

The play : OEDIPUS THE KING BY SOPHOCLES

Character list

Oedipus: The king of Thebes, married to Jocasta. He is unaware at the start of the play that he murdered his father and married his mother.

Creon: The second in command in Thebes, Jocasta's brother and brother-in-law of Oedipus. He is the ~~dead~~^a follower of the Oracle of Apollo.

Jocasta: She is the wife and mother of Oedipus and queen of ~~the~~ Thebes. Before marrying Oedipus, she was married to King Laius.

Tiresias: He is a blind prophet who has guided the kings of Thebes with his advice and counsel. He knows the truth about Oedipus' parentage.

Messenger from Corinth: A man belonging bringing news of the royal family of Corinth (Polybus and Merope) to Oedipus.

A shepherd / Herdsman: A herder from the nearby mountains who once served in the house of Laius. This is the same herder who gives Laius and Jocasta's baby to the messenger.

Second messenger: Oedipus and Jocasta's servant who comes from the palace to announce the death of the king and the blinding of King Oedipus.

A priest: He leads followers at the beginning of the play who sacrifice to the gods hoping that the gods will lift the plague that has struck the city.

Ismene and Antigone: Oedipus' daughters

Chorus of Theban elders: A group of men who comment on the events of the drama and react to its tragic progression. They reflect on the plot development while asking important philosophical questions.

King's attendants

Queen's attendants

Citizens of Thebes

PLOT SUMMARY

When the play opens, the city of Thebes is suffering a plague which leaves its fields and women barren. Women are dying in childbirth and their babies are

stillborn. Oedipus, king of Thebes receives a group of citizens led by an old priest. The priest describes the suffering that the city is facing. Recalling Oedipus' early triumph over the Sphinx, the priest begs the king to save Thebes once more.

Oedipus expresses his sympathy and concern and announces that he has already sent his brother-in-law, Creon to the Oracle of the God Apollo at Delphi to find out how to end the plague. As Oedipus speaks, Creon returns with the Oracle's message; for the plague to end, the murderer of Laius the former King, must be discovered and punished by either killing or banishing. The oracle claims that the murderer still lives in Thebes.

Oedipus immediately curses the unknown murderer and swears he will find the murderer, punish him and save the city. He orders the people of Thebes under the punishment of exile to give any information they have about the death of Laius. He promises leniency i.e. exile not death to the murderer and a reward to anyone providing information.

The chorus chants a prayer to the gods, Zeus, Apollo, Athena and Artemis, describing the horrors of the Theban plague. They suggest that Oedipus consult Teiresias, the blind prophet. Oedipus tells them that he has already sent for Teiresias. The blind prophet arrives. The king asks for Teiresias' help in finding the murderer but the prophet refuses. Oedipus accuses Teiresias of taking part in Laius' death. He threatens Teiresias with death but Teiresias grows angry and says that Oedipus is the cause of the plague, he is the murderer of Laius and that his marriage is a sinful union. Furious, Oedipus dismisses Teiresias, accusing him of plotting with Creon to overthrow him. Teiresias goes repeating that Laius' killer is right here before him - a man who is his father's killer and his mother's husband, a man who came weeping but will leave in blindness.

Convinced that Creon is plotting to overthrow him, Oedipus declares his intention to banish or execute his brother-in-law. The chorus wonder at the prophet's accusation that Oedipus is the murderer of Laius. As royal subjects, they are shocked and confused. Still, they will stand by their king unless the charges are proved. Jocasta and the Chorus believe Creon is innocent and beg Oedipus to let Creon go. Oedipus

Unwillingly relents still convinced of Creon's guilt. Jocasta stops the wrangling between Oedipus and Creon by ~~Separating~~^{Separating} them and sending Creon home.

Oedipus continues to complain of Creon's charge through Teiresias that he himself killed Laius. Jocasta comforts him by ^{saying} that there is no truth in oracles or prophets, and she has proof. As an example, she tells him the prophecy she once received that Laius her first husband would be killed by their own son. She and Jocasta gave their infant son to a shepherd to leave it out on a hillside to die with a pin through its ankles. Yet Laius was killed by robbers, not by his own son, proof that the Oracle was wrong. But her description of where Laius was killed - a triple crossroad - worries Oedipus. It is the same place where Oedipus once fought with several people and killed them, one of whom fit the description of Laius. This troubles him as Laius's description matches his memory.

Yet Jocasta tells him that the only eyewitness to Laius's death, a herdsman swore that five robbers killed him. Oedipus orders that this shepherd be brought to him for questioning.

While they wait for the man to arrive, Jocasta asks Oedipus why he seems so troubled. Oedipus tells her the story of his past. Once when he was not his father's son. He asks his parents about it, and they deny it. Still it troubles him, and he eventually goes to an Oracle to determine his true parentage. The Oracle told him he would kill his father and marry his mother. This prophecy frightens Oedipus that he leaves his hometown and never returns. On his journey, he encounters a stubborn man at a crossroads - and kills the man after suffering an insult. Oedipus is afraid that the stranger he killed might have been Laius. If this is the case, Oedipus will forever be banished both from Thebes (the punishment he swore for the killer of Laius) and from Corinth, his hometown. If these eyewitness will swear that robbers killed Laius, then Oedipus is set free. He prays for the witness to deliver him from guilt and from punishment banishment. Oedipus and Jocasta enter the palace to wait for him.

Jocasta comes back out of the palace, on her way to the holy temple to pray for Oedipus. A messenger arrives from Corinth with the news that Oedipus' father Polybus is dead. Overjoyed, Jocasta sends for Oedipus glad that she has even more proof in the uselessness of Oracles. Oedipus rejoices but then states that he is still afraid of the rest of the Oracle's prophecy; that he will marry his mother. The messenger assures him that he need not fear approaching Corinth since Merope, his mother is not really his mother and moreover Polybus wasn't his father either. Stunned, Oedipus asks him how he came to know this. The messenger replies that years ago, a man gave a baby to him and he delivered this baby to the king and queen of Corinth - a baby that would grow up to be Oedipus' the king. The injury to Oedipus' ankles is a testament to the truth of his tale, because the baby's feet had been pierced through the ankles. Oedipus asks the messenger who gave the baby to him, and he replies that it was one of Laius's servants. Oedipus sends his men out to find this servant. The messenger suggests that Jocasta should be able to help identify the servant and help unveil the true story of Oedipus' birth. Suddenly understanding the terrible truth, Jocasta begs Oedipus not to carry through with his investigation. Oedipus replies that he swore to unravel this mystery, and he will follow through on his word. Jocasta exits into the palace.

