



*Chorus members dressing*

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SOPHOKLES

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ŒDIPUS REX

STUDY GUIDE

## Background

LAIUS (*LIE-us or LAY-us*) and JOCASTA, king and queen of Thebes (*THEEBS*), are warned by an oracle that a son to be born to them will kill his father and marry his mother. When a child is born, they give it to a shepherd to be killed after piercing and binding the baby’s feet. The shepherd, taking pity on the child, gives it to another shepherd who in turn gives it to POLYBUS (*POL-ee-bus*) and Merope (*MARE-o-pee*), the king and queen of CORINTH. When he reaches manhood, ŒDIPUS (*ED-ih-puss* or *EE-duh-puss*) learns from the oracle that he is to kill his father and wed his mother. To avoid that, he resolves never to return to Corinth

On his journey away, he kills a man who blocks his way with a chariot after an argument over the right of way. Soon after, he reaches Thebes, a city plagued by the SPHINX who denies access to the city to those who cannot answer her riddle. When Œdipus answers it, the Sphinx kills herself and Œdipus is hailed as the savior of the city. He is made king and marries the queen, jocasta. After he has ruled successfully for many years and born four children (Antigone [*Ann-TIG-uh-nee*], Ismene [*is-MEN-ee*], Eteocles [*ee-TEE-uh-klees*], and Polynices [*paw-lee-NICE-ees*]), a plague suddenly strikes the city.

Terms

agon

antagonist

antistrophe

blank verse

catharsis

chorus

classical

climax

*deus ex machina*

Dionysos

dithyramb

epiphany

episode

spode

exodos

Golden Mean

hamartia

hubris (hybris)

iambic

in medias res

irony

lyric

ode

paean

parodos

pathos

peripety

probability

prologue

propriety

protagonist

satyr-play

Sophoclean irony

stasimon

strophe

tragedy

trimeter

Some questions

1. What function does the Chorus serve in the Parodos?
2. What facets of Œdipus’s character does the first scene reveal?
3. How is Œdipus always so ‘reasonable”--insufferably so at times?
4. Why does Jocasta say that “Miserable” is the only name she may now call Œdipus?
5. How do the very actions taken by the characters to circumvent the prophecies serve to make them come true?
6. In what sense are Œdipus’s misdeeds performed “on purpose”?
7. Is the final comment of the Chorus too glib? Discuss

### Some questions on the early part of the play

### Prologue

1. What is the setting of the play, in time and place?
2. According to the opening speech by the Priest, what do the Athenians believe about who controls the lives of humans, about the role of the king, about the power of prayer?
3. What is the cause of the plague, and what must be done to lift it?
4. What action has Œdipus taken to solve the problem?
5. What news does Creon bring back from the oracle at Delphi?
6. List and explain at least three of Œdipus’s lines that contain dramatic irony.

### parodos (Ode of entry)

1. To which god does the Chorus sing its opening hymn?
2. List all the references to sight, blindness, light, and darkness in the Parodos.

### Episode One

1. What is the curse Œdipus decrees on the murderer of Laius?
2. In times of trouble, how does Œdipus go to the gods for help? How does he turn to human wisdom for help?
3. What does Teiresias do that provokes Œdipus, making him call the seer a “demon... soul of evil!”?
4. Whom does Teiresias identify as the murder of Laius?
5. What is Œdipus’s reaction to this announcement? Of what does he accuse Teiresias and Creon?

### Stasimon

1. What reason does the Chorus give for not believing that Œdipus could be the murderer?
2. What new references have been made to sight and blindness and to light and darkness?

Questions from Paul Fletcher, Barnes & Noble Book Notes to Œdipus Rex-Œdipus at Colonus-Antingoe; B&N, 1969.

## Cliff’s exam questions © Cliff’s Notes

1. In *King Œdipus*, is Œdipus a helpless victim of fate or were there ever times when he could have acted to prevent his downfall?
2. Explain how Œdipus came to kill his father and marry his mother, and then to discover his true identity. Do you feel he deserves the punishment he receives at the conclusion of the play? Why does Œdipus accept his guild and punishment without question or protest?
3. Describe the character of Creon in *King Œdipus* and explain his function in the play.
4. What is Jocasta’s function in *King Œdipus*? Why does she commit suicide?
5. Discuss the Sophoclean view of humanity’s place in the world as it is expressed in *King Œdipus*. Is it compatible with your own outlook/
6. What influence did Sophocles’s affection for the traditions and countryside of Athens have on the composition of his plays? Give specific examples.
7. How did tragedy originate and what was its function in fifth-century Athens?
8. What is the place of Sophocles in Greek drama? mention his other plays and his innovations in dramatic technique.
9. Identify the following: *episode* *stasimon*, *exodos*, *choregos*, *protagonist*, tetralogy, festival of dionysos, dithyramb, Thespis.
10. What is the purpose of the chorus in Greek tragedy?
11. Why were myths and legends the main source of plots for tragedy, and what effects did their use have?

## NOTES: