

Oedipus at Colonus

Background Info

Author Bio

Full Name: Sophocles

Date of Birth: 496 B.C.E.

Place of Birth: Colonus, a village outside of Athens, Greece

Date of Death: 405–406 B.C.E.

Brief Life Story: Considered one of the three greatest playwrights of classical Greek theater, Sophocles was a friend of Pericles and Herodotus, and a respected citizen who held political and military offices in fifth-century B.C.E. Athens. He won fame by defeating the playwright Aeschylus for a prize in tragic drama at Athens in 468 B.C.E. Only seven of his complete plays have survived to reach the modern era, but he wrote more than 100 and won first prize in 24 contests. Best known are his three Theban plays, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Sophocles's other complete surviving works are *Ajax*, *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, and *Trachinian Women*. He is credited with changing Greek drama by adding a third actor, reducing the role of the chorus, and paying greater attention to character development.

Key Facts

Full Title: *Oedipus at Colonus*

Genre: Tragic drama

Setting: The sacred grove of the Furies at Colonus, outside of Athens

Climax: The death of Oedipus

Protagonist: Oedipus

Antagonist: Creon

Historical and Literary Context

When Written: 405–406 B.C.

Where Written: Athens, Greece

When Performed: 401 B.C.

Literary Period: Classical

Related Literary Works: Of Sophocles's surviving dramatic works, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* treat different episodes of the same legend, using many of the same characters. Sophocles's writing career overlapped with that of Aeschylus and Euripedes, the other great tragic playwrights of fifth-century Athens. Among Aeschylus's best-known tragedies are *Seven Against Thebes*, *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. Euripedes's most

influential works include *Medea*, *Electra*, and *The Bacchae*.

Related Historical Events: Sophocles completed *Oedipus at Colonus* and passed away in 405–406 B.C.E., just before the utter defeat of Athens by Sparta at the end of the Peloponnesian War. The defeat led to the replacement of Athenian democracy by a harsh, Spartan-controlled dictatorship known as the Thirty Tyrants. When *Oedipus at Colonus* was first performed, four years later, at the festival of Dionysus in 401 B.C.E., the Athenian audience may have watched the play's celebration of the glory of Athens through misty eyes. Theseus, in the play, is the mythical founder and reformer of the Athenian state, and Oedipus, through his death, offers the city protection. The audience would have been painfully aware that Athens's golden period had just ended.

Extra Credit

Sophocles's Home Town: Sophocles was born at Colonus, and lived his life in Athens during the city-state's golden years. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, his final play, he has adapted the Oedipus legend to intersect with Athens' origins and provide a mythical foundation for Athens' glory. Sadly, Athens fell from power just a few years after Sophocles's death.

Plot Summary

The play begins in the **grove of the Furies** at Colonus, near Athens. It is several years after **Oedipus** was banished from Thebes, the city he once ruled. He is now a sorry sight, blind and hobbled, dressed in rags, led by his daughter **Antigone**. The two stop to rest in the grove. A **citizen** of Colonus passes by and tells them they need to move—they're on the sacred ground of the Furies. Oedipus, however, believes that this grove was prophesied as the location of his life's final chapter. More citizens (the **chorus**) come, and Oedipus asks them to send for **Theseus**, king of Athens. When the chorus learns who Oedipus is, they're frightened and tell him to leave before he brings ruin to their city. Oedipus appeals to their humanity and explains that his famous acts, although terrible, were committed unknowingly. The chorus agrees to wait for Theseus.

Before the king arrives, Oedipus's other daughter, **Ismene**, brings news from Thebes. Oedipus's two sons are fighting for control of the city. **Polynices** has been banished by his younger brother **Eteocles**, but has raised an army in Argos and is preparing to attack Thebes. She says the leaders of Thebes want Oedipus to return, but want to keep him at the border of the city, because the oracles say his presence there would protect Thebes. Oedipus is furious at the Thebans desire to use him in this way. While they wait for the king, he very reluctantly

tells the chorus about his famous deeds—killing his father and marrying his mother. He again defends himself, saying that he did none of these awful deeds knowingly.

When Theseus arrives, he is kind to Oedipus. Oedipus says that if Theseus allows him to stay under the protection of Athens and be buried at Colonus, his tomb will bless and protect Athens. Theseus welcomes Oedipus to stay and guarantees that no one will take him away against his will. Once Theseus leaves, **Creon** arrives from Thebes. He claims to have suffered at the thought of Oedipus's misfortunes and now hopes to persuade Oedipus to return to Thebes. Oedipus furiously refuses. He states that he's being used as a pawn in the Theban power struggle, and is not truly welcomed by the people who have ignored his suffering for years. Creon's guards take Antigone and Ismene as hostages to try to force Oedipus to come with them. When Creon then tries to seize Oedipus himself by force, the chorus cries for help. Theseus arrives in time to stop Creon from taking Oedipus, and sends his army after the kidnapers. Theseus soon returns with Oedipus's daughters unharmed, and receives Oedipus's gratitude.

