IS 2024 INSIDE STORIES

Oedipus the King by Sophocles

Teaching notes prepared by Emma Catchpole

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VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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Introduction

When Sophocles presented *Oedipus the King* to his Athenian audience in 429 BCE, he was already a highly respected playwright and member of his community. Sophocles was born into a wealthy family and was respected for his political knowledge and religious tenacity. He also held the (elected) rank of General, and his opinion was sought in political negotiations. He held many civic roles and was also believed to be a priest for the god Asclepius, the god of medicine (perhaps it was with the grace of this god that Sophocles lived into his 90s).

A prolific writer, only seven of his plays have survived the passage of time as whole works, but all are regarded as exemplars of the epitome of Ancient Greek theatre, both for their subject matter and for their artistry. Sophocles and his contemporary, Aeschylus, are credited with including a third actor on the stage, and it is claimed by Aristotle that Sophocles introduced the practice of painted scenery.

Further, Sophocles was well regarded by many notable Ancient Greek philosophers, leaders, and historians, including Aristotle, Pericles, and Herodotus. And though he was criticised by Plutarch (as were many playwrights), it is notable that Plutarch saw Sophocles worthy of his (frequent) consideration.

Sophocles' writing – purpose and audience

It is important for students to understand that when Ancient Greek audiences attended a performance of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, they did so already familiar with the prophecy, the Sphinx, and the tragic conclusion of the play. For the audience, it was not the plot that was fresh and interesting, it was Sophocles' interpretation of the messages of the story, and his choices relating to the presentation of these events, that people flocked to see. By this stage in his career, Sophocles was a well-regarded playwright, and a civic and military leader; as such, his views on society, law and religion were broadly respected. It is these views that audiences sought in his performances. It is for this reason that exposing students to the Theban legend and the truth of Oedipus' parentage before reading the play is not detrimental to their studies; however, some teachers may want to engage students in the story through the drama of 'the reveal'. Teachers may choose either approach, and students, like the Athenian audience, will eventually come to 'a place where three roads meet' [790]. At this junction, Sophocles' purpose can be meaningfully explored and analysed, regardless of whether the reader is shocked by the plot. Many have noted that Sophocles' aim is to expose the ills of narcissism, and to caution against seeing oneself as separate to the wills and whims of the gods. It is also argued that Sophocles uses *Oedipus the King* to celebrate the kind of self-awareness that lends one the confidence to act with dignity and conviction (as we see with Creon at the conclusion of the play). This self-awareness is a virtue that can guard against tragedy, and it is a virtue that Oedipus clearly lacks.

As a religiously conservative man, Sophocles naturally placed the gods at the centre of the moral compass in his plays, and suggested wherever they pointed was the 'right' course of action. While there is debate surrounding the social makeup of the audience at the City Dionysia Festival's theatrical performances, the reception of Sophocles' plays suggests that his audience appreciated his conservative views, and that the values expressed in his plays either aligned with their own, or held moral directives that they gratefully received.

The Theban Plays

Antigone (441 BCE), *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* (406 BCE) are often referred to as 'The Theban Plays', leading to an erroneous assumption that they were written as a trilogy; however, in fact, they were each part of separate tetralogies (a collection of plays comprising of three tragedies and one work of satyr submitted as part of the Dionysia competition). Despite the order of their inception, in the chronology of the story, the events of *Oedipus the King* take place first, followed by *Oedipus at Colonus* and then conclude with the events of *Antigone*.

Oedipus the King, Oedipus Rex or Oidipous Tyrannos?

In the original Greek, Sophocles' play was entitled *Oidipous Tyrannos*; once the play was translated to Latin, it became *Oedipus Rex*, and then in English, *Oedipus the King*. The original title aptly included the term 'tyrannos', meaning a king with no legitimate claim to the throne, a nod to Oedipus' belief that he is not descended from Cadmus' lineage. 'Tyrannos' is the source of the term 'tyrant', however, 'tyrannos' does not have a negative connotation. Neither Latin nor English have a word that directly translates from 'tyrannos', hence 'Rex' and 'King' were used.

Translations

Robert Fagles' translation is well regarded as being closely aligned to Sophocles' original words and intention, and for current students, is also enjoyable to read. Fagles' language is poetic and modern, while maintaining much of the rich context, hence ensuring that readers feel connected with the original work.

There are, of course, many translations, each with their own nuances, interpretations, and style. For the purposes of this study, however, students should focus primarily on Fagles' 1982 translation, while bearing in mind that this is not just a translation, it is also an **interpretation**.

Ways into the text

Wherever possible, it is recommended that students be given some context to *Oedipus the King* **before** reading the play. This not only aids their comprehension of the text, but through the provision of relevant background information, students will find it easier to form an interpretation of the text. Access to relevant historical context details will encourage students not to overlook or misinterpret elements of Sophocles' play, thus positioning students to more easily gain an in-depth understanding of the text. The information and activities below aim to provide context that builds a strong foundation for further analysis and interpretation.

Developing a glossary of terms

Students will find this helpful in trying to tease out the nuances of various characters' approaches to prophecy and oracles, in order to understand precisely the distinction between them. Access to a glossary of terms used in the play will assist students' understanding, as well as enrich their vocabulary and interpretations of the text. Encourage students to construct an easy-to-read glossary, perhaps in a format such as an A6 booklet that can double as a bookmark. Terms for the glossary might include: oracle, seer, prophecy, prophet, fate, Destiny (capitalised), destiny, Chance, Apollo, Delphi, barren, allusion, curse, hubris, hamartia, foil, foreboding, dramatic irony, corruption. Students should, where possible, define these terms in their own words. There should also be space to add more terms that require definition and elaboration as they arise over the course of the study.

Research and collaboration

Ask students to divide into pairs/trios, with each group taking it upon themselves to research one of the following areas: Sophocles' life and his roles beyond the theatre; reception of *Oedipus the King* by the Ancient Greeks; the format, roles within, and purpose of theatre in Ancient Athens; Ancient Greeks' regard for the gods, prophecy, and fate. After sufficient research has been completed, each of the groups should be encouraged to share their findings, either in oral presentations or uploaded to an online class page.

Who would you follow?

Ask students to list all the characteristics of a great leader, for example: 'confidence', 'intelligence', 'strategic planning skills', 'capacity to care', and so on. If it appears that all students feel the same way about the suggestions, include some characteristics that may not be universally agreed upon, such as 'willing to apologise', 'charismatic', 'religious', 'well-educated', 'every-man', and 'aloof'. The next part of this activity can be done in pairs, small groups or individually. Ask students to draw a line to represent a continuum. On this line, ask students to plot the various characteristics of a **great leader**, with those on the far left-hand side being seen as less necessary than those on the far right-hand side. If working in pairs or small groups, students must come to a compromise about where they will place each leadership quality. It is likely that students will disagree with each other on where to place certain characteristics and they must therefore debate their choices. Their continuum must not contain contradictions (for example, a great leader cannot be both stoic and emotionally vulnerable; such qualities would need to be at opposing points on the continuum or considered equally unimportant).

In the second part of this activity, present a series of scenarios to the class, and ask the students to imagine that their continuum now represents a leader who has only the qualities they ranked highly. When considering these scenarios, students should analyse how well their leader (and their community) would fare given the qualities they have valued. They can compare their leader with that of another group/pair/student. Two example scenarios are included below.

Scenario 1: Food shortage

The people of Hypothica have just experienced a natural disaster; food and water are scarce, and as a result, disease is beginning to emerge. Many buildings are unstable, and the people are angry that preventative measures were not taken to minimise the impact of such disasters. A large group is outside the leader's residence; some people are yelling, waving signs, crying. Some are standing, some are lying on the ground. Some have their heads bowed. How does your leader respond? Would a leader with different characteristics offer a more effective response? Share and analyse your thinking.

Scenario 2: Conflict

The people of Hypothica have lived a simple, peaceful life for centuries. They are devout in their faith, consistent in their traditions, and have been historically resistant to change. Recently, however, a growing group wants to initiate change; they are calling for a secular approach to government, and the modernisation of industry. Rumours abound that a neighbouring kingdom is influencing this group and is attempting to ignite an internal conflict as a catalyst for war. Your leader is newly elected; how does this leader respond? Would a leader with different characteristics be able to implement a more effective response? Share and analyse your thinking.

Structure of the text

Classical Unities

Sophocles and Aeschylus allegedly made some modernisations to theatre; however, ever the conservative, Sophocles did adhere to what have become known as the Classical Unities:

- **Unity of Action:** the play should have a single plot focus.
- **Unity of Time:** the plot should progress in real time (this was, in some instances, diluted in severity, and the action of a play could take place over 24 hours).
- **Unity of Place:** the action should occur in a single location.

It is for this reason that the plays of Ancient Greece were not divided into Acts and Scenes, as there is no segregation of time and place. In *Oedipus the King*, we see these Unities utilised by Sophocles to focus the audience's attention on the events at hand, and even though the characters do, at times, recall the events of the past, Sophocles' retelling of the myth of Oedipus is centred on the moment of his realisation, not on the moments of first committing his prophesied sins. Combined, the Unities ensure attention is focused on a single day in Oedipus' life, and this then symbolises Sophocles' view that a single day, and a single choice, can be significant.

Another regulation of Ancient Greek theatre, though not strictly part of the Unities, is the requirement that all deaths occur off stage (the etymology of 'obscene' comes from the Ancient Greek 'ob skene', meaning off stage). While technically adhering to this, tragedians often created graphic imagery with words when describing the horrors that have taken place backstage, and Sophocles was no exception to this trend, graphically conveying Oedipus' final act of violence with brutal imagery (see **Language and style** section).

A note on translation

There are many translations of *Oedipus the King* of various styles, and translations often reflect the context of the translator. It should be noted that the role of the translator is not simply to create a literal copy, and that conveying meaning is often more important than maintaining an exact 'word-for-word' translation. Fagles' translation is regarded as one of the more artistic modern translations of the play, and one which does endeavour to maintain many aspects of the original context, in the language he has chosen. He has not, however, translated the Choral odes into rhyming verse. While this decision rejects the original structure, it nonetheless maintains meaning and a sense of poetry that goes far beyond mere rhyme.

