Generally considered to be Sophocles' best play, *Oedipus Rex* (also known as *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Oedipus the King*) opens in the midst of a series of terrible misfortunes for the citizens of the city of Thebes. (See below for a critical commentary.) The crops are dying in the fields, the herds are expiring in the pastures, the children of the women of Thebes are stillborn, and plague is decimating the population. A priest—a member of the chorus—and the city's king, Oedipus, are discussing this situation, and the priest implores Oedipus to do something about it.

Oedipus reports that he has sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to the temple of Phoebus Apollo in Athens to learn the cause and the remedy for the city's suffering. Creon returns with the god's answer. To relieve the city's misery, it will be necessary to banish a man who is under the gods' curse and is defiling the city.

Under Oedipus's close questioning, Creon reports that the city's former king, Laius, and all his retinue, except for one man, were murdered on a visit to Delphi. That man could only report that a band of robbers had done the deed. A subsequent investigation led nowhere, and Thebes lies under the curse, in part, because King Laius's death is still unavenged. The Sphinx has darkly suggested that the fault lies closer to home.

Oedipus vows to begin again at the beginning of the matter to solve the mystery and free his people from the curse. The chorus, representing the people of Thebes, sings the woes of the city and prays to the gods for relief.

Oedipus makes a public declaration in which he promises amnesty to anyone who has information about the murder of Laius and will report it. At the same time, he orders the populace to shun the murderer, neither to speak to nor shelter him, nor to admit him to the religious rites of the city. He prays that anyone disobeying will be destroyed by the afflictions that the city suffers. The leader of the chorus speaks for all, denying knowledge of the truth, but they advise Oedipus to speak with the blind prophet Teiresias—the wisest of living mortals.

A boy leads Teiresias onto the stage. Teiresias begs to be allowed to leave. The ensuing exchange between the prophet and Oedipus makes clear that Teiresias knows something but wishes to be excused from sharing what he knows. Oedipus grows angry and threatens Teiresias, suggesting that if he were not blind, Oedipus would suspect him of being the culprit. That accusation so offends the prophet that he declares what he knows: Oedipus himself is "the accursed defiler" of Thebes. Incredules, Oedipus pushes for further information. Teiresias declares that Oedipus is the killer of Laius, that he lives in "unguessed shame" with his nearest kin, and that greater woe awaits him.

Oedipus thinks that his brother-in-law, Creon, has put Teiresias up to repeating these lies in an effort to usurp the throne. Teiresias denies the accusation and predicts that Oedipus will discover he is the foe of his own child and will suffer under both his mother's and his father's curse. He foretells that the murderer will be found in Thebes: seemingly a stranger, but in fact a native who will become an exile; sighted now but soon to become blind; both brother and father of his children; son and husband of his mother; and the murderer of his father.

Following the chorus's reflection on this turn of events, an angry Creon appears to answer Oedipus's charges against him. Oedipus is irrationally upset, but Creon rationally defends himself against the charges, and Oedipus shifts to investigating the murder of Laius. Oedipus concludes that Teiresias would not have named him as the murderer of Laius had the seer not first conferred with Creon. Oedipus and Creon continue squabbling until Jocasta, Oedipus's wife and mother, enters and reproves them for folly. The chorus joins her until Oedipus withdraws his accusations.

In an effort to put Oedipus's mind at rest, Jocasta tells how Laius met his death at a place where three roads meet. She also recounts how, in an effort to avert his predicted fate of being slain by his own child, Laius took their firstborn, had his feet pinned together, and had him exposed upon a mountainside for the wild beasts to eat. On hearing this story, Oedipus is appalled. He asks Jocasta for further details and begins to be convinced that he is indeed the murderer whose presence in Thebes has provoked the wrath of the gods.
The genius of Sophocles' presentation of this material, familiar in all its details to his audience, lies first in the interaction between Oedipus's state of mind and the emergent details of the story. The psychological realism that Sophocles achieves is a remarkable accomplishment. At least as striking is the moral credibility that Sophocles achieves as he presents a public-spirited leader, attempting to resolve a realm-wide crisis, who finds himself ironically condemned by his own proclamations.

