
UNIT 2 *OEDIPUS REX*: SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Structure

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

After we go through the Unit, we will have learnt about the following:

- a brief summary of the play in 5 sections,
- to analyse the play,
- the tragic collapse of *Oedipus* and its justification, and
- the role of the *Chorus* in the play.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The play is not a lengthy play as it comprises around 1684 lines. We will give you a brief summary of the play in five sections - something that corresponds to the current five scenes or Five Act structure in a play. **Aristotle** was the first to insist on a division of a play into Acts and Scenes so that the plot is orderly arranged into sequential parts. But in ancient Greek theatre, no such division existed and the plot flowed through the lines in an orderly structured way. In the last Unit, we had learnt how in a Tragedy, events are sequenced so that they give shape to the terrible events that helps us to unravel the cause of the ghastly event. Let us begin by summarising and analysing the plot of the *Oedipus Rex*.

2.2 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF *OEDIPUS REX*: SECTION 1: LINES 1 – 337

The play begins with *Oedipus* meeting a procession of priests and citizens of his kingdom in *Thebes*. They request the King to put an end to the deadly plague that is raging in the city. The head priest tells him:

*I and these children; not as deeming thee
A new divinity, but the first of men;
First in the common accidents of life,
And first in visitations of the Gods.*

The lines clearly state that the Greeks looked at the King as first among men and not as a God. He is also the first to suffer the visitation of the Gods. “*Visitation*” here means a catastrophic event, seen as a punishment from God.

Oedipus is variedly addressed as ‘the peerless king’, ‘the ship of the state’, ‘chief of men’ and is requested to ‘upraise our state’. *Oedipus* tells him that he had already sent *Creon*, his brother-in-law (his wife’s brother) to the *Delphic Oracle* to learn what he should do to put an end to the deadly plague. The *Delphic Oracle* was the famous *Oracle* of *Apollo* who gives cryptic predictions and guidance to both city-states (*states consisting of a sovereign cities*) and individuals. Though its predictions were noted for their ambiguity, it was held by the ancient Greeks to be of great authority. He says that he will perform all that the god declares to *Creon* to be performed.

When *Creon* comes, he wonders whether he should speak to *Oedipus* in private.

*Oedipus: How runs the oracle? Thus far thy words
Give me no ground for confidence or fear.*

*Creon: If thou wouldst hear my message publicly,
I’ll tell thee straight, or with thee pass within.*

*Oedipus: Speak before all; the burden that I bear
Is more for these my subjects than myself.*

Analysis: *Oedipus’* sense of fairness and justice is evident as he refuses to have any secret meeting with *Creon*. He wants the message from the *Oracle* to be publicly heard.

Creon comes in and tells him in the presence of all assembled - as desired by *Oedipus* - that his predecessor, King *Laius* has been murdered long ago and “and now the god’s command is plain: “Punish his takers-off, whoe’er they be.” *Oedipus* promises his citizens to find the murderer and punish him and restore the city from the deadly pestilence. The *Chorus* enters with prayers to *Athena*, daughter of *Zeus* to save the city from ruin and death.

Oedipus decides to solve the murder of *Laius*. He first asks the citizens:

*This proclamation I address to all: —
Thebans, if any knows the man by whom
Laius, son of Labdacus, was slain,
I summon him to make clean shrift to me.
And if he shrinks, let him reflect that thus
Confessing he shall ‘scape the capital charge;
For the worst penalty that shall befall him
Is banishment—unscathed he shall depart.
But if an alien from a foreign land
Be known to any as the murderer,
Let him who knows speak out, and he shall have
Due recompense from me*

He tells them of his resolve to punish the murderer but his statement is laden with irony, as later he discovers that he is the murderer.

*And on the murderer this curse I lay
(On him and all the partners in his guilt):—
Wretch, may he pine in utter wretchedness!
And for myself, if with my privity
He gain admittance to my hearth, I pray
The curse I laid on others fall on me.*

Analysis: Oedipus is vehement in his resolve to punish Laius' murderer even if that person happens to be close to him. It is important to note that at no point of time does Oedipus imagine that he is the murderer. It is this confidence of personal probity that gets shattered at the end. This is the tragic irony of the play. His extreme belief in his inviolability is to be seen as his blind spot and this blindness to the possibility of complicity in the murder suggests an element of overweening pride that almost justifies his own blind spot.

