King Oedipus (King Oedipus) by Sophocles

Teaching notes prepared for VATE members by Jacinta McArdle

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Page numbers in these notes refer to Sophocles, King Oedipus in The Theban Plays, Penguin, 1974

VATE Purchasers may copy Inside Stories for classroom use
Section 1.
Introduction to *King Oedipus/ King Oedipus*

When studying *King Oedipus/ King Oedipus* it is important that the students have some understanding of Ancient Greek drama and culture.

Ancient Greece was not the unified country we know as Greece today. It was a series of city-states that held dominance of the day. What we usually associate with Classical or Ancient Greece was actually the dominance of Athens in the fifth century B.C. The Athenian Empire dominated Greece for most of the fifth century B.C. and during that time fostered the flowering of Athenian culture. Athens witnessed the development of drama under the Athenians Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes. Athens fostered the historians Herodotus and Thucydides, while philosophy reached its pinnacle under Socrates and Plato. Dominating the physical and psychological landscape of Athens was the pantheon of the Gods, with the great temple of Pallas Athena, a reminder to Athenian citizens of their dominance and prestige in the civilized world.

What we often associate with Athenian life and culture was generally confined to the privileged few who were citizens. Although the Athenian population was about 300,000 at its height, only about 40,000 were citizens, and in smaller city states, the membership was even smaller, usually about 5-8000. The polis (or city state) was the focus of government and commerce, and included the agora (market) with the acropolis (temples) dominating the skyline. Only men could become citizens. Women were virtually excluded from all aspects of public life; their roles confined to managing the household and child rearing. Women were also excluded from social interaction involving men, other than those in their immediate family.

Much Western thought and culture has been influenced by the Ancient Greeks. Our ideas about democracy, philosophy, mathematics, science, medicine and drama have their origins with the Ancient Greeks. In the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries neoclassicism resulted in a revival in Greek inspired architecture, the legacy for which can be seen today in the public buildings of any major town or city. Most recognisably, the Olympic Games owe their origins to the Pan Hellenic event in ancient times.

Sophocles, the Athenian, lived for ninety years (496-406 B.C.), witnessing the enormous cultural dominance of Athens during this century. Sophocles’ surviving tragedies, *Antigone, King Oedipus* and Oedipus at Colonus, deal with moral conflicts resulting in inevitable and harrowing tragedy.

Athenian drama has its origins in the cult and worship of Dionysus (Bacchus). Over the centuries, Athenian drama developed as a component of the festivals dedicated to Dionysus. Playwrights competed against each other, submitting their plays to a council that chose those to be performed during the festival. Each writer had to produce a group of four plays; three tragedies and a comic satyr play. The focus of these plays was always myth and legend, with which the audience would have been familiar. Greek theatre was originally highly stylised, with the actors wearing masks that depicted with exaggerated emphasis the dominant characteristics of each role. This contrasts with contemporary productions, which usually use symbolism in make-up and costume to enhance the audience’s understanding of the motives of the central characters.
The legend of Oedipus:

(The name Oedipus means ‘swollen feet’ and related to the wounds he sustained as an infant.)

Laius and Jocasta were king and queen of Thebes. When a son was born to them, an oracle prophesied that the boy would grow up and kill his father and marry his own mother. To thwart the prophecy, Laius and Jocasta decided that their baby should die. In those days, it was usual to leave an unwanted or defective baby on a mountain and this is what Laius and Jocasta arranged. The feet of the baby were to be pierced and fastened to a stake so that he couldn't crawl away.

Laius gave the baby to one of his shepherds with the orders for the baby's death, however the shepherd gave the baby to a friend who took it to Corinth. The king of Corinth, Polybus, and his wife couldn't have children, so they gladly adopted the abandoned child.

Oedipus grew to manhood, never suspecting that his adopted parents were not his biological parents. One day, Oedipus happened to hear the truth, and confronted his parents, but they denied it. Oedipus then went to the oracles, who informed him that he would murder his father and marry his mother.

To thwart the oracles, Oedipus immediately left Corinth. Travelling the roads, Oedipus reached the place where three roads met, not far from Corinth. He got into a fight with a stranger, (his true father, Laius) and slew him. Upon entering Corinth, Oedipus found the city in the grip of the fearsome Sphinx, who destroyed all who could not answer her riddle. Oedipus solved the riddle, destroyed the Sphinx and was welcomed by the Thebans as their new king. He married Laius' widow, Jocasta, and some 15 years passed, with sons and daughters being born to the union between Oedipus and Jocasta.