At this point, however, Oedipus still hopes that what he fears may not be true. He wishes to cross-examine the single witness to Laius's murder. Jocasta reports that when the man returned to Thebes and found Oedipus ruling, he asked for assignment as a shepherd outside the city—a request she willingly granted.

Oedipus now reveals that the oracle of Phoebus Apollo at Delphi had predicted that he would slay his father, marry his mother, and produce a brood of offspring in incest. Oedipus thought, however, that his father was Polybus of Corinth and his mother was Merope of Doria. To avoid the curse, he had left Corinth, and on the road he met and killed another wayfarer and his entourage in a dispute over right of way.

Oedipus and Jocasta begin looking for flaws in the evidence that will prove once and for all that he did not kill Laius. Moreover, she remarks that since her child perished as an infant, there is no way that she could become incestuously linked with him.

A messenger now arrives from Corinth, where King Polybus has died. The Corinthians want Oedipus to come and rule them. Both he and Jocasta take this as evidence that the predictions of the oracle are false. Yet Oedipus is still nervous about the prediction of incest. The messenger, trying to set his mind at ease, explains that he himself, once a shepherd on Mt. Cithaeron, received Oedipus as an infant from the hands of another shepherd who had been charged with exposing him as prey for the wild beasts. The messenger, in turn, presented the infant to King Polybus. The chorus identifies the other shepherd as the very man for whom Oedipus has already sent.

Jocasta turns pale and tries to dissuade Oedipus from further investigations. She declares herself miserable, tells Oedipus it is her last word, and rushes from the stage. Oedipus thinks that his humble birth has upset her.

Now the aged shepherd arrives, and he and the Corinthian messenger recognize one another as fellow shepherds in the time of their youth. Under duress, the Theban shepherd admits that he had given Oedipus to the Corinthian messenger and that the child he gave away was Laius's own. The Theban shepherd confesses that he had pitied the child and spared its life.

Now Oedipus realizes that the prophecy has been fulfilled—that he is indeed the incestuous patricide it had foretold and the reason that Thebes lies under the curse. He cries out that he has looked his last on light and rushes into the palace.

A messenger enters and reports that Jocasta has taken her own life. She had locked herself in her chamber. Oedipus, frantic, had forced the doors and found her hanging, cut her body down, and then, with the pins of her golden broaches, blinded himself.

A second messenger obeys the blind Oedipus's command to show the people the cause of their affliction. The palace gate swings open, and a bloody, blinded Oedipus comes forth, attesting to the ironic operation of unavoidable fate.

Creon now assumes the leadership of Thebes. Oedipus begs to be sent from the city into exile. He asks Creon to rear Oedipus's two sons by Jocasta as his own. Then he sends for his daughters, Antigone and Ismene, and parts with them reluctantly when Creon reminds him that Oedipus no longer rules in Thebes.

The chorus ends the play with a bit of wisdom, already ancient when Sophocles borrowed it as his curtain line: Count no persons happy until they leave this life, free from pain.

Commentary

At some level, Sophocles' Oedipus the King simply enacts a well-established pattern in Greek tragedy and Greek thought generally, the reversal of fortune to which mortals are prone. Sophocles' masterful dramatization of this pattern shows the destruction within the span of a single day of a powerful and successful man's entire conception of self and reality. Sophocles himself stresses this time span more than once to emphasize the swift overturning of Oedipus's existence: If a man can go from
It is worth reviewing the stages of Oedipus's fall. At the beginning of the play, he is besieged by citizens hoping he will save them from the plague afflicting Thebes. He had saved them previously from the Sphinx and still enjoys the status of a savior-hero. The cause of the plague is pollution (miasma), a Greek term that signifies the baneful influence of the presence of a person whose impure acts work a kind of contagion on those who touch him or are near him. The effect of pollution is not local, in this case, but total: The crops are blighted, people die of disease, infertility afflicts the fields and women. The land itself has become tainted, along with everything that lives on it, and the polluting presence needs to be driven out for it to recover. A good king was thought to have the opposite effect. The king's beneficent presence as representative of Zeus's kingly power was thought to bring fertility and prosperity to the land. Oedipus, though he does not know it yet, has become the very opposite, a polluting king who brings blight and death. Oedipus's first illusion, then, is that he, as king, is working to help his people and will, he believes, save them once again, whereas, in fact, it is his continuing presence that is destroying the city.

