



**Centre for Distance and Online Education
Punjabi University, Patiala**

Class : M.A. I (English) Semester : 1
Paper : II (Classical And Elizabethan Drama) Unit : I
Medium : English

Lesson No.

- 4 SOPHOCLES: OEDIPUS REX
or
KING OEDIPUS
- 5 SOPHOCLES: OEDIPUS REX
A Detailed Analysis of the text
- 6 SOPHOCLES: OEDIPUS REX
- 7 SOPHOCLES: OEDIPUS REX
Critical Appraisal of the Play
- 8 SOPHOCLES: OEDIPUS REX
Some Important Aspects

Department website : www.pbide.org

- Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning India Private Limited, 2015.
 Bloom, Harold. *How to Read and Why*. Scribner, 2001.
 Eagleton, Terry. *How to Read a Poem*. Blackwell, 2006.
 Kisak, Paul F. *Poetic Devices: The Tools of Poetry*. Createspace Independent Pub, 2015.

Geoffrey Chaucer

- Bowden, Muriel. *A Commentary on the General Prologue*. Macmillan, 1948.
 Chesterton, G.K. *Chaucer*. Faber and Faber, 1932.
 Coghill, Nevill. *The Poet Chaucer*. Oxford University Press, 1967.
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William Shakespeare

- Don, Paterson. *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Faber and Faber, 2012.
 Fuller, David. *The Life in the Sonnets: Shakespeare Now!*. Continuum, 2011.
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 Helen, Vendler. *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999.
 Post, Jonathan F.S. *Shakespeare's Sonnets and Poems: A Very Short Introduction*. Very Short Introductions, Oxford University Press, 2017.

John Donne

- Ford, Boris, Editor. *From Donne to Marvell*. Penguin Books, 1990.
 Gardner, Helen, editor. *John Donne: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice-Hall, 1982.
 Hammond, Gerald. *The Metaphysical Poets*. Macmillan, 1974.
 Lovelock, Julian. *Donne: Songs & Sonnets*. Macmillan, 1973.

Andrew Marvell

- Condren, Conal and A.D. Cousins. *The Political Identity of Andrew Marvell*. Scolar P, 1990.
 Hirst, Derek and Steven N. Zwicker, editors. *The Cambridge Companion to Andrew Marvell*. Cambridge U. P., 2010.
 Lord, George DeForest, editor. *Andrew Marvell: Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice- Hall, 1968.
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John Milton

- Martz, Louis L., editor. *Milton: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice Hall, 1966.
 Pattison, Mark. *Milton*. Lyall Book Depot, Chandigarh, 1966.
 Waldock, A. J. A. *Paradise Lost: And Its Critics*. Cambridge University Press, 1966.

CORE COURSE -II CLASSICAL AND ELIZABETHAN DRAMA COURSE CODE: ENGM1102T

Time: 3 hours

Max. Marks: 100
 Written Examination: 75 Marks
 Internal Assessment: 25 Marks
 Pass Marks: 35%

Course Objectives:

1. To familiarise students with the fundamentals of dramatic representation (with special

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reference to Plato and Aristotle).

2. To familiarise students with the masterpieces of Classical and Elizabethan drama.
3. To impart an understanding to students of the changes taking place in the tradition of English drama in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods.

Course Outcomes:

1. The students will develop an understanding of the differences between Classical, Renaissance and Jacobean dramatic traditions.
2. The students will learn about the historico-cultural factors responsible for the popularity of the genre of drama in Elizabethan England.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE PAPER-SETTER

UNIT-I shall have three questions out of which the students shall be required to attempt any two. Not more than one question shall be set from a text. These questions shall carry 11+11=22 marks.

UNIT-II shall have three questions out of which the students shall be required to attempt any two. Not more than one question shall be set from a text. These questions shall carry 11+11=22 marks.

UNIT-III shall comprise ten short-answer questions of about 100 words each. It shall be of 31 marks. This question shall have two parts. Part (a) shall comprise four questions aimed at testing the close reading of the texts (4+3+3+3= 13 marks). Part (b), comprising six questions, shall be based on the history/movement(s)/genre(s)/concepts, etc. pertaining to the course (3x6=18 marks).

UNIT-I

Plato-“The Allegory/Myth of the Cave” from Book VI and relevant sections on poets and poetry from Books II, III and X of *The Republic* [Poetics, Oxford University Press, 2013]
Aristotle - *Poetics*
Sophocles - *Oedipus Rex*

UNIT-II

William Shakespeare - *King Lear*
Christopher Marlowe - *Doctor Faustus*
John Webster – *The Duchess of Malfi*

UNIT-III

This shall include ten short-answer questions as explained above.

SUGGESTED READING

Cardullo, R.J. *Understanding Drama*. Primus Books, 2021.
Habib, M.A.R. *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. Blackwell, 2005.
Pakmaja, Ashok. *A Companion to Literary Forms*. Orient BlackSwan, 2015.

William Shakespeare

Adelman, J. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of King Lear: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice Hall Direct, 1984.
Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*.

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**SOPHOCLES: *OEDIPUS REX*
OR
*KING OEDIPUS***

Structure :

4.0 Objectives

4.1 Introduction to the Author

4.1.1 Sophocles and his major works

4.2 Treatment of Myths

4.2.1 Tragedy made human

4.2.2 Purifying effect of suffering

4.2.3 God : The final Judge

4.2.4 Aristotle's opinion of the play

4.3 The Theban Legend

4.4 List of important characters, persons and Mythological Allusions in the play

4.5 Self-Check Exercise

4.6 Answers to the Self-Check Exercise

4.7 Let's Sum Up

4.0 Objectives :

- * To introduce Sophocles and his major works to students.
- * To introduce Greek Tragedy, in general.
- * To tell the legend behind the play.

Dear Student,

In this lesson, we plan to introduce you to the play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. This play is a masterpiece, one of the best tragedies ever written. We would recommend that you go through the text in original before reading these lessons and keep referring back to the text during the discussions. This will be of great help to you in understanding the play, enjoying it and finally in attempting questions in the examination.

4.1 Introduction to the Author :

Sophocles was a great Greek dramatist. Very little is known about his life. An ancient biography of unknown authorship gives some details of Sophocles's life. It is believed that he was born at Colonus, a village situated very near to the city of Athens. He was the son of Sophillus, a wealthy merchant, probably a manufacturer of armour. As the son of a wealthy man, Sophocles received good education which was emphasized through training in music, dancing and gymnastics. As a boy, he was noted for his good looks and for his abilities as a dancer, lyre player and wrestler - an unusual combination of qualities in an Athenian gentleman of Greece of 5th century B.C.

Tradition says that when the Greeks won a famous victory over the Persians at Salamis, in 480 B.C. Sophocles was selected as a leader of a chorus of boys to perform a paean in honour of the victor.

4.2 Sophocles and his major works :

Sophocles's writing career, spread over 60 years was of unbroken and unparalleled success. Of the 123 plays, Sophocles is said to have written, there remain only seven tragedies and 400 lines of a satyr play. There are also several hundred fragments of his lost works, fragments varying from a single word mentioned by a grammarian or a lexicographer to passages of 12 to 15 verses. It is possible to date with certainty two of his plays only i.e. *Antigone* (written in 442 or 441 B.C. and *Philoctetes* (written in 409 B.C.). It is believed that *Oedipus at Colonus* was a work of Sophocles's old age and that it was produced by his grandson.

Dating Sophocles's plays is a very risky business because there is very little internal evidence by way of references to contemporary events and personalities. Stylistic analysis is also not quite helpful because Sophocles's dramatic style shows a remarkable flexibility. *Ajax* may have been written in or about 447 B.C. Jebb tentatively ascribes 420-410 B.C. as the probable period of the composition of the *Trachiniae*. Others place it closer to *Antigone*. *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Electra* might have been written around 430 B.C.

4.2 Treatment of Myths :

Looking at the tragedies of Sophocles, one is struck by a remarkable characteristic of Sophocles as a writer of tragedies. Although, like Aeschylus, Sophocles also worked within the framework of myths and legends of Greece, his handling of myths and legends is in marked contrast to Aeschylus's treatment of the same. As Aristotle points out, in relation to *Oedipus Tyrannus* the incredible or the irrational parts of a legend or myth never became the focus of attention. They were generally kept in the background, so that in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the improbability of a man trying to evade his fate of marrying a woman much older than him and not troubled by doubts until the plague strikes the city, never really intrudes upon the consciousness of the audience. Again, although very conscious of the value of myth, Sophocles brought tragedy from the level of the supernatural to the level of the human

4.2.1 Tragedy made human :

We see blind, ignorant and arrogant humans flitting across the stage and struggling against forces of which they have an incomplete understanding. Sophocles deals with man, even if it is the heroic, idealized man. He thus broadens the scope of Greek tragedy by humanizing it. While keeping the main outlines of the myth intact, Sophocles introduced a variety of incidents, emotions and motives to give variety and truthfulness to this presentation of tragedies. Sophocles was a dramatist interested in human nature and not in supernatural dispensation. His characters are clearly drawn but at the same time, they possess a psychological richness which saves them from becoming mere types. In his tragedies, Sophocles expertly employed irony in his plays. Sophoclean irony is of two kinds: irony of situation and irony at the verbal

level. Verbal irony is easier to note and appreciate. Very often an Oedipus or a Creon makes a statement which is ambiguous in its import. It has one meaning for the hero and another for the audiences who know more than the victim-hero. Sometimes the victim-hero expresses happiness at a particular state of affairs and this has a grim irony for the audience who are wiser than the character on the stage. Irony of situation is part and parcel of the Sophoclean vision of life and it is all pervasive.

4.2.2 Purifying effect of Suffering :

Sophocles's main theme appears to be the presentation of 'Man in crisis'. *Oedipus Tyrannus* opens with a grim crisis facing the city of Thebes. Similarly, *Antigone* opens with a tense situation faced by the citizens of Thebes and the unfortunate daughters of Oedipus. Pain or suffering is never adventitious or accidental in the Sophoclean universe. Sophocles was never a pessimist presenting a nihilistic picture of the universe. What matters in Sophocles's plays is not suffering or a callous fate or destiny which is utterly indifferent to human weal or woe. Suffering purifies and enables the victim hero. The antagonist and the protagonist go through a terrible process of suffering for which they are only partly responsible. The suffering is both physical and mental. But suffering changes his character for better. From a spurious, superficial and inauthentic existence, the victim-hero, through suffering moves on to a higher level of irony and consciousness, a level on which the hero is not necessarily happier but definitely wiser, humble and nobler. Suffering leads to what may be called rebirth in religious terms, the achievement of a stage of higher consciousness where all ego and ignorance are destroyed and man is taught the first and the last lesson of the need for intellectual humility. This process of transformation renewal or rebirth is very similar to the significance of the great Dionysian dramatic festival which the Greeks celebrated annually. The problems that Sophocles dealt within his plays were human not superhuman. The concern is with the clash of character with illusion and human ego coming into class with experience, with human aspiration and ideas, man's potentialities for good and evil, his badness and brashness, his anguished search for meaning in human life because his experience shatters his complacent belief in rational, well ordered and well behaved universe. The universe and the gods who were the forces behind universe were inscrutable, mysterious and beyond human comprehension. Sophocles did not celebrate the cosmic order like Aeschylus, nor did he question it as Euripides did. He only recommended acceptance, if at all he recommended anything, for acceptance. He did not justify the ways of gods to mortals. He regarded the gods as mysterious and omnipotent figures whose ways are forever beyond the comprehension of weak and ignorant men. But Sophocles did not denigrate man. In the magnificent Choral Ode, *Antigone* (12-332-367), Sophocles sings of the glory of man. In *Oedipus Tyrannus* (11-863-910) he sings of divine laws. Sophocles denied nothing, nor does he complacently assert anything. Man, not God, is his final concern. He appears to suggest that man must accept his fate and work

Note : Please note that *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus : The King* refer to the same play.

within his limitations.

4.2.3 God : The Final Judge :

Sophocles presents men and women acting and interacting. Not gods in powers of nature but human beings, blinded by ignorance and arrogance, lacking the virtue of intellectual humility, are the main characters of Sophocles. An order natural or cosmic, is upset, a rhythm is disturbed. This leads to suffering, and through suffering to transformation. For Sophocles, the cosmos embodies an order in which happiness and sorrow, life and death, alternate. It is not a divine cosmos in which the presence of a divine power is constantly felt. It is more natural than divine because ultimately Sophocles's subject is man, not gods. Gods may know everything but it is man, who passing through ignorance, pain suffering and death, realises the truth about the order of things. The death of Ajax (in *Ajax*) brings a new understanding of life to the survivors. In *Antigone*, through a conflict of motive and characters, the living arrive at belated recognition of their own shortcomings in the universe. *Oedipus At Colonus* presents Oedipus's heroic endurance and the grim but just ending of the play. Death, symbolic or natural, becomes a gateway to truth. A recognition, dawns on the characters, recognition of the nature of the universe and an awareness of the truths about oneself. The protagonist, after passing through this ordeal, becomes a symbolic or mythic figure. In the figures of Antigone and Oedipus, the Greek audience saw and experienced their own tortured selfhood.

Myths have a pattern which cannot be discerned easily. Myths contain truths, mysterious and painful and very necessary. Sophocles was not a religious rebel. His men and women are neither totally free nor are they puppets in the hands of blind forces. Man transgresses by trying to place himself above the scheme of things. The transgression leads to suffering even death. Through suffering, purged of ego, the human being accepts the order of things and understands his place in the scheme of things.

Was Sophocles a humanist, a religious rebel, or an orthodox and faithful Greek? It is obvious that he was neither a humanist, nor a rebel. His universe is divinely ordained. He did not entertain any heretical notions about the nature of the universe. He was not offering 'modern' or 'natural' explanations of universe. He was orthodox in his religious beliefs but not complacently orthodox. He dramatised the highly, ambiguous relationship between men and gods, overwhelming man and a mysterious universe. He worshipped the gods but was not afraid of them. He knew that pain and suffering constituted the lot of human beings. He knew that evil is, in a way, indestructible. There were no happy endings to man's stories, no satisfactory explanation of the sufferings of an Oedipus or the death of an Antigone. He accepted life because of its being an ineluctable mystery. Critics talk of the serenity of Sophocles. It was, however, the hard-earned serenity of a man who realistically viewed man's fate and destiny.

4.2.4 Aristotle's opinion of the play :

The play prescribed in the syllabus is *Oedipus Rex*. The play is acknowledged as his masterpiece. It is regarded not only as the greatest Greek play, but also the

crown and glory of tragic works ever produced. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle accorded high praise to this play. It possesses one of the three best executed plots in all dramas. In this play Sophocles creates terrible suspense through events, the outcome of which is known to the readers beforehand. The reversal and recognition arise out of the plot itself. It has a well knit plot with no loose ends. It is also classed as the first detective story in literature. Its poetry, especially in the lyrical odes, possesses a great beauty and haunting power. It is admired as one of the best stories of Western literature.

Before we undertake an analysis of the play, we would like to bring to your notice that *Oedipus Rex* is one of a group of three plays by Sophocles known as the 'Theban plays'. All of them are concerned with the destiny of the Theban family of Oedipus and his children. The other two plays of the group are *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. The three plays deal with the same theme and subject, but they do not form a trilogy in the usual sense of the term. A Greek trilogy was a group of plays which were entered in one contest and were meant to be staged in succession as they had a consecutive story.

4.3 The Theban Legend or The Myth of Oedipus :

For a better appreciation of the play, we must acquaint ourselves with the Theban legend.

The place known as Thebes was situated in the central plain of Boeotia. Here, under the guidance of the oracle of Delphi, a city was first founded by Cadmus. Cadmus was the son of Agenor and brother of Europa. Misfortune befell Cadmus even before the city of Thebes was established, for all the trusty companions who should have been its first citizens were devoured by a fierce dragon who lived in a neighbouring valley. But Cadmus killed the dragon. Again the word of heaven guided him, and he was instructed to sow the dragon's teeth in the ground prepared for this future city. From these teeth a tribe of fierce, fully armed giants sprang up who engaged immediately in a deadly combat. Out of this combat only five giants survived who submitted to Cadmus. They became the founders and fathers of the Thebes that came into being.

Cadmus begat Polydorus and Polydorus begat Labdacus, and Labdacus begat Laius. Zeus's two sons, Amphion and Zethus usurped the throne of Thebes. Laius who was the heir to the throne fled and took refuge with Pelops. However, he betrayed his benefactor by kidnapping his son. For this crime of Laius, the gods pronounced a curse on him. Laius recovered his kingdom after the death of Amphion and Zethus, and married Jocasta. He was, however, warned by Apollo that his own son by Jocasta would kill him and marry his own mother. A son was born to Laius and his wife Jocasta. Laius and Jocasta decided to thwart god's prediction by getting the child killed. They would not indeed take upon themselves the sin of infanticide. They handed the infant over to a trusted shepherd to abandon it on the mountain Cithaeron to die. Its feet were to be pierced with an iron pin so that it might not even crawl to safety.

This was done. But still the word of Apollo, and human compassion prevailed.

The shepherd, out of compassion, did not leave the infant to perish. He entrusted it to a fellow shepherd, a Corinthian, entreating him to take it away beyond the borders of Thebes and bring it up as his own son. The Corinthian shepherd, a servant of Polybus, King of Corinth undertook the task. In due course, he brought the child to Polybus. Being childless, Polybus gladly adopted the child as his own son. The child was given the name Oedipus, which means swollen foot, because of deformed feet, for having been chained together.

