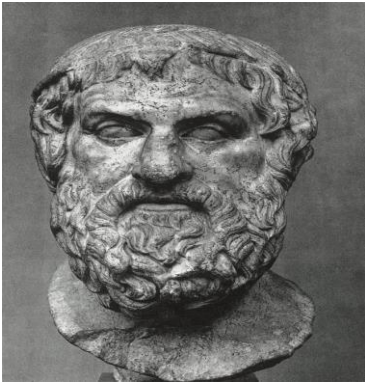


Sophocles and *Oedipus Rex*

1. Life of Sophocles



Probably Sophocles was the king of the Ancient Greek dramatist. He made his first appearance as a contending dramatist at the City Dionysia in 486 B.C., when he was twenty-eight years old, winning a victory over Aeschylus. From that time on he generally exhibited every other year and won in all eighteen victories at the City Dionysia besides those won at Lenaea. Far from being a tortured artist working at the fringes of society, Sophocles was among the most popular and well-respected men of his day. Like most good Athenians, Sophocles was involved with the political and military affairs of Athenian democracy.

In 443/2 Sophocles was "hellanotamis" or treasurer of the Greeks and managed with nine others, the treasury of the Delian League. During the Samian War (441-439) and the Archidamian War (431-421) Sophocles was general. In 413/2, Sophocles was one of the board of 10 commissioners in charge of the council. Throughout his life he was a close friend of the foremost statesman of the day, Pericles. At the same time, Sophocles wrote prolifically. He is believed to have authored 123 plays, only seven of which have survived. Sophocles lived a long life, but not long enough to witness the downfall of his Athens.

Toward the end of his life, Athens became entangled in a war with other city-states jealous of its prosperity and power, a war that would end the glorious century during which Sophocles lived. This political fall also marked an artistic fall, for the unique art of Greek theater began to fade and eventually died. Since then, we have had nothing like it. Nonetheless, we still try to read it, and we often misunderstand it by thinking of it in terms of the categories and assumptions of our own arts. Greek theater still needs to be read, but we must not forget that, because it is so alien to us, reading these plays calls not only for analysis, but also for imagination.

2. The Oedipus Trilogy: *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*.

2-1 *Antigone*

Antigone [æntɪˈɡɒniː | -ni] was probably the first of the three Theban plays that Sophocles wrote, although the events dramatized in it happen last. Antigone is one of the first heroines in literature, a

woman who fights against a male power structure, exhibiting greater bravery than any of the men who scorn her. *Antigone* is not only a feminist play but a radical one as well, making rebellion against authority appear splendid and noble.

2-2 *Oedipus Rex*

The story of Oedipus [édapəs | í:d-] was well known to Sophocles' audience. Oedipus arrives at Thebes [θí:bz] a stranger and finds the town under the curse of the Sphinx, who will not free the city unless her riddle is answered. Oedipus solves the riddle and, since the king has recently been murdered, becomes the king and marries the queen. In time, he comes to learn that he is actually a Theban, the king's son, cast out of Thebes as a baby. He has killed his father and married his mother. Horrified, he blinds himself and leaves Thebes forever.

The story was not invented by Sophocles. Quite the opposite: the play's most powerful effects often depend on the fact that the audience already knows the story. Since the first performance of *Oedipus Rex*, the story has fascinated critics just as it fascinated Sophocles. Aristotle used this play and its plot as the supreme example of tragedy. Sigmund Freud famously based his theory of the "Oedipal Complex" on this story, claiming that every boy has a latent desire to kill his father and sleep with his mother. The story of Oedipus has given birth to innumerable fascinating variations, but we should not forget that this play is one of the variations, not the original story itself.

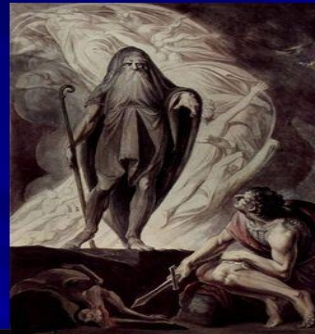
2-3 *Oedipus at Colonus*

Beginning with the arrival of Oedipus in Colonus [kalóunəs] after years of wandering, *Oedipus at Colonus* ends with Antigone setting off toward her own fate in Thebes. In and of itself, *Oedipus at Colonus* is not a tragedy; it hardly even has a plot in the normal sense of the word. Thought to have been written toward the end of Sophocles' life and the conclusion of the Golden Age of Athens. *Oedipus at Colonus*, the last of the Oedipus plays, is a quiet and religious play, one that does not attempt the dramatic fireworks of the others. Written after *Antigone*, the play for which it might be seen as a kind of prequel, *Oedipus at Colonus* seems not to look forward to the suffering that envelops that play but back upon it, as though it has already been surmounted.

