About the Playwright

Sophocles (496–406 B.C.) was one of three Classical Athenian playwrights who together created the basic theatrical conventions of Greek tragedy, the foundation of drama in Western civilization. The other two were Aeschylus and Euripides. Before these three great dramatists, Greek theater consisted of static recitations performed by a chorus and a single actor. Aeschylus added a second actor, creating the possibility of true dialogue. When Sophocles added a third actor, complex relationships emerged in Greek drama.

Tool Kit

First-Read Guide and Model Annotation

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.

Oedipus the King, Part I

You will encounter the following words as you read *Oedipus the King*, Part I. 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>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>proclamation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>edicts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.
BACKGROUND FOR THE PLAY

The Theban Plays  *Oedipus the King* (or *Oedipus Rex*) is one of three surviving plays by Sophocles centering on the Greek myth of Oedipus (EHD ih puhs), king of Thebes; the other two are *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. Known as the Theban plays, they are now often published as a chronological trilogy, with *Antigone* last. However, Sophocles did not write the plays for the same Dionysia, and he apparently wrote *Antigone* first.

The Oedipus Myth  The myth of Oedipus was well known to Greek audiences; in fact, Aeschylus wrote several earlier plays about it, although only his *Seven Against Thebes* has survived. In the myth, a prophecy informs Laius (LAY uhs; also spelled *Laïos*), king of Thebes, and his wife Jocasta (yoh KOS tuh; also spelled *Iocaste*) that their son will grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. Horrified, they send the infant off to be destroyed, but he is instead saved and adopted by a couple from Corinth. When the child, called Oedipus, grows up, he learns of the prophecy. Believing the warning refers to his adoptive parents, he flees in order to protect them. At a crossroads, he quarrels with and kills a stranger. Then, on the road to Thebes, he discovers the city is being plagued by a monstrous sphinx. In Greek mythology, the sphinx is a creature with a lion’s body, bird’s wings, and a woman’s head. Waiting near the entrance to the city, the sphinx poses a riddle to all those who approach and eats anyone who cannot answer. The sphinx refuses to abandon its hold on the city until someone can solve the riddle. Oedipus does so, thereby saving the city and becoming a hero. As compensation, the recently widowed queen marries him, and he becomes king. It is several years after this point in the larger story that the play *Oedipus the King* begins.

QUICK INSIGHT

The famous riddle that Oedipus answered was “What has four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?” The answer is a human being—crawling as a child, walking upright as an adult, and using a cane in old age.
Oedipus
the King

Sophocles
translated by Nicholas Rudall

CHARACTERS

Oedipus
Priest of Zeus
Creon, brother of the queen
Teiresias, a prophet
Jocasta, the queen
Messenger

Shepherd of Laius
Second Messenger
Chorus of Theban elders
Antigone, daughter of Oedipus
Ismene, daughter of Oedipus
Boy
Oedipus. My children, you who live in the heart of this our city, living sons of ancient Cadmus, why have you come to these sacred altars? Why do you bring garlands and kneel in supplication to the gods?

The city is laced with the breath of incense. The air quivers with lamentation and with prayer. My children, I did not want to hear your desires from messengers. Therefore I have come in person to hear you speak—I, Oedipus your king.

(to a Priest) You there, since you are the eldest, speak on their behalf. Tell me what is troubling you. Do you come in fear? Do you seek a blessing from the gods? Tell me. Never doubt that I will help you in every way I can. I am moved and touched to find you suppliant here.

Priest. Oedipus, great king of Thebes! You see before you clinging to the altar’s steps men of all ages. Here are boys too young to be alone. Here are priests weighed down with time, priests of Zeus—as I am. Here are young men as yet unmarried. And thousands more, olive wreaths in their hair, throng the public squares. They huddle before the two shrines of Athena and at Apollo’s temple where the god speaks in the glowing embers of his fire. Your eyes see the truth: Thebes is drowning in a deadly sea, is sinking beneath the waves of death. There is a blight that eats the budding fruits of the earth. Our cattle die. Women give birth to stillborn children. A deadly plague consumes our city, strikes like bolts of lightning, burns our flesh, and ravages the house of Cadmus. My lord, we are plunged into darkness. Death alone grows fat upon our agony. We have come to you to offer our prayers. We know you are no god. But of all men you are the most wise in the ways of god. You saved us from the Sphinx, who sang her doom from the stone of her breast.

You saved us from her plague. You knew no more than we, we could not teach you. But you saved us when a god touched your mind. Therefore, great King of Thebes, we turn to you. Save us. Heal us. Listen to the gods. Listen to the minds of mortals. Your wisdom saved us long ago. It can save us now when troubles seethe again. You are the pinnacle of nobility, give us back our lives. Remember that we call you the Liberator. Remember that we love you for your courage long ago. Let not the world remember you as the king who once was great but then fell from greatness.
Save the ship of state from the storm.
Once, years ago, you turned our unhappiness to joy.
You can do it once more.

You rule this land. No man disputes your power.
But rule over the living, not the dead.
When no men throng the streets, the city walls are nothing and
our proud ships mere empty shells.

