

## ANALYSIS OF OEDIPUS THE KING

### At glance:

Oedipus the King is the play which was written by a famous Greek author, Sophocles in 420 BC. This play is also well-known with Oedipus Tyrannos or Oedipus the Rex. Actually the play Oedipus is a trilogy of Oedipus which was written in three plays: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone. These three plays describe about Oedipus tale beginning from his appointment as the king of Thebes after answering the riddles of the Sphinx until the fall of Oedipus and later the tragedies of his children suffer.

### Summary of Oedipus the King

The story starts with **King Oedipus'** concern of the plague which falls to **Thebes**. Afraid of the end of his country, Oedipus sent his **brother-in-law, Creon**, to seek the advice from **Apollo, the God prophecy**. Back to Thebes, Creon informs Oedipus that the plague is a curse from the Gods that they want the murderer of **Laius**, the former king of Thebes, is prosecuted by banishment or death. According to the tale spread, Laius was murdered by a pack of gangs in a crossroads.

Oedipus himself swears and dedicates to discover and prosecute the Laius's murderer. Oedipus subjects a series of unwilling citizens to questioning, including a blind prophet, **Teiresias**. At first, Teiresias refuses to give the answer because the answer itself will not please the king. Yet, Oedipus insists him to give the answer. In anger, Oedipus threat Teiresias and make him out. Then he informs Oedipus that Oedipus himself killed Laius.

This news, of course, bothers Oedipus, but his wife **Jocasta**, Laius' wife, convinces him not believe in prophecy since the prophecy has been wrong so far. As an example, she tells Oedipus about how she and King Laius had a son who was prophesied to kill Laius and sleep with her. Well, she and Laius had the child killed, so obviously that prophecy didn't come true, right?

However, Jocasta's story doesn't comfort Oedipus. As a child, an old man told Oedipus that he was adopted by **the ruler of Corinth, Polybus and Merope**, and that he would eventually kill his biological father and sleep with his biological mother. Not to mention, Oedipus once killed a man at a crossroads, which sounds a lot like the way Laius died.

Jocasta advises Oedipus not to look into the past any further, but he ignores her. Oedipus continues to question a messenger, the messenger actually came to Thebes to bring news about Polybus' death, and a shepherd who gave the infant Oedipus to the King of Corinth. Both of whom have information about how Oedipus was abandoned as an infant and adopted by a new family, the ruler of Corinth. In a moment, Jocasta realizes that Oedipus is her son, and further, Oedipus himself who killed his father, the man he killed in crossroad. Horrified at what has happened, she kills herself. Shortly thereafter, Oedipus, too, realizes that he was Laius's murderer and that he's been married to (and having children with) his mother. In horror and despair, he gouges his eyes out and is exiled from Thebes.

## **Analysis**

### A. Theme

There are many themes that can be revealed from the play. The themes here are described as contrast theme:

#### 1. Fate and free will

In the play, it is described that what Oedipus faces in his life is about either fate or free will. Oedipus has to face the prophecy which is the God's will or Oedipus can stand far away from the prophecy.

Facing the prophecy that says that Oedipus will kill his father and sleep with his mother, he set out from his fostered father, Polybos, and went to his own father, Laius, whom he killed later then he marries Jocasta, Laius' wife or his own mother.

When Oedipus left his parents (foster parents) because of the prophecy, it is his will to stay away from the prophecy. But his will even drag him into his real fate.

Apparently, Sophocles wants to show that human cannot defeat what Gods will. No matter the deeds that human has done, he has to admit the Gods' power toward men. Human cannot defeat Gods' will.

As stated in the play

OEDIPUS: But when he spoke he uttered monstrous things, [790]  
strange terrors and horrific miseries—  
it was my fate to defile my mother's bed,  
to bring forth to men a human family  
that people could not bear to look upon,  
to murder the father who engendered me.  
When I heard that, I ran away from Corinth.  
From then on I thought of it just as a place beneath the stars.  
I went to other lands,  
so I would never see that prophecy fulfilled,  
the abomination of my evil fate.

The verses above show us that Oedipus is willing to free himself from the prophecy. But what he did is he walked away from a fate of his own to another real fate of he was prophesized as that is what his fate is just as Teiresias says

TEIRESIAS: It is not your fate [370]  
to fall because of me. It's up to Apollo  
to make that happen. He will be enough.

As also Oedipus says to curse himself about the Gods' will. He blames Apollo for the prophecy but he does not blame himself for what he did to his eyes to gouge them.

OEDIPUS: Oh Zeus, what have you done? [378]  
What have you planned for me?

OEDIPUS: It was Apollo, friends, it was Apollo.  
He brought on these troubles— [1330]  
the awful things I suffer. But the hand  
which stabbed out my eyes was mine alone.  
In my wretched life, why should I have  
eyes when nothing I could see would bring me joy?

## 2. Wisdom and knowledge

Besides the theme about fate and free will, Sophocles also wants to show about wisdom and knowledge. In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus is a seeker of knowledge and truth. He struggles to uncover Laius's murder and his own identity, despite numerous warnings that he should leave the truth alone. His pursuit of knowledge and truth, however, results in ruin as Oedipus uncovers his destiny, which he was better off not knowing. The wisdom and knowledge is shown in the dialogue between Oedipus and Teiresias, a blind prophet.

