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Line by line critical summary of *Oedipus: The King*

Line 1-168

Summary

As the play opens, a group of citizens led by an old priest is seen in the court of the king. Enquiry reveals that the city of Thebes has been attacked by an epidemic causing the loss of life. The priest also informed that the lad has been infertile day by day. So, the people of Thebes take refuge of their king to get rid of from this turmoil situation, as, according to the priest the city of Thebes was saved earlier from destruction by the king by his deciphering the meaning of the riddle of The Sphinx.

Oedipus expresses his sympathy and concern about the present condition of his kingdom, and announces that he has already sent his brother-in-law Creon to the oracle to make an enquiry about the cause of the plague and how to get relief from it. As Oedipus speaks, Creon returns with the oracle's message: The plague will end when the murderer of Laius (the former King) is killed or banished.

Oedipus immediately, in front of his courtiers promises that proper action will be taken to save the city. That is to say that he will retrieve the murderer and will take necessary steps for the benevolence of the city.

Analysis

The first scene presents the problem of the play and indicates the direction to which the play is going to proceed. Sophocles employed the dramatic irony at the very out set of the play and the irony is not unknown to the audience because from the story of Oedipus it is clear that Oedipus himself is the murderer of his father, King Laius, though Oedipus is totally unaware of that fact.



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The oracle — and Oedipus himself — identify the king with the land, so that calamity or corruption in the king causes famine in his domain. This principle existed in many ancient cultures. In some early societies, a famine or pestilence on the land was enough to arouse people to kill their king and choose another — hopefully purer — ruler whose ascent to power could restore the fertility of the land.

The "wasteland" of Thebes — with its hunger, disease, and death — must therefore be the responsibility of the king. Oedipus takes up the challenge, believing he can purge the land by punishing another — unconscious that he himself is the source of corruption.

In this first scene, Oedipus seems outwardly the ideal king, revealing his intelligence, responsibility, and energy — attributes that Athenians prized as their own particular virtues. But his overly eager insistence that Creon announce the oracle's words publicly betrays a certain arrogance about his abilities.

As the play unfolds, then, both Oedipus' virtues and his weaknesses will lead to his ultimate downfall. The audience can see that Oedipus' sense of responsibility for his city-state drives his search for the truth, and because of this the hero gains sympathy — even when he is at his most arrogant, and especially at his fall from power.

Line 169-244

Summary

The chorus chants a prayer to the gods Zeus, Apollo, Athena, and Artemis, describing the horrors of the Theban plague. In the name of the people, they beg for deliverance from the gods, but worry about the sacrifice that may be demanded in return.



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Analysis

At this point, the chorus takes over the stage, providing a break in the action as they reflect the fear and foreboding implicit in the unfolding drama.

Most practically, this chanting denotes the passage of time, from Oedipus' command to assemble all the Thebans to their appearance before the palace in the next scene. The theme of the chorus — the suffering of Thebes — also develops in detail the reality of the plague, which has been discussed only in general terms so far. The poetic repetition — "Death / so many deaths, numberless deaths on deaths" (203-204) — arouses pity in the audience, as does the chorus' plaintive plea for help from the gods.

The chorus' anxiety about the price of deliverance also continues the dramatic irony begun in the first scene, foreshadowing the tragedy's climax, the disgrace and downfall of Oedipus.

Line 245-526

Summary

With the people of Thebes assembled before him, Oedipus calls upon anyone who knows the murderer of Laius to come forward with the truth. As an incentive, the king promises leniency — exile, not death — to the murderer and a reward to anyone providing information. When no one steps forward, Oedipus curses the murderer and anyone who shelters him — including himself.

The blind prophet Tiresias arrives, reluctantly obeying Oedipus' summons. The king asks for Tiresias' help in finding the murderer, but the prophet refuses.



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Furious, Oedipus accuses Tiresias of taking part in the murder. In response, Tiresias states flatly that Oedipus himself murdered Laius.

The quest for truth collapses into a battle of wits and words, with Oedipus bragging of his victory over the Sphinx instead of pursuing the murderer of Laius. In a rage, Oedipus declares that Tiresias and Creon must be plotting against him. Tiresias replies with dark hints of Oedipus' corruption and his fate. At last, the furious Oedipus orders Tiresias away.