Oedipus. Oh my poor children. I understand the passions that
brought you here.
I know that you are plagued with sickness. Yet sick as you are,
not as sick as I.
What each of you suffers is your own pain, no one else’s.
But I suffer for you, for my city, and for myself.

I was not asleep. You are not waking me.
I have been weeping for a long time.
I have paced my restless room thinking, thinking.
In the end I found a remedy and I have put it to work:
I have sent Creon, son of Menoeceus,⁸ brother of the queen, to
Delphi. There at Apollo’s oracle he will learn, if he can, what
I must do or promise to do to save the city.
I have been counting the days and I am troubled. For he should
have returned.
What can be keeping him? This is the day! He should be here.
But whenever he returns I will do what the god orders.

Priest. Your promise is given in good time. They say that Creon
is here.

Oedipus. Oh Lord Apollo, may his news shine as bright as the
hope on his face.

Priest. The news must be good. He is crowned with laurel,⁹ a
wreath thick with berries.

Oedipus. We shall soon know. See where he comes.

(Creon enters)

Oedipus. Oh brother, Prince of Thebes, what answer do you
bring us from Apollo?

Creon. A powerful answer. Our deep agonies will be healed if
they are treated right.

Oedipus. What did the oracle say? Your words are ambiguous. I
still hover between hope and fear.

Creon. Do you wish me to speak in public in front of all these
men? I will of course. But should we not go inside?

Oedipus. Let them hear. For I suffer for them more than for myself.

Creon. Then I will tell you what I heard. In plain words, the
oracle commands us to expel from Thebes an old pollution. We
are sheltering a thing that is killing us and is beyond cure.

We cannot let it feed upon us any longer.
Oedipus. What pollution? How are we to expel it from our midst?
Creon. By exile or by death. Blood must answer for blood.
A murder blew the deadly plague breath on our city.
Oedipus. A murder? Whose? Did the god not name the man?

Creon. My lord, Laius once was our king before you came to rule over us.
Oedipus. I know. I never saw the man, but others told me of him.
Creon. He was murdered. Apollo demands that we take revenge upon the man who killed him.

Oedipus. Where are the killers? How, after so many years, can we find a clue to solve the crime?
Creon. Apollo said the killer is amongst us. We must search and be aware of everything.

Oedipus. Where was he killed? In the palace or outside the city or in some other country?
Creon. He told us that he was going to the shrine of a god. He never came home again.

Oedipus. Was there no witness . . . some attendant to tell what happened?
Creon. They were all killed. Except for one.
He escaped, but his terror made him forget all but one thing.

Oedipus. What was that? That one thing may be the key that unlocks this whole mystery.
Creon. He said a band of highwaymen attacked them.

They were outnumbered and the king was killed.

Oedipus. Strange that highwaymen should be so bold . . . unless they were bribed by some faction from the city.

Creon. We considered that. But when Laius was killed the city was besieged with other troubles. There was no time for vengeance.

Oedipus. What troubles could have stopped you from finding the killer of your king?
Creon. The Sphinx. Her riddles stopped our ears and brought destruction.

Oedipus. Once again I must bring the darkness into the light. Apollo is right to show, as you do, this concern for the dead. I will obey his command. I will stand by your side. I will avenge this country’s loss. It is my duty. I do it not for some unknown friend but for myself. We must expel this evil.

Whoever killed King Laius might be the death of me—who knows? It might happen even now. It is in my own interest to avenge your slaughtered king.

CLOSE READ
ANNOTATE: In line 93, mark the words Creon uses to describe how the murder affected the city.

QUESTION: Why does the playwright use a metaphor, or imaginative comparison, to describe the arrival of the plague?

CONCLUDE: What is the effect of Creon’s describing the plague in this way?

10. highwaymen n. robbers.
Athena, golden child of Zeus,
180
Turn your shining face upon our pain.
The War god stalks our streets,
185
No sword in hand and yet we die.
Fire encircles our screams.
Send him to the Ocean’s depths
Into the waves that kill the flames.

What life survives the night
190
Dies in tomorrow’s sun.
Zeus turn your fire upon him,
With lightning strike the god of War.

Apollo, stretch tight your golden bow
195
Loose your arrows in our defense.
Artemis, race across our hills
In a blaze of saving light.
Dionysus,13 God of Thebes,
Come to us with your shock of golden curls,
13. Dionysus (dy uh NY suhs) Greek god of ecstasy, the theater, and wine.
Flushed with wine in the whirlwind
Ecstasy of your followers.
Destroy the loathsome god of Death
In the conflagration of your joy.

(enter Oedipus)
200 Oedipus. I hear your prayer. Listen to me and I will teach you
how to heal.
You will find comfort and relief.
I knew nothing of this story of Laius’s death, knew nothing of
the deed itself.

How could I therefore solve a crime alone?
But now, since I became a citizen after the murder, I make this
proclamation to all my fellow Thebans: If anyone knows the
man who killed King Laius, I order him to tell me everything.
He must not be afraid for his long silence. No, I promise that he
will not be punished with death but may leave this land in
safety. If any man knows that the killer was a foreigner, let him
speak out at once.
He shall have my thanks and a rich reward. But if you remain
silent and attempt to protect yourself or a friend and ignore my
commands, hear what I will do:
I forbid the people of this country, where I am king, ever to
harbor the killer or speak to him. Give him no place at your
prayers or sacrifices. Hound him from your homes. For he it is
who defiles our city. This the oracle has shown to me.