Oedipus's son Polynices comes to see his father. Oedipus doesn't want to speak to him but is persuaded to listen by Antigone and Theseus. Polynices says he's miserable that he

neglected his father for so long. He adds that the oracles have decreed that whichever side of the upcoming battle Oedipus supports will win, and asks for his father's help. Oedipus curses Polynices for failing to come to his aid when he was in exile and sends him away with a prophecy: Polynices's attack on Thebes will fail, and that the two brothers will kill each other in battle. Before he leaves, Polynices asks his sisters to give him a proper burial should Oedipus's prophecy come to pass.

A thunderstorm begins, signalling to Oedipus that his time to die has arrived. He sends for Theseus, and when the king arrives, he tells Theseus that if the king keeps Oedipus's burial place a secret, then Oedipus's presence there will be a great defense for the city of Athens. Oedipus leads the king, his daughters, and a small group of attendants out of the grove. Not long after, a messenger returns with an account of Oedipus's death. After his daughters mourned him and received his blessing, he told everyone but Theseus to leave. When they looked back, Oedipus had simply vanished, and Theseus was covering his eyes as if he'd witnessed something supernatural. Antigone and Ismene return to the grove, mourning their father. Although he will not tell them the location of their father's tomb, Theseus agrees to send them back to Thebes, where they hope to stop the upcoming battle.

Characters

Oedipus – The protagonist of *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus is feeble and impoverished, wandering in exile, and known throughout Greece as the man who killed his father and married his mother (events covered in more detail in Sophocles's play *Oedipus Rex*). Oedipus gouged out his own eyes when he discovered the truth about his actions, and now his faithful daughter **Antigone** leads him in his wanderings. As a younger man, Oedipus struggled against the terrible fate that had been prophesied for him. Now, as his life nears its end, he struggles no longer and is ready to fulfill the final chapter of this prophecy and find his last resting place. Although he is a pitiful figure, Oedipus is still an eloquent and convincing speaker.

Antigone – Oedipus's daughter and guide in his blind wanderings. Although she has not been banished from Thebes, she suffers the same hardships as her father out of her love for him. When her brother **Polynices** visits in a failed attempt to gain Oedipus's blessing, he asks Antigone to give him a proper

burial if he should die in battle (these efforts are the subject of Sophocles's *Antigone*).

Theseus – The just and brave king of Athens who welcomes Oedipus and promises to protect him. When the men from Thebes kidnap Oedipus's daughters, Theseus and his army rescue the girls. Theseus is a familiar figure in Greek mythology and is the legendary hero and founder of Athens.

A Citizen – The citizen of Colonus who first encounters Oedipus in the sacred grove of the Furies.

The Chorus – In this play, the chorus represents the elder citizens of Colonus. Sophocles's choruses react to the events of the play. The chorus speaks as one voice, or sometimes through the voice of its leader. It praises, damns, covers in fear, asks or offers advice, and generally helps the audience interpret the play.

Ismene – Daughter of Oedipus and sister of Antigone. She brings the news from Thebes about the conflict between her brothers.

Creon – Oedipus's brother-in-law (and uncle), Creon comes to Colonus to persuade Oedipus to return to Thebes. When Oedipus refuses, Creon has his men kidnap the old man's daughters. Creon tries to take Oedipus by force, but **Theseus** prevents him. While Oedipus tends to give long and dramatic speeches, Creon is direct and to-the-point.

Polynices – Eldest son of Oedipus and brother of Antigone. When he was in power, Polynices helped to drive his father into exile from Thebes. By the time of *Oedipus at Colonus*, Polynices had been overthrown by his younger brother, **Eteocles**, and had himself been banished. Polynices then moved to the city of Argos, married there, and now has raised an army to attack Thebes. He comes to Oedipus asking for forgiveness for his

previous sins, but also because the oracles have declared that the side that Oedipus favors will win the battle. Oedipus curses Polynices and predicts that his two sons will kill each other in

the battle. Creon's refusal to allow Polynices a proper burial is the conflict at the heart of Sophocles's play *Antigone*.

A Messenger – The messenger gives an eyewitness account of the miraculous death of **Oedipus**.

Eteocles – Oedipus's younger son, who overthrew Polynices to take the throne and rule Thebes jointly with Creon. He never appears onstage in the play.

Themes

In LitCharts, each theme gets its own corresponding color, which you can use to track where the themes occur in the work. There are two ways to track themes:

- Refer to the color-coded bars next to each plot point throughout the *Summary and Analysis* sections.
- Use the *ThemeTracker* section to get a quick overview of where the themes appear throughout the entire work.

