

Christ Presbyterian Academy
AP English: Literature and Composition
AP European History
The Oedipus Cycle Study Guide

ABSTRACT:

In the 5th and 6th centuries before the birth of Christ, an ancient civilization reached such heights of intellectual and artistic achievement that every succeeding period of Western culture from the Roman Empire to the 20th century has been heavily in its debt. Drama and especially tragedy rose out of a creative outburst in this society and explored political, religious, and social theories, ideas, and beliefs. Oral tradition served as the primary source for Greek dramatists who explored the myths and stories that consisted of the only national memory of the remote past. These myths lived in transference from generation to generation; in drama they represented more than the masked actors on stage and took on symbolic significance of life and death, the ambitions, and hopes, and fears of the people. Sophocles's three plays explore man's relationship to the gods, as the action raises questions about the function of the deities and explores the mystery of the divine purpose. The plays show concern not only for the fate of the hero but also for the fate of the city which he depends, attacks, rules, or represents.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Much about the specifics of the playwright Sophocles is left to chance or speculation. Scholars agree that the dramatist was born in Greece in 497 or 496 B.C.; he grew up in a wealthy family, which allowed him to obtain an education. By the time he was sixteen years old, Sophocles had already distinguished himself throughout Colonus. The playwright participated in the annual festival honoring Greek god Dionysus, winning eighteen coveted first place prizes for his works. Sophocles's masterpiece, *The Oedipus Cycle* or *The Theban Plays* chronicles the life of mythical King Oedipus of Thebes and his descendents. Written across 36 years, the trilogy remains one of the staples of Greek tragedy found in the vault of the Western Canon.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

The questions serve to guide your reading and analysis of the plays of Sophocles. Students must answer a *minimum* of 6 questions **per play** in order to prepare for in-class discussion, analysis, and assessment over the works (students should complete a minimum of 18 questions total for Sophocles's works).

Oedipus the King

1. Find instances of dramatic irony throughout the play. What do you think were the effects of dramatic irony on the Greek audience? Try to find ways in which these examples of dramatic irony might be related to the themes of human ignorance and godlike knowledge. How might they be related to religious prophecy and / or the literary technique of foreshadowing?
2. Who do you think is responsible for the tragedy of Oedipus? (Some candidates: the gods (Apollo), fate, Oedipus' hubris, Tiresias, Iocaste and Laios, the sphinx.)
3. Try to find examples of Oedipus' hubris. Why do you think Oedipus accuses Creon and Teiresias of plotting against him? Even if he does have certain flaws, do you think they justify his horrible fate and final punishment?

4. Give some examples of how the symbols of blindness / sight are connected with the themes of ignorance / knowledge in this play. How do you think the solution to the riddle illustrates Oedipus' knowledge and ignorance?
5. Oedipus actually has to find the answer to several riddles: a) the Sphinx's riddle, b) the riddle of who killed Laios, and c) the riddle of his own birth. In what ways are these riddles and their answers similar and different? In what ways could the play be said to be about the riddle of existence?
6. There's a lot of talk about feet in this play. How are the motifs of the swollen foot and the limp related to the answers of the riddles? Can you find some ways in which they are related to the symbols of blindness / sight and themes of ignorance / knowledge?
7. What are some psychological reasons why Iocaste doesn't believe in prophets or oracles. What do you think prophets and / or oracles represent in these tragedies?
8. Do you think Oedipus is innocent? (If he is innocent, why doesn't he get angry and curse the gods? Does he blame the gods? If he is guilty, what are some of his flaws?)
9. Why do you think the gods are so nasty to Oedipus? Do you think Oedipus has any free will, or is he just a plaything of the gods?
10. In what ways is Oedipus' fate representative of that of every Greek? In what ways is Oedipus portrayed as a representative Athenian?
11. What do you think Sophocles is saying about the gods in this play? About fate or destiny? (The choruses and the numerous examples of dramatic irony can give you clues to the author's views.) Why do you think Oedipus does not curse the gods for his fate?
12. What functions does the Chorus have in this play?
13. Although Oedipus gives some reasons for blinding himself, can you think of some others? What do you think Oedipus learns from his suffering? What do you think the audience learns?
14. In what ways does Oedipus' story follow a typical hero's journey? What kind of hero do you think Oedipus is?

