

1. Who is Tiresias? What events have led up to him being summoned and what has he done to anger Oedipus?

Tiresias, a character from the play *Oedipus the King*, is an old blind prophet/seer who is summoned to tell Oedipus his fate. Tiresias has the special gift of foresight and prophecy, which he learns from the Gods. Because of his talent of being able to predict and tell the future, he is the Gods messenger. Oedipus accuses Tiresias of the murder of King Laius, but in the end, it is Tiresias that is proved right.

Leading up to the summoning of Tiresias, we as readers see how the city of Thebes is suffering from a disastrous plague, causing devastation to the people of the city. The plague is killing the people of the city, their fruit and crops are dying and women are dying in child labour:

"Thebes is dying. A blight on the fresh crops and the rich pastures, cattle sicken and die, and the women die in child labour, children stillborn."

Tiresias has been called to Oedipus because of this plague. The people have been begging Oedipus for his help, they are showing an act of suppliant, they are in desperate need of help and they look to Oedipus for this. They look to him as a soter, a God on earth. As Oedipus questions what the trouble is, what is causing the plague, it is ironic that it is actually him, something which Tiresias is desperately trying to tell him.

However, when Tiresias is telling Oedipus the oracle, Oedipus becomes very angry. Tiresias is known for speaking in riddles, this which he does to Oedipus. As Oedipus cannot understand or make out what these riddle are about, he becomes angry and does not understand why Tiresias cannot just tell him. Tiresias appears to be mocking Oedipus because he cannot understand the riddles:

"Didn't you understand, just now?"

"Shall I say more, so you can really rage?"

By Oedipus not understanding what the riddle means, it shows how Tiresias has a greater power over Oedipus. Tiresias is aware that Oedipus does not understand the riddle, so he continues to speak in one, infuriating him even more by not saying who has killed King Laius. Tiresias becomes angry:

"..You did the killing single handed."

Previously, Oedipus has begged the people of Thebes to come forwards and say who committed the murder, he begged them to come forward with information, but as it was him that murdered Laius, no one came forward. This is another reason why Oedipus is so annoyed and angry with Tiresias.

2. This passage contains references to sight and blindness. Analyse in detail how Sophocles uses these themes in the passage. What dramatic effect do these references have?

Throughout this passage, there are several references to sight and blindness, creating dramatic irony and effect. In line 419, Tiresias says:

“you cannot see how far you’ve gone in guilt.”

This shows how Oedipus cannot see how much trouble he has got himself into. Both physically and mentally, he will not be able to see the amount of guilt he carries. Physically because of his blindness which he will encounter with in the future, and mentally because he does not understand right now that he is in fact the murderer. When he is blind, he will not see the pain he has caused others, to Jocasta, the wife of Laius, his mother. He has a good sight now but cannot see what he has done, this shows the dramatic effectiveness. It is ironic as he if he cannot see it now, he will not see it in the future when he is actually blind.

In line 423, Oedipus says to Tiresias:

“You’ve lost your power,
stone blind, stone deaf, senses, eyes blind as stone.”

This shows dramatic effectiveness and dramatic irony. Oedipus thinks this of Tiresias, showing disrespect to him because he is blind. However, once the truth comes out, it will actually be the other way round. Oedipus will have lost everything, he will lose his power, status and respect from the people of Thebes. It is ironic, because although Tiresias is blind, he can still see more than Oedipus can. He can see into the future, can predict what will happen, and can see what Oedipus has done. Oedipus assumes Tiresias has lost his power, however we know as readers that it will be Oedipus in the end that not only loses his power, but also his sight.

In line 425, Oedipus says:

“Blind,
lost in the night, endless night that nursed you!”

This again shows references to blindness. Oedipus is again mocking Tiresias for his blindness, saying that it was only the night that helped him, nursed him. This shows dramatic effect again, as when Oedipus is saying this, he does not know that in the end it will be him.

Line 427 shows even greater dramatic effect:

“You can’t hurt me, or anyone else who sees the light -
You can never touch me.”

Oedipus thinks that all those who can see cannot be hurt, both physically and mentally. By him saying, “you can never touch me” shows greater irony and humour. He is stupid to say that no one can ever touch him, he has only gone blind, and he hasn’t lost all his senses, so of course someone could touch him. Once he turns blind, he will have less control of who touches him.

All of the references to sight and blindness help to compliment the dramatic effect between Oedipus and Tiresias.

3. Describe how Oedipus is portrayed in this passage. Compare this portrayal with his portrayal in the rest of the play. In your answer you should consider his actions and the way he talks to other characters.

In the passage where Tiresias and Oedipus talk about the oracle, Oedipus begins talking quite calmly, asking Tiresias to tell him what the oracle means, and who has killed King Laius. However, when Tiresias refuses to tell him, and continues to speak in riddles that Oedipus finds hard to understand, this is where Oedipus starts to lose his temper. He becomes angry with the old man, starts to mock him and his blindness showing no respect to him at all. This is wrong of Oedipus, but he cannot see it. He doesn't show Tiresias any respect, which is what he should be doing in order to get Tiresias to tell him the oracle. He makes spiteful comments to Tiresias, he doesn't show any hospitality towards him and doesn't show any loyalty either. He shows no manners to Tiresias, by him saying " Out with it again" it shows abrupt rudeness, not kindness. He is aggressive and argumentative to him.

From looking previously in the play, we know that Oedipus is the central figure and tragic hero of Sophocles' play. From the opening of the play, we as readers see how Oedipus is confident and well looked up to:

" I am Oedipus."

" The world knows my fame."

He shows his fame and self-assertiveness, the people of Thebes look up to him as a God on earth, they respect and honour him and turn to him in needs of distress and despair. He doesn't refuse their begs for help, he turns to them when they need him most. His character appears quite different in the opening of the play to the end where he turns arrogant and rude.

Looking back at the opening of the play, and to how Oedipus is now in this passage, there is a change in his character that is noticeable to the readers. When Oedipus should be respecting Tiresias and asking him kindly about the oracle, he shows rudeness towards him. This doesn't help him get the answer of the answer of who committed the murder, it infuriates Tiresias even more, and makes him continue to speak in riddles, containing the answer, but making it clear to the reader that it is Oedipus.