

## **OEDIPUS THE KING: Sophocles**

### **BACKGROUND**

Oedipus is son to Laius and Jocasta, the king and queen of Thebes. The misfortune of his house are as a result of a curse laid upon his father for violating the sacred laws of hospitality. In his youth, Laius was the guest of Pelops, the king of Elis and he became the tutor of the King's youngest son, Chrysippus in Chariot racing. Laius seduced and raped Chrysippus who later kills himself in shame. This abomination cast doom over Laius and all his descendants. Laius would bear a son who would marry his own mother.

When he bears a son (Oedipus) he binds the boy's feet together with a pin and orders Jocasta to kill him. Unable to kill her own son, Jocasta orders a servant to slay the infant for her. He should be taken to the mountain and killed. The servant however out of pity and control by fate, gives the infant to another shepherd. The shepherd names the child Oedipus-“swollen feet” as his feet had been tightly bound by Laius-causing them to swell. The shepherd takes the child to Corinth –a neighbouring kingdom and presents him to the childless king-Polybus, who raises the child as his own son.

Oedipus grows into manhood and hears that he is not truly the son of Polybus and his wife Merope. He consults the oracle about who his real parents are but the oracle ignores the question but instead tells him that he is destined to mate with his own mother after killing his own mother. Desperate to avoid this terrible fate, he leaves Corinth for the city of Thebes.

On the way to Thebes, Oedipus encounters a King and his attendants and the two quarrel over whose chariot/carriage has a right of way. The Theban king moves to strike the insolent youth but Oedipus, unaware that this is his true father, throws the old man down from the carriage, killing him. Thus Laius has been slain by his own son and the prophecy that the king had sought to avoid by exposing Oedipus at birth is fulfilled.

Before arriving at Thebes, Oedipus encounters a Sphinx, a legendary beast with the head and breast of a woman, the body of a lioness, and the wings of an eagle. The sphinx had been sent to the road approaching Thebes as a punishment from the gods and would kill any traveler who failed to

answer a certain riddle. The riddle was: “what creature walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon and three in the evening?” Oedipus correctly guessed the answer as ‘man’ who crawls as an infant on all fours, walks upright in maturity and leans on a walking stick in old age. Overpowered by Oedipus, the sphinx throws herself from a cliff, thereby ending the curse. Oedipus’ reward for freeing Thebes from the sphinx is it kingship and hand of queen, Jocasta-his mother. The prophecy has then been fulfilled.

## **PLOT**

Thebes is suffering under unknown circumstances to find a solution. He sends Creon, his brother-in-law to consult the oracle at Delphi concerning the plague experienced by the Thebans. Creon returns to report that the plague is a result of religious pollution since the murderer of their former king, Laius has never been caught. Oedipus swears to find the murderer and curses him.

Oedipus summons the blind prophet Tiresias for help. The prophet claims to know the answers to Oedipus’ questions but refuses to speak and instead advises him to abandon his search. This annoys Oedipus, who accuses the prophet of complicity in Laius’ murder. Annoyed, Tiresias tells the king that he himself is the murder. “You are yourself the murderer you seek.” Oedipus concludes that the prophet must have been paid off by Creon in an attempt to undermine him. Oedipus mocks the prophet’s lack of sight. Tiresias tells him that he himself is blind. Tiresias leaves after stating that when the murder is discovered he shall be a native citizen of Thebes, and son and husband to his own mother.

The King wants Creon executed, however the chorus persuades him to let Creon live. Jocasta enters and tries to console the king, telling him to ignore prophets. She tells him of a prophecy that never came to pass: Laius was to be killed by his own son, however he was killed by bandits/strangers at a crossroad on the way to Delphi. The mention of crossroads reminds him of something, he asks Jocasta for details. What did Laius look like? He begins to worry that Tiresias’ accusations were true. He sends for the only surviving witness of the attack from the fields where he now works as a shepherd. Confused, Jocasta now asks Oedipus what the matter was. He recounts to her of how he got accused by a drunken man in Corinth that he was not his father’s son, upon consulting the oracle, he was instead told that he would kill his father and marry the mother and that this made him leave Corinth. On his way from Corinth he encountered a carriage

which attempted to drive him off the road. He killed the travelers including a man who matches Jocasta's description of Laius. Oedipus has hope however because he has been told that Laius was murdered by several robbers.

A man arrives from Corinth with the news of Polybus' death. To his surprise, this excites Oedipus so much. He is now sure he cannot kill his father. He however fears that he can commit incest. The messenger however eases Oedipus' mind by telling him that Merope was not his real mother. This messenger is the former shepherd whom Jocasta gave a baby to kill but ended up taking the baby to Polybus and Merope. The baby, he says, was given to him by a shepherd from Laius' household, who had been told to get rid of the child. That same shepherd was a witness of Laius' murder whom Oedipus has already sent for. Jocasta now realises the truth and begs Oedipus to stop asking questions. She runs into the palace where she commits suicide.

The shepherd arrives, Oedipus questions him but he begs to be allowed to leave without answering questions. Oedipus threatens him with torture and execution. It emerges that the child he gave away Laius' own son.