Oedipus grew to manhood, the honoured prince of Corinth, with the belief that Polybus and Merope were his parents. But by chance, he came to hear, again from Apollo's Oracle, the terrible prediction concerning him. Again as Laius and Jocasta had done, he sought to circumvent the Oracle. He fled from Corinth. He was determined never to meet his parents so long as they lived. His wanderings brought him towards Thebes. At a place where three roads meet, he encountered Laius and his companions whom he did not know. He was roughly treated and ordered to make way. He was attacked and a fight followed. Oedipus killed Laius, thus fulfilling the first part of the prophecy without realizing the identity of the man he had killed. He entered Thebes and found the city in the throes of misery. The city was in the grip of a monster, the Sphinx who had established herself outside its gates. She would not let anybody pass the gate without answering her counting riddle. Since none could answer the riddle so far, she killed them. Moreover, the city was further afflicted by the loss of their king who had been murdered, while on a pilgrimage to Delphi. Creon, brother of Jocasta and regent of Thebes, offered the kingdom and Jocasta's hand to one who could rid the city of monster. Oedipus answered the riddle. The monster killed herself in desperation. The harried Thebans heaved a sigh of relief and gave him hero's welcome. He was joyfully received into Thebes as her king, heir to the house and fortune. He was hailed as wise, resourceful and peace loving man. He married Jocasta and in due course they were blessed with two sons and two daughters.

They passed fifteen years of blissful conjugal life. But beneath the deceptive surface of happiness and prosperity lay concealed shame and infamy. The gods could no longer allow Oedipus's sins go unpunished. Plague and famine once again brought Thebes to the brink of utter ruin. In despair and hopelessness the citizens called upon their king to save them. They prayed to Apollo for light and healing in their wretchedness.

The fate predicted for Oedipus had taken its course, although its revelation had been delayed. The gods afflicted the city of Thebes with a terrible plague. The Oracle of Delphi, when consulted once again, said that troubles of the city arose from the fact that there was an unclean person amidst them who had murdered Laius and the remedy was the banishment or death of that person. Oedipus was determined to track the culprit and punish him in order to rid the city of plague. Ironically, however, he ultimately discovered that the culprit he was seeking was none other than himself. At this terrible revelation Jocasta killed herself and Oedipus voluntarily underwent the punishment of self-blinding. He begged the new king, Creon to banish him from

Thebes, in deference to his proclamation regarding the murderer of Laius as well as the command of the oracle of Delphi. Creon told him that he must obtain clear instruction from the god before taking any step about Oedipus's future. Thus we are to suppose that *Oedipus Rex* comes to an end with Oedipus continuing to stay at Thebes for the time being but expected to be banished in the near future.

However, it may be noted that Sophocles did not strictly stick to the Thebes legend. In *Oedipus Rex* he leaves a major part of the story outside the plot. He deals directly with only the last days of Oedipus's rule over Thebes. We are given to understand that Oedipus has been ruling happily over Thebes for about fifteen years. His personal married life has also been blissful. He has four children by his wife, Jocasta. There is going to be further addition to their happiness or as after the death of Polybus, the foster father, Oedipus is to succeed him to the throne of Corinth also. However, all this happiness proves illusory. Fate with one irony stroke turns Oedipus, the happiest man into the most wretched person. The wise and intelligent solver of the riddles is suddenly shown to be stupid and ignorant who does not know even his identity and parentage. In ignorance, that he has killed his father and married his mother, believing himself to be Corinthian Prince, he earnestly tries to evade the fate which the Oracle has predicted, that is, he shall kill his father and marry his mother. He decided not to go back to Corinth lest he should kill his father, Polybus, the king of Corinth and marry his mother, Merope, the queen of Corinth. But all his sincere efforts to evade the inexorable fate prove futile and he is at last entrapped. Oedipus symbolises the utter helplessness of man in the face of destiny. Viewed from another angle Oedipus is the master of his fate at every stage. He is the prime mover of the entire action in the play because whatever happens in it is initiated by him. Thus *Oedipus Rex*, is a perfect tragedy because of its harmonious blending of character and fate.

Dear student, as you must have noted that the names of the persons and places mentioned in the legend are not familiar. Some of them are difficult to pronounce also. Besides, there are some mythological allusions, which must be kept in mind for a proper appreciation of the play. We give below the names of persons and places. We have for the sake of convenience, given their equivalents in Punjabi also. This might help you a little to pronounce them correctly.

4.4 List of important characters, persons and Mythological Allusions in the play :

(A) Persons

1. Oedipus (ਫਜ਼ਵਿਗ;) : The hero of the the play and the king of Thebes. He is a Theban prince by birth but believes that his parents are the king and the queen of Corinth. The word Oedipus means 'swell foot' or 'club-foot'.
2. Laius (ਲਾਇਸ;) : Father of Oedipus and the former king of Thebes. He is murdered by his son, as predicted by the Oracle.

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| 3. | Jocasta (iē;Nk) | : | Laius's wife and the queen of Thebes. She becomes the queen again when she ignorantly marries the new king, Oedipus, who is in reality her son. |
| 4. | Creon (eTB) | : | Jocasta's brother. He assumes kingship from Oedipus. |
| 5. | Ismene (fJ;whBh) | : | Oedipus's elder daughter. More practical, less sensitive. |
| 6. | Antigone (JBfNrB) | : | Oedipus's second daughter. |
| 7. | Teiresias (NkJhoh;hN;) | : | A legendary blind prophet who is accused by Oedipus of being a plotter against the throne. (Also spelt as Tiresias) |
| 8. | Polybus (gbip;) | : | The king of Corinth and the supposed father of Oedipus whom he brings up. |
| 9. | Merope (wogh) | : | The queen of Corinth and the supposed mother of Oedipus. She is a Dorian by birth. |
| 10. | Menoeceous (wffeT;) | : | Father of Creon and Jocasta. |
| 11. | Labdacus (bpve;) | : | Father of Laius. |
| 12. | Polydorus (gbhvo;) | : | Father of Labdacus. |
| 13. | Cadmus (evw;) | : | The legendary founder of Thebes, father of Polydorus. The Thebans are known as the children of Cadmus. |
| 14. | Agenor (JrBo) | : | Father of Cadmus. |
| 15. | Lycus (bkJhe;) | : | King of Thebes during Laius's minority. |
| (B) Places | | | |
| 1. | Helicon (jfbeB) | : | A range of mountains of Boeotia, sacred to Apollo and the Muses. The two fountains of the Muses were situated here. The chorus sings that Oedipus might be the product of the love of Apollo and some Muse on Mount Helicon. |
| 2. | Cithaeron (;hEoB) | : | The mountain on which Oedipus was abandoned as an infant. |
| 3. | Delphi (vbch) | : | A small town on the southern slope of Mount Parnassus. The Greeks believed that the temple of Apollo at Delphi was situated over the centre of the earth. The oracle of Delphi was very famous. In the play, Oedipus sends Creon to consult this oracle. We also learn that Laius and Oedipus have consulted it at various times. |

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| 4. | Corinth (εφοΕ) | : | The city state; ruled over by Polybus, where Oedipus was brought up. |
| 5. | Pythian house of Apollo
(γκῆφεΕJB) | :
L | The temple at Delphi where the oracles of Apollo were given by the 'Pythian' priestess. Another temple of Apollo, from Python the huge snake living on Mount Parnassus, who was killed by Apollo. This was situated on the road leading to the sea coast. |
| 6. | Thebes (Εἰπι) | : | The chief city of Boeotia. According to legend it was the birth place of Dionysus as well as Heracles. It is the scene of action of <i>Oedipus Rex</i> and <i>Antigone</i> . |
| 7. | Phocis(ϕή;)) | : | The place 'where three roads meet.' The confrontation between Oedipus and Laius took place here. |
| 8. | Heart of the Earth
(Χοση δὲ εἰδο) | : | A descriptive phrase for the temple of Delphi spoken of as the centre or the navel of earth. |
| 9. | Delos (δῆλος;) | : | One of the islands in the Aegean sea. A temple of Apollo, having an oracle, was situated here. In the play, Apollo is once referred to as Healer of Delos. |
| 10. | Daulia (δαυλία) | : | The place to which one of the 'three roads' at Phocis lead, the other two leading to Delphi and Thebes, respectively. |
| 11. | Ismenus (Ἰσημός;) | : | The river on the banks of which Thebes was situated. |
| 12. | Isterolstros (Ἰστρος;) | : | The lower reaches of the Danube. |
| 13. | Phasis (φάσις;) | : | A river in eastern Asia that empties into the Black Sea. |

Mythological Allusions in *Oedipus the King*

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| 1. | Loxias | : | One of the several names of Phoebus, Apollo, the son of Zeus. He is god of the sun, medicine, music, archery and prophecy. Delos and Delphi were the two prominent centres of the cult of Apollo. The Romans adopted this god from Greek mythology and gave him a prominent place in their religion. He was known as the god of healing as well as oracles and prophecy. The Romans also regarded him as the |
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- patron of poetry and music. The other names for the god are Lyceans god, Delian Healer and Pytho. He is both the author of the divine messages (which are at the same time the messages of Zeus, the God of gods) and the source of help and relief, the slayer of evil things.
2. Zeus : Chief of the Greek gods. He was the son of Cronos, whom he overthrew. Zeus was the god of the sky and the weather but was also associated with most aspects of human life. He was the giver of good and evil to man, chiefly the former. Zeus was the supreme god and was restricted only by the decrees of Fate. The Romans identified him with Jupiter.
 3. Lycaen : Pertaining to Lycaen, a mountain in Arcadia, which is also a synonym of Zeus who was believed to have been born on this mountain. 'Lyceius' however, is an epithet of Apollo.
 4. Fates : Various believed to be the daughters of the Night, or of Zeus and Themis. Originally they were birth spirits i.e. they allotted to the new-born child his portion in life. They were three in number. They have survived into modern Greek folklore.
 5. Pallas : A part of the title of goddess, Pallas Athene. She is also known as Athena. She is the daughter of Zeus and his first wife, Metis. Zeus swallowed Metis for the fear that she might give birth to a son stronger than himself. Athena was born subsequently. She is said to have sprung from Zeus's head. She was the patron goddess of Athens, and of Greek cities in general. She was also the inventor of the flute. There is no certain explanation of the title 'Pallas'. The Romans identified Athene with their goddess Minerva.
 6. Artemis : The daughter of Zeus and Leto identified by the Romans with Diana. She is the sister of Apollo. She was identified with the

- moon and also regarded as the goddess of child-birth and of all young things.
7. Bacchus : Or Dionysus, son of Zeus and Semele, the daughter of Cadmus. He was a god who punished those who did not recognise his power. Dionysus was also connected with Greek theatre. He was not only the god in whose honour the Athenian festival of tragedy is held but also especially related, in legend and cult to Thebes.
8. Maenad : One of the class of female votaries who followed Dionysus. The word literally means 'man woman' or frenzied woman. The woman worshippers of Bacchus or Dionysus were called Bacchantes or Maenads.
9. Sphinx : The name literally means 'strangler'. The Sphinx was a monster having a woman's head on a lion's body. She put a riddle to Oedipus what is it that walks on four legs in the morning on two in the noon, and on three in the evening. She waylaid all passers-by at the gate and killed those who failed to answer the riddle she proposed. Oedipus correctly answered it a Man-who crawls on all fours as an infant, on two legs in his youth and takes the help of stick in old age. For answering it successfully and causing the monster to kill himself, Oedipus was rewarded with the throne of Thebes and the hand of Jocasta, the widowed queen of Laius. In *Oedipus Rex* various descriptive phrases and words are used for Sphinx such as the life Enchantress, the Dogfaced Witch, the Claw-foot lady and the She-devil. She is also called Winged Maiden.
10. Teiresias : In addition to being a character in *Oedipus Rex*, Teiresias is also a figure in Greek mythology. He was a Theban who was transformed for a time into a woman for killing the female of a pair of snakes. Here, the wife of Zeus, struck him blind for

supporting Zeus in answering a question that the two put to him. Zeus gave long life in compensation and also blessed him with the gift of prophecy.

11. Oreads : Mountain nymphs.
12. Ares : Mars, the war god.

4.5 Self-Check Exercise :

- * What is the main theme of Sophocles' plays?
- * Briefly comment on the use of myths in the plays of Sophocles.

4.6 Answers to the Self-Check Exercise :

- * The main theme of Sophocles' plays is presentation of man in grim crisis posed by destiny. But his suffering at the hands of fate changes his character for better, it takes him to a higher plane of existence.
- * Like other great dramatists of his age, Sophocles also made use of myths and legends in his plays. But his treatment is markedly different from others. He never makes the incredible or irrational parts of the myths his centre of attention.

4.7 Lets Sum Up :

In this lesson, we've made an effort to acquaint you with the great Greek dramatist Sophocles and his art. We've also tried to provide you an introductory list of characters, places and mythological references necessary for the understanding of the text.

Unit I

LESSON NO. 5

SOPHOCLES : *OEDIPUS REX*

A DETAILED ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

Structure :

5.0 Objectives

5.1 Critical Analysis of the text, Part-I

- 5.1.1 Thebes under curse**
- 5.1.2 Probe into Laius' murder**
- 5.1.3 The Chorus Prays**
- 5.1.4 Oedipus addresses the citizens**
- 5.1.5 Help from Tiersias**
- 5.1.6 The truth revealed**
- 5.1.7 Critical Comments**
- 5.1.8 Oedipus accuses Creon**
- 5.1.9 Jocasta Intervenes**
- 5.1.10 Critical Comments**
- 5.1.11 Oedipus realizes the truth**
- 5.1.12 Critical Comments**
- 5.1.13 The Chorus Prays**

5.2 Glossary

5.3 Self-Check Exercise

5.4 Answers to Self-Check Exercise

5.5 Short answer questions

5.6 Lets Sum Up

5.0 Objectives :

- * To introduce the prescribed text to the students.
- * To critically analyse a part of the text.
- * To evaluate the students' understanding of the text.

5.1 Critical Analysis of the text, Part-I :

Dear Student,

In this lesson, will take up a detailed analysis of Part-I of the play. It has been divided into smaller sections followed by critical comments about each section. A list of key words will make the understanding better.

5.1.1 Thebes under Curse :

Oedipus, King of Thebes, comes out of his palace to hear a request by a group of Theban citizens led by the priest of Zeus. The king asks them what has brought them there and also what they are praying and lamenting for. The priest replies that

they are not the only people praying. There are thousands of citizens who are praying in the market place and near Athene's temple. A deadly plague has broken out in the city of Thebes. Many people have died. The land has become barren. The herds of sheep have no grass to eat. Women are giving birth to dead children. Oedipus is not a god, but he is wiser than all other men. He can solve the riddles of life and can understand the mysterious ways of God. The priest reminds him that it was he who had delivered the city from the cruel and bloodthirsty Sphinx. The citizens look upon him as their saviour. They pray to the king to deliver the city from the ravages of the plague that is afflicting them. The people could not be allowed to think that under his rule, they were saved from one malady only to be ruined by the other.

Oedipus replies that he is overwhelmed with grief. While each man grieves for himself alone, he is sorry for every man; he symbolises the collective destiny of his people. But he brings to their notice that he has not been sitting idle. He has already sent his kinsman, Creon, his wife's brother, to Delphi to find out from Apollo's Oracle the reason for the sufferings of Theban people and the method by which they can be delivered of those sufferings. Creon is expected to arrive this day but he has not so far returned. Oedipus assures them on his honour, that he would do everything that the god directs him to do. In the meantime, Creon is seen approaching them. Oedipus notices Creon who is coming with a smiling face, from which he concludes that he is coming with a favourable message.

5.1.2 Probe into Laius' Murder :

Creon arrives and Oedipus asks him if the message which he brings is favourable or unfavourable. Creon replies that it is favourable in the sense that if all goes well, good may come out of the present sufferings. Creon tells Oedipus that, according to Delphi Oracle, the sufferings of the people are due to the presence of an evil man there. That evil man had murdered Laius, the ruler of Thebes before Oedipus was crowned the king. The murder of Laius must be avenged before people can expect any relief in their sufferings. The misfortunes of the city have proceeded from the murder of Laius and they can be ended by banishing or putting to death the man who committed the murder. The Oracle did not say how the killer could be found but only that he was living in Thebes. Oedipus wants to know how and by whom Laius was killed. Creon tells him that Laius had gone on a pilgrimage from where he never returned. Laius along with all but one of his companions was killed by a band of robbers. Oedipus remarks that robbers would not dare to kill the king unless someone in Thebes had bribed them to commit this crime. Creon replies that no inquiry had been held into the murder because the city was preoccupied with a grave problem created by the Sphinx. Nobody was able to solve his riddle and they were groaning with the affliction caused to them by the Sphinx. It was only Oedipus who had solved the riddle and thus rescued the city from the clutches of the Sphinx. Laius having been allegedly killed by robbers, the people had made Oedipus their king and offered their widowed queen to him as his wife.

Oedipus declares that he will immediately start an investigation into the

murder of Laius and that he will find out the truth. He thanks Phoebus as well as Creon for pointing out to Oedipus his duty to the dead king. The cause of avenging the murder of Laius is the cause of Phoebus, the country has his ownself. He will remove the stigma from the city. He will also protect himself because if no action is taken, it is possible that the killer of Laius may grow bold and think of attacking Oedipus himself. He advises the people to go away and to call all the people of the city as he wants to make a proclamation before them.

5.1.3 The Chorus Prays :

The Priest and the people are satisfied with the king's declaration. They disperse, Creon also leaves and Oedipus goes back to the palace. The chorus comes on the stage singing an ode.

The song sung by the chorus is a kind of invocation. The chorus appeals to gods to save the people of Thebes from the plague that is taking its toll unabated. Their sorrow is beyond measure and the physical as well as the spiritual landscape has become completely barren. The streets of the city are full of the smell of death and yet no one weeps. Young wives and aged mothers go to altars and cry aloud in prayer. Violence is in air and might soon break out and cause further destruction. The song ends with a prayer to the gods to come to the rescue further of the people and save them.

