Oedipus the King, Part II

Concept Vocabulary

You will encounter the following words as you read *Oedipus the King*, Part II. Before reading, note how familiar you are with each word. Then, rank the words in order from most familiar (1) to least familiar (3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORD</th>
<th>YOUR RANKING</th>
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<tr>
<td>oracles</td>
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<tr>
<td>prophecy</td>
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<td>inexorable</td>
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After completing the first read, come back to the concept vocabulary and review your rankings. Mark changes to your original rankings as needed.

First Read DRAMA

Apply these strategies as you conduct your first read. You will have an opportunity to complete the close-read notes after your first read.

**NOTICE** whom the story is about, what happens, where and when it happens, and why those involved react as they do.

**ANNOTATE** by marking vocabulary and key passages you want to revisit.

**CONNECT** ideas within the selection to what you already know and what you have already read.

**RESPOND** by completing the Comprehension Check and by writing a brief summary of the selection.

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**STANDARDS**

Reading Literature

By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9–10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

702  UNIT 6 • BLINDNESS AND SIGHT
Chorus. Let me walk humble in the paths of righteousness. Let my life be simple and full of awe for things divine. Let my tongue be free of arrogance. Let me never seek too much. For the gods live high in their imperial grace. We alone are frail and mortal. They live forever. Oblivion¹ will not cloud Their everlasting power. A tyrant is born from a womb of arrogance. And insolence grows fat, Fed by empty riches. He scales the dizzying cliffs and grasps the crown. But then his foot falters, falters, And he will fall, fall and lie crumpled in the dust. May the gods protect the man Who loves his country, Burns with the flame Of his love for the state. God is my eternal hope. In god I trust. In god I wait for death. But the proud man, The man who spits in the face of justice, The man who scorns the altars of the gods, That man will lose his empty dreams in the whirlwind of god’s fire. Greed will cut him down.

¹. Oblivion (uh BLHV ee uhn) n. condition of being entirely forgotten, especially in death.

CLOSE READ
ANNOTATE: In lines 1–14, mark details related to humility. Mark other details related to excessive pride.

QUESTION: Why does the playwright include these reminders of divine power and human frailty?

CONCLUDE: How do the concepts presented in this speech set up a context for the rest of the play’s action?
For he will never freely touch the divine
With hands that are sullied with money.
God’s lightning will strike,
Strike the arrogant, strike the sinner.

30 In cities where there is no chorus
That will sing god’s truth,
Fools will ever honor the wicked.
No more will I seek the mystery
Buried in the earth’s deep core.

35 No more will I respect Delphi, Elis, or Olympus
If god’s truth is not fulfilled on earth.
O Zeus, reveal your power!
O king, O lord of all, if that be true,
Reveal your eternal power to us!

40 The prophecies of Laius wither
And they die. Apollo is forsaken.
Faith and reverence are no more.

(enter Jocasta)

Jocasta. My lords of Thebes, I have come here with wreaths and incense to visit the shrines of the gods.

45 Oedipus is deeply troubled, haunted by images of terror.
He will not trust his reason as before. The new prophecies frighten him as did the old.
He listens to anyone who speaks of disaster for our house.
Nothing I say will comfort him, and so I turn to you, Lord Apollo, since you are closest to our grief.
I bring my prayers and petitions to you. Grant us deliverance from this curse.
We are like sailors in a storm when they see their helmsman’s terror.

50 Oh help us, lord!

(enter Messenger)

Messenger. Friends, can you direct me to the palace of the king, or better yet to the king himself?

Chorus. This is his palace. The king is inside. This is his wife, the mother of his children.

55 Messenger. May the gods bless her and all her house and bring happiness to everyone.
Jocasta. Greetings to you! Your kind words deserve a kind reply. Why have you come? What is your news?

Messenger. It is good both for the king and the royal house.

60 Jocasta. Then speak. Who sent you?

Messenger. I come from Corinth. The words I bring may bring you joy . . . though they are not without some pain.
Jocasta. What is it? How can there be both joy and pain?

Messenger. The people of Corinth have resolved to make

Oedipus their king.

Jocasta. Is not the aged Polybus still king?

Messenger. No, my lady, he is dead and in his grave.

Jocasta. The father of Oedipus is dead?

Messenger. If I tell a lie may I die myself.

Jocasta. Quick! Take this news to my lord.

You oracles of the gods, where are you now?

Oedipus spent his life running from his father. He was in terror
that he would kill him.

And now not his son’s hand but the hand of fate has cut him down.

(enter Oedipus)

Oedipus. My queen, Jocasta, why have you summoned me from
the palace?

Jocasta. Hear this man, and as he speaks think of what has
become of the solemn prophecies!

Oedipus. Who is he? What is his news?

Jocasta. He has come from Corinth, and his news is this: Your
father, Polybus, is dead.

