

Welcome to Columbia University!

This is Literature Humanities, a course that all Columbia College students are required to take. If you keep up with the requirements, you will receive Columbia University credit for the course. I'm looking forward to working with you! I wish I could be there in person, but we'll have to make do with paper and DVDs. Fingers crossed that this will all work!!!

Course Description

In this course, we'll analyze two famous plays from roughly 2500 years ago. As you'll see, although this literature is very weird in some ways, it also speaks to us now. Since the plays were written and performed 2500 years ago, they have been performed, discussed, and debated.

The plays that we'll discuss explore love, desire, fear, family, revenge, courage, justice, power, and gender. The questions we will ask about the works include: How do these ancient works of literature create imagined worlds that still resonate with us, despite their historical distance, and what do they tell us about the *challenges* of human existence? Besides examining the themes and ideas in these dramas, we'll pay attention to the theatrical elements they employ. We'll do close readings of passages and scenes, and sometimes explore their complications by performing or acting out parts of them.

Our Main Questions/Themes

Our classroom discussions will focus on the following questions: As human beings, what should we seek or love? How do our goals and loves relate to those of our family, friends, and community? Why is fulfilling our loves so hard? What gets in the way? What do we fear and how can we overcome those fears? How can we know what's right? Are we fated to do what we do? Is suffering a means to insight and knowledge? In the end, what do the answers offered to these questions by this ancient literature tell us about ourselves as human beings?

Pedagogical Goals

Improve writing skills.

Learn about theatrical arts and poetic means of expression.

Use theatrical techniques to develop means for individual expression and community building.

Explore philosophical questions about love, desire, fear, family, revenge, courage, justice, power, and gender.

Improve skills of close-reading, literary analysis, and philosophical analysis.

Assignments

- Your primary goal each week is to read and think about the assigned materials. You are asked to submit a 1-2 pages (about 100-200 words) of commentary on the assigned reading **almost every week (see Schedule for details)**. Your weekly commentary should be based on one of the questions that interests you on the syllabus as it applies to the reading. Sometimes I'll also make suggestions. These comments do NOT need to be formal essays, but do try to practice essay writing. NOTE: PUT YOUR NAME, YOUR CLASS TIME, AND THE DATE ON THE TOP OF EVERY COMMENTARY.

- Two 500-600 word papers.
- Four artistic “responses” to the assigned reading. This can be a poem, reimagining a scene or passage from our reading, or any kind of improvisational response to a scene or passage. You may work with another student or two.
- A very short final exam that will tie together some of the themes of the course.

If you have a QUESTION about an assignment, please turn it in with your weekly response and I will try to answer it the next week.

Grades

- Each of two papers, 20% each, for total of 40%
- Artistic (or Literary) Responses, 10%
- Commentaries = 5 points each; total 30%
- Final Exam = 20%

Assigned Readings

Books:

- Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in *Sophocles, Three Tragedies*.
- Sophocles' *Antigone* [Notice that Oedipus is the SECOND play in the book, although we will read it first.]

Packet of Printed Materials --- VERY IMPORTANT

The materials that are attached below, one for *Oedipus* and one for *Antigone*, are VERY important because they will direct you through each of our DVD classes. PLEASE PAY ATTENTION to what the materials direct you to do. Students should help one another coordinate with one another and move at a pace that suits everyone.

Course Schedule

A SUMMARY OF OUR SEMESTER BY WEEK

September

Week 1 Introduction to Course, Themes and Goals.

Required Reading: Sophocles' *Oedipus the King -- The King Faces Problems*

Notice that there are lines along the margins. We will refer to those so we'll know exactly where to go on a page. For the first day, read at least lines, 1-512, i.e., pp. 73- top of p. 95. But feel free to read the entire thing.

Week 2 Sophocles' *Oedipus the King - Oedipus as a Great Man*

Required Reading: Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, READ THE WHOLE DAMN THING, paying special attention to lines 1-633.

DON'T WORRY -- you'll read it all over again!!

Turn in Commentary 1.

Week 3 Sophocles' *Oedipus the King -- Man is Confronted by the Prophet*

Required Reading: Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, special attention to lines 1-910
Turn in Commentary 2.

Turn in Artistic Response of some sort if you can?