5.1.4 Oedipus addresses the citizens :

Oedipus comes out of the palace to meet all the citizens of Thebes who have gathered there to hear him. He solicits their cooperation to find out the culprit. He reminds the people that a few years ago, he came to the city as a complete stranger and that it was only afterwards that he became a Theban among Thebans. When he first came he did not know anything about the murder of Laius and even now he has no clue to that murder. He now wishes to proclaim to the whole city that he is bent upon avenging the murder. Let the murderer come forward and confess his crime. The murderer need not have any fear. No punishment other than banishment from the city will be awarded. If any citizen brings information about the identity of the murderer, he will be duly rewarded and will, besides, earn the king's gratitude. He warns the people against harbouring the murderer in their houses. The murderer should be speedily driven out because it is the presence of the murderer in the city which is responsible for the plague raging there. Oedipus then goes on to utter a curse on the man who murdered Laius. The murderer will find nothing but misery as long as he lives. On those who disobey, Oedipus invokes another curse. May their fields as well as wives become barren! May a worse plague destroy them. If he gives shelter to the guilty man, he will accept all the punishment which he has announced for others. Oedipus exclaims with wonder that no purification was made after the murder of such a worthy man as the former king of their country. However, now that he is the king, he would avenge the death of Laius as though he was his own father. Oedipus concludes his prayer, "May justice and all the gods always help you!"

5.1.5 Help from Teiresias :

Oedipus then consults the Chorus. He is informed that Teiresias has the power to read the mind of Apollo and should be consulted in this matter. Oedipus replies he has not overlooked this possibility. On the advice of Creon, he has already twice sent for Teiresias. It is strange that the prophet has not yet come. Oedipus asks the chorus to tell him something about the circumstances in which Laius was killed. They inform him that nothing definite was known. According to rumours, Laius was killed on the road by some unknown people.

Just then the blind Teiresias arrives, led by a boy. Oedipus turns to Teiresias and respectfully tells him that only he can save the city from plague. The plague will never relent unless the murderer of Laius is discovered and punished with either death or banishment. He appeals to Teiresias to exercise his divine powers and give him the name and identity of the murderer.

Teiresias responds to the words of Oedipus in a strange manner. The prophet regrets having come in response to the king's call. He says that he would like to keep silent and go back home. Silence on his part would be best not only for himself but also for Oedipus. Oedipus remarks that if Teiresias does not reveal the truth, he will prove disloyal to the city where he was born. Teiresias answers that he is not telling anything because he only wants to spare him his suffering.

Oedipus now loses his temper and asks if Teiresias is so hard-hearted that he will like to see the city ruined and all the inhabitants killed. He calls Teiresias a villain.

5.1.6 The Truth Revealed :

Oedipus flies into rage at the persistent refusal of Teiresias to divulge the truth. He accuses Teiresias of murder of Laius. Teiresias, being blind, must have used someone else for the murder of the former king. This accusation provokes Teiresias to speak the truth against his will. Teiresias tells Oedipus that the latter himself is the killer and should submit to the punishment he has announced for the culprit. Oedipus is shocked by the accusation. Teiresias goes on to say that Oedipus is living in a sinful union with his mother, that he has sinned against his father and that he will become blind and leave Thebes.

Oedipus suspects that Creon is in league with Teiresias and that they have both hatched a conspiracy against him. Teiresias denies this adding that Oedipus himself is his enemy. Oedipus calls Teiresias a crafty schemer who is not only blind by sight but also by brains. It was Oedipus who had solved the riddle and saved the people of Thebes from the clutches of the Sphinx, Oedipus taunts Teiresias as a fake prophet as all his prophetic skill proved useless when the city was being troubled by the Sphinx. Teiresias says that he is the servant of Apollo, and that by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus invited disaster on his head. Oedipus remarks that if the prophet had not been so old, he would have awarded him stern punishment. The Chorus tries to calm down both of them but their efforts are rendered futile.

5.1.7 Critical Comments :

Oedipus's talk with Teiresias, the blind prophet constitutes the first climax in

the play. Though Oedipus makes an earnest request to the prophet to speak the truth, Teiresias is unwilling to reveal the facts. Teiresias's reluctance makes Oedipus angry. Finding no valid reason for Teiresias's silence, Oedipus jumps to a hasty conclusion and accuses the prophet of his complicity in the murder of King Laius. At this undeserved accusation, Teiresias, also loses his temper and declares that it is Oedipus himself whose sins have polluted the city and brought the sufferings to the people. Oedipus expresses the suspicion that the prophet is in league with Creon and that they have both conspired against him. Teiresias angrily warns Oedipus that he will be hounded out of Thebes, that he will be deprived of his eyesight and that he will find himself at one with own children. The scene carries the plot forward as many things mentioned here happen afterwards. The scene is another striking example of tragic irony. Teiresias knows the whole truth while Oedipus is ignorant of the reality of his identity and parentage. At the unexpected revelation made by Teiresias, Oedipus loses his temper and self control. Indirectly, he is giving expression to his egotism and arrogance, Teiresias's words have punctured the balloon of his persona. He reveals himself to be an unreasonable man. He has thrown all decorum, decency and self-restraint to winds in dealing with Teiresias, a man with established spiritual reputation who is held in high esteem by the Theban community. Oedipus goes to the length of calling him a crafty intriguer. He taunts Teiresias about his blindness. Thus, Oedipus proves himself guilty of **hybris**, the bane of successful men. He not only unjustly accuses Teiresias of treason but holds Creon guilty of disloyalty and intrigue. His suspicion of both men is unfounded and baseless. The clash between the highly respected king and highly esteemed prophet arouses a multitude of feeling in us. We wonder what will happen to Oedipus in view of the horrible utterings by Teiresias. The hot-tempered Oedipus is contrasted with the wise and sedate prophet.

In this scene, we feel excited as the truth is on the verge of being told, yet the clear revelation does not come. The scene is a triumph of dramatic art. For the Sophoclean audience, it has special importance as it intensifies the impression of impending doom on Oedipus. Oedipus is being delayed in his discovery by suspecting the wrong person and following the wrong clue. When Jocasta comes between her husband and her brother, Oedipus is on the verge of committing a violent act against Creon.

Creon has heard of the accusation made against him by Oedipus and has come himself to clarify his position. He tells the Chorus that he has never said or done anything to harm Oedipus and that Oedipus's accusation was most unjust. The Chorus Leader replies that accusation was probably the result of anger and not of well considered judgement. Creon wants to know if Oedipus said that Teiresias told a lie at the instance of Creon. The Chorus Leader admits that this was the case, but he does not know with what intention the king said so. Meanwhile, Oedipus himself arrives on the scene.

5.1.8 Oedipus accuses Creon :

At the sight of Creon, Oedipus flies into rage. Oedipus asks Creon how the latter dared to come there when it has clearly been proved that he has tried to take

Oedipus's life and snatch his crown. Creon tries to defend himself and denies all accusations. But Oedipus is so convinced of Creon's guilt that he refuses to listen to him. Still Creon begs to know what his fault is. Oedipus replies that it was Creon who advised him to send for Teiresias, and that although this prophet did not mention Oedipus before, he now charges him with being the murderer of Laius. It proves that Creon conspired with Teiresias to implicate him in the murder of Laius. Oedipus calls Creon a traitor. Creon now gets an opportunity to defend himself. He asserts that he never aspired to be the king. The life of a king is full of fears and anxieties. He cannot lead a peaceful and happy life. So he has no reason to plot against Oedipus. As his brother-in-law, he enjoys all the power and influence. If he had been a traitor he would not have truthfully reported the message he got from the Delphi Oracle. Oedipus can test him by checking up the truthfulness of the message. In the second place, Oedipus should prove that Creon was guilty of conspiracy with the soothsayer before the latter is condemned. It is unjust on the part of Oedipus to question his loyalty. Only time can prove the worth of an honest man. The chorus approves of his words. They also advise Oedipus that hasty judgements are seldom the best. Oedipus replies that when one is faced with a quick plotter, one must take quick action. Creon wishes to know if Oedipus would banish him from the city as a punishment. The king answers that banishment would not be an adequate punishment for him and that he would sentence him to death. Thus chorus again tries to intervene in the dispute. Just then Jocasta, the Queen appears on the scene.

5.1.9 Jocasta Intervenes :

Seeing her husband and brother quarrelling, Jocasta feels pained and disturbed. She asks both of them to feel ashamed of indulging in private quarrels when the city is afflicted by the plague. She asks Oedipus to accompany her into the palace, and directs Creon to go home. He is probably making much of some ordinary matter. Creon remarks that the matter is not ordinary, for Oedipus has made terrible accusation against him and has decided either to banish him from Thebes or to sentence him to death. Oedipus tells Jocasta that Creon had secretly plotted against his life. Creon pleads his ignorance. Jocasta appeals to Oedipus to believe Creon's words and to respect the oath of allegiance, Creon had taken. The chorus also joins Jocasta in defending Creon. Oedipus fears that if he spares the life of Creon, it will mean either banishment or death for Oedipus himself. The chorus appeals to Oedipus not to add to the misery of Thebes which is already afflicted with plague. In response to the appeals of chorus, Oedipus softens. He pardons Creon but declares that he cannot help hating him. Creon remarks that Oedipus has pardoned him in an unwilling and ungenerous manner. Therefore, he goes on to say when Oedipus anger will cool down he will realise the injustice of the action he had desired to take against him. But Oedipus remains unconvinced and orders Creon to get out of his sight.

Creon withdraws and the chorus asks Jocasta to take the king inside the palace with her. Jocasta learns from the Chorus that the quarrel arose from a suspicion. Jocasta asks if both men had spoken in an anger. The Chorus says 'yes' to

this question and then suggests that the matter should be allowed to rest there. Oedipus complains that the Chorus had been partial to him. The Chorus assures him that they have all the goodwill for the king. The king had saved them from the wrath of the cruel Sphinx. In fact, they again look up to his guidance to deliver them from the plague.

5.1.10 Critical Comments :

The Chorus song is a commentary on the episode which has just ended. The Chorus calls upon the murderer of Laius to quit the city without delay. The Chorus expresses its doubt regarding the fantastic accusation levelled against Oedipus by Teiresias. They cannot believe their ears that Oedipus could be guilty of such a heinous crime as this.

Oedipus's behaviour with Creon reveals his character. He is suspicious and self-opinionated. He loses his temper when his ego is injured. In a fit of anger, he loses his balance and becomes rash, harsh and unreasonable. This shows that human rationality is skin deep when a man of Oedipus's intelligence becomes prone to reaching to the impulse of the moment and to taking hasty action.

In the beginning, Oedipus is depicted as an ideal king who is devoted to the welfare of his people. They look upon him as their saviour and look up to him confidently to save them from the plague afflicting the country as he had earlier saved them from Sphinx. Towards Creon he is courteous. But after his altercation with Teiresias, Creon is most unjustly condemned to death, or exile. Thus, Oedipus, the king becomes Oedipus, the tyrant. Although he is persuaded to revoke the punishment, he is not convinced that his judgement of Creon was wrong. Oedipus is depicted as going to this length in tyrannical *hubris*. This *hubris* contributes neither to his doom nor explains it. His doom is already sealed. It is never suggested that Oedipus fulfilled the prophecies through '*hubris*'. It is his intellectual blindness which leads Oedipus to suspect an intrigue by the prophet and Creon. Oedipus feels so sure of himself that he will not listen to Creon's appeal to good sense. He rejects the suggestion that he should go to Delphi and inquire whether the god had or had not given the message which Creon had reported. His conviction that Creon is conspiring against him leads him to an outburst of tyrannical '*hubris*'.

Jocasta asks her husband as to why he has become hostile to Creon. Oedipus tells her that her brother Creon had plotted against his life. He had used a crafty soothsayer, Teiresias as a tool to accuse him of the murder of Laius. Jocasta advises her husband not to take the prophecies seriously. What the prophet says had no bearing on human life at all. She has proof of this in her own experience. One of the priests of Apollo had prophesied that Laius would die at the hands of his own son. But later events proved that prophecy was false. Laius had been killed not by his son, but by brigands at a place where three roads meet as for the child born of them, he was hardly few days old when Laius fastened both its feet together and ordered it to be exposed over a precipice to die. Thus, the prophecy of Apollo's Oracle had failed. Laius's

son did not kill his father.

5.1.11 Oedipus realizes the truth :

On hearing Jocasta's account, Oedipus is shaken by terror. He remembers that he had killed not one but several at a place where three roads meet. He wonders that one of the men killed by him might have been Laius. He asks her when Laius was murdered. She tells him that it happened shortly before Oedipus became the king. This upsets him. The queen asks him why is he feeling agitated. Oedipus asks how Laius looked like. Jocasta replies that Laius was a tall man with some gray patches in his hair. He resembled Oedipus. Oedipus fears that he himself might be the man who had murdered Laius. In that case the curse that he pronounced against the murderer would descend upon himself. He thinks that the blind prophet was probably speaking the truth. Oedipus further questions Jocasta whether Laius was alone at the time of his murder. Jocasta tells him that Laius was accompanied by four attendants. Four of them, including Laius, were killed. Only one of them survived. The survivor returned to Thebes with the information of Laius' murder. He had immediately left the city with her permission to become a shepherd in the country. Oedipus finds that the facts as stated by her fitted in with the similar incident in which he was involved. He had come across a royal party. He had got involved in a fight with them and killed all except one, though he recognized none of them. In order to confirm the facts Oedipus expresses his strong desire to see the man who had survived. Jocasta promised to send for him. Oedipus, then, tells the story of his past.

When Jocasta asks Oedipus why he looked so troubled, he gives an account of his past life. His father was Polybus, King of Corinth and his mother was Merope, the Queen of Corinth. One day a drunken man had said that Oedipus was not the son of King Polybus. This remark had hurt Oedipus and he had reported it to his parents, who dismissed it as a lie. Oedipus was not fully satisfied. Without the knowledge of his parents, Oedipus went to Delphi and asked the oracle who his parents were. The oracle, instead of answering this question, prophesied that Oedipus would murder his father and marry his mother who would bear children to him. This terrible prophecy had shaken Oedipus. In order to prevent its fulfillment, he decided never to go back to his parents at Corinth. His journey brought him to a place where three roads met. There he encountered a herald followed by a horse-drawn carriage. A man, of the description that Jocasta had given of Laius, sat in the carriage. The herald rudely told Oedipus to get out of the way. The master also treated him boorishly. The driver thrust Oedipus aside and so he struck him. The old man struck Oedipus on the head. Oedipus retaliated and killed the old man and his companions but one of them fled away in terror. Now if it happens that the murdered man turns out to have been Laius, Oedipus must expect the banishment pronounced on him for the murder. Oedipus must now be ready to suffer banishment from Thebes. At the same time, it is not possible for Oedipus to go back to his parents in Corinth because there would still be the possibility of killing his father Polybus and marrying his mother, Merope, as foretold by the Apollo's Oracle. It would be better for him to die than to incur the stigma of such a sin. The chorus says that the words spoken by Oedipus are terrible, yet he must wait till he has learnt the whole truth from the witness.

Jocasta hears Oedipus's story of life and asks him what he expects to find out from the man who had survived the bloody incident. Oedipus replies that if the survivor still says that robbers killed Laius, Oedipus would be proved innocent of Laius's murder, for when he fought Laius, he was alone. If the shepherd says that Laius and his companions were attacked by a single man, Oedipus must regard himself as guilty of the murder of the former and submit to the punishment that he has himself pronounced for the murderer. Jocasta assures him that the shepherd spoke of robbers. Even if he changed his story now, in some slight particulars, he could say nothing which would prove that Laius met his death in the manner predicted by the Oracle. Apollo had predicted that Laius would be killed by his own son borne by Jocasta. That poor child had died. Jocasta did not care for prophecy. Oedipus agrees with her but says that he would still like to meet and question the shepherd. Jocasta promises to send for the shepherd at once. Oedipus and Jocasta make their exit, leaving the chorus on the stage.

5.1.12 Critical Comments :

This scene is important as it takes the plot forward. It is out of tune with the times and irreligious for Jocasta that Oedipus should not feel afraid of prophecies. She argues that the prophecy about Laius's death has already proved false. Here is another striking example of the tragic irony. The Greek audience is aware of the facts of Laius's death where as both Jocasta and Oedipus are ignorant about this. Jocasta's account of the circumstance of Laius creates a terrifying suspicion in Oedipus's mind. This suspicion can be allayed only by the Theban shepherd who is accordingly sent for. Jocasta's religious scepticism is an evidence of her '*hubris*'.

5.1.13 The Chorus Prays :

As soon as the king and the queen retire into the palace, the Chorus sings a song. They pray to God that they may live in pure faith and never transgress the divine law. These divine laws are created by Olympus. Mortal men had no share in framing them. These laws are eternal because the God who created them is eternal. Power and wealth make a man proud. It is pride which makes a man tyrant. The same pride brings about his downfall. A person who strays away from the path of righteousness can never escape the due punishment for his pride. The Chorus ends its song by affirming its complete faith in the shrine of Apollo and in the temple of Zeus. They deplore the fact that people are losing faith in the Oracle and moving towards a denial of Apollo's power.

Jocasta feels deeply concerned that her husband is greatly disturbed in mind. She fails to comfort and console him. She decides to pray to Apollo. She comes out of the palace with a garland and incense. She visits the holy shrine of Apollo near her door to worship and pray for the restoration of the health of her husband. She also prays to be saved from the curse of uncleanness. She appeals to Apollo to grant peace to all the people. The peace is necessary in view of the fact that the king himself is in the grip of fear.

Dear Student, as we proceed in our reading of the play, we are compelled to take notice of one fact that *Oedipus Rex* is rich in tragic irony at all levels. There is basic

irony in the fact that Oedipus, whose own birth and parentage are a riddle to him, becomes famous as a solver of riddles and is proud of this fact. The efforts of Oedipus, to escape his destiny as foretold by the Oracle, are also ironical because they take him to the exact place which ought to have been avoided most of all. There is a contrast between the condition of Oedipus as he fancies and as it really is. This contrast is always there from the beginning for the spectators, though Oedipus discovers it only at the last moment.

In the next lesson, we will see how Oedipus is determined to find the truth and his search becomes his undoing.

