I BACKGROUNDS:
SOPHOCLES: “About the life of Sophocles there exists a modest amount of information none of which is of any help in the interpretation of his plays. Living as he did through the 5th century B.C., he saw in succession the Persian invasions of Greece and their defeat, the growth of Athens as an imperial power and center of culture under the regime of Pericles, and the long, cruel, ruinous war with Sparta and her allies which began in 431 B.C. and was drawing to a close when he died. He was a native of Colonus, on the outskirts of Athens, where a local cult honored the hero Oedipus, said to have been buried there. Rich, successful, sociable, witty, long-lived, he gives even less comfort than does Shakespeare to the bibliographical and psychological schools of criticism. He was a prolific writer and acclaimed in his own time. He won a large number of dramatic victories; one of his occasional defeats is said to be Oedipus Rex.” P. Arnott

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL: “At this particular time Athens was not only the center of political power and source of law; it was also the center of the intellectual revolution of the 5th century. With the practical, innovating spirit of the democratic Athenian in politics, commerce, and warfare were now combined the intellectual innovations of philosophers and teachers who explored and explained a revolutionary view of man’s nature and importance. It was in Athens that the new anthropological and anthropocentric attitude reached its high point. The idea that man was capable of full understanding and eventual domination of his environment found its home in a city which could see no limits to its own unprecedented expansion The attitude and activity of Oedipus are images of the critical spirit and the great intellectual achievements of a generation of sophists, scientists and philosophers. Oedipus investigates, examines, questions, infers; he uses intelligence, mind; thought; he knows, finds, reveals, makes clear, demonstrates; the words for these items are in large part the vocabulary of the play.” B. Knox

MYTH AND FOLKTALE: “The drama belongs to the general story pattern of the lost one found. The lost one may be a wife, husband, brother or sister, or any close friend, thought dead far away but discovered to be present, unknown. A particularly popular variant is one that makes the baby or foundling the lost one: the type to which Oedipus belongs. Whatever variant happens to be followed, the pattern of itself seems to generate certain features that are almost required: the child is noble, the child is unwanted and usually thought dead; a servant is usually delegated to do the dirty work. The child grows up in the wilds, is thought to be plebeian, but is at last recognized and restored to its proper station. Thus the story of the triumph of truth over rumor or opinion, and the triumph is likely to occur after the darkest moment, when error is on the point of prevailing.” R. Lattimore
II PLOT SYNOPSIS:
“Oedipus, the great and prosperous king of Thebes, has in all ignorance committed the horrible crimes of killing his father (Laios) and marrying his mother (Jokasta). The play opens many years after Oedipus, by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, has saved Thebes and become its king. A plague on fertility has struck Thebes, and Kreon (Jokasta’s brother) brings from the oracle of Apollo at Delphi the proclamation that the murderer of Laios must be discovered and driven out. Oedipus pronounces a formal curse on that man. Teiresias enters reluctantly and after angry exchange declares that Oedipus himself is the guilty party. Oedipus concludes that Kreon and Teiresias are conspiring against him, and Jokasta intervenes as the two quarrel. Her comments about the unreliability of oracles and the history of Laios lead Oedipus to suspect that he may indeed have killed Laios, in self-defence, at a place where three roads meet. They send for a herdsman who survived the encounter, but in the meantime a messenger from Corinth arrives to announce the death of Oedipus’ ‘father’ and in trying to remove his fear concerning his mother reveals that Oedipus was not the son of Polybus and Merope of Corinth. The messenger in fact had received the infant Oedipus from a Theban herdsman, the very same man whom they have summoned concerning the murder of Laios. The herdsman reluctantly reveals that Oedipus was the son of Laios and Jokasta. Jokasta hangs herself and Oedipus blinds himself now that he sees the horrible truth.” Ian Storey & Arlene Allen

III THE CHARACTER OF OEDIPUS:
“Moving from king to pollution, from seeing to blind, from rich house to savage mountain of the monstrous birth and rejected outcast, Oedipus becomes, even more deeply than Teiresias, a constellation of contradictions and opposites. He realizes his identity not as a stable unity, but as a juncture of polarities. Replacing the blind seer as the paradigm of man’s tragic knowledge, he joins these oppositions in conscious and agonized union rather than unconscious coincidence. Oedipus seeks the murderer of Laius, whom he hears as his own, and finds himself. His sufferings in the play constitute a far more significant ‘answer’ to the Sphinx’s riddle than the one he so confidently gave outside Thebes in his youth. By living out his answer, he becomes a more authentic civilizing hero, the bearer of the tragic meaning of civilization for men. Prometheus, the archetypal culture-hero, gave men ‘blind hopes’ along with the arts of civilization so that they could not foresee their death. Oedipus tears away the veil and by his own self-chosen blindness gives men sight.” C. Segal

