

An Abridged and Adapted Version of Sophocles' Play* by Nick Bartel, 1999
(Intended for use as Readers' Theater in the Junior - Senior High School Classroom)

Characters:

Oedipus, King of Thebes
Jocasta, His Wife
Creon, His Brother-in-Law
Teiresias, an Old Blind Prophet
A Priest
First Messenger
Second Messenger
A Herdsman
A Chorus of Old Men of Thebes (three or more chorus members)
[Non-Speaking Parts] Servants of Oedipus (2)
Children and young priests who pray; one leads Teiresias
Antigone and Ismene, daughters of Oedipus

Scene: In front of Oedipus' palace in Thebes. To the right is an altar where a priest stands with a crowd of children in sorrowful prayer. Oedipus emerges from the palace door. The chorus is on the left.

Oedipus: Children, why do you sit here with such sorrow, crying out to the gods? The town is filled with the sounds of hymns and smells of incense! I, whom all men call the Great, came out to learn of this myself. [He turns to the priest.] You're old and they are young. Come, speak for them. What do you fear or want that you sit here crying out? I'm willing to give all that you may need.

Priest: Lord Oedipus, these innocent children and I, the priest of Zeus, we come to pray at your altars. King, you have seen our city tossing like a wrecked ship in a storm. It can scarcely lift its prow out of the depths, out of the bloody surf. A disease is upon the plants of the earth and on the cattle in our fields. A blight is on our women that no children are born to them. Our city is emptied of its people while black Death reaps the harvest of our tears. We have come to speak to you, o king. You came and saved our city, and freed us from the monster Sphinx who enslaved us. This you did by your wisdom; some God was by your side. Oedipus, greatest in all men's eyes, we pray, find some strength again and rescue our city. Perhaps you'll hear a wise word whispered by some God, or in any human way you know. Noblest of men, keep our city from sinking. This land of ours calls you its savior since you saved it once. Before you brought us luck; help us again in this misfortune.

Oedipus: I pity you, children. I know you all are sick, yet not one of you suffers as much as I. My heart grieves and I have wept many tears due to this. I have thought of only one hope, one remedy: I sent Creon, my brother-in-law, to ask Apollo at his temple how I could save this city. He is gone far longer than he needed for the journey. But when he comes, then I shall do all the God commands.

Priest: Thank you for your kind words. Look, your servants signal that Creon is coming now.

Oedipus: His face is bright! O holy Lord Apollo, grant that his news will also be bright and will bring us comfort! [Creon enters.] Lord Creon, my good brother, what is the word you bring us from the God?

Creon: A good word. Apollo commanded us to drive out a pollution from our land, a pollution that is nourished here. Drive it out and we are saved.

Oedipus: How shall it be done?

Creon: By banishing a man or by taking blood, for it is a murder's guilt that holds our city in this destructive storm.

Oedipus: Who is this man whose fate the God reveals?

Creon: My lord, before you came to guide us, we had a king called Laius. Apollo commanded that someone punish this dead man's murderers.

Oedipus: Where are they? Where would a trace of this old crime be found?

Creon: The clue is in this land, so said the God.

Oedipus: Where did this murder take place?

Creon: The king was on a trip, but never returned.

Oedipus: Was there no messenger, no fellow traveler who knew what happened?

Creon: They were all killed, except one. He fled in fear and he could tell us nothing in clear terms of what he knew. Nothing, but one thing.

Oedipus: What was that? If we had a clue, we might discover more.

Creon: This man said that the robbers were many; it was not a single man's doing. Because of the riddling Sphinx, we neglected the mysterious crime and sought a solution to the troubles before us. That was long ago, before you came.

Oedipus: I swear by Apollo that I will bring this to light again. Whoever he was that killed the king may readily wish to kill me with his murderous hand! Children, go now. I will do what is needed. God will decide whether we prosper or remain in sorrow.
[Exit all but the chorus.]

Chorus: [Original text, lines 150 - 204.]

What is the sweet voice from the shrine of Apollo, rich in gold, that I have heard?

I am wracked with doubt and fear, and in trembling hold my heart, and

I worship full of fears for what will pass throughout the years.

No spear have we to drive away the plague; no children are begotten.

Our sorrows are without number; mighty Zeus, are we forgotten?

In unnumbered deaths dies the city; those children born lie dead on naked earth without pity.

Gray haired mothers and wives stand at the altar with hymns to Father Zeus to spare our lives.

[Oedipus returns.]

Oedipus: [Original text, lines 205 - 265.]

Hear my words, citizens of Thebes, for in them you will find strength. I command that whoever among you knows the murderer of Laius, tell everything. In telling there shall be no punishment, but the murderer shall be banished to save our land. Or if you know the murderer, speak the truth, for I will pay and be grateful, too. But if you keep silent, beware! I forbid any to welcome him or let him join in sacrifice or offering to the gods, or give him water. I command all to drive him from your homes, since he is our pollution. I stand as champion of the God and of the man who

died. Upon the murderer I invoke this curse: may he live out his life in misery to miserable doom! A good man is dead. Since I am now the holder of his office and have his bed and wife that once was his, I will defend him as I would my own father. Those who do not obey me, may the Gods grant no crops springing from the ground they plow nor children to their women! May a fate like this, or one still worse, consume them!

Chorus: I neither killed the king, nor know the killer. But since Apollo set the task, it is his part to tell who the man is. Blind old Teiresias can see what Apollo sees. If you inquire of him, you might find out most clearly.

Oedipus: Yes! I have already sent for the prophet.

Chorus: Look. Here comes the godly prophet guided by your men.
[Teiresias enters led by a little boy. - Original text, line 289.]

Oedipus: Teiresias, you know much - things teachable and things not to be spoken, things of the heavens and earth. You have no eyes, but in your mind you know what a plague holds our city. My lord, you alone can rescue us. We should learn the names of those who killed King Laius and kill them or expel them from our country. Do not withhold from us the oracles from birds, or any other way of prophecy within your skill; save yourself and the city, and save me. End this pollution that lies on us because of this dead man. We are in your hands.

Teiresias: Alas, how terrible is wisdom when it turns against you! Let me go home. It will be easiest for us both to go no further in this.

Oedipus: You would rob us of your gift of prophecy? Do you have no care for law nor love of your city Thebes who reared you?

Teiresias: Yes, but I see that your own words lead you to error. Therefore I must fear for mine.

Oedipus: For God's sake, if you know anything, do not turn from us.

Teiresias: All of you here know nothing. I will not bring our troubles to the light of day.

Oedipus: What do you mean? You know something and refuse to speak! Would you betray us and destroy the city?

Teiresias: I will not bring this pain upon us both.

Oedipus: Tell us, you villain!

Teiresias: Of themselves things will come, even if I breathe no word of them.

Oedipus: Since they will come, tell them to me.

Teiresias: I will say nothing further. Let your temper rage as wildly as you will.

Oedipus: Indeed I am angry. You must be a conspirator in the deed. If you had eyes, I would have said that you alone murdered him!

Teiresias: Yes? Then I warn you faithfully to keep your word and from this day forth to speak no

word of greeting to these people nor me. You are the land's pollution.

Oedipus: How shamelessly you taunt me. Do you think you will escape?

Teiresias: You have made me speak against my will.

Oedipus: Speak what? Tell me again that I may learn it better.

Teiresias: Did you not understand before? Would you provoke me into speaking? You are the murderer of the king.

Oedipus: You shall not lie like this and stay unpunished.

Teiresias: I say that with those you love best you live in foulest shame and do not see where you are wrong.

Oedipus: Do you think you can talk like this and live to laugh at it hereafter? You are blind in mind and ears as well as in your eyes.

Teiresias: You are a poor wretch to pile upon me insults which everyone soon will heap upon you.

Oedipus: Was this your own design or was it Creon's?

Teiresias: Your ruin comes not from Creon, but from yourself.

Oedipus: My one-time friend Creon attacks me secretly for wealth and power. He wants to drive me out and devises this trick with this beggar who has only eyes for his own gains, but blindness in his skill. Before I defeated the Sphinx by answering its riddle. Where was your gift of prophecy then? I came and stopped her. Mine was no knowledge got from birds. And now you expel me, because you think that you will find a place by Creon's throne!

Chorus: We look on this man's words and yours, and find you have both spoken in anger.

Teiresias: I have the right to speak in my defense against you. I live in the service of Apollo, not in yours nor Creon's. Listen to me. You have called me blind, but you have your eyes but see not where you are in sin. Do you know who your parents are? And of the multitude of other evils between you and your children, you know nothing.