Fate and Prophecy

The ancient Greeks believed that their gods could see the future, and that certain people could access this information. Independent prophets, called seers, saw visions of things to come. Oracles, priests who resided at the temples of gods—such as the oracle to Apollo at Delphi—were also believed to be able to interpret the gods' visions and give prophecies to people who sought to know the future. Oracles were an accepted part of Greek life—famous leaders and common people alike consulted them for help with making all kinds of decisions. Long before the beginning of *Oedipus at Colonus*, **Oedipus** has fulfilled one of the most famous prophecies in world literature—that he would kill his father and marry his mother (these events are covered in detail in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*). Despite his efforts to avoid this terrible fate, it came to pass. When Oedipus learned what he had inadvertently done, he gouged out his own eyes, and was banished from Thebes.

As *Oedipus at Colonus* begins, Oedipus is nearing the end of his life. When he arrives at the **grove of the Furies** at Colonus, he realizes that in the same prophecy that foretold his fate, the oracle said that this grove would be the spot where he would die. No longer one to question the power of fate, Oedipus refuses to leave the area of the grove. He convinces **Theseus**, king of Athens, that an oracle has predicted that Oedipus's tomb will serve as a great defense for Athens if Theseus protects Oedipus at the end of his life. Theseus accepts this version of fate, and the supernatural way in which Oedipus dies suggests that the gods have, in fact, afforded the old man some power in death. Based on the predictions of another oracle, both **Polynices** and **Creon** come to find Oedipus and try to win his favor—by persuasion or by force—to their respective causes, knowing that whoever has Oedipus on their side is destined to win. But Oedipus has become something of a prophet himself—he predicts the miserable death of Polynices, and Polynices leaves, knowing he cannot avoid his fate. Theseus keeps his word, and Oedipus's death occurs just as he predicted it would.

Guilt

Oedipus lives with the guilt and remorse for having violated two of the most severe taboos of civilized society—incest and the killing of one's parents. His overwhelming guilt at his actions caused him to blind himself and to beg to be banished from Thebes.

Yet Oedipus's sense of guilt for his famous crimes is more complicated in *Oedipus at Colonus* than it is in *Oedipus Rex*. He's a man who has suffered much for what he's done. He still feels guilt and revulsion, and he's still too ashamed to speak freely of his past when asked by the citizens of Colonus. However, with time has come some perspective. He realizes that he never intended to commit the acts he is infamous for committing. He killed his father in self-defense, he tells the citizens of Colonus, and without knowing what was happening. "Look through all humanity," he tells his listeners, "you'll never find a man on earth, if a god leads him on, who can escape his fate." Oedipus's guilt has diminished. At the same time, others who once shunned him and who now need his favor seek him out to express their own guilt at having cast him away before.

Old Age, Wisdom, and Death

Oedipus at Colonus is Sophocles' last play, written when he was 90 years old. As such, it should come as no surprise that one of the play's major themes is old age and the end of life. Through Oedipus, who himself is about to die, and to a lesser extent through Creon, the play examines the question of whether or not old age brings wisdom. When Oedipus tells Antigone early in the play that he has learned to accept his suffering the answer appears to be a resounding "Yes." And in his conduct regarding the gods, Oedipus unfailingly accepts the gods' dictates, a profound change from his youthful attempts to thwart the prophecies of the Delphic oracle. Yet in his dealings with other people, Oedipus is still prone to outbursts of holy rage. The subject of one such outburst, Creon responds that "not even the years can bring you to your senses. Must you disgrace old age?" Yet Creon himself seems no wiser, responding to a challenge from **Theseus by saying**: "But opposing you, old as I am, I'll stop at nothing, match you blow for blow. A man's anger can never age and fade away, not until he dies. The dead alone feel no pain."

Creon's comment seems to point to the play's larger point about old age: that it is awful, full of pain, envy, and loneliness that is only relieved by death. Perhaps, ultimately, that is the wisdom that Oedipus has learned. He does not fight death, as he used to fight the prophecies of the gods. He accepts his coming death, and so his last moments of life, as described by

the **messenger**, are of love, calm, and acceptance. Although his life was one of misery and infamy, in his final hours Oedipus becomes a model of how to die.

Redemption and Atonement

Oedipus killed his father and married his mother, driving his mother to suicide, causing his exile, and ensuring a miserable life for his daughter and traveling companion, **Antigone**. And yet, Oedipus didn't knowingly commit these acts, didn't wish to commit them, and punished himself harshly by gouging out his eyes and wandering the land as an outcast and beggar.