First Paper Topic Distributed

Week 4 Sophocles' *Oedipus the King - Oedipus as Detective and Man Detected*

Required Reading: Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, special attention to lines 1-end.

No commentary due -- **First Paper Abstract Due**

Week 5 Sophocles' *Oedipus the King - From Insight to Blindness*

Turn in Commentary 3 which might be part of your paper.

Receive suggestions/comments on your Abstract.

Turn in Artistic Response of some sort if you can?

Week 6 Sophocles' *Oedipus the King- Conclusion -Discussion*

Turn in FIRST Paper

Week 7 *Sophocles' Antigone - Family First?*

Required Reading: Sophocles' *Antigone*, special attention to lines 1-162.

Turn in Commentary 4.

Return Papers- Discuss with one another

Week 8 *Sophocles' Antigone - Confronting Power*

Required Reading: Sophocles' *Antigone*, special attention to lines 1-986.

Turn in Commentary 5.

Second Paper Topic Distributed

Turn in Artistic Response of some sort if you can?

Week 9 *Sophocles' Antigone - Tragedy of Justice*

Required Reading: Sophocles' *Antigone*, whole play

No commentary due -- **Second Paper Abstract Due**

Week 10 *Sophocles' Antigone - What Did We Learn?*

Receive suggestions/comments on your Abstract.

Make sure ALL YOUR ARTISTIC RESPONSES ARE IN.

Week 11 *Sophocles' Antigone - How is this Relevant?*

Turn in SECOND Paper

Week 12 **Conclusion**

Summary -- Conclusions

Short Exam

MDC -- OEDIPUS THE KING

During the first part of our course, we will read the SECOND play in your book, *Oedipus the King*. *Oedipus* is a prequel to the play, *Antigone*, which is first in your book.

Oedipus was a great (mythological) king of Thebes who is one of the greatest tragic heroes in literature. Antigone is one of his daughters who is also a tragic hero. *Oedipus the King* sets the background for *Antigone* [pronounce "An-ti-go-nee"].

Both of the plays are written by Sophocles [pronounce "sof-o-clees"] and performed nearly 2500 years ago!!!

Plot Summary (everyone who watched the play knew the story, so you should too).

At the start of the play, the city of Thebes is suffering terribly. Citizens are dying from plague, crops fail, women are dying in childbirth and their babies are stillborn. A group of priests comes to the royal palace to ask for help from Oedipus, their king who once saved them from the tyranny of the terrible Sphinx (Oedipus was the only person who could solve the "riddle of the Sphinx"). Oedipus has already sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to the oracle of the god Apollo to find out what can be done. (A little background: before Oedipus arrived in Thebes, the previous king, Laius, was murdered under mysterious circumstances and the murderer was never found. When Oedipus arrived in Thebes and saved the city, he was made king and married the widowed queen, Jocasta, sister of Creon.) Now Creon returns with the oracle's news: for the plague to be lifted from the city, the murderer of Laius must be discovered and punished. The oracle claims that the murderer is still living in Thebes.

Oedipus curses the unknown murderer (IRONY!) and swears he will find and punish him. He orders the people of Thebes, under punishment of exile, to give any information they have about the death of Laius. Oedipus sends for Tiresias, the blind prophet, to help with the investigation. Tiresias comes, but refuses to tell Oedipus what he has seen in his prophetic visions. Oedipus accuses Tiresias of playing a part in Laius's death. Tiresias grows angry and says that Oedipus is the cause of the plague—he is the murderer of Laius. As the argument escalates, Oedipus accuses Tiresias of plotting with Creon to overthrow him, while Tiresias hints at other terrible things that Oedipus has done.

Convinced that Creon is plotting to overthrow him, Oedipus declares his intention to banish or execute his brother-in-law. Jocasta and the chorus believe Creon is innocent and beg Oedipus to let Creon go. He relents, reluctantly, still convinced of Creon's guilt. Jocasta tells Oedipus not to put any stock in what prophets and seers say. As an example, she tells him the prophecy she once received—that Laius, her first husband, would be killed by their own son. And yet, Laius was killed by strangers, and her own infant son was left to die in the mountains. But her description of where Laius was killed—a triple-crossroad—worries Oedipus. It's the same place where Oedipus once fought with several people and killed them, one of whom fit the description of Laius. He asks that the surviving eyewitness to Laius's murder be brought to him. He tells Jocasta that oracles have played a big part in his life as well—he received a prophecy that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother, which is why he left Corinth, the city he was raised in, and never returned.

