Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex (Oedipus the King)*

**Author Background**
Sophocles was a general and playwright in ancient Greece 496 - 406 BCE.

**Historical Context**
*Oedipus Rex* was written during the Peloponnesian War and the plague in Athens.

**Oedipus Myth**
Cadmus, founder of Thebes, angers Apollo by killing his favorite snake. Apollo punishes Cadmus’s descendents with a curse. The Oracle at Delphi prophesies the curse for each generation. The Oracle tells Laius, king of Thebes, that if he has a son by his wife Jocasta, the son will kill his father and marry his mother. When a baby boy is born, Laius has a rivet driven between the baby’s ankles and asks a servant to leave the baby on the mountains to die. The servant has pity on the baby and gives him to a herdsman; the herdsman gives the baby to Polybus and Merope, king and queen of Corinth, who name the baby Oedipus (“swollen foot”). Oedipus grows up and consults the Oracle, who repeats what she told Laius. So Oedipus leaves Corinth to avoid fulfilling the prophesy. Injured by a chariot, Oedipus kills the rider (Laius) and charioteer in anger. He goes to Thebes, where a Sphinx is terrorizing the city by eating one inhabitant a day. Before she eats her victims, she asks a riddle: “What is it that goes on four legs in the morning, two at midday, and three in the evening?” Oedipus solves the riddle “man,” and the Sphinx throws herself to her death. Oedipus is rewarded with the throne and the wife of the deceased king Laius. After two decades, a plague strikes Thebes, and Oedipus opens an investigation to discover why the plague was caused. The plague is punishment for murder.

**Characters**
- **Oedipus** - king of Thebes; his name means “swollen foot”
- **Jocasta** - queen of Thebes; previously married to Laius; actually Oedipus’s mother
- **Creon** - Jocasta’s brother, Oedipus’s brother-in-law
- **Teiresias** - A blind prophet
- **A Priest** - A priest in Thebes concerned about the plague
- **First Messenger** - messenger who brings news to Thebes
- **Second Messenger** - messenger who brings news to Thebes
- **Herdsman** - found the infant Oedipus left to die on a mountain; gave the infant to Merope and Polybus of Corinth to raise
- **Chorus** - a group of Theban men
  - **Oracle at Delphi** - Where Greeks came from all over to get advice. Apollo answered questions through the Oracle.
  - **Apollo** - The archer god and god of light and of healing. He also sends plagues.
  - **Pythia** - Apollo’s priestess at Delphi through whom Apollo spoke as the Oracle of Delphi. She was named after the giant python, the original inhabitant of Delphi, slain by Apollo.
  - **Damasistratus** - a nearby king who reports Laius has been killed on the way to Delphi
  - **Sphinx** - a female monster who terrorized Thebes. She ate one Theban a day and asked her victim a riddle.
- **Laius** - previous king of Thebes, married to Jocasta; killed, anonymously, by Oedipus
- **Merope** - queen of Corinth, wife of Polybus, foster-mother to Oedipus
- **Cadmus** - The founder of Thebes; he angered Apollo by killing the god’s favorite snake, and so Apollo put a curse on all the generations of the house of Thebes
- **Polybus** - king of Corinth, husband of Merope, foster-father to Oedipus
Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex (Oedipus the King)*

**Literary Terms**

**tragedy**
- Recounts an important series of events in the life of a protagonist (hero)
- Hero is of high status or noble (or semi-divine) birth
- The events all relate through cause and effect
- Ends in a catastrophe in which the hero is brought low through his own actions

**tragic plot**
- **exposition** - characters and settings are introduced; the hero is at the height of his career
- **introduction of conflict** - conflict enters the narrative
- **rising action** - events begin to cause other events as conflict builds between the hero and his opposing forces
- **climax** - turning point of the play, moment of greatest suspense and conflict
- **falling action** - forces opposing the hero become overwhelming
- **resolution** - a catastrophe occurs that marks the tragic fall of the hero, who is ennobled by facing his destiny courageously and accepting his responsibility in his own downfall

**catharsis** - Aristotle’s idea that the end of a work of drama should relieve the audience of pity and fear; the audience’s experience of a purging of emotions

**peripeteia** - a reversal of conditions

**motif** - a design or recurrent image or idea. The motif of the quest for knowledge continues throughout *Oedipus Rex*.