By accepting his fate and punishment in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus has atoned for his guilt. He is at peace in the **grove of the Furies**, the avenging spirits of Greek mythology who punished those who killed a parent or sibling—or who broke their oaths. In addition, in his blindness, he now has powers of prophecy, as well as the power to offer eternal protection to a deserving leader of a just city. *Oedipus at Colonus* shows Oedipus's final transformation from an outcast in life to a hero in death—a redemption earned through years of hardship and remorse. His miraculous death proves that the gods who brought on his awful fate feel that he has suffered enough and has earned a kind of immortality. They welcome him to the underworld so that he may at last rest in peace.

Justice

After years of reflection, **Oedipus** realizes he was not treated fairly by the people of Thebes, by his own sons, and by Creon in particular. They took advantage of his misery and banished him forever—in his moment of greatest agony he let them, even asked them to banish him. Now, stung and angered by Creon's insults, Oedipus turns to the question of justice: "Come, tell me: if, by an oracle of the gods, some doom were hanging over my father's head that he should die at the hands of his own son, how, with any justice, could you blame *me*?" Oedipus killed a man in self-defense, not knowing that man was his father. So how, he asks, could Creon condemn such an unwitting act with any real sense of justice.

Oedipus finds the justice he was denied by his own family and city of Thebes in **Theseus** and Athens. At last, Oedipus has found a ruler and a people who will not torment him for things he didn't mean to do. Theseus himself makes this plain to Creon when Creon tries to kidnap Oedipus: "You have come to a city that practices justice, that sanctions nothing without law." Unlike the Thebans, who seem caught in an endless cycle of vengeance, Athens is held up as an ideal city, founded on the rule of law.

Symbols


Symbols are shown in **red** text whenever they appear in the *Plot Summary* and *Summary and Analysis* sections of this LitChart.

The Grove of the Furies

The Furies were the avenging spirits of Greek mythology who punished those who broke the laws of nature or of the gods—such as killing a parent or sibling—or who broke their oaths.

The fact that Oedipus is at peace in the grove that is sacred to the Furies suggests that he is no longer being persecuted for his past deeds. The grove represents Oedipus's atonement and redemption.

Summary and Analysis

The color-coded bars in *Summary and Analysis* make it easy to track the themes through the work. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the *Themes* section. For instance, a bar of  indicates that all five themes apply to that part of the summary.

Lines 1 - 576 (in the Robert Fagles translation)

It is several years after **Oedipus** was banished from Thebes, the city he once ruled. The play begins in the **grove of the Furies** at Colonus, which is close to and ruled by the great city of Athens. Oedipus is now a sorry sight, blind and hobbled, dressed in rags, led by his daughter **Antigone**.

The oracle in Oedipus Rex punished for killing his father and marrying his mother. Now a blind old man in rags who needs his daughter to guide him, Oedipus has been punished for his misdeeds.



Oedipus tells **Antigone** that acceptance is the lesson taught by his suffering. He then asks Antigone to find a place for them to rest, and wonders where they are. Antigone recognizes Athens in the distance, though she doesn't recognize their precise location. But from the landscape she believes they are on holy ground. They decide to rest.

Oedipus's remarks about acceptance suggest that his suffering has made him a wiser man than he was as the headstrong leader in Oedipus Rex. In his past, he tried to fight the fate ordered for him by the gods. Now he accepts his suffering and his fate.



A **citizen** of Colonus approaches and demands that they move from their resting place, because it is holy ground, **the grove of the Furies**. **Oedipus** responds that this is a sign and that in fact he must not move from this place, which will be his refuge. He asks the citizen to send for the king, **Theseus**, and promises that if Theseus does Oedipus a small service, great good will come of it. The citizen leaves. Oedipus prays to the Furies. In his prayer, he says that, in the same prophecy in which the god Apollo foretold Oedipus's terrible fate, the god also spoke of the grove of the Furies as a place where Oedipus could rest, and where the last chapter of Oedipus's life would take place.

The Furies were avenging spirits of Greek mythology who punished those, like Oedipus, who broke natural law, such as by committing incest or killing a parent. That this grove is prophesied to be Oedipus's final resting place suggests that through suffering—blindness and banishment—Oedipus has atoned for his actions and has been granted redemption by the Furies and the gods. Also, notice how Oedipus now pays strict attention to the prophecy, rather than trying to fight it.



More citizens (the **chorus**) come looking for the stranger who has dared to set foot on the sacred ground of the terrible Furies. When **Oedipus** speaks to them, they tell him he must step out of the **grove of the Furies**. He does, with **Antigone's** help, and sits on a rocky area just outside the grove. The chorus ask his name and background. Reluctantly, Oedipus identifies himself. Upon hearing his name, the chorus shrinks back in terror and commands him to leave before he brings ruin to their city.