An old messenger arrives from Corinth with the news that Oedipus's father, King Polybus, has died

of old age. This encourages Oedipus. It seems his prophecy might not come true, but he remains worried because his mother is still alive. The messenger tells him not to worry—the king and queen of Corinth were not his real parents. The messenger himself brought Oedipus as a baby to the royal family as a gift after a shepherd found the boy in the mountains and gave him to the messenger. The shepherd was the same man Oedipus has already sent for—the eyewitness to Laius's murder. Jocasta begs Oedipus to abandon his search for his origins, but Oedipus insists he must know the story of his birth. Jocasta cries out in agony and leaves the stage. The shepherd arrives but doesn't want to tell what he knows. Only under threat of death does he reveal that he disobeyed the order to kill the infant son of Laius and Jocasta, and instead gave that baby to the messenger. That baby was Oedipus, who in fact killed his father Laius and married his mother. Oedipus realizes that he has fulfilled his awful prophecy. Queen Jocasta kills herself and Oedipus, in a fit of grief, gouges out his own eyes. Blind and grief-stricken, Oedipus bemoans his fate. Creon, after consulting an oracle, grants Oedipus's request and banishes him from Thebes.

There are several things to think about as you read *Oedipus*.

- EVERY ONE who saw the play knew the story of Oedipus. So, the audience members (and readers) are not surprised by the story, but by how it's told. As you read the play, think about how Sophocles tells the story. How does he make a story that everyone knows so exciting?
- The ancient Greeks were obsessed with people who have **areté** (Greek: ἀρετή) [pronounce "a-re-TAY"] which they considered the greatest virtue and highest excellence. The idea was that some people have the potential for greatness and when they fulfill that by acting courageously, then they have areté.
- What has made *Oedipus* so popular over the years is that Oedipus is a great man -- who arguably has **areté** and yet does terrible things. What makes him a *tragic hero* is that he does everything in his power to do the right thing (and to escape his **FATE**), but in acting as he does, he runs headlong into his **FATE**. He suffers terribly and causes suffering to those he loves.
- **FATE**: Greek religion was committed to the idea that the main events of our lives are fated and that the gods -- especially the god, Apollo -- knew what would happen. Some Greeks felt that humans could change their fates or avoid them. Oedipus thought he could escape his fate and is proven wrong.
- In ancient Greek plays, there are a few main characters, but also a Chorus of actors who speak in groups (=Strophe or Antistrophe) and represents the "people".
- Greek plays constantly refer to Greek gods and some other heroes or famous people. For help with these names, see the **Glossary in the back of the book**.
- Irony - *Oedipus* is famous for its use of "dramatic irony," which is defined as "a literary technique, by which the full significance of a character's words or actions are clear to the audience or reader although unknown to the character." The play is a murder mystery and "whodunit" but the same person looking for the murderer is the murderer himself. It's mind-blowing! Oedipus is determined to hunt down a person who turns out to be himself. The amazing thing about the story is that the audience knows that Oedipus has done these awful things, but feels sorry for him. Tragic irony at its best.
- The ancient Greeks believed in the powers of the Oracle of Delphi to foresee the future. But the Oracle (ruled by the god Apollo) usually spoke in riddles, or at least not clearly.

The prophet Teiresias, who is a priest of Apollo, "knows" what he knows about the past and future, sometimes by watching the signs of birds and other "signs" of nature.

- The slaves in the ancient world were people defeated in battle who were forced to be servants to the victors.

Course schedule: The hope is that you meet for 2 hours over 4 weeks. So our DVDs are organized accordingly. This course is BASED AND DEPENDS on discussion. There are NO RIGHT ANSWERS. Every time I read *Oedipus*, I see something different and I often change my mind about what's going on in the text. So, think about what you read and discuss. Be open to listen to others.

Main Questions to Direct Your Reading:

DAYS 1-2. If you can read the entire play for the first class, then do so. If not, then try to read at least half. Read the materials below. Think about BIG Questions.

