

**How far do you agree that Sophocles, 'Oedipus The King' is nothing more than a detective story?**

'Oedipus the king' is a play written by a great poet named Sophocles. Oedipus the king is a tragic play as it displays features such as death, pity and irony. Some may call this play a detective story, going by the story line that Oedipus is the detective looking for the murderer. However, there are many twists in the play that go against the detective theory. Sophocles uses many themes in the play to emphasise the roles of the characters and the morals of the story.

One of the main themes of the play which leads us away from the detective story is the theme of Fate and the Gods. The play is written around the prophecy which we hear at the beginning of the play that one day, Oedipus will marry his mother and murder his father. When Oedipus's parents hear of this they are obviously heartbroken and to make sure this sinful action will never happen they give Oedipus away as a baby to be killed. However, it is well known in Greek mythology that you can never change or dodge fate. This feature of the play is unlike a detective story in the fact that the murderer has no choice of his actions as they have already been chosen and cannot be changed. Also, the murderer already knows of what he is going to do but goes out of his own way in order to change his fate. Therefore there is no act of free will and it is not his choice but the choice of the Gods. Therefore the murderer is strangely innocent. This completely defies the object of being a detective story.

The dramatic irony is incorporated into the text to emphasize Oedipus's and Jocasta's disloyalty towards the Gods. To demonstrate their unfaithfulness, Oedipus and Jocasta continually reject the prophesies that the oracles deliver. As Oedipus grows in terrifying self-knowledge, he changes from a prideful, heroic king at the beginning of the play, to a tyrant in denial toward the middle, to a fearful, condemned man, humbled by his tragic fate by the end. This behaviour is shown when Oedipus is talking to the old blind prophet Tiresias. Oedipus begins by showing great respect for Tiresias, 'O Tiresias, master of all the mysteries of our life...blind as you are you can feel all the more.' Oedipus knows that his city is counting on him to save them from devastation. His leadership qualities show that he is passionate toward his people and is doing whatever it takes to get rid of the sin which has brought about the plague. The great Irony in this is that it is himself who is causing the pain. The unpunished sin of the king Laius has come back to haunt both him and the city. To be a great leader Oedipus must choose between his own life or the survival of his city. Tiresias knows the truth but doesn't want to tell Oedipus of the pain he has and in future will cause. Oedipus, in desperation to save his city is furious when Tiresias refuses to tell. His attitude quickly changes to insolence and disrespect, whereas Tiresias is doing him a favour by not telling him and all the priests around that it is Oedipus the king who killed their last king. Another irony of

*this play is that Oedipus is casting his own punishment as he announces that who ever the killer is, they shall be banisher from Thebes.*

*Soon, however, Oedipus' character changes to a man in denial—a man more like a tyrant than a king—as he begins to solve the new riddle of Laius' death. A growing paranoia grips Oedipus when Jocasta recounts the story of her husband's murder, leading the king to suspect his own past actions. He remarks, absentmindedly, "Strange, hearing you just now . . . my mind wandered, my thoughts racing back and forth"). Yet Oedipus is not quick to blame himself for the plague of the city—indeed he tries to place the burden onto others as he continues his investigation, blindly trusting his own superior ability while ignoring the damaging evidence that surrounds him. For example, when Tiresias accuses Oedipus of being the murderer, the king takes the counter-offensive, actually accusing Tiresias of the murder when he asserts, "You helped hatch the plot, you did the work, yes, short of killing him with your own hands . . ."). Similarly, he blames Creon for conspiracy and treason, charging, "I see it all, the marauding thief himself scheming to steal my crown and power!". In this way, Oedipus chooses to attack the messenger while disregarding the message. Besides spiting the prophet, Oedipus also fuels the wrath of the gods, who vest their divine wisdom in Tiresias. The Chorus underscores the vengeance of the gods when it warns, "But if any man comes striding, high and mighty, in all he says and does, no fear of justice, no reverence for the temples of the gods—let a rough doom tear him down, repay his pride, breakneck, ruinous pride!". Here, Sophocles portrays Oedipus as a tyrant of sorts; indeed the peoples' greatest blessing has become their worst curse.*

*Throughout Oedipus the King, Sophocles employs one continuous metaphor: light vs. darkness, and sight vs. blindness. A reference to this metaphor occurs early in the play, when Oedipus falsely accuses Tiresias and Creon of conspiracy: Creon, the soul of trust, my loyal friend from the start steals against me... so hungry to overthrow me he sets this wizard on me, this scheming quack, this fortune-teller peddling lies, eyes peeled for his own profit—seer blind in his craft!*

*Tiresias responds by using the same metaphor: So, you mock my blindness? Let me tell you this. You with your precious eyes, you're blind to the corruption of your life, to the house you live in, those you live with—who are your parents? Do you know? All unknowing you are the scourge of your own flesh and blood, the dead below the earth and the living here above, and the double lash of your mother and your father's curse will whip you from this land one day, their footfall treading you down in terror, darkness shrouding your eyes that now can see the light!*

*Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher claimed that a good tragic play must arouse pity from the audience, adding that the best way to accomplish this was through the use of dramatic irony. For example Oedipus has no idea that he is the murderer of his father but the evidence is right in front of him. He is known for his intelligence and wit for solving the riddle of the sphinx but he cannot see what is right in front of his eyes. This links us with the theme of sight and blindness. Though Tiresias is physically blind, he sees the truth from the beginning, while Oedipus, who has physical eyesight, is blind to his fate. By the end, Oedipus makes his eyes blind when he learns the truth and finally sees - great irony. The contrast between this play and a detective play is the fact that it is so simple to figure out and the audience are almost brought to frustration watching Oedipus humiliate himself in finding ways for the prophecy to be wrong. Another contrast is that the audience from the beginning of the play already know who the murderer is so it is no surprise at the end when all is revealed.*