

Block

2

SOPHOCLES: *OEDIPUS REX*

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

In the previous Block, we learnt about the Greek epic tradition with special reference to **Homer's** the *Iliad*. In this Block, we will learn about Greek Theatre with special reference to **Sophocles' Oedipus Rex**, also known as *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Oedipus the King*— a Greek classical tragedy, first performed in the 5th century BC. Except for the first Unit, all the three succeeding Units of this Block deal with the play *Oedipus Rex*. This Block of four Units will help us to get a clear idea of the Greek concept of Tragedy and in the light of that concept, an analysis of *Oedipus Rex* as a classical tragedy that transcends the ancient period of Greek civilisation with its universal appeal for all times. Even today, we learn much from the play as it has a humanizing effect that safeguards us from becoming de-civilised and de-humanised. You are expected to read **Sophocles' Oedipus the King** tr. **Robert Fangles** in *Sophocles: The Theban Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).



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UNIT 1 GREEK THEATRE: MAJOR PLAYWRIGHTS

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Greek Theatre: Major Playwrights
- 1.3 Tragedy as a Literary term
- 1.4 Four Basic Elements of a Tragedy
 - 1.4.1 *Mimesis*
 - 1.4.2 *Catharsis*
 - 1.4.3 *Peripetia*
 - 1.4.4 *Anagnorisis*
- 1.5 Role of Fate & Destiny
- 1.6 Emotion and Meaning in Tragedy
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Questions
- 1.9 Glossary

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will provide us with:

- a glimpse to ancient Greek Theatre and the major playwrights;
- an understanding of the literary term ‘Tragedy’, as that branch of drama which treats in a serious and dignified style the sorrowful or terrible events encountered or caused by a heroic individual; and
- an analysis of emotion and meaning in Greek Tragedy.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

According to the *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, “Greek Theatre began in the 6th century BCE in Athens with the performance of tragedy plays at religious festivals. These, in turn, inspired the genre of Greek comedy plays...the works of such great playwrights as Sophocles and Aristophanes formed the foundation upon which all modern theatre is based.” Having said that let’s explore this exciting theatrical space next.

Ancient Greek theatre began with festivals honouring their pantheon of gods. One of the gods honoured was *Dionysus* (the god of wine, ritual madness, fertility, theatre and religious ecstasy in ancient Greek religion and myth). *Dionysus*, known as the patron of the arts was the son of *Zeus* who was the supreme God and ruler of the gods. All classical Greek plays were presented in this theatre of *Dionysus*. During the 5th century BC, the theatre served as a platform for dramatic contests in which the plays of **Aeschylus**, **Sophocles**, **Euripides**, and **Aristophanes** were first performed. Initially only three actors were allowed to perform in each play and this necessitated the introduction of the *Chorus* to be an integral part of the play and its main role was to comment on the action staged. Along with the *Chorus*’ delivery of lines, music was played. The players used masks to contribute to the theatrical effect of the plays. The three major forms of the plays performed were *Tragedy plays*, *Comedy plays* (Tragedies and Comedies as we classify them today) and *Satyr plays* which dealt with mythological plays in a comic manner. In the next section we will look at the major playwrights of ancient Greek theatre next.

1.2 GREEK THEATRE: MAJOR PLAYWRIGHTS

The well known playwrights of ancient Greek Tragedy plays were **Aeschylus**, **Sophocles**, and **Euripides**. Thirty three of their plays are extant. They were written between 480 BC and 430 BC when Athens was at its peak in culture, governance and military might. They were written against a background of war, as Athens was at that time engaged in war with Persia and Sparta.

Aeschylus wrote an estimated seventy to ninety tragedies of which only seven have survived intact:

The Oresteia Trilogy comprised of: “*Agamemnon*”, “*The Libation Bearers*”, “*The Eumenides*”, “*The Persians*”, “*The Suppliants*”, “*Seven against Thebes*” and “*Prometheus Bound*” (whose authorship is disputed).

Sophocles wrote one hundred and twenty plays during the course of his life, but only seven of them have survived in complete form: *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Women of Trachis*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Electra*, *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Euripides composed over ninety plays, with roughly eighteen surviving pieces studied and incorporated by contemporary playwrights, including “*Medea*,” “*Heracles*”, “*The Trojan Women*”, “*Alcestis*”, “*Heracleidae* or *The Children of Heracles*”, “*Hippolytus Veiled*”, “*Andromache*”, “*Hecuba*”, “*The Suppliants*”, “*Phoenician Women*”, “*Orestes*”, *Iphigenia in Tauris*”, and “*Electra*”.

Aristophanes wrote most of the Comedy plays and eleven of them have survived till date. The *Acharnians*, *Ecclesiazusae/ The Assembly women*, *The Birds*, *The Clouds*, *The Frogs*, *The Knights*, *Lysistrata*, *Peace*, *Plutus*, *Thesmophoriazusae/ The Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria* and *The wasps*.

Many of the conventions of modern theatre - both of Tragedy and Comedy - have been founded upon the great plays of these four playwrights – **Aeschylus**, **Sophocles**, **Euripides**, and **Aristophanes**. Having talked about Greek Tragedy in passing it is but pertinent that we look at Tragedy as a literary term next.

Activity1: It will enhance your understanding of Greek tragedy if you read *Antigone*, a sequel to *Oedipus Rex*.

Activity 2: It will also be of interest to read *The Trojan Women* in the light of your study of *The Iliad*.

1.2 GREEK THEATRE: MAJOR PLAYWRIGHTS

As stated above, the early Greek plays were tragedies. When we use the word ‘tragedy’ in common parlance, we use it indiscriminately to refer to any unfortunate, shocking event. For example we call it a tragedy if a dog or a cat is run over by a speeding vehicle. But to describe it as a tragedy is an uncritical and haphazard description. The event is sad, pathetic, pitiable but not tragic. ‘*Tragic*’ refers to something that is calamitous or disastrous, involving catastrophic and grievous destruction all round. Thus the phrases ‘tragic loss of so many lives in an earthquake’ or ‘a tragic waste of young lives in a car accident’ are in order as they communicate grief of an extremely mournful and lamentable kind, experienced by a number of people.

Tragedy as a literary genre is often associated with theatre though the term is now applicable to other literary compositions such as a tragic novel or a tragic poem. As a theatre form, it refers to a play in which the protagonist or the hero, usually a man of importance and outstanding personal qualities, falls to disaster through the combination of a personal failing or flaw and circumstances beyond him which he can neither prevent nor triumph over. This essentially means tragedy is about:

- the fall of the central character or hero of the play
- the fall of someone of great reputation, endowed with qualities that surpass all other individuals, i.e., the fall of a super hero
- his fall is brought about by circumstances beyond his control and
- by an inherent flaw or weakness in him that triggers the fall.

Thus, the fall of a great man at the height of his glory is devastating, not only because of the overwhelming grief that the event entails, but it also highlights the colossal waste of the human potential. The sadness at the end of witnessing a tragedy is the painful awareness that **Marlowe** talks about in *Dr Faustus*, “*Cut is the branch that should have grown full straight*”.

The earliest tragedies are from Greece when they were performed during religious festivals. As a result a majority of these plays show Man’s subjection to Gods and how his fall was engineered both by the Gods and his own (intentional or unintentional) faulty actions. The audience’s empathy with the fallen hero makes drama a shared experience.

This raises a question as to why do we go to a theatre to watch a tragedy? Isn’t there enough misery and sadness around us so, why do we add to that by going to a theatre to watch a tragedy? Why do we pay to experience sadness in a theatre? How is it that tragedies were popular in the past and they continue to be so today, attracting a large number of theatre goers? If tragedies end on a note of grievous sadness, how do they interest the audience? The simple answer is tragedy provides us a comforting lesson that through suffering man grows both mentally and spiritually. The essence of tragedy is in man’s recognition of his own folly and in his acceptance of the misfortunes that follow as a means of atonement. He does not fault others for his suffering but accepts his flawed actions and in that moment of recognition, he rises in stature. **Oliver Goldsmith**, the 18th century Irish writer wrote: “*Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall*”. When you watch *Oedipus Rex*, you will realise how tall *Oedipus* rises as the curtain comes down when he accepts his guilt, blinds himself as punishment and walks out of his own kingdom into a life of exile. “*The Greek idea was essentially cognitive let man know, for good or ill,*” as suggested by **Clifford Leech**. The representation of personal suffering and its heroic endurance which we witness in a tragic drama is distinctive of the Western tradition. In the next section we shall look at the elements that constitute a tragedy.

1.4 FOUR BASIC ELEMENTS OF A TRAGEDY

A century later, **Aristotle**, the great Greek philosopher who laid the rules for Western intellectual thought deduced key characteristics of a tragedy from his study of the Greek plays of **Aeschylus**, **Sophocles**, and **Euripides**. While he emphasised the structural unity of time, place and action in a play, (these three Unities will be discussed in Unit 3 of this Block) he wrote about the four basic elements of Tragedy-*mimesis*, *catharsis*, *peripeteia* and *anagnorsis*.

1.4.1 *Mimesis*

Mimesis: *Mimesis* is the imitation of life in art and literature. **Aristotle** and **Plato**, the two Greek geniuses spoke of *mimesis* as the re-presentation of nature. Re-presentation is different from representation. ‘Representation’ means copying. For example, if you paint a flower to be true to a real flower, it is a copy of what you see as a flower. But the idea inherent in a flower is the idea of beauty. Re-presentation is to capture the concept of Beauty which is behind the natural phenomenon, i.e., the flower. Hence, we can conclude that seeing does not necessarily mean perceiving. Through what we perceive, we get closer to ‘Reality’ or what we can describe as ‘hyper reality’.” As **Michelle Peutz** says, “*Mimesis not only functions to re-create existing objects or elements of nature, but also beautifies, improves upon, and universalizes them. Thus, Mimesis is the re-presentation of Reality in art and literature. It is both an imitation of nature (or phenomenon or the world as we see) and an artistic expression of the essence behind it*”. Tragedy presents the hero that we can recognise as an extraordinary person, we are saddened by his fall or death, but Tragedy does not stop there. It exalts him through his suffering to a higher plane of cognitive and spiritual dimension to produce an effect of awe and reverence in the viewer. How does this exaltation happen? In the play *Oedipus Rex*, the hero, King *Oedipus* falls from his kingly stature to that of a sinner who was responsible for the suffering of his people due to the visitation of the deadly plague. Even though his earlier actions were not intentionally evil, he still recognises that his inadvertent guilt is the cause behind the plague and blinds himself and walks out of his city as an exile. This punishment he inflicts on himself consequent upon his acceptance of his guilt, raises him in stature. He majestically walks off the stage like a *colossus*, a Man among men of exceptional importance and reputation. The tragic action ends on a note of grace.

1.4.2 *Catharsis*

Catharsis: **Aristotle** describes *catharsis* as the purging of the emotions of pity and fear while viewing a tragedy and that it contributes to the positive social function of tragedy. It is a release of emotional tension – as after an overwhelming experience, it restores or refreshes the spirit. *Catharsis* is a Greek word and refers to the cleansing of the emotions of the characters. In the play, *Oedipus Rex*, the fall of the great King *Oedipus* that evokes pity and fear in the audience is transformed into awe and reverence as his self blinding heals all the negative emotions. While reading a particular work of literature, such as a tragedy, or witnessing a tragic drama, the reader/ the viewer experiences intense emotions of fear and sadness. Though nothing bad is personally happening to him, he experiences these feelings that transcend the distance between him and the stage. The awareness of being in the presence of a mighty hero who redeems himself by self infliction of suffering brings the *catharsis* that converts excess emotions into virtuous dispositions.