Oedipus. What? Let me hear it, stranger, from your mouth.

Messenger. It cannot be said more plainly. Polybus is dead.

Oedipus. Did he die by treachery or from disease?

Messenger. It takes so little to send an old man to his rest.

Oedipus. Then the poor man died of sickness.

Messenger. Yes. He had lived a long life.

Oedipus. Ha! Oh my wife, where are the oracles now?

Why believe in the screams of whirling birds?

The Delphic god had sworn that I would kill my father.

But he is dead and in his grave! And here I stand, I never drew
my sword.

Perhaps they might argue that he died of grief for his long
absent son.

But only in that sense could I have killed him. But no . . . the
oracles are dead.

Like Polybus, their words are turned to dust.

Jocasta. Did I not say that this is how it would be?

Oedipus. You did. But my own fear betrayed me.

Jocasta. Then never think on it again!

Oedipus. But yet . . . I am afraid of my mother’s bed.

Jocasta. You are a mere man . . . the plaything of fate. You
cannot know the future.
So why be afraid? Live your life from day to day. Have no more cares.
Do not fear this marriage with your mother.
How many times have men lain with their mother in their dreams!
If you have sense in that head of yours, you will not be troubled by such thoughts.

**Oedipus.** I want to be as confident as you. But my mother is still alive.
And so I harbor still some fear.
**Jocasta.** But your father’s death is filled with light.
**Oedipus.** Yes. But I am afraid of the living.

**Messenger.** Who is this woman that you fear?
**Oedipus.** Merope, Polybus’s wife.
**Messenger.** Why should you fear her?
**Oedipus.** An oracle from the gods filled with terror.
**Messenger.** It is a secret or may a stranger hear of it?

**Oedipus.** It is no secret.
Apollo once prophesied that I would lie with my own mother and with these hands kill my father.
That is why for all these years I have stayed away from Corinth.
I traveled far but always longed to see my parents’ faces.

**Messenger.** This was the fear that turned you into an exile?
**Oedipus.** And the fear of killing my own father.
**Messenger.** Well, since I came to bring you pleasure, why should I not free you from this fear?
**Oedipus.** You would be well rewarded.

**Messenger.** I confess I hoped to profit when you returned to Corinth.
**Oedipus.** I will never go near my parents’ home.
**Messenger.** Then, my son, you do not know what you are doing.
**Oedipus.** How so, old man? Tell me all you know.

**Messenger.** Is this why you are afraid to come home?
**Oedipus.** Yes. In case the word of the gods comes true.
**Messenger.** You are afraid that you will be cursed through your parents?
**Oedipus.** I fear it now—I have feared it always.
**Messenger.** My son, your fears are baseless.
**Oedipus.** How baseless?
**Messenger.** Polybus had no blood ties to you.
**Oedipus.** Are you saying that Polybus was not my father?
**Messenger.** No more your father than I am.
Oedipus. But you are nothing to me.

Messenger. Nor was he.

Oedipus. Why then did he call me his son?

Messenger. Long ago I gave you to him as a gift.

Oedipus. What! But he loved me like a son.

Messenger. He had no children of his own. You touched his heart.

Oedipus. Was I a foundling\(^6\) . . . did you buy me?

Messenger. I found you in the woods of Cithaeron.

Oedipus. What were you doing there?

Messenger. I was a shepherd. I tended the mountain flocks.

Oedipus. A wandering shepherd . . . a hired hand?

Messenger. Yes—but the man who saved your life.


Messenger. Your ankles will tell the story.

Oedipus. Why remind me of my childhood pain?

Messenger. I removed the pin that bolted your feet\(^7\) together.

Oedipus. Yes . . . from my earliest memory I have had that mark.

Messenger. That is why you were given your name.

Oedipus. Who did it? My father, my mother? Tell me.

Messenger. I do not know. The man who gave you to me may know more.

Oedipus. I thought it was you who had found me.

Messenger. No, another shepherd gave you to me.

Oedipus. Who was he? Can you tell me who he was?

Messenger. He was one of Laius’s household.

Oedipus. The man who was once the king?

Messenger. Yes. He was a herdsman for King Laius.

Oedipus. Do you know if he is still alive?

Messenger. These Thebans here could better answer that.

Oedipus. Does any one of you know this shepherd?

Have you seen him in the fields or in the city? Answer me right away.

It is time to clear this matter up.

Chorus. I think he is talking about the very man that we have sent for.

But Queen Jocasta would know better than I.

Oedipus. Do you know this man we sent for? Is this the man the stranger speaks of?


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6. foundling \(\text{[FOWND \text{lihng}]}\)

\(\text{n. baby or small child found deserted.}\)

7. pin that bolted your feet

Laius pierced his baby’s feet and put a metal pin through them before sending him to be left on a mountainside to die. The name \textit{Oedipus} means “swollen foot.”
It is a waste of time to worry about such trivial things.