Oedipus again swears that he will figure out this secret. no matter how vile the answer is. The chorus senses that something bad is about to happen and join Jocasta's cry is begging the mystery to be left unresolved. ~~Oedipus's question~~: But finally he tells Oedipus the truth. He did in fact give men lead in an old sheep-shepherd, who is afraid to answer Oedipus' questions. But finally he tells Oedipus the truth. He did in fact give the messenger a baby boy, and that babyboy was Laius's son the same son that Jocasta and Laius left on a hillside to die because of the Oracle's prophecy.

Finally the truth is clear. Devastated, Oedipus exits into the palace. A messenger reveals that he grabbed a sword and searched for

Jocasta with the intent to kill her. Upon entering her chamber, however, he finds that she has hanged herself. He takes the gold brooches from her dress and gouges his eyes out. He appears on stage again, blood streaming from his now blind eyes. He cries out that he who has seen and done such vile things, shall never see again. He begs the chorus to kill him. Creon enters, having heard the entire story and begs Oedipus to let him leave the city and Creon tells him that he must consult Apollo first. Oedipus tells him that banishment was the punishment he declared for Laius's killer, and Creon agrees with him. Before he leaves forever, however, Oedipus asks to see his daughters and begs Creon to take care of them. Oedipus is then led away while Creon ~~to take care of them~~ and the girls go back in the palace. The chorus, alone, laments Oedipus's tragic fate and his doomed lineage. The chorus ends with these tragic words; "Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day, count no man happy, till he dies, free of pain at last - -"

THEMES AND IDEAS IN THE PLAY "OEDIPUS THE KING"

Fate:

Fate refers to the course of someone's life or the outcome of a situation for someone or something, seen as outside their control. In other words, fate is the development of events outside a person's control, regarded as predetermined by a supernatural power. The ancient Greeks acknowledged the role of fate as a reality outside the individual that shaped and determined human life. They also believed that their gods could see the future and that the prophets, seers could have powers ~~to access~~ the information about the future. In the play, prophets like Teiresias, Oracle and priests at the temples of gods - for example, the Oracle to Apollo at Delphi, were able to interpret the gods' wills and prophecy for the people. Therefore, fate is unavoidable in the play. No matter how hard the characters work to ensure that they escape their destinies, the nearer they bring themselves to that fate.

In the play, fate brings about King Oedipus's downfall. The gods have decreed that Oedipus will kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus does everything possible to change that. The knowledge of the people who have

raised him as parents ^{is} incorrect "---- my father was a Corinthian, Polybus; My mother a boorian, Merope ---" Once ^{time} he is informed by an Oracle at Pytho that he would kill his father and marry his mother. He runs away from Corinth thus bringing himself closer to his fate.

In an attempt to avert fate, Jocasta, Oedipus' mother tries to control the events of the prophecy. She and Laius put a pin through the ankles of their own son causing ^{him} to be lame and scarred for life. They order a shepherd to abandon Oedipus on a rock on a mountainside so that the baby dies. However, fearing her fate, orders the ^{shepherd} to abandon Oedipus on a rock on a mountain side so that the baby ~~dies~~. However, fearing her fate, orders the shepherd to kill the baby instead. The merciful shepherd fears to commit such a horrible act and hands over the baby to a messenger of the king of Corinth, Polybus. The messenger takes the baby and hands it to the childless king, Polybus and his wife Merope. As fate would have it, that baby is Oedipus. SHEPHERD: "I hadn't the heart to destroy, Master I thought --- He will take it away to another country, his home --- He took it and saved its life to come to this! if you are the man, O then your life is lost --- !"

Fate pursues Oedipus' life as he attempts to run away from it. He grows in Polybus' palace and feels Polybus and Merope are his real parents. As he grows, he is taunted by other servants as not being Polybus' son. Oedipus approaches the "parents" for an explanation but he is not satisfied. He goes to an oracle who gives him yet disturbing news of him killing his father and marrying his mother. Thinking this prophecy was about Polybus and Merope, Oedipus runs away from Corinth to avoid the fulfillment of the prophecy.

OEDIPUS : --- At this I fled away putting the stars between me and Corinth, never to see home again,

That no such horror should ever come to pass --- "

This instead brings ^{him} home to Thebes where he encounters Laius and kills him thus fulfilling the prophecy. This depicts the inevitability of fate.

Jocasta tries to stop Oedipus from knowing the full story and she is willing to accept her fate and suffer in silence as long as Oedipus doesn't know he is the one who tried to have killed. However, Oedipus will not back down and instead attempts more to find out what Jocasta is trying to hide.

Jocasta : Yet do not do it. I implore you, do not do it.

Oedipus : I must. I can't leave the truth unknown - - -

Jocasta further seals Oedipus's fate to befall him due to his "insistence;" doomed man! O never live to learn the truth - - -!"

The oracles are agents of fate and are usually misunderstood by those who hear them. Hence Oedipus's misunderstanding is the significance of the Delphic Oracle and the inevitability of fate. He visits Delphi to find out who his real parents are and assumes that the Oracle refuses to answer that question. He offers instead an unrelated prophecy, which forecasts the murderer of his father and an evil practice of marrying his mother. Oedipus feels he did not get any answer and he flees in a direction away from Corinth believing Merope and Polybus are his real parents. As fate would have it, Oedipus instead encounters Laius where three roads meet, kills everybody Laius inclusive, thus fate is sealed;

OEDIPUS : When I come to the place where three roads meet
join, I met - - - a man seated there in, just as you have
described - - -

And every man of them there I killed. But now, if the
blood of Laius runs in this stranger's veins, Is there any
more wretched & mortal than I, more hated by God and man? - - -"

Oedipus finally admits that fate is powerful as all the details of his life are described by the shepherd. He realizes that he has murdered his father and married his mother. He declares:

OEDIPUS : Now, shedder of father's blood, husband of mother is my name,
Godless and child of shame, begetter of brother-sons! - - -" He
pushes out.

blinds himself and asks to be killed but Creon consults the Oracle and Oedipus is exiled. The chorus ends with those key words that seal fate's power;

CHORUS: ...

