

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Legend of Oedipus

By CommonLit Staff
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Oedipus was a mythical king of the ancient Greek city of Thebes¹ and one of the most iconic tragic heroes of Greek mythology. The following story recounts the legend of Oedipus' life and death. As you read, take notes on Oedipus' actions and how they reveal the theme of the myth.

- [1] *"As for this marriage with your mother—have no fear. Many a man before you, in his dreams, has shared his mother's bed. Take such things for shadows, nothing at all— Live, Oedipus, as if there's no tomorrow!" (From Oedipus the King, by Sophocles²)*

Oedipus is a mythical Greek king of Thebes. The story of how he got to be the king was the subject of a set of plays by Sophocles in 430 BC: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, and Antigone. There are many different endings to the legend of Oedipus due to its oral tradition, and most of what we know about Oedipus is based on these plays.



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The Life of Oedipus

Oedipus was the son of Laius and Jocasta, king and queen of Thebes. After having been married some time without children, his parents consulted the Oracle³ of Apollo at Delphi⁴ about their childlessness. The Oracle prophesied that if Laius should have a son, the son would kill his father and marry his mother, Jocasta. In an attempt to prevent this prophecy's fulfillment, when Jocasta indeed bore a son, Laius had his ankles pinned together so that he could not crawl, and gave the boy to a servant to abandon on the nearby mountain. However, rather than leave the child to die in the wilderness, as Laius intended, the sympathetic servant passed the baby onto a shepherd from Corinth.⁵

Oedipus, the infant, eventually ends up at the house of Polybus and Merope, king and queen of Corinth, who adopt him as they are without children of their own. Little Oedipus is named in Greek after the swelling from the injuries to his feet and ankles.

1. Thebes is a large city in Greece that has been the setting for many Greek myths.
2. Sophocles is one of three ancient Greek tragedians whose plays have survived.
3. A fortune teller
4. Delphi is an ancient site in Greece where people would go to see the oracle.
5. Another ancient city in Greece, between Athens and Sparta

- [5] Many years later, Oedipus is told by a drunk that Polybus is not his real father, but when he asks his parents if this is true, they deny it. Oedipus, unsure, seeks counsel from the same Delphic Oracle. The Oracle does not tell him the identity of his true parents, but instead tells him that he is destined to couple with his mother and kill his father (though not specifying in which order). In his attempt to avoid the fate predicted by the Oracle, he decides to flee from Corinth to Thebes.

As Oedipus travels he comes to the place where three roads meet, Davlia. Here he encounters a chariot,⁶ driven by his (unrecognized) birth-father, King Laius. They fight over who has the right to go first and Oedipus kills Laius in self defense, unwittingly fulfilling part of the prophecy. The only witness to the king's death was a slave who fled from a caravan⁷ of slaves also traveling on the road.

Continuing his journey to Thebes, Oedipus encounters a Sphinx⁸ that would stop all those who traveled to Thebes and ask them a riddle. If the travelers were unable to answer correctly, they were eaten by the sphinx; if they were successful, they would be able to continue their journey. The riddle was: "What walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon and three at night?" Oedipus answers: "Man; as an infant, he crawls on all fours, as an adult, he walks on two legs and, in old age, he relies on a walking stick." Oedipus was the first to answer the riddle correctly. Having heard Oedipus' answer, the Sphinx is astounded and inexplicably kills itself, freeing Thebes. Grateful, the people of Thebes appoint Oedipus as their king and give him the recently widowed Queen Jocasta's hand in marriage. (The people of Thebes believed her husband had been killed while on a search for the answer to the Sphinx's riddle. They had no idea who the killer was.) The marriage of Oedipus and Jocasta fulfilled the rest of the prophecy. Oedipus and Jocasta have four children: two sons, Polynices and Eteocles, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene.

Oedipus' Downfall

Meanwhile, a messenger reveals that Oedipus was, in fact, adopted. Jocasta, finally realizing Oedipus' true identity, entreats him to abandon his search for Laius' murderer. Oedipus misunderstands the motivation of her pleas, thinking that she was ashamed of him because he might have been the son of a slave. She then goes into the palace where she hangs herself. Oedipus seeks verification of the messenger's story from the very same herdsman who was supposed to have left Oedipus to die as a baby. From the herdsman, Oedipus learns that the infant raised as the adopted son of Polybus and Merope was the son of Laius and Jocasta. Thus, Oedipus finally realizes in great agony that so many years ago, at the place where three roads meet, he had killed his own father, King Laius, and as consequence, married his mother, Jocasta.

Oedipus goes in search of Jocasta and finds she has killed herself. Taking two pins from her dress, Oedipus gouges his eyes out. He is exiled from Thebes and spends the remainder of his life wandering the desert.

- [10] Oedipus is a tragic hero in Greek mythology. He accidentally fulfilled a prophecy, and in doing so, he brought disaster to his city and family. Oedipus represents two enduring themes of Greek myth and drama: the flawed nature of humanity, and an individual's role in the course of destiny in a harsh universe.

6. A chariot is a type of carriage driven by a person and using horses to provide rapid speed

7. Here, "caravan" refers to a group of people, especially traders or pilgrims, traveling together.

8. A winged creature with a lion's body and a human's head

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best identifies a central theme of the story of Oedipus? [RL.2]
 - A. Human relationships
 - B. Violence and war
 - C. Fate and free will
 - D. The indifference of nature

2. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answers to Part A? [RL.1]
 - A. "Many years later, Oedipus is told by a drunk that Polybus is not his real father but when he asks his parents, they deny it." (Paragraph 5)
 - B. "They fight over who has the right to go first and Oedipus kills Laius in self defense, unwittingly fulfilling part of the prophecy." (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "Oedipus was the first to answer the riddle correctly. Having heard Oedipus' answer, the Sphinx is astounded and inexplicably kills itself, freeing Thebes." (Paragraph 7)
 - D. "He is exiled from Thebes and spends the remainder of his life wandering the desert." (Paragraph 9)

3. How is the opening quotation (in paragraph 1) important to the development of the passage's theme? Cite evidence from the text in your response. [RL.5]

4. PART A: What does the word "entreat" most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 8? [RL.4]
 - A. To beg
 - B. To forgive
 - C. To suggest
 - D. To condemn

5. PART B: Which phrase from the paragraph provides the best support for the answer [RL.1] to Part A?
- A. “was, in fact, adopted”
 - B. “finally realizing Oedipus’ true identity”
 - C. “misunderstands the motivation”
 - D. “her pleas”

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In your opinion, is it possible to evade fate? Does destiny exist, and if so, can it be changed? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

2. Could the fulfillment of Oedipus' prophecy have been avoided?

3. Should Oedipus be blamed for his actions? Was he right to punish himself?

4. In the context of this text how is "tragedy" defined? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.