190  **Oedipus.** Trivial? I cannot find out the secret of my birth!

**Jocasta.** If you care for your life . . . stop now. No more! My pain is hard enough.

**Oedipus.** You need not worry. Even if my mother were a slave and the daughter of slaves, my baseness cannot touch you.

**Jocasta.** Oh listen to me. I am begging you. Seek no further.

**Oedipus.** I must go on. I must find the truth.

**Jocasta.** I am only thinking of your own good.

**Oedipus.** This breaks my patience!

**Jocasta.** May you never learn who you are!

**Oedipus.** Bring the man to me. Let her ever boast of her royal name.

**Jocasta.** I pity you. Pity is the only word I know. The rest is nothing.

*(exit Jocasta)*

200  **Chorus.** Oedipus, why has the queen left in such anguish? I am afraid of this silence. There is something terrifying hanging over us.

**Oedipus.** Let it hang there. I have made up my mind. I will find out who my parents were even if they were slaves.

205  Perhaps, with her woman’s pride, the queen scorns my parentage. But I cannot be dishonored. Fortune is my mother. As the moons change, so do my fortunes. If I am her child, why should I fear to trace my birth. I am who I am.

210  **Chorus.** If I am a prophet, if wisdom lives in me, Then in all reverence I proclaim that you, Mount Cithaeron—you are the nurse and mother Of our king! Before the next full moon we will worship you,

215  Cithaeron! We will dance in your honor, Protector of our royal house. Apollo, Lord, join in the dance! Who gave birth to you, child? Who of the immortals was your mother?

220  Pan, roaming god of the hills . . . was he your father? Or Apollo who haunts the woodland meadows? Or was it Hermes of Cylene? Or Dionysus Who lives among the mountain peaks? Did he take you from the arms of one

225  Of his dancing worshipers And smile the smile of a god?
Oedipus, beginning to see the truth
(enter Shepherd and Servants)

Oedipus. You elders of Thebes, though I have never seen him, I would guess that this is the man we have been waiting for. His age matches well with the messenger there.

And I recognize the men who are bringing him as my servants. But you perhaps have seen him before and know him. I yield to you.

Chorus. I recognize him. He is one of Laius’s servants . . . a simple herdsman but honest.

Oedipus. Let me ask you . . . you from Corinth . . . is this the man you meant?

Messenger. It is.

Oedipus. Now . . . old man . . . look into my eyes and answer me all that I ask.

Were you once a servant here?

Shepherd. I was. A slave . . . not bought but born on the estate.

Oedipus. What was your occupation . . . your livelihood?

Shepherd. For the best part of my life I tended sheep.

Oedipus. What pastures did you use the most?

Shepherd. Cithaeron and neighboring hills.

Oedipus. There you must have known this man.

Shepherd. Why would I . . . Which man??

Oedipus. This man here . . . since you met him years ago.

Shepherd. Offhand I . . . I can’t remember.

Messenger. My king, I’m not surprised . . . but I will awaken his memory.
I’m sure he remembers when we both herded our flocks on Cithaeron.
He had two flocks, I one. Three long summers we were friends.
Then when winter came I drove my flock home, and he drove his to Laius’s folds.
Isn’t that what happened?

Shepherd. It was a long time ago, but that is all true.

Messenger. Then do you remember giving me a child to bring up as my own?

Shepherd. Why do you ask me this question?

Messenger. Because this man who stands before you was that child.

Shepherd. Damnation take you! Hold your tongue!

Oedipus. Old man! Do not curse him.
What you said deserved our displeasure far more than he.
Shepherd. Oh my king . . . what did I say that was wrong?

Oedipus. You refused to answer about the child.

Shepherd. He made no sense!!! He talks like a fool.

Oedipus. If you won’t do it voluntarily, I’ll make you talk.

Shepherd. I beg you . . . do not treat an old man like this.

Oedipus. Arrest this man. Seize him and put him in irons.

Shepherd. Alas . . . what have I done? What is it you want to know?

Oedipus. Did you give this man the child?

Shepherd. I did. And I wish I had died that very day.

Oedipus. And die you will unless you tell the truth.

Shepherd. If I tell the truth, I lose twice over.

Oedipus. This wicked man is still being evasive.

Shepherd. No! I have confessed I gave him the child a long time ago.

Oedipus. Whose child was it? Was it yours, or was it given to you?

Shepherd. Not mine . . . it was given to me.

Oedipus. Which of our citizens gave it, and from what family?

Shepherd. Oh for god’s sake, master, ask no more!

Oedipus. If I have to question you again . . . you are finished.

Shepherd. Well then . . . it was a child of the house Laius.