3. Characters

Oedipus Rex: Characters

- Oedipus- King of Thebes
- Jocasta- Queen of Thebes
- **Creon**- Jocasta's brother; acted as king when Laius was murdered
- **Tiresias**- blind prophet
- Messenger from Corinth (city that Oedipus is originally from)
- Shepherd
- **Antigone and Ismene**- Oedipus and Jocasta's daughters
- Chorus and Chorus leader (**Choragus**) - act as the "voices of society"



1) **Oedipus:** The protagonist of *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Oedipus becomes king of Thebes before the action of *Oedipus Rex* begins. He is renowned for his intelligence and his ability to solve riddles—he saved the city of Thebes and was made its king by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, the supernatural being that had held the city captive. Yet Oedipus is stubbornly blind to the truth about himself. His name's literal meaning ("swollen foot") is the clue to his identity—he was taken from the house of Laius as a baby and left in the mountains with his feet bound together. On his way to Thebes, he killed his biological father, not knowing who he was, and proceeded to marry Iokaste, his biological mother.



Still from Tyrone Guthrie's filmed adaptation of *Oedipus Rex*, 1957

2) Iokaste(Jocasta); Oedipus's wife and mother, and Kreon's sister. Iokaste appears only in the final scenes of *Oedipus Rex*. In her first words, she attempts to make peace between Oedipus and Kreon, pleading with Oedipus not to banish Kreon. She is comforting to her husband and calmly tries to urge him to reject Tiresias's terrifying prophecies as false. Iokaste solves the riddle of Oedipus's identity before Oedipus does, and she expresses her love for her son and husband in her desire to protect him from this knowledge.



3) Kreon(Creon): Iokaste's brother and Oedipus's brother-in-law, Kreon appears more than any other character in the three plays combined. In him more than anyone else we see the gradual rise and fall of one man's power. Early in *Oedipus Rex*, Kreon claims to have no desire for kingship. Yet, when he has the opportunity to grasp power at the end of that play, Kreon seems quite eager. We learn in *Oedipus at Colonus* that he is willing to fight with his nephews for this power, and in *Antigone* Kreon rules Thebes with a stubborn blindness that is similar to Oedipus's rule. But Kreon never has our sympathy in the way Oedipus does, because he is bossy and bureaucratic, intent on asserting his own authority.

4) Tiresias: The blind soothsayer of Thebes, appears in both *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. In *Oedipus Rex*, Tiresias tells Oedipus that he is the murderer he hunts, and Oedipus does not believe him. In *Antigone*, Tiresias tells Kreon that Kreon himself is bringing disaster upon Thebes, and Kreon does not believe him. Yet, both Oedipus and Kreon claim to trust Tiresias deeply. The literal blindness of the soothsayer points to the metaphorical blindness of those who refuse to believe the truth about themselves when they hear it spoken.