Despite efforts to distance his own context from that of Sophocles, Fagles does employ occasional modern idioms, for example, 'I paid him back with interest!' [894], a phrase not used before the sixteenth century AD. Ultimately, however, these occasional inclusions positively serve both the modern reader and the original playwright: the translation is an interpretation, bridging centuries to deliver Sophocles' views in a manner both enjoyable and accessible to the modern reader.

Resolution

When read in isolation (without the accompaniment of *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*), there appears to be little resolution to Sophocles' retelling of the myth. After the death of Jocasta and the blinding of Oedipus, Creon refuses to make a definitive statement regarding Oedipus' future. He insists on waiting for Apollo to 'clarify [his] duties' [1574], deciding that 'in such a crisis it's better to ask precisely what to do' [1578–1579]. And this, ultimately, is Sophocles' point: there is not always a clear ending to mortal troubles, and when mortals need guidance, they should be patient, as Creon is, and accept that 'Time is the great healer' [1664]. The Chorus will 'keep [their] watch and wait the final day' [1683], but will not act against Oedipus, as 'only the gods' can pass final judgements [1667].

The flexibility, and role, of myth

Sophocles' interpretation of the myth of Oedipus of Thebes is by far the most well-known, however, it is not the only version of events, and Sophocles' characterisation of Oedipus is not the only Oedipus. The legend of the swollen-footed king prophesied to marry his mother and kill his father is believed to have originated in the Mycenaean era. Thus, it can be speculated that Sophocles chose to rewrite the original myth, for similar reasons to those of contemporary screen writers who often choose to draw on comic book heroes as the basis of their modern-day stories. Like Sophocles' characterisation of Oedipus, modern writers' new versions of the classic superheroes and villains are re-imagined, not exact replicas of the original characters. Writers often use myth and legend, relying on the readily recognisable plot lines, to make more accessible accounts of their own experiences, as well as to present familiar contexts in order to explore their own views and values. In this play, Sophocles takes the broad components of the legend of Oedipus, which did not initially include Oedipus' act of blinding himself, relying on his audience's foreknowledge of the story to enable him to explore the definitive truth of prophecy and the punishment for those who would question its legitimacy.

In terms of how myths were used and understood by the Ancient Greeks, academics suggest that myths were not considered 'predictive'. Myths 'are not predicting an outcome that absolutely must happen. Myths are descriptive' (Svehla, 2019). Thus, while many modern readers may become preoccupied with what Oedipus might have done differently to avoid his fate, or avoid having been punished with his fate, this was not the concern of Sophocles or his audience. In ancient times, myth was a source of moral storytelling, often offering a description of a scenario from which one could draw insight and clarity to apply to one's own life. Many forms of contemporary literature likewise pursue a similar purpose.

The role of the Theban legend

What came before the action of *Oedipus the King* is essential to understanding the play itself. Characters refer to fragmented details of the past; thus, it is important to develop some knowledge of this history, for such knowledge allows readers to recognise what Oedipus misses. For example, without knowing that Tiresias is correct in his accusations, we cannot appreciate the extent to which Oedipus' anger comes from a misguided belief in his innocence. When Oedipus announces his fears that he may be Laius' murderer and laments that there is no 'man alive more miserable than I' [901], the audience is aware that there is more pain to come for Oedipus. Anyone watching who is familiar with the Theban Legend will experience dramatic irony, adding to the pathos engendered by this particular retelling of the well-known tragedy.

Although the events that precede the action of the play are important, some students might question certain aspects of these. To a modern audience, the plots of the ancient myths may seem unlikely or fantastical, and as a consequence, some might then disengage from the text. However, aspects of the play itself reveal how the actions of the past come to pass. One might, for example, question what kind of man would kill a stranger over merely being 'thrust ... off the road' [889]. Sophocles ensures that over the course of the play we get more than a glimpse of just such a man. While the Oedipus in the opening stages of the play is confident and calm, we soon see his impulsivity, and his temper flares against Tiresias and Creon. Oedipus also speaks of his 'terror' as he 'ran' and 'abandoned Corinth ... running, always running' [872–878]; it is in this mindset that he came across the 'old man' [888], and then 'killed them all—every mother's son!' [898]. And while this might not be the response of the average person, Oedipus is not average.

Another event from the Theban Legend which might prompt students' questions, to the point of disengaging with the play, is Polybus and Merope's response to Oedipus when he questions his parentage. Many students might justifiably ask, 'Why didn't they just tell him the truth?!' – a close reading of the play notes that they in fact did. Oedipus approaches his parents due to 'Some man at a banquet who had drunk too much' shouting that Oedipus was 'not [his] father's son' [858, 860]; Oedipus 'questioned [his parents] closely' and 'was satisfied' with their response [863, 865]. Audiences who are aware of the truth of Oedipus' parentage assume the man was claiming that Oedipus was adopted, and that Polybus and Merope have therefore lied when questioned. However, Sophocles' exact wording is that the man claimed that Oedipus was not his 'father's son', and so Oedipus has assumed the man means that Merope had an affair and bore an illegitimate child. This accounts for their 'enraged' responses. And thus, Oedipus' belief that his parents are none other than Polybus and Merope remains unquestioned by him. Context also explains why they would not have revealed that they are Oedipus' adoptive parents; while common citizens could ascend to the throne (as Oedipus did in Thebes), concealing the fact that Oedipus was not of their blood line, protected his claim to throne of Corinth.

Foreshadowing

Sophocles' use of foreshadowing has a significant meaning; in addition to being a frequently used technique in literature, for Sophocles it symbolises knowing what is to come, and having faith in that knowledge when it comes from the gods. When Creon returns from the oracle 'he's crowned ...[with a] laurel wreath' [94–95], a symbol of triumph; Creon will, indeed ,soon be crowned, which represents the power of prophecy, and the reward for those who respect it.

Sophocles also intertwines foreshadowing with dramatic irony (see **Language and style** section) when Oedipus curses the murderer of Laius, promising to 'lay [his] hands on the man who shed his blood' [301–304], which he will do, and which is also prophesied by Tiresias. Foreshadowing acts as literary technique in and of itself, as well as serving Sophocles as a metaphor for his view that divine messages delivered through oracles and prophets should be respected.

Foreshadowing, combined with a knowledge of the Theban Legend, also allows Sophocles to control his audience's perception of Oedipus in the final lines of the play. When the Leader anxiously predicts from his fear 'that from this silence something monstrous may come bursting forth' [1181–1182], because readers are aware that the next time Oedipus comes on stage he will be bloodied and blinded, our perspective is shaped by these lines to regard Oedipus as 'monstrous'.

Characters

Oedipus

At the beginning of the play, the eponymous character believes himself to be the son of Polybus and Merope, the King and Queen of Corinth. Oedipus had been granted the throne of Thebes because of his ingenuity in defeating the Sphinx, who had cursed Thebes and was terrorising its citizens. An additional part of Oedipus' reward was marriage to Jocasta, the widowed wife of the former king, Laius. Unbeknownst to Oedipus, he has married his biological mother, having previously murdered Laius on a road far outside Thebes, not realising that Laius was the King of Thebes, nor that Laius was his biological father.

Towards the end of the play, the Messenger from Corinth points out that Oedipus' name was born of a 'misfortune' [1135], that his 'ankles were pinned together' [1133], hence his name meaning 'swollen foot'. There is another aspect to Oedipus' name that is lost in translation: 'Oidipous', his name in Ancient Greek, is a pun of 'oistha pou' meaning 'what do you know?' This pun would have added to the interpretation by the Ancient Greek audience, and it reinforces the play's theme of ignorance leading to tragedy.

Elsewhere in myth and legend, Oedipus is occasionally mocked as a fool or a villain, with no redeeming qualities. However, that is not the Oedipus that Sophocles has created. Despite his excessive narcissism, Oedipus does appear to care for his people – Oedipus' first action in the play is *'Helping a Priest to his feet'* (p. 159), and he claims to 'grieve for these, [his] people, far more than [he] fear[s] for [his] own life' [105–106]. Of course, each of these instances is preceded by Oedipus' excessive use of first-person pronouns that far exceeds what is necessary or what would form part of a natural dialogue; Sophocles utilises this to create a sense of narcissism from the outset [1–9] and continues to use this technique even after Oedipus' sense of self is shattered. In the line 'You pray to the gods? Let me grant your prayers' [245], Sophocles intertwines Oedipus' passion for his people with his own high sense of self and need to be seen always as the loved and respected leader. The interactions Oedipus has with both the Priest and the Leader illustrate the complex character Sophocles has created. If Oedipus were merely a selfish, arrogant king, the audience could easily hate him, however, for Sophocles to achieve his goal, we must see the good in Oedipus. The downfall of an unlikable character teaches no lesson.

Arrogance does not materialise spontaneously from Oedipus himself. He is frequently lauded in the play, due both to his royal status and because of his past actions. The Priest refers to Oedipus as 'our greatest power' [16] and the 'best of men' [57]. While such praise certainly feeds Oedipus' ego and arrogance, it cannot be said that Oedipus' **hubris** is fuelled by others; it is Oedipus' interpretation of the praise that leads him to make statements that suggest he believes himself to be equal to the gods. When the Priest extols Oedipus' actions against the Sphinx by saying 'We taught you nothing, no skill, no extra knowledge, still you triumphed' [46–47], it reinforces Oedipus' belief that his triumphs are his alone. The Priest then qualifies that, while no mortal taught Oedipus how to defeat the Sphinx, he believes that 'A god was with [Oedipus]' [48]. This sentiment, however, is not acknowledged by Oedipus, not even when the Priest suggests that Oedipus may be able to help Thebes again because 'perhaps [he's] heard the voice of a god or something from other men' [52–53]. Oedipus is famous in Thebes for his knowledge, and famous in literature for his ignorance. When Oedipus argues with Tiresias, he tells the seer 'I see it all' [394] and shortly after to Creon, he again claims to 'see it all' [597]. In both instances, Oedipus is ignorant. It is not until he begins to ask the right questions of Jocasta and learns some of the details of Laius and his death, that Oedipus comes close to the truth. Even then, however, when he cries 'Ai—now I can see it all, clear as day' [830] he **still** does not see it all, for there is more to come.