Another gap in Oedipus's self-knowledge relates to his place in the city and his relation to the city. In the opening scenes, he is both of the city and separate. It is revealing that the priest specifies that the people are not praying to him as a god but as the first among men. Oedipus has a special, quasi-divine status and enjoys the glamour of an outsider who was able to save the city when no Theban was able to do so. The opening sequence of the play is very much concerned with the relation between Oedipus and his city. He at times takes up a paternal role, calling the citizens "children" and stating that he is more concerned for them than for himself. The citizens have a problem, and he comes as an outside savior-figure to solve their dilemma: He truly cares about their misery. Oedipus explains that he comes as a stranger (xenos) to the report of Laius's death and the deed itself, and thus needs the citizens' help in finding the killer. Dramatic irony is particularly intense at this point, since Oedipus was not only present during the deed, he perpetrated it; no one could be less a "stranger" to it than he.

The irony goes even deeper, however. Oedipus, as a man from Corinth, is both the king of Thebes and an outsider (xenos), a glamorous savior-hero. Yet, in reality, as we will learn, he is a native Theban, born of the king and queen of Thebes, and abandoned on Mount Cithaeron. Oedipus, then, takes the role of outsider/stranger/savior-god, who displays a beneficent willingness to save the Thebans whom he has taken under his wing, and yet, as the play goes on, he will realize that he himself is the problem, the pollution. He is not a savior coming from outside, but a Theban polluting his own city. Tiresias pointedly remarks that the man who killed Laius is reputed to be an alien resident (xenos … metoikos) but is actually Theban-born. When Oedipus finally understands his true Theban origins, however, he is destroyed and, as the polluting presence, must banish himself from the land, according to the terms of his own curse. At the beginning of the play, then, Oedipus is an alien resident who strives to save the city as paternalistic ruler; by the end, he is a native-born Theban acknowledged to be destroying the city and must leave it. He is revealed to be not a Corinthian by origin but a Theban, yet he is to be banished from Thebes: He has no true place. The entire play negotiates the hero's place in the community, first as beneficent outsider, then as baneful presence to be expelled.

Sophocles pays close attention, both at the beginning and throughout the play, to first-person pronouns and adjectives, and reflexives ("myself"). In Greek, the use of the personal pronoun (e.g., "I," Greek ego) is not grammatically necessary, and thus conveys emphasis. In Oedipus the King, the central protagonist's use of "I" is often pointed and ominous, as when he states, regarding the lapsed investigation into Laius's death, "I will start from the beginning and make things clear …" He will indeed "clarify" the issue by the end of the day, but not with the outcome he imagines. Oedipus, moreover, will undertake the investigation himself (autos); for finding the murderer not only serves the murdered Laius but "himself" as well—since he, too, is vulnerable to assassination. As things turn out, Oedipus will conduct the investigation himself, but discovering the murderer of Laius is hardly useful to him, given that he himself turns out to be the murderer. "Casting light on" or "clarifying" the issue, moreover, takes on a somewhat different sense: Oedipus will receive the terrible illuminating realization of who he truly is, and at the same time, he will serve as a lucid example, making plain to Thebes and all mortals the ineluctability of destiny and the fearsome power of the gods' designs.