Eventually, Oedipus and Jocasta were confronted with the truth. Jocasta committed suicide while Oedipus blinded himself and left Thebes, resolved to wander the world as a beggar in penance for his sins.
Section 2. Ways into the text

A text such as *King Oedipus* may seem daunting to most students and even teachers who haven’t worked with Ancient Greek texts before. Unfortunately, this apprehension can sometimes result in teachers never tackling such rich and rewarding material. Below are some ideas which should assist the teacher and student in familiarising themselves with the context and background of the play. There are many and varied resources available about Ancient Greece and Greek theatre. The Internet is invaluable, and also offers quirky sites, which may be of interest to students. (A bibliography is included at the end of this guide.) Obviously, the time spent on introducing the text is constrained by the requirements of VCE. If teaching a Year 10 or 11 class, there will likely be more time to enhance the study of the play with creative activities.

- Give students a map of Ancient Greece and have them circle the places referred to in the play – Athens, Thebes, Corinth, Colonus, Delphi etc.

- Have students research Classical Greek mythology on the internet. They might choose to dramatise and retell one myth or to classify types of myths and present their findings as a PowerPoint Presentation. Students love doing this type of research and there are hundreds of sites on classical mythology.

- Students could collect information about the royal house of Thebes as mentioned in the myth and construct a family tree.

- Students could design and make a Greek theatre mask. Teachers can purchase Modroc (plaster of Paris strips), and mask mould from art supplies for students to use, or seek assistance from the school Art Department. Again this is a very popular activity with students.

- Those students who enjoy drawing, could draw or construct a model of an Ancient Greek amphitheatre.

- Check local theatres for performances of classic Greek plays – take the students along to see one if possible.

- The class could view a documentary about Classical Greece. The SOSE/History section of your school library should have relevant videos about Ancient Greece.

- In small groups, students could compile a list of cultural references and words that owe their origin to Ancient Greece.

- Images of Greek ruins, art and architecture could be collected and put up around the room for visual stimulus.

- Small groups could work together to compose a guided meditation for the class based on the events in the play. After writing the meditation, groups could plan ways to use music, incense and candles to add atmosphere to their work and then present to the class. Each meditation should take about 5-10 minutes. This activity could be followed up with some creative writing.
## Section 3. Running sheet

There are two web sites, which give particularly detailed and critical commentary on various points of the play. These are recommended for students and teachers wanting a more comprehensive guide to the text.

Classic Notes: [www.classicnote.com/ClassicNotes/Titles/oedipus](http://www.classicnote.com/ClassicNotes/Titles/oedipus)

Oedipus the Wreck: [http://vccslitonline.cc.va.us/oedipusthewreck](http://vccslitonline.cc.va.us/oedipusthewreck)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prologue:</th>
<th>The people of Thebes turn to Oedipus to save them (lines 1-60).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parados:</td>
<td>The Thebans pray to Apollo and other gods to save them from the plague-bringer. (169-244).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episode 1:</td>
<td>Oedipus seeks the truth of the murderer’s identity from the prophet, Teiresias (299-482).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stasimon 1</td>
<td>The Thebans weigh the reputations of Teiresias and Oedipus, siding with their saviour, Oedipus (482-512).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episode 2</td>
<td>Oedipus accuses Creon of conspiring with Teiresias to take the throne and threatens to kill him. (530-632)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kommos:</td>
<td>Thebes wants its leaders to relent because there is trouble enough in the city without political troubles causing further unrest. Oedipus relents. (649-676) Jocasta, trying to soothe her husband, offers the first corroboration that he may be the murderer (709-875)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stasimon 2:</td>
<td>The people of Thebes are so torn by the words of Oedipus, that they claim religion itself is at stake. (998-1214)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episode 3</td>
<td>A messenger from Corinth notifies Oedipus that his father is dead and the throne of Corinth is his. (911-950)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stasimon 3</td>
<td>The Thebans speculate on what idyllic rural episode might have led to Oedipus’ birth, i.e. is he a child of the gods? (1086-1101) The messenger confronts the shepherd about his actions in giving the baby of Laius to the messenger’s care (1122-1134)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stasimon 4</td>
<td>The people of Thebes react to the revelation that their king, hero and saviour is the murderer of the previous King, Laius. (1311-1350)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus</td>
<td>An eyewitness describes Jocasta’s suicide and Oedipus blinding himself in grief and humiliation. (1351-1432)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kommos</td>
<td>Oedipus, blinded and leaning on a staff, seeks exile and farewells his daughters. (1432-1682)</td>
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Section 4. A Perspective on the text

Sophocles’ *King Oedipus* is the archetypal tragedy. Aristotle cited the play in his work, *Poetics*, referring to the structure of the play as being representative of the downfall of a hero from great status to calamity. When reading *Oedipus*, keeping in mind Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, one cannot help but also compare the play with those of that other great tragedian, Shakespeare. It is interesting to note the parallels between *Oedipus* and *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *King Lear*. We can only speculate that Shakespeare was familiar with Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and had read the great Greek tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides: *Oedipus*, *Antigone* and *Medea*.