One of Oedipus' admirable qualities is also one that leads to his downfall: his inexhaustible desire to uncover the truth. Sophocles positions us to believe that Oedipus should be admired for his commitment to Thebes. However, it is implied that even in this quest for truth, Oedipus does not always exhibit the virtues of a good leader, and his search for the truth is not always motivated by an altruistic consideration for the Thebans.

Jocasta

Oedipus' wife (and unknowingly his mother) does not enter the play until the conflict between Oedipus and Creon is well underway. She is immediately presented to the audience as a confident woman and one whom the people respect; the Leader asserts firmly, that she is one who can 'help' Oedipus 'put this fighting ... to rest' [708–709]. With the security offered by her position and experience of many years of royal life, Jocasta engages with her husband and her brother as an equal. She immediately chastises Oedipus and

Creon, questioning their sanity and criticising them for "stir[ring] up private quarrels ... with the land so sick' [711–12]. Jocasta reminds them of their obligation to their people and implies that leaders must prioritise the needs of others over themselves. Jocasta's power seems out of context, given the roles and limited rights of women (even royal women) at the time, however, when she orders Oedipus 'into the palace' and insists 'Creon ... go home' [713], Sophocles subverts context and establishes for Jocasta a character role, not a real-world role. In *Oedipus the King*, Jocasta acts with the authority of a mother, and with the assurance of one who has been a consistent figurehead in Thebes during the rule of two kings, and the turbulent times in between. Sophocles' characterisation of Jocasta reminds us that this is a work of fictional literature, and that characters are as much a technique of the playwright as metaphor and structure: they are tools utilised to share views and values through art.

Despite careful construction of her character, Jocasta's motivations are open to interpretation, especially in regard to her religious deference (see **Issues and themes – Attitudes towards fate, oracles and prophecy**). She exists within the play as a peacemaker to soothe Oedipus' temper, and as a connection to the past (essential once Oedipus loses trust in Creon).

Jocasta is careful not to mistrust the gods, just their mortal minions. When she mocks the prophecy that, as far as she is concerned, never came to pass, she qualifies that the oracle 'came to Laius ... (I won't say from Apollo himself but his underlings his priests)' [784–786]. Jocasta seems triumphant in her conclusion that 'Apollo brought neither thing to pass' [794], boastful in her implication that Apollo would not curse Laius in such a way, and therefore oracles are merely the work of mortals, not worthy of consideration. Thus, she counsels Oedipus to 'brush them from [his] mind' [798].

Jocasta's shift in character and motivation *'turns sharply'* (p. 221); we see her confidence and self-assured faith crumble as she begs Oedipus to 'Stop—in the name of god' [1163]. When Oedipus dismisses her concerns (and, in fairness, she has not been able to explain to him **why** he should desist), Jocasta can only plead that she 'want[s] the best for [him]' [1171]. Her assertive sense of self is shattered upon realising that being Queen is meaningless if she is both wife and mother to the same man. When Oedipus again rejects her pleas, they turn to despair and anger, and Jocasta retreats to the palace and hangs herself.

Oedipus and Jocasta's different responses to the revelation of their connection to each other is often critiqued. Some have claimed Jocasta 'took the easy way out', others argue that this sentiment belongs to Oedipus. Even the Chorus questions Oedipus' choice, stating their view that for him it would be '[b]etter to die' [1498]. Oedipus can speak for himself, and even though Jocasta cannot, the explanation for her action is clear: Jocasta suicides because she cannot live with herself, but also because, as a woman, she cannot live within society.

The Chorus (and their Leader)

The role of the Chorus meant something specific to the audience of Ancient Athens. Modern audiences may see them as additional characters, or as a structural reminder of the play's historic origins. In the Chorus, the Ancient Athenian audience, however, saw a version of themselves. Sometimes a playwright wrote the Chorus to pose the questions and issues of the common people to the (often royal) protagonists, and sometimes they were written as adjuncts to cautionary tales – people who saw, as the audience sees, characters such as Oedipus act contrary to the views of the society of the time, and having witnessed this, change their own views and narrowly escape committing such sins themselves.

In addition to these functions, in *Oedipus the King*, the Chorus' primary role is to foreground the plight of the common people. The Chorus reminds the audience of the human cost of Oedipus' pride and ignorance through both their words and their consistent presence on stage. That Oedipus is able, at times, to ignore their presence, further reinforces his narcissism.

The Chorus also represent a particular approach to religious reverence. When they first enter the stage, the Chorus express their agony, anxious that their circumstances are punishment from the gods, and if so, they are fearful of the requirements of their atonement. As such, the Chorus 'worship [Apollo] in dread', wondering 'what is [his] price' [174]. It is hard to say whether the Chorus' overall devotion to the gods is one founded on reverence or on fear. Despite their clear respect for Oedipus, the Chorus fearfully seek the will and support of the gods. They also verbally mirror the vindictive attitude of the gods when they call upon Artemis to 'ride Death down in pain!' [237] and to 'Burn that god of death that all gods hate!' [244]. These words reveal that for the Chorus, it is not enough that their troubles cease; they need a guilty party to suffer, as they have suffered. This is their understanding of their gods and of their king, and thus a belief system that they seek to emulate.

Whilst some translations combine the roles of the Chorus and the Leader, Fagles maintains the separation indicative of the original staging of the play. The Leader (or *coryphaeus*) has direct interaction with the principal characters, and while by no means an equal in status, speaks openly and honestly, even when gently criticising Oedipus for his temper and redirecting him towards the goal of saving Thebes:

> I would suggest his words were spoken in anger,
> Oedipus ... yours too, and it isn't what we need.
> The best solution to the oracle, the riddle
> posed by god—we should look for that. [460–463]

The Leader is often the voice of reason within the play, and acts as a tether to keep warring principal characters on stage, while also being a conduit to relay news from one character to another without bias.

Creon

Creon, Jocasta's brother, is respected by the people of Thebes and is initially regarded by Oedipus as a loyal and trusted friend. Despite their relationship souring, and Oedipus even viewing Creon as the antagonist at times, he is in fact the hero of this tale. Creon is held up by Sophocles as the man we should aspire to be: steadfast without stubbornness, confident without arrogance. He even bears the quality most commonly regarded as being essential for a good king: he does not want to be one. Sophocles creates in Creon a leader who holds in equal measure, Oedipus' positive qualities, and (almost) none of his negative ones. He shares Oedipus' desire to save Thebes from destruction and is equally determined to search for the truth behind the oracle. It is Creon who goes to the oracle, Creon who knows of Tiresias' power, and Creon who suggests that Oedipus bring him to Thebes. Creon's temper almost matches that of Oedipus during the heated exchange in which Oedipus accuses Creon of treason. What limits an assessment of Creon's temper being averse to leadership (as is the case for Oedipus) is that Creon is in the right and does not base his arguments on false logic and supposition. Creon proudly proclaims: 'when I don't [know] ... *I* keep quiet' [635].

Once the truth is revealed, and Oedipus' reign must end, Creon reluctantly takes it upon himself to rule Thebes. He agrees to care for Oedipus' daughters, and does not 'come to mock ... Oedipus, or criticize [his] former failings' [1557–1558]. Creon also embodies Sophocles' devotion to the gods, by refusing to act upon the exile of Oedipus; he waits for 'the god to clarify [his] duties' [1574]. While the oracle he originally brought from Delphi commanded that they 'Drive the corruption from the land' [109], the specific curse of exile came from Oedipus. Creon makes it clear that the words of the gods, and their exact desires, far outweigh the commands of former King Oedipus.

Tiresias

The character of Tiresias, whose name literally means 'portent', was included in many Ancient Greek myths and tragedies. He is revered by the Thebans, who refer to him as 'Lord Tiresias' and claim he 'sees with the eyes of Lord Apollo' [323]. Despite the esteem in which he is held by the Chorus, Tiresias' role in *Oedipus the King* is a tragic one. He unwillingly comes to Thebes at Oedipus' behest, and endeavours to conceal his knowledge, because he knows 'the truth is only pain to him who sees' [360]. He is threatened and taunted by Oedipus, who not only is ignorant of the knowledge Tiresias holds, but also unaware of the kindness Tiresias attempts to show Oedipus in bearing the burden of being the one in whom 'the truth lives ... [in] him alone' [339].

The encounter between Oedipus and Tiresias begins civilly. Oedipus, taking a lead from his people, shows Tiresias respect when he greets the seer as 'my lord' adding that Tiresias is 'the one shield, the one saviour we can find' [345–346]. Whether or not Oedipus truly believes these words becomes irrelevant, as Oedipus withdraws his civility the moment Tiresias refuses Oedipus' request. When the two men argue, despite Oedipus' far greater political power, Tiresias continues to refuse Oedipus until he becomes so incensed at Oedipus' insults that he no longer cares for carrying the burden of the 'dreadful secrets' [374]. Tiresias alludes to Oedipus' guilt twice before matching Oedipus' temper and clearly revealing that Oedipus 'is the curse, the corruption of the land!' [401].

Oedipus rejects Tiresias' revelation as lies (as Tiresias presumably knew he would), and threatens Tiresias, demanding he retract the accusation. Tiresias refuses all of Oedipus' demands on the grounds that he is not Oedipus' 'slave', and only 'serve[s] Apollo' [467]. And it is with this anger and sanctimonious ego that Tiresias also reveals that Oedipus is 'brother

and father both to the children he embraces, to his mother son and husband both' [520–522]. By this time, however, Oedipus has entered the palace, literally turning his back on the truth.

Tiresias, being blind, further feeds into Sophocles' motif of sight being symbolic of truth and blindness being symbolic of ignorance, as Oedipus is physically sighted, but blind to the truth, while Tiresias is physically blind, and yet can see both past and future clearly. He recognises that it is Oedipus who is 'blind to the corruption of [his] life' [471], 'blind who now has eyes' [517].