Oedipus: Go out of my house at once and be damned! I did not know you would talk like a fool.

Teiresias: I am a fool, then, but to your parents, wise. This day will show you your birth and will destroy you. [To the audience] In name he is an outsider, but soon he will be shown to be a citizen, a true native of Thebes. And he'll have no joy in the discovery. He will exchange blindness for sight and poverty for riches. He shall be proved father and brother both to his own children in his house. To the one who gave him birth, a son and a husband both. [Teiresias and Oedipus exit separately. - Original Text, line 452]

Chorus:

By Delphi's oracle, who is proclaimed
The doer of deeds that remains unnamed?

Now is the time for him to run,
The prophet has spread such confusion.
Truly Zeus and Apollo are wise,
But amongst men there is no judgment of truth or lies.
I'll find no fault with the king till proven beyond a doubt,
For he saved us from the Sphinx and helped us out. [Creon enters.]

Creon: Citizens, I have come because I heard scandalous words spread about me by the king. I am no traitor to my city nor to my friends.

Chorus: Perhaps it was a burst of anger with no judgment. Here comes the king now.
[Oedipus enters . - Original text, line 493.]

Oedipus: You dare come here after you tried to rob me of my crown? What made you lay a plot like this against me? Did you think a criminal would not be punished because he is my kinsman?

Creon: Will you listen to words and then pass judgment? Of what offense am I guilty?

Oedipus: Did you or did you not urge me to send for this prophetic mumbler?

Creon: I did.

Oedipus: How long ago is it since Laius vanished - died - was murdered?

Creon: It was long, a long, long time ago.

Oedipus: Did the prophet ever say a word about me then? Why didn't our wise friend say something then?

Creon: I don't know. When I know nothing, I usually hold my tongue.

Oedipus: As my brother-in-law, you have had a share in ruling of this country. And you have proven yourself a false friend. I should kill you!

Creon: [Original text, line 564.] Consider this. Would any man be king in constant fear, when he could live in peace and quiet, and have no less power? I have no desire to have the responsibilities of a king. Now I am carefree. You give me all I want. The prizes are all mine: riches, respect and honor, and without fear. Why should I let all this go? I would never dare to join a plot. Do you look for proof? Then go to the oracle and ask if they are as I told you. If you discover I plotted together with the seer, sentence me to death, not by your vote alone, but by my own as well. Don't throw away an honest friend. In time you will know all with certainty; time is the only test of honest men. In one day you can know a villain.

Chorus: His words are wise, king. Those who are quick of temper are not safe. But stop, my lords! Here just in time I see Jocasta coming from the house. With her help you can settle the quarrel that now divides you. [Enters Jocasta, queen and wife of Oedipus. - Original text, line 614.]

Jocasta: Are you not ashamed to start a private feud when the country is suffering?

Creon: My sister, your husband thinks he has the right to do me wrong. He has but to choose

how to make me suffer: by banishing me or killing me.

Jocasta: I beg you, Oedipus, trust him. Spare him for the sake of his oath to God, for my sake.

Chorus: Be gracious, be merciful, we beg of you. Respect him. He has been your friend for years.

Oedipus: This request of yours really requests my death or banishment. Well, let him go then. Wherever he is, I shall hate him.

Creon: I'll go, and they have known my innocence. Your temper is your own worst enemy.
[Creon exits. - Original text, line 655.]

Chorus: Quickly, lady, take him inside.

Jocasta: Yes, when I've found out what was the matter. What was the story that angered the king so?

Chorus: I think it best, in the interest of the country, to leave this alone.

Jocasta: Tell me, my lord, I beg of you. What was it that roused your anger so?

Oedipus: It was Creon and the plots he laid against me. Creon says that I am the murderer of Laius.

Jocasta: Does he speak from knowledge or hearsay?

Oedipus: He sent this rascal prophet to me. He keeps his own mouth clean of any guilt.

Jocasta: [Original text, line 680.] Then you have no need to worry about this matter. Listen, and learn from me: no human being is gifted in the art of prophecy. Of that I'll offer you proof. There was an oracle once that came to Laius, and it told him that it was fate that he should die a victim at the hands of his own son, a son to be born of Laius and me. But, see, the king was killed by foreign highway robbers at a place where three roads meet - so the story goes. And for the son, before three days were out after his birth King Laius pierced his ankles and had him cast out upon a hillside to die. So Apollo failed to fulfill his oracle to the son, that he should kill his father. And to Laius also prophecy proved false: the thing he feared, death at his son's hands, never came to pass. So clear and false were the oracles. Give them no heed, I say.

Oedipus: O dear Jocasta, as I hear this from you, I could go mad.

Jocasta: What makes you speak like this?

Oedipus: I thought I heard you say that Laius was killed at a crossroads.

Jocasta: That was the story.

Oedipus: Where is this place?

Jocasta: In the country where the road splits, one road from Delphi, another to Daulia.

Oedipus: How long ago was this?

Jocasta: It was just before you came to our city to rule us. What is it, Oedipus, that's on your mind?

Oedipus: What is it Zeus, that you do with me? Tell me, Jocasta, of Laius. How did he look? How old or young was he?

Jocasta: He was a tall man and his hair was gray, nearly white. He looked a lot like you.

Oedipus: I think I have called curses on myself in ignorance.

Jocasta: What do you mean? I am terrified when I look at you!

Oedipus: Tell me one more thing. Did he travel with many servants, or a few?

Jocasta: There were five. Laius rode in a carriage with a coachman.

Oedipus: It's plain - it's plain - who told you of what happened?

Jocasta: The only servant that escaped safely home.

Oedipus: Is he part of the household now?

Jocasta: No. When he came home again and saw you king and Laius was dead, he begged that I should send him to the fields to be my shepherd. So I sent him away.

Oedipus: O, how I wish that he could come back quickly!

Jocasta: He can. Why is your heart so set on this?

Oedipus: O dear Jocasta, I am full of fears that I have spoken far too much; and therefore wish to see this shepherd.

Jocasta: He will come. But Oedipus, let me know what bothers you.

Oedipus: [Original text, lines 742 - 805] Polybus was my father, king of Corinth. I was respected by the citizens in Corinth and had a good life. And then a strange thing happened. There was a dinner and at it a drunken man accused me of being a bastard. I was furious, but held my temper. The next day I asked my parents about it. They were insulted by it, as was I. I went to the Oracle to learn more, and Apollo foretold of horrors to befall me: that I was doomed to lie with my mother and be the murderer of my father. When I heard this I fled so that the terrible prophecies would not come true. As I journeyed, I came to the place where, as you tell me, Laius met with his death. Wife, I will tell you the whole truth. When I was near the crossroads going on foot, I encountered a servant and a carriage with a man in it, just like you told me. The one who led the way, and the old man himself, wanted to push me out of the road by force. I became angry and struck the coachman who was pushing me. When the old man saw this he struck me on the head from his carriage with a two-pointed staff. I struck him back and he rolled out. And then I killed them all. Was there any tie between this man and Laius? It is I who have cursed myself and pollute the bed of him I killed. O no, no, no - O holy God on high, may I never see that day!

Chorus: Sir, we too fear these things. But until you see this man face to face and hear his story, have hope.

Jocasta: And when he comes, what do you want with him?

Oedipus: If I find that his story is the same as yours, I at least will be clear of this guilt. You said that he spoke of highway robbers who killed Laius. Now if he used the plural number, it was not I who killed him. One man cannot be the same as many. But if he speaks of a man traveling alone, then guilt points to me.

Jocasta: I will send for him quickly. But he cannot prove the prophecy, for that poor creature did not kill him surely, for he died himself first on the hillside. So as far as prophecy goes, don't be worried about it. [They exit. - Original text, line 835.]

Chorus: I pray that I may keep pure in word and deed and follow the laws made in the clear air of heaven.

Out of pride is born the tyrant.

The man who is arrogant and does not fear the gods

And blasphemes in the holy places

Must fall to an evil fate.

I shall not cease to hold the God as my champion!

O Zeus, if you are rightly called the Almighty, the ruler of mankind, look to these things.

If the oracles are forgotten and slighted,

Apollo is diminished

And man turns his face away from heaven, not raising his voice in prayerful song. [Jocasta enters carrying garlands of flowers. She is with a servant.]