This scene suggests that Oedipus's fame—or rather, his infamy—was widespread even in his own time. Everywhere he went, he could not escape his outcast status. The citizens of Colonus react to him as a cursed man whose presence may bring misfortune to them if they harbor or help him.



Antigone appeals to the citizens' pity and humanity. **Oedipus** says they should not drive him out just because of his name. He admits that his acts caused terrible suffering, but says that he committed them unknowingly. He appeals to the honor of Athens as a just city and a protector of the weak. Moved by his speech, the **chorus** agrees to let the king of Athens decide what should be done.

Oedipus's acceptance of his fate seems to have lessened his guilt—he realizes now that he never had a role in determining his actions or his fate. Sophocles's Athenian audience would have appreciated Oedipus's appeal to the reputation of Athens as a place of justice.



A rider approaches—it is **Ismene**, **Oedipus's** other daughter. Oedipus, **Antigone**, and Ismene have a heartfelt reunion, and then Ismene delivers her news: Oedipus's two sons are engaged in a power struggle for control of Thebes. The younger son, **Eteocles**, seized the throne from and exiled the elder son, **Polynices**. Polynices fled to Argos and now is raising an army to attack Thebes, where Eteocles and **Creon** rule jointly.

Oedipus's daughters are faithful and loving. But his sons rejected their father after his banishment and are now fighting each other for control of Thebes. The sons's actions are also violations of natural law, and Oedipus himself is proof that such actions are punished by the gods.



Ismene then tells **Oedipus** the latest prophecies from the oracle: the men of Thebes, who cast Oedipus out, will soon try to bring him back. According to the oracle, Oedipus's presence just outside a city would protect that city. So the Thebans will want him to settle near Thebes, but not within the city itself. Oedipus asks whether the Thebans would give him a proper Theban burial after he died. Ismene reports that because Oedipus killed his own father, they would not. Ismene then adds that Oedipus's sons already know of the prophecy.

By accepting and enduring his punishment, Oedipus seems to have earned more than just forgiveness for his terrible actions—his presence has now become a powerful blessing that can safeguard Thebes. Though Creon and Eteocles are eager to exploit Oedipus's newfound power, they still would refuse to accept him as a Theban citizen after his death.



Oedipus is furious, and promises never to return to Thebes. He vents his rage against his sons, who never tried to rescue him, bring him back, or protect him after his downfall. He praises his two daughters for their devotion to him, but says he will never help his sons. He tells the **chorus** that if they help defend him against the men from Thebes who will try to take him away, they will gain a savior for their land.

The rage Oedipus displays here resembles the rage he showed as a younger man in Oedipus Rex. Yet his rage now is justified because it is directed at those who have legitimately wronged him. In Oedipus Rex, he raged at the innocent and at the gods.



The leader of the **chorus** is moved by **Oedipus's** request. He tells Oedipus the ritual that must be performed to appease the Furies, whose sacred ground Oedipus has stepped on and violated. **Ismene** exits to visit a nearby spring and perform the proper rituals.

Oedipus again displays his obedience to the gods by having Ismene perform the rites to appease the Furies. He doesn't fear other people and may rage at them, but he does fear the gods.



Lines 577 - 1192

The **chorus** surrounds **Oedipus** and presses him to hear the true story of his suffering. Oedipus doesn't want to talk about it, but the chorus has only heard rumors about Oedipus and wants to hear his story from his own lips. Oedipus reluctantly and painfully tells them that his daughters are also his sisters, that he married his mother and killed his father. But he defends his actions: he killed in self-defense, without knowing who his father was, and he likewise did not know his wife was also his mother.

In Oedipus Rex, Oedipus is his own harshest critic—he gouged out his eyes to punish himself for his crimes. Now, time has passed and Oedipus has accepted that his misdeeds resulted from fate, not from actions he committed knowingly. Since he did not know he was committing these crimes, he no longer feels guilty.



Theseus, king of Athens, arrives. He knows **Oedipus's** story and asks kindly why Oedipus has come. Oedipus thanks Theseus for not asking him to tell his story once again, and then says he comes bearing a gift. If Theseus agrees to let him be buried at Colonus, Oedipus will fulfill a prophecy and protect Athens. Theseus agrees.

Theseus is an ideal leader, a wise, brave, and just protector of the weak. Notice the contrast: he agrees to let Oedipus be buried in Colonus, a part of Athens, while the Thebans would only bury Oedipus outside the city.



Oedipus warns **Theseus** that he will have to defend Oedipus against the Thebans, who will try to capture him. Theseus wonders why Oedipus does not want to return to his home of Thebes if they apparently want him to return so badly. In response, Oedipus describes his harsh exile and explains how quickly bonds of love can fail and nations can turn from friends to enemies. Oedipus finishes by saying that only the gods can be trusted, and they have promised to protect the city that hosts his grave.