Oedipus at Colonus

1. Oedipus's attitude towards his guilt or innocence in this play is interesting. He keeps saying that he was ignorant of what he was doing (the theme of knowledge), or he says that he acted in self-defense and thus is "innocent" in the eyes of the law. Yet if Oedipus is as innocent as he claims, how can he think he is so impure that he dare not even touch Theseus? Can he be both guilty and innocent at the same time?
2. Do you think that Sophocles believes that suffering leads people to wisdom?
3. Why has Oedipus left Thebes?
4. Do you think that Oedipus blames the gods for his fate more than he does in Oedipus the King? If even Oedipus will not blame the gods for such a terrible fate, then what do you think Sophocles is saying about the gods and how they treat humans? Why do they

cause pain and suffering for humans? (This last question may not have any easy answer. One commentator says that "Oedipus imposes himself on the gods; it is not forgiveness, for there was no sin. [*Oedipus at Colonus*] is Sophocles' answer to the tragedy of life. He cannot justify God to man, but he can justify man to man" [Kitto 420]. What do you think of this comment?)

5. Do you agree with the Chorus that "Not to be born is best / when all is reckoned in" (358)? How do you account for this viewpoint? Do you think Sophocles agrees? Why or why not?

6. In what senses is Oedipus a hero? Notice how Oedipus moves from despised beggar to a figure of towering anger to a hero who leads Theseus, even though he is blind. After he dies, Oedipus becomes a hero-daimon whose "presence in the soil [is] feared by some and thanked by others" (Knox 265).

7. What do you think of Oedipus' "departure" at the end of the play? Think of some possible meanings for this strange ending.

8. Sophocles wrote *Oedipus at Colonus* when he was quite old, just as Athens was about to suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. Colonus (a suburb or part of Athens) was also Sophocles's hometown. How do these facts change your view of certain scenes?

Antigone

1. Do you agree with Bernard Knox when he says that Creon is presented in the opening scenes "in a light that the original audience was certain to regard as favorable?" Why or why not?

2. What do you think of Antigone as a person? In trying to bury her brother, is she "doing the right thing for the wrong reason?"

3. What do you think are Antigone's motives for her actions? Which of her motives seems most important to you and why?

4. What do you think Creon's motives are?

5. Name some of the conflicts in the play.

6. Compare and contrast the chorus on the wonders of man with statement from Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*: "Not to be born is best / when all is reckoned in" (358). Do you think that these two ideas are contradictory? Why or why not?

7. Why do you think the chorus is singing about how wonderful "man" is at this point in the play? Who do you think the chorus is referring to when they speak of the person "who weds himself to inhumanity / thanks to reckless daring?"

8. In the light of the sentry's speech, do you think Antigone wants to get caught?

9. Why do you think Ismene tries to "share the guilt?" Why do you think Antigone denies her?

10. Haimon accuses his father Creon of lacking judgement and reason. What quality do you think Creon lacks? Why do you think he kills Antigone as he does? In what ways could Antigone also be said to lack judgement?

11. Read carefully Antigone's speeches. Do you think that she has changed her motives for burying her brother? Why or why not? What do you think this speech says about her character and state of mind at that moment?

12. What do you think is the chorus' attitude towards Antigone? Do you think their attitude changes in any way? If so, why, and if not, why not? Try to figure out whose side the chorus is on throughout the play.

13. Who do you think are the tragic figures in this play? Why?

14. If Antigone is right, why do you suppose the gods don't save her?

15. What "wisdom" do you think Creon learns?