TEIRESIAS: You may be king, but I have the right  
to answer you—and I control that right,  
for I am not your slave. I serve Apollo, [410]  
and thus will never stand with Creon,  
signed up as his man. So I say this to you,  
since you have chosen to insult my blindness—  
you have your eyesight, and you do not see  
how miserable you are, or where you live,  
or who it is who shares your household.  
Do you know the family you come from?  
Without your knowledge you've become  
the enemy of your own kindred,  
those in the world below and those up here,  
and the dreadful feet of that two-edged curse  
from father and mother both will drive you  
from this land in exile. Those eyes of yours,  
which now can see so clearly, will be dark.

In the verses Teiresias shows Oedipus the truth wisdom. Although he is a blind man, but he can see clearer even more than Oedipus can, who actually has eyes. Teiresias also show that Oedipus does not have knowledge even to know the family he comes from.

Though Oedipus, as a king, as the knowledge (right) to leave the case because more accuse is led to him for the murder of Laius, Oedipus, in the contrary, wants to know the truth about the Laius' murderer which the truth itself actually brings unfortunate to him.

JOCASTA: All right, forget about those things you've said.  
Listen to me, and ease your mind with this—  
no human being has skill in prophecy.

I'll show you why with this example. [710]  
 King Laius.....  
 .....  
 So don't concern yourself with prophecies. [720]  
 Whatever gods intend to bring about  
 they themselves make known quite easily.  
 OEDIPUS: Lady, as I listen to these words of yours,  
 my soul is shaken, my mind confused . . .  
 JOCASTA: Why do you say that? What's worrying you?  
 OEDIPUS: I thought I heard you say that  
 Laius was murdered at a place where three roads meet. [730]  
 JOCASTA: That's what was said and people still believe.  
 OEDIPUS: Where is this place? Where did it happen?  
 JOCASTA: In a land called Phocis. Two roads lead there—  
 one from Delphi and one from Daulia.  
 OEDIPUS: How long is it since these events took place?

From this verse, we can see that Oedipus actually begins to understand by drawing comparison between what happened to Laius and to him in the past. He begins to conclude that all the characteristics of the murderer and the murdering lead to him. Instead of leaving the talking, he continues to seek the truth and bring his infortune by his own.

This suggests that knowledge is futile and limited in its ability to bring happiness to those who seek it.

### 3. Determination

Determination is also Oedipus' character. His stubbornness to reveal the riddles of Laius' death and his keeping on his words makes him a determined man though it comes to an unfortunate fate and unhappy life for he is exiled because of his determination.

CREON : At least first listen to what I have to say.  
 OEDIPUS : There's one thing you do not have to tell me—  
 you have betrayed me.  
 CREON : If you think being stubborn  
 and forgetting common sense is wise,  
 then you're not thinking as you should. [550]  
 OEDIPUS : And if you think you can act to injure  
 a man who is a relative of yours  
 and escape without a penalty

then you're not thinking as you should.

Once Oedipus figures that he is the one who murdered Laius, he keeps his promise to be exiled

OEDIPUS :  
Whoever among you knows the man it was 260  
who murdered Laius, son of Labdacus,  
I order him to reveal it all to me.  
And if the murderer's afraid, I tell him  
to avoid the danger of the major charge  
by speaking out against himself. If so,  
he will be sent out from this land unhurt—  
and undergo no further punishment. [230]

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OEDIPUS : By all the gods, since you are acting now  
so differently from what I would expect  
and have come here to treat me graciously,  
the very worst of men, do what I ask.

I will speak for your own benefit, not mine.

CREON : What are you so keen to get from me?

OEDIPUS : Cast me out as quickly as you can,  
away from Thebes, to a place where no one,  
no living human being, will cross my path.

CREON : That is something I could do, of course,  
but first I wish to know what the god says  
about what I should do.

OEDIPUS: But what he said [1440]  
was all so clear—the man who killed his father  
must be destroyed. And that corrupted man

## B. Setting

The setting of the play *Oedipus the King* is in front of the Palace, Thebes, Ancient Greece. The play is set in that doomed city- state called Thebes

## C. Plot

The three main plot in the *Oedipus the King* are:

### 1. Introduction

Oedipes, aware that there is a curse on Thebes, sends Creon for additional information to the Apollo, the god of prophecy. Oedipus is informed that

to lift the curse, he must find and prosecute Laius's murderer. He promises to fix things.

OEDIPUS

My poor children, I know why you have come—  
I am not ignorant of what you yearn for.  
For I well know that you are ill, and yet, [60]  
sick as you are, there is not one of you  
whose illness equals mine. Your agony  
comes to each one of you as his alone,  
a special pain for him and no one else.  
But the soul inside me sorrows for myself,  
and for the city, and for you—all together.  
You are not rousing me from a deep sleep.  
You must know I've been shedding many tears  
and, in my wandering thoughts, exploring  
many pathways. After a careful search  
I followed up the one thing I could find  
and acted on it. So I have sent away  
my brother-in-law, son of Menoeceus,  
Creon, to Pythian Apollo's shrine, [70]  
to learn from him what I might do or say  
to save our city. But when I count the days—  
the time he's been away—I now worry  
what he's doing. For he's been gone too long,  
well past the time he should have taken.  
But when he comes, I'll be a wicked man  
if I do not act on all the god reveals.