The Priest

The Priest of Thebes plays an important role within his community, as well as in this play, as it is his treatment of Oedipus that sets the tone for Sophocles' interpretation of the mythological character of Oedipus. While Oedipus presents himself as a god among men when he questions why the Chorus is 'pray[ing] to the gods' when he will 'grant [their] prayers' [245], the Priest identifies Oedipus as the 'first of men' [41], and he has already clearly stated that Oedipus 'cannot equal the gods' [39]. The Priest's distinction between the gods and men (even the 'first of men') challenges Oedipus to step back from his hubris, however, Oedipus responds to the Priest's words with excessive references to himself and all he feels and all he has done.

While the Priest's role seems to be that of a grounding agent, persistently reminding Oedipus of his status, and that even in Oedipus' greatest triumph 'a god was with [him]' [48], there are inconsistencies that feed into Oedipus' sense of grandeur and blur the line between respect for a king and worship of a god. The Priest explains to Oedipus, right before telling him he 'cannot equal the gods', that he and the suppliants 'pray to [Oedipus]' [39], they 'bend to ... [his] power ... on [their] knees' [50–51]. This is followed by the Priest again diluting these remarks by asking if Oedipus has 'heard the voice of a god' [52–53] that might aid them in their plight. The apparent inconsistencies of the Priest can be explained through context and the fear being experienced by the people of Thebes. It also reflects Sophocles' message that in order to be truly self-aware, one must examine the entirety of a situation, and not only hear what one desires, as Oedipus does here.

Issues and themes

When considering the issues and themes of any text, students should, wherever possible, make connections between these and the playwright's views, values, and purpose, as well as show an understanding of how these are expressed through literary technique, language, and structure.

Morality and the good life

Views on how one could live a good life are often the subject of literature and evidently were of significant interest to the Ancient Greeks. The epic poems, tragedies and satyr were all used as a conduit for prescribing the writer's views on what constituted a good life, and these included directives that ranged from the need to be remembered, achieving glory and fame, to living a modest life of piety and equanimity. It is the latter to which Sophocles points as the potential source of 'eudaimonia'. Sophocles is not opposed to one achieving fame and fortune, however, if such feats are accompanied by an inflated sense of self (as is often the case), especially to the point where one might think oneself capable of defying a god, then this hubris prohibits them from ever living a good life. Sophocles uses the character of Oedipus to explore the notion that one may have many admirable qualities, however, the subject ought not to balance the scales in favour of believing oneself capable of 'grant[ing] prayers' [245] meant for the gods. Likewise, Sophocles holds Creon up as an example of a man capable of living a good life. He is flawed, but those flaws do not prevent him from living a life of pious respect and moderation. Creon recognises the good life he is already living, and when Oedipus' downfall increases Creon's power, the man who claimed to not 'yearn for kingship' [657] is consistent in that resolve; he does not 'come to mock ... Oedipus' [1557], but quietly accepts his new role without long speeches or hasty decrees. Creon recognises the good in living a life where 'all men sing [his] praises, all salute [him]' [668] and questions 'who in his right mind would rather rule and live in anxiety than sleep in peace?' [654–655].

Scholars have long questioned what specifically is Oedipus' sin. Is it murder? No, Oedipus is not punished or scorned for having murdered a group of men. Is it the murder of a king? While the people of Thebes are led to believe this by the oracle Creon consults, it is not so much that Oedipus killed the king, but that the king was his father – the sin is the crime of a child against their parent; a common narrative construct in Classical literature. Added to this is Oedipus' sin of marriage to his biological mother; these are the sins he was **fated** to commit. Thus, if Oedipus was **fated** to do these things, is he responsible? Ought he to be held accountable? Was he fated to commit such acts and therefore does so? Or was he always going to commit these acts, and hence it was known to be his fate? According to all of the various versions of the myth, including Sophocles', the fate was a punishment. When considering **why** Oedipus (and by extension Jocasta and Laius) is given such a terrible fate, it is often assumed that his hubris is his hamartia, that Sophocles constructs the play around Oedipus' punishment for believing that he could defy fate – something of the divine will of the gods. His other 'sin'? That his people should look to him in place of the gods when they need help. Sophocles does indicate Oedipus' hubris as a reason to explain his dire punishment, but instead of focusing on the sins of patricide and incest, Sophocles uses frequent metaphors and allusions around sight and listening to show that Oedipus' main sin is his lack of awareness. He murders without knowing who he murders, he marries without knowing whom he marries, and he acts with unbridled arrogance without acknowledging his place in the hierarchy of god and mortals.

Choice and freedom

Do Oedipus and Jocasta have choice? Can one 'choose' to follow their fate? Both of these characters insist, at various points in the play, that they are the masters of their actions, that prophecies and oracles do not control them. And while contextually it may be that such an attitude speaks to their royal status, it is not one we see mirrored in Creon. Furthermore, the claims of Oedipus and Jocasta certainly do not represent the views of Sophocles when we consider the play as a whole.

Oedipus' belief in his freedom is a cornerstone of his character, as is his latent fear that he is not, in fact, in control of his life. Without this contradiction, we have no plot. On the one hand, if Oedipus rejected outright the notion of freedom, he would have remained in Corinth, despondently accepting of a horrific, prophesied future with his mother and father. It is his belief that he can escape the prophecy through his own choices that leads him to believe that leaving Corinth will resolve this foretold 'future'. Paradoxically, if he held absolute faith in the notion of freedom, Oedipus would have no reason to leave Corinth; he makes it abundantly clear that he bears no ill will towards Polybus, and no unnatural feelings towards Merope. Therefore, if Oedipus truly believed in his own agency, he could have remained in Corinth, safe in the knowledge that he would never undertake the prophesied actions.

Sophocles resolves the paradox by claiming that the only solution is not to wonder whether or not we are free, but instead to simply embrace that we are not: the gods see all, and the gods are masters of all. It is only when we question this idea, as Oedipus did, that our actions and perceptions become tangled.

After Oedipus and Jocasta are forced to confront the truth of the oracles, they each respond in a way that they believe is an act of choice. We assume that Jocasta chose to take her own life, and Oedipus clearly states that 'the hand that struck [his] eyes was [his], [his] alone—no one else' [1469–1470]. At this point, Oedipus acknowledges Apollo's intervention in his life, finally accepting that 'Apollo ... ordained [his] agonies ... pains on pains' [1467–1468] but maintains that from this point in time onward (and beyond what has been revealed by the original oracle), he is making his own choices. Sophocles, however, makes it clear that regardless of Oedipus' assertions, he still lacks awareness of the scope of the gods and the power of fate. The Chorus question Oedipus' free will, wondering 'what superhuman power drove' [1466] Oedipus to mutilate himself. The messenger from the palace is consistent with the Chorus' view, and states that Oedipus was being led by 'dark powers' [1390] 'leading him on' [1392]. Oedipus, once considered their 'greatest power' [16], is ultimately revealed as not having any control or freedom whatsoever.

Attitudes towards fate, oracles, and prophecy

When considering the attitudes of various characters in *Oedipus the King*, it is important to recognise that for some, notably Oedipus and Jocasta, 'prophecy' is not always synonymous with 'god's will'. Oedipus further distinguishes between prophecy and oracles, and while a distinction does, by definition, exist in the context of Ancient Greece, both were accepted as having divine origin, and therefore were each deserving of religious deference.

From beginning to end, the play examines the extent of the gods' involvement, and by extension, whether a character's disrespect of prophecy equates to a disrespect of the gods. From Jocasta's point of view, it does not; upon hearing that a prophet is at the centre of the rift between Oedipus and Creon, she assures Oedipus that 'no skill in the world, nothing human can penetrate the future' [781–782]. She further mocks prophecy when she learns of Polybus' death, exultantly crying: 'You prophecies of the gods, where are you now?' [1036]. Despite her disdain for prophecy, however, Jocasta follows the customs of a devout woman, she 'visit[s] the temples of the gods ...[with] branch in hand and incense too' [999–1000] because she believes that '[w]hatever the god needs and seeks he'll bring to light himself' [799–800] without the need of prophets and oracles. Jocasta separates her faith in the gods from her disdain for prophecy with her belief in the gods' ultimate power; she believes they have no need of human conduits. This interpretation sets Jocasta in a different light; she is commonly perceived as the arrogant mother of an arrogant child: she defied the gods' will and suffered as punishment. If we assume, however, that she is so devout that she places no one so highly as to be able to speak on behalf of the gods, this shifts her character from one deserving of punishment, to an unfortunate character whose misunderstanding leads to tragedy. Sophocles appears to have little sympathy for the fictional Jocasta. After all, his goal is to promote his own religious views. Through the fate Sophocles writes for Jocasta, he proselytises that one of the ways people should show devotion to the gods is through the deference paid to their messengers.

Oedipus and Jocasta are seen revelling in Polybus' death by old age because it confirms their closely held (and desired) beliefs that those 'awful prophecies of god' [1043] '[t]hey're nothing, worthless' [1064]. Audience sympathy for the pair melts away. Jocasta is almost boastful in her assertion that 'Not a man on earth can see a day ahead, groping through the dark' [1070–1071]. What she does not realise is that this is why some people (including Sophocles) place seers, oracles, and prophets above average mortals: because the gods **can** see ahead, and they allow some mortals to divine this knowledge, so that all mortals are not 'groping through the dark'.

For the Chorus, prophecy **is** synonymous with the will and knowledge of the gods, although they do at times waver in this devotion under the influence of their loyalty to Oedipus. After the accusations by Tiresias and argument between Oedipus and Creon, the Chorus struggle with their competing obligations. They chant:

> Destiny guide me always
> Destiny find me filled with reverence
> pure in word and deed. [954–956]

The Chorus appear to find comfort in destiny; however, they then qualify this 'reverence' with the assertion '[n]ever again will I go reverent to Delphi ... unless these prophecies all come true' [985–989]. Is the Chorus testing the gods? Or just testing the oracles? Are they beginning to distinguish, as their King and Queen do, between the gods and those who claim to be conduits of divine knowledge? The Chorus have watched Oedipus assert his innocence against prophetic accusations, and pledged their

fealty to him, and through them, Sophocles voices the existential concerns of the Athenians:

> They are dying, the old oracles sent to Laius,
> now our masters strike them off the rolls.
> Nowhere Apollo's golden glory now—
> the gods, the gods go down. [994–997]

If Apollo's glory is questioned, then he has no power. The Chorus wonder: who will triumph? Sophocles responds to their concerns with Oedipus' and Jocasta's tragic ends.