5.2 Glossary :

Lamenting	:	Repenting
Malady	:	Disease
To banish	:	To order to move out from the state or country
Pilgrimage	:	A journey with a religious purpose
Groaning	:	Crying in Pain
Barren	:	Infertile
Rage	:	Anger
Inhabitants	:	Residents
Divulge	:	Tell the secret
Reluctance	:	Unwillingness
On the verge	:	On the edge
Allegiance	:	Loyalty
Altercation	:	Fight
Boorishly	:	In a rough manner

5.3 Self-Check Exercise :

1. What is the condition of the Theban citizens when Oedipus reaches there?
2. How does Oedipus respond to the pleas of the people?
3. How, according to the Oracle of Delphi, the misery of the Thebans can be put to an end?
4. What appeal does Oedipus make to Tiresias?
5. How does Tiresias respond to Oedipus' appeal?
6. What does Oedipus suspect?
7. What does Jocasta tell Oedipus and Creon?
8. How does Jocasta try to prove to Oedipus that prophecies are not always true?

5.4 Answers to Self-Check Exercise :

1. The Theban citizens have been ravaged by the deadly disease of plague. Many people have died. The land has become barren and animals have no grass to eat. Dead children are being born.
2. Oedipus responds extremely sympathetically to the pleas of the people. He solves the riddle of the sphinx and rescues the citizens of Thebes. He assures them of identifying the murderer of king Laius and punishing him.

appropriately.

3. According to the oracle of Delphi, the misery of the Theban people can be put to an end if the evil person, responsible for the murder of king Laius, is either banished from the kingdom or put to death.
4. Oedipus appeals to Tiersias to exercise his divine powers and tell him the name of the person guilty of murdering the king Laius.
5. Tiersias responds to his appeal in a very strange manner. He says it would be better on his part to remain silent and go back home.
6. Oedipus suspects Creon and Tiersias of having hatched a conspiracy against him. He accuses Tiersias of participation in the murder of the king and charges Creon of treason.
7. When Oedipus and Creon have an argument, Jocasta tells both of them to be ashamed of their conduct. She tells them to pacify and think about the welfare of the public instead.
8. On seeing Oedipus disturbed by the prophecies, she tries to relax him by saying that they may not always be true. She quotes the example of the prophecy regarding the murder of king Laius at the hands of his own son, but who was murdered by the brigands on a cross-roads instead.

5.5 Short Answer Questions :

Q. 1. *Restore our city to life, Have a care for your fame. Your diligence saved us once.* Trace the reference of italicised lines. What is it that the priest is referring to?

Ans. The priest of Zeus is referring to Oedipus's brave act of combating the enchantress Sphinx who devoured all the men of Thebes because of their inability to solve the riddle which she propounded. The riddle asked was, what is it that walks on four legs in the morning, on two at noon and on three in the evening. Oedipus answered it correctly by saying that it was man who crawled on all the four in the childhood, on two legs in his youth and with the help of a stick in old age. The monster killed herself in desperation. Hence, the priest's remark that your diligence saved us once. In reward, Oedipus, got the throne of Thebes and the hand of the widowed queen Jocasta. At present when the city is pestilence-stricken, the priest reminds the king of his diligence and implores upon him to rid the city of death and disease.

Q. 2. Give an example of tragic irony from *Oedipus Rex*.

Ans. Irony was used with striking effect by Sophocles in his plays. *Oedipus Rex* is replete with tragic irony. Most of the speeches and situations are designed as to heighten the tragic effect. The very proclamation of Oedipus that he will make determined effort to trace the murderer of Laius and the curse that Oedipus utters upon the killer and upon those sheltering the criminal, possess a tragic irony in view of the audience's knowledge that Oedipus himself will ultimately prove to be Laius's murderer. Oedipus proclaims that no home or house in Thebes is to provide shelter to the guilty man and that the gods will curse those who disobey his command

in this respect. Thus, without knowing the real meaning of his words, Oedipus announced the sentence of banishment against the murderer and this heightens the tragic effect of the discovery which comes toward the end of the play. Oedipus does not know that he himself is to become the victim of the punishment which he is proclaiming but the audience knows it. In this contrast between Oedipus's ignorance and the audience's knowledge of the true fact, lies the tragic irony.

5.6 Lets Sum Up :

An effort has been made to help you in understanding a large section of the text with detailed critical comments. Self-Check exercise will be greatly helpful in assessing your comprehension of the first part of the play.

LESSON NO. 6

SOPHOCLES : *OEDIPUS REX*

Structure :

6.0 Objectives

6.1 Critical analysis of the text

6.1.1 Mystery uncovering itself

6.1.2 Critical Comments

6.1.3 Jocasta realizes the truth

6.1.4 Critical Comments

6.1.5 Shepherd reveals the truth

6.1.6 Critical Comments

6.1.7 Jocasta kills herself

6.1.8 Oedipus blinds himself

6.1.9 Critical Comments

6.1.10 Oedipus begs for punishment

6.1.11 Critical Comments

6.2 Glossary

6.3 Self-Check Exercise

6.4 Answers to Self-Check Exercise

6.5 Short Answer Questions

6.6 Lets Sum Up

6.0 Objectives :

- * To critically analyse the remaining part of the text.
- * To evaluate the student's understanding of the text and its critical aspects.

6.1 Critical analysis of the text :

Dear Student,

In this lesson, we will explain the remaining part of the text with critical comments.

6.1.1 Mystery uncovering itself :

The play has reached a crucial stage. The Chorus finds both Oedipus and Jocasta guilty of pride. Jocasta's behaviour is torn with conflicts. On the one hand, she expresses scepticism of Teiresias's prophecies, at the same time she turns to Apollo for consolation.

At this stage a stranger appears on the scene. He is the Shepherd from Corinth and he asks whether he can meet King Oedipus. The Chorus tells him that he is standing before Oedipus's palace, and that right in front of him is the queen. The messenger blesses Oedipus and his house. He informs the queen that what he brings

is good news for the king and his family. He informs her that the Corinthians wish to make Oedipus the King of Corinth. Jocasta asks what has happened to King Polybus.

The messenger replies that Polybus has died. Jocasta immediately sends for her husband. She exclaims that the prophecies of the gods have proved to be worthless. Oedipus has been 'avoiding Polybus for his own life lest he should kill him, and now the man has died a natural death. When a moment later, Oedipus enters, Jocasta asks him to listen to the news brought by the Corinthian and to draw his own conclusion, whether there is any truth in the prophecies. After hearing the news from the messenger, Oedipus comes to the same conclusion as Jocasta had done. The oracle has been proved wrong because Polybus has died a natural death. However, there is still the other half of the prophecy, namely that Oedipus will marry his mother.

Oedipus asks the messenger to describe the manner of Polybus's death. He wants to know whether there was any accident or foul play involved. The messenger replies that Polybus died of old age. Oedipus heaves a sigh of relief that there is no fear of murdering his father. But the fear of marrying his mother still persists. Because of this, he still cannot visit Corinth so long as Merope is alive. Jocasta tries to console her husband and allay his fears. She believes that man is ruled by chance and there is no room for any prophecy. A man must live from day to day, without any care for the tomorrow. Oedipus must not feel worried by the thought of marrying his mother, for many people have done so in dreams. If one is to live peacefully, one must forget such things. Oedipus says that he would have agreed with Jocasta if his mother had not been alive. The fear of marrying his mother still haunts him. The messenger at this point intervenes, asking Oedipus the nature of his fear. Oedipus tells him about the prophecy pronounced by Apollo's oracle. At this, the Messenger who is a shepherd by profession, tells him that he would remove the other fear also. Polybus was not his real father. Oedipus was called his son because Polybus brought him up. He himself had presented Oedipus to Polybus and Merope as an infant. They were childless and adopted him. The infant had been found in the woods upon Mount Cithaeron. The shepherd happened to wander to that spot while tending his sheep. He had found the infant with fetters clamped on its feet. For that reason the child had been named Oedipus. The messenger further says that the infant had been given to him by another Theban shepherd who was in the service of King Laius. Oedipus shows eagerness to contact the Theban shepherd to find out the truth about his origin and birth.

6.1.2 Critical Comments :

The disclosure by the Corinthian shepherd marks a further step in the development of the plot and carries the process of discovery a little further. There is dramatic irony in this scene also. The Corinthian shepherd thinks that he is doing good to Oedipus, because by his disclosure he is relieving Oedipus of a mortal fear of marrying Merope whom he thinks to be his real mother. But in practice this disclosure takes Oedipus further towards his doom.

When Oedipus asks the Corinthian messenger whether it was his father or

his mother who had clamped fetters upon the infant's feet, the messenger replies that the question should be put to the Theban shepherd who gave this child to him. The Chorus leader expresses the view that the Theban shepherd might be the very man who has already been sent for by Jocasta at Oedipus's request.

6.1.3 Jocasta realizes the truth :

Oedipus asks Jocasta if the man sent for could be the same shepherd who had handed over the infant Oedipus to this Corinthian shepherd years ago. Jocasta has understood the reality of the situation. She has realized the terrible truth that Oedipus is her own son. It was Oedipus himself who as an infant was handed over to the Theban shepherd to be exposed on Mt. Cithaeron and left there to die. She has committed the gravest sin of having married her own son. But she is anxious to spare Oedipus agony of this knowledge. She, therefore, entreats him not to pursue his investigation into his parentage. She says he has already suffered much and asks him to leave the matter there. But Oedipus misunderstands her intention. He thinks that she fears the possibility of his being found to be low born. He, therefore, insists on seeing the Theban shepherd and knowing the truth. So Oedipus orders the servant to fetch the Theban shepherd immediately. Jocasta is now utterly desperate and leaves in a state of helplessness and deep anguish.

When the Chorus leader points out that Jocasta has gone away in a state of fear and grief, Oedipus replies that she is miserable at the thought that he is a man of humble origin. Oedipus calls himself 'the child of Fortune'. He says that he would not be ashamed of his low birth.

The Chorus leader expresses surprise at the Queen's sudden retiring into the palace. He is afraid that the Queen is hiding something and that from it some vile calamity will befall. Oedipus exclaims that he would like to find out the truth however vile it may turn out to be. He must know the secret of his birth. His wife is very proud of her family honour. She fears that her husband may prove to be low born. He says that he will not be ashamed of his low birth. He calls himself 'the child of Fortune.' He is the giver of good to everyone. The Chorus leader exclaims that before the moon rises tomorrow, the whole world would know the secret of his birth. They will then, sing a song about Mt. Cithaeron for she was Oedipus's father, mother as well as nurse. They wonder if Oedipus is child of the mountain god Pan and some primeval spirit. It is possible that Oedipus may be the child of Apollo himself, the result of his love with some nymph.

6.1.4 Critical Comments :

The song of the Chorus is remarkable for its tragic irony because the Chorus sings rapturously regarding Oedipus being the offspring of the union of some god with a mountain nymph. The fact of the matter is that Oedipus is moving rapidly and surely towards his doom.

6.1.5 Shepherd reveals the truth :

At this time Oedipus notices a man being brought by his servants. He guesses that he is the Theban shepherd. He asks the Chorus to confirm this. The Chorus

recognizes the man as one of the most trusted of shepherds of King Laius. The Corinthian shepherd also recognises him as the man who had given the infant to him. But the Theban shepherd refuses to recognise the Corinthian. The Corinthian, then reminds him of the days when two of them worked as neighbours on Mount Cithaeron. The Theban shepherd had two flocks while he had only one. They worked together for three fourth of that year. In winter the Corinthian would drive his flock to Corinth and Theban would return his sheep to Laius's folds. He asks the Theban to confirm this. The Theban confirms this but adds that it was many years ago. The Corinthian then reminds him of the infant that he had handed over to him to bring up. The Theban denies any knowledge of any such incident. Oedipus suspects that the Theban is trying to hide something. He then threatens the Theban with serious consequences if he does not come out with the truth. The Theban confesses that he had given the infant to the Corinthian. Oedipus asks him whether the child was his own or belonged to another house. The Theban replies that it was not his child. Oedipus asks him as to which family the child belonged to. The Theban entreats him to ask no more. On being threatened with death, he reveals that the infant belonged to Laius's house. It was Laius's own child and was given to him by Jocasta. It was her own child and she wanted it to be destroyed because of the prophecy that the child would kill his father. When asked why he had then handed over the child to the Corinthian, the Theban replies that he had taken pity upon the infant. He did not want to kill the infant therefore he handed the infant over to the Corinthian to bring it up. He thought that the Corinthian would take it away to his country and nobody would know about it. He now regrets that his kindness has only resulted in bringing a terrible misfortune on the infant. Oedipus is horror-stricken. He has at last discovered the secret of his parentage. He is the son of King Laius whom he had killed at the spot where three roads meet. He is the son of Queen Jocasta whom he has married and with whom he has lived as her husband for many years. He exclaims that he may never look upon light again, for he has been revealed to be sinful in begetting, sinful in marriage and sinful in shedding the blood of his father. He is doomed.

The Chorus now sings a song commenting on the ups and downs of life. In this world nobody can win any real happiness. All human happiness is an illusion. The fate of Oedipus is a glaring example of this fact. Oedipus won great prosperity and wealth. By conquering the Sphinx, he had become the sovereign ruler of Thebes. The Thebans were proud of him. But now he was the most wretched person. He had committed a monstrous crime of marrying his own mother. Time sees everything and time has punished the unnatural marriage of Oedipus with his mother. The Chorus wishes they had not known such a person as Oedipus.

6.1.6 Critical Comments :

At this point the Chorus gives an appropriate commentary on the fate which Oedipus has met. It also sums up aptly human condition in general. The choral song

lends piquancy to the situation.

The central scenes of the play contain the heart of the drama, the drama of revelation. We have three-fold revelation rising to climax. The dramatist has displayed supreme incidents. By the end of the first of these scenes, Oedipus knows almost for certain he is the killer of Laius. The dramatist's next step, therefore, is to reveal that Laius was Oedipus's father. The role of Teiresias is essential to the play as he is the only person who knows the secret of Oedipus's parentage. The Theban shepherd has already disclosed the fact that the infant given to him for killing was not actually killed, but was given to the Corinthian messenger. The Corinthian messenger discloses that the infant was given over to Polybus and Merope, the King and the Queen of Corinth. The two facts disclosed by the Theban shepherd and Corinthian add up and lead to the horrible revelation. The dramatist brings in the Corinthian messenger first in order that the coming of the Theban shepherd may be the culmination of a new revelation. It is the interest of the audience that determines the way the action is developed and the motives and acts of the dramatis personae must be directed accordingly. Sophocles brings in the Corinthian messenger to intrude and interrupt the orderly progress of events. It is only accidental occurrence in the play. It is a pure coincidence that he should arrive at this juncture. His coming looks, on the face of it, like an answer to Jocasta's prayer to Apollo to grant peace to her husband. But it is an ironical answer to her prayer. The arrival of the Corinthian messenger lends to the shattering of Oedipus's belief that the King and the Queen of Corinth are his parents. It is he who would urge the Theban shepherd and confirm his suspicions. Jocasta is the first to discover the whole truth. She tries to dissuade Oedipus from going along with the investigation in respect of his parentage but in vain. The prediction of a Delphi Oracle and the other prediction made by Teiresias about Oedipus becoming blind are going to be fulfilled.

6.1.7 Jocasta kills herself :

A Messenger comes out of the palace now and informs the Chorus that the royal palace has become the seat of sin. Jocasta has committed suicide. The messenger obviously suffers more than they, for he has seen the ruin of the Queen with his own eyes. After having discovered the real identity of Oedipus, beyond any doubt, Jocasta goes mad with grief and she runs across the courtyard of the palace, tearing her hair with both her hands. She enters her chamber and closes the door. She goes to her bridal bed, cries aloud to the dead Laius. She had called upon Laius and wept aloud that he had been killed by his own son and she had, afterwards got married to the same son and begot children. She cried aloud upon the bed where she had given birth to a son with whom she had afterwards slept as his wife. They could not hear her wails and could not see how she met her death.

6.1.8 Oedipus blinds himself :

Shortly afterwards, Oedipus too arrives there with a sword in his hand. He rushes to the room of Jocasta as though guided by a demon. He throws himself on the

locked doors with all his might and the door is thrown open. They can now see that Jocasta had hanged herself. Oedipus unties the ropes and lowers the body on the ground. He then snatches away the gold brooches from her dress and strikes them repeatedly into his eyes until the blood comes out. He cries out that he does not want his eyes to see any longer because they remained unseeing in the presence of those he longed to see. Oedipus and Jocasta have sinned and the punishment falls jointly on them. The happiness which Oedipus and Jocasta enjoyed for many years has met a tragic end. Now shame, lamentation, ruin and death loom large.

The Chorus leader asks the messenger whether Oedipus is still suffering. The messenger replies that Oedipus is shouting that the gates of the palace be opened to allow the whole city to see the man who killed his father and polluted his mother. Oedipus declares that he would very soon leave the country for good because he has pronounced that the murderer of Laius would be banished from the country. He is completely broken down. There is nobody to guide him. He is suffering unbearable pain. The messenger then points out that the door is opening.

The blind Oedipus now enters the stage. The Chorus is shocked to see the horrible sight of Oedipus. Being blind, he is groping to find his way. Oedipus is bemoaning his fate and is complaining that Heaven has crushed him. He is afflicted by the pain of blinding and the anguish of the sin he was made to commit unconsciously. The chorus leader says that the sight of Oedipus was too terrible to be seen or described. He expresses his sympathy for the unfortunate man. Oedipus appreciates the words of sympathy spoken by the Chorus leader. Oedipus bewails that the night that has befallen him is intolerable because it has no day. He is constantly feeling the piercing pain in the flesh and in his soul. The Chorus leader asks Oedipus, what led him to blind himself. Oedipus replies that it was Apollo's decree that he should suffer but the hand that blinded his eyes was his own. Oedipus says that he should be driven out of Thebes because he is the accused. He is more hateful to heaven than anybody else. Oedipus pronounces curse on the man who had removed fetters from his feet and saved him from death when he was an infant. If he had been allowed to die as an infant, he would not have suffered that humiliation and disgrace. He would not then have killed his father and become the husband of his own mother. Now he is a sinner in the eyes of man and God. The woman who gave him birth has become the mother of his own children. There can be no bigger sin than this.