We witness in Oedipus the downfall of a revered and noble king, whose own commitment to his people drives him towards his destruction. According to Aristotle’s definition, it is the ‘fatal flaw’ in Oedipus’ character, his desire for knowledge, for truth, perhaps his impetuousity, which leads to his ultimate downfall. In the course of that downfall the protagonist experiences enormous anguish and loss. *Oedipus* is startling in its portrayal of Oedipus’ self-inflicted punishment – the repetitive piercing of his eyes:

‘He pierced his eyeballs time and time again,
’Till bloody tears ran…
in drenching cataracts of scarlet rain.’

Sophocles employs the metaphor of light and darkness, sight and blindness to emphasize Oedipus’ own blindness to the horror that has dogged him from birth. We gasp in collective pain at Oedipus’ self-mutilation, and the stark future he faces in retribution for his crimes, as no doubt an Athenian audience would have done.

Despite the absolute horror of his crimes, we must acknowledge Oedipus as a heroic figure. When we first encounter Oedipus, he is every inch the king, (Tyrranus), enthroned and proud as the people of Thebes make supplication before him. Oedipus was the saviour of Thebes fifteen years before when he solved the riddle of the sphinx, releasing the city from pestilence and death. In victory, Oedipus inherited the throne vacated by an absent Laius, and ‘Thebes’ queen, Jocasta. For fifteen years Oedipus had ruled Thebes in prosperity and strength, so it was only natural that when a new disaster threatened the city, the people turned to Oedipus with ‘branches and garlands, the incense filling the city.’

We cannot underestimate the dominance and stature of Oedipus: he is god-like in the eyes of his people, they had even speculated about the immortal origins of Oedipus’ birth. Of course, the ancient Athenians recognized the irony here, as does a modern audience. A mythic, heroic figure whose stature and pride (hubris) lead him to believe that he can defy even the very decrees of the gods,

‘what of the Pythian fire
The oracles, the prophesying birds,
That scream above us?’

Oedipus is paternalistic in his rule over his people, and takes upon himself the responsibility to maintain the prosperity of the city:

‘I grieve for you my children…
My heart bears the weight of
My own, and yours and all
My people’s sorrows.’
The famine that stalks Thebes is disastrous; ‘a tide of death’ where crops fail, stock dies and women are delivered of ‘death in the womb’. The evil has settled like a shroud over the city which ‘reeks with the death in her streets’. Creon has been sent to consult the Oracle at Delphi and returns with the revelation that ‘There is an unclean thing, Born and nursed on our soil, polluting our soil.’

Oblivious to the irony, Oedipus declares his punishment to the polluter: ‘forbidden shelter or intercourse with any man…’ It is at this point that Teiresias, Oedipus’ nemesis, enters the stage. A blind, bent, frail prophet, burdened with his knowledge, leaning on a staff. He prefigures Oedipus’ own destruction when Oedipus leaves the stage at the end, a mirror image of Teiresias. It is Teiresias who identifies Oedipus as ‘the cursed polluter’, the scourge of his parents, one who ‘shall be trodden down With fouler scorn than ever fell on man.’

With the entrance of Teiresias, and his accusations against Oedipus, we watch the full tragedy unravel. Oedipus, refusing to acknowledge he is the ‘cursed polluter’, embarks on a full investigation to either clear his name or face the full consequences of Teiresias’ charges. The ensuing scenes move rapidly as various witnesses are produced who substantiate the stark truth revealing itself to Oedipus’ inner eye. One could imagine a particularly innovative production of the play setting these scenes within a courtroom, with Oedipus as Judge, unwittingly presiding over his own trial.

It is at this stage of the play that Jocasta’s role becomes more significant. We, the audience, know that she is the mother of Oedipus and has since borne four children to him; ‘the same bosom enfolded the son and the father.’ Yet we feel ambivalent towards her. She is a contradictory, shadowy figure — mother and grandmother, wife and lover. She seemingly scorns the prophecies of the gods, ‘Fear? What has man to fear? Chance rules our lives, and the all unknown.’ This is perhaps a precursor to Lady Macbeth’s, ‘We, fail? But screw your courage to the sticking place and we’ll not fail.’. We are both repelled and fascinated by her. As the truth unravels, we share her horror at what she has done. And Jocasta recognizes the truth long before Oedipus. Her suicide; ‘We saw…a strangled woman swinging before our eyes’ again foreshadows that of Lady Macbeth. We cannot help but sympathise with this plaything of the gods who, foolishly in her youth, believed she could outwit them, and who later believed she could either defy them with bravado, or placate them with piety.