1.4.3 *Peripeteia*

Peripeteia: is a sudden change of events or reversal of circumstances, especially in a literary work, in particular, drama. This is basic to tragedy as the term *peripeteia* means reversal. The reversal of the hero’s fortune from good to bad is basic to the plot of a tragedy. It is the single most important and powerful element of plot in a tragedy. When we see the destruction, fall and ruin of the hero, it causes both fear and pity. It is that one dark moment that changes the life of the hero for ever. *Peripeteia* marks this dark moment, on which hinges the whole plot of the story. It is the moment of self-discovery for the

protagonist of the story. **Aristotle** says: “*A man cannot become a hero until he can see the root of his own downfall.*”

1.4.4 *Anagnorisis*

Anagnorisis: means recognition. This term refers to the recognition or discovery by the protagonist of the nature of his own predicament, which leads to the resolution of the plot. It is a startling discovery that brings a change in the protagonist from ignorance to knowledge and effects a change in his fortunes, from good to bad. The ideal moment of *anagnorisis* coincides with *peripeteia* or reversal of fortunes. In *Oedipus Rex*, *anagnorisis* is seen in *Oedipus*' discovery that he has killed his father and married his mother (though unknowingly) and brought the plague upon his city and his people. This recognition of his fault is known as *anagnorisis* and it coincides with the dark moment of *peripeteia* or reversal of fortunes. Let us see how these two - *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* are present in *Oedipus Rex*. The story begins with the city of *Thebes* infected with plague. A large number of *Thebans* fall victims to the plague and die. *Oedipus* the King wants to find out the cause of this deadly disease. He learns that the earlier King of *Thebes* was murdered, though he neither knows he (*Oedipus*) was the murderer nor that the murdered man was his father. He is told that the only way to stop the plague is to catch the murderer.

After you read the detailed story in the next unit, you will realise the functioning of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* in the play. Suffice it to say that *Oedipus* later learns that he had indeed killed his father in a brawl without knowing that the old man he met at the crossing of roads was his biological father. He had also married his mother (again not knowing that she was his mother). *Oedipus* is shocked and horrified when he makes this terrible discovery of he having committed parricide as well as incest and he blinds himself in atonement for his sins and goes into exile, alone, blinded and with a deep sense of guilt and anguish thus, ending the plague.

We'll look at the whole notion of the role of fate/ destiny in the next section.

1.5 ROLE OF FATE & DESTINY

What we see in a Greek Tragedy is the role of fate or destiny that is pre-ordained over which Man has no control. This, in essence is the tragic sense of life which the Greeks assert in their tragedies. Even in *the Iliad*, we have come across this sense of the tragic as evidenced in the shortness of life irrespective of the superhuman strength of its heroes like *Hector* and *Achilles* and their falling victim to the caprice and whims of the gods. **George Steiner** writes: “*The Homeric hero knows that he can neither comprehend nor master the workings of destiny...Call for justice or explanation and the sea will thunder back with its mute clamour. Men's accounts with the gods do not balance.*” As the hero meets with a disastrous end he comes to terms with the incomprehensible truths that falsify all rational thinking and knowledge. **Steiner** comes to the conclusion: “*Tragic drama tells us that the spheres of reason, order and justice are severely limited... Outside and within man is the otherness of the world. Call it what you will- a hidden or malevolent God, blind fate...it waits for us in ambush at the cross- roads. It mocks us and destroys us. In some rare instances, it leads us after destruction to some incomprehensible repose.*”

Tragedy thus, provides a terrible insight into life where man has no control over forces that pre-determine to destroy him. It does not absolve man of his guilt, but what is tragic and beyond remedy is that his punishment is far in excess of his guilt. As we delve into the darkness of life- a darkness that we cannot fully comprehend, we recognise the human spirit that confronts this suffering with dignity and accepts it as a punishment for its folly. It is in this respect, man enters into a dialogue with the power that destroys him and the affirmation of his courageous spirit ennobles him and gives him dignity. **Steiner** concludes: *“Hence there is in the final moments of tragedy- whether Greek or Shakespearean, a fusion of grief and joy, of lament over the fall of man and rejoicing in the resurrection of his spirit.”* The next section will deal with ‘emotion’ and what it does, in a Greek Tragedy.

1.6 EMOTION AND MEANING IN TRAGEDY

Reading the play or watching it on stage, we arrive at a disturbing conclusion, that Man is a puppet in the hands of some higher powers, euphemistically designated as Fate or Destiny. If Man is presented as a helpless victim of pre-ordained destiny, it contradicts the claim of tragedy as an ennobling experience. If all the blame for the ruin or fall of a man is fixated on the unseen powers, what is in the play to ennoble him? He is just used as a helpless pawn for the hidden, malevolent forces to crush him.

Such an interpretation is erroneous as it defeats the very purpose of tragedy which is to exalt human spirit in its courageous confrontation with the unseen forces. Putting it in a simpler way, though man can never triumph over the powers that are remote and ruthless, Man (the hero) does not shy away from confronting them and that too with an awareness that in the fight with those unseen but powerful forces, he will be the loser at the end. He fights not for a win but for a certain defeat. It is this profile in courage that makes man rise up and gain dignity despite all the physical and material losses he suffers. Many cultures, that include the ancient Greek culture accepted fatalism as something that cannot be triumphed over and man has no option except to face it. But in that confrontation, displaying courage was the one possible solace and comfort in the face of *“pointless waste of ill fortune”*, as **Eric Segal** says. The Greeks believed that man is endowed with free will and therefore it is incumbent on man to exercise his free will and take responsibility to act rather than give up in despair and disheartenment. In Greek tragedy, again to quote **Segal** *“much of the time, they (the protagonists) are presented as agents working out their destinies- as a rule disastrously... but never are the characters of Greek tragedy portrayed as automata or marionettes. Even when they are viewed as victims of the gods, they remain human and independent”*. So to blame destiny for all the ills, however true they may be, is to deny man his strength and resolve, his spirit and vitality. Much later **Shakespeare** speaking about the nobility and greatness of man says *“It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves.”* Greek tragedy was written for the fifth century Athenians and presents the social, moral and emotional aspects that have a bearing on their lives. But at the same time, the plays do not have any reference to contemporary issues.

There is no direct address to the audience to shape their views on any political or social issue; there is neither a personal reference by the dramatist about his views nor any reference to any theatre or actor of the time. This shows that

the stage is distanced from the world of the audience and it deals with issues that have a universal validity for all times. It is a fallacy that tragedy teaches and we should look for it. We do get universal truths such as life is full of unexpected turns, or no man can overcome his fate or no one is happy until he departs from the world- all three truths can be culled from *Oedipus Rex*. But these lines of wisdom are actually experienced through the play as a whole rather than by extracting them from the play as quotable quotes. In the words of **Eric Segal**, “*the audience learns, so far as it learns by way of the whole experience. That is to say, the intellectual burden of the tragedy and its value as teaching has to do with the quality of the audience’s experience.*” When *Oedipus* walks out after blinding himself and walks majestically far from the kingdom he had till then presided over, the audience stands transfixed by amazement and bows its head in silence and reverence. It is important to understand that we should not approach the play seeking knowledge and enlightenment, but wholesomely experience them and thereby erase the distance between the stage and the auditorium.

This makes the audience feel the emotions that are at the heart of any tragedy. We feel a personal emotion over the good and bad fortunes of people far removed from us. These emotions go beyond those of pity and fear which according to **Aristotle** are central to a tragedy. We feel an overwhelming compassion for those others who undergo pain, suffering, trials and tribulations which are at the core of a tragedy. The emotions at the end of a tragedy are complex but all the emotions that we experience exclude hatred and lust for those who are the cause of the tragic experience. This is what the Sicilian writer **Gorgias** speaks of – namely “*tragedy is essentially the emotional experience of the audience.*” These emotions give the audience the ability to distinguish between a moral stand as opposed to immoral logic and reasoning and to develop sensitivity and mental awareness and responses towards the events that arouse these emotions. This can be best understood by the fact that we are able to feel for people with whom we have no touch or connection. The intensity of feelings exists and at the same time this helps us to gain objectivity and new perspectives because we are distanced from them. When we are not personally involved, we can - despite feeling for those at a distance - look at the whole picture with impartial, unbiased neutrality. *Feeling does not cloud rationality; rationality provides us with an objectivity that enhances our compassion and sensitivity.* The events or happenings are given a moral setting and this gives us the power of discrimination to distinguish between moral and immoral-ethical and unethical practices. “The characters act and suffer within situations of moral conflict or social, intellectual and theological conflict. The quality of the tragedy depends both on its power to arouse our emotions and on the *setting* of these emotions in a series of moral and intellectual complications which is set out and examined. Once again quoting **Segal**, “*Tragedy evokes our feeling for others ... it is distinguished by the order and significance it imparts to suffering.*” Thus, emotions in a tragedy coexist with thought and meaning. The better way to recognise the impact of tragedy is it strengthens us to cope with suffering, waste and misfortune. If one tries to look for philosophy in tragedy, he loses the basic quality of its emotional appeal.

This takes us to the last point. We see many unhappy events in our daily life such as a plane crash or a fatal accident. But these events are haphazard events,

random, unorganised; there is no order or shape or meaning we can give to them. We are aghast at what happens in real life, but we find them arbitrary and meaningless. In a tragedy, events are sequenced, and they give shape to the terrible events that helps us to unravel the cause of the ghastly event. Tragedy, in short, unites emotion and meaning.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

This Unit:

- has given us a brief look at ancient Greek theatre and dramatists
- discusses the four basic elements of a tragedy
- analyses *Oedipus Rex* with reference to these basic elements
- gives us a brief exposition of emotion and meaning in a tragedy

1.8 QUESTIONS

- 1) Give a brief summary of ancient Greek Theatre
- 2) What are the four basic elements of a tragedy? Relate them with reference to *Oedipus Rex*
- 3) Tragedy blends emotion and meaning. Discuss with reference to *Oedipus Rex*

1.9 GLOSSARY

Ecstasy	: intense delight or joy
Failing	: Fault or blemish
Phenomenon	: that which is perceptible by the sense
Colossus	: someone or something that is abnormally large and powerful
Fatalism	: the doctrine that all things are subject to fate or inevitable predestination and that man is ultimately unable to prevent inevitabilities
Automata	: things capable of acting automatically or without an external motive force.
Marionette	: a puppet manipulated from above by strings attached to its jointed limbs.

UNIT 2 *OEDIPUS REX*: SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Summary and Analysis of *Oedipus Rex*: Section 1: Lines 1 – 337
- 2.3 Summary and Analysis of *Oedipus Rex*: Section 2: Lines 338 – 706
- 2.4 Summary and Analysis of *Oedipus Rex*: Section 3: Lines 707 – 1007
- 2.5 Summary and Analysis of *Oedipus Rex*: Section 4: Lines 1008 – 1310
- 2.6 Summary and Analysis of *Oedipus Rex*: Section 5: Lines 1311 - 1684
- 2.7 The *Chorus*
- 2.8 Analysis of the Speeches of the *Chorus*
- 2.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.10 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

After we go through the Unit, we will have learnt about the following:

- a brief summary of the play in 5 sections,
- to analyse the play,
- the tragic collapse of *Oedipus* and its justification, and
- the role of the *Chorus* in the play.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The play is not a lengthy play as it comprises around 1684 lines. We will give you a brief summary of the play in five sections - something that corresponds to the current five scenes or Five Act structure in a play. **Aristotle** was the first to insist on a division of a play into Acts and Scenes so that the plot is orderly arranged into sequential parts. But in ancient Greek theatre, no such division existed and the plot flowed through the lines in an orderly structured way. In the last Unit, we had learnt how in a Tragedy, events are sequenced so that they give shape to the terrible events that helps us to unravel the cause of the ghastly event. Let us begin by summarising and analysing the plot of the *Oedipus Rex*.

2.2 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF *OEDIPUS REX*: SECTION 1: LINES 1 – 337

The play begins with *Oedipus* meeting a procession of priests and citizens of his kingdom in *Thebes*. They request the King to put an end to the deadly plague that is raging in the city. The head priest tells him:

*I and these children; not as deeming thee
A new divinity, but the first of men;
First in the common accidents of life,
And first in visitations of the Gods.*

The lines clearly state that the Greeks looked at the King as first among men and not as a God. He is also the first to suffer the visitation of the Gods. “*Visitation*” here means a catastrophic event, seen as a punishment from God.

Oedipus is variedly addressed as ‘the peerless king’, ‘the ship of the state’, ‘chief of men’ and is requested to ‘upraise our state’. *Oedipus* tells him that he had already sent *Creon*, his brother-in-law (his wife’s brother) to the *Delphic Oracle* to learn what he should do to put an end to the deadly plague. The *Delphic Oracle* was the famous *Oracle* of *Apollo* who gives cryptic predictions and guidance to both city-states (*states consisting of a sovereign cities*) and individuals. Though its predictions were noted for their ambiguity, it was held by the ancient Greeks to be of great authority. He says that he will perform all that the god declares to *Creon* to be performed.