The Chorus leader says that it would have been better and less painful to die than to be blind. At this, Oedipus gives his reasons for his act of self-blinding. He says if he had killed himself, he would have gone to Hades where he would have found it unbearable to face the ghosts of his father and mother. He wanted to avoid the shame of confronting them. Moreover, death would not have been an adequate punishment for the heinous crimes he has committed. If he had not thus blinded himself, he would have faced his children and the sight of them would have been repugnant to him because these children were begotten of an unnatural union. He had no use for

his eyes, for all around him was nothing but ugliness and signs of woe. He could not see the towers of Thebes and her holy images which he had forbidden to the murderer of Laius. As he has himself commanded his people to throw the murderer of Laius out of the city, he could not now bear their state. He feels that he does not even need the faculty of hearing either. If he knew the way of getting rid of his sense of hearing, he would have removed it and turned deaf too.

6.1.9 Critical Comments :

The dramatist does not present the scenes of Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus's self-blinding on the stage. He conveys the terrible information through the speech of the Messenger. These scenes would have been traumatic on the stage. The effect of the messenger is too deep for tears. Richard B. Sewall describes the scene in which messenger reports the blinding of Oedipus followed by the appearance of bleeding Oedipus on the stage as the most horrible and enigmatic in the play. He adds, "Oedipus's own motives are far from clear. He says that he did so to spare himself the sight of the ugliness he had caused that he could not bring himself to face the people on whom he had brought such suffering. He further says that he had to do it so that he might not meet eye to eye his father or mother beyond the grave. No one reason suffices nor all of them put together. The act seems to be compounded of opposite elements, egotism and altruism, self-loathing and self-glorification. As an act of destruction, it shows him at his worst. But as an act of freedom, it turns out to be curiously creative in unexpected ways and shows man at his best. What Oedipus insists upon in his reply to the Chorus is that act was his own.

*Apollo, friends, Apollo
Has laid this agony upon me;
Not by his hand, I did it.*

Whatever he may have thought he was doing, the act stands in the play as his culminating act of freedom, the association of his ability to act independent of any god, oracle or prophecy.

6.1.10 Oedipus begs for punishment :

Oedipus invokes Mount Cithaeron, his father and grumbles whether the mountain had sheltered him for that terrible fate. He wishes that the mountain had not saved him and allowed him to die when he was an infant. He complains why the King of Corinth had brought him up. He curses the day when he went to the spot where three roads meet and where he killed his own father. Then in Thebes he committed the most heinous crime as he had married his own mother and begotten children by her thus mingling the blood of fathers, mothers, wives, sons and brothers. For all these unpardonable sins, he would like to be banished immediately, or be killed or be thrown into the sea where he may sink from view. He appeals to Chorus Leader not to shrink from touching him. There is no man alive who can endure this much load of sin that he is carrying. On seeing Creon approaching them, the Chorus informs Oedipus about it and advises him to address his prayer to Creon who will now be the

King of Thebes.

Creon now appears on the scene. Oedipus is smitten with remorse. He cannot speak to him because he had wronged him by misjudging him and falsely accusing him of treason. Though Creon was ill treated by Oedipus, the former is not vindictive. He is rather considerate. Creon says that he has not come to gloat over Oedipus's fall or to reproach him for his past deeds. He reminds the Chorus that their respect for the sun should not permit such a sinful person as Oedipus to be openly exposed. He would like Oedipus to be taken inside the palace where only his kinsmen should see and hear the tale of suffering resulting from his sins. Oedipus says that he has only one request to make. He would like to be banished from Thebes immediately so that he can be alone in his misery and nobody is able to speak to him. Creon replies that he would like to get divine approval for such an action. Oedipus says that the Oracle had given clear instructions in advance to this effect. The murderer of Laius was to meet his destruction. Creon says that those were the original instructions but that he would like to ascertain the opinion of the god in the present situation. Oedipus then says that there is another thing that he must request Creon to do. He must arrange a suitable burial for the dead Jocasta. So far as he is concerned, he would like to go to Mount Cithareon and die at the place where he had been sent as an infant to die. Oedipus says that Creon need not bother about Oedipus's sons. They will somehow fend for themselves. He would certainly want Creon to look after his unhappy daughters.

Oedipus's daughters have already been brought there and stand before him. Creon says that he had brought them to him because he has always loved them. Oedipus then asks if he can hold his daughters in his arms for a while. Being blind, he cannot see them but can hear their sobs. Oedipus thanks Creon for having allowed him to meet his children. He then turns to his daughters, feeling for the love of a brother as well as the love of a father. He cannot see them but he can weep for the bitter life in store for them. He is pained to think that with the dark shadow of their father's sins upon them, they will never be able to lead a normal life, to take part in the celebration of festivals, to join the gathering of citizens and so on. He wonders whether any man will be brave enough to rise above the shame and disgrace clinging to his daughters and offer to marry them. He laments the fact that his daughters will remain unwedded and barren throughout their life. Oedipus reminds Creon that as his kinsman, he is in the position of a father to the unfortunate daughters. He entreats him to see that they do not wander homeless and husbandless. He asks Creon to give him his hand as a pledge that he will not desert them. Creon promises to take care of them. Oedipus thanks him for this generosity. Then he says to his children that they should prepare for a life better than their unfortunate father.

Creon advises Oedipus to shed no more tears but to go inside. Oedipus again insists that he be banished from Thebes immediately. Creon replies that this will be decided by gods, not by him. Oedipus then expresses his wish to keep the children

with him. Creon rebukes him for trying to have his way in everything. Creon advises him to learn from his past experience and to remember that he is no more the king. Oedipus is then led away from the stage.

The play concludes with chorus singing the moral of the story. They bring home to the people the fickleness of human happiness. Oedipus was once the greatest of men. He was the wisest man who could solve the greatest mysteries. Everyone envied him for his great prosperity. Now the wheel of fortune has come full circle and he is the most wretched person. They must keep in view the end of human life. No one should be called happy until the day he carries his happiness down to the grave in peace.

6.1.11 Critical Comments :

The final scene is deeply pathetic and heart-rending. Oedipus's expression of his love for his daughters is touching. He is completely transformed and has dropped his ego. He has effaced his self and is now concerned about the fate of his hopeless daughters who will die unwedded and unfruitful. His appeal to Creon that he be immediately banished from Thebes is very moving. Creon would not do anything without consulting the Delphic Oracle. He is not vindictive and does not gloat over Oedipus's misfortunes. On the contrary, he is considerate and kind towards him. He allows Oedipus to meet his daughters. Creon, however, is not sentimental and does not show his weakness. He asserts his authority as a king in refusing to grant Oedipus's request to be allowed to keep his daughters with him. Creon rebukes him for trying to have his own way in everything. The last scene marks the recovery of Oedipus. The heroic nature of Oedipus is revealed. The play ends as it began with the greatness of the hero. This greatness is based on knowledge about the reality of things and not on ignorance as was the case previously. Oedipus has now heroically accepted his fate and demands the punishment he deserves. He demands the fulfillment of Oedipus's command that the murderer of Laius be killed or exiled. The heroic qualities find full expression even now but now with the divine powers that shape destiny and govern the world. In this scene, he supports the commands of the Oracle against the will of Creon. Oedipus is now blind like Teiresias, and like Teiresias he has a more penetrating vision than the ruler he opposes. Oedipus has now reconciled to his fate. He has become the spokesman of Apollo. He believes in the just ways of God to men. He is not swimming against the tide but has abandoned himself to flow with the tide. The greatness of Oedipus in his ruin is more than his greatness when he was in the heyday of his royal glory and power.

Oedipus is not guilty of *hubris*. He is essentially innocent. The dramatist intentionally obscures the thought of his innocence. He is trying to justify the calamity and thus alleviating the moral shock on Oedipus's undeserved suffering by harping on the familiar *hubris* theme.

6.2 Glossary :

Messenger	:	A person who carries messages
Tending	:	Taking care
Fetters	:	Chains put around a prisoner's feet
Clamped	:	Tied
Gravest	:	Most serious
Nymph	:	the form of a young woman (In Greek and Roman Myths)
Consequences	:	Results
Fickleness	:	Temporariness

6.3 Self-Check Exercise :

1. What good news has the shepherd from Corinth brought?
2. Why is Oedipus relieved at the news that Polybus died of old age?
3. Why had Oedipus been named so?
4. Why does Jocasta press upon Oedipus not to pursue the investigation further?
5. What does Oedipus think is the reason for Jocasta having left in a state of grief and anguish?
6. How does Oedipus react after knowing the truth of his parentage?
7. What request does Oedipus make to Creon?
8. What is Creon's attitude towards Oedipus?

6.4 Answers to Self-Check Exercise :

1. The Shepherd from Corinth has brought the good news that the Corinthians have decided to make Oedipus the king of Thebes, the king of Corinth as well as Polybus, the king of Corinth has died.
2. Oedipus is relieved at the news that Polybus died of old age as it ends this fear of the prophecy of him killing his father becoming true.
3. Oedipus was named so because he had been found with fetters clamped on his feet, rendering them deformed.
4. Oedipus asks Jocasta if the Theban shepherd sent for by her could be the same one who handed over an infant to the Corinthian shepherd as told by him (the Corinthian shepherd); she immediately realizes the truth. Greatly agonized though she is, she wants to save Oedipus from the pain the disclosure of the truth is likely to bring. Therefore, she presses upon Oedipus not to pursue his investigation.
5. Oedipus believes that Jocasta has left in a state of agony because she is proud of her family honour and would feel miserable to find that he is a man of low birth.
6. Oedipus is horror-stricken and inconsolable after knowing the truth of his parentage. He realizes that he has committed the gravest sin and exclaims that he may never see light again. Miserably, he pleads with Creon to punish him appropriately for his sin.

7. He requests Creon to banish him from Thebes so that he can be alone in his misery and is not able to talk to anyone.
8. Creon's attitude towards Oedipus is not vindictive. When Oedipus pleads him for banishment, he says that the punishment will be decided by Gods, not by him.

6.5 Short Answer Questions :

Q.1. Trace the various steps in the process of self-discovery?

Ans. The play *Oedipus Rex* opens many years after Oedipus had committed two heinous crimes foretold by the Delphic Oracle. The play opens when Oedipus, after having killed his father, Laius, has lived as his mother's husband for many years during which period he begot several children by his mother-wife. The tragedy lies in the revelation of guilt. It is towards revelation of the guilt that the plot of the play has been moving. Sophocles shows his dramatic skill in choosing as the theme of his play, the circumstances leading to the discovery, the sins themselves being shown as having occurred in the past. Oedipus himself is responsible for his tragedy. He was determined to find out Laius's murderer to bring relief to his pestilence-stricken subjects. Teiresias, the blind prophet aroused some doubt in the mind of Oedipus, which was further strengthened by Jocasta's account of Laius's murder. The Corinthian messenger's information marked the next step in the process of discovery and the process was completed by the information obtained from the Theban shepherd under the pressure exerted upon him. Thus, it is a result of Oedipus's efforts to punish the murderer of Laius and to find out his parentage that Oedipus learns the truth and the truth is appalling for him and for us.

Q. 2. Discuss the significance of the final choral song.

Ans. The play *Oedipus Rex* concludes with chorus singing the moral of the story. They bring home to the people the fickleness of human happiness. Oedipus was once the greatest of men. He was the wisest man who could solve the greatest mysteries. Everyone envied him for his great prosperity. Now the wheel of fortune has turned full circle and he is the most wretched person. We must keep in view the end of human life. No one should be called happy until the day he carries his happiness down to the grave in peace.

6.6 Let's Sum Up :

In this lesson, we've made an effort to explain the remaining part of the play along with critical comments. Samples have been provided for you to attempt short answer type questions in the examination.

LESSON NO. 7

SOPHOCLES: *OEDIPUS REX*

CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE PLAY

Structure :

7.0 Objectives

7.1 Critical appraisal of the plot

7.1.1 Prologue

7.1.2 Parodos

7.1.3 Structure of the play

7.1.4 Ending of the play

7.1.5 Elements of irony in the play

7.2 Critical appreciation of the play

7.2.1 Multiple
interpretations

7.2.2 Oedipus's 'hamartia'

7.2.3 Man and Divine Justice

7.3 Self-Check Exercise

7.4 Answers to Self-Check Exercise

7.5 Let's Sum Up

7.0 Objectives :

* To critically appraise the plot of the play

* To critically appreciate the play

7.1 Critical Appraisal of the Plot in *Oedipus Rex*

Dear Student,

In this lesson, we'll acquaint you with various concepts related to drama in general and *Oedipus Rex* in particular.

7.1.1 Prologue :

Aristotle in the 12th chapter of the *Poetics* provides a quantitative division of a tragedy. A typical Greek tragedy opens with a Prologue, a scene in which a single character speaks or there is a dialogue. The scene serves the purpose of an exposition scene and the audience immediately comes to grips with the central thematic concern of the play. Thus, we encounter Oedipus in dialogue with the priest at the head of the delegation of the citizens of Thebes. As the priest brings to the notice of the king that the city is in the grip of a terrible and deadly plague, the latter expresses his concern and anguish. In fact, the king is already in the know of the fact that plague has invaded his kingdom. Creon brings the startling message that suffering of people is due to the presence in their midst

of the murderer of King Laius and that the murderer must be punished before the people can be relieved of the curse on them. At this, Oedipus promises to track the murderer and avenge the murder of King Laius. The priest feels satisfied and withdraws from the scene along with the citizens. The subject of the play is clearly stated in the prologue which is to find out the murderer and meet out to him the punishment ordained by the Oracle. Besides stating the subject of the play, the prologue also provides us an insight into Oedipus's character. He is considered to be wise and he is held in high esteem by his people. The priest observes that Oedipus, though not a god, is the wisest person of all. He can read the riddle of life and the mysterious ways of heavens. It was he who had saved them from the Sphinx. We come to know that Oedipus is a very sympathetic man. For instance, he informs the priest that while the citizens are suffering as individuals, he himself is bearing the weight of the suffering of all of them. Oedipus is alive to his duties as a king and is deeply concerned with the welfare of his people. He had sent Creon to Delphi to seek Apollo's guidance before the priest came to him. Oedipus's love for truth is also brought out in the prologue. He is anxious to find out the truth regarding the murder of Laius. The Prologue also throws light on the character of Creon and his role in the play. Creon acts as Oedipus's messenger to the Delphic Oracle. Oedipus appears as a man of much greater intellectual and moral stature than Creon.

7.1.2 Parodos :

After the Prologue comes the *Parodos* in which Chorus appears for the first time. Aristotle refers to this part of the play as the first uninterrupted appearance of the Chorus. The members of the Chorus generally entered the 'orchestra', singing and dancing and their song and dance reflected the mood of the moment. In *Oedipus Rex*, the Chorus of the Theban elders invokes the gods to protect the people of Thebes.

*Their song conveys their feelings and thoughts.
Deathless Athena, First Daughter of Zeus, on thee
We call; then on thy sister Queen
Artemis, over our city enthroned in her majesty,
And Phoebus, Lord of the Bow,
Show us again your threefold power
This hour as in ages long ago.
From the fire and pain of pestilence save us and make us clean.*

The Chorus represents the people of the city and its songs convey the collective feelings and thoughts of the entire population. Their song also brings into bold relief the suffering of the people. The invocation to the gods shows the religious feelings of the chorus and of the people whom it represents. After the opening song of the chorus, the chorus leaders enter into a conversation with Oedipus. Oedipus takes the message from Delphi very seriously. He assures the chorus that he is determined to avenge the murder of Laius. Oedipus also pronounces a curse upon the man who committed the murder. It is typical example of tragic irony because Oedipus is, in fact, cursing himself though unknowingly. He reveals himself to be an earnest, conscientious and thorough going ruler. He loves people and feels for them. He has resolved to show no mercy to the murderer

who is responsible for the misfortunes that have descended upon the city. After reiterating his resolve to track down the murderer and punish him, he utters a prayer for the welfare of the chorus. When the chorus leader suggests that Oedipus should consult the blind prophet, Teiresias, Oedipus informs him that he has already sent for the prophet.

The **Parodos** or the first undivided utterance of the chorus was followed by an episode, a counterpart of the scene or act in modern play. The rest of the play consisted of Parodos or episode alternating. In a normal play, there were four or five of them.

7.1.3 Structure of the Play :

The Structure of *Oedipus Rex* fulfils the requirements of a typical Greek Tragedy. It begins with a prologue which is the prayer of the priest of Zeus to Oedipus to do something, to relieve the sufferings of the Theban people who are afflicted with a terrible plague. The reply of the king also forms a part of the prologue. This is followed by the entry of the chorus and the ode they sing. Then follow various episodes, punctuated by the songs of the chorus. There are two gripping scenes in which Oedipus first accuses Teiresias and Creon of disloyalty. The real climax is the scene in which Oedipus interrogates the shepherd in spite of Jocasta's entreaty to him not to do so. This is swiftly followed by tragic reversal and recognition. Oedipus blinds himself and bewails his sad fate. The play ends with the speech of the chorus which highlights the illusiveness of human happiness.