And I hereby join with the god as champion of our murdered king.
I lay this curse upon the killer, whether he acted alone or with
accomplices:
May your life be a searing agony!
This curse I even turn upon myself. For if it turns out that the killer breaks my bread and shares my hearth,¹⁴ I too must suffer. This is my command. Obey it for my sake, for Apollo, and for our country, which lies barren and diseased through the anger of heaven.

Let us suppose the oracle had not spoken.

Should the murder of your king, your noble king, go unavenged? This pollution had to be purged clean.

And now that I sit upon that great man’s throne, possess his wife, his bed, fathering children as would he if he had lived, I will be his avenger. For had not fate cut him down he might have produced a son, a brother to my children.

I now will become that son, as though in truth I were, and I will hunt the killer down.

Vengeance for Laius, son of Labdacus, descendant of great Cadmus and King Agenor!¹⁵

If any men disobey my commands, may the gods make their crops wither in the fields, may they never see the fruit of their loins, may they rot on earth. But to you who are loyal to me and approve what I have done, I pray that Justice and all the gods look kindly upon you forever more.

Chorus. I swear to you my lord that I accept your commands. I did not kill the king nor do I know who did. My advice is this . . . Apollo posed the question . . . he should give the answer and tell us who the murderer is.

Oedipus. Your advice is well taken. But no man can force the gods to speak against their will.

Chorus. May I then suggest a second plan.

Oedipus. And a third if need be.

Chorus. My lord, if any man can speak with the god it is Teiresias. He might bring us to the light.

Oedipus. I have already done it. Creon suggested it. And I have sent for him. I am surprised he is not here.

Chorus. My mind is stirring now. Rumors from long ago. Mere gossip.

Oedipus. Tell me. I want to know everything.

Chorus. It was said that he was killed by travelers.

Oedipus. That is what I heard. But no one knows the man who saw him die.

Chorus. Well, if he knows what fear is, he will run in terror of your curse.

Oedipus. A man who can do a thing like that is not afraid of words.

NOTES

14. hearth (hahrth) n. home.

15. King Agenor (uh GEE nawr) mythical king of Phoenicia, believed to have trained the Greek hero Achilles.

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: Mark the punctuation that suggests hesitation in lines 245–248.

QUESTION: Why does the playwright, or translator, indicate that these words should be spoken with hesitation?

CONCLUDE: What effect do these lines have on the reader? On a viewing audience?
This eighteenth-century drawing depicts the blind seer Teiresias being led by a boy.

**Chorus.** But here comes one who can capture him. Here is Teiresias, whose mind is fired by the god and in whom truth lives and breathes.

*(enter Teiresias, led by a boy)*

**Oedipus.** Teiresias our prophet, you understand all things—the hidden mysteries of the wise, the high things of heaven, and the low things of the earth. Though your eyes cannot see, you know of this plague that infects our city.

275 We turn to you—our one defense—our shield.
No doubt the messengers told you what Apollo said in his reply to us:
One course alone can free us from this plague . . . we must find the murderers of King Laius.
We must execute them or expel them from this land.
Therefore give us freely of your gift of prophecy.
Save yourself, your country, and your king.
Save all the people from this pollution of spilled blood. We are in your hands.

There is no greater honor than for a man to serve his fellow men.

Teiresias. Alas! It is a miserable thing to be wise when wisdom brings no reward. I had forgotten that ancient truth. Otherwise I would not be here.

Oedipus. What is wrong? Why this melancholy mood?

Teiresias. Let me go home. Do not keep me here. It would be best if you bear your burden and I mine.

Oedipus. For shame!
No true-born Theban would withhold his gift of prophecy from the country that he loves.

Teiresias. Your words, my king, lie far from the truth. I am afraid that I, like you, will not speak true.

Oedipus. Oh speak! Hold nothing back. I order you to tell us what you know.
We are your suppliants.

Teiresias. Yes . . . but you do not know what you are asking me. I will never reveal my miseries . . . or yours.

Oedipus. What!! You know something but will not speak?
Will you betray us and destroy the state?

Teiresias. I will not hurt myself or you. Why ask from me what I will never tell?

Oedipus. You are a wicked man. Your silence would anger a lifeless stone.
Will nothing loosen your tongue, melt your heart, shake you out of this implacable silence?

Teiresias. You blame me but you do not see yourself. In your anger you turn on me.

Oedipus. Who could be calm when he heard you scorn the desperation of our city?

Teiresias. Well, whether I will speak or not, what will be will be.

Oedipus. That is true. And your duty is to tell me.

Teiresias. I have nothing more to say. You can rage to your heart’s content.
Oedipus. Yes, I am angry and I will not be silent! I will speak what is on my mind. I think it was you, yes you, who planned the murder. Yes—and did it all—except the actual killing. And if you were not blind you would have done that too.

Teiresias. Is that so? Then hear me! I call upon you to obey the words of your own decree. From this day on do not speak to me or to these citizens. You are the killer. You bring the pollution upon Thebes.