And none can be called happy until that day, when he carries his happiness down to the grave in peace --

EXCESSIVE PRIDE (HUBRIS)

In the play, Sophocles presents Oedipus as a noble and a good man. He is however brought to his downfall by his tragic flaw, that is his pride. The play shows Oedipus as the main character, noble by birth but his major flaw is hubris (pride) shown in the way he degrades many people and how he decides to blind himself.

Oedipus reveals how proud he is when he leaves his adopted parents in Corinth and he flees. When he hears from one of the servants that he is not Polybus and Merope's real child, he goes to an old prophet to be told about his destiny. The prophet tells him about a prophecy that he would one day kill his father and marry his mother. In his pride, he does not even consult his adopted parents but instead decides to flee Corinth and runs to Thebes. He naively believes that he is smart enough to outwit the gods. He naively believes he can prevent his destiny from coming to fulfillment.

Oedipus: So without my parents' knowledge, I went to Pytho; ---- At this I fled away putting the stars between me and Corinth never to see home again ----

Oedipus' pride is also portrayed as the play begins when he is so proud of his power that helped him save the city of Thebes from the deadly Sphinx. Oedipus: ---- bird-lore and god-craft all were silent.

Until I came - I, ignorant to Oedipus came - And stopped the riddler's mouth, --- "Oedipus feels so proud that he alone will do whatever it takes to save the city from the current suffering. Even when the blind Teiresias warns Oedipus, not to pursue the issue of finding out

Laius's killer, Oedipus in his pride vow that he can't be outwitted; He says: "... No matter! I have saved this land from ruin. I am content ..."

In his pride, Oedipus accuses Creon of treason. He says that Creon has persuaded him to send for the old prophet, Teiresias to find out the murderer of the former king Laius. Oedipus misunderstands Teiresias' advice and he thinks Creon has plotted to take his kingdom by telling the old blind seer to accuse Oedipus of murdering king Laius. Oedipus accuses Creon thus, "-- When a quick plotter's on the move - --- Am I to sit and wait for him, and ~~lose~~ my opportunity while he takes his - --" Thus Oedipus's pride gets the better of him and he will not listen to anyone. Thus the good character in him is ~~ruined~~ ruined by excessive pride.

Even still when the messenger advises Oedipus not to pursue the truth about Laius's murder, king Oedipus will not listen. His pride gets the better of him as he demands the messenger to tell him all he knows about Oedipus's real parents. Oedipus pesters the messenger until he tells him that Polybus and Merope are not his real parents. Jocasta quickly realizes who now Oedipus is and advises him to stop pursuing what he is doing but Oedipus does not listen;

Jocasta : What does it matter what man he means?

It makes no difference now --- forget what he has told you --- It makes no difference - - -

Oedipus is an intelligent man but overcome by hubris. In trying to avoid his destiny, he instead fulfills it. As he leaves Corinth traveling towards Thebes, he encounters Laius's men who provoke him. Oedipus's pride gets the better of him and he feels none can hurt his pride and go unpunished. He kills them all little knowing this will affect his future.

ROLE OF GODS / THE SUPER NATURAL

The gods are believed to be beings that watch over men. They control the lives of us all and foreshadow what is going to happen to us. It is very clear that the gods are driving and controlling force ~~and King Oedipus~~. However, Sophocles makes it perfectly clear that while these forces are catalysts, the characters make their own decision that leads to their tragic end.

First of all, the gods predetermine Oedipus' life and make sure that he fulfills every aspect of it as planned. When king Laius goes to seek for guidance from Apollo, he is told that his son will kill him and marry his wife. When he comes home to Jocasta, he tells her about the prophecy and the two decide to escape the god's fate by eliminating the boy's life. Laius pins the boy's ankles and orders Jocasta to kill him. Jocasta instead gives the boy to the shepherd to live him on mountain Cithaeron on a bare rock. However, since it is the god's plan, the shepherd spares the boy's life by giving it to another shepherd who takes it to Corinth to king Polybus and Merope who raise Oedipus as their own child.

The fact that all people seek guidance from the gods in the quest for what their future holds also shows the role of gods in the society of Sophocles. The god is seen to be the answer of every problem query and quest e.g. when Laius wanted to know about his future he turned to Apollo for knowledge, when Oedipus is at tenterhooks over his parentage while in Corinth, he turns to the god Pytho for guidance, when Thebes worth not in still, when Thebes is afflicted by pestilence, it is the gods that are relied on. Oedipus sends Creon to find out from the gods the cause of the affliction.

Despite the fact that some characters tend to be blind to the fact that the gods are powerful, they still pray to them for deliverance. Jocasta for example despises the gods and calls them empty vessels because according to her, they prophesied the death of Laius by his son which didn't happen. However, as Oedipus grows suspicious of the act, Jocasta comes with supplications to pray to the gods to help Oedipus. It is ironic that a person who despises gods is praying for their guidance which shows their importance.

The respect accorded to the messengers of the gods and the fulfillment of their curses is an indication of how important the gods are e.g. when Teiresias is invited to the palace, to explain the mystery of king Laius's murder, the chorus say; "They are bringing the prophet in whom, of all men, lives the incarnate truth." The chorus believes that Teiresias knows the truth and indeed he knows and even goes ahead to tell Oedipus the truth though Oedipus decides not to think about it but dismisses it as a conspiracy to overthrow him. Teiresias even goes ahead to prophesize Oedipus's future that he would get out of

Thebes without eyes and indeed it happens showing the infallibility of the gods and a lesson that the gods will is undisputed

Finally, Oedipus's fulfillment of the Oracle also portrays the role of gods as a theme in the play. The gods decide to destroy a man's life from the beginning and it seems no matter how the characters try to escape their fate they will still face it. For example, Oedipus who has been adopted and raised by Polybus and Merope is living a good life till he drunkard tells him that he is not their son. Oedipus goes to find out the truth and he is told his fate instead. He makes a bold and virtual decision to leave Corinth in order not to hurt his parents not knowing that he is actually going to meet his fate. On his way he meets and kills his father and marries his mother later thereby sealing the Oracle.

SUFFERING

Suffering in "King Oedipus" is both physical and psychological. The Thebans suffer from the calamities that befall them while King Oedipus and Jocasta suffer fate as explained below.