When *Creon* comes, he wonders whether he should speak to *Oedipus* in private.

*Oedipus: How runs the oracle? Thus far thy words
Give me no ground for confidence or fear.*

*Creon: If thou wouldst hear my message publicly,
I’ll tell thee straight, or with thee pass within.*

*Oedipus: Speak before all; the burden that I bear
Is more for these my subjects than myself.*

Analysis: *Oedipus’* sense of fairness and justice is evident as he refuses to have any secret meeting with *Creon*. He wants the message from the *Oracle* to be publicly heard.

Creon comes in and tells him in the presence of all assembled - as desired by *Oedipus* - that his predecessor, King *Laius* has been murdered long ago and “and now the god’s command is plain: “Punish his takers-off, whoe’er they be.” *Oedipus* promises his citizens to find the murderer and punish him and restore the city from the deadly pestilence. The *Chorus* enters with prayers to *Athena*, daughter of *Zeus* to save the city from ruin and death.

Oedipus decides to solve the murder of *Laius*. He first asks the citizens:

*This proclamation I address to all: —
Thebans, if any knows the man by whom
Laius, son of Labdacus, was slain,
I summon him to make clean shrift to me.
And if he shrinks, let him reflect that thus
Confessing he shall ‘scape the capital charge;
For the worst penalty that shall befall him
Is banishment—unscathed he shall depart.
But if an alien from a foreign land
Be known to any as the murderer,
Let him who knows speak out, and he shall have
Due recompense from me*

He tells them of his resolve to punish the murderer but his statement is laden with irony, as later he discovers that he is the murderer.

*And on the murderer this curse I lay
(On him and all the partners in his guilt):—
Wretch, may he pine in utter wretchedness!
And for myself, if with my privity
He gain admittance to my hearth, I pray
The curse I laid on others fall on me.*

Analysis: Oedipus is vehement in his resolve to punish Laius' murderer even if that person happens to be close to him. It is important to note that at no point of time does Oedipus imagine that he is the murderer. It is this confidence of personal probity that gets shattered at the end. This is the tragic irony of the play. His extreme belief in his inviolability is to be seen as his blind spot and this blindness to the possibility of complicity in the murder suggests an element of overweening pride that almost justifies his own blind spot.

On the advice of the chorus, Oedipus summons the blind prophet Tiresias.

2.3 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF OEDIPUS REX: SECTION 2: LINES 338 – 706

The prophet at first refuses to name the murderer, but sensing the wrath of Oedipus, he speaks the truth:

*Tiresias: Thou art the man,
Thou the accursed polluter of this land.*

Analysis: Oedipus cannot believe what Tiresias has to say and asks him to say it again.

*Oedipus: I but half caught thy meaning; say it again.
Tiresias: I say thou art the murderer of the man
Whose murderer thou pursuest.
I say thou livest with thy nearest kin
In infamy, unwitting in thy shame.*

Analysis: Oedipus refuses to believe him and suspects Creon's hand in fabricating the falsehood. He orders the blind prophet to move out, but not before the latter hints at incestuous marriage and a future of blindness and infamy.

*Tiresias: Say thou livest with thy nearest kin
In infamy, unwitting in thy shame.
Hear then: this man whom thou hast sought to arrest
With threats and warrants this long while, the wretch
Who murdered Laius— that man is here.
He passes for an alien in the land
But soon shall prove a Theban, native born.
And yet his fortune brings him little joy;
For blind of seeing, clad in beggar's weeds,

For purple robes, and leaning on his staff,
To a strange land he soon shall grope his way.*

Analysis: This reveals Oedipus' strong resolve to arrest and punish the murderer of King Laius and the irony is that he happens to be the murderer. The blind seer correctly says that the murderer will initially be regarded as an alien and later will be proved to be a native Theban. Oedipus is in reality the Theban prince who had been born to Laius and Jocasta and who returns to Thebes as a person from Corinth.

*Tiresias: And of the children, inmates of his home,
He shall be proved the brother and the sire,
Of her who bare him son and husband both,*

*Co-partner, and assassin of his sire.
Go in and ponder this, and if thou find
That I have missed the mark, henceforth declare
I have no wit nor skill in prophecy.*

Analysis: Once again we cannot miss the dramatic irony. *Tiresias* is blind, but he can see the truth. He is strong in the sense of truth. *Oedipus* has sight, but he cannot see the truth. *Oedipus* taunts *Tiresias* saying “*thou in ear, wit, eye, in everything art blind.*”

Then *Oedipus* charges *Creon* for conspiring with the Priest tell a falsehood. He cannot visualise that he could be the murderer.

*Oedipus: Question and prove me murderer if thou canst.
Creon: Then let me ask thee, didst thou wed my sister?
Oedipus: A fact so plain I cannot well deny.
Creon: And as thy consort queen she shares the throne?
Oedipus: I grant her freely all her heart desires.
Creon: And with you twain I share the triple rule?
Oedipus: Yea, and it is that proves thee a false friend.*

Analysis: The Question-answer dialogue affirms *Oedipus* is the murderer. The *Chorus* warns *Oedipus* to respect a man (*Creon*) whose probity is known to all. *Oedipus*' charge against *Creon* and *Tiresias* is another instance of his arrogance that he, the great *Oedipus* can never be at fault. This narcissistic arrogance as a result of his self - belief in his own greatness almost divine like is true to the saying ‘*pride goes before a fall*’. Having said that we would also need to remember that since *Oedipus* has no idea about his real/ birth/ biological parents and because he has been raised in *Corinth* from the time he is a new born baby, he sincerely believes that he could not have killed King *Laius* who is his real father.

2.4 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF *OEDIPUS REX*: SECTION 3: LINES 707–1007

Incensed with both *Creon* and *Tiresias*, *Oedipus* turns to his wife *Jocasta*. She asks him to ignore these prophecies in the light of the *Delphic Oracle* that had earlier prophesied *Laius*' death at the hands of their son who would eventually marry his mother. But she believes that prophecy did not happen as they had abandoned their baby and were subsequently informed that he had died early. So *Jocasta* argues that the son could not have killed his father nor married his mother. *Laius*, according to her was killed by a band of robbers on a crossroad. This is how *Jocasta* comforts her present husband,

*Jocasta: Then thou mayest ease thy conscience on that score.
Listen and I'll convince thee that no man
Hath scot or lot in the prophetic art.
Here is the proof in brief. An oracle
Once came to Laius (I will not say
'Twas from the Delphic god himself, but from
His ministers) declaring he was doomed
To perish by the hand of his own son,
A child that should be born to him by me.
Now Laius—so at least report affirmed—*

*Was murdered on a day by highwaymen,
No natives, at a spot where three roads meet.
As for the child, it was but three days old,
When Laius, its ankles pierced and pinned
Together, gave it to be cast away
By others on the trackless mountain side.
So then Apollo brought it not to pass
The child should be his father's murderer,
Or the dread terror find accomplishment,
And Laius be slain by his own son.
Such was the prophet's horoscope. O king,
Regard it not. Whate'er the god deems fit
To search, himself unaided will reveal.*

The irony is that, *Jocasta* is not aware that her child abandoned and sent away to be killed lest it should commit the heinous crime of killing his father and marrying his mother, is none other than *Oedipus*, who was saved and was brought up by the King and Queen of *Corinth* as their son.

2.5 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF OEDIPUS REX: SECTION 4: LINES 1008 – 1310

Oedipus had earlier heard the prophecy when he was in *Corinth* as the son of the King and Queen of *Corinth*. *Oedipus* has no clue about his adoption by the *Corinth* King and Queen. So he decides to run away from *Corinth* to avoid committing such a heinous crime. Now as King of *Thebes*, while waiting to solve the murder of *Laius*, he learns that the King of *Corinth* *Polybus* has died of natural causes and he feels relieved that the prophecy had not come true. The Messenger from *Corinth* shocks him by disclosing the truth that the King and Queen of *Corinth* were not his genetic parents, but only his foster parents. The messenger says that a shepherd had rescued the abandoned baby of *Laius* and *Jocasta* and given it to him and he had handed the baby over to the King and the queen who were childless. It is at this point, *Oedipus* recalls his fight at a crossroad when he was running away from *Corinth* with someone who resembled *Laius*.

The story unfolds before his eyes. Desiring to get to the bottom of the truth, he resolves to track down the shepherd who had rescued the abandoned baby of *Laius* and *Jocasta* and learn the truth about his birth. He tells *Jocasta* –

*Oedipus: Who has a higher claim that thou to hear
My tale of dire adventures? Listen then.
My sire was Polybus of Corinth, and
My mother Merope, a Dorian;
And I was held the foremost citizen,
Till a strange thing befell me, strange indeed,
Yet scarce deserving all the heat it stirred.
A roisterer at some banquet, flown with wine,
Shouted "Thou art not true son of thy sire."*

Analysis: This is how he believed himself to be the son of King *Polybus* and Queen *Merope* and it explains why he left *Corinth* in the first place ... till someone discloses that he was not their true son.

*Oedipus: It irked me, but I stomached for the nonce
 The insult; on the morrow I sought out
 My mother and my sire and questioned them.
 They were indignant at the random slur
 Cast on my parentage and did their best
 To comfort me, but still the venom'd barb
 Rankled, for still the scandal spread and grew.
 So privily without their leave I went
 To Delphi, and Apollo sent me back
 Baulked of the knowledge that I came to seek.
 But other grievous things he prophesied,*

Analysis: This disclosure bothers him and to find the truth about his life he goes to *Delphi* to consult the *Oracle*. Though the *Oracle* does not give him the answer to his question, he prophesies that *Oedipus* will slay his father and marry his mother. The *Delphic Oracle* had marked *Oedipus* twice—in *Thebes* and in *Corinth* as the future perpetrator of crime against his parents.

*Woes, lamentations, mourning, portents dire;
 To wit I should defile my mother's bed
 And raise up seed too loathsome to behold,
 What Gods decree, no man can escape.
 And slay the father from whose loins I sprang.
 Then, lady,—thou shalt hear the very truth—
 As I drew near the triple-branching roads,
 A herald met me and a man who sat
 In a car drawn by colts—as in thy tale—
 The man in front and the old man himself
 Threatened to thrust me rudely from the path,
 Then jostled by the charioteer in wrath
 I struck him, and the old man, seeing this,
 Watched till I passed and from his car brought down
 Full on my head the double-pointed goad.
 Yet was I quits with him and more; one stroke
 Of my good staff sufficed to fling him clean
 Out of the chariot seat and laid him prone.
 And so I slew them every one. But if
 Betwixt this stranger there was aught in common
 With Laius, who more miserable than I,
 What mortal could you find more god-abhorred?
 Wretch whom no sojourner, no citizen
 May harbor or address, whom all are bound
 To harry from their homes. And this same curse
 Was laid on me, and laid by none but me.
 Yea with these hands all gory I pollute
 The bed of him I slew. Say, am I vile?
 Am I not utterly unclean, a wretch
 Doomed to be banished, and in banishment
 Forgo the sight of all my dearest ones,
 And never tread again my native earth;
 Or else to wed my mother and slay my sire,
 Polybus, who begat me and upreared?
 If one should say, this is the handiwork*

*Of some inhuman power, who could blame
His judgment? But, ye pure and awful gods,
Forbid, forbid that I should see that day!
May I be blotted out from living men
Ere such a plague spot set on me its brand!*

Analysis: Oedipus takes the blame on himself though he knows that he is a doomed man, on whom such a curse had been laid. The curse of the Gods – call it Fate or Destiny- cannot be circumvented by ordinary mortals.

Queen *Jocasta* understands the horror of her marriage to her son after the murder of her husband King *Laius*. Despite the precaution taken by her and *Laius* to outwit the *Delphic Oracle*, the prophecy had come true. On learning the truth, Queen *Jocasta* kills herself. Similarly what *Oedipus* has dreaded in the context of his foster parents in *Corinth* - has actually come true. *Oedipus* thinking that he is the biological son of the King and Queen of *Corinth* tries to run away to disprove the *Oracle* that had predicted this horrible crime. Destiny triumphs with the *Oracle's* script running true as he kills his biological father, King *Laius* and marries his biological mother, Queen *Jocasta*. He commits these heinous crimes without knowing the truth about his parentage.