On the advice of the chorus, Oedipus summons the blind prophet Tiresias.

2.3 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF OEDIPUS REX: SECTION 2: LINES 338 – 706

The prophet at first refuses to name the murderer, but sensing the wrath of Oedipus, he speaks the truth:

*Tiresias: Thou art the man,
Thou the accursed polluter of this land.*

Analysis: Oedipus cannot believe what Tiresias has to say and asks him to say it again.

*Oedipus: I but half caught thy meaning; say it again.
Tiresias: I say thou art the murderer of the man
Whose murderer thou pursuest.
I say thou livest with thy nearest kin
In infamy, unwitting in thy shame.*

Analysis: Oedipus refuses to believe him and suspects Creon's hand in fabricating the falsehood. He orders the blind prophet to move out, but not before the latter hints at incestuous marriage and a future of blindness and infamy.

*Tiresias: Say thou livest with thy nearest kin
In infamy, unwitting in thy shame.
Hear then: this man whom thou hast sought to arrest
With threats and warrants this long while, the wretch
Who murdered Laius— that man is here.
He passes for an alien in the land
But soon shall prove a Theban, native born.
And yet his fortune brings him little joy;
For blind of seeing, clad in beggar's weeds,

For purple robes, and leaning on his staff,
To a strange land he soon shall grope his way.*

Analysis: This reveals Oedipus' strong resolve to arrest and punish the murderer of King Laius and the irony is that he happens to be the murderer. The blind seer correctly says that the murderer will initially be regarded as an alien and later will be proved to be a native Theban. Oedipus is in reality the Theban prince who had been born to Laius and Jocasta and who returns to Thebes as a person from Corinth.

*Tiresias: And of the children, inmates of his home,
He shall be proved the brother and the sire,
Of her who bare him son and husband both,*

*Co-partner, and assassin of his sire.
Go in and ponder this, and if thou find
That I have missed the mark, henceforth declare
I have no wit nor skill in prophecy.*

Analysis: Once again we cannot miss the dramatic irony. *Tiresias* is blind, but he can see the truth. He is strong in the sense of truth. *Oedipus* has sight, but he cannot see the truth. *Oedipus* taunts *Tiresias* saying “*thou in ear, wit, eye, in everything art blind.*”

Then *Oedipus* charges *Creon* for conspiring with the Priest tell a falsehood. He cannot visualise that he could be the murderer.

*Oedipus: Question and prove me murderer if thou canst.
Creon: Then let me ask thee, didst thou wed my sister?
Oedipus: A fact so plain I cannot well deny.
Creon: And as thy consort queen she shares the throne?
Oedipus: I grant her freely all her heart desires.
Creon: And with you twain I share the triple rule?
Oedipus: Yea, and it is that proves thee a false friend.*

Analysis: The Question-answer dialogue affirms *Oedipus* is the murderer. The *Chorus* warns *Oedipus* to respect a man (*Creon*) whose probity is known to all. *Oedipus*' charge against *Creon* and *Tiresias* is another instance of his arrogance that he, the great *Oedipus* can never be at fault. This narcissistic arrogance as a result of his self - belief in his own greatness almost divine like is true to the saying ‘*pride goes before a fall*’. Having said that we would also need to remember that since *Oedipus* has no idea about his real/ birth/ biological parents and because he has been raised in *Corinth* from the time he is a new born baby, he sincerely believes that he could not have killed King *Laius* who is his real father.

2.4 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF *OEDIPUS REX*: SECTION 3: LINES 707–1007

Incensed with both *Creon* and *Tiresias*, *Oedipus* turns to his wife *Jocasta*. She asks him to ignore these prophecies in the light of the *Delphic Oracle* that had earlier prophesied *Laius*' death at the hands of their son who would eventually marry his mother. But she believes that prophecy did not happen as they had abandoned their baby and were subsequently informed that he had died early. So *Jocasta* argues that the son could not have killed his father nor married his mother. *Laius*, according to her was killed by a band of robbers on a crossroad. This is how *Jocasta* comforts her present husband,

*Jocasta: Then thou mayest ease thy conscience on that score.
Listen and I'll convince thee that no man
Hath scot or lot in the prophetic art.
Here is the proof in brief. An oracle
Once came to Laius (I will not say
'Twas from the Delphic god himself, but from
His ministers) declaring he was doomed
To perish by the hand of his own son,
A child that should be born to him by me.
Now Laius—so at least report affirmed—*