**dramatic irony** - a contradiction between what the reader / audience knows to be true and what the character knows to be true

**causality** - the relation of cause and effect; each plot event should cause the next

**mechane** - a crane used to lower the gods “miraculously” onto the stage; Sophocles was the first playwright to use the *mechane*

**deux ex machina** - the appearance of a god at the end of the play to wrap up loose ends or give the hero a last-minute reprieve just in the nick of time

**chorus** - a group of singers and dancers who play an active part in the play; often, members of the chorus serve as confidants and advisors to the main characters

**parados** - presented as the chorus enters

**strophe** - the title of a lyric stanza delivered by half the chorus. The chorus faces one direction for the strophe.

**antistrophe** - the title of a lyric stanza delivered by the other half of the chorus. The chorus faces the opposite direction for the antistrophe.
Rhetoric Terms and Errors of Reasoning

**Pathos** - appeal to emotion

**Logos** - appeal to logic

**Ethos** - appeal to ethics

**Ad hominem** - fallacy that attacks the target's person's characteristics rather than the argument

**Ad populum** - assumption that widespread occurrence of something makes the idea true or right

**Non sequitor** - fallacy that makes an inference or draws a conclusion that does not follow established premises or evidence; literally, "it does not follow"

**Post hoc, ergo propter hoc** - fallacy that assumes that an incident that precedes another is the cause of the second incident

**Begging the question** - taking for granted something that really needs proving

**Circular reasoning** - trying to prove one idea with another idea that is too similar to the first idea

**Hasty generalization** - drawing a general or premature conclusion on the basis of only one or two cases

**Propaganda** - uses writing or images that seek to persuade through emotional appeal rather than through logical proof

**Either - or reasoning** - suggesting that an issue has only two sides

**Oversimplification** - taking for granted something that really needs proving

**Claiming too much** - assuming a solution, action, or proposal will completely solve or even fully address all problems involved in a complex topic
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION and QUESTIONS</th>
<th>SCENE 1 (433 - 436) (3 PARTS)</th>
<th>SCENE 2 (438 - 443) (3 PARTS)</th>
<th>SCENE 3 (444 - 451) (4 PARTS)</th>
<th>SCENE 4 (457 - 461) (4 PARTS)</th>
<th>SCENE 5 (461 - 462) (4 PARTS)</th>
<th>SCENE 6 (465 - 470) (4 PARTS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions: p.452: 1, 2, 9</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Creon</td>
<td>Jocasta</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>2nd Messenger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit Terms: tragedy, exposition, chorus, strophe, and antistrophe</td>
<td>Priest</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Messenger</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHORUS 1 (436 - 438)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions: p.452: 3, 4, 5</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Teiresias</td>
<td>Creon</td>
<td>Jocasta</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit Terms: introduction of conflict, rising action, motif, dramatic irony, situational irony</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHORUS 2 (443 - 444)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions: p.452: 6, 7, 8</td>
<td>Creon</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Herdsman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit Terms: strophe and antistrophe, logos, ethos, Creon complex, pathos</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHORUS 3 (451 - 452)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions: p.471: 1, 2, and Analyzing Lit 1</td>
<td>Jocasta</td>
<td>Jocasta</td>
<td>Jocasta</td>
<td>Jocasta</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit Terms: parados, dramatic irony, causality, peripeteia, motif</td>
<td>Messenger</td>
<td>Messenger</td>
<td>Herdsman</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Herdsman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHORUS 4 (461 - 462)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions: p.471: 6 Causality 1, 2</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit Terms: climax, falling action, motif, causality, pathos</td>
<td>Messenger</td>
<td>Herdsman</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHORUS 5 (465)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions: p.471: 7, 8, 9</td>
<td>2nd Messenger</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Herdsman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit Terms: motif, tragic hero, peripeteia, catharsis, resolution / catastrophe</td>
<td>2nd Messenger</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHORUS 6 (470)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
<td>Chorus Member(s)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>