According to F.L. Lucas, *Oedipus Rex* is a marvel of construction. The Greek dramatists did not divide their plays into acts. The modern critics have attempted the following division for the sake of convenience:

- Act I :** The arrival of an oracle about the plague in Thebes, commanding the banishment of the unknown murderer of the late King Laius.
- Act II :** Oedipus in the course of his investigation of the murder of King Laius had a quarrel with blind soothsayer, Teiresias, the true servant of the gods.
- Act III :** Oedipus reveals his suspicious nature and hot temper. Oedipus suspects that Creon is in league with Teiresias; and is conspiring against him.
- Act IV :** A messenger comes from Corinth. He brings the news that Polybus, the King of Corinth, has died and Oedipus is to succeed him. Oedipus is reluctant to go to Corinth because of the oracle. Though his father the king of Corinth is dead yet his mother is alive. He is afraid lest the second part of the oracle's prophecy should come true. The messenger tries to disabuse him concerning Polybus and Merope. The messenger tells him under what circumstances he had been found. Oedipus misunderstands the situation and persists in his investigation of his parentage.
- Act V :** The Theban Shepherd who revealed the truth about the parentage of Oedipus is sent for. Knowing that he was the son of Laius and Jocasta, Oedipus rushes to blind himself.
- Act VI :** An attendant announces that Jocasta has hanged herself and Oedipus has blinded himself. Then Oedipus enters and laments his fate and entreats Creon to banish him as ordained by the oracle.

7.1.4 Ending of the Play :

Nothing could be more logical and dramatic than the play should end with the exile of Oedipus. Teiresias prophesied that Oedipus would become blind, as an exile and a beggar, cursed by all. Oedipus himself pronounced a curse on the murderer of Laius. Now the curse has recoiled upon his own head. It is established that he is responsible for the misfortunes of the people of Thebes. The stranger who once saved Thebes by his intelligence must now save it by leaving the city for ever. But Sophocles has not given such a dramatic and logical ending to the play. Sophocles gives a forceful character contrast. Creon who had barely escaped death or exile at the hands of Oedipus has now become the King and Oedipus is reduced to the position of a petitioner. Creon had a passive role in the play, but now he has emerged as generous and kind king.

Sophocles develops a situation perfectly antistrophic to the first climax. Oedipus demands four times to be banished, twice he demands it *of* the chorus and twice of Creon. Once again Oedipus shows himself quite sure *of* his position. But Creon refuses the demand both times. He refuses not *of* kindness but because he does not know the will of Apollo. Earlier, Oedipus had not consulted Apollo to verify his own inference about Creon even though Creon's life was at stake. Now Creon refuses to act in the crisis until he has consulted Apollo even though, the case for his exile is clear. The link between the first and third climaxes is brought out. In the course *of* Oedipus's questioning *of* Creon in the first climax, Creon says that he prefers not to express an opinion when he lacks the necessary knowledge. Now, in the last climax, he replies to a question by Oedipus that when he lacks knowledge, he prefers not to speak-at random. There is clear contrast between certainty on the part *of* Oedipus and caution on the part of Creon.

Oedipus's meeting with his two daughters is poignant and what he says to them is the most tragic addition to the picture of ruin and desolation. When Oedipus is led into the palace, he is forcibly separated from his children contrary to his desire to keep them with him. Creon asserts his authority by saying, "Command no more. Obey, your rule is ended."

The situation undergoes a tragic reversal. Oedipus, who was the first of men in the prologue, now becomes a homeless blind beggar, stained by the deepest pollution of incest and parricide in the last scene.

Sophocles had manipulated the events in a superb manner. The use of irony lends to the play a rich and complicated texture. *Oedipus Rex* is rich in tragic irony at all levels.

7.1.5 Elements of irony in the play :

The irony of the situation, of a person, lies in the fact that he manages to do exactly the opposite of what he intends to in spite of his serious and most well intentioned effort. This is applicable to both the events within the play and those outside it. Thus Oedipus's decision not to return to Corinth in order to skirt the fate prophesied for him by the Oracle might be termed misguided. But the circumstances that take him to Thebes after he has ignorantly killed his own father, and made him marry his own mother without knowledge and choice, are surely ironical. There is irony in the proclamation which Oedipus makes about meeting out the same punishment to himself which he announces for those who may harbour or have intercourse with the killer of Laius. It is ironical when he asserts that it is as though he is investigating the killing of his father and that

the killer of Laius is his enemy also. Jocasta's casual mention of the phrase, 'where three roads meet, or the shepherd's assurance to Oedipus that he need not be afraid of returning to Corinth because Polybus and Merope they are not his parents, only serve to aggravate his worries. There is irony also in the fact that both Jocasta and Oedipus express their jubilant indifference to oracles exactly when unknown to them are faced with the deadliest of oracles which has been fulfilled and stares them in the face. It is ironical that the famed solver of riddles should be the last person in the play to discover the truth which has already become clear to Jocasta, the chorus and the Thebes shepherd and that baseless suspicion of conspiracy and intrigue involving Teiresias and Creon should constantly haunt his mind.

Many of Oedipus's statements contain unconscious forewarning of his own approaching fate. This is statement of the motive of unravelling the mystery of Laius's murder:

*Not merely from a fellow creature will I clear this taint
But from myself*

The spectators know that Oedipus himself will have an intimate connection with the fate of Laius's murder, but not in the way he imagines, and he will not clear the taint from himself in it. There is a terrible irony in the curse of Oedipus, a curse which he is unknowingly pronouncing upon himself. There is irony also in Oedipus's wishful fantasy that he is the son of Apollo himself and in the praise of Mount Cithaeron has saved him from death only to expose him to the fury of a horrible fate. Fate and Oedipus's own actions have combined to bring him down to the level of the blind soothsayer whom he described for his blindness.

It is a measure of the genius of Sophocles that he has managed to weave a fine web intertwining irony and suspense in a play of which it is so well known.

7.2 Critical Appreciation of *Oedipus Rex* :

7.2.1 Multiple Interpretations :

Oedipus Rex is one of the most fascinating plays. It is so rich that it lends itself to various interpretations. In fact, there is something mysterious about this play which is really inexplicable. From the technical point of view, *Oedipus Rex* is a marvel. Its plot structure remains unique. Its characterization as well as patterning of character is superb. It maintains suspense in spite of the fact that its plot is well known. In terms of tragic irony, no dramatist can ever hope to equal Sophocles. *Oedipus Rex* is a fine proof of Sophocles's art of making use of tragic irony.

The critics have discovered various meanings, psychological, metaphysical, Symbolic under the surface of the play. The one meaning of the play which is beyond all controversy is that man cannot avoid his fate and any attempt to evade it would achieve only the reverse of what one desires. The belief in the power of the human intellect to solve the riddle of life is misplaced and leads to hubris. Man is essentially ignorant and one who is proud of his intellectual power would only turn out to be more ignorant than the others. At the same time, we also come to know that man is not entirely a plaything of destiny, for he has the freedom of choice and action, though the result of these actions may be predetermined. The play expresses Sophocles's conviction of man's essential

powerlessness. It also brings out the indestructible and conquering majesty of suffering humanity. The strange fusion of character and fate is mysteriously expressed in his heroes. Oedipus is a symbolic figure who has to bear the weight of universal human suffering. He is suffering-humanity personified.

Some critics believe that the play justifies the gods by showing that we get what we deserve. Oedipus is rash as is seen in his treatment to Teiresias and Creon and so gods punish him. There are other critics who say that he is not altogether bad, he is rather noble in some ways but he has one of those defects which all tragic heroes have. So they characterize *Oedipus Rex* as a tragedy of destiny. The play shows that man has no free will but is a puppet in the hand of the gods. According to yet another view, Sophocles was a pure artist and was, therefore, not interested in offering a thesis about the gods. He took the story as he found it and used it to write an exciting play, with the gods simply as part of the machinery of the plot. All these interpretations of the play are unsound. The first interpretation is based on Aristotle's views that the tragic hero is a man of high stature who falls into misfortune because of some serious defect. Oedipus is proud and over-confident. He is unjustly suspicious of Teiresias and Creon. In one place, he goes so far as to express some uncertainty about the truth of the Oracles. But the fallacy in this argument is that, even before the action of the play, Oedipus has been declared to be a would-be incestuous parricide. It means that punishment has been decided upon before the crime has been committed. Apart from this Sophocles has depicted Oedipus as a good man. The priest in the opening scene considers him to be the greatest and noblest man, the saviour of Thebes who, with divine aid, rescued the city from the Sphinx. The chorus calls him wise. He is the darling of the people. The people will never believe ill from him. By *hamartia* Aristotle did not mean a moral defect as is generally believed. He means an offence committed in ignorance of some material fact therefore, free from wickedness and vice. Oedipus violated the most sacred of nature's laws and thus incurred the most horrible of pollutions. But he did so without wickedness because he was ignorant of what he was doing. Only inhuman monsters can deliberately commit such heinous crimes. In this case, we are not moved for them to pity which tragedy ought to produce. But in *Oedipus Rex* we feel both pity and terror, pity for the fragile state of man, and because of a world whose laws we do not understand. The *hamartia* of Oedipus did not lie in losing his temper with Teiresias and Creon. It lay in killing his father and marrying his mother.

One also has to keep in mind that the oracle's prediction was, unconditional. It did not say that if Oedipus did such a thing he would kill his father and marry his mother. The Oracle stipulated that Oedipus could kill his father and marry his mother. What the Oracle said was bound to happen. Oedipus did what he could to evade his fate. He decided never to see his parents again. But it was certain that his best efforts would be in vain. It is clear that Oedipus was morally innocent.

If we say that Oedipus is the innocent victim of a relentless fate which he cannot avoid he is a mere puppet. The play is a tragedy of destiny. Such a view is also not correct. Sophocles did not intend that we should treat Oedipus as a puppet and not a free agent. Divine foreknowledge does not mean that all human actions are predetermined. The

Corinthian messenger distinguishes Oedipus's self-blinding as voluntary and self chosen from the involuntary parricide and incest. Certain actions of Oedipus were determined by fate, but everything he does on stage, from first to last, he does as a free agent. The gods know the future but they do not order it. Oedipus freely chooses, from the highest motive, a series of actions which leads to his own ruin. Oedipus could have left the plague to take its course but pity for suffering of his people forced him to consult the Oracle. When he came to know the oracle ' he might still have left the murder of Laius uninvestigated, but piety and justice compelled him to act'. There was no need-for him to force the Theban Shepherd to speak the truth. Teiresias, Jocasta and the Shepherd each tried to dissuade Oedipus from pursuing the matter but all in vain. He must unravel the riddle of his own life. The immediate cause of Oedipus's ruin is not 'fate of god.' No oracle said that he must discover the truth. The cause of his ruin also does not lie in his own weakness of character. It is strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes, and his loyalty to truth that brought about his ruin. Here we see him as a free agent. His self-mutilation and self-banishment are free acts of choice.

7.2.2 Oedipus's 'Hamartia':

Some critics argue that Oedipus's *hamartia* is not his bad temper, suspiciousness or hastiness in action, for his punishment does not fit these crimes. Oedipus's fault is his failure in existential commitment, a failure to realize that not all difficulties are riddles to be solved by the application of pure intellect but that some are mysteries not to be solved at all, but to be coped up with only by the engagement of the whole self. Oedipus's punishment, then, is not really punishment at all, but the only means by which the gods may enlighten the blindness of this destiny.

The initiative of Oedipus comes into play so far as the discovery of his crime is concerned. It is this sense of curiosity which is responsible for the discovery of the past, as well as the dramatic and public manner in which this discovery takes place. What is discovered has no connection with Oedipus's character. It is true that he is somewhat rash in his attack on the old man. He mentions that he killed three of the king's attendants rather calmly. But he tells us that if he had not reacted violently, he himself would have been killed. It was not result of his choice that he married Jocasta. The Thebans made him their king in order to express thankfulness for his having rid them of the Sphinx and marrying the queen was a part of this reward.

7.2.3 Man and Divine Justice :

Sophocles does not try to justify the ways of God to man. If human justice is the standard then nothing can excuse the gods. It does not mean that Sophocles intended the play to be an attack on the gods. In fact, Sophocles does not seek to give a message or meaning to the play. According to Waldo, "There is no meaning in *Oedipus: The King*, there is merely the terror of coincidence." Kirkwood says, "Sophocles has no theological pronouncement to make and no criticism to score." The gods are merely agents in a traditional story which Sophocles, a pure artist, uses for dramatic purpose, without raising the religious issue or drawing moral. Sophocles did not claim that the gods were in any

human sense just, yet he believed that they were entitled to worship by human beings. The two opinions are not contradictory. Disbelief in divine justice as measured by human standards can perfectly well be associated with deep religious feeling. Men may find some thing unjust and other just, but in the eyes of God all things are beautiful, good and just. There is the moral order that regulates the world. Man cannot hope to understand it fully. What he can do, is not to violate it.

According to some critics, Oedipus represents human suffering while the gods symbolize the universe of circumstances as it is. The play then becomes a dramatic expression of the universe of circumstances as it is and of the suffering of man.

We may draw a lesson from the play. Oedipus, a great and prosperous man, is humiliated. This treatment is not deserved by Oedipus. It is not a punishment for insolence nor is it due to any fault of judgement or character in the man. The gods display their power because they must. The lesson which we can learn is stated at the end of the play in the comment by the Chorus. "And being moral, think on the last day of death, when all must see and speak of man's happiness till without sorrow, he passed the goals of life."

To know oneself is for Sophocles to know man's powerlessness. It is also to know the spiritual grandeur of suffering humanity. The stranger fusion of character and fate is most moving and mysteriously expressed in the greatest of his heroes.

Sophocles in this play supports the traditional religion. Apollo and ' his ministers are shown as justified, while the scepticism of Jocasta and Oedipus is condemned. Sophocles wrote this play to defend, what was for him, as for Socrates, one of the basic facts of religion.

7.3 Self-Check Exercises :

1. What is the first impression of the character of Oedipus?
2. Whom does the chorus represent? What is the theme of its song in the opening scene.
3. How do Oedipus and Creon differ from each other?
4. What main flaws of Oedipus's character are exposed in the play?

7.4 Answers to Self-Check Exercises :

1. The first impression of the character of Oedipus is that of an extremely wise and intelligent man. He is a king who cares for his subjects and will do anything to relieve them of their pain and suffering. He is a man of great intellect and moral stature.
2. The chorus represents the people of Thebes. In the opening scene, it sings to invoke Gods to give relief to the people of Thebes who are suffering on several accounts.
3. Oedipus and Creon differ from each other in temperament. Oedipus is impulsive, whereas Creon is balanced. Oedipus jumps to the conclusion that Creon is involved in a conspiracy against him; but when it is Creon's turn to hold the reins of the kingdom, he doesn't hurry in imposing punishment upon Oedipus without consulting Apollo whom Oedipus had ignored.

4. Oedipus has been portrayed as an impulsive, sometimes bad-tempered and suspicious person.

7.5 Let's Sum Up :

In this lesson, we made an attempt to acquaint you with various concepts related to this play and to drama in general. This will be of great help towards understanding of tragedies.

LESSON NO. 8

SOPHOCLES : *OEDIPUS REX*

Some Important Aspects

Structure :

8.0 Objectives

8.1 Oedipus-Rex as a Tragedy

8.1.1 A tragedy of fate

8.1.2 Character of Oedipus

8.2 Oedipus as a Tragic Hero

8.2.1 Aristotle's definition of 'Tragedy'

8.2.2 Oedipus : as an Aristotalian tragic hero

8.2.3 Reasons for his tragedy

8.2.4 Attitude of Intolerance

8.2.5 Discovery of the hidden sin

8.2.6 Oedipus : A real Tragic Hero

8.2.7 Oedipus : A symbol of intelligence

8.2.8 Oedipus : An unconquered hero

8.2.9 Function of a Tragedy

8.2.10 The final effect of the play

8.3 The function of the chorus in the play

8.3.1 Aristotle's view

8.3.2 In Greek Tragedy

8.3.3 Chorus : a representative of citizens

8.3.4 Contents of the odes

8.3.5 Faith of the Chorus in God

8.3.6 The indispensable Chorus

8.4 Suggested Questions

8.5 Let's Sum Up

8.6 Suggested Readings and Web Sources

8.0 Objectives :

To discuss :

- * The play as a Tragedy.
- * Oedipus as a Tragic Hero
- * The function of the Chorus in the play.

Dear Student,

In this last lesson of the unit, we shall take up various critical issues related with Oedipus Rex in detail. Student's Response Sheet will provide you a chance to

attempt the type of questions you are likely to answer in the examination.

8.1 Oedipus Rex as a Tragedy :

The word tragedy was first used by the Greeks to describe a specific kind of a play which raised profoundly disturbing questions about the nature of the universe and the place of men in the scheme of things. Greek tragedy time and again probed questions which have always disturbed man. What is the relationship between man and gods ? It is true that just as the ways of gods to man or is it that 'like flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport.' Is the universe rational or irrational ? Why is there so much evil in the universe ? Is man a free agent whose character is his destiny or is he is a helpless victim of supernatural powers which are downright cruel ? Greek tragedians asked these questions and each writer came to his own unique conclusions and gave his own answers to these eternal and unanswerable questions. That is why Greek tragedy is particularly popular.

According to C.M. Bowra, *Oedipus Rex* is a tragedy in the modern sense as the faults or defects of Oedipus are a part of his great qualities. His rashness and violent reaction is the cause of his doom. However, the actual disaster which befalls him is undeserved and beyond his control. Even his self-blinding is prompted by a desire to escape from the intolerable burden of almost physical guilt. "He is essentially tragic because, in his fight against unsurpassable odds, he shows all his nobility of character and is none the less defeated. The other characters are fit companions for him. The old seer Teiresias is anxious to hide the truth but is forced into telling it; Creon, mechanical and honourable Jocasta, entirely a woman, whose chief aim is to keep Oedipus happy, no matter what the truth may be; all are caught in the tense excitement and deadly horror." .

