

The Oedipus Trilogy: Still Relevant Today?

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.

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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

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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

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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?

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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

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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.

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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!

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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.]

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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.

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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.

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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

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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.

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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.

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

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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?

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

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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