Jocasta: Princes of the land, I will go to the God's temples, bringing garlands and gifts of incense. Oedipus excites himself too much. May they grant that we escape free of the curse. Now when we look to him we are all afraid; he's captain of our ship and he is frightened. [Messenger enters. - Original text, line 888.]

Messenger: God bless you, lady.

Jocasta: God bless you, sir. What do you want of us? What have you to tell us?

Messenger: Good news, lady. Good for your household and for your husband.

Jocasta: What is your news? Who sent you to us?

Messenger: I come from Corinth and the news I bring will please you. Perhaps pain you a little, too.

Jocasta: What is this news with a double meaning?

Messenger: King Polybus is dead. The people there want Oedipus to be their king.

Jocasta [to the servant]: Be quick and run to the King with the news! Oracles of the Gods, where are you now? It was from this man Oedipus fled, and now he is dead - and not killed by Oedipus! [Oedipus enters. - Original text, line 915.]

Oedipus: Dearest Jocasta, why have you sent for me?

Jocasta: This man is from Corinth and he tells that your father Polybus is dead and gone.

Oedipus: What's this you say? Is he dead by foul play or sickness?

Messenger: A small thing will put old bodies to rest. He died of old age.

Oedipus: [Original text, line 930.] Ha! O dear Jocasta, why should one believe in prophecies? Why look to the birds screaming overhead. They prophesied that I should kill my father! But he is dead and buried deep in the earth. And I stand here never having raised a hand against him. The oracles, they are worthless!

Jocasta: That I told you before now. What has a man to fear when life is ruled by chance, and the future is unknowable? The best way is to take life as it comes.

Oedipus: But surely I must fear my mother's bed?

Messenger: Who is the woman that makes you afraid?

Oedipus: Once a prophecy said that I should lie with my own mother and take the blood of my own father. So for these long years I've lived away from Corinth. How I missed my parents.

Messenger: This was the fear that drove you out of Corinth?

Oedipus: I did not wish to kill my father.

Messenger: It's plain that all your fears are empty. Polybus was no kin to you in blood.

Oedipus: What? Was not Polybus my father?

Messenger: No more than I!

Oedipus: Why then did he call me son?

Messenger: He took you as a gift from these hands of mine.

Oedipus: Was I a child you bought or found when I was given to him?

Messenger: On the slopes outside of town you were found. I was shepherd then, and the man that saved your life, son.

Oedipus: What was wrong with me when you took me in your arms?

Messenger: Your ankles should be witnesses.

Oedipus: Why do you speak of that old pain?

Messenger: I loosed you; the tendons of your feet were pierced and tied together... But the man who gave you to me has more knowledge than I.

Oedipus: Then you yourself did not find me? You took me from someone else?

Messenger: Yes, from another shepherd. He was Laius' man.

Oedipus: Do any of you know about this man? Jocasta, do you know about this man whom we have sent for? Is he the man he mentions?

Jocasta: Why ask of whom he spoke? Don't pay it any attention. I beg you - do not hunt this out - I beg you, if you have any care for your own life. What I am suffering is enough.

Oedipus: Take courage. If my mother was a slave... I must know the truth.

Jocasta: My Oedipus, God help you! Keep from you the knowledge of who you are!

Oedipus: Here, someone go and fetch the shepherd for me.

Jocasta: O Oedipus, unhappy Oedipus! That is all I can call you... The last thing I shall ever call you. [Jocasta exits. - Original text, line 1038.]

Chorus: Why has the queen gone in wild grief, Oedipus, rushing from us? I fear that from her silence will break a storm.

Oedipus: Let break what will, but find the secret of my birth. Was my mother a humble slave, or... [Enter an old man, led by Oedipus' servants.]

Oedipus: I think this is the herdsman we were seeking.

Messenger: This is he.

Oedipus: Old man, look at me and tell me what I ask you. Were you ever a servant of King Laius?

Herdsman: I was. Most of my life was spent among the flocks.

Oedipus: This man here, have you had any dealings with him?

Herdsman: No, not that I call to mind.

Messenger: Do you remember giving me a child to bring up as my foster child?

Herdsman: Why do you ask this question?

Messenger: Look, old man, here he is - here's the man who was that child!

Herdsman: Damn you! Hold your tongue you meddling fool!

Oedipus: No, no, old man. Don't find fault with him.

Herdsman: He speaks out of ignorance.

Oedipus: If you won't talk, pain will encourage your tongue.

Herdsmen: O please, sir, don't hurt an old man, sir.

Oedipus [to his servants]: Here, twist his hands behind him.

Herdsmen: Why? What do you want to know?

Oedipus: You gave him a child...?

Herdsmen: I did. I wish I'd died that day.

Oedipus: You will die now unless you tell me the truth!

Herdsmen: And I'll die far worse if I should tell you.

Oedipus: Where did you get this child from? Was it your own or did you get it from another?

Herdsmen: Not my own. I beg you, master, please don't ask me more.

Oedipus: You're a dead man if I ask you again.

Herdsmen: It was from the house of Laius.

Oedipus: A slave? Or born in wedlock?

Herdsmen: O God, I am on the brink of frightful speech.

Oedipus: And I of frightful hearing. But I must hear!

Herdsmen: The child was his child, but your wife would tell you best how all this was.

Oedipus: She gave it to you?

Herdsmen: Yes, my lord.

Oedipus: Its mother was so hard-hearted?

Herdsmen: Aye, my lord, through fear of evil oracles. They said that he should kill his parents.

Oedipus: How was it that you gave it away to this old man?

Herdsmen: I pitied it, and thought I could send it off to another country. But he saved it for the most terrible troubles. If you are the man he says you are, you were born to misery.

Oedipus: O, O, O, Light of the sun, let me look upon you no more. Cursed is my life.
[Exit all but the Chorus. A messenger enters. - Original text, line 1182.]

Second messenger: O princes, our glorious queen Jocasta is dead.

Chorus: Unfortunate woman! How?

Second Messenger: By her own hand. The worst of what was done you cannot know. When she

came raging into the house she went straight to her marriage bed tearing her hair with both hands and crying to Laius. Then Oedipus burst upon us shouting and he begged us, "Give me a sword!" Into the room he rushed and saw his wife hanging, the twisted rope around her neck. He cried out fearfully and cut the dangling noose. Then, as she lay on the ground, ... what happened after was terrible to see. He tore the brooches from her and lifted them up high and dashed them into his own eyeballs, shrieking out such things as: "They will never see the crime I have committed. Dark eyes, now in the days to come look on forbidden faces, do not recognize those whom you long for." And he struck his eyes again and again. With every blow blood spurted down his cheeks.

Chorus: How is he now? Is he now at peace from his pain?

Second Messenger: He shouts for someone to show him to the men of Thebes - his father's killer, and his mother's - no I cannot say the forbidden word. [The blinded Oedipus enters. - Original text, line 1255.]

Chorus: This is a terrible sight. Wretched king, what madness came upon you! I pity you, but I cannot look in your face. I shudder at the sight of you.

Oedipus: O, O the pain! Where do my poor legs take me? Darkness! Horror of darkness enfolding, madness and stabbing pain and guilt for my evil deeds!

Chorus: What demon urged you to stab into your own eyes?

Oedipus: It was Apollo that brought my ruin to completion. But the hand that struck was my own. Why should I see when vision shows me nothing sweet to see? Curse the man who rescued me as I lay cast out on the hillside. He stole me from death. I wish I had died then.

Chorus: You would be far better off dead than living still and blind

Oedipus: Do not tell me I am wrong. What I have done is best, so give me no more advice. My sufferings are all my own.

Chorus: Here comes Creon. [Creon enters. - Original text, line 1374.]

Creon: Oedipus, I've come not to jeer at you nor taunt you with your past actions. Come inside. You should not be made a public spectacle.

Oedipus: Creon, most noble spirit, I have treated you so badly. Yet I beg you -

Creon: What do you need from me?

Oedipus: Drive me from here with all speed to where I may not hear a human voice. Let me live in the mountain which would have been my tomb so long ago.

Creon: For that, you must ask of the God.

Oedipus: But I am hated by the Gods. The will of the gods is clear enough already.

Creon: It is better to seek their guidance. I will go in your place to seek their help.

Oedipus: I urge other duties on you. Bury your sister who lies inside the house and perform the rites for her. I must go from here to the hill where my parents tried to kill me. Nothing can kill me now. I would not have been saved from death, unless it were for some strange destiny. Let my destiny go where it will. As for my children - Creon, do not worry about my two sons. They are men and can take care of themselves. But I beg you, look after my poor unhappy daughters. Let me touch them and weep with them. [Enter Antigone and Ismene, Oedipus' two daughters, crying. - Original text, line 1423.] Oh my lord! Is it my daughters I hear sobbing? My two darlings. Come to these hands of mine, your brother's hands. Creon has had pity and has sent me what I loved most!