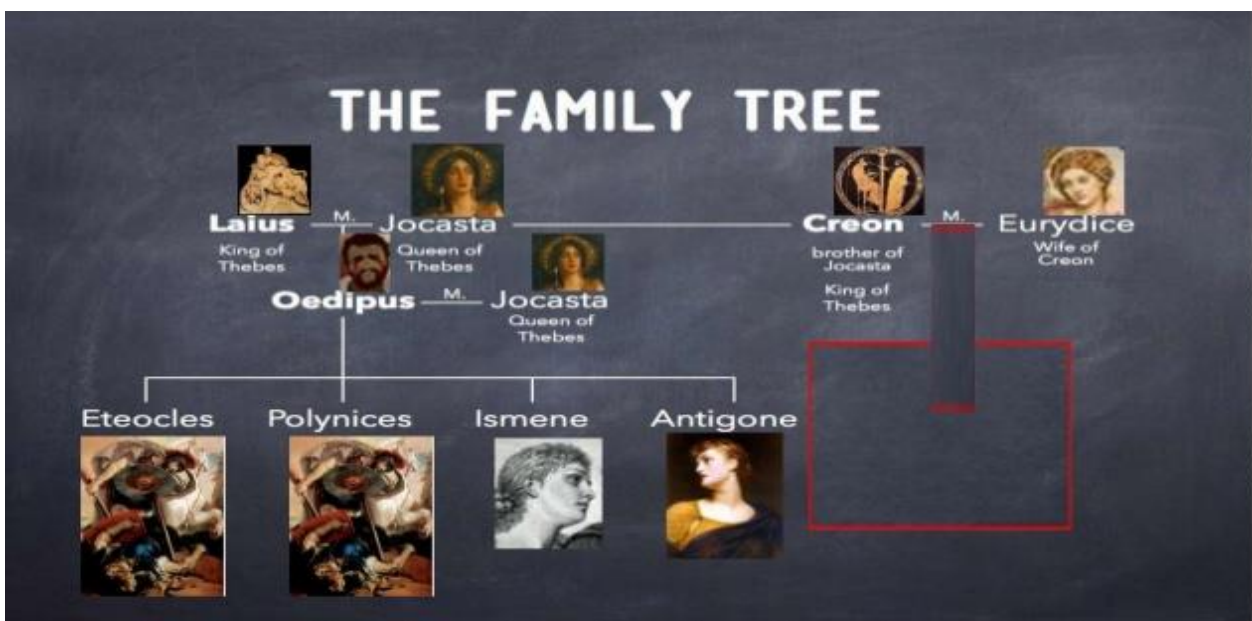
5) Chorus: Sometimes comically obtuse or fickle, sometimes perceptive, sometimes melodramatic, the Chorus reacts to the events onstage. The Chorus's reactions can be lessons in how the audience should interpret what it is seeing, or how it should *not* interpret what it is seeing.

6) Antigone: Child of Oedipus and Iokaste, and therefore both Oedipus's daughter and his sister. Antigone appears briefly at the end of *Oedipus Rex*, when she says goodbye to her father as Kreon prepares to banish Oedipus. She appears at greater length in *Oedipus at Colonus*, leading and caring for her old, blind father in his exile. But Antigone comes into her own in *Antigone*. As that play's protagonist, she demonstrates a courage and clarity of sight unparalleled by any other character in the three Theban plays. Whereas other characters—Oedipus, Kreon, Polynices—are reluctant to acknowledge the consequences of their actions, Antigone is unabashed in her conviction that she has done right.

7) Ismene: Oedipus's daughter Ismene appears at the end of *Oedipus Rex* and to a limited extent in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. Ismene's minor part underscores her sister's grandeur

and courage. Ismene fears helping Antigone bury Polynices but offers to die beside Antigone when Kreon sentences her to die. Antigone, however, refuses to allow her sister to be martyred for something she did not have the courage to stand up for.

8) Polynices: Son of Oedipus, and thus also his brother. Polynices appears only very briefly in *Oedipus at Colonus*. He arrives at Colonus seeking his father's blessing in his battle with his brother, Eteocles, for power in Thebes. Polynices tries to point out the similarity between his own situation and that of Oedipus, but his words seem opportunistic rather than filial, a fact that Oedipus points out.



4. Setting: Thebes



Thebes was located in Boeotia, central Greece. The city was founded by the Phoenician Cadmus in the sixteenth century B.C., afterwards made illustrious by the legends of Laius, Oedipus, and of Antigone, the rivalry of Eteocles and Polynices, and the unfortunate siege by the seven chiefs of Argos. After the taking of Troy, Thebes became the capital of

Boeotia, but did not succeed in imposing its hegemony, for Athens supported certain towns in their opposition. Thebes allied itself to the Persians against the Greeks, but was conquered with them and submitted to Sparta, until its two generals Pelopidas and Epaminondas restored it to the first rank. The death of the latter before Mantinea in 363 B.C., opened a new series of misfortunes for the city. Conquered by Philip of Macedon, in 338 B.C., it revolted two years after and drew on itself the vengeance of Alexander who killed or sold all the inhabitants and destroyed all the houses save that of the poet Pindar. Rebuilt in 316 B.C., by Cassander, it was taken and retaken again. In the second century B.C., the acropolis alone was inhabited.