*Was murdered on a day by highwaymen,
No natives, at a spot where three roads meet.
As for the child, it was but three days old,
When Laius, its ankles pierced and pinned
Together, gave it to be cast away
By others on the trackless mountain side.
So then Apollo brought it not to pass
The child should be his father's murderer,
Or the dread terror find accomplishment,
And Laius be slain by his own son.
Such was the prophet's horoscope. O king,
Regard it not. Whate'er the god deems fit
To search, himself unaided will reveal.*

The irony is that, *Jocasta* is not aware that her child abandoned and sent away to be killed lest it should commit the heinous crime of killing his father and marrying his mother, is none other than *Oedipus*, who was saved and was brought up by the King and Queen of *Corinth* as their son.

2.5 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF OEDIPUS REX: SECTION 4: LINES 1008 – 1310

Oedipus had earlier heard the prophecy when he was in *Corinth* as the son of the King and Queen of *Corinth*. *Oedipus* has no clue about his adoption by the *Corinth* King and Queen. So he decides to run away from *Corinth* to avoid committing such a heinous crime. Now as King of *Thebes*, while waiting to solve the murder of *Laius*, he learns that the King of *Corinth* *Polybus* has died of natural causes and he feels relieved that the prophecy had not come true. The Messenger from *Corinth* shocks him by disclosing the truth that the King and Queen of *Corinth* were not his genetic parents, but only his foster parents. The messenger says that a shepherd had rescued the abandoned baby of *Laius* and *Jocasta* and given it to him and he had handed the baby over to the King and the queen who were childless. It is at this point, *Oedipus* recalls his fight at a crossroad when he was running away from *Corinth* with someone who resembled *Laius*.

The story unfolds before his eyes. Desiring to get to the bottom of the truth, he resolves to track down the shepherd who had rescued the abandoned baby of *Laius* and *Jocasta* and learn the truth about his birth. He tells *Jocasta* –

*Oedipus: Who has a higher claim that thou to hear
My tale of dire adventures? Listen then.
My sire was Polybus of Corinth, and
My mother Merope, a Dorian;
And I was held the foremost citizen,
Till a strange thing befell me, strange indeed,
Yet scarce deserving all the heat it stirred.
A roisterer at some banquet, flown with wine,
Shouted "Thou art not true son of thy sire."*

Analysis: This is how he believed himself to be the son of King *Polybus* and Queen *Merope* and it explains why he left *Corinth* in the first place ... till someone discloses that he was not their true son.

*Oedipus: It irked me, but I stomached for the nonce
 The insult; on the morrow I sought out
 My mother and my sire and questioned them.
 They were indignant at the random slur
 Cast on my parentage and did their best
 To comfort me, but still the venom'd barb
 Rankled, for still the scandal spread and grew.
 So privily without their leave I went
 To Delphi, and Apollo sent me back
 Baulked of the knowledge that I came to seek.
 But other grievous things he prophesied,*

Analysis: This disclosure bothers him and to find the truth about his life he goes to *Delphi* to consult the *Oracle*. Though the *Oracle* does not give him the answer to his question, he prophesies that *Oedipus* will slay his father and marry his mother. The *Delphic Oracle* had marked *Oedipus* twice—in *Thebes* and in *Corinth* as the future perpetrator of crime against his parents.

*Woes, lamentations, mourning, portents dire;
 To wit I should defile my mother's bed
 And raise up seed too loathsome to behold,
 What Gods decree, no man can escape.
 And slay the father from whose loins I sprang.
 Then, lady,—thou shalt hear the very truth—
 As I drew near the triple-branching roads,
 A herald met me and a man who sat
 In a car drawn by colts—as in thy tale—
 The man in front and the old man himself
 Threatened to thrust me rudely from the path,
 Then jostled by the charioteer in wrath
 I struck him, and the old man, seeing this,
 Watched till I passed and from his car brought down
 Full on my head the double-pointed goad.
 Yet was I quits with him and more; one stroke
 Of my good staff sufficed to fling him clean
 Out of the chariot seat and laid him prone.
 And so I slew them every one. But if
 Betwixt this stranger there was aught in common
 With Laius, who more miserable than I,
 What mortal could you find more god-abhorred?
 Wretch whom no sojourner, no citizen
 May harbor or address, whom all are bound
 To harry from their homes. And this same curse
 Was laid on me, and laid by none but me.
 Yea with these hands all gory I pollute
 The bed of him I slew. Say, am I vile?
 Am I not utterly unclean, a wretch
 Doomed to be banished, and in banishment
 Forgo the sight of all my dearest ones,
 And never tread again my native earth;
 Or else to wed my mother and slay my sire,
 Polybus, who begat me and upreared?
 If one should say, this is the handiwork*