Authority

Throughout *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles explores questions around authority. In particular, he examines closely the dilemmas raised by competing obligations to the law, to one's community, as well as to the gods, and to religion. Over the course of the play, the characters' perspectives on authority and loyalty shift. The Priest attempts to set a standard, a measure by which citizens can sequence their obligations: 'Now we pray to you. You cannot equal the gods, your children know that ... But we do rate you first of men' [39–41]. Through his evocation of the conflict experienced by the Chorus, Sophocles suggests that one should ideally never feel conflicted by the competing obligations to heavenly leaders and earthly ones, and that it is the responsibility of the earthly leaders to ensure their citizens are never placed in such a predicament.

At several points in the play, the Leader and the Chorus find themselves in difficult situations where they not only have to choose between their faith and their loyalty to Oedipus, but they also essentially need to **lead** Oedipus. The Leader confirms their role in society to Creon, they 'never look to judge the ones in power.' [592–593], and yet after Creon advises patience and calm, the Leader must counsel that this is 'Good advice ... for anyone who wants to avoid disaster. Those who jump to conclusions may go wrong.' [691–692]. The Leader here is aware that he must lead a king, and this situation serves to infer Sophocles' judgement on Oedipus' poor leadership: why should it be left to the people (with no power or protection) to lead? Oedipus has a responsibility to his people to 'steer [them] through the storm' [767], not act the petulant child who needs to be coerced into behaving with the temperance of a good king.

Oedipus counters the Leader with the strategy that he always uses: 'When my enemy moves against me quickly ... I move quickly, too' [693–694]. He aims to act first, and if not, act fast. Oedipus employed this strategy when confronted by the oracle about his parents, against an antagonistic man on the road, with the Sphinx, and he uses it now against Creon and Tiresias. Sophocles is not necessarily suggesting that this strategy is never appropriate, however, different contexts call for different actions, and therefore leaders must be dynamic in their response to conflict. This approach, however, is not Oedipus' way. 'No matter' he asserts, 'I must rule.' [703]. This line shows a value shift in Oedipus; he sees maintaining control as more important than being right. Sophocles punishes Oedipus for this view, and again holds Creon up as an example of good leadership when he responds 'Not if you rule unjustly' [703]. Creon here asserts his view of the responsibility of leadership.

While Jocasta does not have faith in oracles, she does have sincere faith in Oedipus and in her brother, Creon. When Oedipus and Creon argue, she begs Oedipus to 'honour the solemn oath [Creon] swears to heaven' [723]. Jocasta also recognises the authority of the gods; when Oedipus is so shaken by his fears that he may be the murderer of Laius, Jocasta 'urge[s] him gently, [but] nothing seems to help' and so she 'turn[s] to ... Apollo', begging him to 'cleanse us, set us free of defilement!' [1006–1009].

The Chorus have a religious obligation to the gods, as well as a political and social obligation to Oedipus. Generally, these obligations are consistent, but once there is contradiction, they are in a state of moral flux. They also find themselves having to defend their loyalty to an angry Oedipus after they convince Oedipus to let Creon go, after which he turns his anger upon them: 'You see what comes of your good intentions now? And all because you tried to blunt my anger.' [760–761], forcing them into an oath of loyalty, promising that one would have to be 'senseless, ever to turn [their] back on [Oedipus]' [764]. The Chorus have already by this point recommitted themselves to Oedipus after Tiresias' accusation, deciding that 'Never will [they] convict [their] king, never in [their] heart' [572]. By the end of *Oedipus the King*, the Chorus realise their faith in Oedipus was misplaced, and they rephrase their commitment, having learnt from the events before them: 'god, my champion, I will never let you go' [971]. And thus, Sophocles' message to his audience, to dedicate oneself to the gods and have trust in their authority over all else, is underscored. It is possible to argue that the play is also subtly delivering a message to those with power that they should never compromise themselves or their citizens by creating a contradiction in obligation when it comes to the need to pay service to the gods **and** to society.

The cost of ignorance and the value of knowledge

Through his depiction of the character Oedipus, Sophocles criticises ignorance and celebrates awareness, especially self-awareness. Sophocles uses the events of the play to castigate Oedipus, and anyone else who would let themselves fall victim to such a fatal flaw.

When Oedipus refers to himself as 'ignorant' [451], he believes he is being ironic, however, Sophocles includes this line to reinforce the degree to which Oedipus is truly ignorant. The play also emphasises how Oedipus' arrogance feeds his ignorance (and vice versa). This is seen in his recollection of his greatest triumph: 'I came by, Oedipus the ignorant, I stopped the Sphinx ... the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark' [450–453]. Sophocles' heavy use of dramatic irony (see **Language and style** section), and characterisation of Oedipus as impulsive and falsely confident in his wit, ensures a stark contrast with the truth; that every choice Oedipus makes is marked by his ignorance, by what he does not know, or refuses to see. For example, Oedipus jumps to conclusions: upon hearing the first details of the murder of Laius, he wonders, with no supporting evidence, if the killer is 'a thief', questioning whether one might be 'so daring ... he'd kill a king? Impossible, unless conspirators paid him off in Thebes' [140–143]. Oedipus constructs this entire scenario from nothing. He again impulsively draws connections where there are none while arguing with Tiresias, believing that he and Creon are conspiring against him. This imprudent approach is at odds with his reputation for being a man of great knowledge and wit. Sophocles reveals that there is no value in wit if it is not accompanied by humble introspection.

Tiresias endeavours to correct Oedipus' ignorance; however, Oedipus is so convinced that he knows himself completely, that he rejects Tiresias' truths. Frustrated, Tiresias notes that there is 'darkness shrouding [Oedipus'] eyes that now can see the light!' [478–479]; not only can Tiresias see the truth of Oedipus' parentage and marriage, but he can also see that Oedipus' ignorance blinds him to the point that there is nothing Tiresias can do to lift that veil.

Although much of the plot focuses on the ignorance of Oedipus, he is not the only character to sacrifice knowledge because of naivete. The Chorus grapple with a choice: the decision to ignore Tiresias, or to choose treason. The Chorus 'can't accept him, can't deny him, don't know what to say' [551]. They then think they have chosen to 'see' the truth because they 'saw [Oedipus] then ... saw with our own eyes his skill, his brilliant triumph—' against the Sphinx [569–570]; because the Chorus believe they have based their choice on evidence, they conclude 'not till [they] see these charges proved will [they] side with his accusers' [567–568]. The Chorus continue to fear the truth, even when directly questioned by Jocasta, and want to hide the accusations from her: 'Enough, please, enough! ... End the trouble here, just where they left it' [757–759].

Jocasta, too, is not only guilty of ignorance, but also of the greater sin of **choosing** ignorance. When Oedipus is on the cusp of learning the truth, Jocasta urges him (and herself), 'don't even think—' [1159]. When this first attempt fails, Jocasta calls for Oedipus to 'stop—in the name of god' [1163]. The truth has dawned on her, and she is afraid. In an effort to convince Oedipus to cease his line of inquiry, she warns him for his own sake: 'if you love your own life, call off this search!' [1163], and then asserts: 'My suffering is enough' [1164]. Oedipus' sense of self is so closely tied to being a man of knowledge that he cannot stop.

It is Creon, once again, who acts as a model for Sophocles' values. In his argument with Oedipus, Creon uses logic, not insults and bias, to point out that the oracle he reported from Delphi can be easily confirmed. Then, when confronted with a statement he cannot explain, he simply states: 'I don't know. And when I don't, *I* keep quiet.' [635]

Inscribed upon the pediment at Delphi was the maxim 'Know thyself'. Sophocles definitively utilises the myth of Oedipus to chastise ignorance, but he also wants his audience to look inward: In what ways are we acting without the appropriate awareness? How can we become more aware in order to lead a better life?

Language and style

Graphic language

Despite not being visually confronted with the death of Jocasta and the self-mutilation of Oedipus, Sophocles ensures that his audience receives a graphic depiction of their final acts within the play. Sophocles also chooses to contrast the tone of each of their fates. Jocasta's death is romanticised: Oedipus finds her 'cradled high in a woven noose' [1396]; he then 'eased her down, in a slow embrace he laid her down' [1399–1400]. Oedipus' next action, however, is exceedingly graphic and violent as he uses Jocasta's brooch pins to blind himself, 'at each stroke blood spurts from the roots ... a swirl of it, nerves and clots—black hail of blood pulsing, gushing down' [1412–1414]. While the play adheres to the regulation to keep deaths and extreme acts of violence off the stage, the audience is nonetheless left with deeply horrifying allusions as to what has occurred. This act of using spoken word to detail off-stage action does provide an advantage for the playwright: their words are clear. If the scene of Oedipus finding Jocasta's body, and his ensuing self-mutilation, were to be performed on stage, there might be room for a variety of interpretations; actors might not take proper care with Jocasta's body or be as violent in the act of blinding as Sophocles intended. In choosing to describe, rather than enact, the horrors on stage, Sophocles' intention is clear and cannot be changed through staging. He juxtaposes Oedipus' gentle actions towards Jocasta with his violent aggression towards himself.

Punctuation, pace, and line structure

Sophocles uses line length and structure to control the pace of dialogue. This technique is briefly utilised when Oedipus first learns of the directive from the Oracle of Delphi to 'Drive the corruption from the land' [109]; Oedipus puts his ego temporarily aside, and his focus is instead on uncovering the truth that might save Thebes. Even here, though, the dialogue of Oedipus and Creon are equally weighted, and 2-3 lines in length. Readers do not see this technique in full effect until Oedipus and Tiresias argue over who is 'blind'; in this scene, Sophocles shortens the lines of dialogue as the two men spit insults and threats at one another. The same technique also creates a rapid pace when Creon confronts Oedipus over claims of treason. In this section of dialogue, many of Oedipus' lines are punctuated as questions, however, they are not posed as questions, rather as accusations aimed at entrapping Creon in a Socratic-style of debate. Contrasting these moments of rapid-fire question and answer, call and response, Oedipus' many lengthy statements (usually serving his ego) draw additional attention to the former, highlighting a shift in Oedipus' character.