2.6 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF OEDIPUS REX: SECTION 5: LINES 1311 - 1684

Rushing into the palace, *Oedipus* finds that the queen has killed herself. Devastated, *Oedipus* takes the pins from her gown and rakes out his eyes, as a punishment for his heinous crimes. It does not matter to him if the crimes had been committed in total ignorance; the fact remains that he was the murderer and therefore responsible for bringing the plague on his city.

*Think, with what eyes hereafter in the place
Of shadows could I see my father's face,
Or my poor mother's? Both of whom this hand
Hath wronged too deep for man to understand.*

On hearing about his wife nee mother's death, he behaves like one possessed.

In the words of the messenger,
*But him, as in the fury of his stride,
"A sword! A sword! And show me here," he cried,
"That wife, no wife, that field of bloodstained earth
Where husband, father, sin on sin, had birth,
Polluted generations!" While he thus
Raged on, some god—for sure 'twas none of us—
Showed where she was; and with a shout away,
As though some hand had pointed to the prey,
He dashed him on the chamber door. The straight
Door-bar of oak, it bent beneath his weight,
Shook from its sockets free, and in he burst
To the dark chamber.
There we saw her first
Hanged, swinging from a noose, like a dead bird.
He fell back when he saw her. Then we heard
A miserable groan, and straight he found*

And loosed the strangling knot, and on the ground
 Laid her.—Ah, then the sight of horror came!
 The pin of gold, broad-beaten like a flame,
 He tore from off her breast, and, left and right,
 Down on the shuddering orbits of his sight
 Dashed it: “Out! Out! Ye never more shall see
 Me nor the anguish nor the sins of me.
 Ye looked on lives whose like earth never bore,
 Ye knew not those my spirit thirsted for:
 Therefore be dark forever!”

His blindness in some way calms him down as he can no longer look upon the misery he has caused. In self-humiliation and utter dejection, the disgraced *Oedipus* begs Creon to kill him. The play concludes, with his quiet submission to *Creon's* leadership, and he humbly awaits the oracle that will determine whether he will stay in *Thebes* or be cast out forever. The play ends with the chorus:

*Chorus: Ye citizens of Thebes, behold; 'tis Oedipus that passeth here,
 Who read the riddle-word of Death, and mightiest stood of mortal men,
 And Fortune loved him, and the folk that saw him turned and looked
 again.*

*Lo, he is fallen, and around great storms and the outreaching sea!
 Therefore, O Man, beware, and look toward the end of things that be,
 The last of sights, the last of days; and no man's life account as gain
 Ere the full tale be finished and the darkness find him without pain.
 [Oedipus is led into the house and the doors close on him.]*

Analysis: *Oedipus* is described as the mightiest among men, favoured by Fortune and he is now fallen.

2.7 THE CHORUS

In modern plays, the *Chorus* is rarely one of the *dramatis personae*. But in a classical tragedy, the *Chorus* is an integral part of the play. Both the *Chorus* and the three Unities (which will be discussed in the next Unit (Unit 3) require each other to perform their respective functions. The ancient view of the *Chorus* is stated by **Horace**, the Latin poet (65 BC - 8 BC) in his *Ars of Poetry*, *Ars Poetica*:

The Chorus must back the good and give sage counsel; must control the passionate and cherish those that fear to do evil; it must praise the thrifty meal, the blessings of Justice, the Laws and Peace with her unbarred gates. It will respect confidences and implore heaven that prosperity may revisit the miserable and quit the proud.”

Horace on the Art of Poetry, ed. by Edward Henry Blakeney, 1928

The basic functions of the *Chorus*, as laid out by **Horace** gives the *Chorus* the role of an objective viewer of the events that unfold before their eyes. The *Chorus* is the upholder of virtue, morality and wisdom and underlines the moral of the play that implores prosperity to the unfortunate victims and woe to the proud and the haughty. In other words, the *Chorus* speaks the voice of the audience, expressing its fears, anxieties, premonitions and wisdom – They arrive early on in the play and they remain till the end. In *Oedipus Rex* it will be noticed that they seem to know in advance the coming of disaster before *Oedipus*

knows it. They conclude with the message of the play about the appalling reversal of fortune that shows the power of the Gods over men.

The summary of *Oedipus Rex* as given above in 5 sections, does not include the speeches of the *Chorus*. We will highlight those speeches and see how the *Chorus* becomes an integral part of the story as stated by **Horace**.

2.8 ANALYSIS OF THE SPEECHES OF THE CHORUS

The *Chorus* makes its first entry in Section 1 with special prayers to the Gods to rid *Thebes* of the raging plague. Their prayers are answered by *Oedipus* who enters announcing that he will answer their prayers. The *Chorus* informs the audience that *Phoebus Apollo*, the god of the sun will give the answer, but *Oedipus* takes upon himself the role of a god — a role the *Chorus* has been reluctant to allow him. *Oedipus* is proudly conscious of his competence to find the murderer of *Laius*. He says: “no living man can hope to force the gods to speak against their will” and therefore he will speak. Here he comes close to dismissing the gods and giving himself the right to answer the chorus although this does not amount to blasphemy. His dialogue with the *Chorus* enables us to see early in the play *Oedipus*’s dangerous pride in his inviolable character, almost displaying a willful blindness to any blemish in his character and this to a certain extent, justifies his downfall. The *Chorus* is almost a crystal gazer who believes in divine sources for seeing the future.

In Section 2 the *Chorus* tries to calm *Oedipus* down who in his arrogance charges both *Creon* and *Tiresias* of conspiring to overthrow him. It asks him not to be stubborn and unrelenting but

“...respect a man whose probity and truth are known to all and now confirmed by oath.”

The *Chorus* thus gives the King sage counsel. The *Chorus* after hearing *Tiresias* is perplexed about believing and not believing his words

*The Chorus: Sore perplexed am I by the words of the master seer.
Are they true, are they false? I know not and bridle my tongue for fear,
Fluttered with vague surmise; nor present nor future is clear.
Proof is there none: how then can I challenge our King’s good name,
How in a blood-feud join for an untracked deed of shame?
All wise are Zeus and Apollo, and nothing is hid from their ken;
They are gods; and in wits a man may surpass his fellow men;
But that a mortal seer knows more than I know—where
Hath this been proven? Or how without sign assured, can I blame
Him who saved our State when the winged songstress came,
Tested and tried in the light of us all, like gold assayed?
How can I now assent when a crime is on Oedipus laid?*

Analysis: The *Chorus* like all other men cannot think of *Oedipus* as the murderer. When there is no proof, it is not possible to challenge the King’s good name, in which case it would also be difficult to believe the blind seer? The *Chorus* is terrified, helpless, confused and full of anxiety and uncertainty.

After *Oedipus* and *Jocasta* leave the stage, the *Chorus* enters, announcing that the world is ruled by destiny and denouncing arrogant men who defy the gods.

Throughout the play, the *Chorus* is miserable, and desperate for the plague to end and for stability to be restored to the city. Nevertheless, the *Chorus* holds staunchly to the belief that the prophecies of *Tiresias* will come true. For if they do not, there is no order on earth or in the heavens. The *Chorus* is the voice of the Greek faith in decrees made by God. The only way to restore order both in heaven and on earth is not to override the decree of the divine powers.

The *Chorus* makes its appearance again in the final section. The *Chorus* laments that even *Oedipus*, the greatest of men, has been brought low by destiny, for an unknowing crime committed out of good intentions.

Oedipus' crimes are presented as a kind of blight on the land, a plague—symbolised by the plague with which the play begins—that infects the earth on which *Oedipus*, his family, and his citizens stand, and in which all have been victimised as a result of *Oedipus'* violent acts. The *Chorus* sums up the fate of man in its speeches in the last section.

*The Chorus: Of insolence is bred
The tyrant; insolence full blown,
With empty riches surfeited,
Scales the precipitous height and grasps the throne.
Then topples o'er and lies in ruin*

*Oedipus: Curse on the man who took
the cruel bonds from off my legs, as I lay in the field.
He stole me from death and saved me,
no kindly service.*

*Had I died then
I would not be so burdensome to friends.*

Analysis: The *Chorus* charges *Oedipus* with tyranny born of insolence. *Oedipus'* ascent to the throne and his conscious awareness of his kingly qualities of probity, fairness and justice make him assume almost tyrannical against sinners—a power that backfires on Him and topples him to fall down to ignominy and dishonor.

Chorus: I, too, could have wished it had been so.

Analysis: The *Chorus* echoes *Oedipus'* lament that it was his misfortune to have been spared death in infancy and for him to grow into adulthood and to commit this horrendous crime that his birth parents had been trying to avoid.

*Oedipus: Then I would not have come
to kill my father and marry my mother infamously.
Now I am godless and child of impurity,
begetter in the same seed that created my wretched self.
If there is any ill worse than ill,
that is the lot of Oedipus.*

*Chorus: I cannot say your remedy was good;
you would be better dead than blind and living*

Analysis: The *chorus* seems to speak on behalf of the audience that *Oedipus* dead is preferable to blind and living *Oedipus*.

*Chorus: Ancestral Thebes, behold this Oedipus, —
Him who knew the famous riddles and was a man most masterful;
not a citizen who did not look with envy on his lot—
see him now and see the breakers of misfortune swallow him!
Look upon that last day always. Count no mortal happy
till he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain.*

Analysis: This is the final message that no man can count himself happy if he fails to be secure from pain at the end of his life.

The last message of the *Chorus* shows how men are cast down from a position of glory to that of infamy, not entirely due to their folly, but through a combination of a flaw in their character/ *hamartia* as the Greeks would call it and the whimsical power of the Gods. The play raises difficult and imponderable questions regarding man's relationship with Gods. The Greek view of life rests on the might of the gods over men. Underlying the malevolence and vengefulness of Gods, the play reveals the strength and dignity of man in his confrontation with forces that he can neither match nor win over. The play leaves us with dark questions about gods' treatment of men that includes a brave, just and wise *Oedipus* who falls because of his belief in his faultless and immaculate character.

The questions that arise in the viewer are mixed and confused - Is *Oedipus* at fault for which he was punished or was he destined to be destroyed as foretold by the *Delphic Oracle*? **Sophocles'** own idea about the fall of *Oedipus* is rooted in the Greek view of life. **Sophocles** does not attribute *Oedipus'* fall to an inherited curse or doom – what we identify as fate or destiny - but in two passages given to *Oedipus*, we find that he believed that he was in some way the architect of his own doom. When he discovers the double crime that he has committed, one of parricide and the other of incest, he owns it saying

*Stand (s) naked now: Shamefully was I born
In shame I wedded; in shame I slew*

He does not blame his biological parents *Laius* and *Jocasta* for abandoning him as a baby lest he should commit the two heinous crimes, on the contrary, had he not been born, there would have been no possibility of any criminal action. *Oedipus* blames himself for being born to a polluted family, an accursed race. The second causative factor for his fall - which is more a plausibility than a reality - is his own arrogance that he, King *Oedipus* can do no wrong. His assertion before his citizens that he will punish the killer of *Laius* without mercy is proof of his belief in his blemish free character. This cannot be misconstrued as bombast and vanity, but it highlights the fact that no one born in this world can claim to be spotlessly clean. But to say that *Oedipus* was punished for wanton pride cannot be justified. The closest that we come to attributing pride to *Oedipus* is his cavalier attitude towards *Creon* and *Tiresias*, charging them with conspiracy to overthrow him. Refusing to accept *Tiresias'* charge that he (*Oedipus*) was the culprit and imputing motives to *Creon* and *Tiresias* for making him such an allegation reveal a mean streak in *Oedipus*, very unlike his regal, noble and just demeanour. In fact the *Chorus* expresses its anxiety that *Oedipus* displays signs of tyrannical traits and says: *Insolence: it is that breeds a tyrant.*