Oedipus. Was he born of a slave or one of Laius’s own children?

Shepherd. Aahlh, I stand upon the razor’s edge. What must I say?


Shepherd. Know that the . . . the child . . . so people said . . . was his.
But the lady in the palace, your wife, she could tell you best.

Oedipus. What? She . . . she gave it to you?

Shepherd. My king, she did.

Oedipus. For what reason?

Shepherd. To put it to death.

Oedipus. The child’s own mother?

Shepherd. She was afraid of a terrible prophecy.

Oedipus. What prophecy?

Shepherd. It was said that he would kill his father.

Oedipus. Did you then give it to this old man?

Shepherd. I felt such pity for the child. I thought he’d take it to the safety of the country.

But he saved it for the worst of griefs.
For if you are indeed who this man says . . . god have mercy on you.
You were born into a life of misery.

**Oedipus.** Aaah, all has come to pass. All is true!

Light of the sun, let me never look on you again. I stand here, the most cursed of men.
Cursed in my birth. Cursed in an incestuous marriage.
Cursed in the murder of my father.

*(exit Oedipus)*

**Chorus.** Oh you generations of men,
Your life is as nothing.
A man is bathed in Fortune’s light
And then he fades, fades, and fades into the dark.
Your fate I pity, Oedipus, your sad fall,
Your birth, your very birth into this world.

Oh Zeus! His was the greatest mind of all.
He defeated the riddling sharp-clawed Sphinx
And won glory, happiness, and power.
He saved us, was our tower and strength.
We made him our lord, our King of Thebes.

Now who is more abased, more lost than he?
Whose life more desolate, whose grief more deep?
Oh Oedipus! In the same safe bed
You were both son and father!
How could the palace walls have so long kept their silence?

Time, that sees all things, has found you Oedipus,
Condemned the incest and the guilt.
Oh son of Laius! I wish that I had never
Looked on you. On you I pour my grief
As on the dead. From you I found new life.

*(enter Second Messenger)*

**Second Messenger.** Oh you mighty lords of Thebes!
Oh! What you must now hear, now see!
Oh! How you will mourn if still you respect this house of Labdacus.

No river could wash the bloodstains from this house. What now lies dark will soon be brought to light—anguish inflicted—all with full intent! Self-inflicted wounds cut deepest of all.

**Chorus.** Our past pains were deep enough. What more can you bring?

**Second Messenger.** My story is quickly told and quickly heard.
Our queen Jocasta is dead.

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10. **abased** (uh BAYST) adj. brought down or lowered.

11. **house of Labdacus** (LAB duh kuhs) the family that includes Laius, Jocasta, and their descendants, including Oedipus and his children.
Chorus. Alas! Poor lady, how did she die?

Second Messenger. By her own hand. I was not there to see the horror taking place.

But I will tell you, as best I can, of the wretched lady’s suffering. She ran into the forecourt of the palace. She was in a frenzy. Then she raced towards her bridal chamber. She was tearing her hair with both hands. Once she was in the room, she slammed the huge doors shut.

Laius! Oh Laius! she cried, called on her husband dead so long ago. She cast her mind upon the child that he had fathered . . . the child that had cut him down . . . the child who lay with his own mother and fathered the most monstrous brood. She cursed the bed that had fathered a husband by a husband and children by a child.

What happened after that I cannot tell. For Oedipus burst in on us screaming loud. All of us fixed our gaze upon him as he ran about in all directions. We did not witness the last agony of her life. For he ran up to us and demanded a sword, called on the wife that was no wife . . . the mother of his children and of his cursed self. Some god must have entered him then in his madness. It surely was no mortal . . . not one of us . . .

With a terrifying scream . . . as though someone called him from the other side . . . he hurled himself against the doors of her chamber. The hinges buckled, snapped—and he rushed inside. That’s when we saw her.

She was hanging there with a noose around her neck. When he saw her he roared like a mad man and unhooked the noose. Her poor body lay there on the ground and then, oh then . . . oh the terror . . . he tore the brooches from her robe and raised them and plunged them into the sockets of his eyes. He shouted aloud, “No longer shall these eyes see such agony as this! No longer see the things that I have done . . . the things that I have suffered. Those whom you should never have seen will now be shrouded in darkness, nor will you know those whom you love.” And as he cried these words . . . not once but many times . . . he stabbed his eyes until the blood ran down his cheeks and matted his beard . . . Aahhh, not drop by drop but in a stream of black rain.

This is the horror that has struck them both, man and wife alike. Till now this house was blessed with fortune. But from this day—Grief, ruin, death, and shame . . . all ills that have a name . . . all are theirs.
Chorus. Is there no respite from his pain?

Second Messenger. He cries aloud to unlock the doors and let all Thebes look upon him—his father’s killer—his mother’s . . . I cannot speak the word. He swears that he will exile himself from this land.