The technique, coupled with Oedipus' increased use of em dashes and ellipses, later infers a loss in Oedipus' confidence. When Oedipus speaks with Jocasta, the Messenger from Corinth, and the Theban Shepherd about the murder of Laius and his own origins, his questions become genuine, and his pauses denote rare moments when Oedipus does not know what to say. The impulsive man who interrupts, even when he has nothing new to say, stops – pauses – and finally fears what he does not know.

Dramatic irony

'A dramatic effect in which the audience for a drama (in any medium) or the reader of a novel has information that characters lack that enables the audience or reader to understand the impacts of a situation or of what is being said that the characters do not.' (Oxford University Press, 2023).

Sophocles' use of dramatic irony is an excellent example of a literary technique being used specifically to reinforce a thematic value of the playwright (a connection between 'form' and 'meaning'). For Sophocles, awareness is not only a virtue in the moral sense, but also utilitarian in its ability to ensure one does not fall prey to avoidable misery.

Much of the dramatic irony in *Oedipus the King* is intertwined with symbolism of light, dark, blindness and sight. Every time he responds to the oracle, when trying to save Thebes, Oedipus asserts that he will 'bring it all to light [him]self!' [150], confident that they 'will see [their] triumph —or [their] fall' [164]. The audience, however, is aware that the truth will, indeed, come to light, and while it is concerned with Oedipus, he will not achieve this discovery alone. In fact, Oedipus will at points thwart the revelation of the truth with his ignorance and ego refusing to 'see how far [he's] gone in guilt.' [419], 'blind to the corruption of [his] life' [471]. The conclusion of the play sees both Thebes' triumph and Oedipus' fall, a conclusion likely already to have been predicted by audiences who come to the play with the benefit of knowledge of the myth's outcome, and amplified by Sophocles to reinforce just how much Oedipus does **not** know.

It can be argued that many of the judgements the audience makes are influenced by dramatic irony stemming from the degree of their knowledge of the Theban Legend. While many in the past may have negatively judged Oedipus for his actions after he first hears the oracle's prophecy about his future, that judgement may arise from a contextual place of religious deference, and with the foreknowledge that Oedipus' actions will inevitably lead to the fulfilment of the prophecy. Had he not acted as he did, it would not have come to pass. If, however, the audience of the play is as ignorant of the circumstances as Oedipus himself, this may lead to an entirely different interpretation of Oedipus as a character and of the play as a whole.

Metaphors and motifs

Sophocles uses metaphor in abundant fashion. And while it is valuable for students to be able to identify these, it is important that we as teachers encourage them to dig a little deeper and ask themselves questions such as: Why these specific metaphors? Why metaphors at all? In response to the latter question, students should be encouraged to consider the play as a whole: a man seeks specific, clear answers (he is, after all, famous amongst Thebans for bringing clarity to a riddle). However, he initially only receives half-truths and limited information. It is Oedipus who persistently wades through these to reveal his own terrible truth. When posing questions of his own, and demanding the truth from Tiresias and the Shepherd, Oedipus is not handed the truth outright, but he is actively seeking it. Similarly, the purpose of metaphor is to bring connections and deeper truths to the reader, not through literal language, but through our interpretation of the figurative.

It should also be noted, however, that Oedipus is frequently thwarted in his search for truth by his arrogance and his ignorance. He (albeit subconsciously) is blind to the deeper meaning of the words he hears; without deeper analysis, students might find themselves in a similar position: assuming metaphor is used for metaphor's sake. Sophocles' use of metaphor is as clever as it is abundant; his language choices run much deeper than a desire for florid dialogue.

Light and dark, sight and blindness

The irony of a sighted Oedipus mocking the blind Tiresias is well known, and Sophocles further reinforces this perspective through his frequent mention of sight, coupling the image with metaphors and references to light and dark. Sophocles could have chosen any number of antithetical pairs for a literary purpose, however, his choice of light and dark speaks to his deeper views on truth. Further, these binary terms of light and dark suggest Sophocles' binary view of truth and falsity: one either knows, or does not; one is either enlightened, or is ignorant; there is no room for half-measures. Further, in the world Sophocles creates, being only semi-aware leads to plague and destruction. Light as a metaphor for truth also allows Sophocles to further engage with his audience's existing perception of light as positive, life-affirming, and bearing a connection to the gods, influencing them to share his value of truth above all else.

The personification of the metaphor is shown through Oedipus' treatment of Tiresias, the blind prophet in whom '[t]he truth with all its power lives' [405]. Tiresias 'sees with the eyes of Lord Apollo. Anyone searching for the truth ... might learn it from [him], clear as day.' [323–325]. Despite Oedipus' claims during their quarrel that he can 'see it all' [394], Tiresias knows that it is Oedipus who is 'blind to the corruption of [his] life' [471].

Hearing and listening

Much is made of the references to sight; however, it is worth noting the frequent references to hearing, especially the distinction between hearing and listening. The Priest hopes that Oedipus has 'heard the voice of a god' [52–53], not knowing that when Oedipus did hear from the gods, he dismisses their will and flees. By the end of the play, however, Oedipus is improving (by Sophocles' standards), and for all his other faults, he desires the truth and despite being 'at the edge of hearing horrors, [he] must hear!' [1286].

In the final moments of the play, motifs of sight and sound are combined to symbolise the extent to which the Chorus wish they could remain ignorant of the 'depths of terror, too dark to hear, to see' [1449].

Nautical metaphors

Oedipus the King also features many nautical metaphors which add to the sensation of turmoil Sophocles creates to help his audience empathise with the plight of the people of Thebes whose 'ship pitches wildly' upon the 'red waves of death' [29, 30]. The Chorus look to Oedipus, the 'good helmsman' of their 'beloved land' that is 'storm-tossed, shattered' to 'steer [them] through the storm!' [765–767]. Later, when Jocasta turns to Apollo, it is an expression of her concern that while the Thebans, the 'passengers in the grip of fear' are suffering, the 'pilot of the vessel [is going] to pieces'.

Perspective on the text

One of the tragedies of Oedipus is that he was loved as a king, despite his flaws; the Chorus and Priest respect him and are happy to give their loyalty. The messenger from Corinth also respects Oedipus and wants him to return to rule Corinth. It is 'the people', not simply the rules of succession, who 'want to make ... Oedipus king of Corinth' [1029–1030]. This, coupled with elements of Fagles' translation, lead to an argument for a sympathetic view of Oedipus. Many of Fagles' translations of stage directions imply sympathetic characterisations, especially of Oedipus. From the outset, Oedipus is said to be *'Helping a Priest to his feet.'* [page 159]. At the end of the play, a horrified Chorus offer a sympathetic tone in response to Oedipus' self-blinding: 'No wonder you suffer twice over, the pain of your wounds, the lasting grief of pain.' [1456–1458]; other translations imply an impassive, or sometimes even cruel reaction from the Chorus.

Whilst most believe that Oedipus' decision to leave Corinth was an act of hubris, lines 919–923 imply that Oedipus left Corinth motivated by fear, not by hubristic belief that he could defy the gods. Oedipus wished he could 'vanish without a trace before [being] stained with such corruption' [921–922] and begs the 'pure and awesome gods' [919] to spare him from ever committing the sins of the prophecy.

But does a sympathetic view of Oedipus adhere to Sophocles' views and values? Certainly, if we accept that Sophocles' purpose **is** to punish Oedipus for his excessive pride, we can also see how Sophocles shows that it is Oedipus' virtuous commitment to the discovery of the truth that eventually leads to his downfall. After all, this play reveals that it is not just the action of sinning that harms Oedipus, it is his discovery of the sin. Thus, while Sophocles wishes to punish Oedipus and serve a warning to others, his play has so much more to say. Sophocles values truth above all else, and in this play, he also asserts that a good life is not decided by one's peers or oneself, and is not based on a moment, or even a decade, but rather, on the sum of a person's life, whole and known to all.

Analysing *Oedipus the King* through a variety of literary lenses is an excellent way to explore differing interpretations. One which is particularly interesting is a reading through the Critical Disability Theory. When analysing *Oedipus the King* from a Critical Disability perspective (Hall, 2019), readers may notice Sophocles' use of what we now call a 'narrative prosthesis', where a writer uses a character's disability as a way of making a literary point that is entirely separate from the experience of disability, and as a juxtaposition of 'the able norm'. The interaction between Oedipus and Tiresias lends itself to such a reading due not only to Tiresias' blindness being used to convey the irony of his ability to 'see' the truth, but also to highlight Oedipus' arrogance in his treatment of Tiresias: the blind seer is not mocked for being old, or for living in isolation, or for anything other than his physical disability. It should be noted that Sophocles does not create this disability in the character; the myths of Tiresias were as old, rich, and detailed as those of Oedipus. It should also be noted that from the point of view of context, Sophocles and his contemporaries did not view their characters as having rights or roles outside their stories. Nonetheless, viewing *Oedipus the King* through a variety of critical lenses does add depth to analysis and interpretation.

Close study

Passage 1

Oedipus' altercation with Tiresias (lines 464–505)

Despite only being on stage for less than 200 lines, Tiresias has a significant impact not only on the plot, but also on the characterisation of Oedipus; it is in this passage that students can see Oedipus' desperation and his temper. Tiresias' presence also adds to Sophocles' motifs of sight and blindness being antithetical pairs, symbolic of truth and ignorance (see **Language and style** section). After Oedipus chooses to 'mock [his] blindness' [469], Tiresias appropriates this taunt and applies it to Oedipus, accusing him of being 'blind to the corruption of [his] life' [471], further connecting it to the future he sees, where 'darkness shroud[s]' Oedipus' 'eyes that can now see the light!' [477, 478].