Creon: I brought them to you because I know how you love them.

Oedipus: Bless you for it. O children, I weep for you - I cannot see your faces-I weep when I think of the bitterness there will be in your lives. When you're ready for marriage, who'll take the child of such infamy? Such insults you will hear. Creon, since you are the only father left for these two girls, do not allow them to wander like beggars, poor and husbandless.

Creon: Come along. Soon you will leave the city, but let the children stay.

Oedipus: Do not take them from me!

Creon: Do not ask to have everything your way. Your time for giving orders has passed. [Creon and Oedipus go out. His daughters help lead him. - Original text, line 1478.]

Chorus: Behold Oedipus, he who knew the famous riddle and rose to greatness.

His good fortune was the envy of all.

See him now and see how the waves of disaster have swallowed him!

Look upon the last day always.

Count no mortal happy till he has passed the final limit of his life without calamity.

*This Readers' Theater Adapted Version used a few texts for guidance: Greek Tragedies, Vol. 1: Oedipus the King, translated by David Grene, University of Chicago Press, 1991; Sophocles' Oedipus the King, Translated and edited by Peter Arnott, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., N.Y., 1960; and Knox, Bernard M. W., Oedipus at Thebes, Sophocles Tragic Hero and His Time, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966. Limited use was also made of the online version at Perseus Site edited with introduction and notes by Sir Richard Jebb, Cambridge University Press, 1887, updated. It is approximately 1/3 of any complete translation of the original version and is designed as an introduction to the great work by Sophocles for junior and senior high school students.

The Master is twisting the knife

The myth of Oedipus was old and well-known before Sophocles wrote his version. His retelling of the tale in the form of a dramatic trilogy survives as the best version, not only because of his masterful handling of the story, but also because of the twists he adds which reinforce one of the central lessons of the story: that there is no escaping fate.

Sophocles presented his Oedipus trilogy as part of an annual festival and competition around 430 BCE. His Oedipus trilogy revisits the tales of the mythical Theban monarchy of his popular Antigone trilogy, which he presented around a decade earlier at the same festival

In the myth of Oedipus, a prophecy is given to his father that he will kill his father and marry his

mother. His father commands a servant to leave the baby on a hillside. The baby would have then died of exposure or been killed by wild animals, and the king and his servants would not have been considered guilty of murder. Oedipus is rescued and when he is grown, receives a prophecy that he will murder his father and marry his mother. Not realizing that he is adopted, he flees his adopted home and in the course of his exile, kills his real father and marries his real mother.

Now for Sophocles' personal touches. His division of the myth into three parts for a standard dramatic trilogy effected the flow of the story: giving each part it's own mini-climax. He milks each part for the maximum amount of suspense: remember, the audience already knew the tale, so he needed to make it new for them. Like the audience in a modern horror movie, they knew what was coming, but the fun was in how he presented it.

In Sophocles' version of the Oedipus myth, Oedipus' adopted parents are Polybus and Merope, king and queen of Corinth. The Messenger's line, roughly translated into English is: "Polybus is dead; the queen and the people want you to return and become king of Corinth." Modern audiences don't care, and modern directors cut this line. Directors know that when a messenger appears on stage at a crucial moment that this is the turning point of the drama. They try to figure out what's important in this Messenger's speech, and invariably emphasize the wrong point. Some cut the entire character in exasperation.

But the audience in 430 BCE in Athens would have reacted strongly to this line: this is Sophocles at his finest. The master is twisting the knife. He was referencing another myth, adding Oedipus into it, and in doing so, tightening the noose around Oedipus' neck. The penalty for patricide or incest was death. The blind could not be executed, so Oedipus blinds himself in order to avoid a death sentence

The myth of Merope comes to us in incomplete fragments. Merope was the queen of Corinth. Polybus, a grandson of Hercules, invades Corinth, kills the king, and marries Merope, making himself king. Her sons flee Corinth and go into exile. Sophocles tells us that they adopt Oedipus, giving Polybus an heir. Had Merope pre-deceased Polybus, the monarchy would have gone to her son (and his): Oedipus. But because Merope outlives Polybus, she retains the monarchy: her husband will be king. It becomes more all the more twisted when you realize that Polybus was murdered by Merope's sons.

In one line Sophocles reinforces the myth's central theme. With the inclusion of this line, he tells the audience that even had Oedipus remained in Corinth, he would have ended up murdering his adopted father and marrying his adopted mother. Here is how he truly proves that you can not circumvent the gods' wills.

Writing Tasks for *Oedipus*

Who Are the Chorus?

Are the chorus right about the gods and Oedipus? Does the chorus (townspeople) get anything exactly right in the whole play? If they are not spokespersons for the playwright, what kind of portrayal of human beings are they?

Is Oedipus Selfless or Self-Centered?

Look for indications of Oedipus' selflessness and self-centeredness in his words, To what extent is Oedipus acting as a savior, for the benefit of his people, in this play, and to what extent is he acting on his own behalf? Consider his reasons for fleeing Corinth and Delphi, his accusations against Creon, his reasons for wanting to talk to the survivor of the attack on Laius and other

actions he has taken in his life.

The Punishment Fits the Crime?

Note the details of the plague in the Priest's description of it, which uses some powerful poetic imagery. State these lines in plain English; then, once you see what he's saying, tell your reaction to these lines. Do you feel disgusted by them, intrigued or curious, horrified, amused--what? and why?

Oedipus vs. Creon

What sources of conflict or jealousy might there have been between Creon and Oedipus before this day? How do you think Creon felt about Oedipus' getting the throne after Laius was reported dead (he would have been next in line for the throne after Laius, wouldn't he)? Oedipus apparently trusted him enough to send him to Delphi; does Oedipus accuse Creon of not reporting the gods' message accurately or just of trying to take advantage of it to get Oedipus ousted? How does Creon seem to feel about becoming king at the end of the play?

Is Oedipus a True Leader?

Oedipus was born a prince, raised to be a king. What does this play tell us about the nature of leadership and the qualities of a great leader? Does Oedipus possess the sort of concern for downtrodden that Princess Diana Windsor tried to instill in her sons, or is he the sort of king who is more concerned with outer image than the substance of his rule? Does Oedipus have a "messiah complex," or is he justifiably taking on the role of savior of Thebes?

Is Oedipus a Free Man or a Fool of the Gods?

Irony and coincidence also influence our view of Oedipus as a tragic protagonist. To what extent is Oedipus a fool of the gods, and to what extent is he free to choose his own way? In other words, do the gods simply know what Oedipus will do in a given situation because they know human nature, or do they actually manipulate events beyond likelihood and mere coincidence? Mention several incidents or decision points for Oedipus in your answer.

Jocasta's Shame

Is Jocasta actually willing to live in incest with her son as long as the information isn't public? Since it was Jocasta, according to the herdsman in the next scene, who actually gave the baby to him and commanded him to abandon it on the mountainside, does Jocasta kill herself because she can't face Oedipus or because she can't face the public shame of their incest?

Regicide or Incest?

Which seems to bother the chorus (elders of Thebes) more--the killing of the king or the incest? To answer, review "stasimon 1"--the chorus' response to Oedipus and Tiresias making accusations against each other. That is, contrast how the chorus feels about incest vs. how they feel about the assassin of Laius.

Theme

Check the last statements of the chorus and of Creon to see if they tell the theme of this tragedy. Is this a story of personal tragedy? Is it a religious story, justifying the gods?

Filming *Oedipus*

Consider how you would film this play--or how Hollywood might. Given today's special effects, the hanging and the blinding could be staged directly and would not have to be simply reported by a horrified messenger. How much of Oedipus' life would you tell? Would you flashback to the birth, the exchange at Mount Cithaeron, any of his life at Corinth, his visit to Delphi, the fight

where three roads meet, his confrontation with the Sphinx, accepting the throne of Thebes, his life with Jocasta, the plague, the investigation?

Oedipus vs. Hamlet

Compare and contrast Oedipus and Hamlet. Is Oedipus more a man of action? Or is he more a man driven by whim and sudden, rash decisions? Which character is more selfless? Does Hamlet show any signs of selfish motives in his actions or inactions? Which protagonist seems more learned? wiser? more religious? more loving? more incestuous? Which seems to be a better murder investigator? Does Oedipus have any of Claudius' motives when he kills the king, Laius? Then which murderer is more blameworthy--Oedipus or Claudius?

