Oedipus the King

VCE CLASSICS Student Lectures – 2010

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An extract of approx. 30-40 lines from the Fagles translation

Students will need to address ‘2 short answer parts and an extended response part’ e.g. 2 x 5 marks and 1 x 10 mark

Assessed on your ability to answer the question using the given extract

The questions come from the Study Design Knowledge bullet points

- the socio-historical context of a classical work;
- the relationship of a classical work to its socio-historical context;
- key ideas contained in a classical work;
- the techniques used by the classical writer to express these ideas;
- the relationship of sections of a work to the work as a whole.
What is the socio-historical background?

- Written in c 430-429 BC
- Historic points of note:
  - Height of the Athenian Empire;
  - The second year of the Peloponnesian War – Athens under siege behind the renovated and reinforced ‘Long Walls’ linking Acropolis to Piraeus;
  - Pericles was *Strategos-Autocrator* (elected 15 consecutive times between 445-430) He convinces Athenians to remain behind the Walls as Spartans are at the gate from May 431 BC;
  - This decision provides the breeding ground for Plague which devastates Athens from 430 BC
What is the socio-historic background?

- Plague in 430 – Thucydides describes 'burning feelings in the head...stomach-aches and with vomiting of every kind of bile that has been given a name by the medical profession...a thirst which was unquenchable...insomnia ... violent ulcerations...'.

'The bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead creatures reeled about in the streets. The catastrophe became so overwhelming that men cared nothing for any rule of religion or law.'

Thucydides 2.47 - 55.
What is the socio-historical background?

Athenian Society:

- Complex society – sophisticated but married to archaic form of worship;
- Democratic but...
- The Delphic Oracle – connection to Apollo
What is the relationship of the work to its socio-historic background?

Thebes – March 431 Thebes made a surprise attack on Platea that was disastrous but Platea suspected more invasions so called on Athens for assistance – Athens as ever acquiesced. Thebes turned to Sparta...

The plague

Indeed, there would be very few people in the audience who had not been personally afflicted by the Plague that ultimately robbed Athens of as much as one third of its citizens. When the chorus wails about 'Death so many deaths, numberless deaths on deaths, no end-' the Athenian audience may well have joined the 'wild hymn for the Healer'.

Pericles at end of 1st year of war gives his funeral oration - Oedipus represents this ideal at the start of the play Pericles was leading Athens with the best of intentions and had inadvertently courted disaster, so too, Oedipus. Both had 'stopped some ruin launched against [their] walls' but now both cities lay in sight of ruin, 'like a great army dying'.
What is the relationship of the sections to the work as a whole?

- Plot is universally admired from Aristotle onwards
- Think of it as a detective story and the threads of the plot weave together
- ‘...thieves attacked them – a whole band, not single-handed cut Lauis down’.
- ‘A thief, so daring, so wild, he’d kill a king’. (138-141)
What are the key ideas in *Oedipus the King*?

- Freedom v destiny
- Is Man the plaything of Fate?
- Or is it just Oedipus who must face this fate to teach us (the audience) a lesson?
- Does Oedipus deserve his fate?
- Suffering occurs for a reason despite the best intentions of individuals
- "Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day, count no man happy till he dies, free of pain of last'.
What are the techniques used to convey these ideas?

- **Dramatic Irony**
  
  ‘Now my curse on the murderer. Whoever he is, let that man drag out his life in agony, step by painful step...’ (280-282)

- **Eyes and sight** – Tiresias says “you’re blind to the corruption in your life’. (470)

- **Blood** – “That is my blood, my nature – I will never betray it. Never fail to search and learn my birth’. (1193-94)

- **Other techniques** –
  
  - Plot construction – tragic cycle
  - Ritualistic actions and invocations by the chorus
  - Character – all of them three dimensional and vivid.
Final Advice

- Answer the Question.
- ANSWER THE QUESTION!
- Stick to the extract given to you.
- Don’t rob the essay – each mark on the exam is worth 1 ½ minutes – stick to the time limits. Practice writing short answer responses in 7 ½ minutes.