8.1.1 A tragedy of fate :

Oedipus Rex is to a large extent, the tragedy of fate. The tragic events in the play have been predetermined by fate or the gods. Man seems to be a plaything in the hands of Destiny. The Delphic Oracle had ordained that Laius, the King of Thebes, would be killed by his own son. Laius took the extreme step to prevent the disaster from taking place. As soon as his wife, Jocasta gave birth to a son, the King had him chained and handed him over to a trustworthy servant with strict orders to desert the child on Mt. Cithaeron to perish. But the servant, out of compassion, handed over the child to a Corinthian Shepherd who later passed him on to the Corinthian King. The child grew up as the son of Polybus and Merope, the king and queen of Corinth. When Oedipus learnt of the horrible Oracle that he was destined to kill his father and marry his own mother, he fled from Corinth to avoid the fulfilment of the prophecy. He wandered towards Thebes. On the way he met his true father, Laius and killed him in a broil. Of course, Oedipus killed his father unknowingly and in complete ignorance of the real identity of his victim. But Apollo's Oracle was fulfilled in the case of Laius even though he and his wife took the extreme step of ordering the death of their own son, in order to escape the fate which had been foretold by the Oracle.'

After killing Laius at a place where three roads-meet, Oedipus entered the

city. Nobody knew that he was the same man who had killed Laius. The City of Thebes was in the grip of a frightful monster who was causing a lot of human destruction because nobody was able to solve the riddle which she had propounded. Oedipus was able to solve the riddle and thus rid the city of the monster. As a reward, Oedipus was joyfully received by the people as their king and was given Laius's widow as his wife. Thus in complete ignorance of the identity of both his parents, he killed his father and married his own mother. He committed these horrible acts not only unknowingly but as a direct result of his efforts to escape the cruel fate which the Delphic Oracle had communicated to him.

It is evident that the events which bring about the tragedy in the life of Laius, Oedipus and Jocasta are the work of that mysterious supernatural power *which may* be called fate or destiny or the god Apollo. The victims were informed in advance about that fate that was to overtake them. They took all possible measures to skirt the fate. But things turned out exactly as they had been foretold by the Oracle. They had done nothing at all to deserve the fate they meet.

8.1.2 Character of Oedipus :

In the Prologue, we get the impression that Oedipus is an ideal king. He is an able ruler, father to his people, an honest and great administrator and of an outstanding intellect. His chief care is not for himself but for the welfare of his subjects. The people look upon him as their saviour. He is adored and worshipped by them. He is also a religious man. He believes in Oracles. 'He is loving husband and father. He hates impurity-That such a man should meet the sad fate is, indeed unbearably painful to us.

If we make a deep study of his character we find that he is neither a perfect man nor an ideal king. He suffers from a defect of character which makes him liable to incur the wrath of the gods. He is short-tempered, rash, and hasty, in judgements. Even though in the beginning, his behaviour towards Teiresias is one of reverence, he quickly loses his temper and speaks to the prophet in a highly insulting manner. When he refuses to divulge the truth behind his parentage. He charges Teiresias with treason. He suspects a conspiracy between Teiresias and Creon to harm him. He shows his rash and suspicious nature by passing the sentence of death for Creon which he subsequently withdraws. He cannot tolerate opposition and loses self control. His position and authority lead him to be making come a tyrant. Even when blinded and divested of all authority, he provokes Creon to remark, "Do not crave to be the master of everything always." It is clear that Oedipus possesses some serious flaws of character. His pride in the correctness of his judgement is one of the glaring flaws, His success in solving the riddle of the Sphinx inflated his ego and made him vain. He boasts that no one could solve the riddle which he did. Pride and self confidence have turned his head. Under the influence of Jocasta he grows irreligious and sceptic of the Oracles. He lacks true wisdom.

This is also true that there is no connection between these defects of character

in Oedipus and the tragic fate he meets. It may be argued that if he had not been hot tempered, he would not have got entangled in a fight on the road and would thus not have been guilty of murdering his father. Similarly if he had been a little cautious, he might have hesitated to marry a woman old enough to be his mother. Thus there was no compulsion either in the fight that he picked up during his journey or in the act of his marriage with Jocasta. Both his killing his father and marrying his mother may, thus be attributed to the defects in his own character. At the same time it has to be borne in mind that the pronouncements of the Oracle were inescapable. Even if Oedipus had taken the precautions, the prophecy was to be fulfilled. The Oracle's prediction was unconditional. It did not say that if Oedipus did such a thing he would not kill his father and marry his mother. The Oracle simply ordained that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother.

If Oedipus is the innocent victim of a doom which he cannot escape, he would appear to be a mere puppet. The whole play, then, becomes a tragedy of destiny which denies human freedom. But such a view would also be unsound. The fore knowledge of certain events does not supply that all human actions are predetermined. The attendant emphatically describes Oedipus' self-blinding as a voluntary and self-chosen act and distinguishes it from his involuntary murder of his father and marriage with his mother. Some of Oedipus's actions were fate bound but everything he does on the stage, he does as free agent-his condemnation of Teiresias and Creon, his conversation with Jocasta leading him to reveal the facts of his life to her and to his learning from her the circumstances of the death of Laius, his pursuing his investigation despite the efforts of Jocasta and Theban Shepherd not to go on with it. We find in this play a man freely choosing from the highest motives a series of actions which lead to his own ruin. Oedipus could have left the plague to take its toll but this pity for the suffering of the people compelled him to consult the Oracle. When the message from Apollo came, he could still have left the murder of Laius uninvestigated, but his pity and his love of justice forced him to start an enquiry. He need not have compelled the reluctant Theban shepherd to divulge the secret of his parentage, but it was not in his nature to rest content with an issue, and therefore wanted to probe the matter fully. Teiresias, Jocasta and Theban Shepherd, each in turn, tried to dissuade him, but in vain. The immediate cause of his ruin is not fate or the gods; no oracle said that he must discover the truth. The cause of his ruin does not lie in his weakness of character. The cause lies in his strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes and his love of truth. We see him as a free agent in all this. His self-blinding is equally a free act of choice.

In spite of the evidence to prove Oedipus a free agent in most of his actions as depicted in the play we must remember that the most tragic events of his life, the murder of his father at his hands and his marriage with his mother were inevitably to happen. Here the intervention of fate cannot be denied. But the discovery by Oedipus of his crimes or sins is the result of the compulsions of his nature. If he had not gone out of the way to find the truth he would have continued to live in a state of blissful

ignorance and there would have been no tragedy, no shock, no self-blinding and no suffering. But fate had preordained parricides. Through the tragedy of Oedipus, Sophocles dramatizes the fact of man's utter helplessness in this universe where every step he takes falls on uncertain and dark grounds.

8.2 Oedipus as Tragic Hero :

8.2.1 Aristotle's concept of a 'tragic hero' :

Aristotle discusses his conception of the Greek tragic hero in his *Poetics*. According to him a tragic hero is an eminent person occupying a high position and in prosperous circumstances falling into misfortune on account of a hamartia or some flaw in character. He is a noble person, though not perfect. There is nothing to arouse the feeling of pity and fear in seeing a bad character pass from prosperity to misfortune. At the same time, the ruin of a virtuous man is repugnant and horrible. Tragic hero is neither a paragon of virtue nor a scoundrel. He undergoes suffering and reversal which result, not from vice and depravity, but from some hamartia. Aristotle also demands that the tragic hero must be true to himself. The disaster overtaking a tragic hero is on account of an error than a deliberate crime. Aristotle gives the example of Oedipus in Sophocles's play as a great and successful hero.

The main requirements of Aristotle in regard to tragic hero are : high social standing, moral excellence and goodness and some fault in character or some error committed by the hero in ignorance of the circumstances. Oedipus fulfils eminently the first two requirements. Oedipus is a man of royal birth, he is brought up by the king and queen of Corinth and himself afterwards become a king and marries a queen. He possesses excellent qualities of character, though he is by no means perfect. But we cannot say categorically that his misfortune is due to any flaw in his character. At the same time, it would not be correct to say that he is puppet in the hands of fate. Within certain limits he is a free agent. No matter what precautions he had taken, the prophecy of Oracle would, yet have been fulfilled.

8.2.2 Oedipus : as an Aristotelian tragic hero :

Oedipus is a good king, a well wisher of his people, a man of integrity. He is an honest and well meaning administrator of an outstanding intellect. He is a pious man who believes in Oracle, respects the bonds of family and hates impurity. It is because he receives a message from the Delphic Oracle that he undertakes an investigation into the murder of the late king Laius. Oedipus is held in high esteem by his people. The suppliant people approach him almost as a god and he is honoured as saviour. The priest appreciates the valuable services, that he has rendered to the people of Thebes by conquering the Sphinx and now look forward to his rescuing the people from the plague they were effected with. Oedipus expresses concern for the well-being of his people and responds to the appeal of the priest whole heartedly. He has already moved in the matter and sent Creon to consult the Delphic Oracle. On the advice of Chorus he summons the prophet Teiresias. When Creon reveals the cause of the calamity of the city and remedy prescribed by the Oracle, Oedipus declares his resolve to track down the culprit and he utters a terrible curse upon him. He is so

earnest that he pronounces that same curse on himself if he is found guilty. All this qualifies him to be an ideal king. He also shows himself as a devoted husband and a loving father. His relations with the Chorus are also very cordial and he shows due courtesy to them. Some time he acts upon the advice tendered by them. Oedipus is worthy of high respect both as a king and as a man.

8.2.3 Reasons for his tragedy :

The cause of Oedipus's tragedy may be attributed to excessive pride in his intelligence which is very much like hubris or arrogance. It leads him to think that he can outwit the Oracle by not going back to Corinth. In an apparently innocent manner, this arrogance leads him to solve the riddle of the Sphinx and thereby he becomes indirectly and unconsciously guilty of incest. Too much confidence and reliance upon his intellectual powers make him vain and haughty. Fate plays a trick with him when he is able to solve the Sphinx's riddle. It turns his head and strengthens his ego all the more. This impious pride in his intellectual capacity leads him into many unfortunate situations and also creates unfavourable impression on the reader. Thus pride leads him to arrest his superiority over the prophet Teiresias. Oedipus even taunts him on his inability in solving the Sphinx's riddle. After calling the soothsayer, a false prophet, Oedipus boasts of his own intellectual power in having solved the puzzle which proved too much for the blind prophet;

Until I came-1, ignorant Oedipus came-

And stopped the riddler's mouth, guessing the truth

by mother wit, not birdlore.

8.2.4 Attitude of Intolerance :

His attitude of intolerance towards both Teiresias and Creon and the use of highly offensive and insulting language towards them is disgusting and obnoxious. Earlier his rashness had made him slay his own father, though Oedipus was ignorant of the old man's identity. Within the play, we may say that, Oedipus's rashness makes him pronounce a curse on the murderer of Laius that also includes him within the purview of the curse. He quickly loses his temper with Teiresias when he finds the prophet reluctant to reveal the truth. He impetuously jumps to the conclusion that Teiresias has been bribed by Creon and that both of them have conspired against him. Oedipus is misled by Jocasta into speaking profanely of the Oracle. In his strong-headedness he does not pay heed to Jocasta's warnings and misinterprets them as arising from her snobbery. In spite of his piety Oedipus belongs to the world of politics and human standards rather than to the divine order of the world. However, the tragic fate which befalls him within the play is independent of his faults of character. The acts of parricide and incest have been committed by him in the past and his errors and faults only influence the manner in which he discovers his past crimes as well as his identity.

8.2.5 Discovery of the hidden sin :

Oedipus has already committed heinous crimes which make him a sinner in the eyes of the gods, in his own eyes and of the people. But the tragedy lies not so much

in the committing of these crimes as in his discovery that he is guilty of them. If crimes had remained unknown, there would have hardly been any tragedy. Tragedy comes with the fact of discovery both for Jocasta-and himself. Though his pride has no direct link with the commission of crimes, it certainly prompts him to relentlessly pursue his investigation to find out the truth of his parentage. He wants to live up to his reputation and social image. This enquiry will feed his ego. Something in him drives him towards discovery. Teiresias, Jocasta, Theban Shepherd, in their own ways, discourage him from going ahead with the enquiry. It is his own single minded insistence to know the truth that leads to the discovery. This obsession to find out the truth is also an-expression of intellectual pride, the pride of intellectually knowing everything. The Oracle said that Oedipus would be guilty of those sins, but no Oracle said that Oedipus must discover the truth. What follows the discovery, the self-blinding and self-punishment is deeply tragic, but that is the result of the discovery of his sins. It can be argued that the tragedy of Oedipus is the result more of his good qualities rather than bad ones. It is his love and concern for the well-being of his subjects that makes him send Creon to consult the Delphic Oracle. It is his sincerity of purpose which prompts him to pronounce curse on the murderer of Laius. It is the absolute honesty that makes him include even himself within the curse and punishment. It is his earnestness that makes him lose temper with Teiresias who is reluctant to divulge the secret about the murderer of Laius. He is ready to stake his all to find out the truth. To Oedipus, the discovery of Truth is more important than his own good and safety. He is so honest and upright that he inflicts the punishment of self-blinding when he finds himself guilty of having committed horrible crimes against his own parents, although in complete ignorance. He even urges Creon to banish him from the city, as demanded by the Oracle and announced by Oedipus himself in his proclamation.

8.2.6 Oedipus : A real Tragic Hero :

Oedipus is, thus, an authentic tragic hero in the Aristotelian sense as his tragedy is as much due to his own initiative in discovering the truth as to external circumstances. The character of Oedipus leaves a powerful impression on the mind of the reader. We admire his relentless pursuit of truth. We also sympathise with him because he is the victim of irony of fate and circumstances. He displays indomitable courage in misfortune. We are moved by his intense love for his hapless daughters. He is a symbol of human intelligence and human courage which remains undefeated in the face of the greatest adversities. One critic characterises *Oedipus Rex*, as a play about human greatness and observes, "Oedipus is great, not in virtue of a great worldly position, for his worldly position in an illusion which will vanish like a dream-but in virtue of his inner strength; strength to pursue the truth at whatever personal cost and strength to accept and endure it when found. Oedipus is great because he accepts the responsibility for all his acts, including those which are objectively most horrible though subjectively innocent." The same critic goes on to say :

8.2.7 Oedipus : A symbol of intelligence :

To me personally, Oedipus is a kind of symbol of the human intelligence which cannot rest until it has solved all the riddle-even the last riddle, to which the answer is that human happiness is built on an illusion. In the last lines of the play, he does generalise the case. He does appear to suggest that in some sense Oedipus is every man and every man is potentially Oedipus.

8.2.8 Oedipus as an unconquered hero :

Oedipus is a tragic hero even from the modern point of view. In *Oedipus Rex*, we witness the spectacle of human weakness in the face of uncontrollable circumstances and we see at the same time man's essential greatness. The manner in which Oedipus blinds himself after realizing his guilt and the manner in which he endures this punishment, win our admiration. In the Prologue, he is introduced to us as a man. Oedipus remains unconquered even in his defeat, and that is the essential fact about a tragic hero.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses the emotional function and impact of tragedy on the audience. He says that a tragedy arouses in the spectators the feelings of pity and terror-pity chiefly for the hero's tragic fate and terror at the possibility that the spectator might meet the same tragic fate in his life as the tragic hero does. By arousing these feelings, a tragedy aims at the catharsis or purgation of these and similar emotions. According to the homeopathic system of medicine; like cures. Similarly, tragedy by arousing pity and terror, cures us of these very feelings which reside in our heart sometimes in excess. A tragedy, therefore, affords emotional relief and the spectators rise at its end with a feeling of pleasure. This, according to Aristotle, is the aesthetic function of tragedy. The catharsis of pity and fear and similar other emotions does not mean that men are purged of their emotions, it means that emotions, are brought into harmony and balance. According to another view catharsis signifies purification and not purging. F.L. Lucas, for instance, makes a very shrewd observation. He rejects the purgation theory by saying : "The theatre is not a hospital." Aristotle implies that a tragedy allows a person to exercise his negative feelings like pity and fear vicariously, which if expressed directly without restraint in real life, would bring trouble and misery. Aristotle does not say that pity and fear are the only emotions proper to tragedy.

The spectator experiences such other feelings as contempt, repugnance, delight, indignation and admiration while witnessing a tragedy. However, these emotions are less important. The most characteristic emotions are of pity and fear. According to some other critics, great tragedy gives rise to a sense of mystery. It also engenders a sense of admiration for the greatness of the human spirit and at man's limitless capacity for suffering. Tragedy impresses us with the seriousness of human life. It may temporarily give us the feeling that man's life is a very sad affair but this is only a fleeting impression. The ultimate and real function of tragedy is to bring out the moral splendor of man through suffering, and thus to exercise an ennobling and uplifting influence on human consciousness.

8.2.9 Function of a Tragedy :

Man learns through experience. Tragedy leads to an enrichment of our experience of human life. Its function is to widen the boundaries of our experience of life. Tragedy deals primarily with evil suffering and it presents human beings as caught in the net of the evil forces beyond their control. Tragedy shows us the eternal contradiction between human weakness and human courage, human stupidity and human greatness. Tragedy affords us pleasure by exhibiting human endurance and perseverance in the face of calamities and disaster. Tragedy also confirms that there is a moral order governing the universe and that there is divine justice. The total effect of tragedy, in some mysterious way, is to remould our whole view of life towards something larger, universal and less self-centred.

Oedipus Rex arouses pity and fear in us and brings about catharsis of these feelings. The fate of Oedipus, who has always been concerned with the welfare of his people, inspires us with awe. We wonder at the mystery of human life in which a man may suffer even with the best of intentions. We also learn that fate is inexorable and that no one, however clever and intelligent, can escape its decrees. This is illustrated by the examples of Laius, Jocasta and Oedipus who try to evade the prediction of the Oracle. For a time it seems to them that they have succeeded in eluding the rounds of testing before long, but they are sadly disillusioned. We are also amazed at the fact that even kindness and compassion some time produce a very cruel effect. The act of kindness shown by the Theban shepherd to the infant by saving his life, turned out, in practice a cruel act. The play arouses deep sense of pity for the suffering of Oedipus and it also inspires a feeling of terror at his suffering which seems to us to be largely undeserved. However, the final effect of the play is not one of gloom and despair. On the other hand, the acceptance of suffering and defeat which Oedipus displays inspires great respect for the indomitable spirit of men. It is in his boundary situation that he drops his ego and intuitively grasps the mystery of life.