He will not stay to bring upon the house the curse he himself pronounced.

But his strength has left him. He has no one to guide him.
The torture that he suffers is more than any man can bear.

He will show himself to you. Even now they are opening the palace gates.

And you will see a sight that would provoke his bitterest enemy to tears.

Chorus. Oh pitiful, pitiful!! Never have these eyes seen such a terrible sight.

Sir, what madness descended on you?

What god has cursed you with this ungodly fate . . . you who were the most blessed of men?
Oh wretched, wretched Oedipus, I cannot look upon you.

Though I yearn to question and to learn, I must turn my eyes away in horror.

(enter Oedipus)

Oedipus. Ahhhh. Ahhhhhh. Pity me, pity me!

Where upon this earth am I to go in my pain?

Where will my voice be carried on the wind?

Oh god, where will it end?

Chorus. A place too terrible to tell, too dark to see.

Oedipus. Yes, even now the dark holds me in its grip.

Inexorable, unspeakable, eternal darkness.
The pain . . . yet again the pain. I am racked with spasms, tormented by memory.

Chorus. The past weighs heavy on the present.

Oedipus. My true and constant friend!

You are still beside me. You do not forget me nor spurn my blindness.

In my private dark I still know your voice.

Chorus. You have done terrible things. But why did you put out your eyes?

What demon set you on?

Oedipus. It was Apollo, my friends, Apollo.

He did this to me. He buried me in this pain.

But it was this hand, no other’s, that struck my eyes.

For why should I have eyes when there is nothing that I yearn to see?

Chorus. It is all that you say. It is true.
Oedipus. What could I look on to delight my heart?
What hear or touch to bring me joy?
Now take me from this place!
My friends, do not delay.
I am, of all men, the most accursed, most hated by the gods.
Chorus. I hear the depths of your despair but wish I had never looked upon your face.

Oedipus. I curse the man who pulled the bolt from my feet.
He saved my life but should have left me on the hills to die.
This heavy grief would not now lie upon me and those I love.
Chorus. I share your sad wish.

Oedipus. Then I would never have killed my father
Nor married the woman who gave me birth.
But now my name will live on as the child unholy,
The child who defiled his mother’s womb.
Was ever man more doomed than Oedipus?

Chorus. You have chosen a painful path.
It were better to be no more than live in darkness.

Oedipus. No! What I have done is right. You cannot change my mind.
If I had eyes . . . how could I look upon my father down below?
How look upon my mother? I have sinned against them both.
To hang myself would not wash clean that sin.
You might say that the sight of children warms the heart.
But children born as mine were born?
My heart could not feel joy to look on them . . . nor on the walls and temple statues of great Thebes.

No! Once I was its king—now I am nothing. I have condemned myself to this my fate.
I have put the brand of murderer upon my own head.
How could I have looked my people in the face?
No . . . if I had known how to stop the spring of listening, I would have done so.

I would have made this body a prison bereft of sight and sound.
Happiness lives only where sorrow cannot reach.
Cithaeron, why did you keep me safe . . . why did you not kill me?
Then I would never have had to bare my shame unto the world.

Polybus! Corinth! Oh my home!
For that is what I called you then . . . home of my ancestors,
home to my infant innocence.
Now all is turned to filth and evil.
Oh place where three roads meet, oh hidden pathway of doom!

You drank my blood!
Drank the blood that these hands shed . . . my father’s blood!
You were the silent witnesses to my crime. You drove me here to save the city.

CLOSE READ
ANNOTATE: In lines 476–491, mark the places that Oedipus addresses directly.

QUESTION: Why would the playwright have Oedipus speak to these places instead of to the chorus?

CONCLUDE: What is the effect of this use of direct address?
The blinded Oedipus
Oh marriage, fatal marriage . . . you gave me birth, and having spawned you sowed the seed again and placed upon this earth for all to see the mingled blood of fathers, brothers, children, brides, wives, and mothers. These horrors are the worst that mankind can ever know! Take me then . . . for to speak of them is living death . . . Take me from here with all speed—I beg you by the gods. Hide me in the earth. Kill me. Hurl me to the bottom of the sea . . . anywhere so long as you never see my face again. Come to me. Do not fear to touch this wretched body. Please . . . do not be afraid. I must bear the burden of my guilt alone.

(enter Creon)

Chorus. Here is Creon. He alone can grant your wishes. He is now sole ruler and guardian of the state.

Oedipus. Ahh! what words can I find to speak? Why should he trust me?

I have treated him like a bitter enemy.

Creon. I have not come here to mock you, Oedipus, nor to reproach you for what happened in the past. (he speaks to the Chorus) You should feel nothing but shame. If you have no sense of human decency, at least show your respect for the Sun, the god that gives us light and gives us life. Do not let this man stand here when the heavens and the earth cannot bear the sight of him. Take him to the palace. Only his family should see the pain.