It is true that Oedipus's use of first-person pronouns and reflexives are an instance of dramatic irony, which pervades the play, but such irony is not merely a clever effect; it is integral to the play's meaning. The central puzzle of the play concerns the nature and identity of Oedipus's "I," who he is and where he came from. Thus we begin the play with the insistent, at times overbearing "I" of a ruler-hero confident in his own powers: "I will take this in hand"; "I will endeavor to bring aid to my suffering people"; "I solved the riddle of the Sphinx." As the play goes on, however, the Oedipal "I" becomes more and more ominous and fraught with the anxious beginnings of a terrible realization: Oedipus was, indeed, always central, but not in the way he thought. His powerlessness...
before destiny and the gods matters the most in the end, not his capacity to take matters in hand as a controlling agent. By the end of
the play, he will realize what it means to be Oedipus, whose name is etymologized in the play itself as referring to his swollen
foot deriving from the pinning of his ankles as a newborn baby. Oedipus's "I" goes from being the dogged investigator to the
solution of the mystery. By the end of this play, his first-person statements take more or less the following form: "I am Oedipus; I
am wretched, born to fulfill a horrifying destiny." The emphasis shifts from actions denoted by transitive verbs and verbs of
intention to first-person statements of identity: Oedipus now rehearses to himself and others what he is, has always been, and is
now openly shown to be.

One approach to reading the play is to view it as the unfolding of a grim riddle. The Sphinx's famous riddle, to which the answer
was "man," was imbued with a taunting circularity: The man attempting to solve the riddle ends up being killed by the Sphinx for
not realizing that the answer to the riddle is, in effect, himself. It is not accidental that Sophocles' play constantly refers to
Oedipus's victory over the Sphinx, setting up a parallel between this past act of heroism and the present situation. In the past,
there was a deadly threat to Thebes, and the solution involved an act of intellectual discovery. In the present of the play's action,
there is again a deadly threat to Thebes, and the solution must be discovered by investigation. Oedipus assures the citizens that he
has been "traveling many roads of thought" in his attempt to identify the problem. No doubt, we would be at least partially right in
viewing the play's outcome as a chastisement of Oedipus's intellectual hubris, his assumption that he can resolve any dilemma
through his mental powers. From another perspective, however, it would be equally valid to point out that he succeeds in
identifying the source of pollution, solving the riddle once again, and thus opening up the path to purification. The riddle, moreover,
repeats the form of the original deadly riddle of the Sphinx: The answer to the question posed to Oedipus—who is the source of
pollution?—is, quite specifically, himself.

The play moves Oedipus from one aspect of Greek heroism (ridding the world of monsters) to another (being banished from the
community as a harmful presence). The answer to the first riddle, "man," is general and unproblematic; the answer to the second
riddle, "Oedipus," involves the specific fate of an individual and the tangled paths of his conception, birth, and upbringing. A
central problem in all this is how to see the truth about oneself and the world around one. As many have noticed, Sophocles'
Oedipus the King is crowded with references to seeing, vision, and eyes. The references to seeing begin to intensify with the
entrance of Tiresias, the blind seer. Throughout the passage, Sophocles plays on the paradox that Tiresias, though blind, sees the
truth clearly, while Oedipus, increasingly enraged by the prophet's answers, calls him truly blind in every sense, though it is he
himself who is blind to his own situation and true origins. Oedipus does not see with whom he shares his bed, what sort of
offspring he has produced, who he truly is, and in that sense, he is blind to the meaning of his entire existence. Tiresias, for his part,
predicts Oedipus's act of self-blinding: "[T]he eyes that now see will see darkness." Creon later complains that Oedipus is not seeing
straight when he charges him with treason.

Finally, when Oedipus discovers his true identity, he calls upon the light and wishes that he may look on it now for the last time.
We subsequently learn that he blinded himself with the brooch pins from his dead wife's robes, proclaiming that he will never have
to look on what he has suffered and done. Self-blinding, he states, is preferable to suicide, because otherwise he might have to
look upon Laius's or Jocasta's shade in the underworld. He has no desire to look on his own "monstrous" children or the buildings
of Thebes. Then Oedipus himself becomes a spectacle, a thing "terrible to look upon"; the Chorus wishes both to gaze on him and
to avert its gaze. Oedipus himself, though now blinded, sees the truth about his life in a new way, and thus has uncannily become
the mirror image of Tiresias, his hated adversary earlier in the play. His ocular blindness betokens a new, inner vision. The sight of
him is fearsome, yet he now displays a certain majesty and suffering in the full realization of his sublimely terrible destiny.