Oedipus Agree/Disagree questions

Directions: Read the statement in the center column. Decide if you **strongly agree** (SA), **agree** (A), **disagree** (D), or **strongly disagree** (SD) with the statement. Circle your response and **write a reason or reasons in the statement box**. (You may use the back of the paper if you need more room.) Be prepared to discuss your opinion on the statements.

before you read	Statements	after you read
SA A D SD	1. Violence never solves anything.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	2. If we sin, we should be punished.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	3. You can't escape your fate.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	4. Strong family ties can survive any attack.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	5. What goes around comes around.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	6. Man is responsible for his own downfall or success.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	7. Man's life is governed by chance.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	8. Pride is the catalyst for catastrophe.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	9. Ignorance and bliss are better than knowledge and pain.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	10. If someone prophesied you would become someone of importance (i.e.-President, Homecoming King/Queen, etc), you would try to make it happen.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	11. It is never right to kill another person.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	12. A guilty act requires a guilty mind.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	13. No cause, political or otherwise, is worth dying for.	SA A D SD
SA A D SD	14. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.	SA A D SD

The Gospel at Colonus

The Gospel at Colonus- a reconceived approach to Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* as parable-like sermons on the ways of fate and particularly a happy death. It is set in an African-American Pentecostal church. The congregation performs the invocation ("Live Where You Can") and as the Ministers narrate, portions of the story come to life.

The Story

After years of wandering with his daughter Antigone, suffering for the sins he committed in innocence, Oedipus comes to Colonus ("Fair Colonus"), the holy resting place he has been promised for his death. At first, the citizens of Colonus turn him away ("Stop! Do Not Go On!") and interrogate him ("Who is This Man?"). His second daughter, Ismene, finds them there, rejected. She has come, however, to bring Oedipus the prophecy that he shall now be blessed, and that those he blesses shall also be so ("How Shall I See You Through My Tears?"). She tells him to pray to the gods he once offended ("A Voice Foretold [Prayer]"). Theseus, King of Athens, hears his prayer and is touched by his story, and the outcasts are welcomed to Colonus ("Never Drive You Away [Jubilee]"). Creon, King of Thebes, comes to bring Oedipus back to that city. But Oedipus refuses to go, and Creon kidnaps the daughters ("You Take Me Away"). Theseus returns them. At his death, Oedipus passes on to Theseus alone his knowledge of life and his blessing ("Sunlight of No Light/Eternal Sleep"). The final sermon is delivered, reminding the congregation to mourn no more, for Oedipus has found redemption at his death ("Lift Him Up/Lift Me Up"). Indeed, his end was wonderful, if mortal's ever was ("Now Let the Weeping Cease").

Cast

Narrator / MinisterMorgan Freeman
Oedipus Clarence Fountain
Antigone Isabell Monk
Chorus Leader Martin Jacox
Ismene Jevetta Steele
Theseus Carl Lumbly
Creon Robert Earl Jones
Polyneices Kevin Davis
Citizens of Colonus:
. . . . Willie Rogers
. . . . Five Blind Boys of Alabama
. . . . Sam Butler (guitar/vocals)
. . . . The J.D. Steele Singers
. . . . The Institutional Radio Choir
. . . . The Original Soul Stirrers

THE INVOCATION: LIVE WHERE YOU CAN

CHOIR:

Don't go... away

O Father... won't you stay?

SOLOIST:

Let every man consider his last day
When youthful pleasures have faded away
Can he look at his life without pain?
Let every child remember how to pray
For the lost of the earth to find the way
And the kingdom of Heaven to reign.

CHOIR (Rising):

Live where you can
Be happy as you can

Happier than God has made your father.
Live where you can
Be happy as you can
For you may not be here tomorrow.

SOLOIST:

O Father, let the singer sing for thee
Let word and song and harmony
Be mightier than the sword
O vision holy vision come to me
Let word and song and harmony
Be a sound like the voice of the Lord.

CHOIR:

Live where you can
Be happy as you can
Happier than God has made your father.
Live where you can
Be happy as you can
For you may not be here tomorrow.

Don't go... away O Father... won't you stay?

RECAPITULATION FROM *OEDIPUS THE KING*

Men of Thebes: Look upon Oedipus.
This is the king who solved the famous riddle
And towered up, most powerful of men.
No mortal eyes but looked on him with envy,
Yet in the end, ruin swept over him.

Let every man in mankind's frailty
Consider his last day; and let none
Presume on his good fortune until he find
Life, at his death, a memory without pain. Amen

ODE TO COLONUS: "FAIR COLONUS"

THE FRIEND (Falsetto, without accompaniment):

Fair Colonus
Land of running horses
Where leaves and berries throng
And wine-dark ivy climbs the bough
The sweet sojourning nightingale
Murmurs all night long.

Here with drops of Heaven's dews
At daybreak all the year,
The clusters of narcissus bloom
Time-hallowed garlands for the brows
Of those great ladies whom we fear.

Fair Colonus
Land of running horses
Where leaves and berries throng
And wine-dark ivy climbs the bough
The sweet sojourning nightingale
Murmurs all night long.

SONG: "STOP DO NOT GO ON"

CHORAGOS QUINTET AND BALLADEER:

Stop! Do not go on
This place is holy!
Stop! Do not go on
You cannot walk this ground!
Stop! Do not go on
Daughters of Darkness bar the way
Saying, "Stop!
Do not go on!"

They confront Antigone and Oedipus

Stop! Do not go on
This place is holy
Stop! Do not go on
First you must kneel down and pray.
Stop! Do not go on
Till the Gods answer "Yes, you may!"
Saying, "Stop!
Do not go on!"

Oedipus is now joined by his own Quintet, all old men and blind

SINGER OEDIPUS WITH QUINTET:

Here I stand a wanderer
On life's journey
At the close of the day
Hungry and tired
Beaten by the rain;

Won't you give me shelter
All I need is a resting place
Promised so long ago.

The blind men force their way into the church. The two Quintets face off.

CHORAGOS QUINTET AND BALLADEER:

Stop! Do not go on
This place is holy!
Stop! Do not go on
You cannot walk this ground!
Stop! Do not go on
Daughters of Darkness bar the way
Saying, "Stop!
Do not go on!"

CHORAL DIALOGUE: "WHO IS THIS MAN?"

CHORAGOS (Tunes up with organ):

Who is this man?
What is his name?
Where does he come from?

PREACHER:

And when he heard that, he was afraid,
And he turned to his daughter and said:
"God in Heaven, what will become of me now, child?"

EVANGELIST:

And she said:
“Tell them, Father, you cannot hide.”

CHORAGOS:

Who is this man?
What is his name?
Where does he come from?
What is his race?
Who was his father?

ISMENE COMES TO COLONUS: “HOW SHALL I SEE YOU THROUGH MY TEARS?”

Ismene, a gospel singer, is attended by two men and a woman. Together they are the Ismene Quartet.

QUARTET:

Father! Sister!

ISMENE:

Father, Sister, dearest voices,
I have found you and I don't know how.
Father, Sister-I hear your voices
Am I dreaming? Are you here right now?

QUARTET:

How shall I see you through my tears?
How shall I see you through my tears?
How shall I see you through my tears?

ISMENE:

Father, sister, the Gods have spoken
I bring a promise, a holy vow
A world that cast you down forgives you
And those who blamed you sing your praises now.

QUARTET:

Destiny brings you back to me.

SINGER OEDIPUS:

Child, I'm so glad I'm here
It was meant to be, it's a prophecy.

ISMENE:

All your suffering and pain
Has not been in vain.

SINGER OEDIPUS:

I've been waiting for a sign
To ease my troubled mind

NARRATIVE OF ISMENE

The Evangelist speaks over the music. The men of Ismene's Quartet silently enact the struggle of the sons of Oedipus.

EVANGELIST;

She tells how his sons Polyneices and Eteocles
Began to itch for power; how they fought
Till the younger threw the elder out
And took the crown. How Polyneices went to Argos,
Committed treason for an army; sold out his city
For the promise of this father's throne.
How he marches on Thebes now.

(To Oedipus)

Brother, the traitor, marches on brother, the usurper,
And, trembling at his coming, Thebes calls for you.