Oedipus. Hear me . . . please, Creon. You are here, and it fills my heart with hope. You are so noble—I so low. I ask of you one thing . . . not for me but for you.

Creon. What is it?

Oedipus. Send me into exile now! Put me in some desert where I will never again hear a human voice.

Creon. This I had already decided. But first I had to consult the god.

Oedipus. The decision was made . . . death to the father-killer, the murderer. I am he.

Creon. Yes, that is what Apollo decreed. But now, in our sudden present grief, we should consult him again.

Oedipus. How can you ask him about such a man as I?

Creon. I can. For even you would believe him now.

Oedipus. Yes. I am humbled now. But I ask you this one thing:
Grace the woman who lies within with a burial that only you can command.
You are her brother, touch her with your love.
For me . . . Oh never let this city—this Thebes—be cursed with my living body.
No! Let me live in the hills . . . on Cithaeron. For that is where my name will ever live.
Cithaeron was to be my tomb. My father and my mother wished to bury me there.
Now let me find my death upon her slopes. For that is what they wished.
This much I know . . . disease will not cut me down, nor any common accident.
I was saved from death so I might die in grief beyond all mortal knowing.
So be it. I care no longer how fate treats me.
But my children. Oh Creon . . . for my sons I have less concern.
They are men, and they will survive.
But my daughters . . . two sweet innocents . . . ohhhh . . .
I can see them now . . . stealing a little of my food, sipping my wine. Laughing.
Oh look after them.
And one last request . . . let me hold them in my arms once more.
Let me touch them and let me weep.
Oh Creon, let your noble heart break.
I have no eyes. But I have hands. Let me touch them, let me feel what once I saw.
(enter Antigone and Ismene)
**Oedipus.** I have no words! I touch you . . . I touch you my pretty ones.
I hear your tears. Can this be . . . can Creon have given you to me?
**Creon.** I have. I know how much you loved them.
**Oedipus.** God bless you . . . may the fates shine warm upon you for your kindness.
Not like me! Oh my children, where are you? Let me take you in my arms.
I am your brother and your father.
Ahh, these hands that touch you now took the light from my eyes.
These hands touched the mother that was both yours and mine!
I cannot see you, but my eyes still weep. My life to come will be a path of pain.
For you there will be only grief.
At festivals, at feasts you will skulk in the shadows. You will burst into sudden tears. And when you are ready to marry—oh god, no man will woo you, no man will brook the shame. For this shame will cling forever to our house. It will never die.
Their father killed his father, spewed the seed where he himself
found life, and was the father of these children here . . . That is what they will say.
So no one will marry you . . . no one . . . you will be alone forever.

580 Creon, I turn to you now. You must be their father.
We who gave them life are dead. They are your family. . . .
Do not let them wander forever.
They are young. Pity them. Let them live in peace as I wander on the earth.

585 You must be their father now.
Do not let them be orphans of the dark . . . unmarried, beggar children. Oh pity them.
They are so young. And now they have nothing. Oh touch my hand, Lord Creon.

590 Swear pity.
My children, my heart is breaking.
Give me your word, Creon.
Oh my children, I wanted to talk to you.
But you are so young... so young.
My last words... find a home, find happiness, and be more fortunate than I.

**Creon.** Weep no more... go inside.

**Oedipus.** I will—but the pain lies heavy.

**Creon.** Weep no more. Time comes. Time comes.

**Oedipus.** I go but I have a last request.

**Creon.** Tell me.

**Oedipus.** Exile me, oh send me from this land!

**Creon.** That is what the gods will choose—not I.

**Oedipus.** But the gods loathe my very being!

**Creon.** Then they will grant your wish.

**Oedipus.** Take me from this place. I am ready.

**Creon.** Come. But you must let your children go.

**Oedipus.** Ohhhh, do not take my children from me!!!

**Creon.** You have nothing now. The power that made you great was your destruction.

**Chorus.** Look on this man, you citizens of Thebes. ... Mankind look hard.
This is and was Oedipus.
The man who defeated the Sphinx...

The man who became our great and brilliant king,
We envied him, we loved him, we admired him.
Now he is drowned in a sea of eternal pain.
Count no man happy till he dies.
Then, free from pain and sorrow—he may lie in peace.

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**MEDIA CONNECTION**

**Discuss It** How does listening to this audio performance, by L.A. Theatre Works, enhance your understanding of the characters and events featured in *Oedipus the King*?
Write your response before sharing your ideas.
Comprehension Check
Complete the following items after you finish your first read.