But **Sophocles** does not show *Oedipus* guilty of tyranny as he makes him pray that his children should be blessed with a quiet middle state unlike his life that swings from two extremes of great prosperity and abject downfall. His killing his father cannot be construed as naked aggression as it was *Laius* who showed aggression in the first instance leading to *Oedipus*' retaliation of a fatal order. His mistakes are not even errors of judgement as he does not even know who *Laius* is. Yet it is this crime that leads to the breaking of the deadly plague, to his discovery of his own crimes, his final blinding and his exile from *Thebes*. But the fact still remains that this had been prophesied well in advance and *Oedipus* is a doomed man. He is the victim of the gods. The role of the gods is central to understanding *Oedipus*. We studied **Homer**'s *Iliad* where the gods play a central role in determining the affairs of men. This is the Greek view of life where men are victims of the gods. He cannot escape from doing that which he had been destined to do. Abandoned as a baby in *Thebes* and his later attempt to flee from his foster home in *Corinth* to avoid committing the prophesied crimes, cannot prevent what he has been fated to do. Man's endeavours to overcome god's decree are futile. Gods' decisions are final and they cannot be circumvented. **C M Bowra** comments:

"The plague is an act of the gods; an assertion of their rights and of their inviolable laws." C. M. Bowra, *The Sophoclean Tragedy* p.171

Yet another belief of the ancient Greeks was that sins like parricide and incest even when committed in ignorance have to be punished and the wrong doer has to atone for his crimes. *Oedipus* blinding and exiling himself from his kingdom is an act of atonement. The doom that falls on *Oedipus* is incredulously harsh. But it has to be that way because *Oedipus* himself had vowed to give the most appalling punishment to the murderer of *Laius* and that kingly vow had to be fulfilled. So the curse that has fallen on him has to be of a degree that is far in excess of the crimes he has committed in ignorance. Such a doom is not that of the *Oracle*, but it is the proclamation of *Oedipus* himself. On realising that he himself might be the murderer, he says that he has to be more miserable than anyone else as he has invoked the curse on himself and this he takes up on himself *"for the dead man's cause' and for the God"*. This is how god's will is done; this is how the decree through the *Oracle* comes true. This is the tragedy of *Oedipus* - the fall of a great King, self - exiled from his own kingdom, blinded and helpless and wandering around like a beggar.

"The play shows the power of the gods at every important turn in its development and leaves no doubt about the poet's (Sophocles') theological intention." C M Bowra, *The Sophoclean Tragedy* p.171

This is the lesson to take from the play - the power of the gods is final and the *Chorus*' last speech (see above) says it all-no one can be said to be happy unless he has no sorrow till the end of his life. Once when one is in prosperity, one should remain modest as at any moment, the gods may take away his happiness and destroy his life. Till the end, *Oedipus* remains a great king, a great man.

"In his acceptance of his fall, his readiness to take part in it, Oedipus shows a greatness, nobler than ... when he became the king of Thebes."

C M Bowra, *The Sophoclean Tragedy* p.171

2.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have summarised the play into five sections and also analysed the play to an extent. Having gone through the play we have seen the rise, the heights that *Oedipus* rose to and his subsequent fall. We saw how the Gods can snatch away what they've given in the wink of an eye and we saw *Oedipus* reduced to an extremely troubled, almost deranged, blind beggarly state from being King of *Thebes*. We also learnt a little bit about *hamartia*/ tragic flaw and finally we examined the role, the purpose and significance of the *Chorus* in Classical Greek Tragedies. In the next unit we will take up for discussion **Aristotle's** three unities – *Unity of Time, Unity of Place and Unity of Action*.

2.10 QUESTIONS

1. How does Sophocles use the timing of Creon's entrance into the dialogue to create tension for the audience?
2. What according to the Chorus is the condition in the city?
3. What prompts the people of Thebes and the priest to come to the palace at the beginning of the play?
4. Why does Oedipus accuse Creon of a conspiracy?
5. 'Oedipus Rex is the story of a noble man who seeks the truth that ultimately destroys him.' Comment.

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UNIT 3 *OEDIPUS REX* AND ARISTOTLE'S THREE UNITIES

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Aristotle's *Poetics* and the Three Unities
- 3.3 Discussion on the Dramatic Unities
 - 3.3.1 Unity of Time
 - 3.3.2 Unity of Action
 - 3.3.3 Unity of Place
- 3.4 *Oedipus Rex*: An Illustration of the Three Unities
 - 3.4.1 Unity of Time in *Oedipus Rex*
 - 3.4.2 Unity of Action in *Oedipus Rex*
 - 3.4.3 Unity of Place in *Oedipus Rex*
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Questions
- 3.7 Glossary

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This is a comparatively small unit highlighting the Principles of the *Three Unities* as enunciated by **Aristotle** as basic to a play. After a study of this Unit, we will know:

- What the three dramatic Unities are
- Their relevance in drama, especially in ancient Greek theatre
- The employment of the three Unities in *Oedipus Rex*

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 1, we read about the four essential elements of a Greek Tragedy as listed by **Aristotle** - *Mimesis*, *Peripeteia*, *Anagnorisis* and *Catharsis*. In his *Poetics*, he has given one more element as central to a Tragedy - the *Dramatic Unities*. The *three Unities* he has emphasised are the *Unity of Time*, *Unity of Place* and *Unity of Action*. In brief, what that means is that the dramatic unities require a play to have a single action occurring in a single place and within the course of a day. These principals were thus, defined as the, Unity of Action, Unity of Place, and Unity of Time.

No study of Ancient Greek Tragedy is complete without a reference to **Aristotle's** *Three Unities* as the guiding principle of drama. These rules are not to be dismissed as prescriptive and intrusive. A modern writer of plays may use them or ignore them, but it is a good idea to know about the rules and recognise their place and importance in the ancient Greek theatre. Let us briefly discuss the three Unities next.

3.2 ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS* AND THE THREE UNITIES

It is difficult to conceive of the three Unities in drama in isolation. One has to read the Greek plays and then recognise the significance of the three Unities.

Another difficulty today is the fact that these unities are not strictly followed in modern drama and thus, makes it difficult for us to understand why they were important in the ancient Greek theatre. As mentioned earlier, when we look at plays of the last 400 years, starting with **Shakespeare's** plays in the 17th Century to the plays of the present times, we notice that these Unities are no longer regarded as intrinsic to drama. For example, **Shakespeare's** plays stretch over a fairly long period and characters are located in different places. **Shakespeare** sets his plays in different time periods and different geographical locations such as Greece, Rome and Egypt (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*), Italy (*Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Measure for Measure*), England (especially his historical plays like the *King Henry* plays and *Richard III* besides *King Lear*) and Scotland (*Macbeth*) to name a few. *Othello* takes place in Venice, the famous Italian city and shifts to Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean region. **Shakespeare** set *Hamlet* in Elsinore, a remote royal castle in Denmark where the action is set in various parts of the castle. There's also one scene that takes place away from the castle on a plain in Denmark. Also within the plays **Shakespeare** introduces scene shifts as required by the action.

As for the unity of action, we have both the main plot and the sub plot in most plays of **Shakespeare**, though the main action is not hindered by the sub plot. In most of his tragedies the sub plot provides relief from the serious tragic import; at other times, the action or the main plot moves as though on a straight line. This is evidenced in the linear progress of the plays - that have a beginning, middle and an end. As for the third unity, **Shakespeare** does not adhere to unity of time. We see the shifts of time in all his plays as though action takes place in 'real' time. We see in many of his plays the passing of time, whereby the action of the play extends by a week or a month or even several years.

But in **Aristotle's** time when Greek theatre was at its height, these three principles of unities were needed to build up the interest of the audience and keep the theatre goers in a state of tension, as the plays moved towards a calamitous climax. **Aristotle's** principle of unities of time, place and action were meant to power the play's impact through its singleness of concentration of events and make them move through a single setting and action and all within a brief span of hours. Thus, in the Greek tragedies, the Unities were regarded as essential and they served as means to focus and rivet the attention of the audience on the imminent disaster and make them feel the intensity of *anagnorisis*, (i.e., the recognition or discovery by the protagonist/ hero of the nature of his own predicament) which ultimately leads to the resolution of the plot. The important thing to note is the plays came first and the critical theory related to the three unities came later. It is not that **Sophocles** had knowledge of the three Unities and strictly followed them in writing the plays, but it is **Aristotle** who after viewing the staging of the plays deduced these principles when he wrote his commentary. **Aristotle** worked out the three Unities from his analysis of the **Sophoclean** tragedies. What **Aristotle** has defined as the guiding principle of a play should not be seen as a prescriptive set of rules framed by him but as rules inferred from his witnessing the plays and experiencing in full their impact both on him and the audience. **Aristotle** works his theory from a critical analysis of the plays which exemplify the three unities. **Aristotle's** thesis complements **Sophocles** while **Sophocles** is the progenitor of **Aristotle's** *Poetics*.

Activities:

1. Select any one play of Shakespeare or one of a modern dramatist and note down the locations/settings of each scene. Find out whether the change of locations affects the intensity of the play.
2. Also see the time frame during which action takes place in the play you have selected.
3. Identify the plot and the sub plot and analyze the subplot in relation to the main plot.

3.3 DISCUSSION ON THE DRAMATIC UNITIES

Let us discuss the three unities in detail next as it will enhance our understanding of Greek Tragedies and of Aristotle's concepts of the three Unities.

3.3.1 Unity of Time

Aristotle says that the action of the play should take place preferably in 24 hours. If you recall the TV serial *24*, you understand how the whole serial in 24 episodes narrates events that take place within 24 hours. Today thanks to technology, it is possible to flag the time of action to continually flash on the TV screen. The audience is able to see time slowly winding down second by second from 24 hours (time is shown as 24:00:00, 23:11:59, 23:11:58 ...) in accordance with the events winding down to a close as the clock strikes 00:00:00. Thus, for us in modern times and from the perspective of modern drama, Unity of time does not have the same value as it had in the ancient days. In today's theatre, narratives criss-cross through long periods not only spanning many days but also spanning generations. It is now easy to re-enact the past as it happened and also forge forward through time leap. A film like *Raazi* unfolds the events that happened over a time gap of a few years in preparation for our country's success in the 1971 war. But for the audience in the early times, Unity of Time served a definitive purpose. It created a state of urgency, so that the narrative gained both in intensity and immediacy of response. This is different from what is happening today when films, plays and narratives move through chronological sequences, almost losing the focus on the immediate present. This isn't necessarily bad, but something we have to be aware of. The Greeks ensured the close attention of the audience by concentrating on the here and the now.

“Stages were set in large amphitheatres, with actors often playing multiple roles. Communicating the passage of time could be tricky and confusing, as masks and body language were used to communicate different characters across the large space. Trying to capture various ages between those characters might just muddy the waters”.

(wordweasel@tunbir.com)

Unlike in the past, today, non-linear storytelling is often desired, far removed from the straightforward narrative of the Greek theatre. Nevertheless for the audience in the early times, *Unity of Time* served a purpose. It created a state of urgency, so that the narrative gained both in intensity and immediacy of response. Today moving through the chronological sequence, the focus on the immediate present is lost. This isn't necessarily bad, just something we have to be aware of. The Greeks ensured the close attention of the audience by concentrating on the here and the now. Let's look at the *Unity of Action* next.

3.3.2 Unity of Action

This brings us to the question: What constitutes action? Action is not in terms of the characters fighting each other or actions that are violent or spectacular to see on stage, but action simply comprise the steps that follow one another from the beginning to the end of the story. As the plot progresses, it holds the interest and attention of the audience. In Greek Theatres, action was contained within the narrative in the form of dialogues.

Narratives are of two kinds - linear and non linear. Unlike in the past, today non-linear storytelling is often desired, far removed from the straightforward narrative of the Greek theatre. In literature, narrative refers to the telling of a story through the presentation of events. When authors use linear narratives, the order in which events are portrayed corresponds to the order in which they occur. Stories told using the linear narrative structure will have a clear beginning, middle and end. So a *linear narrative* basically describes *story*, action or events in a sequential manner. *Nonlinear narratives*, on the other hand, do not stick to such a structured format. They do not follow chronological sequence as the story can start in the middle or the end and then follow a flash back or flash forward movement to make it cohere. Often *non linear* narratives are known as disjointed or disrupted narratives. *Oedipus Rex* is a linear story and is presented in a logical manner by telling what happens from one point in time to the next without using flashbacks or flash-forwards and then returning to the present. **Aristotle** identifies this form of a *linear* narrative as contributing to unity of action.