5. Plot Summary of *Oedipus Rex*

A plague has stricken Thebes. The citizens gather outside the palace of their king, Oedipus, asking him to take action. Oedipus replies that he already sent his brother-in-law, Kreon, to the Oracle at Delphi to learn how to help the city. Kreon returns with a message from the Oracle: the plague will end when the murderer of Laius, former king of Thebes, is caught and expelled; the murderer is within the city. Oedipus questions Kreon about the murder of Laius [léias / láias], who was killed by thieves on his way to consult an oracle. Only one of his fellow travelers escaped alive. Oedipus promises to solve the mystery of Laius's death, vowing to curse and drive out the murderer.

Oedipus sends for Tiresias[tairí : siās], the blind prophet, and asks him what he knows about the murder. Tiresias responds cryptically, lamenting his ability to see the truth when the truth brings nothing but pain. At first he refuses to tell Oedipus what he knows. Oedipus curses and insults the old man, going so far as to accuse him of the murder. These taunts provoke Tiresias into revealing that Oedipus himself is the murderer. Oedipus naturally refuses to believe Tiresias's accusation. He accuses Kreon and Tiresias of conspiring against his life, and charges Tiresias with insanity. He asks why Tiresias did nothing when Thebes suffered under a plague once before. At that time, a Sphinx held the city captive and refused to leave until someone answered her riddle. Oedipus brags that he alone was able to solve the puzzle. Tiresias defends his skills as a prophet, noting that Oedipus's parents found him trustworthy. At this mention of his parents, Oedipus, who grew up in the distant city of Corinth, asks how Tiresias knew his parents. But Tiresias answers enigmatically. Then, before leaving the stage, Tiresias puts forth one last riddle, saying that the murderer of Laius will turn out to be both father and brother to his own children, and the son of his own wife.

After Tiresias leaves, Oedipus threatens Kreon with death or exile for conspiring with the prophet. Oedipus's wife, Iokaste (also the widow of King Laius), enters and asks why the men shout at one another. Oedipus explains to Iokaste [aiokástē] that the prophet has charged him with Laius's murder, and Iokaste replies that all prophecies are false. As proof, she notes that the Delphic oracle once told Laius he would be murdered by his son, when in fact his son was cast out of Thebes as a

baby, and Laius was murdered by a band of thieves. Her description of Laius's murder, however, sounds familiar to Oedipus, and he asks further questions. Iokaste tells him that Laius was killed at a three-way crossroads, just before Oedipus arrived in Thebes. Oedipus, stunned, tells his wife that he may be the one who murdered Laius. He tells Iokaste that, long ago, when he was the prince of Corinth, he overheard someone mention at a banquet that he was not really the son of the king and queen. He therefore traveled to the Oracle of Delphi, who did not answer him but did tell him he would murder his father and sleep with his mother. Hearing this, Oedipus fled his home, never to return. It was then, on the journey that would take him to Thebes, that Oedipus was confronted and harassed by a group of travelers, whom he killed in self-defense. This skirmish occurred at the very crossroads where Laius was killed.

Oedipus sends for the man who survived the attack, a shepherd, in the hope that he will not be identified as the murderer. Outside the palace, a messenger approaches Iokaste and tells her that he has come from Corinth to inform Oedipus that his father, Polybus, is dead, and that Corinth has asked Oedipus to come and rule there in his place. Iokaste rejoices, convinced that Polybus's death from natural causes has disproved the prophecy that Oedipus would murder his father. At Iokaste's summons, Oedipus comes outside, hears the news, and rejoices with her. He now feels much more inclined to agree with the queen in deeming prophecies worthless and viewing chance as the principle governing the world. But while Oedipus finds great comfort in the fact that one-half of the prophecy has been disproved, he still fears the other half—the half that claimed he would sleep with his mother.

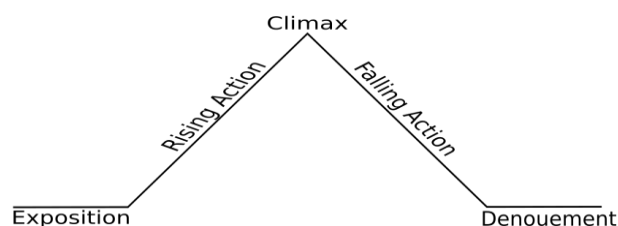
The messenger remarks that Oedipus need not worry, because Polybus and his wife, Merope (Greek Μερόπη), are not Oedipus's biological parents. The messenger, a shepherd by profession, knows firsthand that Oedipus came to Corinth as an orphan. One day long ago, he was tending his sheep when another shepherd approached him carrying a baby, its ankles pinned together. The messenger took the baby to the royal family of Corinth, and they raised him as their own. That baby was Oedipus. Oedipus asks who the other shepherd was, and the messenger answers that he was a servant of Laius.

