

English IB part IV oral

The process to discover ones self, looked at through the characters of Vanessa and Oedipus

To come to the realization of who they really are, the characters Vanessa MacLeod and Oedipus Rex must look into their past to find the relevant puzzle pieces of their life. Although the pieces are often in obscure places, these characters must find the courage to persevere and create a finished picture. They must also evaluate their beliefs and values to reach the final moment of epiphany and achieve true self acceptance. Vanessa and Oedipus create barriers for themselves as a means of blocking out the truth and remaining blind from it. Although the situations and final outcome of the characters differ, the process each follows to discover themselves is similar.

The novel A Bird in the House by Margaret Laurence shows the life of Vanessa from the age of nine to adulthood. Vanessa's realizations are accumulative, taking forty some years for her to reach the final moment of epiphany. Over her childhood and much of her adult life, Vanessa travels on a journey from innocence and ignorance to self-awareness and knowledge of the world around her. On this journey Vanessa must collect the different pieces of the puzzle and comprehend her past, present and future. The greatest wonder in Vanessa's life and the key to her self discovery is her grandfather. Grandfather Connor is the last person to whom Vanessa wants to be compared. She despises his need for power, intolerance and stubbornness which are in fact all characteristics present in herself. Until Vanessa can accept this fate she can never discover her true self. With Grandfather Connor, the adult Vanessa looking back, evaluates his past and present to find herself. By studying Grandfather Connor's past, Vanessa sees how far he has come and the hardships he has endured for his family showing that he does care for them. The adult Vanessa looks back and evaluates her grandfather when she was a child, the reader sees that he did have moments when he revealed the sensitive man underneath. This is the case with the death of his wife when he removes the bear coat and refuses to part with the canary. It is obvious to the reader that Vanessa and her grandfather share many of the same traits but Vanessa is blind to this fact. As the book progresses she is given hints of the truth. Aunt Edna says, "you know who she really takes after" and Vanessa even notices with the help of Roddie that "her own voice carries some disturbing echo of her grandfathers." Vanessa pushes the truth away but as she realizes his good traits from his past and the moments of softness that he showed during her childhood she finally accepts the inevitable. Vanessa carries the Brick House with her. She knows that she does not need to see her grandfathers grave but looks towards the house. She can hear him proclaim himself in her veins when she thinks about how the new owners need to trim the hedges and repaint the window frames. Vanessa has collected all the pieces of the puzzle and can stand back to observe them. The narrator of this story is the Vanessa of knowledge looking at the picture in front of her and explaining to the reader the individual pieces of which it is composed.

Oedipus' arrival and exit at Thebes arose from the riddle of the oracle. But also at the time of the play, Oedipus embarks upon a quest for the answer of the riddle of his life. For Oedipus the most important aspect to find the truth is his past, while the future proves to bring the consequence for the past actions. The Oedipus of the present remembers little of his earlier life before he reached Thebes and became King. The past was chosen to be

forgotten and forced to the back of his memory. Because of this Oedipus cannot initially find the pieces even when they are right in front of him. He says “nothing will escape my gaze” but he cannot see himself and therefore even with many obvious hints from Theresias and Jocasta he still does not see the truth. The reason that Oedipus finally reveals his true self is that he pursued the truth at whatever personal cost. To obtain the answers of Thebes and his life, Oedipus continuously asks questions. He sends for Theresias and the shepherd expecting them to give him sufficient knowledge so that he can draw a reasonable conclusion. Although Oedipus initially does not believe Theresias he provides him with a new idea that sinks in to his subconscious and awakens his memory. If Oedipus had not been so determined he never would have been able to look at the complete picture of his life. Upon realizing who he really is, Oedipus blinds himself from the world he thought he knew. Although he is literally blind he can see the truth. This is a change from his metaphorical blindness of the truth at the start of the play. In Oedipus the King Sophocles says “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Before Oedipus consulted the gods about how to rid Thebes of the plague his life was complete in that he had all that he needed and was living a happy life. But a person cannot live a fulfilled life without understanding their past or who they are. The unexamined life may prove to be more comfortable but the awareness of the examined life is worth the sacrifice.