The final scenes of King Oedipus play out the full Greek tragedy. Oedipus is the greatest and darkest of them all. We see him swimming vainly against the current of his fate and know that he will never safely reach shore. Once the full glare of truth pierces Oedipus, his mind is engulfed in ‘intolerable inescapable night’. In violent retribution, Oedipus pierces his eyeballs ‘time and time again. ’ ‘How could I meet my father beyond the grave with seeing eyes?’

The wheel has turned full circle; the proud victorious solver of riddles has sought the finality of his own riddle: ‘I ask to be no other man Then that I am, and will know who I am.’
In seeking truth, Oedipus has found himself, cursed; ‘all human filthiness in one crime compounded.’ Rather than escape his fate through death, Oedipus faces the full enormity of his crimes, imposing exile on himself as the ‘cursed polluter’ of his land: ‘cast me away this instant
Out of this land, out of the sight of man.’

The closing lines of the play remind us of the purpose of tragedy – to portray the suffering and desolation brought about by the downfall of a great individual: ‘Command no more. Obey. Your rule is ended.’
Section 5. Character, style and setting

Style

*King Oedipus*, or *Oedipus Rex* (*Oedipus Tyrannus* is the literal translation from the Greek) is a classic Greek tragedy. As a play, it follows a specific structure, and when performed, would have been highly stylised and ritualistic. *King Oedipus* needs to be considered within these parameters – it is not naturalistic, nor was meant to be seen as a reflection of contemporary society, although the values and attitudes of the ancient Athenians permeate the text and are worth examining.

The challenge in studying *King Oedipus* is to bring the play to life, to look beyond the conventions of its structure and understand the focus of the play itself. *King Oedipus* is a tragedy and needs to be considered in relation to the conventions of such, (see Aristotle's definition of tragedy in the Appendix.) However, students today can also deconstruct the play to analyse the values and attitudes, which are imposed by the writer. It may help students to gain a greater understanding of the play to research traditional Greek theatre, and to produce a scene from the play either in traditional or contemporary form.

*King Oedipus* does not have a large cast of characters; the central, tragic figure of Oedipus dominates. It might assist students in their understanding of character, to investigate ways of producing the play and to indicate through costume and symbolism, the primary functions and motives of the central characters.

Oedipus

When he first appears in the play, Oedipus is very much the ruler of his people. He has been ensconced on the throne he won fifteen years before and has married Jocasta, (wife of Laius) as part of the spoils of victory. Oedipus saved Thebes from the destruction of the Sphinx and is regarded as saviour and hero by his people. Productions of the play would focus on his statesmanship, stature and strength in the opening scene – all the better to contrast with his reversal of fortune at the close of the play. Visually, a production could highlight the contrast between Oedipus, king at the beginning, and Oedipus, outcast, blind and broken at the end. Teiresias foreshadows Oedipus’ destruction when he enters the stage; blind, bent, leaning on a staff.

Oedipus is the archetypal hero; strong, wise, virile, (he has fathered four children with Jocasta), and patriarchal in his concern for his people. They trust him to release their city from this latest calamity. The irony is that we, the audience, know the history of Oedipus, and know that it is his presence that pollutes the kingdom. When examining the character of Oedipus, students should explore to what extent he contributes to his own downfall. We know that the oracle foretold his terrible crimes, yet we speculate as to the ‘flaw’, (according to Aristotle), which contributes to his downfall. Students may question this focus today. Perhaps it is Oedipus’ honesty, his thirst for truth, those qualities that make him great which are also his undoing. Oedipus, the riddle solver, needs to solve two more riddles in the course of the play. Who killed Laius, and who are his parents? In discovering the answers to both, Oedipus meets his own destruction.
### Teiresias

Teiresias is the nemesis of Oedipus. When he enters the stage, the audience recognises the irony of this figure, blind, aged, bent; a homeless wanderer leaning on a staff. Teiresias prefigures Oedipus’ downfall, and at the close of the play, Oedipus himself has become the figure he mocked: ‘Shameless and brainless, sightless, senseless sot!’ Teiresias, as soothsayer, also represents a dramatic presence – he represents the truth that Oedipus must face.