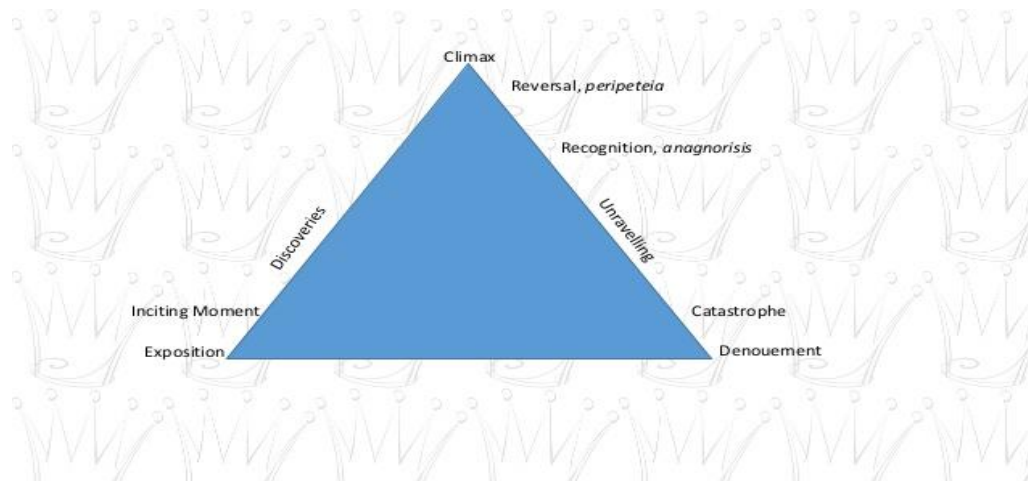
Oedipus asks that this shepherd be brought forth to testify, but Iokaste, beginning to suspect the truth, begs her husband not to seek more information. She runs back into the palace. The shepherd then enters. Oedipus interrogates him, asking who gave him the baby. The shepherd refuses to disclose anything, and Oedipus threatens him with torture. Finally, he answers that the child came from the house of Laius. Questioned further, he answers that the baby was in fact the child of Laius himself, and that it was Iokaste who gave him the infant, ordering him to kill it, as it had been prophesied that the child would kill his parents. But the shepherd pitied the child, and decided that the prophecy could be avoided just as well if the child were to grow up in a foreign city, far from his true parents. The shepherd therefore passed the boy on to the shepherd in Corinth.

Realizing who he is and who his parents are, Oedipus screams that he sees the truth and flees back into the palace. The shepherd and the messenger slowly exit the stage. A second messenger enters and describes scenes of suffering. Iokaste has hanged herself, and Oedipus, finding her dead, has pulled the pins from her robe and stabbed out his own eyes. Oedipus now emerges from the palace, bleeding and begging to be exiled. He asks Kreon to send him away from Thebes and to look after his daughters, Antigone and Ismene. Kreon, covetous of royal power, is all too happy to oblige.

6. Structure:

In his *Poetics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle put forth the idea that "A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end." This three-part view of a plot structure (with a beginning, middle, and end – technically, the protasis, epitasis, and catastrophe) prevailed until the Roman drama critic Horace advocated a 5-act structure in his *Ars Poetica*: "Neue minor neu sit quinto productior actu fabula" (lines 189-190) ("A play should not be shorter or longer than five acts"). According to Gustav Freytag, a drama is divided into five parts which some refer to as a dramatic arc: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement. Freytag Pyramids helps a writer organize their thoughts and ideas which describe the main problem of the drama, the rising action, the climax and the falling action. Although Freytag's analysis of dramatic structure is based on five-act plays, it can be applied (sometimes in a modified manner) to short stories and novels as well, making dramatic structure a literary element.





Prologue → Parodos → Scene I → Ode I → Scene II → Ode II → Scene III → Ode III → Scene
 IV → Ode IV → Exodus

- * Strophe=The first movement of the chorus in classical Greek drama while turning from one side of the orchestra to the other.
- * Antistrophe= The choral movement in classical Greek drama in the opposite direction from that of the strophe
- * Ode=A choric song of classical Greece, often accompanied by a dance and performed at a public festival or as part of a drama. The Chorus is completely confused by the accusations of Tiresias.

