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# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Sophocles'

## **Oedipus Rex**

from

**Multiple Critical Perspectives™**

by

Rebecca Grudzina



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## General Introduction to the Work

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### Origins of Greek Drama

**Sixth Century BC** – According to legend and recorded by Aristotle, **Thespis** essentially invents acting by stepping in front of the chorus and performing a solo. The word “thespian” has come to mean “actor.”

**Fifth Century BC** – Athens makes tremendous advances in philosophy, rhetoric, literature, science, architecture, and the visual arts. Tragedies are performed in an annual competition as a part of the Great Dionysia, one of Athens’ chief religious festivals, in honor of the god Dionysus.

- Each playwright produced three tragedies and a satyr-play (a kind of farce intended to provide comic relief after the tragedies); all four plays were performed in a single day.
- Sophocles won twenty competitions (Aeschylus thirteen, and Euripides four).
- Sophocles’ “Theban plays,” *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*—while they are often anthologized together and in “chronological order”—are not a trilogy. In fact *Antigone* was written first and *Oedipus at Colonus* last—about forty years later. Each play, therefore, should be considered a separate work, not as an episode in a serial.

**Aeschylus** (525—456 BC) – wrote the *Oresteia*, a tragic trilogy, and introduced the use of a second actor onstage, interacting with the first. He also began to develop a more complicated plot.

**Sopocles** (496—406 BC) – brought a third actor onstage, and wrote *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*.

## New Historicism Applied to *Oedipus Rex*



### Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.



## Activity One

### Examining the Play for Evidence of the Athenian Political Structure

1. Have students—individually, in pairs, or in small groups—examine the play and answer the following questions:
  - Who rules in Thebes at the beginning of the play?
  - How did each come to rule?
  - What is implied by how each came to rule?
  - Who rules at the end of the play?
  - How absolute is his rule?
  - How or why does Oedipus fall from power? (Specify the *reasons*. Do not merely summarize the sequence of events.)
2. Reconvene the full class and discuss the view of ancient Greek government we see in this play and what we can infer about Sophocles' view of how it operated.





## Formalist Approach Applied to *Oedipus Rex*

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### Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



## Activity One

### Examining the Question and Answer Format of the Play

1. Have students—individually, in pairs, or in small groups—examine the play and identify the major question-and-answer sequences.
  - What is the essential “line of questioning” of each sequence?
  - Who is the primary questioner in each sequence?
  - Who is the primary answerer?
  - Is there any order or arrangement of ideas apparent from one question sequence to the next?
  - How closely does any order of arrangement of ideas follow the typical plot graph: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution?
2. Reconvene the class and discuss the above.
3. With the full class, analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of Sophocles’ use of interrogation as a narrative technique. What impact, if any, does this technique have on the plot? The building of suspense? The power of the catharsis?




## Marxist Approach Applied to *Oedipus Rex*

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### Notes on the Marxist Approach



THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

#### Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies





## Activity One

### Examining the Play for Evidence of Social Bias

1. With the full class, skim the play and identify all of the choral odes.
2. Have students—individually, in pairs, or in small groups—reread each of the odes and summarize the Chorus's position in each.
3. Have students examine the context of each ode:
  - Who has been speaking?
  - What has been happening?
  - What information has just been revealed?
  - What is the Chorus's response or reaction to what has transpired?
4. Reconvene the class and allow each group to present its findings.
5. In full class, discuss the extent to which the Chorus appears wise or foolish:
  - Does the Chorus seem insightful?
  - Is the Chorus consistent or capricious in its opinions and actions?
  - Is the Chorus loyal or fickle to the characters?
6. Finally, discuss what a Marxist would conclude about the Greek proletariat based on the evidence presented to us in the Chorus of *Oedipus Rex*. Does Sophocles seem to be sympathetic to the plight of the commoner or no? Why or why not?