To begin with, the Thebans suffer the siege of the sphinx. This creature that has a lion's body and a human's face lays a siege on the city of Thebes and doesn't allow anyone in or out unless you have answered its riddle. Those who have tried and failed have been killed and the whole city is in fear as they ran out of supplies. Not until Oedipus solves the riddle do the Thebans get their life back.

The city of Thebes suffers yet again when it is faced by a series of calamities as a result of a curse brought unto them by the man that killed their king. At the beginning of the play, Theban elders, children and women sit in attitudes of supplication before King Oedipus seeking him to address the calamity that has befallen them. He hear are told of sickness that grips people at night and die by morning, the women miscarry, while crops wither mysteriously. It is this kind of suffering that tempts Oedipus to find the ultimate solution from the gods.

The play also depicts human suffering as we explore the life of Oedipus, he is a man fated to matto kill his father and marry his mom.

to which the execution of these ~~very~~ act will cause suffering and therefore the characters involved try to avoid these but unknowingly bring themselves or others suffering. For example when the messenger reminds Oedipus of the injured ankles as he tries to explain his parentage, Oedipus says "...oh, that odd trouble, have carried the stigma from my cradle---" thus Oedipus suffers psychologically. The riveted ankles ~~must~~ have caused Oedipus a lot of difficulty in walking hence suffering.

Oedipus again suffers psychologically when at Adena, a drunkard tell him that he is not a son to Polybus and Merope. As a proud young man, Oedipus enjoys his nobility and by instigating seeds of doubt regarding his parentage gives him thoughts of concern. He says that he suffered in silence after hearing these until he talks to his "parents" though even then the "Pain" smart remained. This is why he goes to Pytho to seek knowledge of his parentage. At Pytho, he is not given the answer to his question but told devastating information of how he is meant to kill his father and marry his mother. The young man who loves his parents has to banish himself from the city in fear of the act. He leaves the comfort of his home and goes a man carrying a weight of problems.

Oedipus yet again drowns in fear as he ~~desperately~~ searches for the murderer of Laius with all fingers apparently pointing at him. After Jocasta narrating to him how Laius was killed, Oedipus finds the story related to the man he killed on his way to Thebes (page 49) --- but if he speaks of one lone wayfarer, there is no escape; the finger points to me--- "later on, we see Jocasta coming with supplications to pray for Oedipus who has apparently gone out of control and has lost the sense of judgement. She says --- We are afraid, seeing our master pilot distraught destroyed...."

When the truth finally gets out, Oedipus has to suffer a lot from his shameful acts of murder and incest. First of all, he suffers the sight of his dead mother and wife. Jocasta who warns Oedipus not to continue with the investigation but Oedipus persists, decides to commit suicide as a result to escape facing reality. These devastating ~~result~~ ^{act} creates a sombre mood in all of us as we reflect on whether she is right or wrong in her decision which not only causes suffering to the characters such as Oedipus and

the children but the audience as well.

The gauging ^{out} of his eyes is also a symbol of suffering. Oedipus painfully pins his eyes out to keep himself ~~in~~ in darkness ".... With golden broaches.... the king --- thrust from full arms length, into his eyes— eyes that should see no longer his shame, his guilt...."

Oedipus suffers as he faces banishment. A man who once had it all, money, a wife, children, fame and people who adored him and wanted to be him. He leaves all there behind and is led out blind, a punished man ".... As he ~~lives~~, he is resigned to his fate ".... As for me, no longer let my living presence curse these fatherland of mine but let me go and live upon the mountains — and die there - - -"

IGNORANCE/BLINDNESS

All throughout "King Oedipus", Sophocles has Oedipus on an unknown journey from ignorance to knowledge. Oedipus believes that he has nothing to do with the murder of King Laius even though the truth ~~is~~ is laid out in front of him multiple times. As the story goes on, Oedipus begins to become more open minded to new information therefore through the journey to recognition, the once great and powerful Oedipus can cause his own downfall. Sophocles demonstrates that ignorance will blind one from the truth and knowledge will open one's eyes.

Oedipus's ignorance shows itself immediately when he curses the polluter of the land ignorant of the fact that he once killed a man. Sophocles intends to show man's folly by his anxiety and speed at passing judgment before looking deep into our hearts. Oedipus ~~learns~~ from Creon that the cause of Thebes's suffering is the unavenged death of their former king. He then curses the man responsible for these deaths, Oedipus doesn't know that by these curses he has cursed himself.

Oedipus is ignorant and constantly avoids the truth in order to protect his reputation. Oedipus's unwillingness to open his eyes to the truth develops when Teiresias reveals that he killed Laius and one of his responses is "Your words are nothing---futile" although Oedipus has begged to hear Teiresias's words, he is not willing to pay attention or open his eyes to the unfortunate idea. He pushes aside the words

Tiresias's ways refusing to believe that he could be the one who killed Laius, the one who must be cursed. Later, Tiresias brings out Oedipus's ignorance saying "---- living in ignorance of your own doing" Sophocles foreshadows using Tiresias in this way. Therefore even though the truth has been revealed to him, Oedipus still chooses to remain blind to the truth in order to remain good in the eyes of his people.

Due to ignorance, Oedipus claims that Tiresias's words are a conspiracy to overthrow him from his throne. He lashes out at Creon claiming he employed Tiresias to tell him the truth "---- This is the man whom you would dispossess, hoping to stand nearest to Creon's throne. You shall repent, you and your fellow plotter, of your ~~zeal~~ for ~~the~~ scapegoat hunting ----" He says to Creon "---- Have you the face to stand before my door, proved plotter against my life, thief of my crown? ----" He thinks he is right and others are wrong not sparing the prophets of the gods. His failure to ~~stop~~ pause and think of Tiresias's words shows he doesn't intend to know the truth and therefore blind.

Inspite of his previous attitude, as the story goes on, Oedipus begins to hear the truth to gain more knowledge about his past. He starts opening his ears and starts asking about Laius out of fear that he was his killer and asks questions such as "Where did these things happen? and when? how long ago?" he confesses to killing a noble man who according to Jocasta's description ~~sheets~~ suited the personality of Laius, she says he died just before Oedipus arrived to Thebes and was of the same height and resemblance to Oedipus. Though we see Oedipus beginning to fear, he still believes that he is innocent. By summoning the Shepherd Shepherd to tell whether ^{Laius} Oedipus was killed by many men or one shows that he is still blind to the truth though the prophet of the gods has already told him that he is the murderer.