PREACHER OEDIPUS:

They will never hold me!
Gods! May their fires of ambition never be quenched.
Let the last word be mine on this battle.
Let them that would be kings of Thebes before sons of
Oedipus—
Let them kill each other!

QUARTET:
How shall I see you through my tears?

PRAYER: "A VOICE FORETOLD"

SINGER OEDIPUS (With his Quintet, without accompaniment):

A voice foretold
Where I shall die
Where my soul shall rest
And my body lie
Where pain unending
Ends for me
Where I shall find
Sanctuary

A voice foretold
That at my grave
Down my God shall come
My soul to save
And I shall be
Endowed with grace
And I shall find
My resting place

QUINTET (Individually):
Hear me
Hear me
Hear me

QUINTET BASS:
O hear my prayer
O Lord, won't you hear my prayer

The blind Singer approaches the podium unassisted to preach over the music. Balladeer sings under him.

SINGER OEDIPUS:
Ladies whose eyes are terrible:
Spirits: upon your sacred ground
I have first bent my knees in this new land;
Therefore be mindful of me and of Apollo,
For when he gave me oracles of evil,
He also spoke of this: a resting place,
After long years in the last country,
Where I should find a home among the powers of justice:
That I might round out there my bitter life.
Conferring benefit on those who received me,
A curse on those who have driven me away.

Portents, he said, would make me sure of this:
Earthquakes, or thunder, or God's smiling lightning;

But I am sure of it now, sure that you guided me
And led me here into your hallowed wood.
How otherwise could I have found this chair of stone?

Grant me, then, Goddesses, passage from life at last,
And consummation, as the unearthly voice foretold;
Unless indeed I seem not worthy of your grace—
Slave as I am to such unending pain
As no man had before.

O hear my prayer,
Sweet children of original Darkness! Hear me,
Pity a poor man's carcass and his ghost,
For Oedipus is not the strength he was.

Therefore, in the name of God, give me shelter!
Give me sanctuary! Though my face
Be dreadful in its look, yet honor me!
For I come as one endowed with grace
By those who are over Nature; and I bring
Advantage to this place.

SINGER OEDIPUS AND BALLADEER (Concluding with a call and response):
Where pain unending
Ends for me
Where I shall find
Sanctuary

THE JUBILEE: NO NEVER”

CHORAGOS AND QUINTET:

We will never
No no never
Drive you away!
We will never drive you away
From peace in this land.

SINGER OEDIPUS AND HIS QUINTET:

I stood, a wanderer
On life's journey
At the close of the day
Hungry and tired
And beaten by the rain
Lord here is my shelter
A sacred resting place
Promised so long ago.

CHORAGOS AND QUINTET:

We will never
No no never
Drive you away!
We will never drive you away
From peace in this land.

THE SEIZURE OF THE DAUGHTERS

SINGER OEDIPUS:

When I was sick with my own life's evil

When I would—

QUINTET:

--gladly have left the earth

SINGER:

You had no mind to—

QUINTET:

--give me what I wanted!

SINGER:

You see a City and all its people

Being kind to me, so you

Take me away!

QUINTET:

Evil kindness!

SINGER:

Evil kindness!

That's the kind of kindness you—

QUINTET:

--offer me!

CHOIR:

You'd take him away

But you would not take him home

You'd take him away

To a prison outside the walls.

SINGER:

You'd take me away

To a prison outside the walls.

SINGER:

Creon! You have taken them

Who served my naked eyepits as eyes

On you and yours forever

May God, watcher of all the world,

Confer on you such days as I have had

And such age as mine!

CHORAL ODE FROM *ANTIGONE*: "NUMBERLESS ARE THE WORLD'S WONDERS"

QUARTET (With the Choir):

Numberless are the world's wonders

But none more wonderful than man

The stormgray sea yields to his prows

Huge crests bear him high

Earth, holy and inexhaustible,

Is graven where his plows have gone

Numberless are the world's wonders

But none more wonderful than man

The lightboned birds clinging to cover

Lithe fish darting away

All are taken, tamed in the net of his mind

The wild horses resign to him

Numberless are the world's wonders

But none more wonderful than man

Words and thought rapid as air

He fashions for his use

And his the skill that deflects the arrows of snow

The spears of winter rain

From every wind he has made himself secure
From every wind he has made himself secure
From all but one...all but one
In the late wind of death he cannot stand

THE LAMENT: "LIFT ME UP"

I wish the wind would lift me
I wish the wind would lift me
Like a dove
I wish the wind would lift me
So I could look with the eyes of the angels
For the child that I love.

I wish the Lord would hide me
I wish the Lord would hide me
In a cloud.
I wish the Lord would hide me
I'd fall like a rain of fire
And I'd lie like a shroud

SINGER AND QUINTET:

Lift me up
Lift me up
Like a dove—

ODE: "OH SUNLIGHT"

BALLADEER AND CHORAGOS QUINTET:

Oh, sunlight of no light
Once you were mine
This is the last my flesh will feel of you
For now I go to shade my ending days
In the dark underworld

Oh, sunlight of no light
Once you were mine
Now in the shadow of the vale I pray
You warmed my flesh above, now bless my soul
In the cold underworld.

O sunlight of no light
O sunlight of no light
Once you were mine

THE DESCENT: "ETERNAL SLEEP"

SOLOIST:

Let not our friend go down
In grief and weariness
Let some god spare him
From any more distress.

QUINTET:

O eternal sleep
Child of earth and hell
O eternal sleep
Let him sleep well

SOLOIST:

We pray to you, almighty ones
Let his descent be clear
On those dim fields of underground
That all men living fear

QUINTET:

O eternal sleep
Child of earth and hell
O eternal sleep
Let him sleep well

CHORAGOS QUINTET:

Down, down, down he goes
He goes among the ghosts
Down, down, down below—

O eternal sleep
Child of earth and hell
O eternal sleep
Sleep on, sleep on, sleep on

O eternal sleep
Let him sleep well.

DOXOLOGY; THE PAEAN “LIFT HIM UP”

CHOIR SOLOIST:

Well I’m crying hallelujah
Yes I’m crying hallelujah
For I was blind, but he made me see

Yes I’m crying, “Hallelujah;”
Lift him up in a blaze of glory
With a choir of voices heavenly

CHOIR:

Lift him high--lift him high--higher
Lift him high--lift him high--higher

Crying hallelujah—crying hallelujah
I was blind and now I see
Crying hallelujah
Lift him up in a blaze of glory
With a choir of voices heavenly

Crying hallelujah—crying hallelujah
Set him free Lord, set him free
Crying hallelujah
Lift him up in a blaze of glory
With a choir of voices heavenly!

Lift him up—lift him up
O lift him up—lift him up
O lift him up—lift him up
Lift him high high high high high high high high—higher.
Lift him high high high high high high high high—higher.

CLOSING HYMN: “LET THE WEEPING CEASE”

SOLOIST;

Now let the weeping cease

Let no one mourn again
The love of God will bring you peace
There is no end

Antigone Ode – Fitts and Fitzgerald

ODE 1

CHORUS: [STROPHE 1
Numberless are the world's wonders, but none
More wonderful than man; the stormgray sea
Yields to his prows, the huge crests bear him high;
Earth, holy and inexhaustible, is graven
With shining furrows where his plows have gone
Year after year, the timeless labor of stallions.

[ANTISTROPHE 1

The lightboned birds and beasts that cling to cover,
The lithe fish lighting their reaches of dim water,
All are taken, tamed in the net of his mind;
The lion on the hill, the wild horse windy-maned,
Resign to him; and his blunt yoke has broken
The sultry shoulders of the mountain bull.

[STROPHE 2

Words also, and thought as rapid as air,
He fashions to his good use; statecraft is his,
And his the skill -that deflects the arrows of snow,
The spears of winter rain: from every wind
He has made himself secure—from all but one:
In the late wind of death he cannot stand.

[ANTISTROPHE 2

O clear intelligence, force beyond all measure!
O fate of man, working both good and evil!
When the laws are kept, how proudly his city stands!
When the laws are broken, what of his city then?
Never may the anarchic man find rest at my hearth,
Never be it said that my thoughts are his thoughts.

Note: Choral songs were divided into stanzas: strophe (turn), antistrophe (turn the other way), and epode (added song) that were sung while the chorus moved (danced). While singing the strophe an ancient commentator tells us they moved from left to right; while singing the antistrophe they moved from right to left.

Questions to consider as you read/watch *Antigone*

Please answer the questions in the back of your journal.