By the end of the play, when the dark design of destiny has become clear, Oedipus is an example to behold and contemplate, a
lesson for humankind. But what kind of lesson does his life teach the audience? There is no single answer to this question, but the
authority and power of the gods are surely part of the answer. Apollo's oracle predicted that Laius would die at the hands of his
offspring, and also predicted that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother. One simple lesson to be learned is that the
god's truth, while sometimes difficult to interpret or apply to one's life, is unerring. Oedipus and the herdsman, as they unravel the
secret of his life in a dialogue of mounting, nearly unbearable tension, declare at a crucial point that they are on the razor's edge,
the turning point of realization, which will either mean salvation or disaster. A disastrous realization for Oedipus is the result:
Apollo's and Tiresias's words are confirmed.

Yet, from another perspective, the outcome is positive, since it confirms the authority of the gods. Previously, Jocasta dismissed
prophecy and oracular truth, since, as far as she knew, the oracles were disproven by the manner of her husband's death.
Oedipus similarly triumphs in the revelation that King Polybus has died a natural death. Apparently thinking that he is not subject
to the grim destiny (moira) assigned him, he proclaims himself the "child of chance/fortune" (tukhe). The Chorus responds joyfully to the new wealth of possibilities that opened up regarding Oedipus's birth, including divine parentage. Earlier, the Chorus had sung that the authority of the oracles and faith in Apollo would diminish if it turned out that the prophecies regarding Laius and Oedipus were not confirmed by events. In one sense, the play sets up a wager, a test of the authority of the gods, and, with rising suspense, weighs Oedipus' fate against the word of the gods. In the end, the gods' truth is overwhelmingly confirmed. The manner in which it is confirmed must have inspired feelings of Aristotelian "pity and fear" in the audience, but also relief: The gods still exist, and their truth orders human life.

Oedipus himself is, in one sense, blameless, and in another, utterly guilty. (In this regard, he is a classic scapegoat figure.) He is blameless insofar as he did not know he was killing his father and wedding his mother. The killing of his father was certainly a violent act, but then again, the most admired Greek heroes rarely put up with insolent treatment at the hands of others. The description of the killing suggests a sudden brawl in which neither party was strictly guilty; indeed, it would appear that Laius's party arrogantly pushed Oedipus to the side and began the conflict. Certainly, Oedipus is not a pacifistic character, and the play repeatedly suggests that he needs to be in command of any given situation. In itself a desire to be in control is not ethically damnable, yet Oedipus risks hubris in moments when he seems confident in being able to evade the pronouncements of Apollo, and when he violently denounces Creon and Tiresias. It is no accident that the Chorus devotes one of their odes to the importance of showing respect for the gods and shunning hubris. The characterization of Oedipus as a man who values control and self-determination, doing things "himself" (autos), and taking his destiny into his own hands only underlines more emphatically the power of the gods and fate. Even Oedipus, king of Thebes, slayer of the Sphinx, is shown to be, in the end, pitifully subject to his destiny. Oedipus, who presents himself as being supremely self-confident, thus furnishes the ideal object lesson in the fragility of mortal understanding and self-determination. The lesson goes beyond mere personal culpability—and that is essential to the point.

