)

Fill in a word that completes each statement below. Place your responses in the blanks provided.

1. The \_\_\_\_\_ explains to Creon that he lost the toss and had to bring bad news.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ grieves over the death of an older son, Megareus.
3. Antigone hangs herself with a noose of \_\_\_\_\_.
4. A stranger arrives at Poseidon's \_\_\_\_\_.
5. Tiresias explains that the din of \_\_\_\_\_ warned him of coming evil.
6. Oedipus angers Tiresias, the blind \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Polyneices seizes the \_\_\_\_\_ of Thebes.
8. Iocasta is certain that \_\_\_\_\_ was murdered by brigands.
9. A messenger terrifies Oedipus with news of the death of \_\_\_\_\_.
10. Oedipus's name indicates his \_\_\_\_\_.

### Part III: Quotation Identification (20 points)

Name the character who speaks each of these lines.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Therefore, good sirs, since you moved me from my seat, you must— by all the gods—protect me now.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Stranger, see what you've brought upon yourself!  
By birth and race you ought to know much better.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. There is no way to tell the character and mettle of a man until you've seen him govern.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. He never gave you life, no more than I.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. You insult us; you insult your very race and native land.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. There ain't no mark of pick or mattock, ground's all 'ard, unbroken.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. No marriage I could make would ever match the good of your abiding counsel.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I'm just not made to war against the state.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Her poor remains still in the house, bury them—what tomb you wish.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. As eldest son I claimed my sovereign birthright to your throne.

### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Explain how Ismene and Antigone suffer for their parents' wrongs.
2. Compare the shepherd and Eurydice as minor characters.
3. Contrast Oedipus as king and exile.
4. Describe the royal households of Thebes.
5. Predict future quarrels between Creon and his subjects.

## THE OEDIPUS CYCLE

### VOCABULARY

- |      |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. G  | 11. D |
| 2. N | 7. B  | 12. I |
| 3. A | 8. J  | 13. K |
| 4. H | 9. E  | 14. O |
| 5. C | 10. L | 15. M |

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Matching (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. D | 6. O  |
| 2. J | 7. C  |
| 3. A | 8. N  |
| 4. M | 9. H  |
| 5. F | 10. K |

#### Part II: Identification (30 points)

- |             |                |              |
|-------------|----------------|--------------|
| 1. Eurydice | 6. chorus      | 11. Oedipus  |
| 2. Haemon   | 7. Ismene      | 12. Laios    |
| 3. Creon    | 8. Creon       | 13. shepherd |
| 4. Iocasta  | 9. Theseus     | 14. Creon    |
| 5. Creon    | 10. Polyneices | 15. Oedipus  |

#### Part III: True/False (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. F  |
| 2. T | 7. F  |
| 3. T | 8. F  |
| 4. F | 9. T  |
| 5. T | 10. F |

#### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

## ANSWER KEY

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Multiple Choice (30 points)

- |      |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. B | 6. C  | 11. A |
| 2. A | 7. D  | 12. B |
| 3. A | 8. B  | 13. D |
| 4. D | 9. B  | 14. D |
| 5. C | 10. B | 15. C |

#### Part II: Fill-in (20 points)

- |             |                  |
|-------------|------------------|
| 1. sentry   | 6. seer          |
| 2. Eurydice | 7. throne        |
| 3. linen    | 8. Laios         |
| 4. altar    | 9. Polybus       |
| 5. birds    | 10. swollen foot |

#### Part III: Quotation Identification (20 points)

- |              |                |
|--------------|----------------|
| 1. Oedipus   | 6. sentry      |
| 2. chorus    | 7. Haemon      |
| 3. Creon     | 8. Ismene      |
| 4. messenger | 9. Oedipus     |
| 5. Theseus   | 10. Polyneices |

#### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.



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