The drama begins at dawn, after a night in which there has been a war in Thebes between armies led by the two sons of Oedipus. Keep in mind that the Greek theater was in the open air, and that the first performances of the day would begin at daybreak. Thus, imagine that the time of day of the setting would be identical to the performance time.

Overview points to note:

As you read/watch the first scene, consider the gravity of the city's condition and how aware Antigone seems of it.

Throughout the play, Antigone and Creon will talk much about friends and enemies. Think about what each means by these terms. You will find, in general, Antigone and Creon tend to use the same words but mean different things by them.

Questions/Considerations

Why does Antigone assume that Creon's order is directed against her and Ismene? When Creon appears later, consider whether his conduct and language in fact supports her assumption.

Do you sympathize at all with Ismene's caution? Does Antigone treat her fairly?

Why is Antigone so concerned with glory? Should she be?

After the initial dialogue the Chorus emerges for their first choral ode (*stasimon*), which concerns the previous night's battle. Contrast the picture of Polynices drawn there with Antigone's earlier discussion of her brother; does your opinion of him, and of Antigone's position, change at all?

The chorus evokes Dionysus (handout), the first of several times this god is mentioned. Why should the chorus call upon Dionysus?

Creon enters. It is very important that you do not project Creon's later conduct back into his first speech. Read this speech carefully, consider his values and beliefs, and ask yourself whether there is anything wrong with his principles, whether in Greek terms or your own. Later, compare Creon's subsequent actions with the principles he articulates here.

Throughout this scene, pay close attention to the assumptions Creon makes about gender.

When Creon talks about the gods and the law, is he talking about the same types of gods as Antigone does?

Second stasimon, perhaps the most famous choral ode in Greek tragedy. What image of man does this ode present? In this vision, what is human greatness? What are the limits of human ability and action? When can a daring man get into trouble?

Choral odes often generalize a given problem specific to the play's action into a statement about human life as a whole. Is that the case here? If so, then is the chorus alluding to Antigone, or to Creon, or to both?

Why is Creon so surprised when the Sentry brings in Antigone?

Antigone is compared to a mother bird, not the last time she is referred to as maternal in this play. Is there anything strange or ironic about Antigone being represented as a mother?

Antigone's defense to Creon is very important, so read/watch it carefully.

Ismene defends Antigone and asks Creon how he could kill his own son's bride. Has there been any reference to this relationship before?

Contrast this *stasimon* with the previous one. Is this ode's thought and tone similar or different? What, if anything, has changed?

Compare the Creon in this scene with the one who first entered the play. Has he changed at all in language or conduct?

To what does Haemon appeal in his attempt to save Antigone?

Does Haemon threaten his father, as Creon thinks?

Why does Creon chose the particular method of execution that he does? What does it say about him?

The ancient Greeks had two words for "love"; *philia*, meaning something like "friendship", and *eros*, which has more to do with passion. When the chorus talks about "love" in the ode, which of the two do they mean? And why is the chorus generalizing about love here?

Note the chorus' reference to Antigone's "bridal vault". What do they mean by referring to a wedding chamber? This will be an important image in the last part of the play. Antigone becomes a "Bride of Death" (or "Bride of Hades"). To understand the importance of this metaphor, you might benefit from reading the Hymn to Demeter, which tells the story of Demeter and Persephone. (handout about Demeter) Strangely, the maternal imagery continues with Antigone as well, as she tries to compare herself with Niobe (handout about Niobe). After reading about Niobe, consider what Antigone does and does not share with that mythical figure?

How would you characterize the chorus' exchange with Antigone here?

Consider Antigone's speech. Is this speech consistent with what she has argued before?

Is Antigone's faith in the gods wavering here?

Consider what these myths have in common with each other, and with the story of the play at this point.

What does the failure of Tiresias' sacrifice have to do with Polynices and Antigone?

What, specifically, in Tiresias' warnings leads Creon to change his mind?

Why does the chorus call on Dionysus in this ode?

Why does Antigone chose to commit suicide? Does it suggest her mother's death, or is there an important difference?

Creon's wife is only on stage momentarily, yet she plays a key role in Creon's disaster. What does her suicide mean to him?

Is Creon a tragic figure? Do you feel sympathy for him at the end as someone who initially tried to do good yet was overwhelmed by circumstance, or do you believe that he is a bullying, misogynistic control-freak who gets what he deserves? Try to come up with arguments for both sides. Could the play have been called *Creon*, instead?

Conversely, what, specifically, makes Antigone a tragic figure? Think about what, exactly, you mean by such words as "tragedy" and "tragic".

Haemon and Creon argument

HAEMON: Father, the most enviable of a man's gifts
Is the ability to reason clearly,
And it's not for me to say you are wrong,
Even if I were clever enough, or experienced enough,
Which I'm not. But it's also true to say
That some men think differently about these things,
And as your son, my most useful function,
It seems to me, is to keep you in touch
With what other people are thinking,
What they say, and do, and approve or disapprove of,
And sometimes what they leave unsaid.
The prospect of your disapproval is great
Silence of most men's tongues, and some things
Are never said, for fear of the consequences.
But I can sometimes hear what people whisper
Behind their hands: and everywhere, I hear sympathy
Expressed for this unfortunate girl,
Condemned, as she is, to a horrifying death
That no woman has ever suffered before,
And unjustly, in most people's eyes.
In burying her brother, who was killed
In action, she did something most people consider
Decent and honourable — rather than leaving him
Naked on the battlefield, for the dogs to tear at
And kites and scavengers to pick to the bone.
She should be given a medal for it,
Those same people say, and her name inscribed
On the roll of honour. Such things are whispered
In secret, Father, and they have reached my ears.
Sir, your reputation matters to me
As much as your good health and happiness do,
Indeed, your good name matters more.
What can a loving son be more jealous of
Than his father's reputation, and what could please
A father more than to see his son's concern
That people will think well of him?

Then let me beg you to have second thoughts,
And not be certain that your own opinion
Is the only right one, and that all men share it.
A man who thinks he has the monopoly
Of wisdom, that only what *he* says
And what *he* thinks are of any relevance,
Reveals his own shallowness of mind
With every word he says. The man of judgement
Knows that it is a sign of strength,
Not weakness, to value other opinions,
And to learn from them: and when he is wrong,
To admit it openly and change his mind.
You see it when a river floods, the trees
That bend, survive, those whose trunks
Are inflexible, are snapped off short
By the weight of the water. And a sailor in a storm
Who refuses to reef his sail, and run
With the wind, is likely to end up capsized.
I beg you Father, think twice about this.
Don't let your anger influence you. If a man
Of my age may lay some small claim
To common sense, let me say this:
Absolute certainty is fine, if a man
Can be certain that his wisdom is absolute.
But such certainty and such wisdom
Is rare among men: and that being so,
The next best, is to learn to listen,
And to take good advice when it is offered.
CHORUS: There's a lot of sense, my Lord Creon,
In what this young man has said: as indeed,
There was in everything that you said too.
The fact is, you are both in the right,
And there's a good deal to be said for either.
CREON: Is there indeed? Am I expected to listen
And take lessons in political tactics
At my age, from a mere boy?
HAEMON: I'm a man, Father, and my arguments are just.
They stand upon their merits, not my age.
CREON: Oh, they stand upon their merits do they? What merit
Is there, please tell me, in breaking the law?
HAEMON: If she'd done something shameful I wouldn't defend her.
CREON: She has brought the law into contempt! That's shameful!
HAEMON: Listen to the people in the street, Father,
The ordinary Thebans! They say she hasn't!
CREON: I have never based my political principles
On the opinions of people in the Street!
HAEMON: Now you're the one who's speaking like a boy!
CREON: I'm speaking like a king. It's my responsibility,
And I will act according to my own convictions!
HAEMON: When the State becomes one man it ceases to be a State!
CREON: The State is the statesman who rules it, it reflects
His judgement, it belongs to him!
HAEMON: Go and rule in the desert then! There's nobody there