Oedipus, who, so far as he knows, is living a very successful and morally acceptable life, has nonetheless violated fundamental moral laws. These laws go deeper than mere mortal comprehension and vision, and operate independently of them, i.e., even if a man is socially acceptable and lives a conventionally laudable life, if he violates these laws, the punishment of the gods is still inevitable. While he is carrying on with his transgressions, the land is blighted and the people of Thebes suffer and die. Even if the Thebans are happy with Oedipus as their king, the gods, as keepers of fundamental moral rules, are not. Oedipus's two major transgressions relate to the acts of creation and destruction: He extinguished the life of the man who created him and himself created monstrous offspring by "sowing the same field" as his own begetter. Begetting and killing have become horribly intertwined in Oedipus; the revelation of the incestuous marriage effectively kills Jocasta, while their male offspring, Polynices and Eteocles, will end up killing each other in battle. Sophocles' language throughout the play is replete with words signifying "creation," "coming into being," and "begetting" from the very first line. Employing language that, in retrospect, seems ominous, Oedipus hails his fellow Thebans as "children," the latest "offspring" of old Cadmus. With an inevitable logic, Oedipus's presence as polluting begetter/destroyer brings death, blight, and infertility on the land. In a certain sense, Oedipus the King displays the same set of concerns as Antigone, in which the social order of the city-state is opposed to deeper moral laws overseen by the gods. However great Creon's authority as ruler of the city, he cannot violate the rules of burial; when he attempts to do so, he is punished. Oedipus, though king of Thebes, is subject to the fundamental laws prohibiting incest and parricide. When he is revealed to have broken them, he becomes as vulnerable and wretched as any beggar.

It is not quite adequate, however, to state simply that punishment was meted out to Oedipus for his sins. His only punishment is the knowledge of what he has done. As he states emphatically, he blinded himself; no god did this to him. The broader outlook is not wholly negative; now, at least, Oedipus comprehends who he is and what he has done; he is now in a position to save the citizens once again by going into exile. Nor is Oedipus utterly destroyed at the end of the play. His fate is left, suggestively, up in the air. Oedipus himself desires to return to the place that should have been the scene of his death long ago, Mount Cithaeron. Creon is hesitant and wants first to consult the oracle. Oedipus, though brought low by his fate, has hardly been utterly crushed. He is still very demanding and even controlling. He insists that his daughters come to see him; he argues with Creon over his fate; he insists on his autonomy as self-punisher. In his last words, Creon must remind Oedipus not to continue to try to lord it over others and to exert mastery. Oedipus is thus still a fairly awe-inspiring figure, even with his eye socket dripping gore. He retains an astonishing resilience and insistent desire to control his fate—an insistence that will be on display again in Sophocles's last, posthumously produced play, Oedipus at Colonus.

Oedipus the King, like other plays of Sophocles, is a showcase for the playwright's mastery of plot, staging, and buildup of suspense as the culminating scene of self-recognition and revelation approaches. The workings of the plot, while not utterly seamless, are impressively designed and, as Aristotle appreciated, impressively self-contained. No outside intervention or deus ex
machina is needed; there is no episodic extension of the plot. Oedipus's tragedy, from the beginning, is implicit in his very identity, and thus needs only to be unfolded on the stage. What at first appears to be an external problem to be solved—a murderer polluting the citizens—neatly collapses onto Oedipus himself by the end: The hero himself is at once cause and solution of the problem. Many scholars have viewed Aristotle's prescriptions about tragedy in the *Poetics* as based on Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* as idealizing paradigm. Aristotle's criteria of coherence and self-containedness of plot, of a "single action" not divisible into separate episodes, for example, are largely satisfied by Sophocles' play, but not by most other Athenian tragedies. Perhaps paradoxically, Aristotle's brilliant interpretation of *Oedipus the King* has sometimes derailed understanding of it, insofar as he presents it as the essential tragedy, or tragedy in its perfect form. The interesting particularities of Sophocles' play are thus in danger of being overlooked as its status as classic paradigm is accepted. Another even more famous interpretation—that of Sigmund Freud—has presented a broadly comparable danger: Oedipus's murder of his father and marriage with the mother are interpreted as an emblematic expression of underlying psychological tendencies of the human mind. In the end, it is a testament to Sophocles' compelling character that readers have persistently sought universal human significance in Oedipus's particular fate.

**Further Information**