Oedipus knows all too well that things can change very quickly. One day he was the powerful king of Thebes, the next he was a blind homeless outcast. The Thebans want to exploit him, not accept him as one of their own. Oedipus's advice to trust the gods, rather than other men or nations, is the wisdom he gained from his suffering.



Theseus welcomes **Oedipus** to live in Athens or to remain at Colonus. Theseus then guarantees that he will protect Oedipus and that no one will be allowed take Oedipus away against his will. Theseus exits.

By welcoming Oedipus, Theseus upholds Athens's reputation as a just protector of the weak. Oedipus is no longer in exile, no longer a man without a home.



The **chorus** gathers around **Oedipus** and chants in praise of his new home, the city of Athens, and of Colonus in particular. The chant specifies some of the appealing aspects of Athens, such as its horses and natural beauty, and mentions the favor that the gods (especially Poseidon) have bestowed upon it.

Sophocles was Athenian, and Oedipus at Colonus was performed in Athens. The Athenian audience would have enjoyed this lyrical bit of patriotism.



Just then, **Antigone** gives an alarm that **Creon** is approaching. Creon enters and says he has come not with force but to persuade **Oedipus** to come home. He says he has grieved for Oedipus as much as any other man and asks him to return to Thebes.

Creon is lying. As Ismene has already told Oedipus, the Thebans want to use Oedipus to protect their city. They did not grieve for him, will not fully welcome him back, or honor him in death.



Oedipus responds with an impassioned angry speech. According to Oedipus, **Creon** would not exile him when he first wanted exile, and then when Oedipus changed his mind and decided he wanted to live out his days at home, Creon banished him from Thebes. Now, when Oedipus is finally settled and welcome in Athens, Creon comes to take him away again—but not into Thebes, but just to its border, and not out of love, but to keep Thebes safe from Athens. He tells Creon to leave.

Oedipus's rage surfaces again. Yet as with his rage at the Thebans earlier, his anger is justified. He accepts that fate and the gods might be unfair, but he does not have to accept the injustice imposed on him by other people.



Creon responds that **Oedipus** is a disgrace to old age. He orders his guards to take Oedipus's two daughters away, toward Thebes. As the guards seize **Antigone** and **Ismene**, the **chorus** condemns this action but is unable to stop them. When Creon tries to leave, however, the chorus blocks his way. His anger grows and he threatens now to take Oedipus away by force, as well. He grabs Oedipus. The chorus calls for help.

Creon implies that Oedipus is just as unreasonable now as he was as king, before his misfortunes. In Creon's view, experience and suffering haven't given Oedipus wisdom in his old age. Yet it appears to be Creon who now fails to make the distinction between accepting the will of the gods and the will of other people.



Theseus arrives with an armed escort. He demands to know why he has been summoned with such urgency. **Oedipus** explains what happened. Theseus immediately sends soldiers to rouse his troops and chase after the kidnappers.

Theseus refuses to let **Creon** leave until the girls are returned safely. He says that Creon has shamed Thebes with his violent actions. He adds that Thebes has laws, like Athens, and wouldn't condone Creon's kidnapping of the girls. Finally, Theseus says that he would never presume to go to Thebes and take someone without permission of the Theban king.

Creon doesn't back down. He says that he didn't expect the people of Athens to protect a father-killing, incestuous exile like **Oedipus** because it would be wrong to do so. For that reason, he decided to take Oedipus by force. Creon admits that he is in a weak position, but says he will oppose **Theseus** as long as he can, because, although he is old, his anger "can never age and fade away."

Oedipus lets loose another forceful speech against **Creon** and in defense of himself—his own terrible deeds were done unknowingly, without intent to harm. He praises Athens and calls on the Furies to fight for his cause.

Theseus orders **Creon** to take him to where Oedipus's daughters are being held. Creon submits, but remains defiant—things will be different, he says, when he's back in Thebes and can raise troops. Theseus promises to return the children safely to **Oedipus**, for which Oedipus blesses him. Theseus, his guard, and Creon exit.

Theseus acts quickly and decisively, and upholds his oath to protect Oedipus. Theseus has truly welcomed Oedipus as a fellow Athenian.



Theseus draws a distinction between acting justly, according to laws, and using to force to take what you want. He not only denounces Creon's actions as illegal, but connects that illegality to shame and guilt.



Creon thinks Oedipus can never atone for his sins. But by taking this position, Creon denies the will of the gods. Only they can decide who has or has not atoned.



No longer guilty for violating natural law, Oedipus now feels so certain that he is the wronged party that he calls on the Furies to avenge him.