Everything is at last revealed, Oedipus curses himself before leaving the stage. He enters the palace in anger calling the servants to bring him a sword so he can cut out his mother's womb. He comes across Jocasta's body, which he takes down, removes the long gold pins that held her dress together, plunges them into his own eyes in despair. The blind king now exits the palace, begging to be exiled as soon as possible.

On an empty stage, the chorus states that no man should be considered fortunate until he is dead.

## **Themes**

**Self-pride.** Self-----pride brings downfall and often the heroes take one or more characters with them. Oedipus is proud of his own wisdom to solve the sphinx's riddle and mocks Tiresias' blindness.

**Self-discovery:** After learning from a drunkard that he isn't Polybus and Merope's son, he wants to discover the truth behind this accusation. He consults Apollo, who gives a terrible prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. In a bid to avoid the father, he leaves Corinth. He

unwittingly brings this fate upon himself. This however is not an act of self pride but simply natural curiosity. His pride only lies in the self conviction that he can defy the oracle and change the course of his fate.

He persistently sends Creon to Tiresias (the priest to find out why his people are ill. He however cannot handle the answers he gets. He accuses Creon of plotting with the priest to overthrow him. When he questions Jocasta about the death of Laius, both he and Jocasta begin to see parallels in their past-the same prophecy. She wants to remain blind to the reality, insisting the oracles are silly, but continues to pray at the altar-revealing her self-knowledge to the audience. The messenger says that the shepherd was the one who gave him a baby bound at the ankles, Jocasta knows the truth but refuses to face it. She tries to protect Oedipus from knowing how disastrous the situation really is. He says: I cannot read this now. I must reveal the details of my birth. Jocasta replies, in the name of the gods, no! If you have some concern for your own life, then stop! Do not keep investigating this.”She says: O you unhappy man! May you never find out who you really are!

### **Fate versus Free will**

The gods, though not human beings, determine the fate of an individual. Sophocles play reflect his belief that suffering is a way to clarify the power of the gods and their intentions for humanity. Trying to avoid rather than accept one’s fate increases one’s suffering even more. This idea however does not eradicate free will and the choices characters make over the course of their lives. There is always a perpetual conflict between humans and the gods.

### **Blindness/ignorance**

All the characters either as blind or become blind, refuse to see the truth, or wish they had never seen the truth. This is a sign of the character’s ignorance. However, when they acquire the knowledge and understanding that leads to the truth, their vision becomes clear.

Tiresias, the old, blind prophet ironically is the first representation of truth behind Oedipus’ birth and life story. Creon when accused of wanting the throne says he does not want to deal with all the problems that come with running a city. He would rather remain blind to everything and enjoy his life as the brother of a king and queen.

Jocasta however blinds herself to the power of the gods by trying to avoid her fate. When she discovers the truth about Oedipus, she adopts a wilful blindness to the facts. Why should a man whose life seems ruled by chance live in fear – a man who never looks ahead, who has no certain vision of his future? She encourages Oedipus to join her blindness. She keeps it up until she can no longer deny the facts – commits suicide.

**Suffering.** Oedipus is tied, bound by pins at his ankles by his parents sent to the mountains to die. He suffers with sad discovery that he has murdered his father and got children with his own mother, also witnesses the suicide of a woman who is both his wife and mother of which he is the one who finds her hanging in their room. Her death raises his level of suffering to a degree that he can not stand. He takes the brooches from her clothes and uses the pins to gauge out his eyes, blinding himself permanently.

**The role of the gods:** They put society in order. They punish wrongdoers and administer poetic justice. They ensure moral standards amongst the mortals.

Living in perpetual night, you cannot harm me, or any man else that sees light” Oedipus.

## **Dramatic Techniques**

### **Symbolism:**

The crossroads where Oedipus kills Laius symbolizes the dilemma involved in the life of Oedipus and later the complexity in finding out the polluter of the land.

**Dramatic Irony.** The audience is aware of who the polluter of the land is but Oedipus and other characters do not.

**Tragic irony.** Oedipus curses and pronounces banishment on whoever the polluter of Thebes is before he gets the culprit. This has tragic effects on him as it later dawns on him that he is the criminal he is looking for. He thus has to tragically gouge out his eyes and has to banish himself from Thebes.

**Sarcasm.** Tiresias’ sarcastic remarks to Oedipus after the latter has made rude remarks about his lack of eye sight. Tiresias tells Oedipus thus:

“You are yourself the criminal you seek.”

**The Chorus.** The chorus commentates and reacts to the events on stage. They provide the audience with clarification and reinforce the morals of the play.

**Dramatic reversal.** There is a sudden twist of events when Oedipus is revealed as the culprit and he has to banish himself after gouging out his eyes

## LESSONS

- Pride goes before a fall
- One cannot escape one's fate. As we run away from our fate, we instead come closer to it.
- The supernatural and their representatives should be respected.
- One good turn deserves another.
- Suicide shouldn't be a solution to problems.
- A man is as good as his word.