*Of some inhuman power, who could blame
His judgment? But, ye pure and awful gods,
Forbid, forbid that I should see that day!
May I be blotted out from living men
Ere such a plague spot set on me its brand!*

Analysis: Oedipus takes the blame on himself though he knows that he is a doomed man, on whom such a curse had been laid. The curse of the Gods – call it Fate or Destiny- cannot be circumvented by ordinary mortals.

Queen *Jocasta* understands the horror of her marriage to her son after the murder of her husband King *Laius*. Despite the precaution taken by her and *Laius* to outwit the *Delphic Oracle*, the prophecy had come true. On learning the truth, Queen *Jocasta* kills herself. Similarly what *Oedipus* has dreaded in the context of his foster parents in *Corinth* - has actually come true. *Oedipus* thinking that he is the biological son of the King and Queen of *Corinth* tries to run away to disprove the *Oracle* that had predicted this horrible crime. Destiny triumphs with the *Oracle's* script running true as he kills his biological father, King *Laius* and marries his biological mother, Queen *Jocasta*. He commits these heinous crimes without knowing the truth about his parentage.

2.6 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF OEDIPUS REX: SECTION 5: LINES 1311 - 1684

Rushing into the palace, *Oedipus* finds that the queen has killed herself. Devastated, *Oedipus* takes the pins from her gown and rakes out his eyes, as a punishment for his heinous crimes. It does not matter to him if the crimes had been committed in total ignorance; the fact remains that he was the murderer and therefore responsible for bringing the plague on his city.

*Think, with what eyes hereafter in the place
Of shadows could I see my father's face,
Or my poor mother's? Both of whom this hand
Hath wronged too deep for man to understand.*

On hearing about his wife nee mother's death, he behaves like one possessed.

In the words of the messenger,
*But him, as in the fury of his stride,
"A sword! A sword! And show me here," he cried,
"That wife, no wife, that field of bloodstained earth
Where husband, father, sin on sin, had birth,
Polluted generations!" While he thus
Raged on, some god—for sure 'twas none of us—
Showed where she was; and with a shout away,
As though some hand had pointed to the prey,
He dashed him on the chamber door. The straight
Door-bar of oak, it bent beneath his weight,
Shook from its sockets free, and in he burst
To the dark chamber.
There we saw her first
Hanged, swinging from a noose, like a dead bird.
He fell back when he saw her. Then we heard
A miserable groan, and straight he found*

*And loosed the strangling knot, and on the ground
Laid her.—Ah, then the sight of horror came!
The pin of gold, broad-beaten like a flame,
He tore from off her breast, and, left and right,
Down on the shuddering orbits of his sight
Dashed it: “Out! Out! Ye never more shall see
Me nor the anguish nor the sins of me.
Ye looked on lives whose like earth never bore,
Ye knew not those my spirit thirsted for:
Therefore be dark forever!”*

His blindness in some way calms him down as he can no longer look upon the misery he has caused. In self-humiliation and utter dejection, the disgraced *Oedipus* begs Creon to kill him. The play concludes, with his quiet submission to *Creon's* leadership, and he humbly awaits the oracle that will determine whether he will stay in *Thebes* or be cast out forever. The play ends with the chorus:

*Chorus: Ye citizens of Thebes, behold; 'tis Oedipus that passeth here,
Who read the riddle-word of Death, and mightiest stood of mortal men,
And Fortune loved him, and the folk that saw him turned and looked
again.*

*Lo, he is fallen, and around great storms and the outreaching sea!
Therefore, O Man, beware, and look toward the end of things that be,
The last of sights, the last of days; and no man's life account as gain
Ere the full tale be finished and the darkness find him without pain.
[Oedipus is led into the house and the doors close on him.]*

Analysis: *Oedipus* is described as the mightiest among men, favoured by Fortune and he is now fallen.