1. What news does the messenger bring Oedipus from Corinth?

2. What fear drove Jocasta to give her child to the shepherd?

3. What is the literal meaning of Oedipus’ name? How does this name connect him to his past?

4. Why does Oedipus curse the man who saved him when he was an infant?

5. What injury does Oedipus inflict upon himself after he sees Jocasta dead?

6. Notebook Confirm your understanding of the text by writing a summary.

RESEARCH

Research to Clarify Choose at least one unfamiliar detail from the text. Briefly research that detail. In what way does the information you learned shed light on an aspect of the play?

Research to Explore Conduct research on the way various artists have portrayed Oedipus over the centuries. You may want to share what you learn with the class.
Close Read the Text

1. This model, from lines 146–153, shows two sample annotations, along with questions and conclusions. Close read the passage, and find another detail to annotate. Then, write a question and your conclusion.

```
ANNOTATE: Oedipus does not understand what the messenger is saying.
QUESTION: Why is Oedipus so confused?
CONCLUDE: Everything he understands about his life is being challenged.
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```
Messenger. Polybus had no blood ties to you.
Oedipus. Are you saying that Polybus was not my father?
Messenger. No more your father than I am.
Oedipus. But you are nothing to me.
Messenger. Nor was he.
Oedipus. Why then did he call me his son?
Messenger. Long ago I gave you to him as a gift.
```

2. For more practice, go back into the play, and complete the close-read notes.

3. Revisit a section of the play you found important during your first read. Read this section closely, and annotate what you notice. Ask yourself questions such as “Why did the author make this choice?” What can you conclude?

Analyze the Text

**Notebook** Respond to these questions.

1. (a) What facts does Oedipus establish by questioning the old shepherd? (b) **Draw Conclusions** Why might this scene be considered the **climax**, or point of highest tension, in the tragedy? Explain.

2. (a) Why do you think Oedipus continues his investigation despite Jocasta’s strong objections? (b) **Extend** What might the playwright be saying about the importance of knowing oneself?

3. (a) At the end of the play, what does Oedipus want Creon to do? (b) **Analyze** Why does Oedipus insist that he should remain blind and living rather than dead? (c) **Make a Judgment** At the end of the play, is Oedipus ennobled by his suffering? Explain.

4. **Essential Question:** *What does it mean to see?* What have you learned about seeing and knowing from reading this play?
Analyze Craft and Structure

Elements of Greek Tragedy In *Poetics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle describes a *tragedy* as a serious play recounting related events in the life of a renowned and prosperous person who experiences a downfall. The main character, called the *tragic hero* or *protagonist*, undergoes this reversal of fortune as a result of *hamartia*, which is often translated as “a tragic flaw.” This flaw may be an innate character weakness. However, it may simply be a terrible mistake, an error in judgment, or the result of incomplete knowledge or ignorance. In addition, the protagonist may face an *antagonist*, a rival character or a force that is in conflict with the protagonist and contributes to his or her downfall.

The events in Greek tragedies came as no surprise to their first audiences. Greek audiences knew the myths on which the plays were based. The result was *dramatic irony*, a contradiction between what a character thinks and what the audience knows to be true. Dramatic irony engages an audience emotionally. Tension and suspense build as the audience waits for the characters to realize the truth. Dramatic irony helps produce the result that Aristotle said defines a tragedy: inspiring fear and pity in the audience.

Practice

**Notebook** Respond to these questions.

1. In what ways does Oedipus fit the definition of a tragic hero?

2. Is there an antagonist in the play? If so, who or what is it? Use the chart to explore the possibilities. Then, write a paragraph making an argument for your choice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CREON</th>
<th>TEIRESIAS</th>
<th>FATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whom or what does Oedipus struggle against most strongly?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who or what causes Oedipus the most harm?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who or what eventually destroys Oedipus?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. How does the dramatic irony of the play build as Oedipus learns about his past?

4. Some scholars have stated that Oedipus’ tragic flaw is anger, whereas others suggest it is excessive pride. Do you think Oedipus has a tragic flaw? If so, explain whether you believe it to be anger, excessive pride, or another quality. If you do not think he has a specific tragic flaw, explain your reasoning. Support your answer with text evidence.
Concept Vocabulary

**Why These Words?** These concept vocabulary words relate to predicting and experiencing the future. For example, when the ancient Greeks wanted to know what the gods had planned for them, they consulted an oracle, a religious figure who spoke for the gods. In *Oedipus the King*, the Oracle at Delphi issues a prophecy, or prediction about the future, that sets the events of the play in motion.

1. How does the concept vocabulary sharpen a reader's understanding of the role that predictions played in Greek culture?

2. What other words from *Oedipus the King* relate to this concept?

**Practice**

- **Notebook** The concept words appear in *Oedipus the King*, Part II.

1. Use each concept word in a sentence that demonstrates your understanding of the word's meaning. Then, write a sentence about Oedipus using all three words.