### Jocasta

Jocasta is perhaps the most fascinating (and even more tragic) figure in the play. She would have only been fourteen or fifteen when she gave birth to Oedipus and would have been in her early thirties when she was married to him. Students will enjoy working out the logistics of an adult son being able to marry his mother, and father four children by her. Remember, Jocasta and Oedipus had been married for fifteen years, so by the time of the play she would be in her late forties. Jocasta's ambivalence towards the oracles and her words to Oedipus about the prophecy are of particular interest:

Nor need this mother-marrying frighten you;  
Many a man has dreamt as much.

Jocasta’s character lends itself well to creative responses. We know nothing of her inner thoughts; only that Oedipus won her as a trophy in his victory against the Sphinx, and that she appears conflicted through much of the play. Her suicide says volumes about her inner turmoil and we can only surmise about when she suspected the truth.
Section 6. A guided approach to selected passages

Below are close study questions for three key passages in King Oedipus. The internet site, Classics Technology Centre (http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/netshots/Oedipus.htm), also has further passages with key focus questions.

Episode 1, lines 245-526: Oedipus consults Teiresias.

- How did Oedipus come to be king of Thebes?
- What affliction has come upon Thebes?
- Why do the people of Thebes go to Oedipus for help? What does this tell us about his power and status?
- What does the oracle say is the cause and cure of the plague?
- Given the events of the play, what irony would an audience recognise when the figure of Teiresias enters the stage?
- Why is Teiresias so reluctant to reveal the truth to Oedipus?
- What hints does Teiresias give Oedipus before he finally reveals the truth?
- ‘You are the cursed polluter of this land.’ How does Oedipus react to Teiresias accusation?
- Identify the references to sight and blindness, light and dark in this passage. Use quotes.
- What is the irony of Oedipus calling Teiresias a ‘shameless, and brainless, sightless, senseless sot’?
- Rather than face the truth, what conspiracy does Oedipus suggest?
- What prediction does Teiresias make about Oedipus’ future?
- What is the irony in Oedipus being able to solve puzzles?
- What taboos does Teiresias accuse Oedipus of breaking?
- What final challenge does Teiresias throw at Oedipus? Why does he subsequently accept the challenge?

Episode 2: Jocasta and Oedipus.

- What is the irony in Jocasta’s denunciation of oracles?
- How does Oedipus react to Jocasta’s story? Why does he take so long to recognise the truth?
- Why does Oedipus need to question the messenger?
- What crime / taboo is Oedipus berating himself for at this stage?
- Is there any evidence that both Oedipus and Jocasta are ‘turning a blind eye’ to the obvious?
- How do you think a contemporary audience, being familiar with the legend, would have reacted to this scene?
- Jocasta, despite her assurances in not believing in the oracles, immediately afterwards, visits the temples to sacrifice to the gods. What does this tell us about her state of mind?
- What famous Shakespearean tragedy does this scene bring to mind? What are the parallels?
Kommos: Enter Oedipus Blind.

- To what extent does the chorus reflect our own horror at Oedipus' blindness?
- What character fore shadowed Oedipus downfall?
- How did Oedipus blind himself? Why does he do this?
- What images are used in this scene?
- Why is Oedipus cursed?
- What images does he use to describe his crime? What does this tell us of the Ancient Greek taboos he has broken?
- What request does Oedipus make of Creon? Why Mt.Cithaeron?
- What future does Oedipus predict for his daughters, Ismene and Antigone?
- If you were producing this scene, how would you accentuate the downfall of Oedipus compared to his former glory?
- To what extent is Oedipus a ‘tragic hero’?
Section 7. Activities for exploring the text

Individual and group activities

- Give students the list of Internet sites included at the back of this guide, and have each student select and review a site.

- Have the students work in groups to prepare and present a PowerPoint presentation about an aspect of the play or Greek theatre, Greek society or Sophocles.

- Students, alone or in small groups could write production notes for a film version of the play. They should include the following:
  - special effects
  - music
  - characterisation / actors
  - setting

- Students could dramatise a scene from the play.

- Have the class present a debate on the topic: ‘That Oedipus contributes to his own destruction.’

- As a small group activity students could script and role-play a Rikki Lake type show based on the action of the play. Include the main characters, and have comments from the audience.

- Turn the play into a cartoon strip.

- Musical students could compose or choose music which they think would complement the action of the play. They should then explain to the class the points at which the music would be used and why it would be appropriate at that point.

- Turn the play into a melodrama and tape record it as a radio play.

- Complete the close study questions on the play (see Appendix 2).