2.7 THE CHORUS

In modern plays, the *Chorus* is rarely one of the *dramatis personae*. But in a classical tragedy, the *Chorus* is an integral part of the play. Both the *Chorus* and the three Unities (which will be discussed in the next Unit (Unit 3) require each other to perform their respective functions. The ancient view of the *Chorus* is stated by **Horace**, the Latin poet (65 BC - 8 BC) in his *Ars of Poetry*, *Ars Poetica*:

*The Chorus must back the good and give sage counsel; must control the
passionate and cherish those that fear to do evil; it must praise the thrifty
meal, the blessings of Justice, the Laws and Peace with her unbarred gates.
It will respect confidences and implore heaven that prosperity may revisit
the miserable and quit the proud.”*

Horace on the Art of Poetry, ed. by Edward Henry Blakeney, 1928

The basic functions of the *Chorus*, as laid out by **Horace** gives the *Chorus* the role of an objective viewer of the events that unfold before their eyes. The *Chorus* is the upholder of virtue, morality and wisdom and underlines the moral of the play that implores prosperity to the unfortunate victims and woe to the proud and the haughty. In other words, the *Chorus* speaks the voice of the audience, expressing its fears, anxieties, premonitions and wisdom – They arrive early on in the play and they remain till the end. In *Oedipus Rex* it will be noticed that they seem to know in advance the coming of disaster before *Oedipus*

knows it. They conclude with the message of the play about the appalling reversal of fortune that shows the power of the Gods over men.

The summary of *Oedipus Rex* as given above in 5 sections, does not include the speeches of the *Chorus*. We will highlight those speeches and see how the *Chorus* becomes an integral part of the story as stated by **Horace**.

2.8 ANALYSIS OF THE SPEECHES OF THE CHORUS

The *Chorus* makes its first entry in Section 1 with special prayers to the Gods to rid *Thebes* of the raging plague. Their prayers are answered by *Oedipus* who enters announcing that he will answer their prayers. The *Chorus* informs the audience that *Phoebus Apollo*, the god of the sun will give the answer, but *Oedipus* takes upon himself the role of a god — a role the *Chorus* has been reluctant to allow him. *Oedipus* is proudly conscious of his competence to find the murderer of *Laius*. He says: “no living man can hope to force the gods to speak against their will” and therefore he will speak. Here he comes close to dismissing the gods and giving himself the right to answer the chorus although this does not amount to blasphemy. His dialogue with the *Chorus* enables us to see early in the play *Oedipus*’s dangerous pride in his inviolable character, almost displaying a willful blindness to any blemish in his character and this to a certain extent, justifies his downfall. The *Chorus* is almost a crystal gazer who believes in divine sources for seeing the future.

In Section 2 the *Chorus* tries to calm *Oedipus* down who in his arrogance charges both *Creon* and *Tiresias* of conspiring to overthrow him. It asks him not to be stubborn and unrelenting but

“...respect a man whose probity and truth are known to all and now confirmed by oath.”

The *Chorus* thus gives the King sage counsel. The *Chorus* after hearing *Tiresias* is perplexed about believing and not believing his words

*The Chorus: Sore perplexed am I by the words of the master seer.
Are they true, are they false? I know not and bridle my tongue for fear,
Fluttered with vague surmise; nor present nor future is clear.
Proof is there none: how then can I challenge our King’s good name,
How in a blood-feud join for an untracked deed of shame?
All wise are Zeus and Apollo, and nothing is hid from their ken;
They are gods; and in wits a man may surpass his fellow men;
But that a mortal seer knows more than I know—where
Hath this been proven? Or how without sign assured, can I blame
Him who saved our State when the winged songstress came,
Tested and tried in the light of us all, like gold assayed?
How can I now assent when a crime is on Oedipus laid?*

Analysis: The *Chorus* like all other men cannot think of *Oedipus* as the murderer. When there is no proof, it is not possible to challenge the King’s good name, in which case it would also be difficult to believe the blind seer? The *Chorus* is terrified, helpless, confused and full of anxiety and uncertainty.

After *Oedipus* and *Jocasta* leave the stage, the *Chorus* enters, announcing that the world is ruled by destiny and denouncing arrogant men who defy the gods.

Throughout the play, the *Chorus* is miserable, and desperate for the plague to end and for stability to be restored to the city. Nevertheless, the *Chorus* holds staunchly to the belief that the prophecies of *Tiresias* will come true. For if they do not, there is no order on earth or in the heavens. The *Chorus* is the voice of the Greek faith in decrees made by God. The only way to restore order both in heaven and on earth is not to override the decree of the divine powers.