Another example of blindness is Jocasta's failure to recognize that her new husband is her son but even after realizing it, she chooses to ignore it all together. This is blindness to the truth. She for example lambasts the prophets saying they are liars and in the same scene she assures Oedipus that the shepherd already said that Laius was killed by robbers and so can not change. She says "---- Even if he changes,---- he can't in any event pretend that Laius died as

was foretold..." Though Oedipus insists that the shepherd be fetched, it is clear Jocasta already has a side to take.

Further more after realising the truth, Jocasta tries to stop Oedipus from further investigation but to Oedipus's blindness, he refuses thinking that Jocasta is concerned over his law-born status. This comes after the messenger telling Oedipus that he is no kin to Polybus but was given to him as a child by a shepherd from Laius's house and in turn took him to Polybus and Merope. Jocasta realises the truth and begs Oedipus to stop probing and when he refuses she ^{decides} chooses to kill herself therefore entering ~~intern~~ eternal blindness.

In the same way, Oedipus loses sight when he pins out his eyes after knowing and acknowledging the truth about his ~~parent~~ birth. As prophesized by Teiresias, Oedipus meets the truth and blinds himself in order not to face reality. At the end, Oedipus is banished from the kingdom which becomes his final punishment.

On his part, Teiresias is physically blind. He can not see his surroundings, however he can see into the future and link it to the past. His physical blindness presents him with the gift of having visions. He knows that Oedipus is the polluter of the land and Jocasta is his mother. Sappholes tends to show that some people have eyes but don't see yet those without eyes do. Oedipus has eyes but has no vision yet Teiresias who has no eyes has visions. In conclusion even after people knowing the truth, people have a tendency to ignore it however, ignoring facts doesn't change them. The truth dawns on Jocasta as she realizes she can not overlook the truth anymore. Death is the only secure way out unfortunately. On the other hand, Oedipus gouges out his eyes to avoid meeting truth physically although he has it on his heart.

CHARACTER AND CHARACTERISATION

Oedipus

He is the king of Thebes, he is the protagonist and a tragic hero. He suffers because of circumstances beyond his control. Abandoned as a baby by his parents King Laius and Jocasta of Thebes, Oedipus is fated to kill his father and marry his mother.

er and marry his mother.

Oedipus is a kind king. He is willing to help the people of Thebes. When he hears that the plague devastating Thebes is a result of Laius's murderer being unpunished, Oedipus stops at nothing to discover the truth about Laius's death. He does this despite being warned that the search for the truth will harm him. He assures the people "... I would gladly do anything to help you."

He is brave / courageous. He solves the puzzle of the sphinx and saves the city of Thebes. Inspite of the fact that the sphinx threatened to kill anyone who fails the riddle, Oedipus is still courageous and confident of himself that he would solve the puzzle. He is made king of Thebes thereby marrying Jocasta. These character however helps to develop the themes in the play e.g. the inevitability of fate as in marrying his mother he fulfills what the Oracle had ordained.

He is easily angered / irascible. He sends for the blind prophet Teiresias to explain the mysteries surrounding Thebe's suffering but he is easily angered by Teiresias's words and blames him for plotting with Creon to dispossess him. In a fit of anger, he calls Teiresias's names "Involent scoundrel"! --- shameless and brainless, sightless, senseless though ~~is~~ sort! --- "This leads to plot development as his failure to control his anger brings about his tragedy. He doesn't reason well and in the process makes mistakes which he is punished for at the end of the play.

He is arrogant / proud of his own abilities such as solving the riddle of the sphinx "... Until I came - I, Ignorant Oedipus - and stopped the riddler's mouth guessing the truth by mother-wit, not badlore...." His pride makes him loose his sense of reason and doesn't know what he should do. He proudly accuses the intelligent blind prophet Teiresias. Due to his pride, he leaves his adoptive parents Polybus and Merope because of a rumour he has heard from a drunkard that he is not their biological son. His pride makes him live Corinth where he would be safe and goes to Thebes. His pride brings him to his downfall thus His pride developing plot. He is reduced to abject suffering and utter helplessness. He realizes when it is too late. He remarks " --- now, shedder of fathers blood, husband of mother is my name; Godless and child of shame, begetter of brother-sons; what infamy remains that isn't spoken of Oedipus ---?"

Oedipus is steadfast and determined in his quest to expose the truth. " --- nonsense; I must pursue this trail to the end, till I have unravelled the mystery of my birth... " He sends for Teiresias and is not convinced. The messenger from Corinth gives him all the details of his birth but he is still not convinced until he must send for the shepherd. " ... does any of you know the fellow — these shepherd of whom he speaks? ... speak if you know. Now is the chance to get to the bottom of the mystery. Jocasta implores him not to do it but he insists " I must. I can not live the truth unknown ". ~~This~~ This character helps to develop the plot. Oedipus's determination to unravel the mystery of his birth brings him to his downfall when all the truth is exposed. He bows to fate " O light! may I never look on you again, revealed as I'm, sinful in my begetting, sinful in marriage, sinful in shedding of blood! "

Oedipus ^{is} ~~A~~ rash / impulsive. He jumps to conclusions about the ones closest to him. He accuses Creon of conspiring to take over the throne " ... must Creon, so long my friend, my most trusted friend, stalk me by stealth and study to dispossess me of power that this city has given to me? ". He assumes that Jocasta fears that he was an illegitimate child " The woman, with more than woman's pride is shamed by my low origin " this further develops the character traits of other characters for example we see Creon as calm and more reasonable. He calmly contends Oedipus's accusations against him. Jocasta is revealed as more understanding than her husband.

Oedipus is ; fearless / strong in the face of disaster

Cruel

Guilty conscious

Sympathetic

Courageous

Insultant

Loving husband

Injustice

Abusive

~~CREON~~

CREON

He is a contrast to Oedipus in terms of character. He is Jocasta's brother and second in command to Oedipus. In the play, he is tasked to find out the decree at the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi about the plague ravaging Thebes.