Oedipus. Hold your slanderous tongue. You taunt me and think because you are a prophet you will go scot-free.

Teiresias. I am free. For my strength lies in the truth.

Oedipus. Who made you say this? You didn’t find this accusation through your art.

Teiresias. You made me speak. You provoked me against my will.

Oedipus. I made you speak?? Then speak again. Make clear your charges.

Teiresias. Did you not understand the first time? Will you provoke me yet again?

Oedipus. I half understood your meaning. Speak again.

Teiresias. I say you are the murderer of the man whose murderer you seek.

Oedipus. You will regret repeating so foul a slander.

Teiresias. Must I go on and inflame your anger even more?

Oedipus. You can say all you want. It will be a waste of breath.

Teiresias. I say that you are living in darkest shame with the closest of your family. And you know nothing of your sin.

Oedipus. Do you think that you can keep on spewing out your filth and get away with it?

Teiresias. Yes, if there is strength in truth and truth does not die.

Oedipus. Truth lives in other men but not in you. For you, in ear, in mind, in eye, in everything are blind.

Teiresias. Poor fool! You lay words upon me which soon all men will lay upon you.

Oedipus. You are a child of endless darkness, and you have no power over me or any man who can see the light of the sun.

Teiresias. True, I have no such power over you. Your fate is in the hands of Apollo.

Oedipus. Is this plot yours alone or was it Creon’s idea?

Oedipus. Wealth! Power! The art of being a ruler!

Kingship! The admiration of one’s subjects!

What envy these things breed—if Creon, Creon whom I trusted, who was my friend, seeks in secret to overthrow me.

All for this position of majesty which the city gave to me though I did not seek it.

He has bought the services of this charlatan, this fraud, this scheming beggar-priest.

With money in his hands his eyes can see. But his art is stone blind.

You there! Tell me! When did you ever prove that you were a true prophet? When the Sphinx was destroying the city with her riddles, why could you not save these people?

The riddle could not be solved by guessing.

It needed the true art of prophecy. And you were found wanting. Neither the birds of the air nor the configurations of the stars could help you.

It was I, I who came here, Oedipus, an ordinary simple man.

I stopped the mouth of the Sphinx. I did not need omens.

I needed only my native wit. And you seek to overthrow me?

In a 1945 stage production, Oedipus, played by Laurence Olivier, accuses the prophet Teiresias. The chorus watches in the background.

16. the birds . . . the stars Augury, the study of the flights of birds, and astrology, the study of the movements of stars and planets, were believed to tell the future to those who practiced them.
You hope to reign with Creon in my place?
You will regret it, you and your friend Creon.
If it weren’t for your age you would feel the pain that your treachery deserves.

Chorus. You both are angry. But now is not the time for fury.
We must decide how we can best obey the oracle.

Teiresias. You are the king. But I have the right to speak my mind freely.
In this I too am a king. I have no master but Apollo. I am his servant.
You cannot accuse me of being allied with Creon.
This is my answer: since you mocked my blindness, know that though you have eyes you cannot see how low you have fallen.
You do not know in whose house you live, no, nor with whom.
Who is your father, who is your mother? You do not know.
In ignorance you live as an enemy to the living and the dead.
But the curse of your parents one day will drive you wounded from this land.
Those eyes that now see clear day will be covered with darkest night.
Your cries will echo on every hill. Cithaeron\(^{17}\) will ring with your moans. For you will know that the marriage hymns that welcomed you to Thebes were a dirge of mourning for your ill-fated return.
All this will come to pass—and more—before you find your children and yourself.
Curse me then. Curse Creon. No mortal will be punished more horribly than you.

Oedipus. Must I endure his insolence? Damnation fall upon you! Get out of my sight!
Never set foot in my house again!

Teiresias. I would never have come if you had not ordered it.

Oedipus. I did not know you would play the fool.
Otherwise you would have waited a long time to be called.

Teiresias. The fool? Ha! Your parents thought me wise enough.

Oedipus. My parents? Who were they? Speak.

Teiresias. This day will give you a father and lead you to your grave.

Oedipus. You know only how to speak in the darkness of riddles.

Teiresias. I thought you were the man who could unlock a riddle’s secret.

Oedipus. Yes! Mock me for the skill that made me great.

Teiresias. A greatness that will be your ruin.

Oedipus. I saved this city!

17. Cithaeron (suh THEE ruhn) mountain range in Greece.
Teiresias. It is time to leave. Come boy.

Oedipus. Yes, take him away. Leave me in peace.

Your presence here disturbs my world.

Teiresias. I go. But first I will tell you why I came. I am not afraid of you.
You cannot do me harm.
Hear me: the man you seek with your edicts warrants and

decrees—the man who killed the king—that man is here.
You think of him as foreign-born. But he is a Theban.
His good fortune will turn to sorrow. Though he has eyes, he
will be blind.
Though he wear purple, he will wear beggar’s rags.

Leaning upon his staff, he will tap the earth that leads him into
exile.
To his children he will be both brother and father.
To her who gave him birth both son and husband.
And to his father he will be both killer and the man who shared
his bed.

Go in now and think upon my words.
If you find that I have not spoken truth, then you can say I have
no gift for prophecy.