To argue with you! What a king you'll be there!
CREON: This boy of mine is on the woman's side!
HAEMON: Yes, if *you* are a woman, I am.
I'm on your side Father, I'm fighting for you.
CREON: You damned impertinent devil! Every word
You say is against me. Your own father!
HAEMON: When I know you are wrong, I have to speak.
CREON: How am I wrong? By maintaining my position
And the authority of the State? Is that wrong?
HAEMON: When position and authority
Ride roughshod over moral feeling...
CREON: You're weak, and uxorious, and contemptible,
With no will of your own. You're a woman's mouthpiece!
HAEMON I'm not ashamed of what I'm saying.
CREON: Every word you have said pleads for her cause.
HAEMON I plead for you, and for myself,
And for common humanity, respect for the dead!
CREON: You will never marry that woman, she won't
Live long enough to see that day!
HAEMON: If she dies,
She won't die alone. There'll be two deaths, not one.
CREON: Are you threatening me? How dare you threaten...
HAEMON: No, that's not a threat. I'm telling you
Your policy was misbegotten from the beginning.
CREON: Misbegotten! Dear God, if anything's misbegotten
Here, it's my son. You'll regret this, I promise you.
HAEMON: If you weren't my father, I'd say you were demented.
CREON: Don't father me! You're a woman's plaything,
A tame lap dog!
HAEMON: Is anyone else
Allowed to speak? Must you have the last word
In everything, must all the rest of us be gagged?
CREON: I must, and I will! And you, I promise you,
Will regret what you have spoken here
Today. I will not be sneered at or contradicted
By anyone. Sons can be punished too.
Bring her out, the bitch, let her die here and now,
In the open, with her bridegroom beside her
As a witness! You can watch the execution!
HAEMON: That's one sight I shall never see!
Nor from this moment, Father, will you
Ever see me again. Those that wish
To stay and watch this disgusting spectacle
In company with a madman, are welcome to it!
Exit Haemon.

Segal, Charles. *Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text*. 1986. Originally, this segment appeared in an article in *Arion* 3.2 (Summer, 1964:46-66) as "Sophocles' Praise of Man and the Conflicts of the Antigone." It was revised by Segal for republication without footnotes in *Twentieth Century Views Sophocles*, ed. Thomas Wooland (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977: 62-85. summarized below

See also Segal's 1995 book on Sophocles, *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society* published by and can be ordered from Harvard University Press

In *Antigone*, two protagonists oppose each other, and this is the source of the play's many conflicts. Friedrich Hegel's analysis led to considering whether Creon or Antigone was more "right," but these characters are more than just embodiments of opposing principles. These characters are not just issues but layered "individuals moving as all men do in a complex entanglement of will and circumstance, passion and altruism, guilt and innocence" (63). Creon's absolutism causes Antigone's harshness, and her moral stance provides the measure to which Creon falls short. Yet their conflict defines the limitations of human nature when confronted with opposing obligations--"divine versus human law, individual versus state, religious versus secular, private versus public morality" (64).

Creon uses the words "decree" and "law" interchangeably, but Antigone's speech on the supremacy of divine, eternal, although unwritten law over a merely human decree separates the two words. Similarly, Creon identifies justice with the state and suggests [ironically] that one who is "just" at home is "just" in public. When he taunts Haemon, Creon shows that he is unjust in both private, familial ways and in the polis. Antigone asserts public "autonomy," placing herself above Creon's decree, and becomes heroic in that she is willing to die for familial obligation (65).

Antigone and Creon also use the word "profit" in different ways. While Antigone asserts that she profits by dying early if she lives a life of woe, Creon sees bribery as a motivator for the guards and Tiresias. Antigone also turns Creon's and the chorus' use of the word "foolish." She embraces her apparent "folly" [because she will be rewarded for it in the hereafter], and she is not understood by Creon or the chorus. In addition, Creon and Antigone oppose each other on the matter of "wisdom" or "intelligence" or "knowledge." Antigone claims divine law's origins are not known; she acknowledges the limits of human wisdom while Creon arrogantly claims to have cornered the knowledge market (66-67).

Who of these two is truly pious? Creon talks piety but in a way that must have made the audience for his inaugural speech shudder. Just before calling on Zeus, he remarks on Polynices' guilt and swears that the state comes before everything; then he announces his decree and its unusually harsh punishment. When the chorus suggests that the burial given to Polynices may have occurred through divine intervention, Creon abuses the chorus for being foolish old men rather than the prescient elders they are. At his angriest, Creon is invoking Zeus' name--when he swears to kill Ismene even though she is closer to him than the altar to Zeus in his household and when he is denying to Tiresias that anyone will bury Polynices. Mentioning the chief god while cursing and punishing people is not a form of piety. Strategically, then, it is appropriate for Sophocles to have Antigone begin by mentioning Zeus--not just as the chief god or even as the sky-god who would be offended by a rotting corpse, but also as an indicator of Creon's pride and the height of her own dissent from Creon's decree (68). Antigone mentions the irony in her last words of being accused of impiety for the pious act of honoring the dead. Antigone dies because she rejects life that falls short morally. It is Creon who sees life simplistically in opposites while Antigone sees

complexity (69).

Creon's categories of opposites basically show various forms of strength vs. weakness. This simplistic view is most pronounced in his hatred for Antigone trying to conquer him as a man. Creon really brings up the question of who is deserving of love and of honor, presuming that "human and divine--or political and religious--values exactly coincide" (71).

The Chorus' Praise of Man: Ironically, the first choral ode, which praises human intellectual achievement and control of nature, is preceded by Creon's anger (being out of control) and the guard's pondering on the role of chance and perhaps the gods in human endeavors. Within the ode itself, the Greek adjective that describes man (*deinos*) means not just "wonderful" but also "terrible" or "fearful." The word often translated as "order" (*orgas*) also means "anger" (71). So, although the ode "reflects much of the optimistic rationalism of Sophocles' time," Sophocles sees reason and technical control as a double-edged sword: more freedom on the one hand, but more potential for tyranny on the other (72).

Creon echoes the opening word of this ode when he later talks to Creon about the terror of yielding to forces he cannot control (74-75). Earlier, he demonstrates distinct lack of control in his angry scene with his son, thus not living up to the image of "man" in the ode (75).

This ode also begins a motif of "bird" images that run through the play, since catching birds is one of man's skills. But birds threatening the corpse seem more like reminders of Creon's authority [yet they are also a force of nature beyond control] and therefore sinister. For Tiresias, birds are the means to know prophecy and the will of the gods. So when the guard likens Antigone to a "mother-bird in bitter grief" over the loss of her young, we see both his pity for the hunted creature and Creon's will to dominate Antigone by "caging" or killing her, connecting domination of Antigone to man's conquest of nature (75-76).

The whole last half of the play shifts its imagery to the "rebellion" of nature--woman, gods, and the non-rational. The choral odes mention Eros and Dionysos. Creon's reply to Antigone's speech in the first episode uses imagery of domination, devolving finally to calling her a "slave," a reminder of "Creon's debasement of man" (77). Antigone renounces the idea of slavery with brotherhood (78).

Creon's rejection of his son as an individual is accomplished by echoing the imagery of plowing from the end of the first stanza ("strophe") of the ode praising man. When he suggests that Haemon has "other fields to plow" and so does not need Antigone, he rejects the notion of love, even mocking his son and marriage by threatening to kill Antigone "in the presence of her bridegroom" (78-79). This motif plays itself out with imagery that merges marriage with death--in Antigone's cryptic bridal chamber and in the deaths of Creon's marriage partner and son, leaving Creon as nothing--both in the private and the public realm (79).

In contrast to the notion that man the builder can shelter himself against the elements, the guards report immediately after the ode praising man on their exposure to the elements and the windstorm, a reminder of the untamable wildness now associated with the corpse of the rebel Polynices (80-81). "Thus, the corpse, in its connections with the themes both of shelter and pollution, serves as an active link between the two aspects of Creon's 'irreligious' attitude, his degradation of man and his disregard for the divine sanctions" (81). Antigone's burying Polynices affirms the dignity of man and the divine requirement of honoring the dead (81-82).

While Creon seems to negate the ode on man, Antigone affirms it--but with some corrections.

Antigone achieves stature by her willingness to face death; so, too, does mankind. "In regarding death as another instrument of control, not as a necessary condition of existence to be approached with compassion and understanding, Creon devalues his subjects and ultimately himself (83).

The Significance of Antigone: Although the play can be seen as an affirmation of the ideals of Athenian democracy and an echo of Pericles funeral oration (83), its real strength rests in affirming human nature. Man is more than a builder and maker of objects (84). Creon's denial of humanity leaves him perhaps more alone than Antigone. "To live humanly, in Sophocles' terms, is to know fully the conditions of man's existence; and this means to accept the gods who, in their limitless, ageless power . . . are those conditions, the unbending realities of the universe" (85). If the first ode praises man, the play defines exactly what is praiseworthy in humans and a later ode reminds us of the human condition: "Nothing of magnitude comes into the life of mortals without suffering and disaster" (85).