Values and belief play a large role in how Vanessa and Oedipus come to their realizations. Vanessa’s beliefs were put upon her by people she lives with. With Harvey Shinwell Vanessa sees the conditions in which he lives and becomes aware of how fortunate she is to live in her grandfather’s house. Vanessa and her family must also show a great deal of tolerance for grandmother MacLeod due to her mental condition and the hard life she has lived. At first Vanessa finds this concept hard to grasp and asks her father “why [she can not] be nice to [them] for a change.” The occurrences in Jericho’s Brick Battlement teach her to be not so trusting of people and that things are often not as they appear. Life is based on experiences and what is gained from them. Vanessa often does not gain much initially from her experiences but with greater knowledge the pieces come together.

Oedipus’s beliefs were a creation of his own values and the values of the Greek society. It was the oracle that led to Oedipus’ downfall. Oedipus believed in the oracle but also believed that he had the power to change his fate. In Delphi when Oedipus learns of his fate to kill his father and sleep with his mother, he runs away hoping to leave fate behind him. However, as Oedipus flees he comes to the cross roads where the inevitable happens and the oracle proves to be true. Oedipus’ original parents felt the same way about the oracle and the words of the gods. When Oedipus was born they were given the same news about his fate and tried to destroy him to save themselves. It is impossible to judge what the outcome would be if Oedipus, Laios and Jocasta had accepted the words of the gods rather than attempting to change it and running from it.

Both the characters of Vanessa and Oedipus create masks for themselves that act as barriers preventing them from finding the puzzle pieces. As Vanessa realizes the similarity between herself and her grandfather she puts on a mask denying herself the truth and attempts to hide it from others around her. As Vanessa grows older she finds the courage to let the mask fall and finally accept herself. If Vanessa had embraced the truth rather than pushing it away the elements of her life would have come together much more

quickly. Vanessa's age acts as a disability for her. Throughout her childhood she wished to be old enough to join into the important conversation and comfort her friends and family. In *Horses of the Night*, Vanessa longs to be able to speak openly to Chris but feels that the age difference between them is too great. Vanessa's family feels that she is too young to be a part of their conversations. To join the adults in her life, Vanessa becomes a professional listener. By doing this she is trying to grow up quickly and leave her childhood behind. This may have resulted in Vanessa having missed out on finding certain puzzle pieces in her childhood that she needed for her adult life. Eventually Vanessa found all the pieces but it would have been a simpler process if she had accepted the entrapment of her grandfather's personality and her age.

Oedipus' hubristic nature proves to be his barrier to the truth. He was unaccepting of the words of Teiresias and believed that he had the power to circumvent the prediction of the Oracle. Because Oedipus is forced to solve the riddle of the plague he is forced to solve the riddle of his life. Oedipus' hubristic nature does not allow him to accept the truth. When Teiresias says that he is the reason for the plague he thinks that it is the most absurd thing he has ever heard. Because he thinks he is better than the gods he believes that Teiresias, a parallel to the gods, is working with Kreon to get him off the throne. If Oedipus had accepted Teiresias' words he would have gone through less pain to find the truth. He has the courage to pursue the truth and even punishes himself showing that he accepts responsibility for his actions. When Oedipus discovers who he is he also realizes his mortal limitations and comes to accept them.

In *A Bird in the House* the reader can assume that Vanessa leads a relatively happy adult life. After the moment of epiphany she is more aware of who she is but does not make drastic changes in her life style. Oedipus however has a completely different life after he discovers who he is. He is exiled from Thebes, alone and blind to the world around him. Despite his misfortunes Oedipus' life is complete. The pieces of these characters past, present and future have come together so that they have a finished picture to look back at. It may have been a difficult process to discover oneself but the end result is rewarding.