The dominant emotions produced by *Oedipus Rex* are pity and fear. Besides effecting catharsis of these feelings, the play greatly deepens our experience of human life and enhances our understanding of human nature and human psychology. The very Prologue produces in us the feeling of pity and fear-for the suffering population of Thebes and fear of future misfortunes which might befall the people. The priest refers to a tide of death sweeping the land from which there seems to be no escape. Oedipus gives expression to his anguish when he tells the priest that his heart is burdened with collective suffering of people. The entry song of the Chorus which follows the Prologue further heightens the feeling of pity and fear. The Chorus says, "With fear my heart is riven, fear of what shall be told. Fear is upon us." The Chorus appeals to the gods to take pity on the suffering people and our hearts are also filled with pity.

Oedipus's declaration of his firm resolve to track down the murderer of Laius brings relief to us. But the curse that Oedipus pronounces on the unknown criminal and upon those who may be sheltering him also terrifies us by its harshness. The scene in which Oedipus clashes with Teiresias further contributes to the feeling of

pity and terror. The prophecy of Teiresias is terrible especially because it seems to pertain to Oedipus himself in whose fortunes we have become deeply interested. Teiresias speaks to Oedipus in menacing tones describing Oedipus in a veiled manner as husband to the woman who bore him, father killer and father supplanter', and accusing him of being the murderer of Laius. The relation of the Chorus to the horrible utterance of Teiresias intensifies horror. The Chorus refers to the unknown criminal as the shedder of blood and doer of evil deeds and expresses its feelings of perplexity and awe at the terrible things the prophet has spoken.

In the clash between Oedipus and Creon, the feeling of terror is considerably less, for here it arises mainly from Oedipus's sentence of death against the innocent Creon which however is soon withdrawn. . The tension which had somewhat subsided starts building up again with Oedipus's suspicions on hearing from Jocasta that Laius was killed at a spot where three roads meet. Oedipus's account of his early life before his arrival at Thebes arouses the feeling of terror by its reference to the horrible prophecy which was received from the Oracle at Delphi. But when Jocasta tries to assure Oedipus that prophecies deserve no attention, both pity and terror tend to subside for a time. The song of the Chorus severely scolding Oedipus creates terror in our minds but it again subsides at the arrival of the Corinthian Messenger. After hearing him Jocasta jeers at the Oracles. The plan moves at a low key till first Jocasta and then Oedipus find themselves confronted with true facts of the situation. With the episode of the discovery of facts of the situation both the feelings of pity and terror reach a climax, with Oedipus lamenting his sinful acts of having killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus, who has in vain been searching for his parents all this while, who tried to avoid doing wrong to them by leaving Corinth, finds that he has unconsciously become guilty of the gravest offences. Jocasta all her life had been caring only for the happiness and prosperity of Laius and Oedipus but she ultimately finds that she has not only failed but has been guilty of marrying her own son.

The feelings of pity and fear get accentuated after the terrible discovery. The song of the Chorus immediately after the discovery arouses our deepest sympathy at Oedipus's fate. The Chorus extends the scope of its observation to include all mankind. The entire generation of mortal man adds up to nothing. Then comes the messenger from inside the palace and he gives us a heart-rending account of the manner in which Jocasta hanged herself and Oedipus blinded himself. This is one of the most terrible scenes in the play. The messenger concludes his remark that the royal household is today overwhelmed by calamity, death, ruin, tears and 'shame'. The dialogue of the Chorus with blind Oedipus is also heart-rending. Oedipus speaks of his physical and mental agony and the Chorus tries to console him. Oedipus describes himself as the shedder of father's blood, husband of mother, Godless and child of shame, begetter of brother-sons." The feeling of profound grief expressed by Oedipus is experienced by the audience with equal intensity. The scene of Oedipus's meeting with his daughters is also very touching. Oedipus feels sorry for them who will have

to wander homeless, with all chances of marriage shattered. He begs Creon to look after them. The complete reversal by which the king who was respected and looked upon as saviour by all, turns into a homeless beggar and outcast whose very sight is polluting, produces pity and terror, Oedipus has been searching for truth about the identity of Laius's murder, as well as about his own identity, but the knowledge brings nothing but dismay and suffering. The fate and sufferings of Oedipus thus produce intense pity and terror.

8.2.10 The final effect of the play :

From the beginning to the end, we are overwhelmed with feelings of pity and fear. They reach their climax at the last ghastly and gruesome spectacle. Other feelings aroused in us are hatred for Oedipus at his ill treatment of Teiresias, resentment against Teiresias for his obstinacy, admiration for Jocasta for her devotion to Oedipus, appreciation for Oedipus for his relentless pursuit of truth. We also feel elevated and experience tragic pleasure when we witness the spectacle of human greatness side by side with the spectacle of human misery. The sins of Oedipus were committed unconsciously. Oedipus, sincerely tried his utmost to avert despite his sin of pride. Oedipus is therefore, essentially an innocent man. Jocasta too is innocent, in spite of her sin of scepticism. There is no villain in the play. The essential goodness of Oedipus, Jocasta and Creon please us. Our hearts go out in sympathy for Oedipus and Jocasta, who give the proof of supreme endurance in the face of punishment that is awful and terrible. Oedipus, whom in the first scene the priest calls the first of men to whom all knees are bent, is at the end polluted, blind, banished from the land he ruled and love from the people who obeyed him. At the end Oedipus rises truly to heroic heights and displays indomitable will. Though Oedipus is extremely ashamed of his parricide and incestuous experience yet he shows invulnerable self confidence and it is which has a cheering, uplifting and exhilarating effect upon us. The play presents a mystery, the stubborn and destructive stuff of experience as man meets it on the way. All attempts to rationalize the play, to understand the mystery of life, to remove the secret cause fail. The mystery of the undeserved suffering is one of the chief attractions of *Oedipus Rex*. It is this aspect of the play which makes it an authentic, though a bitter comment on the uncertainties and labyrinthine ways of life.

8.3 The Function of the Chorus in *Oedipus- Rex* :

8.3.1 Aristotle's View :

Aristotle comments on the functions of the Chorus in Greek tragedy in the *Poetics*, elucidating his point with reference to the two of great tragic dramatists. According to Aristotle : "The Chorus should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be integral part of the whole, and take a share in the action that which it has in Sophocles rather than in Euripides. "Horace, too, comments on the role of Chorus in the same vein. *Oedipus Rex* meets the requirements of the Chorus stipulated by Aristotle and Horace. In this play the Chorus consists of the elders of Thebes. They are persons who are not only senior in age but also occupy positions of prominence in

life. The characters of the Chorus are not individualized. The speeches of the Chorus are attributed to a single character, who represents the whole group. The members of the Chorus do not have difference of opinion in the odes they all sing together. The members of the Chorus in Greek tragedy used to range between twelve and fifteen.

8.3.2 In Greek Tragedy :

The Chorus has a great importance in the structure of Greek tragedy. The prologue precedes the first entry of the Chorus. Next to it comes the parodos, which is the song by the Chorus as it enters the stage. The action of the play itself is separated by parts or episodes or by the songs of the Chorus. From the time of the first entry upto the conclusion of the play, the Chorus never left the stage. In *Oedipus Rex*, even the conversation between the king and the queen where both of them confide to each other about their past history, takes place in the presence of the Chorus. In *Oedipus Rex* there are also times when the Chorus is alone on the stage. In addition to singing choral songs, the Chorus also participates in the dialogue. Often this is when some question has been addressed to it,

One such example is - where Oedipus asks it concerning the circumstances in which the murder of Laius occurred. Another is when the Corinthian messenger asks to be directed to the palace of Oedipus. The tone of their speeches differs as they perform these two different functions when they participate in dialogue; they are on the level of the characters of the common man, while in the Choral speeches they speak in an idealized manner and take on a universal character. The Chorus in Sophocles has a conformist and conservative character. The Chorus never takes a hand in the action of the play, but short of this, it contributes to the play in several ways.

8.3.3 Chorus as a representative of citizens :

The Chorus was not intended to present literally all the citizens, but it did possess a representative character. *Oedipus Rex*, opens with a large delegation of Theban citizens before Oedipus's palace, while the Chorus proper enters only after the Prologue. The Chorus does not speak directly of the audience all the time. The Chorus represents the point of view and the faith of Thebes as a whole, and by the analogy of the audience. Thus the Chorus represents the citizens and the audience in a particular way, not as a mob formed under the stress of some momentary feeling, but rather as an organ of a highly self-conscious community, something like the conscience of the race.

In its entry song, the Chorus invokes the various gods and describes the misfortunes which have fallen the city of Thebes. With the entry of the Chorus the list of all the characters is complete and the main action can now begin. It is the function of the Chorus to mark the stage of this action and to perform the suffering and perceiving part of the tragic rhythm.

8.3.4 Contents of the Odes :

The choral odes are lyrical and meant to be danced and sung. Each song represents one passion or pathos in changing action of the whole play. His passion, like the other moments in the tragic rhythm, is felt at so general or so deep a level

that it contains both the mob fury and the patience of prayer. The opening song of the Chorus has two themes. One is plague raging in the city of Thebes and the other is the message from Delphic Oracle. Both these themes have already been dealt with in the Prologue. Both these themes have become something much more immediate when presented through song and dance. The dominant mood of this ode is feeling of apprehension and fear. A prayer for help and relief is offered to gods.

The second Ode comes after Teiresias's 'denunciation' of Oedipus. The Chorus here pictures the guilty man as a homeless outcast shrinking from men's eyes. The Chorus expresses its perplexity on hearing the accusation brought by Teiresias against Oedipus. The Chorus is in a fix. It cannot disbelieve the Prophet because of its respect for him, but it cannot believe the Prophet either because of its respect for Oedipus. The Chorus is reluctant to believe that Oedipus can be guilty of any evil. The conflict in the mind of the Chorus reflects which must at this point be taking place in the minds of the audience. The Chorus takes upon itself the role of a mediator or moderator. It urges both Teiresias and Oedipus to -restrain their passion, stating that in their views both of them have been immoderate in their words. It pleads the case of Creon and urges on Oedipus to take the oath of allegiance of Creon at its face value and, on the basis of it pardon him.

The third Song of the Chorus begins with the expression of its reverence for the laws framed by the gods. It then speaks of the tyrant's pride which is a hateful flaw in a tyrant. This ode emphasizes the importance of religion and religious observances. It also indirectly accuses both Oedipus and Jocasta of the fault of pride. It appeals to heaven to preserve the sanctity of Oracles, just after Jocasta and Oedipus have spoken lightly and disrespectfully of them.

In its fourth Song the Chorus speculates on the divine origin of Oedipus. This ode is full of tragic irony because while the Chorus, like Oedipus himself, is ignorant of the true parentage of Oedipus, Jocasta and the audience have become aware of it.

The last song of the Chorus expresses the idea that human happiness is short lived as exemplified in the fate of Oedipus. It is a song of despair.

The various songs show the changing mood of Chorus and to a large extent of the audience. The Chorus is not just a spectator but a commentator which takes notice of the changing situations and developments and expresses its reactions to them mostly in the form of songs. The songs take the shape sometimes of an invocation, sometimes a prayer, sometimes a wish, sometimes a lament, sometimes an expression of joy or grief.

8.3.5 Faith of the Chorus in God :

The Chorus is a strong votary of religious piety and sanctity. The Chorus in its songs expresses a consistent reverence for the gods and complete faith in the Oracles. It deplores and condemn the general decline in religion and prays to the gods to restore people's faith in the Oracles and in religious observances. It stresses a strict conformity to the law framed by the gods. It is a strong champion of religious sanctity. It draws moral lessons from various happening where the violation of divine laws is involved.

The lesson drawn from Oedipus's tragic end is that human happiness is ephemeral and short-lived and that human beings are mere puppets in the hands of Destiny.

The expression of Chorus's reaction to the changing and developing plot is not confined to the song only. The Chorus sometimes takes active part in the dialogue and in this way influences the course of events. When Oedipus has declared his purpose of tracing Laius's murderer and has uttered a curse on the criminal, the Chorus advises him to consult the Oracle to reveal the identity of the murderer. When Oedipus replies that a god cannot be compelled to speak against his will, the Chorus suggests that Prophet, Teiresias should be requested to come and help in the investigation. Oedipus has already sent for the Prophet, so the suggestion of the Chorus agrees with Oedipus's decision and does not, in any way determine it. Later when Oedipus loses temper at Teiresias's silence and speaks harsh words to him, Teiresias is provoked and hits back. To save the situation from becoming worse, the Chorus mediates and tries to pacify both of them saying that both of them have spoken in the heat of the moment. Afterwards when Creon complains that he has been falsely accused of treason by Oedipus, the Chorus tries to soothe Creon's feelings by saying that Oedipus spoke these words under the stress of anger. When Jocasta arrives and is pained to see Oedipus and Creon quarrelling, the Chorus expresses the hope that she would be able to compose the quarrel between them. The Chorus also feels shocked at the pronouncement of death sentence on Creon and appeals to Oedipus to withdraw it. The Chorus urges him not to suspect an ally without properly ascertaining of the facts. When Jocasta enquires how the quarrel arose the Chorus says that the trouble developed because of a 'wild conjecture' on the part of Oedipus. Thus throughout the scene, the role of the Chorus is conciliatory. The Chorus makes a sincere effort to pacify both Oedipus and Creon and to soothe ruffled feelings. In doing so, the Chorus appears loyal to both the king and to the interests of the country. There is not the least touch of partiality or any bad motive in what the Chorus says. At last, under the stress of pressure of the Chorus, Oedipus does withdraw the sentence of death against Creon. To this extent the Chorus is effective in influencing the action of drama. After this the Chorus comments upon the mood of the grief of Jocasta when she withdraws into her own chamber after having learnt the identity of Oedipus from the Corinthian Messenger. The Chorus points out that the queen has left in a state of deep anguish and predicts that some vile catastrophe will emerge from what she is trying to suppress. At this time neither the Chorus nor Oedipus is aware of the real truth. In the final scene the Chorus expresses its horror and grief at Oedipus's self-blinding. In questioning Oedipus it comes to know the reasons for his self-blinding. Then it offers sympathy and consolation to Oedipus and at the same time it emphasizes Oedipus's sinfulness. In its opinion it would have been better for Oedipus to die than to live in blindness. The close questioning of Oedipus by Chorus and its comments reveal the working of Oedipus's mind. Both the questioning and the comments by the Chorus deepen the tragic effect. At the very end of the play the Chorus draws the moral that, "None can be called happy until that day when he carries his happiness down to the grave in peace."

8.3.6 The Indispensable Chorus :

The Sophoclean Chorus is generally an integral part of the play. In respect of *Oedipus Rex*, a critic observes, "The Chorus in Sophocles's play blends so artistically with the other portion, that it adds to the beauty of the whole without impairing the tragic interest." During the dialogue it acts as a foil to the heroic figures upon the stage, accentuating their grandeur by its own feebleness and indecision. In the pauses of action, its grave and solemn strains, intervening between scenes of violence and passion, affords a welcome resting place to the mind; and while limited in length, so as not to interrupt the progress of the events, sheds a sort of lyrical splendor over the whole tragedy. The particular function of the Chorus in *Oedipus Rex*, has been thus brought out by Kitto:

Chorus is so far a personality that its character helps in making the cross rhythms of the party. It is pious, and is devoted to Oedipus. In the second ode it is its loyalty and its confidence in Oedipus which prevail in language somewhat bold for a Chorus, it says; God is certain, but that His prophet knows more than another man, that is not proved. When next it speaks, it has had more shocks and its tone is different, now its instinctive piety asserts itself and leads it to pray for the fulfilment of the Oracle."

In *Oedipus Rex*, the Chorus expounds the past, comments on the present and forbids the future. It provides the dramatist with a mouth piece and the spectator with a counterpart of himself. The Chorus forms a living foreground of common humanity above which the heroes tower, and a living background of poetry which turns lamentation into music and horror into peace. The great Greek dramatists used the Chorus successfully for the creation of atmosphere of contrast, of escape and relief.

8.4 Suggested Questions :

Long:

1. Discuss *Oedipus Rex* as a tragedy.
2. Write a critical note on the functions of chorus in *Oedipus Rex*.
3. How did Laius and Jocasta try to thwart the curse pronounced by the gods on their house? Did they succeed?
4. Comment on the ending of *Oedipus Rex* with particular emphasis on the acts of retribution and self-blinding

Short notes in about 100 words each:

1. The news brought by the Corinthian Shepherd.
2. *Oedipus's* act of self-blinding.
3. Significance of the final choral song.
4. Myth of *Oedipus*.
5. First song of the Chorus.
6. Cause of *Oedipus's* hostility to Creon.
7. Poetic Justice in the play *Oedipus Rex*.
8. Jocasta's Suicide.
9. Is *Oedipus* an innocent victim of a relentless fate ?

8.5 Let's Sum Up :

We've made an effort to discuss in detail various critical aspects of the play. List of suggested questions will give you a fair idea of the type of questions you are likely to get in examination.

8.6 Suggested Readings & Web Sources :

Bates, William Nickelson, *Sophocles : Poet and Dramatist*, London : Oxford University Press, 1940.

Web Sources :

1. www.sparknotes.com/drama/oedipus
2. [hubpages.com/hub/the truth of fate](http://hubpages.com/hub/the_truth_of_fate)



**M.A. (ENGLISH) PART-I
SEMESTER-I**

**COURSE-II
CLASSICAL AND
ELIZABETHAN DRAMA**

ACADEMIC SESSION : 2019-2020

UNIT NO. 2

Department of Distance Education
Punjabi University, Patiala
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**SOPHOCLES : *OEDIPUS REX*
OR
KING OEDIPUS
OR
OEDIPUS TYRRANUS**

Lesson Nos. :

- 6 : Introduction
- 7 : **Oedipus Rex** : A Critical Study of the Text
- 8 : **Oedipus Rex** : A Critical Study of the Text (contd.)
- 9 : Critical Appraisal of the Play
- 10 : Some Important Aspects

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