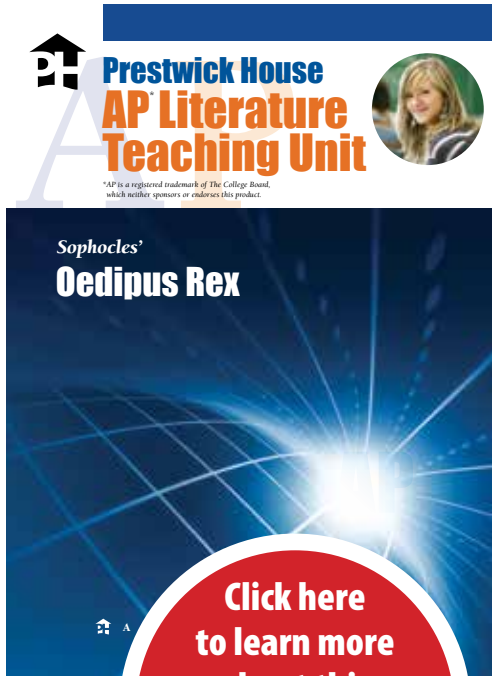




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Teaching Unit

Oedipus Rex

by Sophocles

written by Rebecca Grudzina



Prestwick House

Item No. 302800

Oedipus Rex

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, students will be able to:

1. identify how Aristotle's three unities are observed in the play
2. identify the role of dramatic irony in the play
3. analyze the theme of fate being more powerful than free will
4. examine the role of fate in Greek tragedy
5. discuss the importance of blindness and sight in the play, and identify how various characters either have vision or are blind
6. examine how Sophocles builds suspense in the play
7. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam
8. respond to free response questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.

Lecture Notes

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL—ATHENS 5TH CENTURY BCE

Sophocles was born in Athens, Greece, in 497 BCE and was the best-known of the ancient Greek playwrights. The Athenian government was an “exclusionary democracy,” run by elected officials in the form of an open assembly. Only about ten percent of the population was eligible to participate. Women, slaves, and other “non-citizens” were excluded. Although he was a member of the ruling class, Sophocles was aware of the social inequalities in Athenian society. His plays include repeated attempts to warn his fellow Greeks of the divine retribution that would come to them as a result of their prejudices and injustice to the poor.

RELIGIOUS IDEAS

Contrary to common misconceptions, the Greek pantheon consisted of hundreds of deities in a complex hierarchy. The most familiar “Olympian” gods, perhaps the closest to humans, were a relatively small part of the overall scheme.

The gods, while immortal and powerful, were not *all*-powerful in the sense of our modern concepts of God. They were themselves subject to Fate and to each other’s will. We see much of this in *Oedipus Rex*, when the Delphic Oracle is the prophet of Oedipus’ doomed fate, but she is not the cause of it. Nor, really, is Apollo.

The Greeks did, to some extent, believe in Free Will, always accepting that a person would eventually have to face the human and cosmic consequences of his or her actions and decisions. Still, Free Will was not more powerful than Destiny, and Oedipus is a perfect example of the belief that, try as they might, people cannot avoid the destinies to which they are born.

Still, as Oedipus’ fate was the result of his father’s earlier misdeed (see Section V. Oedipus’ Backstory), human Free Will cannot be completely dismissed either.

ORIGINS OF GREEK DRAMA

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

Fifth Century BCE – Athens made tremendous advances in philosophy, rhetoric, literature, science, architecture, and the visual arts. Tragedies were 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.

Oedipus Rex

1. What is significant about the fact that the first line of the play is a question?

2. How does Oedipus choose the spokesman of the group of supplicants?

3. What is your first impression of Oedipus?

4. What problem is afflicting Thebes at this time?

5. What is the House of Cadmus?

6. How does the Priest say the supplicants view Oedipus? How does this begin to establish Oedipus as an Aristotelian tragic hero?

7. In case we didn't already know it, what exposition does the Priest provide in this scene?

8. Why do the supplicants believe that Oedipus will be able to find a solution to the famine?

9. Why does Oedipus claim he suffers even more than the supplicants?

10. What impression do we get from Oedipus based on his language?

11. What action has Oedipus taken to find an answer to the city's problem?

12. What is Oedipus and Creon's relationship?

13. What is foreshadowed by Oedipus' promise to the Priest?

14. Why does the Priest suspect Creon brings good news?

15. When Creon arrives from Delphi, what does Oedipus insist that he do? What does this indicate about his character?

16. Why do you suppose Creon wants to talk to Oedipus in private first?

17. What does Creon report from the Oracle?

18. What is Oedipus' reaction to Creon's information?

19. Explain the dramatic irony in Oedipus' interrogation of Creon.

20. What is ironic about the one survivor's testimony?

21. What theory does Oedipus immediately develop about Laius' death?