Oedipus Rex is a good example of a story that moves on a *linear* scale. What is striking about the play is the movement is on a straight line knitting the past and the present and it comes full circle as the *Delphic Oracle* that triggers the plot with its prophecy of a heinous disaster ends on the note of its coming true. It seems paradoxical that a linear play ends in a cyclical way - getting back to where it started (the prophecy of the *Delphic Oracle*). It is the Greek genius that conceives of a linear structure and meshes it with a cyclical content. The efforts of human beings to outwit the *Delphic Oracle* end in the colossal tragedy.

Activity: Distinguish a linear narrative from a non linear and illustrate your answer with suitable examples.

3.3.3 Unity of Place

Unity of action inheres in the unity of place. A play's action takes place in a minimal number of locations – ideally, just one. In the ancient Greek theatre one actor had to play multiple roles. So it was difficult to portray characters in different places, donning different costumes. The multiple roles played by a single actor had necessitated the action to take place in a single location. The logistical challenges in changing locations meant the frequent changing of the stage props and this called for breaks in the continuity of stage presentation. Further, time spent in the shifting of the scenes would take the mind of the audience from a sense of immediacy. It is worth noting that the plays were staged on amphitheatres that were large and open. As stated before, there was no curtain (what in the language of the theatre is defined as the fourth wall) and everything took place in front of the audience.

The action of the play in the Greek theatre was made as succinct as possible. According to **Aristotle**, plot is the most important aspect of the tragedy, which according to him is “*the arrangement of the incidents.*” This gives the utmost importance to the enactment of the play that sustains the emotional impact on the audience. To keep the audience riveted to the main plot, it was felt necessary that a play should have one action and from that followed, that it should have minimal subplots. There is no denying the importance of Unity of Action in any story. More so in the Greek tragedies which are stark and serious, blunt and bleak, harsh and severe with no diversion and relief that sub plots or comic plots provide. In modern plays and in films, we have comic interludes in the midst of serious action to provide entertainment and relief. What we have in cinema and theatre today is more of a spectacle than a straightforward narration.

We shall look at how the three unities function in *Oedipus Rex* next.

3.4 OEDIPUS REX: AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE THREE UNITIES

Oedipus Rex is a good example of a story that moves on a linear scale. What is striking about the play is the movement of the plot on a straight line knitting the past and the present and it turns a full circle as the *Delphic Oracle* that triggered the plot with its prophecy of a heinous disaster ends on the note of its coming true. It seems paradoxical that a linear play ends in a cyclical way - getting back to where it started (the prophecy of the *Delphic Oracle*). It is the Greek genius that conceives of a linear structure and meshes it with a cyclical return. The efforts of human beings (here it is *Oedipus*, his father, King *Laius*, the King of *Thebes*, and his mother, Queen *Jocasta*), to outwit the *Delphic Oracle* ends in colossal tragedy. Let us discuss the role of the three unities in *Oedipus Rex*.

3.4.1 Unity of Time in *Oedipus Rex*

As stated earlier, the adherence to unity of time is not important for modern drama. In today’s media, stories can expand across any amount of time, from a measly half hour to spanning many generations. In contemporary times, famous dramatists with their descriptive prose make storytelling a walk in the park. Non-linear storytelling is not only possible but often desired today.

But in **Aristotle**’s day unity of time served more than one purpose. Stages were set in large amphitheatres, with actors often playing multiple roles. Communicating the passage of time could be tricky and confusing, as masks and body language were used to communicate different characters across the large space. Trying to capture various periods of time would have made the plot more confused and less easy to understand. Apart from the logistical difficulty in presenting different time periods, unity of time served a purpose especially for the audience. It gave the audience the tool of urgency – something which can play a pivotal role in any story. If the story is elongated through chronological narration, that sense of urgency gets lost. This does not mean non linear stories are un-interesting, but when one watches a play on an open stage, then the best way to capture the attention of the audience is to hold it in the ‘now’ i.e., in what happens in the present, right in front of the viewer. Let us turn to the play to illustrate the significance of the Unity of time.

The main event on stage presents an infirm state of *Thebes*, in the grip of deadly plague. *Oedipus* is the new king of *Thebes* who has married Queen *Jocasta* without knowing she was his mother. But the events that preceded his ascent to the throne of *Thebes* could not be enacted except by narration either by the *Chorus* or the other characters. Thus, even as King *Oedipus* is seething with anger after the blind *Tiresias* has leveled the charge of murder on him, he learns about the dire prediction of the *Delphic Oracle* for him and the action taken by his parents - - the former king of *Thebes*, King *Laius* and his Queen *Jocasta* to prevent the prophecy of the *Oracle* coming true. He also learns a little later from the messenger from *Corinth* about the events at *Corinth* where again the *Delphic Oracle* has chased *Oedipus* and made him depart from *Corinth* to nullify its prophecy. All through, the stage shows time present and reveals the past events in flashback through the voices of the *Chorus* and other characters. What happens on stage exemplifies unity of time as it deals with *Oedipus* at a particular time.

Activity: Read the full text of *Oedipus Rex* and note the movement of time through the play.

3.4.3 Unity of Action in *Oedipus Rex*

Despite the thousands of years between us and **Aristotle** this is the one step that all writers feel as essential to any story. A stage play is not a Bollywood film where there is an emphasis on action full of gun fights, sword fights, bomb explosions etc. The art of good play writing – both in story and language – lies in being concise in content and precise in expression. Say what you want to say but in as few words as possible. The better those words, the more elegant the play is.

The plot of *Oedipus Rex* moves through the life of *Oedipus* as King of *Thebes* with flashbacks to his childhood when he was abandoned and reared in *Corinth* and a flash forward to his tragic exile from *Thebes*, blinded and forlorn. The *Delphic Oracle* is at the centre directing his destiny. He is destined to be a tragic figure and that is how the Gods will it. The action of the play centres on *Oedipus*' life from beginning to end. There are no sub plots and the narration of the past is woven into the present as action in continuity. **Aristotle** enunciated Unity of action to be complemented by Unity of time and Unity of place. In his reckoning, the Greek concept of tragedy is a theatrical capsule of the colossal waste of the human potential. It is only the decree of the Gods that ultimately triumphs. But the efforts of Man to confront his destiny that had been decreed by the Gods even before his birth, reveals his indomitable spirit and courage to accept defeat and yet not be beaten down. To make us feel the impact of *Oedipus*' tragedy, the playwright uses the three Unities that leave no scope for any diversion from the central narrative. The story begins with *Oedipus*, his regal action to respond to the visitation of the plague –a tragic calamity, viewed as divine punishment, his unsparing efforts to find and punish the sinner who had caused the wrath of the divine, his shock on learning about the cause of the plague as a consequence of his heinous murder of King *Laius* and his shameful and despicable marriage to his mother and ends with his pronouncement of self punishment of blinding and exiling himself from *Thebes*. The entire play is thus knit by a single action vested on *Oedipus*.

Activity: Read the text and follow the line of action that moves the play on a straight line from the beginning to the end.

3.4.2 Unity of Place in *Oedipus Rex*

Again, this was more useful in Aristotle's day when stories faced logistical challenges. Changing location meant using set pieces or making the *Chorus* tell the audience about the shift. This could be awkward and clumsy, and it would pull the audience out of the immediacy of the scene. But today we can capture a sweeping landscape in a few well-crafted lines, and visual media makes movement from place to place even easier. One can change the backdrop through computer images or laser show. Such technological assistance was not available to the ancient Greek theatre.

It is important to understand that many writers show a lack of appreciation for unity of place and their work often suffers as a result. Characters need goals and direction, a steady balance between progress and obstacles. Watching a play is different from reading a play. What we see on stage is a continuation of the story and it is not possible for the theatre audience to revert to a previous scene. What one sees is about 'here' and 'now', i.e., in this place, at this moment. Hence, to have too many changes of locations dilutes the potency of the impact of the story. An open stage play is not a montage of many places and experiences. On the Greek stage, the unity of place becomes an essential part to unite the whole story. Let us revert to *Oedipus Rex* to understand the role of unity of place in the play.

In *Oedipus Rex*, all actions happen in *Thebes* as the crowd of people led by clerics address King *Oedipus* about the need to save the city from the ravaging plague. *Oedipus* assures them of his action after listing out what he had already done. He says he has already sent *Creon* to the *Delphic Oracle* to learn about the cause of the plague. At that moment, *Creon* returns from his visit to the *Delphic Oracle* and reports his findings. He is followed shortly, by the visit of *Tiresias* with his doomed prophecy that the murderer is none other than *Oedipus* himself. The messenger from *Corinth* a little later comes and speaks about the death of the King of *Corinth*. He also says that a long time ago, he had handed over an abandoned child to the King and Queen of *Corinth* who were childless. The *Chorus* enters and predicts the fall of *Oedipus* from his regal splendor to becoming a blind outcast from his kingdom. Unity of place thus does not allow the main story to move the action out of *Thebes*. Frequent scenic changes are avoided so as not to divert the audience's attention from the story and the characters by locating them in different places. The audience is not taken to *Corinth*. It learns everything from one location- from outside the palace of *Thebes*. A single location where the protagonist is present all the time helps in giving the story the needed succinctness.

Activity: Note down in serial order all the happenings in *Oedipus Rex* that move the play forward without a scenic shift of place.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

This Unit has given us a brief description of the *Dramatic Unities* and the role they play in the classical Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. It is not necessary that every play has to follow these dramatic Unities. They had a significant role to play in the ancient times when plays were staged in the open and there was no employment of technology to bring in change of locations or time. The need to have a single plot was to add intensity and immediacy to the tragic story without providing diversion that could lessen its impact.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. What are the three Dramatic Unities?
2. Explain the significance of the Fourth Wall specially for the ancient Greek theatre
3. What is the difference between Ancient Greek theatre and Modern stage?
4. Illustrate from *Oedipus Rex* the role of the three Unities.

3.7 GLOSSARY

Prescriptive	: Normative, pertaining to giving directives or rules
Intrusive	: Uncalled for, presumptuous
Calamitous	: catastrophic, disastrous
Progenitor	: originator, begetter
To flag	: to signal
A Walk in the Park	: Something very easy to do



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UNIT 4 *OEDIPUS REX: A CLASSICAL AND A MODERN TRAGEDY*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Appeal of *Oedipus Rex* for the Modern Audience
- 4.3 Is *Oedipus* Responsible for his Fall?
- 4.4 *Oedipus Rex* as a Classical Tragedy
- 4.5 *Oedipus Rex*, a Tragedy for all Times
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 Glossary
- 4.9 Suggested Readings and Reference

4.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this Unit, we will know

- why the play *Oedipus Rex* holds a fascination for us after nearly 25 millennia.
- how Oedipus is responsible for his fall;
- *Oedipus Rex* as a Classical Tragedy; and
- *Oedipus Rex* as a Modern Tragedy with a difference.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Sophocles wrote *Oedipus Rex* in 430 B.C. The play was first performed in the Theatre of *Dionysus* in Athens around 429 B.C. Nearly 2500 years later, that is, in 2017 *Oedipus the King (Oedipus Rex)* was performed at the European Capital of Culture in Paphos in Cyprus as a part of the International Festival of Greek Drama. It is amazing that this play and the plays of the other two of the ancient Greek triumvirate - **Euripides** and **Aeschylus** - continue to interest audience even after two and a half millennia.

4.2 APPEAL OF *OEDIPUS REX* FOR THE MODERN AUDIENCE

It is astonishing as to why this play that comes under the genre 'Classical Tragedy' - holds our fascination today when such tragedies are no longer written and have been replaced by tragi-comedies (tragedies that have a positive ending), comi - tragedies (comedies that have a tragic element in them) and Absurd drama that deals with the meaninglessness of existence). So we revert to the question as to what is in the Greek plays and in particular *Oedipus Rex* that have such a lasting impact on audience through the world and through the years! The simple and straight answer lies in the theme of the play which examines the heroic Man in respect of his personal freedom and power in his confrontation with the Divine power. This has a lasting appeal for all human beings. This is of perennial interest as it highlights the supreme power of the divine over humans who ironically among all other creations of God are the best and well endowed with the power of reason. But the power of the humans is no match

for the unseen Power that has both the power to create and power to destroy. The bare outline of the story of *Oedipus Rex* enables us to understand the littleness of Man in his confrontation with the mysterious higher powers that he neither can see or unravel or triumph over.

