

LITERATURE FRATERNITY OF UGANDA
A-LEVEL LITERATURE P310/2 (PLAYS) NEW SYLLABUS (2020) WORKSHOP
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0. Preamble

Name: **Hussein Innocent**

Telephone Contact: **0772328079**

E-mail address: **pumuramyeh@gmail.com**

Text and Author of focus: ***Oedipus the King*: Sophocles**

1. Background

When King Laius and his wife Jocasta bear a son (Oedipus) they find a way of killing him to avoid being victims of a spell that is on their child. His feet are pierced together and given to a shepherd who should abandon him on the grazing grounds of Cithareon. The shepherd however gives the infant to another shepherd who takes him to be a child of the childless Polybus and Merope, king and queen of Corinth. Oedipus, later learns that he isn't the child of Polybus and Merope and his seeking of counsel from the oracle brings to his knowledge the spell on him. Desperate to avoid the terrible fate of having to kill his own father and marry his own mother, he leaves Corinth for the city of Thebes. On the way to Thebes, Oedipus encounters a King and his attendants and the two quarrel over whose chariot/carriage has a right of way. The Theban king moves to strike the insolent youth but Oedipus, unaware that this is his true father, throws the old man down from the carriage, killing him. Thus Laius has been slain by his own son and the prophecy that the king had sought to avoid by exposing Oedipus at birth is fulfilled. Before arriving at Thebes, Oedipus encounters a Sphinx, a legendary beast with the head and breast of a woman, the body of a lioness, and the wings of an eagle. The sphinx had been sent to the road approaching Thebes as a punishment from the gods and would kill any traveler who failed to answer a certain riddle. The riddle was: "what creature walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon and three in the evening?" Oedipus correctly guessed the answer as 'man' who crawls as an infant on all fours, walks upright in maturity and leans on a walking stick in old age. Overpowered by Oedipus, the sphinx throws herself from a cliff, thereby ending the curse. Oedipus is rewarded with kingship over Thebes and the, Jocasta, for a wife. The prophecy has then been fulfilled.

2. Plot

- Thebes is under affliction and is desperate for a solution, the Thebans to their King.
- Creon returns to report that the affliction is a result of religious pollution since the murderer of their former king, Laius has never been caught. Oedipus swears to find the murderer and curses him.
- Oedipus summons the blind prophet Tiresias for help. He is forced to reveal the truth which Oedipus finds too bitter. This creates tension between Oedipus and Creon.
- Jocasta' account of the Laius' death burdens Oedipus' conscience.
- He sends for the only surviving witness of the attack from the fields where he now works as a shepherd.
- Oedipus reveals his life story to Jocasta as they wait for the shepherd. Oedipus has hope however because he has been told that Laius was murdered by several robbers.
- A man arrives from Corinth with the news of Polybus' death. This messenger is the former shepherd whom Jocasta gave a baby to kill but ended up taking the baby to Polybus and Merope.
- Jocasta now realises the truth and begs Oedipus to stop asking questions. She runs into the palace where she commits suicide.

-The shepherd arrives, Oedipus questions him but he begs to be allowed to leave without answering questions. Oedipus threatens him with torture and execution. It emerges that the child he gave away Laius' own son.

-The truth comes out.

-He finds Jocasta dead and he plucks his own eyes out

3. Characters

-Oedipus (proud, arrogant, determined, dictatorial, impulsive, irrational loving, strong willed, abusive, authoritarian, mischievous, courageous, egoistic, insensitive)

-Creon (respectful, trustworthy, intelligent, firm, authoritative, honest, reliable, patriotic)

-Tiresias (intelligent, rational, level headed, polite, honest)

4. Themes

-Self-pride.

-Self-discovery

-Fate versus Free will

-Blindness/ignorance

-Suffering.

-The role of the gods

5. Dramatic Techniques

-Symbolism

-Irony (dramatic, situational, verbal and tragic)

-Sarcasm

-The Chorus

-Use of the supernatural

-Monologue

-Contrast

-Foreshadowing

-Dramatic reversal

-Biblical Allusion

6. Lessons

-Pride goes before a fall

-One cannot escape one's fate. As we run away from our fate, we instead come closer to it.

-The supernatural and their representatives should be respected.

-One good turn deserves another.

-Suicide is a solution to problems.

-A man is as good as his word

-The cruel hand of fate is inescapable

-Appearances are deceptive

-The truth always comes out

-You reap what you sow

-Crime attracts punishment

-No one can be wiser than the gods