Oedipus initially shows Tiresias respect, and he certainly expects Tiresias to act according to Oedipus' commands. By this passage, however, Tiresias has asserted that he is 'not [Oedipus'] slave. [He] serves Apollo.' [467], and as such, his eventual revelations are not a result of Oedipus' power, but of Tiresias' own will and desire to hurt this arrogant king. Perhaps at this point, Tiresias realises why the gods have burdened Oedipus with such a fate in the first place.

Tiresias implies he delivered the prophecy to Laius and Jocasta. When Oedipus accuses him of 'blurt[ing] out such absurdities' [494], Tiresias replies that Oedipus' parents did not find him 'Absurd' [496]. Tiresias could have chosen to be blunt with Oedipus, to tell him exactly who his parents were and how he came to live in Corinth with Polybus and Merope, however, Tiresias knows that Oedipus will suffer more if he does **not** yet hear the truth, and so taunts him with 'riddles, murk and darkness' [500]. After all, Oedipus prides himself on being 'the best man alive at solving riddles' [501], and so, just as Oedipus mocked Tiresias' blindness, Tiresias mocks Oedipus' alleged prowess at discovering the truth, knowing full well that Oedipus is ironically ignorant, and that his 'great good fortune' in defeating the Sphinx was his 'ruin' [503]. Tiresias adds to this the paradox that 'this day will bring [Oedipus'] birth and [his] destruction.' [499].

Just as Tiresias uses riddles, Sophocles uses metaphors. The repetition of sight being a metaphor for truth is prevalent throughout the play, especially in this passage, however, there is another metaphor Sophocles uses to explore his values: that the truth needs to be seen, and it also needs to be heard. Oedipus cannot see what Tiresias sees, and he is not entirely at fault for this, however, he also refuses to hear Tiresias, but the seer knows that once Oedipus knows the truth he will 'scream aloud' and have the truth 'reverberate ... back in echo' [480–481]. By this point, Oedipus' 'precious eyes' [470] will know that he is 'the scourge of [his] own flesh and blood' [474].

Oedipus, incensed, demands that Tiresias 'Get out ... vanish!' [491–492], however, Tiresias points out that he 'would never have come if [Oedipus] hadn't called [him] here.' [493]. This is yet another instance where Oedipus acts in a way that he **thinks** will lead to a positive outcome, but that instead leads to his misery and downfall.

Suggested questions for discussion

1. How do the connections Sophocles makes between his motifs of sight/light, blindness/dark and hearing/deafness impact the audience?
2. How might the Critical Disability literary perspective view this passage? (See **Perspective on the text** section)
3. Would you characterise Tiresias as cruel within this passage? Consider the other characters and the events of the play as a whole.

Passage 2

Choral Ode (lines 527–572)

In this passage, the Chorus grapple with competing obligations: they are torn between loyalty, piety, and truth. The latter could perhaps be ignored if it did not bear so heavily on their own survival. In this passage, we see one of the main roles of the Chorus fulfilled: they are us. Sophocles reflects his audience in the Chorus' dilemma; they work through their fears and reasoning as any person might, including occasional errors in logic, and their later conclusion is one that Sophocles hopes his audience will reach when they inevitably feel torn between their duties to their family, their country, their gods, and their own self-interest.

The passage begins with the Chorus posing a question that Tiresias has already answered: 'Who— who is the man the voice of god denounces ... whose ruthless bloody hands have done the work?' [527-530]. Through this seemingly redundant question, Sophocles reveals that the Chorus is struggling to reconcile what they have just witnessed: their beloved king mocking their respected seer, and Tiresias has made claims so terrible that the Chorus **want** to ignore him, despite revering Tiresias and his connection to Apollo. For them, it is a 'horror too dark to tell' [529]. Despite two of the main subjects of the passage being Oedipus and Tiresias' claims against him, neither are mentioned by name. The exclusion of their names is symbolic of the Chorus leaning towards chosen blindness; they are choosing ignorance, and in so doing, cannot bear to name the accused or his accuser.

Instead, this Choral Ode focuses on the role of the gods (after all, the Chorus is choosing to shirk their role in pursuing Tiresias' claims). The Chorus yield their obligation to Apollo, whom they hope 'lunges on [the killer], lightning-bolts afire!' [535] with the 'grim unerring Furies closing for the kill' [536–537]. The Furies are not only aptly included in the Chorus' recitation of deities for their reputation of raining vengeance upon murderers, but they are also known for taking a special interest in the sins of children against their parents (the Furies' own birth resulted from Cronus' castration of his father, Uranus). The Chorus, at this point, do not know with any certainty (because they refuse to analyse the words of Tiresias) that Oedipus is Laius' son; the connection between the Furies and parental vengeance is included by Sophocles to further reinforce their selective ignorance: they know and yet do not know the truth. In calling upon Apollo and the Furies, the Chorus also attempt to unburden themselves from the possibility of accusing Oedipus in error: the Furies are never wrong; if they punish Oedipus, then he is truly guilty, but in calling for the punishment of the 'man the voice of god denounces' [528], and not naming any specific man, they distance themselves from having to make a difficult choice.

The Chorus even go so far as to imagine Laius' murderer far from them, 'up through rocks and caves he stalks ... cut off from men' [543-545]. They acknowledge Tiresias as a 'skilled prophet', but cry that his prophecy 'shatters [them] with terror!' [550]. It is at this point that they acknowledge their dilemma; they 'can't accept him, can't deny him, don't know what to say' [551]. Prior to Oedipus and Tiresias' argument, the Chorus was able to hold both men in consistent esteem, however, now they must choose, and feel that they are being forced to do so without knowing all relevant information. This aspect of the Choral Ode is included by Sophocles because the Chorus **does** have the information they need to make a judgement, however, they choose to ignore it. 'Dark' is repeated as a metaphor for the Chorus' actions, but it is a metaphor used without their realisation; they are the ones 'racing blind' [545], fearing the 'wings of dark foreboding' [553] that will reveal the truth behind the 'horror too dark to tell' [529].

The Chorus make a final prayer to Zeus and Apollo, before choosing loyalty to their king, whom they still cannot name, insisting to themselves that they must 'see these charges proved' [567-568]. They base this assertion on the fact that they 'saw him then, when the she-hawk swept against him, saw with [their] own eyes his skill' [569]. In this, Sophocles juxtaposes desire for tangible evidence, with faith in the metaphysical, and suggests through the outcome of the play that one must place greater weight in faith in the gods, than even their own mortal experiences; mortals are fallible, and thus they should defer all matters of judgement to the gods.

Suggested questions for discussion

1. This Choral Ode includes numerous references to birds; how might birds be symbolic of Sophocles' intention in this passage, and in the play as a whole?
2. Analyse the ways in which the Chorus reflect the following in this passage: the ancient Athenian audience, Oedipus, Sophocles' views, and values.
3. Are the Chorus' actions and statements in this passage consistent with those depicted at the end of the play? At what points can we see their viewpoint shift? Do aspects of consistency remain?

Passage 3

Creon pities Oedipus (lines 1605–1655)

The discovery of the truth is a catalyst for a notable shift in Oedipus' motivation and therefore also his behaviour. Oedipus now looks towards the future to establish his identity, his sense of self instead of looking to his past, his former glory and accomplishments. This feeds into the Chorus' assessment of the precarious nature of a good life (see **Issues and themes**, and **Key quotes**). In this passage, Oedipus now recognises his failings, and also Creon's virtues. Sophocles treats this as a lesson for those who would value action over caution, and passion over restraint. Though Oedipus does briefly struggle to place himself in the role of subject, shown by Sophocles' use of an ellipsis in the line 'Please ... my king' [1608], he recognises Creon's 'noble heart' [1609] and is willing to 'beg' [1606] him to care for his daughters, Antigone and Ismene. He also begs to have his daughters brought to him, so that he can 'touch them with them [his] hands and take [their] fill of tears.' [1607–1608]. Oedipus asks this knowing that Creon might deny his request; Creon has already asserted his authority in refusing to follow Oedipus' decree that he, the murderer of Laius, be immediately banished from Thebes.

This time, however, Creon grants the request; it does not contradict his faith to do so, and he is a benevolent man. Creon is aware of 'the joy they gave [Oedipus]' [1617] and will not deny him the opportunity to feel this joy once more. There is also a recognition of the regret on Oedipus' part; he longs for a time, 'like the early days when [he] could see their eyes.' [1610–1611]. These were the days of ignorance for Oedipus, the days he possessed physical sight, ignorant of his metaphorical blindness, when his family lived blissfully in peace, unaware of the true nature of their relationships. Oedipus shows himself to be a loving, if misguided father, in his desire to grieve with Antigone and Ismene. They also love Oedipus; despite initially approaching him 'cautiously' (understandable given his appearance), they then *'embrace him'* (p. 248). Part of Oedipus' love for his daughters (because, despite the revelation that they are also his sisters, he still holds a paternal role) dictates that he wants them to live a better life than he, a life marked by 'Seeing nothing ... knowing nothing' [1624–1625], and so he embarks on a monologue that at first appears callous in its graphic descriptions delivered to children, but when considering the character and the trauma he has experienced, could also be interpreted as a desperate desire to ensure they are never 'cut off from the sight of it all' [1632]. Oedipus concedes that his role of king has ended, as well as his role of father. After Jocasta's suicide, Oedipus cannot care for the children now that he is not only blind (wholly debilitating in this context) but also soon to be banished. Thus, despite still living, he recognises that 'we who brought them into the world are gone, both gone at a stroke—' [1647–1648]. Despite his benevolence, and willingness to care for his nieces, Creon *'draws back'* (p. 249) when Oedipus reaches for him. Interestingly, in the Fitts and Fitzgerald, and E. F Watling translations, Creon 'clasps his right hand' and 'gives his hand' respectively. The Greene and Lattimore translation excludes this stage direction entirely. Fagles' translation asserts Creon as benevolent, however not entirely forgiving of the trauma Oedipus has caused his family and his citizens.

Suggested questions for discussion

1. Is Oedipus' treatment of Antigone and Ismene in this passage the 'right' thing to do? Consider context in your response.
2. To what extent is the reading of a translated text different to reading a text in its original language? Does this affect the value of the text? What is the role of the translator?
3. How does Sophocles use language and literary techniques to show a shift in his characterisation of both Oedipus and Creon?