- In groups, have students design their own web sites based on the play. Include links to other sites, useful information, focus questions, summaries etc.

- Have students put together a trivia quiz based on the play, Sophocles, Ancient Greek theatre and society.

- Write the production notes for a stage production of Oedipus.

- Design a poster advertising a production / film of Oedipus.

- Create a Murder Mystery board game based on the play.
Creative writing

- Ask students to write Jocasta’s monologue after she learns the truth about Oedipus.
- Ask students to:
  - write and enact the scene where Creon visits the Oracle at Delphi.
  - Write a poem based on the tragic events of the play.
  - Write an alternative ending to the play
  - Write a parody of the play titled: *I Love my Mum!*
  - Write Zeus’ speech where he explains why he has cursed Oedipus.
  - Imagine you are a townsperson of Thebes. Write your reaction to the news of Oedipus’ downfall.
  - Write a modern version of the play. Would the taboos be the same or would you alter/add some?
  - Create a newspaper front page based on the play. Give it
    - a banner head (The Theban Times),
    - headlines,
    - feature story,
    - advertisements,
    - odd-spots,
    - gossip,
    - classifieds,
    - editorial,
    - letters-to-the-editor

Essay topics

- ‘Oedipus is responsible for his own downfall’. Discuss.
- Explore the motif of blindness used in the play.
- To what extent can Teiresias be seen as the nemesis of Oedipus?
- ‘I, Oedipus whose name is known afar.’
  ‘Command no more. Obey. Your rule is ended.’
  The tragedy of Oedipus lies in the fact that it is his duty as king which brings about his own destruction. Do you agree?
- To what extent is Oedipus responsible for his own downfall?
- ‘All human filthiness in one crime compounded!’ Why are the crimes of Oedipus so abhorrent?
- What does King Oedipus have to say about taboos?
- To what extent is King Oedipus a classic tragedy?
- ‘Cursed be the benefactor
  That loosed my feet and gave me life
  For death.’
  Is Oedipus a victim of fate?
- Explore the role of the Chorus in the play.
- ‘We saw a knotted pendulum, a noose
  A strangled woman swinging before our eyes.’
  Explore Jocasta’s role in the destruction of Oedipus.
- Explore the role of fate in the play.
- To what extent does Oedipus, the victor of Thebes, become its polluter?
- Is Oedipus hero or villain?
● According to the classical view of tragedy, the hero is destroyed by a fatal flaw. What is Oedipus’ fatal flaw and how does this contribute to his own downfall?
● ‘All heroes reach their fate, not through weakness, but through strength.’ Is this true of Oedipus?
● ‘I was not snatched from death
That once, unless to be preserved
For some awful destiny.’
Oedipus is a victim of fate. Discuss.
● ‘It is Oedipus’ blindness to the truth that ultimately destroys him.’ Discuss.
● ‘Oedipus suffers because he is a good king.’ Discuss.
● ‘I must pursue this trail to the end.’
It is Oedipus’ commitment to the truth that ultimately destroys him. Discuss.
● Explore the relationship between Jocasta and Oedipus. Is she as guilty as he?
● Trace the downfall of Oedipus. To what extent is he a victim of fate, and to what extent does he contribute to his own destruction?
● To call *King Oedipus* a tragedy is nonsensical. Both Oedipus and Jocasta are guilty of willingly flouting the laws of human decency. And therefore we feel nothing for their fate. Do you agree?
● Part of the success of *King Oedipus* is that we already know his fate before the play begins. Discuss.
● *King Oedipus* shows us the destruction that occurs when the personal is in conflict with the state. Discuss.
● *King Oedipus* is about kingship and its associated duties; Oedipus would never have fallen so low if he had not taken his duties as king so seriously. Do you agree with this view of the play?
Appendix 1. Aristotle’s definition of tragedy


Aristotle based his ideas about tragedy on Sophocles’ *Oedipus*, which he believed represented the perfect tragedy. Below is a summary of Aristotle’s ideas about tragedy taken from VCCS Litonline, (http://vccslitonline.cc.va.us/tragedy/aristotle.htm).

The Tragic Hero:

1. The tragic hero is a character of nobility and greatness. This should be readily evident in the play. The character must occupy a ‘high’ status position but must also embody nobility and virtue as part of his / her innate character.

2. Though the tragic hero is pre-eminently great, he/she is not perfect. Otherwise, the rest of us – mere mortals – would be unable to identify with the tragic hero. We should see in him or her someone who is essentially like us, although elevated to a higher position in society.