Analysis

Oedipus' address to the people of Thebes offers yet another opportunity for dramatic irony. Describing himself as "a stranger to the story" (248) of the king's murder, Oedipus nevertheless declares that he will fight for Laius "as if he were my father" (301).

The double identity of Oedipus as both son and murderer of Laius reverberates through this episode, especially in the revelations of Tiresias. The blind prophet's clear assertion that Oedipus is the murderer, as well as his subtler references to Oedipus' marriage, should end all suspense in the drama. And yet the tension heightens when the prophecy evokes Oedipus' fury, leading to the angry confrontation between the prophet and the king.

As a prophet who is both blind and clairvoyant, Tiresias represents the ambiguous nature of all spiritual power. Prophecies, like the words of the oracle, tend to be apparent only in hindsight. But Tiresias' words — ". . . you are the murderer you hunt." (413) — are uncompromising, and Oedipus' angry refusal to accept them constitutes a rejection of the prophetic power. Sophocles' audience would have understood immediately that Oedipus was rejecting a long-respected conservative tradition in the Greek city-states.

The ridicule of the prophet and his prophecy reflects a change in Athens during the fifth century B.C., when the proponents of reason began to challenge the authority of spiritual power. Sophocles expresses his own conservative views on prophecy by setting up the double irony of a blind man who can see the future and a seeing man who is nevertheless blind to his own past and present — blind even to his own identity.



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Oedipus' metaphorical blindness to the truth, intensified by his anger, provides further dramatic irony, while foreshadowing the king's literal blindness at the end of the drama. Another ironic twist emerges when Oedipus blames Creon for scheming with Tiresias in an attempt to overthrow him and steal his crown. The king cannot guess that as events turn, Creon will succeed him and he will have to beg his fate from Creon.

Line 527-572

Summary

In this ode, the chorus wonders at the prophet's accusation that Oedipus is the murderer of Laius. As loyal subjects, they are horrified and confused. Still, they will stand by their king unless the charges are proved.

Analysis

The ode continues the theme of belief in spiritual power contrasted with reason and everyday common sense. The opening ritually glorifies the Olympian gods, especially their power to reveal truth and destroy evil. The murderer, the chorus warns, will be hunted down by the gods through their oracle, who will descend upon the guilty like "dark wings beating around him shrieking doom" (548).

But the chorus does not trust prophecy completely, and so the image turns around. In the second half of the ode, the chorus itself feels "wings of dark foreboding beating" (552) around them because the prophecy implicates their king. The moment tests the peoples' faith in both the gods and the state, forcing them to choose belief or reason. Conflicted and confused, they come to an uneasy compromise — revere the god, but demand proof of his prophet. This solution allows the chorus to remain loyal to Oedipus while keeping open to conviction on his guilt.



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Line 573-953

Summary

The scene opens with Creon's denial of plotting against Oedipus. When Oedipus angrily repeats his charges, Creon again denies it, arguing rationally that he has no motivation to usurp the throne. The wrangling stops when Jocasta — the queen and Creon's sister — divides the men, sending Creon home.

Oedipus continues to complain of Creon's charge (through Tiresias) that he himself killed Laius. When Jocasta hears that the charge comes from a prophet, she dismisses it immediately. No one can see the future, she insists. As proof, she offers the story of a prophecy that her son would kill her husband, a fate avoided when Laius abandoned the child on a mountain.

After Oedipus learns the details of Laius' death, he begins to worry that he is indeed the murderer. Jocasta, however, reminds him that Laius died at the hands of many men, not one. Nevertheless, Oedipus asks that the only living witness to the murderer — a shepherd — be brought to him for questioning.

Analysis

This scene marks the change in the play from a simple detective story to psychological drama. From now on, the problem of the play will be not only who killed Laius, but also what can people know of one another and themselves, and how can they know it.