(exit Oedipus, Teiresias, and Boy)

Chorus. The Oracle at Delphi has spoken.

But who is the man who took the blood of kings?
Who is this man of unspeakable darkness?
He must fly like the wind’s swift steeds.
For on his heels Apollo races
In the blinding light of his father’s fire.

And ever on his track the Furies follow hard
Like hounds scenting blood.
Parnassus! Blinding peak of snow!
You flash to earth the icy will of the gods.
Find the killer. Find the man who roams

Like a bull in the forest’s shadow,
Raging in the haunting dark as his doom hovers,
Ready to strike.
There is nowhere to hide from the light
Of Apollo’s shrine,

When voices divine hunt him down.
The man skilled in the beating of the wings of birds
Troubles me deeply. Is there truth in his art?
I am lost. I have no words. I can see neither
Past nor future. I am adrift on the wind.

There was no quarrel ever that I knew
Between our royal house and Polybus, father of our king.
There is no proof. How then can I question his honor

edicts (EE dihks) n. commands from a public authority

18. purple color worn by the rich and important, especially royalty.

19. the Furies feared Greek goddesses of vengeance; punishers of the guilty.

20. Parnassus (pahr NAS uhs) sacred mountain within sight of the oracle at Delphi.
And in a feud of blood pursue this untracked murder?
Zeus and Apollo know all things,
But that a prophet knows more than I,
What proof is there? One man may possess
More wisdom than another. So how can I—
Without the truth before my eyes—cast blame
Upon my king?
He saved our city from the Sphinx
Was tested hard and shone like gold.
To my mind he is wise and guilt-free.

(enter Creon)

Creon. My fellow citizens, I have come here to lodge a protest. I have heard that Oedipus has accused me of a grievous charge. If he thinks that I have harmed him—by my actions or in words—in this present crisis then I put no value on my life in face of this dishonor. For I am not being accused of some minor private mistake.

I am charged with being a traitor to the state and to you, my friends.

Chorus. The king was angry. His words were rash. He was not thinking when he spoke.

Creon. Did anyone dare to suggest that I had urged the seer to bring false charges?

Chorus. Such things were mentioned. I do not know why.

Creon. How did he look? Surely he must have been out of his senses when he made this hideous accusation?

Chorus. I do not know. It is not for me to judge the behavior of my king.

(enter Oedipus)

Oedipus. You there! What are you doing here?
Do you have the gall to come near my palace?
There is no doubt in my mind that you planned to kill me and usurp the throne.
Tell me, did you think I was a fool or a coward?
Is that why you hatched this plot against me?
Did you think I was too stupid to see your slithering treachery—too frightened not to fight back?
You are the fool if you think you can get the crown without the support of friends.

Creon. Now you listen to me. You have spoken. It is your turn to hear me.

Oedipus. Oh yes, you have a silver tongue.
But how can I learn anything from my deadliest enemy?

Creon. First, I would prove that those words are not true.

Oedipus. That you are not my enemy?

Creon. You are headstrong and stubborn. Change your ways.

Oedipus. And you are a fool if you think a man can betray his family and get away with it.

Creon. That is a fair statement. But what betrayal are you talking about?

Oedipus. Did you or did you not advise me to summon Teiresias?

Creon. I did. I would do it again.

Oedipus. How long has it been since Laius . . .

Creon. Laius . . . ? What are you talking about?

Oedipus. . . since Laius left this earth in bloody violence?

Creon. I don’t know . . . It was many years ago.

Oedipus. Was Teiresias the city’s prophet at the time?

Creon. Yes. Skilled then as now, and deserving his reputation.

Oedipus. Did he speak of me then in any way?

Creon. Not to my knowledge. No.

Oedipus. Was there no search, no formal inquiry?

Creon. Of course. But nothing was discovered.

Oedipus. Why did our prophet not tell his story then?

Creon. I do not know. And since I don’t, I will hold my tongue.

Oedipus. There is one thing you know and could speak of.

Creon. What is that? I will tell you everything.

Oedipus. That it was you who made Teiresias accuse me of Laius’s death.

Creon. If he accused you, you are the only one who knows of it. But let me question you now.

Oedipus. Proceed. Prove me a killer if you can.

Creon. You married my sister. Is that correct?

Oedipus. Why would I deny it?

Creon. And as your wife and queen, she shares the throne?

Oedipus. She has all her heart’s desires.

Creon. And with the two of you I have a third share of power?

Oedipus. Yes. And it is that which makes you a traitor.

Creon. Not true. Now begin to reason logically as I have. Would any man choose the troubles, the anxiety of power if he had that power but without the responsibility? I certainly would not. I have no longing for the name of king. I prefer to live like one.
Any sensible man would feel the same way. All my needs, all
that I want, you provide.
I have nothing to fear.
But if I were king I would have to do things which I did not want.
So why should I seek the crown rather than the pleasant,
untroubled life I now lead?

I am not mad. I need no greater honors than I have now.
I am welcome everywhere . . . people greet me everywhere.
Those who want a favor from you are kind to me.
I know how to get what they ask of me.
So should I exchange this comfortable life for one like yours?