3. The hero’s downfall is partially his own fault, the result of free choice, not of accident, or villainy or some overriding, malignant fate. In fact, the tragedy is usually triggered by some error of judgement or some fatal flaw that contributes to the hero’s lack of perfection. This error of judgment, or character flaw is know as *hamartia* and is usually translated as ‘tragic flaw’. Often the character’s *hamartia* involved *hubris* (overwhelming pride).

4. The hero’s misfortune is not wholly deserved. The punishment exceeds the crime.

5. The hero’s fall is not pure loss. There is increase in awareness, some gain in self-knowledge, some discovery on the part of the tragic hero.

6. Though it arouses solemn emotion, tragedy does not leave its audience in a state of depression. Aristotle argues that one function of the tragedy is to arouse the ‘unhealthy’ emotions of pity and fear and through a catharsis cleanse us of those emotions.
Appendix 2
Close study questions on King Oedipus.

Answer the following questions in as much depth as possible. Use direct references to the play where necessary.

1. In your own words, relate the Oedipus myth. (There are internet sites which cover versions of the myth – see bibliography).

2. How does Oedipus come to be King of Thebes?

3. What is the riddle of the sphinx that Oedipus solves? Given Oedipus’ fate by the end of the play, how is this ironical?

4. What does the name Oedipus mean?

5. Note the references to sight and blindness, light and dark in the play. How are they symbolic? What other binaries are there?

6. Identify three examples of irony in the play.

7. What was the role of the oracle at Delphi? Which god did she speak for?

8. What curse has fallen on Thebes? What is the cause of the polluted scourge of the city?

9. What solution does the Oracle give Creon?

10. What is Creon’s relationship to Oedipus?

11. Who is Teiresias? What irony, given the events of the play, would the audience have recognised when he entered the stage?

12. Explain the function of the Chorus in the play.

13. To what extent has Oedipus been a hero or saviour to the people of Thebes?

14. How does Oedipus instigate his own undoing?

15. To what two questions does Oedipus need to find an answer?

16. Explain the role of Zeus in the lives of the Ancient Greeks.

17. At what point does Jocasta discover the truth?

18. What taboos are broken by Oedipus?

19. Which crime do you think was worse? Killing his father, or incest with his mother? Which did the Greeks think was worse?
20. What images are used in the play to describe the full horror of Oedipus' crimes?

21. How does Jocasta respond to the truth? Is she blameless? What two crimes has she committed?

22. Why does Oedipus blind himself? Why is the description of this so graphic?

23. How is this a worse punishment than death? How does it relate to the metaphors of sight and blindness running through the play?

24. What fears does Oedipus have for his daughters, Ismene and Antigone?

25. Why must Oedipus leave Thebes?

26. To what extent is Oedipus responsible for his downfall?

27. To what extent does the play match Aristotle's definition of tragedy? (see p 16).

28. Were Laius and Jocasta wrong in trying to defy fate?

29. When Oedipus heard the predictions about himself, what precautions could he have taken to avoid this? Why didn’t he?

30. What character traits does Oedipus display in the play?

31. How do the people of Thebes (The Chorus) respond to the downfall of Oedipus?

32. What propels Oedipus to uncover the truth?
Appendix 3. Some quotes that may be useful for classroom work

Scene: Before the Royal Palace at Thebes  Lines 2-4
Oedipus:  What is the meaning of this supplication,
          These branches and garlands, the incense filling the city,
          These prayers for the healing of the pain, these lamentations?

Lines 21-27
Priests:  You too have seen our city’s affliction, caught
          In a tide of death from which there is no escaping-
          Death in the fruitful flowering of her soil;
          Death in the pastures; death in the womb of woman;
          And pestilence, a fiery demon gripping the city,
          Stripping the house of Cadmus, to fatten hell
          With profusion of lamentation.

Lines 21-27
Oedipus great and glorious
O greatest of men
Restore our city to life

Line 46
Save, save our city, and keep her safe for ever.

Line 53
Oedipus: I grieve for you, my children.

Lines 57-58
My heart bears the weight of my own, and your
And all my people’s sorrows.

Lines 96-98
Creon:  There is an unclean thing
          Born and nursed on our soil, polluting our soil,
          Which must be driven away.

Line100
The banishment of a man, or the payment of blood for blood.

Line175
Chorus:  The city reeks with the death in her streets.

Lines 236 - 241
Oedipus:  I here pronounce my sentence upon his head:
          No matter who he may be, he is forbidden
          Shelter or intercourse with any man…
          ……..expelled from every house, unclean, accursed.

Line 263
I mean to fight for him now, as I would fight for my own father.

Line 353
Teiresias: You are the cursed polluter of this land.