Despite his rejection of Tiresias, Oedipus does believe in the power of prophecy, as he confesses to Jocasta. Oedipus recalls two disturbing revelations — one from an oracle, the other from a drunken man — that make him doubt himself. Note that the drunken man's railings complement and confirm the oracle's message about Oedipus' fate. At the Festival of Dionysus — the god of wine — such a telling detail would be regarded as a tribute.

Jocasta, in contrast to Oedipus, rejects the power of prophecy, citing as proof her own experience with the oracle who predicted that her son would kill her husband. But as she takes Oedipus through a rational explanation of why the prophecy



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turned out to be false, she unexpectedly jogs his memory. Paradoxically, then, Jocasta's skepticism brings Oedipus to the suspicion that perhaps the prophet is right after all — and that he is the murderer of Laius.

Line 954-996

Summary

The chorus glorifies the gods and destiny, rejecting human pride.

Analysis

In the ode, the chorus reflects Oedipus' emerging belief that the prophecies may be correct and that the gods will tear down the proud. Note especially the nostalgic tone of the conclusion, when the chorus laments the erosion of respect for prophecy.

Lines 997-1194

Summary

As Jocasta makes a sacrifice to Apollo, a messenger arrives to announce the death of Polybus. Oedipus rejoices at the news that the father he feared he would kill has died of natural causes, but he continues to worry about the prophecy because his mother still lives.

Overhearing Oedipus, the messenger tells the king that he has nothing to worry about, since Polybus and Merope were not his real parents. This news stuns Oedipus, and he awaits the shepherd to learn the truth of his birth.

Jocasta now realizes that Oedipus is the baby she and Laius abandoned, and that the prophecy has come true. She begs Oedipus to stop his inquiry, but he refuses, and she runs into the palace screaming.



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Analysis

This scene turns on multiple ironies as Oedipus draws closer to the revelation of his birth. For example, the messenger from Corinth brings conflicting news — your father is dead, he tells Oedipus, but he is not your father.

Even the opening ritual of the episode involves irony. Despite her earlier skepticism, Jocasta burns incense to Apollo. Ironically, she implores Apollo — the source of this prophetic truth and the god of prophecy — to release Oedipus from his fears about the very prophecy Apollo himself has given.

Yet the news from the messenger returns Jocasta to her original views on prophecy. She even brushes aside Oedipus' continuing anxiety about his mother with the impious suggestion that he "live at random" (1072), completely oblivious to Apollo's warning. Her bravado is shattered, however, as the scene unfolds and she realizes that Oedipus is, in fact, the child she abandoned.

Meanwhile, Apollo seems to have answered Jocasta's prayer. With the terrible truth pressing in on him, Oedipus calls triumphantly for the shepherd who will tell him everything. At this moment, Oedipus revels in the kind of pride that always precedes the downfall of a tragic hero. He seems proud even in his (mistaken) belief that he is the son of a shepherd and the goddess Chance, "the giver of all good things" (1189). In calling Chance, a goddess, Oedipus follows Jocasta's questionable advice to acknowledge that "chance rules our lives" (1070).

By now, the truth of Oedipus' birth is practically unavoidable, but the fact that he still cannot guess it — and that Jocasta has only now realized it — would not have seemed strange to Sophocles' audience. Sophocles means for the audience to suspend their disbelief, and let the tragedy unfold according to its own conventions.

Line 1195-1214

Summary

ENGLISH (CC); SEM-IV; PAPER-C8T (OEDIPUS: THE KING)



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The chorus sings a joyful ode to Mount Cithaeron, where Oedipus was found. They wonder if some god or goddess actually gave their king birth.

Analysis

The chorus takes up Oedipus' triumphal declaration that he is the son of Chance and speculates about his mysterious birth. Perhaps, the chorus suggests, he is really the son of Pan, or Dionysus, or even Apollo himself.

Relieved to hear the possibility of something great and glorious about their beloved king after Tiresias' terrible pronouncements, the chorus jumps on the uncertainty of Oedipus' birth and expands on his vision. The enthusiasm of the chorus elevates Oedipus to divine proportions. This hopeful viewpoint sets the stage for Oedipus to fall from even greater heights as a tragic hero.