“Oedipus is a ‘good king,’ a father of his people, an honest and great ruler, while at the same time an outstanding intellect. The Polis is always on his mind, and he regards his position as a gift entrusted to him by the free decision of the citizens, and his final care is not for himself but for the people and the State. He is also a pious man who believes in oracles, respects the bonds of family, fears and hates impurity. The same man, however, is called ‘tyrant.’ He is a great man, and he himself knows it, a man who likes to give orders and to hear himself doing so. The suppliant people approach him almost as a god and he is honored as a savior, a soter. Such honors, as every Greek knew, were dangerous, for they may lead to hubris. A great man was more likely than anyone else to overstep the boundaries set to human beings by the gods.” V. Ehrenberg
IV THEMES AND DEVICES:
“The Oedipus Rex is a tragedy of fate: its tragic effect depends on the conflict between the all-powerful will of the gods and the vain efforts of humans threatened by disaster; resignation to the divine will and the perception of one’s own importance is the lesson which the deeply moved spectator is suppose to learn from the tragedy.... Oedipus’ fate moves us only because it might have been our own.” Sigmund Freud

“In the Oedipus Rex, both Apollo and his ministers are triumphantly justified and the skepticism of Jokasta and Oedipus condemned. Sophocles is supporting the religion against contemporary attacks, and criticism of traditional religion and oracles was particularly common at the time of the Peloponnesian War. False oracles were produced in large quantities, and the oracle-monger becomes a figure of fun for the comic stage. In this atmosphere Sophocles wrote the Oedipus to defend what was for him, as for Socrates, one of the basic facts of Religion.” T.B.L. Webster

“In King Oedipus the divine powers, their acts and motives, are hidden, both from us and from the characters in the play. We do not see them, as we do often in the world of Euripidean tragedy; we sense them present and we sense them act, but we must infer their presence and activity from such indications as ordinary men may have of the involvement of superhuman powers in their experience. That is, from the occurrence of uncanny and significant events, from oracular utterances and from the riddling words of seers.” John Gould

“The ascription of the self-blinding to a daimon (superhuman but personal spirit) is also part of the whole fabric of the play. By identifying the daimon with Apollo, Oedipus links his witting and unwitting acts, so that the self-blinding appears to be the culmination of the evil destiny that has attended him from birth. But the divinely-appointed destiny of Oedipus comes about largely through actions which spring directly from his character: it was like Oedipus that he must leave Corinth to discover the truth about his birth; it was like Oedipus to pursue his judicial enquiries with such energy; and so on. ‘Character is destiny.’ Looked at from this angle, the play might seem to be a commentary on this saying of Heraklitus.” R.P. Winnington-Ingram

“Could Sophocles himself have believed that Oedipus was an innocent victim through and through? How could a man remain religious who had a vision like that? But it turns out that there are innumerable religious myths that depend on that very point - guiltless suffering. Some medieval Jews are said to have believed that God has given every generation one just man, one man who suffered terribly through no fault of his own, but knew the suffering was not just. The misery of this poor blameless man was thought somehow to lighten the burden for the rest of mankind.” Thomas Gould
“The play makes it evident that for Oedipus, if for no one else, **self-knowledge** is an appalling and a humbling experience. It would have reminded any Greek spectator of the maxim engraved at Delphi: Know thyself. Self-knowledge is therefore understandably associated with the virtue of **sophrosyne**, a word usually best translated as modesty or self-restraint. The closer we look at the way Sophocles has organized his play, the less remote the story of Oedipus comes to seem from common Greek and common human concerns.” Michael J. O’Brien

“No play is more about **language** than the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. An expert at decoding difficult messages, the hero cannot decode the meaning of his own name. Human communication here parallels he communication by ritual and oracle between man and God. Continually breaking down, this communication either ceases prematurely because of fears or knowledge that cannot be spoken or runs to excess because of passion and anger. Apollo’s oracles from above and the Sphinx’s riddle from below provide models for human discourse, but both short-circuit the significant function of language.” Charles Segal