That would be insane. And I am not mad.
Nor was I ever tempted by the thought or shared in any intrigue.
If you doubt me, go to Delphi, learn if what I have said is true.
The god will speak the truth.
If you find that I conspired with Teiresias, then condemn me to
death.
I will join with you in my own condemnation.
But do not find me guilty on mere suspicion, without appeal.
You cannot on a whim judge a good man bad, a bad man good.
A man should offer up his precious life rather than betray a
friend.
In time you will know the truth. Time alone unlocks the secrets
of true justice.
A wicked man is discovered in the passing light of a single day.

Chorus. His words are carefully chosen. This demands discretion.
There should be no rush to judgment.
Oedipus. But he . . . did he not rush into his schemes, his plots? I must be as quick to counter him. If I do nothing, he will overthrow me.

Creon. So what is your intent . . . to send me into exile?

Oedipus. Exile? No! I want you dead. I want the world to see the punishment that treason brings.

Creon. You still resist the truth? You will not believe me?

Oedipus. Why should I?

Creon. Then you are a fool.

Oedipus. For protecting myself?

Creon. In the name of justice, believe me!

Oedipus. You are a wicked, evil man.

Creon. What if you are wrong?

Oedipus. I must still be king.

Creon. Even if you are wrong?

Oedipus. Oh my city, my city.

Creon. It is my city too!

Chorus. My lords, keep your peace. I see the queen. Jocasta is coming from her chambers. It is time, oh it is time.

For she alone can resolve this quarrel.

(enter Jocasta)

Jocasta. You are fools! Why do you shout in anger like this?
Do you have no shame? The city is dying, and here you fight like petulant children.

(to Oedipus) Come into the house.

600 And you, Creon . . . go now.
No more of this quarreling over nothing!

Creon. Over nothing? You are wrong, my sister.
Your husband will send me into exile or to my death.

Oedipus. That is what I will do. For I have caught him, caught him plotting against my life.

Creon. No! Let me die amongst the damned if I ever wished you harm!

Jocasta. Oh believe him, Oedipus!
In the name of the gods, believe him when he swears.

610 For my sake and for these our citizens.

Chorus. Listen to her, my lord. I beg you listen to her.

Oedipus. What do you want me to do?

Chorus. Trust Creon. He has never spoken like a fool.
And now he has sworn before the gods.

615 Oedipus. Do you know what you are asking of me?

Chorus. I do.

Oedipus. Then speak on.

Chorus. Creon has been your friend. He has sworn an oath.
You should not mistrust his words.

620 You should not seem to be blinded by malice toward him.

Oedipus. You understand that what you say means death or exile for me . . . ?

Chorus. No! No! I swear by Apollo, may I die alone and cursed by the gods if ever meant that!

625 My heart is dying, withering fast when I hear your anger, hear your hate.

Oedipus. Then let him go.
And let me die if that is what must be . . . or wander into exile in shame, leaving this Thebes that I love. You, you citizens, you move me to this change of heart. Not he . . . for wherever he goes he will be hated.

Creon. You make peace, but your words are full of hate.
Your anger still seethes within your heart.
It will come back, this anger, to haunt you.

635 Oedipus. Leave me in peace. Go now.

Creon. I go. You misjudged me—these men did not.

(exit)
Chorus. Lady, take your husband into the palace.
Jocasta. Tell me first, what started this quarrel?
Chorus. There were rumors. And lies breed anger.

Jocasta. Were both to blame?
Chorus. Both.
Jocasta. What was said?
Chorus. Ask me no more. Thebes is dying.
Let sleeping griefs lie in their beds.

Oedipus. That is strange advice, my friend. I know you are thinking of me.
But why would you try to stop me from doing what I must do?
Chorus. My king, I will say this once more.
I would be called a fool if I abandoned you now. You made this country great.
And when the winds lashed our city, you brought our ship of state into safe harbor.
There is no one but you ... no one who can save us.

Jocasta. I must ask you, my husband and my king, what made you so violently angry?
Oedipus. I love you ... love you more than all these citizens. So I will tell you.
Your brother Creon conspired against me.

Jocasta. Why? Why? What was the cause?

Oedipus. He accuses me of murdering Laius.
Jocasta. Does he know this or is it some rumor?

Oedipus. He is too clever to accuse himself.
He speaks through the mouth of a prophet ... one that he has bought.

Jocasta. Then let your conscience rest. Hear me. I have no belief in the prophetic art.
I know. I know.
Let me tell you. Once long ago word came to Laius from the Oracle at Delphi—I will not say it was from the god himself ... probably from his priests.
The word was that Laius would die at the hand of his own son ... my child and his.
Laius ... at least this was the story ... was killed by highwaymen in broad daylight.

He was killed where three roads meet.
We had a son, but when he was only three days old Laius pierced his ankles, left him on a hill to die. He gave the child to others, of course, to do this. We knew then that Apollo had changed the course of fate.
The son would never kill his father.
The terror of the prophecy would die there on the hills.
That is what the prophet said, my king.
Pay it no mind. God alone shows us the truth.

Oedipus. A shadow crossed my mind as you spoke. And the shadow chilled my mind.

Jocasta. What was it that touched you?

Oedipus. You said that Laius was killed where three roads meet.

Jocasta. That was what we were told at the time.

Oedipus. Where?