Line 1215-131

Summary

The shepherd arrives but resists telling what he knows. Only when Oedipus threatens violence does the shepherd reveal that long ago he disobeyed his orders and saved the baby out of pity. And, finally, he admits that the baby was the son of Laius and Jocasta.

With this news, Oedipus realizes that he has murdered his father and married his mother. Horrified by his crimes, Oedipus rushes wildly into the palace.

Analysis

This is the climax of the play. All previous action has moved toward this point of revelation, and this moment, in turn, will determine the outcome of the play. What remains after this scene is the unimaginable consequence of such terrible knowledge. Knowing what he knows, what will Oedipus do?



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Note the energy and determination Oedipus manifests in uncovering the truth of his birth. When the shepherd refuses to speak, Oedipus threatens the man with torture and death. In fact, Oedipus appears to be totally in control of the situation — until the lowly shepherd reveals the truth about him.

The match between a king and a shepherd would seem, in another story, to be a fairly straightforward one. The shepherd would tell the king what he's asked out of fear for his life. But this shepherd knows that what he has to tell may drive the king to violence — probably against him. For this reason and because what he has to say would reveal his part in the plot, he tries to keep the truth to himself.

In his tragic downfall, Oedipus suffers from a very human dilemma. At one moment, he seems all-powerful and in charge of his destiny — but in the next moment he becomes vulnerable and powerless. The audience experiences the pity and terror that leads to catharsis

Line 1311-1350

Summary

The chorus laments Oedipus' discovery of his birth, wondering at the king's fall from power and greatness.

Analysis

Just as the previous ode expands on Oedipus' confidence, this ode reflects and magnifies his horror and pain.

The chorus chooses Oedipus as its example of the fragility of human life. Joy, the chorus chants, is an illusion that quickly fades. The glory of Oedipus' victory over the Sphinx is now buried in the infamy of his marriage. The chorus' comment on the uncertainty of life foreshadows its own final lamentation on the power of fate in the last lines of the play.

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The chorus also looks to Oedipus as a kind of father — "you gave me life" (1348) — and his disgrace therefore brings shame upon the whole city. The phrase "now you bring down night upon my eyes" (1350) expresses this suffering, while foreshadowing Oedipus' violence against himself at the end of the play.

Line 1351-1684

Summary

A messenger from the palace announces that the queen has committed suicide after repenting about her past life. He describes the details of the queen's suicide as well as Oedipus' horrifying self-blinding with Jocasta's pins.

Oedipus appears on stage to the horror and pity of the chorus. Questioned about his self-mutilation, Oedipus explains in agony that he has raked out his eyes because he could not look again upon the loved ones he has defiled, especially his daughters Ismene and Antigone.

Oedipus begs Creon — who has assumed authority in Thebes — to have him put to death or banished. Creon says that he will consult the oracle for judgement; in the meantime, he counsels Oedipus to accept obedience. Humbled, Oedipus disappears with Creon into the palace, as the chorus again laments Oedipus' downfall.

Analysis

Driven to madness by the revelation of his unconscious actions, Oedipus' conscious and deliberate self-blinding — a methodical, rhythmic action — seems to serve as his way of taking control of the pain that torments him. The violence empties and exhausts Oedipus' fury, and he accepts his fate by becoming one with it: "I am agony" (1444).

The final resolution, then, is the humbling of the once proud Oedipus — his literal acceptance of his blindness and his submission to another's will. Now the willful



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king yields to his fate — an uncertain future tarnished by his infamy — as the chorus laments Oedipus' fall from greatness with the warning to "count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last" (1684).

The Athenians were known throughout the ancient world for their decisive action and determination, but, by definition, no one can withstand the blows of fate, anymore than one can avoid death. Therefore, the pity and terror aroused by Oedipus' tragic fall brings about a catharsis, the realization that the power of fate cannot be overcome by will — even by the will of a king.

Modern readers may wonder why Oedipus' self-mutilation occurs off-stage and is announced by the messenger to the assembled elders (and audience). Greek theatre had strict conventions, and one of the strictest involved the depiction of violence. Such action occurred *ob skena* — off-stage — as a matter of tradition. This Greek term later came into English as "obscene," meaning offensive to prevailing notions of decency.



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