## 2. Rising Crisis

Oedipus questions Teiresias, a messenger, Jocasta, and a shepherd for information about Laius's murder and his own birth. Yet, Teiresias insists not to tell anything to Oedipus because the news he brings will bring nothing just burden to Oedipus.

TEIRESIAS

Alas, alas! How dreadful it can be  
to have wisdom when it brings no benefit  
to the man possessing it. This I knew,  
but it had slipped my mind. Otherwise,  
I would not have journeyed here.

OEDIPUS : What's wrong? You've come, but seem so sad.

TEIRESIAS : Let me go home. You must bear your burden [320]  
to the very end, and I will carry mine,

if you'll agree with me.  
OEDIPUS: What you are saying  
is not customary and shows little love  
toward the city state which nurtured you,  
if you deny us your prophetic voice.

### 3. Climax

The climax of the play is when in anger Oedipus sends Teiresias out of the palace. Teiresias leaves the palace with one single information, that if Oedipus and the Thebans want to seek the Laius' murderer, the man is the one who is sitting on his throne, Oedipus himself.

TEIRESIAS: I'm going.  
But first I shall tell you why I came.  
I do not fear the face of your displeasure—  
there is no way you can destroy me. I tell you,  
the man you have been seeking all this time,  
while proclaiming threats and issuing orders [450]  
about the one who murdered Laius—  
that man is here. According to reports,  
he is a stranger who lives here in Thebes.  
But he will prove to be a native Theban.  
From that change he will derive no pleasure.  
He will be blind, although he now can see.  
He will be a poor, although he now is rich.  
He will set off for a foreign country,  
groping the ground before him with a stick.  
And he will turn out to be the brother  
of the children in his house—their father, too,  
both at once, and the husband and the son  
of the very woman who gave birth to them.  
He sowed the same womb as his father  
and murdered him. Go in and think on this. [460]  
If you discover I have spoken falsely,  
you can say I lack all skill in prophecy.

### 4. Falling Action

Jocasta and Oedipus both realize that they have committed incest and that Oedipus has murdered his father, Laius. Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus gouges his eyes out and is exiled.

SECOND MESSENGER:  
She killed herself. You did not see it, so [1240]



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She was remembering that child  
of theirs born many years ago—  
the one who killed his father, who left her  
to conceive cursed children with that son.  
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She was hanging there, swaying, with twisted cords  
roped round her neck. When Oedipus saw her,  
with a dreadful groan he took her body  
out of the noose in which she hung, and then,  
when the poor woman was lying on the ground—  
what happened next was a horrific sight—  
from her clothes he ripped the golden brooches  
she wore as ornaments, raised them high,  
and drove them deep into his eyeballs, [1270]  
crying as he did so

#### 5. Resolution

The play ends with Oedipus asks Creon to look after his daughters but not to his sons because his sons are already grown up but not his daughter.

OEDIPUS :  
But wherever my fate leads, just let it go.  
As for my two sons, Creon, there's no need  
for you to care for them on my behalf—  
they are men—thus, no matter where they are, [1460]  
they'll always have enough to live on.  
But my two poor daughters have never known  
my dining table placed away from them or  
lacked their father's presence. They shared  
everything I touched—that's how it's always been.  
So take care of them for me. But first let me  
feel them with my hands and then I'll grieve.  
Oh my lord, you noble heart, let me do that—

#### D. Character

1. OEDIPUS: king of Thebes
2. PRIEST: the high priest of Thebes
3. CREON: Oedipus' brother-in-law
4. CHORUS of Theban elders
5. TEIRESIAS: an old blind prophet

6. BOY: attendant on Teiresias
7. JOCASTA: wife of Oedipus, sister of Creon
8. MESSENGER: an old man
9. SERVANT: an old shepherd
10. SECOND MESSENGER: a servant of Oedipus
11. ANTIGONE: daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a child
12. ISMENE: daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a child
13. SERVANTS and ATTENDANTS on Oedipus and Jocasta

#### E. Characterization

1. Oedipus : Determined and stubborn
2. Jocasta : Do not believe in prophecy
3. Creon : Honest and loyal man
4. Teiresias : Wise

#### F. Conflict

The play is about the seeking of Laius' murderer. It was prophesized that the king will be murdered by his own son, and the son will sleep with his own mother. The conflict begins when a blind prophet, Teiresias as the servant of Apollo, tells Oedipus that he is the murdered of Laius and his wife, Jocasta, is his own mother.

Unbelieving to the prophet but still in curious about what Teresias said, Oedipus gathers evidence and witness as many as possible. Finally Oedipus figures that Laius' murderer is he himself, and Jocasta is his own mother.