The *Chorus* makes its appearance again in the final section. The *Chorus* laments that even *Oedipus*, the greatest of men, has been brought low by destiny, for an unknowing crime committed out of good intentions.

Oedipus' crimes are presented as a kind of blight on the land, a plague—symbolised by the plague with which the play begins—that infects the earth on which *Oedipus*, his family, and his citizens stand, and in which all have been victimised as a result of *Oedipus'* violent acts. The *Chorus* sums up the fate of man in its speeches in the last section.

*The Chorus: Of insolence is bred
The tyrant; insolence full blown,
With empty riches surfeited,
Scales the precipitous height and grasps the throne.
Then topples o'er and lies in ruin*

*Oedipus: Curse on the man who took
the cruel bonds from off my legs, as I lay in the field.
He stole me from death and saved me,
no kindly service.*

*Had I died then
I would not be so burdensome to friends.*

Analysis: The *Chorus* charges *Oedipus* with tyranny born of insolence. *Oedipus'* ascent to the throne and his conscious awareness of his kingly qualities of probity, fairness and justice make him assume almost tyrannical against sinners—a power that backfires on Him and topples him to fall down to ignominy and dishonor.

Chorus: I, too, could have wished it had been so.

Analysis: The *Chorus* echoes *Oedipus'* lament that it was his misfortune to have been spared death in infancy and for him to grow into adulthood and to commit this horrendous crime that his birth parents had been trying to avoid.

*Oedipus: Then I would not have come
to kill my father and marry my mother infamously.
Now I am godless and child of impurity,
begetter in the same seed that created my wretched self.
If there is any ill worse than ill,
that is the lot of Oedipus.*

*Chorus: I cannot say your remedy was good;
you would be better dead than blind and living*

Analysis: The *chorus* seems to speak on behalf of the audience that *Oedipus* dead is preferable to blind and living *Oedipus*.

*Chorus: Ancestral Thebes, behold this Oedipus, —
Him who knew the famous riddles and was a man most masterful;
not a citizen who did not look with envy on his lot—
see him now and see the breakers of misfortune swallow him!
Look upon that last day always. Count no mortal happy
till he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain.*

Analysis: This is the final message that no man can count himself happy if he fails to be secure from pain at the end of his life.

The last message of the *Chorus* shows how men are cast down from a position of glory to that of infamy, not entirely due to their folly, but through a combination of a flaw in their character/ *hamartia* as the Greeks would call it and the whimsical power of the Gods. The play raises difficult and imponderable questions regarding man's relationship with Gods. The Greek view of life rests on the might of the gods over men. Underlying the malevolence and vengefulness of Gods, the play reveals the strength and dignity of man in his confrontation with forces that he can neither match nor win over. The play leaves us with dark questions about gods' treatment of men that includes a brave, just and wise *Oedipus* who falls because of his belief in his faultless and immaculate character.

The questions that arise in the viewer are mixed and confused - Is *Oedipus* at fault for which he was punished or was he destined to be destroyed as foretold by the *Delphic Oracle*? **Sophocles'** own idea about the fall of *Oedipus* is rooted in the Greek view of life. **Sophocles** does not attribute *Oedipus'* fall to an inherited curse or doom – what we identify as fate or destiny - but in two passages given to *Oedipus*, we find that he believed that he was in some way the architect of his own doom. When he discovers the double crime that he has committed, one of parricide and the other of incest, he owns it saying

*Stand (s) naked now: Shamefully was I born
In shame I wedded; in shame I slew*

He does not blame his biological parents *Laius* and *Jocasta* for abandoning him as a baby lest he should commit the two heinous crimes, on the contrary, had he not been born, there would have been no possibility of any criminal action. *Oedipus* blames himself for being born to a polluted family, an accursed race. The second causative factor for his fall - which is more a plausibility than a reality - is his own arrogance that he, King *Oedipus* can do no wrong. His assertion before his citizens that he will punish the killer of *Laius* without mercy is proof of his belief in his blemish free character. This cannot be misconstrued as bombast and vanity, but it highlights the fact that no one born in this world can claim to be spotlessly clean. But to say that *Oedipus* was punished for wanton pride cannot be justified. The closest that we come to attributing pride to *Oedipus* is his cavalier attitude towards *Creon* and *Tiresias*, charging them with conspiracy to overthrow him. Refusing to accept *Tiresias'* charge that he (*Oedipus*) was the culprit and imputing motives to *Creon* and *Tiresias* for making him such an allegation reveal a mean streak in *Oedipus*, very unlike his regal, noble and just demeanour. In fact the *Chorus* expresses its anxiety that *Oedipus* displays signs of tyrannical traits and says: *Insolence: it is that breeds a tyrant.*