Creon doesn't back down, even when he's surrounded and on foreign soil. And he still insists on the power of force over law. This stubbornness is his undoing in Sophocles's play Antigone.



Lines 1193 - 1645

The **chorus** imagines a battle between Theseus and his men and Creon's guards, who took Antigone and Ismene. They foresee **Theseus** and his men winning a glorious victory. The chorus offers a prayer to the gods Zeus, Athena, Apollo, and Artemis, to bring victory.

Theseus returns with his attendants, escorting **Antigone** and **Ismene**. Overjoyed and relieved to see his daughters, **Oedipus** thanks Theseus profusely and asks what happened. Theseus responds that he has kept his promise to Oedipus but doesn't want to boast about the battle, because he would rather win fame through deeds rather than words.

Theseus then reports that a man claiming to be related to **Oedipus** but now living in Argos has come to ask for help Poseidon's altar. He adds that the man has now requested a brief audience with Oedipus. Oedipus realizes that the man must be his son, **Polynices**.

Oedipus doesn't want to see his son, but **Antigone** and **Theseus** argue that there's no harm in listening. Oedipus agrees to see **Polynices**, and Theseus exits.

The **chorus** surrounds **Oedipus** and chants about the miseries of life and the certainty of death. The chorus says that the luckiest man is one who has never been born, and of those that are born the luckiest are those with short lives. Once a person leaves youth behind, the chorus continues, life is full of pain, envy, and loneliness.

As usual in Greek drama, the action takes place offstage. Sophocles uses the device of having the chorus "imagine" what the battle looks like, which helps the audience do the same.



Theseus has kept his oath to Oedipus. Theseus's refusal to boast is further proof that he is a good king. Theseus's humility stands in stark contrast to Creon's earlier boasting about his military power.



A major change has occurred in Oedipus's status. In addition to Creon, Polynices is the second person who has now traveled great distances in an attempt to win his favor.



Oedipus has hardened his heart against his sons for not helping him in his exile and poverty.



The chorus's statement suggests that it's better not to be born than to suffer at the whims of gods and fate, as Oedipus has. It's observation that the best lives are short ones highlights the horrors of old age.



Antigone says a man is approaching, alone, in tears. **Polynices** enters. He is miserable, and weeps at the pitiable state in which he finds his father and his family. He calls himself "the worst man alive" for not coming to the aid of his exiled father and asks for mercy. **Oedipus** does not respond. Polynices turns to Antigone and **Ismene** for help. Antigone tells him to tell their father why he has come.

Polynices says his younger brother, **Eteocles**, seized power in Thebes by bribing people, and then banished Polynices. Polynices fled to Argos, where he married, made connections, and raised an army. This army is now poised to attack Thebes. Polynices asks his father to let go of his rage toward him and to support his cause. He adds that the oracles have claimed that whatever side **Oedipus** supports will win.

Polynices says that he is a beggar and an exile, like **Oedipus**, while **Eteocles** is a tyrant. Polynices finishes by promising that with Oedipus's support, he will defeat Eteocles, regain the throne, and bring Oedipus home to live in his own house. Oedipus refuses to respond, but the chorus prods him to speak.

Oedipus unleashes a flood of insults and curses at **Polynices**. Oedipus says that he is glad that Polynices is an exile, since Polynices helped drive Oedipus when he in power in Thebes. Oedipus promises that Thebes will not fall to Argos, and that Polynices and Eteocles will both kill each other in the battle. Oedipus tells Polynices to leave with these curses and the assurance of his doom still ringing in his ears.

Before he goes, **Polynices** asks his sisters to give him a proper burial if **Oedipus's** curses come true. **Antigone** begs Polynices to call off the attack on Thebes. Polynices refuses—he has been humiliated by his younger brother, and his honor compels him to fight. He says he won't report **Oedipus's** prophecies to his men, and the attack will go on. He and Antigone share a mournful farewell. She begs him again not to go, but his mind is made up. He prays that Zeus bring her happiness as long as she fulfills her promise to give him a proper burial. He then leaves for Thebes, certain he is heading toward his own doom.

Lines 1646 - 2001

Thunder crashes, terrifying the **chorus**. **Oedipus**, sensing his imminent death, asks for someone to bring **Theseus**. The thunder sounds again and the chorus cries out in terror. As the thunder and lightning continue, Oedipus tells his children that his end has come and he may die at any minute.

The **chorus** calls for **Theseus** to come quickly. When the king arrives, **Oedipus** says that he wants to fulfill the pledge he made to Theseus. Theseus asks what he needs to do. **Oedipus** responds that he will lead **Theseus** to the place where Oedipus will die. Only Theseus will know where it is, and he must never reveal the secret for as long as he lives. Upon his deathbed, the Theseus and each of his descendants may pass along the secret of Oedipus's grave site. If this is done, the presence of Oedipus's burial place near Athens will bless and defend the city.