“In his study of **ambiguity** W.B. Stanford noted that, from the point of view of ambiguity, *Oedipus Rex* is quite exceptional. This work can be taken as a model. No literary genre of antiquity made such full use of the **double entendre** as did tragedy, and *Oedipus Rex* contains more than twice as many ambiguous expressions as Sophocles’ other plays (fifty according to the count made by Hug in 1872). However, the problem is not so much one of quantity as of nature and function.” J.P. Vernant

“Sophoclean **irony** is central to his meaning and it is disturbing, but it is not the irony of a morally uncommitted observer; still less is it a kind of superior mockery of the moral weakness or rashness of the agents in the story. There is a world of difference between Jane Austen’s ironic reinforcement of social values and Sophocles’ cosmic and subversive tragic irony with its terrifying power of coincidence, its capacity for mutation and reversal, of every kind, of sense, of value, of identity.” John Gould

“The **chorus** is a collective body, which mobilizes (but does not simply embody) communal wisdom and communal memory. It speaks both as a particular character and with the authority (religious, social, cultural) that comes from its status as a chorus. As a group, it is constantly in significant tension with the individual heroes onstage and their self-commitment. This tension between group and individual is integral to the ideological concerns of tragedy’s narratives. The chorus’s odes act as hinges between scenes, and guarantee that tragedy is never merely a sad story but always has commentary, reflection, and distance built into its unfolding.” Simon Goldhill

**V INTERPRETATIONS:**

“The *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles combines two apparently irreconcilable themes, the greatness of the gods and the greatness of man, and the combination of these themes is inevitably tragic, for the greatness of the gods is most greatly and clearly manifest in man’s defeat. ‘The god is great and does not grow old.’ But man does, and he dies.
Unlike the gods he exists in time. The beauty and power of his physical frame is subject to sickness, decay, and death; the beauty and power of his intellectual, artistic, and social achievement to decline, overthrow, and oblivion. Oedipus is symbolic of all human achievements: his hard-won magnificence, unlike the eternal magnificence of the divine, cannot last, and while it lives, shines all the more brilliant against the somber impermanence of mortality. Sophocles’ tragedy presents us with a terrible affirmation of man’s subordinate position in the universe, and at the same time with a heroic vision of man’s victory in defeat.” Bernard Knox

“Certainly the *Oedipus Rex* is a play about the blindness of man and the desperate insecurity of the human condition: in a sense every man must grope in the dark as Oedipus gropes, not knowing who he is or what he has to suffer; we all live in a world of appearance which hides from us who-knows-what dreadful reality. But surely the *Oedipus Rex* is also a play about human greatness. Oedipus is great, not in virtue of a great worldly position -for his worldly position is an illusion which will vanish like a dream- but in virtue of his inner strength: strength to pursue the truth at whatever personal cost, and strength to accept and endure it when found. Oedipus is great because he accepts the responsibility for all his acts, including those which are objectively most horrible, though subjectively innocent.” E.R. Dodds

**VI STUDY QUESTIONS: POINTS TO PONDER:**

1. Why does Aristotle like this play so much? Discuss the Unities of Place, Time and Action, the significance of *peripateia* (reversal) and dramatic irony. Olympian and oracular religion?
2. Does Sophocles take a philosophical position on the problem of fate/free will? What role does the god Apollo and Delphi play in the drama? Who is Teiresias?
3. What role does the god Apollo and Delphi play in the drama? Who is Teiresias?
4. Note the significance of mathematics (numbers and equations) and the inductive method, reflecting the scientific climate in Athens at the time.
5. Several patterns of imagery (nautical, legal, medical, scientific) permeate the play; how do they function and relate to the original audience?
6. The Chorus, an important collective or mini-community of Theban elders, contributes information, conflicting emotions and a crucial point of view constantly changing. What are the multiple functions of the Chorus?
7. Conflicts drive the play, and the Greek word for formal debate is *agon*. What are the several *agones* of the play and how are they constructed?
8. What parts do the “minor” antagonists play in their attempt to divert Oedipus from his quest for identity and truth?
9. References to light and dark, sight and blindness are crucial to the discourse of the play. Why does Oedipus blind himself?
10. What part does the Messenger play? What are his strategies for story-telling?
11. There are no stage directions in Greek drama. How does the play end? Where does Oedipus go?
GLOSSARY FOR OEDIPUS THE KING