Even *Oedipus Rex* can be divided into 5 parts according to Freytag Pyramid.

- 1) **Exposition:** The People of Thebes gather to ask God to help them out of the plague. The Priest and the King also are present to hear the voices of the People. King Oedipus said them he sent Kreon to hear the oracle of the Delphi to know the cause of the plague.

(Prologue)

- 2) **Rising Action:** Kreon arrives with the oracle and tells the King that the cause of the plague is the murderer of the former king Laios and that the Thebans must revenge the murder of the king to get rid of the plague. (Prologue & Parodos) **Major conflict** -Tiresias tells Oedipus that Oedipus is responsible for the plague, and Oedipus refuses to believe him. The king accuses Tiresias and Kreon of their treason. The King tries to find out the murder by summoning many people who can know the secret of the murder. (Scene I / Ode I / Scene II) **Turning Point-** Then a messenger came from Corinth to report the death of the King Polibus and to ask Oedipus to be their king. The messenger also tells Oedipus that he was not real son of Polibus and Merope. (Scene III) Oedipus summons all the people including shepherds and messengers in order to find the secret of the murder of the former king and of his own identity.

(Scene IV, Ode IV)

- 3) **Climax** - The climax occurs when Oedipus learns, quite contrary to his expectations, that *he* is the man responsible for the plague that has stricken Thebes—*he* is the man who killed his father and slept with his mother. (Exodus)
- 4) **Falling action** - In *Oedipus Rex*, the consequences of Oedipus's learning of his identity as the man who killed his father and slept with his mother are the falling action. This discovery drives Iokaste to hang herself, Oedipus to poke out his own eyes. (Exodus)

- 5) **Denouement** Kreon to banish Oedipus from Thebes. He meets his children and say goodbye to them and Choragos laments over his fate. (Exodus)

7. Themes

1) Trying to avoid the Truth - When Oedipus and Iokaste begin to get close to the truth about Laius's murder, in *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus fastens onto a detail in the hope of exonerating himself. Iokaste says that she was told that Laius was killed by "strangers," whereas Oedipus knows that he acted alone when he killed a man in similar circumstances. This is an extraordinary moment because it calls into question the entire truth-seeking process Oedipus believes himself to be undertaking. Both Oedipus and Iokaste act as though the servant's story, once spoken, can be refuted. Neither can face the possibility of what it would mean if the servant were wrong. This is perhaps why Iokaste feels she can tell Oedipus of the prophecy that her son would kill his father, and Oedipus can tell her about the similar prophecy given him by an oracle (ll.867–875), and neither feels compelled to remark on the coincidence; or why Oedipus can hear the story of Iokaste binding her child's ankles (ll.780–781) and not think of his own swollen feet. While the information in these speeches is largely intended to make the audience painfully aware of the tragic irony, it also emphasizes just how desperately Oedipus and Iokaste do not want to avoid the obvious truth: they look at the circumstances and details of everyday life and pretend not to see them.

2) Fate vs. Free Will- The ancient Greeks believed that their gods could see the future, and that certain people could access this information. Prophets or seers, like blind Tiresias, saw visions of things to come. Oracles, priests who resided at the temples of gods—such as the oracle to Apollo at Delphi—were also believed to be able to interpret the gods' visions and give prophecies to people who sought to know the future. During the fifth century B.C., however, when Sophocles was writing his plays, intellectuals within Athenian society had begun to question the legitimacy of the oracles and of the traditional gods. Some of this tension is plain to see in *Oedipus Rex*, which hinges on two prophecies. The first is the prophecy received by King Laius of Thebes that he would have a

son by Queen Iokaste who would grow up to kill his own father. The second is the prophecy that Oedipus received that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Laius, Iokaste, and Oedipus all work to prevent the prophecies from coming to pass, but their efforts to thwart the prophecies are what actually bring the prophecies to completion.