The story begins with *Thebes* stricken by plague. No one understands the cause of the plague or what can be done to overcome it. As the play opens, a priest and the *Chorus* of *Theban* elders are calling on King *Oedipus* to aid them overcome the devastating plague which has been sent by *Apollo* as a divine punishment. *Oedipus* has already sent *Creon*, his brother-in-law to consult the *Oracle* at *Delphi* about this matter. *Creon* returns at that very moment when the audience is requesting King *Oedipus* to solve the fatal problem of plague. He reports that the *Delphic Oracle* has predicted that the city will be free of the disease if the murderer of King *Laius* is caught and punished. (Note the lines underlined in the passages quoted below)

*Creon: Let me report then all the god declared.
A fell pollution that infests the land,
King Phoebus bids us straitly extirpate
And no more harbor an inveterate sore.*

(*Creon* reports about what God

(the *Delphic Oracle*) had told him)

*Oedipus: What expiation means he? What's amiss?
Creon: Banishment, or the shedding blood for blood.
This stain of blood makes shipwreck of our state.*

*Oedipus: Whom can he mean, the miscreant thus denounced?
Creon: Before thou didst assume the helm of State,
The sovereign of this land was Laius.*

Oedipus: I heard as much, but never saw the man.

*Creon: He fell; and now the god's command is plain:
Punish his takers-off, whoe'er they be.*

(God's command is to punish the killers of the earlier King *Laius* and that will rid the city of *Thebes* of the cursed plague)

*Oedipus: Where are they? Where in the wide world to find
The far, faint traces of a bygone crime?*

*Creon: In this land, said the god; "who seeks shall find;
Who sits with folded hands or sleeps is blind."*

(The gods clearly say the murderer is only in this land- i.e., only in *Thebes*)

*Oedipus: Was he within his palace, or afield,
Or traveling, when Laius met his fate?*

*Creon: Abroad; he started, so he told us, bound
For Delphi, but he never thence returned.*

*Oedipus: Came there no news, no fellow-traveler
To give some clue that might be followed up?*

*Creon: But one escape, who flying for dear life,
Could tell of all he saw but one thing sure.*

*Oedipus: And what was that? One clue might lead us far,
With but a spark of hope to guide our quest.*

(It is clear *Oedipus* is determined to find the murderer of King *Laius* by seeking answers to the many questions he puts forth).

*Creon: Robbers, he told us, not one bandit but
A troop of knaves, attacked and murdered him.*

*Oedipus: Did any bandit dare so bold a stroke,
Unless indeed he were suborned from Thebes?*

*Creon: So 'twas surmised, but none was found to avenge
His murder mid the trouble that ensued.*

(In this exchange between *Creon* and *Oedipus*, *Oedipus*' efforts to investigate King *Laius*' murder once again prove that his intentions are genuine).

*Oedipus: What trouble can have hindered a full quest,
When royalty had fallen thus miserably?*

*Creon: The riddling Sphinx compelled us to let slide
The dim past and attend to instant needs.*

(*Creon* speaks about the *Sphinx*'s (the *Delphic Oracle*'s) injunction to investigate as it is the compelling need of the hour).

*Oedipus: Well, I will start afresh and once again
Make dark things clear. Right worthy the concern
Of Phoebus, worthy thine too, for the dead;
I also, as is meet, will lend my aid
To avenge this wrong to Thebes and to the god.
Not for some far-off kinsman, but myself,
Shall I expel this poison in the blood;
For who so slew that king might have a mind
To strike me too with his assassin hand.
Therefore in righting him I serve myself.
Up, children, haste ye, quit these altar stairs,
Take hence your suppliant wands, go summon hither
The Theban commons. With the god's good help
Success is sure; 'tis ruin if we fail.*

(*Oedipus*' last line sounds like a premonition except that his investigation proves to be a success, and brings but ruin to him).

*This proclamation I address to all:—
Thebans, if any knows the man by whom
Laius, son of Labdacus, was slain,
I summon him to make clean shrift to me.
And if he shrinks, let him reflect that thus
Confessing he shall 'scape the capital charge;
For the worst penalty that shall befall him
Is banishment—unscathed he shall depart.
But if an alien from a foreign land
Be known to any as the murderer,
Let him who knows speak out, and he shall have*

*Due recompense from me and thanks to boot.
But if ye still keep silence, if through fear
For self or friends ye disregard my hest,
Hear what I then resolve; I lay my ban
On the assassin whosoe'er he be.
Let no man in this land, whereof I hold
The sovereign rule, harbor or speak to him;
Give him no part in prayer or sacrifice
Or lustral rites, but hound him from your homes.
For this is our defilement, so the god
Hath lately shown to me by oracles.
Thus as their champion I maintain the cause
Both of the god and of the murdered King.
And on the murderer this curse I lay
(On him and all the partners in his guilt):—
Wretch, may he pine in utter wretchedness!
And for myself, if with my privity
He gain admittance to my hearth, I pray
The curse I laid on others fall on me.*

(This is *Oedipus'* proclamation which further confirms his resolute drive towards his own ruin: he prays that the curse he has laid on the murderer should be transferred on to him, if the murderer comes into his home with his approval or consent. It shows that *Oedipus* cannot ever conceive that he could have been the murderer and his searing honesty that he would accept any punishment if he were to associate himself with the murderer).

Oedipus who is the new King after the death of King *Laius*, promises to find the murderer. But the more he probes into the murder of King *Laius*, the truth comes closer to him. So we have three stages of *Oedipus'* life- *Oedipus*, the hero who solves the riddle of the *Sphinx* to become the King of *Thebes* (this is not shown on stage but revealed by the *Chorus* as a flashback), *Oedipus*, the investigator who learns the truth that he is the murderer and *Oedipus*, the noble Man who takes the punishment in line with the promise he had made and goes into exile after blinding himself. The *Delphic Oracle* represents the prophetic truth, decreed by Powers higher than Man. It spares no one – even as heroic, noble and truthful like *Oedipus*. It is indeed a great leveler of all human beings. This is the core meaning of the play - *Oedipus* is like any one of us in the presence of the higher power. He is one like us; we are one like him. Hence, the play has a fascinating appeal even today after nearly 2500 years. Its appeal will continue in the future also as long as theatre survives.

The question that had been asked and that continues to be asked is how far man is responsible for his fortunes and misfortunes. Time and again it is seen that man cannot overcome his destiny and he is fated to a life beyond his control. Does this mean Man should resign himself to Fate and make no effort to countenance it? Should he grovel in abject surrender to the powers that be or fight with a fearsome awareness that eventually he will lose, but still he has to fight not for a win, but for a certain loss? Thus, *Oedipus'* story continues to engage our minds from the ancient times to the present day. We shall deal with the question as to what is left for Man in a battle that he is predicted in advance to lose. Let us try and see whether *Oedipus* the man is responsible for his fall or whether it is fate/ destiny.

4.3 IS *OEDIPUS* RESPONSIBLE FOR HIS FALL?

The question about the role of man in his fight against destiny is closely linked to the question with reference to his responsibility for the misfortunes that overtake him. If we deny human responsibility, it amounts to assailing Gods for their whimsical and autocratic dealings with us. If we accept human responsibility, we find the play presenting a sinner and not a hero of exalted nature, thereby justifying the punishment given to him. If a play like *Oedipus Rex* were to leave us with a sense of futility, pusillanimity and peevish finger pointing at Gods, it would not have held sway over man for so many millennia. On the contrary, it has had a great influence on our minds because it has the power to ennoble us, to purge us of all our negative emotions such as fear and pity and replace them by fearlessness and an empathic response to the suffering of the fallen hero. American theologian, **Tryon Edwards** writing about human destiny says: “*What could contribute to the making of one’s destiny? ... Thoughts often lead on to purposes; purposes go forth in actions; actions form habits; habits decide character and character fixes our destiny.*”

Viewed in the light of the above statement, the play does not totally absolve man of his responsibility for his ill fortune (as well as good fortune). Let us look at *Oedipus* in his three aspects and for a moment mentally block the prophecy of the *Delphic Oracle*. Right from the time *Oedipus* appears on stage outside his palace in *Thebes*, he strikes us as someone distinct and different from all other men. He is seen as a daring, dynamic, and strong man who speaks honestly and acts as truthfully as he speaks. It can be truly said that he walks his talk, i.e., he backs up his talk with purposeful actions. He has a regal aura about him and he promises that he will make all efforts to find the murderer of his predecessor King *Laius* and hand him the severest punishment. These are not empty words as he goes the full distance to find out the murderer and when he finds, he does not turn back on his promise to punish him.

As the story unfolds with *Tiresias* charging him as the murderer followed by *Jocasta* (whom he had married without knowing that she was his mother) narrating the killing of her husband during a brawl at the crossing of roads and how she and her husband, King *Laius* had abandoned their only child in order to prevent the prophecy of the *Delphic Oracle* coming true, *Oedipus* gets a sneaking suspicion about the possibility of his own complicity in the murder of King *Laius*. He does not suspend the inquiry that will reveal the truth, but in all earnestness, he goes for further investigation about his past life in *Corinth* where he had been brought up as the child of the *Corinthian* royalty. What is striking about *Oedipus* is his searing honesty to get to the bottom of the truth. When he finally realises the two unpardonable sins he had committed, he keeps to his word of giving maximum punishment to the sinner and blinds himself and walks out of his own kingdom as an exile. *Oedipus* owns his responsibility for the murder of his father and his marriage to his mother. Prior to arriving at the truth, *Oedipus* is angry with *Tiresias* and *Creon* for imputing the criminal action to him. He is proud about his unimpeachable character to the point of being arrogant and cannot conceive of his committing any heinous crime. How can he, King *Oedipus* defile his kingdom? How can he, King *Oedipus* kill his father and marry his mother? But the answer comes to him as a shocking yes. We have evidence of his pride of being a loyal son to his

foster parents in Corinth, when he had attempted to outsmart the *Delphic Oracle* by running away from them. In all these episodes, we recognise a narcissistic pride in his inviolability. We see an assertive confidence that he will punish the sinner, thereby ruling out any possibility of his being the perpetrator of the twin crimes of killing his father and marrying his mother. It is this firm belief “*I, Oedipus, can do no wrong*” that brings down his fall. He is, in this sense, guilty of egoistic arrogance about his personal integrity. Ironically his promise to walk the talk brings his doom. If there is any other failing on his part, it is his vain attempt to prove the *Delphic Oracle* wrong. Though it is not right to impute this failing as a cause for his punishment, it affirms the dilemma of Man caught in a no win situation against the Powers above him. *Oedipus* calls himself the man “*abhorred of gods, accursed of men*”. The chilling description of his discovery of the suicidal death of *Jocasta* and his subsequent act of blinding himself reveal the nobility of a man who accepts punishment for sins that he had committed though unwittingly and unintentionally.

Chorus speaks:

*What happened after that I cannot tell,
Nor how the end befell, for with a shriek
Burst on us Oedipus; all eyes were fixed
On Oedipus, as up and down he strode,
Nor could we mark her agony to the end.
For stalking to and fro “A sword!” he cried,
“Where is the wife, no wife, the teeming womb
That bore a double harvest, me and mine?”
And in his frenzy some supernal power
(No mortal, surely, none of us who watched him)
Guided his footsteps; with a terrible shriek,
As though one beckoned him, he crashed against
The folding doors, and from their staples forced
The wrenched bolts and hurled himself within.
Then we beheld the woman hanging there,
A running noose entwined about her neck.
But when he saw her, with a maddened roar
He loosed the cord; and when her wretched corpse
Lay stretched on earth, what followed—O ’twas dread!
He tore the golden brooches that upheld
Her queenly robes, upraised them high and smote
Full on his eye-balls, uttering words like these:
“No more shall ye behold such sights of woe,
Deeds I have suffered and myself have wrought;
Henceforward quenched in darkness shall ye see
Those ye should ne’er have seen; now blind to those
Whom, when I saw, I vainly yearned to know.”*

(These lines reveal the nobility of *Oedipus* as he owns his sins and blinds himself. Kindly mark the underlined lines above).

*Such was the burden of his moan, whereto,
Not once but oft, he struck with his hand uplift
His eyes, and at each stroke the ensanguined orbs
Bedewed his beard, not oozing drop by drop,*

*But one black gory downpour, thick as hail.
Such evils, issuing from the double source,
Have whelmed them both, confounding man and wife.
Till now the storied fortune of this house
Was fortunate indeed; but from this day
Woe, lamentation, ruin, death, disgrace,
All ills that can be named, all, all are theirs.*

Chorus

But hath he still no respite from his pain?