But **Sophocles** does not show *Oedipus* guilty of tyranny as he makes him pray that his children should be blessed with a quiet middle state unlike his life that swings from two extremes of great prosperity and abject downfall. His killing his father cannot be construed as naked aggression as it was *Laius* who showed aggression in the first instance leading to *Oedipus*' retaliation of a fatal order. His mistakes are not even errors of judgement as he does not even know who *Laius* is. Yet it is this crime that leads to the breaking of the deadly plague, to his discovery of his own crimes, his final blinding and his exile from *Thebes*. But the fact still remains that this had been prophesied well in advance and *Oedipus* is a doomed man. He is the victim of the gods. The role of the gods is central to understanding *Oedipus*. We studied **Homer**'s *Iliad* where the gods play a central role in determining the affairs of men. This is the Greek view of life where men are victims of the gods. He cannot escape from doing that which he had been destined to do. Abandoned as a baby in *Thebes* and his later attempt to flee from his foster home in *Corinth* to avoid committing the prophesied crimes, cannot prevent what he has been fated to do. Man's endeavours to overcome god's decree are futile. Gods' decisions are final and they cannot be circumvented. **C M Bowra** comments:

"The plague is an act of the gods; an assertion of their rights and of their inviolable laws." C. M. Bowra, *The Sophoclean Tragedy* p.171

Yet another belief of the ancient Greeks was that sins like parricide and incest even when committed in ignorance have to be punished and the wrong doer has to atone for his crimes. *Oedipus* blinding and exiling himself from his kingdom is an act of atonement. The doom that falls on *Oedipus* is incredulously harsh. But it has to be that way because *Oedipus* himself had vowed to give the most appalling punishment to the murderer of *Laius* and that kingly vow had to be fulfilled. So the curse that has fallen on him has to be of a degree that is far in excess of the crimes he has committed in ignorance. Such a doom is not that of the *Oracle*, but it is the proclamation of *Oedipus* himself. On realising that he himself might be the murderer, he says that he has to be more miserable than anyone else as he has invoked the curse on himself and this he takes up on himself *"for the dead man's cause' and for the God"*. This is how god's will is done; this is how the decree through the *Oracle* comes true. This is the tragedy of *Oedipus* - the fall of a great King, self - exiled from his own kingdom, blinded and helpless and wandering around like a beggar.

"The play shows the power of the gods at every important turn in its development and leaves no doubt about the poet's (Sophocles') theological intention." C M Bowra, *The Sophoclean Tragedy* p.171

This is the lesson to take from the play - the power of the gods is final and the *Chorus*' last speech (see above) says it all-no one can be said to be happy unless he has no sorrow till the end of his life. Once when one is in prosperity, one should remain modest as at any moment, the gods may take away his happiness and destroy his life. Till the end, *Oedipus* remains a great king, a great man.

"In his acceptance of his fall, his readiness to take part in it, Oedipus shows a greatness, nobler than ... when he became the king of Thebes."

C M Bowra, *The Sophoclean Tragedy* p.171

2.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have summarised the play into five sections and also analysed the play to an extent. Having gone through the play we have seen the rise, the heights that *Oedipus* rose to and his subsequent fall. We saw how the Gods can snatch away what they've given in the wink of an eye and we saw *Oedipus* reduced to an extremely troubled, almost deranged, blind beggarly state from being King of *Thebes*. We also learnt a little bit about *hamartia*/ tragic flaw and finally we examined the role, the purpose and significance of the *Chorus* in Classical Greek Tragedies. In the next unit we will take up for discussion **Aristotle's** three unities – *Unity of Time, Unity of Place and Unity of Action*.

2.10 QUESTIONS

1. How does Sophocles use the timing of Creon's entrance into the dialogue to create tension for the audience?
2. What according to the Chorus is the condition in the city?
3. What prompts the people of Thebes and the priest to come to the palace at the beginning of the play?
4. Why does Oedipus accuse Creon of a conspiracy?
5. 'Oedipus Rex is the story of a noble man who seeks the truth that ultimately destroys him.' Comment.

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