He is calmer and more reasonable. As Oedipus storms, Creon maintains his calm. At a time Oedipus accuses him of treason, Creon is calm and asks Oedipus to be realistic, "... Reason with yourself, as I and ask, would any man exchange a quiet life with royal rank assured, for an uneasy throne ...?" At the end of the play, as Oedipus cries out to be banished, Creon protects him with gentle firmness.

He is secretive when Oedipus sends him to the Oracle at Delphi, he comes back and suggests that Oedipus hear the news inside unlike Oedipus who tells him to speak out in front of everybody.

He is humble and cautious. He realises that he needs not argue with Oedipus as the gods will themselves say the truth. "... I do not presume to say more than I know ..." He acknowledges the gods, "... God will decide not I..."

He is very realistic and sincere. He is deeply hurt by Oedipus' accusations "If he thinks that I have done any harm by word or act, in this calamitous hour, I will not live ..."

He is kind. He shows the suffering king a lot of kindness even at a time Oedipus has been punished by the gods. He allows Oedipus' daughters to meet their father in his banished state.

JOCASTA

Mother to Oedipus at same time his wife. She is not a fatalist as she expresses the belief that chance rules our lives. Her mistakes with her late husband Laius, come later to haunt her and her kingdom.

More intelligent than Oedipus. She ~~goes~~ realises early before Oedipus the reality of his identity and begs him to stop his questioning to avoid grief which might culminate. But the obstinate Oedipus will not listen leading to disastrous consequences.

She is a mediator between Oedipus and Creon - typical of

her role as mother and wife."...what is the meaning of this loud argument, you quarrelsome men? You are making much of unimportant grievance."

In sensitive yet unrealistic, she abandons Oedipus on the hillside to perish because of a prophecy yet dismisses prophecy late in the play:"...for I can tell you, no man possesses the secret of divination. And I have proof:...why should you then heed them for a moment? A fig of divination!"

Short-sighted, she distrusts the Oracle and believes that whatever happens will happen by unforeseeable chance, yet still she is scared and has to honour Apollo with offerings in a crisis.

Cowardly, she can't face the horror of the truth and commits suicide.

TELESIUS

He is a blind prophet who has guided the king of Thebes with his advice and counsel. Though physically blind, he is gifted with prophecy. The whole city of Thebes expects him to tell them the source of their affliction.

Intelligent and cautious. He is reluctant to share his knowledge with Oedipus because he knows the damage it will cause. He says "...when wisdom brings no profit, to be wise is to suffer..."

-Brave - doesn't fear Oedipus' threats.

-Realistic

-Insistent

-Fore-sighted

-Calm

DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES IN "OEDIPUS THE KING"

IRONY

Dramatic Irony is employed by Sophocles in many incidences in the play. Dramatic Irony occurs where the audience know something that the characters are unaware of. It is used by the playwright to build suspense, develop character, emphasise certain plot points and generally create tension between characters.

The first element of dramatic irony occurs before a line is even uttered. Oedipus' decisions upto the start of the play are focused

entirely on trying to avoid the dreaded prophecy he heard as a young man from the Oracle. However it is these very actions that lead him directly back to Thebes and fulfilling the prophecy. His 'parents' he thought he was saving in Corinth are in fact of no relation to him. This leads to the plot development.

Irony in the play also arises from Oedipus' vow to drive the plague out of Thebes. Once Oedipus learns from Creon that the cause of the plague is Laius' murderer who still ~~lives~~ lives in the city, he declares a series of proclamations. This includes a curse on the mysterious murderer proclaiming, "...let that man drag out his life in agony, step by painful step..." The dramatic irony here is two-fold. Not only is Oedipus unknowingly cursing himself, but his eventual fate matches his prescribed curse. The tragedy ends with Oedipus in agony having just blinded himself as he limps out of Thebes.

The argument between Oedipus and the blind prophet Teiresias is an indication of dramatic irony. Teiresias' claim that Oedipus ~~does not~~ has caused the plague does not sit well with the King. Oedipus angrily remarks about the prophet's blindness by suggesting he is a "...seer blind in his craft..." This is ironic as Oedipus is the one blind to his current situation whereas Teiresias is very much aware of everything that has happened in Oedipus' past. Ironically too, once Oedipus finally begins to 'see' the truth he becomes physically blind himself just like Teiresias.

The character of Jocasta too aids in portraying ironic moments in the play. Jocasta attempts to reassure Oedipus after his encounter with Teiresias by arguing that it is impossible for any mortal to prophesise the future. Jocasta tries to prove her point by referring to her experiences with prophets. She says that an Oracle once told her that her late husband would be killed by his own son. Jocasta goes on to say that Laius was in fact killed by a band of robbers and their child was left to die on a mountain and so prophets can't be trusted. The irony here is that this prophecy was in fact carried out and the very man who caused it is Oedipus himself. Oedipus is being re-assured about his own fatal prophecy with the same prophecy he has already fulfilled.

Jocasta's account builds dramatic irony. Her account reminds Oedipus of his encounter with Laius on the road to Thebes. He begins to fear that he may be the murderer and asks a description of Laius to which Jocasta replies, "... his build... wasn't far from yours---". Jocasta is so close to unearthing the truth that it creates a tension in the plot that builds towards the realisation of the fatal flaw of the final scene.

Another example of dramatic irony is the fortune-tellers prophecy. In the beginning of the play, Laius and Jocasta have to make an important decision about whether or not to kill their son in order to save Laius' life. The fortune-teller has delivered a prophecy to the couple which said their son will grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. Thus, they pierce his ankles together and give him to another shepherd who takes Oedipus and gives him to King Polybus and Queen Merope from Corinth to raise. By doing this, the other shepherd doesn't know he is actually helping the prophecy to come true. In addition, Oedipus grows up and is also given the same prophecy, so he flees from Corinth to find somewhere else to live. By doing this, Oedipus also helps the prophecy to come to pass.

USE OF THE CHORUS

The chorus is a group of actors speaking in unison. In the play, "Oedipus the King", the chorus is a group of Theban elders whose basic role is to sing comments about the ongoing situation in the play, link the audience to the drama and evaluate the incident, characters and other developments in the play.

