

Character Analysis of Oedipus Rex

Born from myth, Sophocles' Oedipus figures as the tragic hero who kills his father and marries his mother. A victim of fate vilified by all, he discovers his own corruption and tears out his eyes in self-punishment — a symbolic castration for his incestuous sin.

The keynote of Oedipus' character lies in his will to know — and, thereby, to control reality. Oedipus' brilliance and determination serve him well in solving mysteries — like the riddle of the Sphinx — but lead ultimately to his tragic downfall.

The petition of the chorus that opens Oedipus the King attests to Oedipus' responsible leadership. He has been a good king for Thebes, and in crisis he moves decisively to save his city, but in his excitement and energy, Oedipus lacks discretion. When, for example, Creon hints wisely that they should discuss the news from the oracle in private, Oedipus refuses, insisting that every action he takes to find and to purge corruption from the city must be public.

Impervious to reason and advice, Oedipus follows his will with an intellectual passion. His drive to unearth the mystery — and his pride in performing his intellectual feat before the whole city — end in horror, as he discovers that the object of his relentless search is himself. To the chorus, Oedipus explains his blinding as his mournful inability ever to look upon his loved ones again, but the violence also represents his attack on that part of himself that cannot stop seeking out and finding what is hidden, despite the fateful consequences.

In Oedipus at Colonus, the tragic hero persists in his will and determination, despite his age, blindness, and banishment. In contrast to the Oedipus who accepted infamy and begged for punishment at the end of Oedipus the King, the Oedipus of Oedipus at Colonus maintains furiously that his agonized past was not his fault. All the intellectual passion that he once devoted to solving the mystery of the Sphinx and finding Laius' murderer, he now pours into his self-defense: He did not know that he was doing wrong.

To the end, then, knowledge fires the tragic heart of Oedipus; yet, after his long suffering, he also attains something more profound — wisdom and transcendence. At the end of Oedipus at Colonus, Oedipus leads Theseus, king of Athens, and his daughters to his resting place — confidently, as if he has regained his sight — and there, in the place promised to him, he regains his integrity, becoming at one with the power he once sought to escape and to deny.