Jocasta. Phocis . . . that is the name of the town . . . It is where the road to Thebes divides, and you can go to Delphi or Daulia.

Oedipus. When?

Jocasta. We heard about it just before you came. Just before you won this kingdom.

Oedipus. Oh what a net of death have the gods been weaving for me!
Jocasta. Oedipus, why are you so troubled?

Oedipus. Do not ask me. Not yet. Tell me about Laius—how old was he?

Jocasta. He was tall. His hair was becoming gray. He was about your height.

Oedipus. I feel that my own curse now begins to descend on me.

Jocasta. I am afraid. When I look on you I am afraid.

Oedipus. Perhaps the seer who has no eyes can see the truth. But tell me, tell me all you know.

Jocasta. I will tell you everything. But now fear grips my soul.

Oedipus. Was the king accompanied by many men—as befitting his office or . . . ?

Jocasta. There were just five men. One was a messenger. There was a single chariot. He was driving.

Oedipus. Aaagh, that is enough, enough. Who told you what happened?

Jocasta. A servant. He was the only one to escape.

Oedipus. Is he still one of ours?

Jocasta. No. When he came back here and found that you were now our king . . . he came to me. He touched my hand . . . he begged me to send him to the countryside where the shepherds tend their flocks. Far from here, he said, I granted him his wish. He was a slave, but he had earned this simple gift.

Oedipus. Can you get him back here quickly?

Jocasta. Of course. But why?

Oedipus. I have been too much alone. I have asked too few questions. I need to talk to him.

Jocasta. Then he will be here. But you must talk to me too . . . tell me of your fears.

Oedipus. I owe you that—oh I owe you that. For I have climbed a mountain of fear.

And I need to talk to someone. I need to talk to you. Polybus of Corinth\(^{21}\) is my father. My mother is Merope. I grew up in Corinth. I was a prince. One day a strange thing happened . . . it affected me deeply . . . perhaps it should not.

There was a feast. A man got drunk and shouted to the world that I was not my father’s son. I kept quiet that night . . . though it hurt. And I was angry.
The next day I went to see my father and my mother. I asked them about this.
They too were very angry. They said it was the mindless ranting of a drunken fool.
I found peace in that. But the suspicion lay there. Always. In my mind.
I knew that people talked. I could not be still. I had to leave.
I said nothing to my parents. I went straight to Delphi, to the oracle. I questioned him.
The god was silent. He answered not a word. But then he spoke.
He spoke of other things.
His words were sometimes as clear as the burning sun, full of terror, pain, and things unbearable.
He said that I would bed my own mother, that I would breed children from that womb, and that the world would turn away in horror.
He said that I would kill my own father.
I listened. And I fled.
From that day Corinth was but a distant land touched by the Western stars.
I moved onward, ever onward.
I never wanted to set eyes upon the horror spoken by the god.
And I came here... here where Laius was killed.
I will tell you all that happened.
There were three roads that met where I was traveling. A herald came toward me.
There was a chariot, horses, and a man who looked like the man you described.
He was seated there within it.
The groom—who was leading the horses by the reins—forced me off the road.
The man in the chariot ordered him to do so.
As the man lurched toward me I struck him. I was angry.
The old man saw this and hit me hard with his scepter.
I hit him back! Oh I hit him back! I knocked him out of the chariot.
He rolled on the ground. I beat him to death. I killed them all!
Now if that man... if Laius were part of my family... where then can I hide... escape from my misery? The gods must hate me. No citizen here must shelter me. No man must speak to me. I am anathema.22
I have cursed my pitiful self.
Oh think, oh think... I have touched you with these hands... these hands that killed your husband!
I am polluted. I am the embodiment of evil.
So I must run... run from this city of Thebes.
But I can never go home to the land that I love... never see Corinth again.

22. anathema (uh NATH uh muh) adj. detested or cursed.
I live in terror of killing my father and lying with my mother. Ah, this was my destiny when I was born. The gods are cruel, savage in their anger.

You gods, pity me. You are all powerful. But let me never see that day. Oh let me vanish without trace from this earth rather than know the fate that makes me loathed amongst mankind.

Chorus. We feel your anguish, my lord.
But until you have questioned the survivor, keep your hopes alive.

Oedipus. My hopes are dying, but they will await the coming of this shepherd.

Jocasta. What do you expect from him when he comes?

Oedipus. Only this: if his account matches yours, I am cleared.

Jocasta. What was it I said that you find important?

Oedipus. You used the word “highwaymen.” He said that highwaymen had killed the king.
If he still speaks of several killers, then I was not the murderer.
I was alone.
There was no one else. But if he says there was only one, my guilt is inescapable.

Jocasta. Then take heart. For this is indeed what he said. He cannot change his tune now.
I heard it from his mouth as did the rest of Thebes.
But even if his story were to change, he cannot make the death of Laius conform with the oracle.
Apollo said explicitly that Laius would die at the hands of my son. But he, poor child, never shed any blood. He died too soon.
No, from now on I will give not a second’s thought to the words of the oracles.

Oedipus. You may indeed be right. But send for the shepherd right away.

Jocasta. It is as good as done. Let us go in. I wish only to please you.

(exit Oedipus and Jocasta)
Comprehension Check
Complete the following items after you finish your first read.