Sophocles uses the chorus at the beginning of the play to help tell the audience the given circumstances of the play. From the first ode of the chorus, we hear all about the terrible havoc that the plague is wreaking on Thebes. People are dying, women miscarrying and crops wither. Everyone is fearful and tensed up. The chorus prays to Zeus for an immediate remedy which highlights the role of gods in the Theban society.

The chorus takes part in the dialogue also. When Oedipus consults

them about ending the plague in the city, they express disappointment that the Oracle had not guided them about the Identity of Laius' murderer. They also tell him what they know about the murder of their previous King and its circumstances. The chorus proposes to Oedipus that prophet Teiresias be brought to help unravel the mystery to which Oedipus replies that he has already sent for him. The audience is therefore prepared to meet the prophet.

In addition, when Creon learns that the king had accused him of treason, comes on stage and talks to the chorus who tell him that the king made accusation in heat of anger. Creon asks if the king looked serious while making charges and they say it is not for them to look into the eyes of the master when he ~~says~~ speaks.

The chorus plays the role of peacemaker and is seen as the voice of wisdom in the play. In the heated debate between Oedipus and Teiresias, Oedipus accuses Creon of plotting against his throne when Teiresias tips him to be the polluter of the land. The chorus intervenes seeking to refrain from the functions and focus on the way forward towards finding a solution for the situation.

When Oedipus almost passes a sentence upon Creon, Jocasta arrives on stage and talks to the chorus who requests her to settle the difference between the two men. The chorus pleads for Creon's innocence managing to convince Oedipus not to banish Creon.

The Chorus is used to highlight what will happen in future. They express fear when Jocasta storms into the palace in dejected mood, having stopped Oedipus from further quest into his parentage and he refuses. The chorus says, ".... I fear some vile catastrophe will out from what she dare not tell...."

The chorus in Oedipus plays part as a distinct character with views and emotions which resonates with the audience. They begin by supporting Oedipus believing he is the one to fix things basing on his past experiences. When Oedipus' behaviour changes, they start questioning

his motives. The fact that Oedipus doesn't sentence them yet he has all the powers shows he is not a tyrant. In the end as Oedipus goes into exile, the chorus is on his side again and laments his horrific fate.

FLASHBACK

Flashback is when a story switches from the present to an earlier event. Sophocles uses flashback to precisely tell us the long life history of the characters in the play. In fact all the turning points in the story are told in a flashback which develops the plot of the play as characters unravel what makes their present develop themes and reveal a lot about the characters as they react to these remembrances.

To begin with, the priest tells us that it was Oedipus who saved them from the sphinx in a flashback, "... It was you we remember, the new comer to Cadmus' town that broke our bondage to the vile enchantress..."

When Creon returns from the Pythian house of Apollo, he reports that the city has to banish or kill the man who killed Laius, the former king of Thebes to cleanse itself from the curse. In a flashback we are told that Laius was killed on a pilgrimage and only one man in his company survived. When asked why the city didn't investigate Laius' murder, Creon says they were occupied with the problem of the sphinx which portray the suffering they were going through.

Flashback is again employed when Jocasta is dissuading Oedipus from believing the words of prophets. She narrates how long ago her former husband (Laius) and her had a child that was prophesized to kill his father but as events rolled out, he was killed by robbers at a crossroad. She tells him who Laius was and who he was with at the time of his death. This revelation does not only tell us how Jocasta and Laius tried to avoid fate but also raises Oedipus' curiosity and at the moment, he is fearful, the polluter might be him.. This develops the theme of fate.

When Oedipus hears Jocasta's story, he in a flashback

describes a time in the past when he left Corinth to Thebes. The story has a lot in common with Jocasta when it comes to the death of Laius. Jocasta tries to ignore these signs but Oedipus is determined to discover everything and therefore summons the sphinx shepherd who witnessed the murder. This propels the plot of the play.

The messenger from Corinth also in an attempt to arrest Oedipus' fears, narrates in a flashback how he got Oedipus from another shepherd from the house of Laius while tending sheep at Mount Cithareon and delivered him to the childless Polybus and Merope who adopted him. Flashback is again employed when Oedipus is talking to the shepherd who took the baby from Jocasta. He reveals the whole truth which Oedipus has dreaded from the beginning. This portrays the inevitability of the theme of fate.

Flashback is used as the attendants tell how Jocasta met her death and how Oedipus gorged out his eyes. This shows the power of fate and man's weakness to determine his destiny. Oedipus, a good man bows under the heavy hand of fate as the chorus remarks, "Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day, count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last ----"

SYMBOLISM

Symbols are elements, objects, characters, figures, colours that appear repeatedly in a story and have a deeper meaning than what appears on the surface. They are used to represent abstract ideas or concepts. The symbols help to enhance the themes.

Among the symbols is eyes, sight and blindness. The eye symbols are introduced when Teiresias, a blind prophet is trying to explain to Oedipus that Oedipus himself is actually the man who killed King Laius. Oedipus refuses to believe Teiresias or see the evidence right in front of him to confirm it. Instead he tries to blame the murderer on everyone else. Thus, Oedipus is "blind" to the truth.

Throughout Oedipus and Teiresias' conversation you can find a lot of play on words with the idea of 'seeing'. Teiresias ends up telling Oedipus that not only is he the murderer, but he will end up physically blind once he finally accepts the truth. He says, "...you are pleased to mock my blindness. Have eyes, and do not see your damnation --- shall sweep you from this land. Those now clear seeing eyes shall be darkened---"

Oedipus' reaction to Teiresias' claim is to make fun of him for being an old man. Although Teiresias may have blind eyes, he can see the truth. Unlike Oedipus, Oedipus ends up symbolically punishing himself by blinding his eyes with the brooches belonging to Jocasta, his wife who is also his mother. Therefore, eyes with vision represent ignorant pride, while blinded eyes represent knowledge.

Another symbol featured in the play is the crossroads. A cross road is a place where multiple roads meet. When you are standing at a crossroads, physically or metaphorically, you have a decision to make: which road will you take? Your decision could potentially be life changing.

A crossroad is first mentioned when Jocasta explains how and where King Laius was murdered; at a place where three roads meet. This new knowledge worries Oedipus because he remembers killing a man at a crossroad. He says, "...when I came to a place where three roads join, I met a herald followed by a horse --- a man seated there in just as do you have described..." The herald orders Oedipus out of the way which causes the quarrel between Oedipus and Laius' crew. When tensions heat up, Oedipus has a decision to make and every decision presents its consequences. However, Oedipus is destined to kill his father and all cast. Therefore by meeting his father and killing him at the crossroads is something beyond him since it's programmed by the gods. The crossroads in this case presents fate and the will of gods rather than freedom of choice.