Second Messenger

*He cries, "Unbar the doors and let all Thebes
Behold the slayer of his sire, his mother's—"
That shameful word my lips may not repeat.
He vows to fly self-banished from the land,
Nor stay to bring upon his house the curse
Himself had uttered; but he has no strength
Nor one to guide him, and his torture's more
Than man can suffer, as yourselves will see.
For lo, the palace portals are unbarred,
And soon ye shall behold a sight so sad
That he who must abhorred would pity it.
[Enter Oedipus blinded.]*

Chorus

*Woeful sight! more woeful none
These sad eyes have looked upon.
Whence this madness? None can tell
Who did cast on thee his spell,
prowling all thy life around,
Leaping with a demon bound.
Hapless wretch! how can I brook
On thy misery to look?
Though to gaze on thee I yearn,
Much to question, much to learn,
Horror-struck away I turn.*

Oedipus

*Ah me! ah woe is me!
Ah whither am I borne!*

The play ends with the last speech of the chorus:

Chorus:

*Look ye, countrymen and Thebans, this is Oedipus the great,
He who knew the Sphinx's riddle and was mightiest in our state.*

*Who of all our townsmen gazed not on his fame with envious eyes?
Now, in what a sea of troubles sunk and overwhelmed he lies!
Therefore wait to see life's ending ere thou count one mortal blest;
Wait till free from pain and sorrow he has gained his final rest.*

The Chorus is awe struck by the sight of Oedipus, the great, now fallen and blinded. He who was admired as the mightiest among men, he who was the

envy of many men is now sunk low, in pain and sorrow, waiting for his final rest when he would be freed of all suffering. *Oedipus*, the fallen hero, rises high in stature through acceptance of his sin and self-inflicted punishment. In the next section we shall look at *Oedipus Rex* as a Classical Tragedy.

4.4 OEDIPUS REX AS A CLASSICAL TRAGEDY

The play is the tragedy of an extraordinarily great and noble man whose brave and truthful actions as well as his meek and abject acceptance of his punishment result in his tragic fall. This is the tragedy of man -both ancient and modern. Tragedy, as defined by **Robert Brustein** in his *Theatre of Revolt* is “*the colossal waste of the human potential*”. This definition makes a clear distinction between Tragedy as a dramatic genre and tragedy as a term we use in common parlance. Any fatal incident involving human beings and animals is a sad experience. A plane crash, a fatal accident or a car running over a dog – to cite a few examples are tragic incidents. There is finality about these incidents resulting in an irrevocable loss of life. While they create in us a deep sense of sadness, they are different from Tragedy that we witness on stage. This distinction can be best understood by finding an answer to the simple question as to why do we go to see a Tragedy in a theatre when we have the quotidian experience of the tragic as we read the morning newspapers about fatal accidents and sad, startling deadly events. We feel sad, disturbed, bewildered and frightened by these events. We feel pity for the loss of lives in a plane crash or in a road accident. They raise uncomfortable questions as to why they had happened without a satisfying answer. *The result is a gripping sense of fear about the unpredictability of life.*

Tragedy on stage also raises such uncomfortable questions. But even as we learn about the colossal waste of the human potential, we are given a glimpse of the indomitable will of Man who refuses to fight shy of confronting life’s vicissitudes and confronts it and thereby gains in dignity and nobility. The experience of the rise of man after his fall is an ennobling experience that purges all the negative emotions of pity and fear and exalts positive emotions of nobility and grandeur. Imagine *Oedipus* walking out of stage through the aisle in the auditorium, blind but in regal splendor and the audience standing up in awe and reverence and looking at the man who has risen only because of his fall. We go to a theatre to see a Tragedy to get the overwhelming feeling of respect, reverence, wonder and admiration, an awe-inspiring feeling before something grand, sublime and noble. The despair over “*the colossal waste of the human potential*” is compensated by a feeling of optimism that “*all is not lost. The stars shine still*”. Tragedy as a dramatic genre offers us an uplifting and ennobling experience. Having said that, we shall now try and look at *Oedipus Rex* as a Classical Tragedy that has somehow managed to withstand the test of time and has transcended both time and space.

4.5 OEDIPUS REX, A TRAGEDY FOR ALL TIMES

In modern times, it is increasingly difficult to write tragedies on the lines of the ancient Greeks. For one, the world has moved from monarchy to democracy, though in some countries, it is a descent to dictatorship. In the modern political set up, it is either collective leadership or the rule of an autocrat or a dictator. Both do not measure up to the nobility of a King, who in the olden times

inspired the masses by virtue of his dignity, nobility, stateliness and loftiness. The concept of a hero in a democracy is becoming more of an anachronism, something that is out of historical order. In a democracy we do not have a traditional hero who confers supreme benevolent grace on his people. Hence the depiction in a Tragedy of the rise and fall of a King or anyone of a high status or of a royal lineage is not possible in modern democracy where everyone, technically speaking, is a king. The rule of a King and his sway over the people makes his fall from grace a moving and stirring event. The hero is accompanied by grace arising out of *anagnorisis* (recognition of his folly) that he has been destroyed partially by his violation of the law. Don't we share similar feelings today for great persons who fall off the pedestal? Whether we like a person or not when they are alive, we feel shaken when s/he falls a victim to some heinous murder or a fatal accident. The entire world mourned the assassination of **Mahatma Gandhi**, **Martin Luther King**, **John F. Kennedy** and his brother **Robert Kennedy**. So did the world grieve over the deaths of **Indira Gandhi** and later **Rajiv Gandhi** who were victims to bullets and explosives, their inhuman ends cutting across difference in political ideology. The sadness is to see the branch cut in the middle when it should have grown full length.

Greek culture was rooted in its belief in the working of Fate or Destiny, Necessity and the power of the Gods. Such a deep rooted belief resists any rational explanation or logic. Out of these three, we have studied about the power of the Gods in **Homer's Iliad**. Here in this play *Oedipus Rex* we recognise the role of Fate or Destiny. The fall of *Oedipus* is due to his preordained fate as prophesied by the *Delphic Oracle*. But we need to know about Necessity, which had a penetrating hold over the Greeks. Necessity, known as *ananke* in Greek is at the centre of Greek tragedy. **Harold Bloom** writes: "*Necessity is that set of unalterable. Irreducible, unmanageable facts which we call the human condition... Necessity is first of all death; it is old age, sleep, the reversal of fortune, the dance of fortune; it is thereby the fact of suffering as well as pleasure, for if we must dance and sleep, we must also suffer, age and die*". Necessity is often mistakenly termed as determinism or fatalism (a philosophical doctrine holding that all events are predetermined in advance for all time and human beings are powerless to change them). Necessity is different from determinism.

Let us clarify how Necessity differs from destiny. According to 'destiny' notions, there is a fixed (*divine*) goal which will be attained no matter how much we strive against it. Human actions don't make any difference - fate ensures the future will turn out the same no matter what we choose or how we act. The phrase "you can't fight fate" pretty much sums it up. Determinism or Necessity, by contrast, has no inherent goals; it's just the way things are. No God or gods are imposing their will upon us hapless mortals. This is the important distinction to bear in mind- the question of an individual's power to contribute to the shaping of history. *Necessity shows how even if everything is predetermined there can be individual actions that are possible to make some of them not happen*. In other words Necessity provides a place for such a possibility, though in the Greek belief, such a possibility will not triumph in the final analysis. Thus *Necessity asserts individual human responsibility though the final outcome is what fate had decided*.

Here in *Oedipus*, we have the trap set up by the *Delphic Oracle*, but at the same time *Oedipus* is endowed with supra human courage that drives him into

the trap. It is *Oedipus'* struggle with Necessity (here it is his personal responsibility to unravel the mystery of *Laius'* death) that brings forth his heroism. *Oedipus* acts but all his actions are limited by Necessity. The Greeks understood and accepted human actions, collectively shared the tragic experience with *Oedipus* about the ultimate triumph of Destiny over men and bowed in reverence to the heroism of the hero who confronts it. In modern times, the gradual weakening of the ancient belief in human heroism has brought about the gradual waning of Tragedy. *Oedipus'* entry into the trap is his individual action. It is this primacy of action that Sophocles insisted upon in his tragedies.

The above discussions pertain to *Oedipus Rex* as a Classical Greek Tragedy. In modern times this idea of the micro power of Man against the macro power of the universe has once again been the focus of the dramatists - especially of those who wrote in the post World War II period. Modern dramatists (like **Beckett, Ionesco** and **Pinter**) have adapted the tragic focus of traditional drama. After the deadly holocaust of the Nazi war and the devastation of Japanese cities by the atomic bomb, the world experienced the dread of an unknown annihilating force. The irrationality and meaninglessness of life, the factual reality that life hangs by a thread that could any moment be snapped exercised the intellectual writers. The plays of post War writers like **Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco, John Genet** and **Harold Pinter** - to name a few, deal with the theme of a hostile mechanism reducing human existence to nothing. They dramatised the awesome perception of "absurdity" of life that is out of harmony with logic, rationality and meaning. They coined the term 'the Absurd' to define a lack of correspondence between man's need and desire for coherence and meaning in life and the chaos and meaninglessness that characterises human existence.

The 'Absurd' denies any possibility of meaning in logical and rational terms.; nor does it hold any possibility of transcending this state of meaninglessness which culminates with death, reducing everything into nothing. This is similar to the Greek experience of Tragedy where Man with all his greatness and potential is defeated by the hidden, unseen power of Fate. Similarly in modern times, all the inventions science and technology cannot outdo the suddenness of death or devastation or natural calamity. When we become aware of the absurdity or meaninglessness of life, it results in impotent anger and a hint of revolt, but no final solution, as **Bloom** writes, "*The absurd details the loss of meaning, the shrinking horizon of the human potential.*" These plays show how man is trapped in the universe, where to live is to submit oneself to 'absurdity', and there is no escape. The modern plays present the tragic experience of Man where the situation is imposed on him and it is inescapable. Like the Greek tragedies, Modern plays also seek Man's heroic resilience to the 'absurdity' of life by making him confront it. It is in this confrontation he ennobles life with a meaning.

Oedipus Rex thus, is a precursor of the modern drama, though the ennobling tragic experience is depicted as an experience of absurdity. The theme is common to both- the waste of the human potential in countering the imponderable power - call it God or Fate or Destiny or the Absurd. It is in the heroic struggle of Man seeking a dialogue with that power that the two meet. All human actions are infructuous and this is again common to both theatres- the Greeks and the Modern. But the difference is only in its presentation. The former distills the tragic experience and while the latter makes a mockery of it. The Greeks present the operation of fatalism; the moderns that of futilism.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

This Unit discusses

- The perennial appeal of *Oedipus Rex* that has lasted for 2500 years
- How *Oedipus* is responsible for his fall
- *Oedipus Rex* as a Classical Tragedy and
- *Oedipus Rex* as a Tragedy for all times

4.7 QUESTIONS

- 1) What is the special appeal of *Oedipus Rex* that holds our attention even today?
- 2) Who is responsible for the fall of *Oedipus*- Fate or *Oedipus* himself? Give reasoned answer.
- 3) Discuss *Oedipus Rex* as a Classical and a Modern Tragedy.
- 4) Distinguish the terms destiny and Necessity.

4.8 GLOSSARY

Perennial	:	always existing
Extirpate	:	to completely destroy or get rid of something
Inveterate	:	deep- rooted
Expiation	:	atonement, penance
Suborned	:	incited to commit a crime
Pusillanimity	:	cowardice
Finger pointing	:	act of blaming someone
Narcissitic	:	self love, self absorption
Inviolability	:	secure from doing wrong or violating
Supernal	:	coming from heaven
Ensanguined	:	stained or covered with blood
Orbs	:	Eye or eyeball
Quotidian	:	everyday occurrence
Fatalism	:	the belief all events are predetermined by fate and therefore unalterable
Futilism	:	all human efforts are futile

4.9 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCE

1. Tryon Edwards, *InspirationBoost.com*
2. Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt*, Rowman and Littlefield, 1991
3. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, Harcourt Bruce, 1994