2. Use a dictionary or etymology reference to compare the origins of the words oracle and inexorable. What do the words have in common?

**Word Study**

**Denotation and Connotation** A word’s denotation is its dictionary meaning, independent of any associations the word may have. Synonyms have nearly identical denotations. A word’s connotation is the idea or emotion associated with the word. Often, words have positive or negative connotations that affect how people respond to them in both writing and speech. Synonyms often have different connotations. For example, the concept vocabulary word inexorable means “impossible to stop or prevent.” A synonym would be unstoppable. In most contexts, inexorable has negative connotations, while unstoppable has positive connotations.

1. Using a thesaurus, find other synonyms for inexorable. Write down three synonyms that have positive connotations and three that have negative connotations.

2. Choose three of the synonyms you found, and use each one in a separate sentence. Make the context of each sentence fit the connotation of the synonym.
Author’s Style

Rhetorical Devices: Anaphora In Oedipus the King, the translator uses a variety of rhetorical devices, or patterns of language, to create dramatic effects. One of these rhetorical devices is **anaphora**, the repetition of a word or group of words at the beginning of two or more successive clauses or sentences. This is an ancient literary device that makes longer passages easier to remember, emphasizes key ideas, and adds emotional intensity. For example, consider the effect of anaphora when Oedipus expresses his grief and fear:

**Oedipus.** Where upon this earth am I to go in my pain? Where will my voice be carried on the wind?

Read It

Read aloud the passages from Part II of Oedipus the King to get a sense of the sound of each example of anaphora. Mark the repeated wording in each passage. Then, note the effect of the anaphora. Consider, for example, how it establishes a rhythm, lends dialogue a certain majesty, emphasizes certain ideas, or creates a combination of these effects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PASSAGE</th>
<th>EFFECT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chorus.</strong> Let me walk humble in the paths of righteousness. Let my life be simple and full of awe for things divine. Let my tongue be free of arrogance. Let me never seek too much.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chorus.</strong> The man who spits in the face of justice, The man who scorns the altars of the gods, That man will lose his empty dreams in the whirlwind of god’s fire.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Write It

**Notebook** Write a paragraph in which you describe a scene from Oedipus the King. Use anaphora in your paragraph.
Writing to Sources

Plays differ from other forms of fiction because they are made almost entirely of dialogue, the conversation between or among characters. Along with stage directions, dialogue advances the action of the plot and reveals character traits and relationships. In a play, the name of the character who is speaking precedes each passage of dialogue.

Assignment

Write a dialogue that might have taken place among members of the Theban community after the events of the play. The characters in the dialogue should explain what they think and feel about the events, including answers to these questions:

- Was Oedipus a good king?
- Does he deserve his punishment?
- What does it mean that Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx but suspected nothing of his own true origins?

Vocabulary Connection

Consider including several of the concept vocabulary words in your dialogue.

- oracle
- prophecy
- inexorable

Reflect on Your Writing

After you have written your dialogue, answer these questions.

1. How did writing your dialogue help you understand Oedipus’ dilemma?

2. What advice would you give to another student writing a dialogue?

3. Why These Words? The words you choose make a difference in your writing. Which words did you specifically choose to add power or clarity to your dialogue?
Speaking and Listening

**Assignment**
In the audio performance included with Part II of the play, the prophet Teiresias speaks with Oedipus. Listen to the performance, and consider the quality of the production and how well it interprets the text. Then, write a brief critique of the performance.

1. **Analyze the Performance** As you listen, consider elements of the production listed in the chart. Take notes about your observations. Include specific references and details as evidence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCTION ELEMENTS</th>
<th>NOTES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actors’ Delivery:</strong> Do the actors use their voices well? (Consider the tempo, or speed, at which they speak; variations in pitch; clarity of pronunciations; and uses of pauses or silences.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpretation of the Text:</strong> Does the production clarify the story, show it in a new way, or obscure it? Do actors’ choices emphasize or mute qualities in the characters?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Production Values:</strong> Do sound effects and music contribute to the power of the production or distract from it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. **Write Your Critique** Include a general claim, or statement of your position, on the quality of the production. Then, support your position with references to specific performance elements.

3. **Share and Discuss** When you have finished writing, exchange critiques with a partner, and discuss similarities and differences in your points of view. Then, consider how well you each met the criteria for the assignment. Share your feedback about what worked well, and suggest ways to strengthen any weaknesses. Use the evaluation guide to organize your thoughts.

**EVALUATION GUIDE**
Rate each statement on a scale of 1 (not demonstrated) to 6 (demonstrated).

- 1. The critique demonstrates careful listening and thought.
- 2. The critique states a clear claim, or position.
- 3. The critique takes into account the actors’ deliveries, the interpretation of the text, and the production values.
- 4. The critique cites specific examples to support ideas.

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION:** What does it mean to see?