Abae (AH-bee) - site NE of Thebes with oracle of Apollo
Agenor (Ah-GAY-nor) - father (or son) of Cadmus and descendant of Zeus
Apollo (Ah-POL-oh - god of prophecy, light, healing and music whose major temple is at Delphi, NW of Thebes, and whose epithets include “Lykian” and “Loxias”
Ares (AIR-eez) - god of war and perhaps of the plague (cf. opening of the Iliad)
Amphitrite (AM-fi-trite) - sea-god
Artemis (AR-te-miss) - virginal goddess associated with animals, mountains and hunt
Athena (Ah-THEE-nah) - virgin daughter of Zeus and goddess of wisdom, defensive war and the arts; patron goddess of Athens and also worshipped in Thebes
Bacchus (BAH-cuss) - another name for Dionysus, the god of wine, ecstasy, music and theater; born in Thebes but worshipped most of all in Athens
Cadmus (CAD-muss) - founder of Thebes and great-great-great grandfather of Oedipus
Corinth (KOR-inth) - major port city SW of Thebes ruled by Polybus
Cithaeron (Kith-THIGH-ron - massive mountain south of Thebes where O. was exposed
Daulis (DOW-liss) - city in Phocis (region of Delphi) where O. met his father
Dionysus (Die-oh-NIGH-suss) - god of wine, music, and theater
Dorian (DOR-ee-an) - invaders of Greece (from North?) after Mycenean AGe
Hades (HAY-deez) - both king of the Underworld and place itself and Death personified
Hermes (HER-meez) - god of herdsman, messengers and good luck, who transports the dead to the Underworld and has a temple on Mt. Kyllene in Arcadia
Ister (ISS-ter) - the Danube River emptying into the Black Sea
Jocasta (Joe-KAST-ah) - princess of Thebes, wife of Laius and mother/wife of O.
Labdacus (LAB-dah-cuss) - grandfather of O.
Laius (LIE-uss) - husband of Jocasta and father of O. killed at the crossroads
Lycian (LISH-yun) - epithet of Apollo meaning either “from Lycia” or “wolflike/destructive”
Maenads (MEE-nadz) - female followers of Dionysus
Menoeceus (Men-EE-kee-us) - father of Creon
Merope (Mair-OH-pay) - wife of Polybus and adoptive mother of O. at Corinth
Miasma (MEE-az-mah) - stain, disease, pollution by homicide/crime against family and demanding exile/cleansing/purification
Oedipus (E-di-puss/EE-di-puss) - son of Laius and Jocasta and hence rightful king of Thebes with triple nameplay
Phasis (FAH-sis) - large river originating in Caucasus Mtns. and ending in Black Sea
Phocis (FOH-kiss) - region in central Greece north of Thebes and east of Delphi
Phoebus (FEE-buss) - epithet of Apollos meaning “shining”
Polybus (POL-li-buss) - king of Corinth and O’s adoptive father
Sphinx (SFINKS) - hybrid monster (body of lion and head of woman) plaguing Thebes with her destructive riddle
Thebes (THEEBZ) - city north of Athens and major competitor to Athens in trade/war
Thrace (THRAYCE) - barbarous country NE of Greece north of the Black Sea
Tiresias (Tie-REE-see-uss) - blind prophet associated with Apollo and Delphi
Zeus (ZOOS) - king of the gods and god of justice, hospitality, oaths and thunderbolt
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<th>TIME LINE FOR SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS THE KING</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>GREECE</strong></td>
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<td>508/7 Cleisthenes’ Reforms and the Birth</td>
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<td><strong>404 Fall of Athens to Sparta</strong></td>
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<td><strong>399 Death of Socrates</strong></td>
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<td><strong>c. 442 Sophocles’ Antigone &amp; Ajax</strong></td>
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<td><strong>c. 439 Sophocles elected General</strong></td>
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<td><strong>c. 418-14 Sophocles’ Electra</strong></td>
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<td><strong>c. 413 Sophocles’ Women of Trachis</strong></td>
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<td><strong>409 Sophocles’ Philoctetes</strong></td>
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<td><strong>406/5 Death of Sophocles</strong></td>
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<td><strong>401 Sophocles’ Oedipus at Colonus</strong></td>
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<td>(produced posthumously)</td>
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Theban Royal Family Tree

Agenor

Europa       Cadmus

Polydorus   Semélé -- Zeus   Agavê

Labdacus   Dionysus   Pentheus

Menoceceus

Creon       Jocasta   Laius

Oedipus

Polyneices  Eteocles  Ismene  Antigone
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