This raises a question at the heart of the play: does Oedipus have any choice in the matter? He ends up killing his father and marrying his mother without knowing it—in fact, when he is trying to *avoid* doing these very things. Does he have free will—the ability to choose his own path—or is everything in life predetermined? Iokaste argues that the oracles are a sham because she thinks the prediction that her son would kill her husband never came to pass. When she finds out otherwise, she kills herself. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus has fulfilled his terrible prophecy long ago, but without knowing it. He has *already* fallen into his fate. One could argue that he *does* have free will, however, in his decision to pursue the facts about his past, despite many suggestions that he let it go. In this argument, Oedipus's destruction comes not from his deeds themselves but from his persistent efforts to learn the truth, through which he reveals the true nature of those terrible deeds. Oedipus himself makes a different argument at the end of the play, when he says that his terrible deeds were fated, but that it was he alone who chose to blind himself. Here, Oedipus is arguing that while it is impossible to avoid one's fate, how you respond to your fate is a matter of free will.

3) Guilt and Shame- The play begins with a declaration from the oracle at Delphi: Thebes is suffering because the person guilty of the murder of King Laius has not been brought to

justice. Oedipus sets himself the task of discovering the guilty party—so guilt, in the legal sense, is central to *Oedipus Rex*. Yet ultimately it is not legal guilt but the emotion of guilt, of remorse for having done something terrible, that drives the play. After all, one can argue that neither Oedipus nor Iokaste are guilty in a legal sense. They committed their acts unknowingly. Yet their overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame for violating two of the basic rules of civilized humanity—the taboos against incest and killing one's parents—are enough to make Iokaste commit suicide and to make Oedipus blind himself violently.

8. Motifs *Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.*

- 1) **Suicide** - Almost every character who dies in the three Theban plays does so at his or her own hand (or own will, as is the case in *Oedipus at Colonus*). Iokaste hangs herself in *Oedipus Rex* and Antigone hangs herself in *Antigone*. Eurydice and Haemon stab themselves at the end of *Antigone*. Oedipus inflicts horrible violence on himself at the end of his first play, and willingly goes to his own mysterious death at the end of his second. Polynices and Eteocles die in battle with one another, and it could be argued that Polynices' death at least is self-inflicted in that he has heard his father's curse and knows that his cause is doomed. Incest motivates or indirectly brings about all of the deaths in these plays.
- 2) **Sight and Blindness** - References to eyesight and vision, both literal and metaphorical, are very frequent in all three of the Theban plays. Quite often, the image of clear vision is used as a metaphor for knowledge and insight. In fact, this metaphor is so much a part of the Greek way of thinking that it is almost not a metaphor at all, just as in modern English: to say "I see the truth" or "I see the way things are" is a perfectly ordinary use of language. However, the references to eyesight and insight in these plays form a meaningful pattern in combination with the references to literal and metaphorical blindness. Oedipus is famed for his clear-sightedness and quick comprehension, but he discovers that he has been blind to the truth for many years, and then he blinds himself so as not to have to look on his own children/siblings. Kreon is prone to a similar blindness to the truth in *Antigone*. Though blind, the aging Oedipus

finally acquires a limited prophetic vision. Tiresias is blind, yet he sees farther than others. Overall, the plays seem to say that human beings can demonstrate remarkable powers of intellectual penetration and insight, and that they have a great capacity for knowledge, but that even the smartest human being is liable to error, that the human capability for knowledge is ultimately quite limited and unreliable.

9. Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

- 1) **Oedipus's Swollen Foot:** Oedipus gets his name, as the Corinthian messenger tells us in *Oedipus Rex*, from the fact that he was left in the mountains with his ankles pinned together. Iokaste explains that Laius abandoned him in this state on a barren mountain shortly after he was born. The injury leaves Oedipus with a vivid scar for the rest of his life. Oedipus's injury symbolizes the way in which fate has marked him and set him apart. It also symbolizes the way his movements have been confined and constrained since birth, by Apollo's prophecy to Laius.
- 2) **The Three-way Crossroads:** In *Oedipus Rex*, Iokaste says that Laius was slain at a place where three roads meet. This crossroads is referred to a number of times during the play, and it symbolizes **the crucial moment**, long before the events of the play, when Oedipus began to fulfill the dreadful prophecy that he would murder his father and marry his mother. A crossroads is a place where a choice has to be made, so crossroads usually symbolize **moments where decisions will have important consequences** but where different choices are still possible. In *Oedipus Rex*, the crossroads is part of the distant past, dimly remembered, and Oedipus was not aware at the time that he was making a fateful decision. In this play, the crossroads symbolizes fate and the awesome power of prophecy rather than freedom.