1. As the play opens, what disaster has befallen Thebes?

2. How did Oedipus become king of Thebes?

3. According to the Oracle, what is the solution to the problems Thebes faces?

4. What does Oedipus accuse Creon of doing?

5. 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  Research some of the places mentioned in the play (Corinth, Cithaeron, Thebes, etc.). You may want to share what you learn with the class.
Close Read the Text

Reread lines 347–351 in the argument between Teiresias and Oedipus. Mark the nouns. What word is repeated? What is the effect of that repetition?

Analyze the Text

Notebook Respond to these questions.

1. (a) Why does Oedipus feel he is the person most affected by the plague that has stricken Thebes? (b) Interpret How does this fact affect Oedipus’ reception of Creon when Creon returns from Apollo’s oracle?

2. (a) Interpret Why have the leaders of Thebes failed to pursue Laius’ killers? (b) Connect How does this fact strengthen Oedipus’ belief that he can find the murderers? (c) Analyze Why does the chorus appeal to Apollo after Oedipus promises to avenge Laius?

3. (a) Classify Which details in Teiresias’ speech in lines 385–406 refer to darkness, vision, and insight? (b) Compare and Contrast At the end of Part I, in what different ways are Oedipus and Teiresias both blind? In what ways can both see?

4. (a) In lines 665–683, what reasons does Jocasta give for not having faith in prophecy? (b) Compare and Contrast At this point in the play, what do both Jocasta and Oedipus seem to believe about their abilities to control their own fates? Explain.

Concept Vocabulary

proclamation  
 decree  
edicts

Why These Words? The three concept vocabulary words relate to official pronouncements. Find other words in Part I that relate to this concept.

Practice

Notebook To demonstrate your understanding of the concept vocabulary words, write a definition for each one. Then, list one or two synonyms for each word. Refer to a dictionary or a thesaurus as needed.

Word Study

Notebook Latin Root: -dict- The word edicts is formed from the Latin root -dict-, meaning “say” or “speak.”

Record three other words that are formed from the root -dict-. Write a definition for each word. Then, explain how the root -dict- contributes to each word’s meaning.
Analyze Craft and Structure

Structure of Greek Plays  Greek plays are verse drama, in which the dialogue takes the form of poetry. Greek tragedies follow a consistent format. Note that some modern translations deviate from strict classical form, observing some—but not all—these conventions.

- They open with a **prologue** that presents background information and describes the conflict.
- The **chorus**, a group of performers who speak and move together as they comment on the play, then enters and performs a **parados**, or opening song.
- The parados is followed by the first scene, which is called an **episode** and contains dialogue among characters.
- Additional songs, called **odes**, are presented at the end of each scene. They serve a function similar to that of the curtain coming down at the ends of scenes in modern theatrical productions.
- Before the final scene, the chorus performs a **paean**, or song of thanksgiving, to Dionysus, the Greek god at whose festivals classical drama originated.
- The tragedy concludes with an **exodos**, or final scene.

Practice

**Notebook**  Respond to these questions.

1. Scan or reread Part I of *Oedipus the King*. Then, use the chart to record information that is provided or action that takes place in each section listed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION OF PLAY</th>
<th>INFORMATION AND/OR ACTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>prologue, lines 1–143</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parados, lines 144–199</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>episode, lines 200–443</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ode, lines 444–478</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. In addition to singing odes, the chorus may interact with the characters. (a) Reread lines 479–596. How does the chorus intervene in the dialogue between Oedipus and Creon? (b) Review the remainder of the scene that concludes Part I. What is different about the chorus’s words after Jocasta arrives? (c) In what ways does the chorus heighten the dramatic tension?

CITE TEXTUAL EVIDENCE to support your answers.
Author’s Style

The Greek Chorus  The chorus (a group of performers who speak and move together as they comment on the play) is central to Greek drama. Between each scene or episode of dialogue among characters, the chorus provides key background information and commentary on the action. The chorus’s recitals, or odes, often divide into two parts—a strophe and an answering antistrophe.

- During the strophe, the chorus expresses an initial position on the play’s action. The chorus sings while twisting and dancing from right to left.
- During the antistrophe, the chorus responds to the message of the strophe while moving in the opposite direction.
- Some odes have a concluding stanza, or epode, when the chorus stands still.
- To help propel the plot, the chorus leader, or choragos (also spelled choragus), often exchanges thoughts with the rest of the chorus, as well as with the actors. In ancient Greece, the choragos was often a patron who helped pay the costs of producing a play.

Read It

Reread the ode that begins with line 444. Then, answer the questions.

1. Record your answers in the chart. (a) Which lines make up the strophe? Which lines make up the antistrophe? (b) In the strophe, what main idea does the chorus express about the king’s killer? (c) What main idea does the chorus express in the antistrophe?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STROPHE</th>
<th>ANTISTROPHE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lines:</td>
<td>Lines:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Idea:</td>
<td>Main Idea:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. In which character does the chorus decide to put its faith—Oedipus or Teiresias? Why?

Write It

Notebook  Write a paragraph in which you describe how this ode offers “commentary” on the action of the play.
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>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>oracles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prophecy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inexorable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.