- What does it mean to be morally right? How can you know when you are?
- What does the play suggest about how easy or hard it is to know the truth? Even in the face of mounting evidence, characters (Oedipus, Jocasta) often deny what's before their eyes. Why?
- How does the play represent sight and blindness as symbols? The blind prophet SEES, but the strong king and queen do not.
- Are human beings fated to do what they do or do we have free will? How can we know? Is it satisfying or scary to realize that some things might be fated?
- When someone is in charge and trying to be a good leader, how should he act? Should he listen to everyone or to those he trusts? How does he know who to trust? Is he ever justified in hurting some members of the community to save others?

DAY 3. If you haven't done so, read the entire play. Think about how forms of knowledge collide? Read over our big questions again and note how each character contributes to an answer.

What is Teiresias like? What can he see? What not see? On what is his truth based? It is this point that the detective story starts. He knows "who did the deed," but doesn't want to tell the "police officer," Oedipus. Pretty wild, no? Think about our questions here. Creon, Oedipus and Teiresias have different kinds of knowledge and characters. Each has a point.

DAY 4. When Jocasta enters, the play takes a turn to self-discovery both for her and for Oedipus. Why does Jocasta not believe in prophecy?

First, the discovery of the murderer begins. Long forgotten truths are discovered. First revelation occurs at 725 -834, and then continue to 1073.

DAYS 5-6. The time has come for full self-knowledge. Think about the notion of areté. Oedipus proves in this final part of the play that he has it. How? Pay attention to images of sight, darkness, obscurity. Oedipus acts aggressively against those who get in the way of his finding out the truth. Is this good or bad? Why does he punish himself in the way that he does? Why does Jocasta? Why doesn't Oedipus kill himself too? How is Oedipus changed in the end? How is he not? How has Sophocles' answered or not our questions.

Quick Summary of *Antigone*

Antigone begins with the two sons of Oedipus (the former king), **Eteocles** and **Polyneices**, who are fighting for the kingship of Thebes. Both men die in the battle. Their successor, **Creon**, decides that King Eteocles will be buried, but Polyneices, because he was leading a foreign army, will be left on the field of battle. **Antigone**, his sister, buries him anyway although her sister, Ismene, is afraid to help her.

Antigone is caught burying Polyneices and is condemned to death. Her fiancé (and Creon's son) **Haemon**, learns about this and tries to convince Creon to change his mind. It's only then that the wise seer Tiresias (he's back!) appears. After a long discussion, he finally persuades Creon that the gods want Polyneices buried. By then it's too late -- Antigone has hung herself, Haemon kills himself when he finds her, and Creon's wife kills herself when she learns about her son. It's a tragedy!

BIG Questions - Some of the main questions asked about *Oedipus* apply to *Antigone* so remind yourself of them.

Here are some of the BIG questions that will frame our discussion:

Many philosophers assume that humans seek knowledge and that the knowledge they seek is knowledge that will help them in life. But how do they know what will help them in life?

We're back to the question: what ought we to love or seek in life?

If you want to know what will help you in life, then what should you do?

What does it mean to be morally right? How can you know when you are?

If people in power tell you what is right and you disagree, then what options do you have?

People have often said that there are major themes of the play: civil disobedience and moral inflexibility. How are they discussed and debated? What do you think Sophocles thinks?

There is a lot of discussion of what is private v. public, of who is "base" and who is "noble." Think about these distinctions throughout the play.

There is a lot of tension about being moral in deeds v. being moral in thoughts. What is the difference and why do that matter?

How do the answers to these sorts of questions differ from those in *Oedipus*, if at all?

Notice that *Antigone* was written BEFORE *Oedipus* and so *Oedipus* is a prequel to *Antigone*. How does that impact your understanding of both plays, if at all? Are the characters in both plays -- Tiresias and Creon -- the same or different?

Also, think about these more basic questions:

1. What sort of character is Antigone and what does she represent? Pick passages that are especially important.

2. What sort of character is Ismene and what does she represent? Pick passages that are especially important.
3. What sort of character is Creon and what does he represent? Pick passages that are especially important.
4. Who's side is the Chorus on?
5. What sort of character is the Sentry and what does he represent? Pick passages that are especially important.
5. What sort of character is Haemon and what does he represent? Pick passages that are especially important.
6. How would you characterize the role of fate and luck in the play?
7. Does the play offer any answers to our BIG questions? If so, what are they? If not, why do you think Sophocles choice not to do so.
8. What do you most like or dislike about the play and its story?