Line 373
Oedipus: Shameless and brainless, sightless, senseless sot!

Lines 376-377
Living in perpetual night, you cannot harm
Me, nor any man else that sees the light.

Lines 417-419
Teiresias: Your mother’s and your father’s curse, shall sweep you
Out of this land. Those now clear-seeing eyes
Shall then be darkened.

Lines 427-428
You shall be trodden down
With fouler scorn than ever fell on man.

Lines 452-457
He that came seeing, blind shall he go;
Rich now, then a beggar; stick in hand, groping his way
To a land of exile; brother, as it shall be shown,
And father at once, to the children he cherishes; son,
And husband, to the woman who bore him; father-killer,
And father-supplanter.

Line 716
Jocasta: a place where three roads meet.

Lines 745-747
Oedipus: Am I unwittingly self-cursed?
An offence to all mankind?
Am I not utterly foul?

Lines 964-966
So wife, what of the Pythian fire,
The oracles, the prophesying birds,
That scream above us?

Lines 977-978
Jocasta: Fear? What has man to do with fear?
Chance rules our lives, and the all unknown.

Lines 980-981
Nor need this mother marrying frighten you’
Many a man has dreamt as much.
What does it matter
What he means? It makes no difference now….

Line 1063
Oedipus  I must pursue this trail to the end.

Lines 1080-1081
I am the child of fortune,
The giver of good, and I shall not be shamed.

Lines 1084-1085
I ask to be no other man
Then that I am, and will know who I am.

Lines 1188-1191
O light! May I never look on you again,
Revealed as I am, sinful in my begetting,
Sinful in marriage, sinful in shedding blood!

Lines 1218-1219
Chorus:  O Oedipus, that proud head
When the same bosom enfolded the son and the father.

Line 1224
Oedipus:  Yesterday my morning of light, now my twilight of endless darkness.

Lines 1228-1229
Not all the waters of Ister, the waters of Phasis,
Can wash this dwelling clean…

Lines 1248-1250
Attendant:  There she bewailed
The twice confounded issue of her wifehood-
Husband begotten of husband, child of child.

Lines 1264-1265
We saw a knotted pendulum, a noose
A strangled woman swinging before our eyes.

Lines 1271-1278
Eyes that should see no longer his shame, his guilt
No longer see those they should never have seen
Nor see, unseeing, those he had longed to see
Henceforth seeing nothing but night…
He pierced his eyeballs time and time again,
Till bloody tears ran down his beard – not drops
But in full spate a whole cascade descending
In drenching cataracts of scarlet rain.

 Lines 1297-1298
VATE Inside Stories  King Oedipus
Chorus: Horror beyond all bearing!
    Foulest disfigurement!

**Lines 1311-1313**

Oedipus Where am I? Is this my voice
    That is borne on air?
    What fate has come to me?

**Line 1315**

Chorus. Too terrible for eyes to see.

**Line 1316**

Oedipus O dark intolerable inescapable night.

**Lines 1346-1347**

What should I do with eyes
    Where all is ugliness?

**Lines 1356-1359**

Cursed is the benefactor
    That loosed my feet and gave me life
    For death.

**Lines 1363-1364**

Shredder of father’s blood
    Husband of mother, is my name.

**Lines 1373-1374**

How could I meet my father beyond the grave
    With seeing eyes?

**Lines 1386-1389**

I would not rest
    Till I had prisoned up this body of shame
    In total blankness. For the mind to dwell
    Beyond the reach of pain, were peace indeed.

**Line 1403**

Incestuous sin! Breeding where I had bred!

**Line 1406**

All human filthiness in one crime compounded!

**Lines 1424-1425**

Creon: The unclean must not remain in the eye of day;
    Nor earth nor air nor water may receive it.

**Lines 1434-1435**

Oedipus Cast me away this instant
    Out of this land, out of the sight of man.
I was not snatched from death
That once, unless to be preserved
for some more awful destiny.

Line. 1524
Creon: Command no more. Obey. Your rule is ended.
Appendix 4. Some additional internet sites

http://www.pbs.org/empires/thegreeks/educational/

http://vccslitonline.cc.va.us/oedipusthewreck/

http://homepage.mac.com/cparada/GML/Oedipus.html

http://www.pbs.org/empires/thegreeks/educational/lesson4.html

http://www.human-nature.com/free-associations/emm.html

http://www.watson.org/%7Eleigh/athens.html (Follow the Drama links to information about Sophocles)

http://home.cogeco.ca/~rayser3/starwars.txt

http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~loxias/myth.htm

http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1984/2/84