

OEDIPUS REX

TEACHER GUIDE

BACKGROUND

Oedipus is one of Greek mythology's most notorious characters. Sigmund Freud named the Oedipus complex, a theory that all young boys feel attraction for their mothers and hatred for their fathers, after this character who inadvertently murders his father and marries his mother.

Oedipus' story has horrified and intrigued audiences for over 2,000 years. The most famous (and arguably most powerful) tragedy produced by ancient Greece is *Oedipus Rex* (or Oedipus the King) by the playwright Sophocles. Greek spectators went to the theater for the same reasons we now go to the cinema: to be entertained. But they also went to experience what Aristotle called *catharsis* or the purging of negative emotions. By experiencing the tragic fates of fictional characters, the audience relieves themselves of their own sadness, frustration, and anger. The same theory applies to those who subject themselves to sad movies because they enjoy "a good cry."

Needless to say, Oedipus' story offers plenty of tragedy. Possibly the most tragic element of the story is that Oedipus is basically a good guy. Compared to other characters from mythology, he's a boy scout. It's not his fault that he didn't know the true identity of his parents. He was born doomed. His only crime was trying to escape his fate. This may seem like a poor reason for Oedipus to experience so much tragedy, but the Greeks equated fate with the gods. When Oedipus tries to change his fate, he's actually trying to prove the gods wrong.

Today many students read this play in

high school. Those who don't often read *Antigone* instead, a drama also by Sophocles that deals with the aftermath of Oedipus' reign. Both plays deal with similar themes: What happens when one ignores the gods? How quickly can one rise to power? How quickly can one fall from grace? Thanks to these still-relevant themes *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* will be read for many years to come.

SUMMARY

Shortly after giving birth to a new baby boy, Jocasta, queen of Thebes, is delivered a terrible prophecy by Tiresias, a blind prophet. Tiresias tells Jocasta and her husband, Laius the king, that the child they now hold in their arms will one day murder his father and marry his mother. Laius decides that the child cannot be allowed to live. He sends it into the wilderness with the royal shepherd with instructions to expose the child to the elements.

The kindly shepherd ignores this command and gives the child to a stranger he meets in the wilderness. This stranger is actually a servant of King Polybus of Corinth, and he delivers the baby to his sovereign, who is mourning the death of his own young son. The Corinthian king decides to adopt the baby as his son and heir, naming him Oedipus, which means "swollen foot."

Oedipus grows up believing his true parents are the king and queen of Corinth. When he turns eighteen, Oedipus journeys to Delphi to hear his fortune told by the oracle. She tells him the same prophecy that Tiresias uttered years before. Horrified, Oedipus decides that he cannot return to Corinth and decides to journey toward Thebes.

On the road to Thebes, Oedipus is attacked by an old traveler. Merely protecting himself, Oedipus inadvertently kills the old man. Oedipus flees the scene of the crime, continuing on toward Thebes. Next he

encounters the sphinx, a beast with the head of a woman, the body of a lion, the wings of an eagle, and the tail of a snake. This beast has been killing anyone who travels the road after they fail to solve her riddle: What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening? Oedipus answers her riddle correctly: The answer is man. The sphinx kills herself in anger.

When Oedipus arrives at Thebes, the people there make him their king for slaying the sphinx and marry him to the queen, Jocasta. It is not until years later, when a famine strikes Thebes, that the truth of Oedipus' situation becomes clear. The oracle demands that Oedipus find the murderer of Laius. Oedipus calls upon Tiresias to give him advice on locating the former king's murderer. The blind prophet's answer stuns everyone: Oedipus has accidentally murdered his father and married his mother. Jocasta hangs herself in grief, and Oedipus gouges out his eyes. Creon, Jocasta's brother, assumes control of Thebes and banishes Oedipus to the wilderness, where he wanders until his death.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What is a tragedy?
- Can a person avoid his or her fate?
- Why do horrible things sometimes happen to people who deserve better?

CONNECTIONS

Minority Report (2002) In this science fiction film criminals are arrested *before* they commit crimes thanks to oracle-like mutants. But the question remains: Are these predictions always right, or can the future (fate) be changed?

Sophocles' *Antigone* In this "follow-up" play to *Oedipus Rex*, Antigone, the daughter of

Oedipus, must take a stand against her uncle Creon when he refuses to give her brother a proper burial.

ANTICIPATORY QUESTIONS

- What is a *sphinx*?
- What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?
- What is *fate*?
- It's said that men often marry women who are *like* their mothers. Do you think this is true?
- What is an Oedipus complex?

TEACHABLE TERMS

- **Dramatic Irony** During the course of the story, the reader knows the true identity of Oedipus' parents while he does not. This is dramatic irony.
- **Antagonist** Having students determine exactly who or what is Oedipus' antagonist helps them develop an understanding of this term. (*Fate or the gods* is the most common answer.)
- **Irony** The idea of a blind prophet is ironic. Even though Tiresias can see the future, he cannot see the world around him.
- **Author's purpose** The ancient Greek playwright Sophocles is the main source for this myth. What is he trying to say about those who try to change their fate?

RECALL QUESTIONS

1. What is the prophecy concerning Oedipus?
2. What does the name *Oedipus* mean?
3. What is the riddle of the sphinx?
4. Why do the people of Thebes make Oedipus their king?
5. What does Oedipus do once he sees Jocasta has hanged herself?