World History Name:

Mr. Murray Date:

*Oedipus*, by Sophocles (ca. 450 BCE) Block:

One day a blind man arrived in Athens and asked for permission to stay in the polis and die in peace. He had no eyes, only hollow sockets where his eyes had once been. The old man’s name was Oedipus and this was his story.

Oedipus’ misfortunes had started before he was born. His father Laius, the King of the polis of Thebes, had been told by the Oracle of Delphi that his wide, Queen Jocasta, was carrying a child fated to kill his father and wed his mother. Determined that this would never happen, Laius ordered the baby to have his feet slashed and abandoned on a mountain. But fate had willed it differently. A shepherd from the polis of Corinth found the baby and gave him to the king and queen of Corinth, who were childless. Without a care in the world, Oedipus grew to manhood. Women and men could not resist his beauty. Oedipus had piercing blue eyes and the body and face of a god. One day, Oedipus went to the Oracle of Delphi to find out his fate. Oedipus screamed and vomited his disgust when he heard the words of the priestess: “You will murder your father, and sleep with your mother.” Determined to escape his fate, Oedipus left Corinth without saying goodbye to his parents. He decided to travel to Thebes.

On a narrow mountain path, Oedipus met the chariot of a great lord. “Move!” shouted the servants of the man, but Oedipus refused to budge. “I was here first,” said Oedipus, “and besides, why should I move for an old man?” The lord and his servants attacked Oedipus. Oedipus fought back and killed the lord and all his servants except one who escaped to the mountains. At the fate of Thebes, Oedipus met the Sphinx, a horrible monster. She was surrounded by hundreds of blackened and rotting corpses. She would kill anyone who could not answer her riddle. “What creature is it that walks on four feet in the morning, two at noon, and three at night?” she asked Oedipus with a sinister leer. “Man,” answered Oedipus, “for as a child he walks on all fours, as a man on two feet, and in old age he leans on a staff.” The Sphinx let out a horrible scream and died. Oedipus was greeted as a hero by the people of Thebes. He told them that he was a prince of Corinth. The people demanded that he marry their Queen, whose husband recently died.

Oedipus married the Queen of Thebes whom he could not resist. She had the body of a goddess, with beautiful breasts, and Oedipus did the queen were constantly in bed. Shortly after, a plague hit Thebes. Thousands died, and the stench of their bodies filled the air. A priest from Delphi announced the plague and was sent to Thebes as punishment for never dinging the killer of the king. Finally a man was brought to Oedipus with information on the King’s death. Oedipus asked, “Who killed the great king?” and the man replied “You.” The man was the surviving servant of King Laius’ party on the narrow road.

Oedipus suddenly realized his fate had come true. His mother, sickened by the fact that she had been sleeping with her soon, killed herself. Oedipus then took a sharpened stake, heated it in a red-hot fire, and put out his own eyes, determined never again to have to see the truth. For the rest of his life, Oedipus wandered Greece warning people of the danger of the truth until he came to Athens and died a broken man.



*-Inscription at the Oracle at Delphi*

Know Thyself

“To face ones ignorance becomes the beginning of knowledge”

In Sophocles’ Oedipus the King, tragic events unfold as the title character gradually learns the horrible truth of his own identity. Thus Oedipus the arrogant tyrant can see with his eyes but not with his mind. Not only can’t he “handle” the truth of what he’s done; he can’t even handle the truth of who he really is: killer of his father, husband of his mother. Enlightenment comes hard for Oedipus, and when it does come, he gauges out his eyes and gives up the throne.

Oedipus is the classic example of someone not knowing thyself and realizing his fate. One of the reasons that this play is so famous is that Sophocles creates a situation where both the audience and quite a few of the characters know who committed the murder of the former king of Thebes but Oedipus, ironically the man who committed that murder, does not. What makes this irony more acute is the way in which he pledges himself to find that murderer and see him punished for the tragedy that has befallen Thebes. As the evidence stacks up against him, we see more and more how he is doing his best to ignore the truth, helped by characters such as Jocasta. However, note how he expresses himself when he is forced to truly know himself as the man who is the murderer he is looking for:

O god-

All come true, all burst to light!

O light--now let me look my last on you!

I stand revealed at last-

Cursed in my birth, cursed in my marriage,

Cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands.

Oedipus does his best to subconsciously ignore his true identity for most of the play, but when incontrovertible evidence forces him to see himself for who he is, he has no choice but to yield to the inevitable and finally accept self-knowledge. This is what makes him a perfect example who does everything he can to prevent knowing himself.

Sources: Gnōthi sauton — “Know Thyself”, Andrew Scholtz and http://www.enotes.com/topics/oedipus-rex