Sophocles uses Oedipus' swollen feet symbolically. Oedipus is reminded of the swollen feet where he gets his name by the messenger

as he tries to convince him that he is no kin to Polybus, previously, Jocasta had told Oedipus how Laius pinned his ^{child's} ankles and was to be left to die on Mount Cithareon. At this time however, Oedipus can't connect his name to the scars and the pain the ankles have caused him. The swollen foot therefore symbolises Oedipus' ignorance. Although his name blatantly points attention to his feet, he does not realize his identity till its too late. Oedipus' swollen feet also highlights a fact that he has been marked for suffering from the moment of his birth.

The plague at the play is the symbol of the crisis that Thebes is facing due to the sin unknowingly committed by Oedipus. It involves all the great and minor people into the search of a solution of the crisis.

FORESHADOWING

F Forshadowing suggests in ~~advise~~ advance what happens later in the story. It is a technique often used to warn of a disaster.

An early example of foreshadowing in 'King Oedipus' is when Oedipus promises to find and punish the guilty in polluting the land but he is in his own royal household. This gives an insight to the audience that the guilty will be found in the royal house.

Teiresias predicts Oedipus' fate when he says that "...he that came seeing, blind shall he go...." This happens when Oedipus insults Teiresias because he hears that he is the curse of and the problem in Thebes, refuses the prophecy and gets angry at the prophet calling him a liar. The quote foreshadows that Oedipus will end up blind although his eyes are full of light now. Teiresias' words are proved to be true when in the end Oedipus gouges out his eyes, being aware of his identity and tragic destiny.

Jocasta too gives the audience a hint of who Oedipus is in her description of Oedipus looking like Laius, her first husband. This anticipates that Laius and Oedipus are related. She says, "...silver-frosted hair about your figure..." Despite this, the two ignore this fact and wait for the shepherd to reveal the truth.

Still another example is the description of Laius' and

Jocasta's infant son as having had riveted ankles. This obviously leaves one with a swollen foot which is exactly what the name Oedipus means. Though the two characters are blind to the truth, the audience already knows who King Oedipus is by now b4 the truth is finally revealed.

Jocasta's warnings to Oedipus not to continue with the investigation tells us who Oedipus is even b4 the ~~she~~ shepherd is fetched - she has learnt the truth, begs ~~she~~ Oedipus to stop the search but he refuses.

The chorus too foreshadow danger after Jocasta storms into the palace with acute anger. They say: " -- why has the queen left us in such a deep passion? I fear some vile catastrophe will out ---" Later on the attendant arrives and narrates how Jocasta had committed suicide, to confirm the worries of the chorus.

USE OF THE SUPERNATURAL

Apollo's prophecy that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother.

Teiresias' prophecy that Oedipus would end up physically blind.

CONTRAST / JUXTA POSITION

At first glance, Oedipus and Creon are two very different people. But as time progresses their personalities and even their fates grow more and more similar. In 'Oedipus the King', Oedipus and Creon are two opposite people. Oedipus is rash and thoughtless, while Creon is wise and prudent.

Through juxta-position, Oedipus effectively portrays the idea of the classic flawed hero. He becomes arrogant and rash. He accuses Creon and Teiresias of treachery. Even once however, Oedipus goes against the gods. Creon is the exact antifacit of Oedipus. He thinks before he acts. Creon is wise and loyal as Oedipus is rash, insistent and insensitive while Creon conducts himself with some prudence and temperance.

Sophocles' play in fact abounds with twins and doubles e.g. there are two herdsmen, two brothers in law (Creon and Oedipus) two daughters and two sons, two opposed pairs of King and queen (Laius & Jocasta) who are cruel to their infant and Polybus and Merope who are adoptive

When one monarchy (Thebes) ejects Oedipus and abandons him to die at Mountain Cithareon. The other Monarchy (Corinth) saves him and adopts him as their son. The moment Oedipus abandons Corinth for Thebes again, he is running away from peace to trouble and suffering.

The power of the gods is juxtaposed with human pride. The juxtaposition in the play is shown by the belief in ones self to be endowed with great power that can blind one to the idea that the gods still remain powerful and ready to show that power to humble a king. Oedipus is humbled from his pride when the gods show that they are more powerful. The power of gods vs the power of

LESSONS IN THE PLAY "OEDIPUS THE KING"

- The cruel hand of fate is unescapable - Oedipus' prophecy
- No crime goes unpunished - Oedipus, Jocasta
- Think twice before you act - Oedipus
- The hunter can become the hunted - Oedipus
- Curiosity kills the cat - Oedipus search for his parentage
- Pride goes before a fall - Oedipus
- Suicide is never a solution
- Evil begets evil - Oedipus' marriage
- You reap what you sow - Oedipus
- No one can be wiser than the gods - Jocasta
- The truth always comes out in the end
- Appearances can sometimes be deceptive - Teiresias and the blind seeing Oedipus
- A wise mouth keeps a ~~still~~ still tongue - servant who tells Oedipus that he is no kin to Polybus. Teiresias knows a lot but refuses to speak.
- There is always light at the end of the ~~tunnel~~ tunnel - Thebes is free from suffering after the truth comes out and the real killer of Laius is revealed.

~~Character
Plot
Theme
Style
Aide~~

29

Revision Questions

- 1 How far is Oedipus responsible for what happens to him in the play?
- 2 Discuss the theme of fate as portrayed in the play "Oedipus the King"
- 3 Analyse the character of Oedipus and show the lessons we learn from his behaviour
- 4 Examine the major conflicts in the play "Oedipus the King" How are they resolved?
- 5 How has Irony been used in the play "Oedipus the King"
- 6 "The gods are to blame for the tragedy that befalls Oedipus" Do you agree
- 7 How does Sophocles succeed in portraying Oedipus as the tragic character?
- 8 Examine the character of Teiresias and show his role to the development of the play Oedipus the King
- 9 Discuss the role of the chorus in the play, King Oedipus
- 10 Compare and contrast the characters of Oedipus and Creon as portrayed in the play, King Oedipus.