

## OEDIPUS

Try to visualize Oedipus as a forceful, powerful ruler who begins the trilogy in absolute control of the situation. As the story progresses, however, Oedipus' power and pride are broken down. How do you see him at the end of Oedipus the King? Some readers imagine a broken, pitiful old man who's been crushed by the avenging gods. Others see him as a wiser, soberer man, rising majestically above his misfortunes. How do you see him just before his death at the end of Oedipus at Colonus?

Although Oedipus is the title character of the first two plays, you don't know his exact age or his physical traits. Some readers believe that Sophocles left out these essential character details because he was more concerned with developing Oedipus' inner nature- his moral and ethical qualities- than in developing a character for performance by an actor. Other readers point out that the lack of details is characteristic of Sophocles' economical writing style. (Athenians would probably have already had a mental picture of the legendary Oedipus, anyway.)

Oedipus isn't given a lot of physical action, either. He enters, exits, kneels, prays, shouts, struts, weeps, yells, and dies. His most significant action is blinding himself, but that takes place offstage. Why does Sophocles omit physical movement for Oedipus? Perhaps Oedipus must seem stately and regal, so he will stand as a symbol of Thebes' political order, or as a symbol of political authority in general. Perhaps his restrained, grand actions emphasize his heroic, almost superhuman qualities. Consider these possible meanings when Oedipus first appears. Then, as the trilogy progresses, notice how he changes. As Oedipus loses his noble posture, he gradually becomes more like any other human.

From the information given in the script, you can sketch the following portrait of Oedipus. He is apparently handsome and well built. He is described as a "tower of strength," and has a penetrating way of looking at people. He is quick-tempered, and often acts impulsively and violently. His followers love him, and consider him a brilliant ruler because he solved the riddle of the Sphinx and brought prosperity to the city of Thebes.

When Oedipus the King begins, Oedipus exhibits wisdom, love for his children and his subjects, and a reputation for high moral standards. He has a passion for truth, and shows courage in the face of disaster or conflict. These same noble qualities, however, also lead to his inevitable tragic downfall. His wisdom becomes self-righteousness, and he refuses to believe anyone who doesn't agree with him. His love for his children becomes obsessive, and he refuses to see that he's married his own mother. His passion for the truth and high moral standards lead him in a fatal quest for the murderer of Laios.

The one trait of Oedipus that doesn't change in the course of the plays is his strength and courage in the face of disaster. As the net of guilt tightens on him with each revelation about the truth of the prophecy, Oedipus remains strong and resolved. Every step he takes to solve the mystery of Laios' murder brings him closer to self-exposure, yet he never hesitates to pursue that truth. When the last piece of the puzzle falls into place, Oedipus the detective has become Oedipus the criminal. But his courage and strength help him endure the pain and suffering that come with knowledge of what he has done.

Oedipus' search for the truth leads him to the discovery that he isn't a "child of luck," but a "man of misfortune." His fate was determined years before his birth, as proven by the prophecy of the oracles. All he can do is live out his destiny, but he does this with such dignity and heroism that he shows there is nobility even in suffering and despair. At the end of Oedipus at Colonus you may respect Oedipus for pursuing the truth to its horrible conclusion. Having blinded himself, Oedipus is a broken and shaken man. But he also becomes a model for you to imitate. He has shown what it means to endure in the face of certain defeat. He has shown what it takes to survive in a world that is ruled by unpredictable fate. He has shown the true meaning of suffering and despair. He earns your respect and sympathy when he chooses to live rather than die, and to make his life an example to others of how guilt and pride may lead to self-knowledge. When you think of Oedipus, remember that he suffers for all of us, so that all of us can know the truth about ourselves in a world that will always be hostile and cruel.