Further activities

Tonal control

Modern plays often use music and lighting to control and change the tone on stage. Sophocles had neither of these at his disposal, and yet still successfully controls varying tone in *Oedipus the King*. Complete a close analysis of the play focusing on moments where Sophocles creates shifts in tone. Examples of such moments include: the crack in Oedipus' calm confidence (from line 366); Creon's logic contrasted with Oedipus' anger (from line 594); Jocasta's placation of Oedipus (from line 767); and the shift from an exultant Jocasta to the moment she realises the truth (from lines 1035 and 1157, respectively). Consider:

- what is occurring in the plot at these moments?
- which characters are used to shift the tone?
- what techniques does Sophocles employ to shift the tone?
- why does Sophocles shift the tone at each of these points in the play?

Motivation

The motivation behind Oedipus' actions changes over the course of the play. Identify his motivation in the following scenes, and consider how his motivation influences his actions, tone, and treatment of others. Also consider what has influenced this shift in motivation.

- lines 70–89
- lines 150–159 and 245–314
- lines 340–397
- lines 402–507
- lines 594–749
- lines 770–778
- lines 801–951
- lines 1047–1110
- lines 1116–1175
- lines 1183–1310
- lines 1443–1674

Thought experiments

Thought experiments are a good way to help students empathise with characters, and practise their critical thinking skills. When engaging in thought experiments, it is valuable for students to remember that the goal is not necessarily to discover 'an answer', but to engage with the process of considering and evaluating multiple modes of thought and options, and to consider the possible consequences of employing these. Students should approach the thought experiments with an open mind, ready to explore possibilities.

The following thought experiments could be given to all students, or to different groups who could then later share their thinking, decisions, and rationale with the class. Either way, the sharing process is central to the utility of the activity; having to verbalise and organise one's thoughts in a low-stakes setting is an excellent opportunity to fine-tune one's analytical skills in preparation for the assessment task and end-of-year exam.

1. Shake a magic eight-ball and ask it 'will I fail VCE English?' Expecting a typical 'yes' or 'no', or perhaps even 'ask again later', you are surprised when a voice booms out 'you will sabotage your entire class!'. It does not specify anything else. What do you do? Do you tell anyone? Do you take any actions? Do you believe it? Do you move schools, away from your friends? What choices (if any) do you have? What do you think might happen?
2. Every school has that particular, favourite teacher – the one everyone respects and wants to be liked by them – let us call such a teacher, Ms. D'Mayzin. You are a new student. So far, things are going well: everyone seems to like you, you have already won an inter-school award, and you are confident that you are learning a lot. One day, after a test in Ms. D'Mayzin's class, a tiny note is found on the floor with all the answers to the test. Someone has cheated. People start to talk, then they start to panic: the whole class might have to re-take the test – or maybe even fail! You all turn to Ms. D'Mayzin and ask what is going to happen. She looks at the note. And then looks straight at you. She says **you** have cheated and will be removed from the subject; you will no longer be able to count this subject towards your VCE. If you aren't removed from the subject, the cheating could taint the results of the entire class. You **know** it wasn't you. How do you react? How do your classmates react?

3. You and your best friend are looking after your grandma's dog while she's overseas. You both leave a plate of chocolate brownies on the table, the dog eats the lot, and he becomes very sick. You both rush him to the vet and, one huge vet bill later, he is ok. When your grandma comes home, she sees the bill. Your friend starts to confess how the dog became ill, thinking your grandma will forgive you both, however, you know your grandma will make you both pay the bill, and never trust you again. Your grandma can afford the bill, and you think you should just let her pay it. Do you stop your friend from confessing? Should you offer to pay?
4. A person is on trial for murder. The evidence against them is damning. There is a witness, and their own recollection of events is consistent with them being guilty, and eventually, they confess. The person will be punished, and a panel is trying to decide what punishment to recommend. A lot hangs on whether or not the person can be considered 'responsible' for their actions. Much of their defence was based on the influence of fate (a concept accepted as fact in this society). The Defence argued that the person was fated to commit the murder, and therefore was not in control of the situation, or, indeed, their whole life, and should therefore be pitied. They call upon the panel to be lenient. How should the panel respond? Is the person responsible? What else should be taken into consideration? Are there any future ramifications to be considered?

Two sides of the same coin

Discuss the meaning of this idiom with the class. Use this as a framework to analyse the ways in which Tiresias and Oedipus are two sides of the same coin. Students should closely explore lines 340-526, but may also consider other sections of the play, including the ways in which other characters discuss Oedipus and Tiresias.

Being the Chorus

Students write a scenario featuring a common moral dilemma (for the purposes of this task, the more mundane the better, for example, picking up someone else's rubbish, holding the door open) and write it as a choral ode that reveals the perspective of the writer on the 'right' course of action, despite narrating the character doing the 'wrong' thing. This activity aims to support students' understanding of the role of the Chorus, as well helping their analysis of the language through their own practical application of the style.

Socratic Circles

The topic of the Socratic Circle is written clearly, read aloud, all key terms are explained and, if needed, contextualised. Students should be given a set amount of time to reread sections of the play, annotations, and other notes they feel are relevant (teachers may want to direct student attention to certain lines to further scaffold the activity).

Students then sit in a circle. The topic is read aloud again, and students can begin their discussion. Ideally, the discussion is moderated by a student or a pair of students. It is also recommended that the topic, previously agreed-upon norms for discussion, and sentence starters are written clearly where all students can see them.

Topics should be open-ended, and while students are permitted to have a broad discussion, they are encouraged to connect their statements to the text wherever possible. Topics could include:

1. Many cultures have emphasised the importance of religion and prioritised faith in gods over loyalty to leaders. Does such a system of faith and morality lead to better social outcomes?
2. To what extent are people obligated to uncover and resolve events of the past?

Ideally, all students are involved in the discussion in some way, and for some students this may be in the role of acting as a 'monitor'. There is more information on Socratic Circles on the Victorian Department of Education website, including some excellent reflection questions and advice for teachers who may not have run this style of discussion before.

Key quotes

'Rise my sons. The kindness we came for
Oedipus volunteers himself.
Apollo has sent his word, his oracle—
Come down, Apollo, save us, stop
the plague.' (**Priest** [165–168])

The Priest believes that Thebes' salvation will not be the actions of Oedipus alone, and that in addition to Oedipus' 'kindness', Apollo must still also be called upon. Here, Sophocles reinforces the message that Oedipus' hubris cannot be blamed on the people of Thebes, particularly the Priest, treating him as equal to the gods. It is made clear that the Priest is grateful to Apollo for sending the oracle on which Oedipus can now act, and that Apollo will still be needed to ensure a victory over the plague.

'*He* is the plague ...
as Apollo's oracle has just revealed to me.
So I honour my obligations:
I fight for the god and for the murdered man.'
(**Oedipus** [276-279]; **second emphasis added**)

Oedipus' ignorance is highlighted by Sophocles' use of dramatic irony (see **Language and style** section) when he unknowingly commits to fight for his own destruction. Oedipus' arrogance is also highlighted by this quote; Apollo did not personally reveal his command to Oedipus. Indeed, he did not even reveal it directly to Creon; it was delivered via the Oracle at Delphi. However, an alternative interpretation of this quote might suggest that this shows Oedipus' view of oracles – that they are not, as Jocasta suggests, unreliable claims by mere mortals, but conduits between man and god.

'... fate swooped at his head and cut
him short.' (**Oedipus** [300])

This quotation suggests that Oedipus does defer to fate and believes in its capacity to affect a life, however, only for the lives of others. 'Fate swooped' at Laius' head, and it is regarded by Oedipus as being unavoidable and not an intervention of man. This appears hypocritical, as he clearly does not believe that fate has swooped at his own life. Despite knowing the prophecy, Oedipus leaves Corinth, suggesting he believes he can circumvent fate.

'Look at you, sullen in yielding, brutal in your rage—
you will go too far.' (**Creon** [746-747])

In this quote, Creon points out to readers that Oedipus is indeed a man who would kill a stranger over an insult. Until these altercations with Creon and Tiresias, Oedipus was presented as a respected king, who appeared to deserve the loyalty of his citizens. Without these scenes of conflict and this remark from Creon, it seems inconceivable that Oedipus could have killed a group of men in cold blood, and yet spared it so little thought that he later judges 'another' murderer so harshly. And Creon is right; Oedipus cannot yield, not even when he is begged by his wife and the shepherd. Oedipus' 'brutal ... rage' took him too far in the past, and his inability to yield will take him too far in the very near future.

'People of Thebes ... look on Oedipus.
... he rose to power, a man beyond all power.
Who could behold his greatness without envy?
Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him.
Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day,
count no man happy till he dies, free of
pain at last.' (**Chorus** [1678–1684])

Here, within these lines from the Chorus, lies Sophocles' view on how we judge the lives of others. While the words are shrouded in despair, the Chorus are imparting unto the audience the wisdom they have learnt: we cannot judge a life until it has been lived in its entirety. We should give in to envy, as the life we envy may yet fall short. We must also be careful how we grant esteem, as only the gods know what is to come, the Chorus must simply 'watch and wait'.

Analytical text response topics

1. How does the play subvert the view that Oedipus' hubris makes him deserving of his fate?
2. 'What will come will come'.

   Does Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* reinforce or challenge this view?
3. 'While the play centres on Oedipus, it is really about Creon.'

   To what extent do you agree?
4. "*You are* the curse, the corruption of the land!"

   How does Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* position the audience to reflect on ideas of right and wrong?
5. 'Without a suitable resolution, *Oedipus the King* does not convey its central messages with enough authority to convince its audience.'

   To what extent to do you agree?
6. "Count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last."

   How does Sophocles' retelling of the story of Oedipus engender sympathy for the man?
7. 'Several characters choose ignorance over the harsh consequences of the truth.'

   In what ways does Sophocles reward Oedipus for his tenacity in seeking the truth?
8. 'Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* provides insight into the qualities that make us human, while simultaneously threatening divine punishment for those very same qualities.'

   Discuss.

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