Oedipus rises to his feet on his own power and motions for his children to follow him. Without their aid, the blind man moves toward his final resting place. His daughters, **Theseus**, and Theseus's attendants exit with him.

Polynices does seem genuinely sorry for his past actions, as his description of himself shows. Though Oedipus seems to have hardened his heart against Polynices, Antigone still has a sisterly affection for her eldest brother.



Polynices feels sorry for himself for losing the throne of Thebes to his younger brother. Attacking his home city at the head of a foreign army, however, is a drastic response. Oedipus's role here is like that of the Furies—he gets to choose who is punished and who is not.



Polynices makes an unfortunate comparison between himself and his father. While he has married well and made alliances in Argos, his father suffered blindness and banishment.



Oedipus's suffering has made him powerful and prophetic. And like the gods, Oedipus shows no mercy. Just as he was punished for committing actions he regretted and could not control, he now sentences Polynices to be punished, even though Polynices clearly regrets what he has done.



Polynices seems to accept that Oedipus's prophecy will come true. His stubbornness ensures that this prophecy will come true, just Oedipus's own stubbornness led to his downfall in Oedipus Rex. Fate doesn't just happen to Sophocles's characters, it works through them, using their own traits against them. Antigone's promise to bury Polynices sets the stage for the conflicts in Sophocles's Antigone.



The thunder signals that the gods themselves are involved in Oedipus's fate. Oedipus has become like a prophet—he knows the hour of his death and what he must do when that time comes.



The powerful Theseus has recognized the importance of Oedipus as a protector of Athens. Theseus has been good to his word in his dealings with Oedipus, so Oedipus trusts Theseus to keep the secret of his burial place. A closeness seems to have developed between the two men—it is Theseus, after all, who will be with Oedipus in his final moments.



Oedipus is inspired with new strength and stamina, as well as an ability to sense where he is going, despite his blindness. These changes show that he is now favored by the gods.



The **chorus** remains onstage. It gathers at an altar and prays to the gods of the dead, to the Furies, to the gatekeeper of Hades, to make **Oedipus's** passage to the underworld an easy one, and to let him rest at last.

A **messenger** enters with the news that **Oedipus** is dead. He gives an account of what happened. The whole party followed Oedipus down a steep descent to a place where Oedipus stopped. His daughters then bathed him in spring water and dressed him in linen. Thunder boomed, and Oedipus embraced his weeping daughters and told them of his boundless love for them. Then the voice of a god cried out from the sky that it was time for Oedipus to fulfill his task.

Oedipus asked **Theseus** to swear to watch over his daughters. Theseus pledged to do so. Oedipus then gave a final blessing to his children and told them and everyone besides Theseus to go. The party moved away, and when they looked back, Oedipus had vanished and Theseus stood covering his eyes as if he'd seen something terrible and amazing. Then Theseus knelt and prayed to the gods.

Oedipus is no longer a cursed man to be feared, but a man whose suffering has earned him a peaceful eternal rest.



The prayers of the chorus appear to have been answered—the gods were personally monitoring the rituals of Oedipus's death, moving the process along. Oedipus is depicted as being at peace with his death—he does not fight it, he accepts it. He has been granted a peaceful death with his daughters at his side.



It's common for dramatic events to happen offstage in Greek theater and then be reported onstage by a messenger. But in this case, whatever happened was so awesome that even the messenger wasn't allowed to see it. Oedipus's death is a kind of supernatural miracle.



As the messenger stops speaking, **Antigone** and **Ismene** enter, chanting a funereal dirge. Answering questions from the chorus, Antigone confirms the miraculous nature of **Oedipus's** death. Overcome by grief, Antigone says that now, without their father, she does not know where she and her sister will go, or to whom they can turn.

Theseus enters and tells the daughters to dry their tears, since to grieve too much after **Oedipus** received such a blessing might anger the gods. **Antigone** begs to see her father's tomb, but Theseus says he cannot allow it, citing his oath to Oedipus to keep the location secret. Antigone accepts his decision and ceases her grieving, but asks that she and her sister be sent back to Thebes to try to prevent the war between their brothers. Theseus agrees to do this and to help in whatever way he can. The **chorus** tells the daughters not to weep any more, for everything has been set right.

Antigone has supported and advised her father up until now. In her grieving, Antigone reveals her forceful and passionate personality. She and Ismene are now orphans without a home.



Oedipus's transformation into a heroic protector of Athens is now complete. Antigone accepts Theseus's refusal because she knows it follows her father's wishes, and because she, too, has learned to obey the gods. In Sophocles's Antigone, which takes place after Antigone has returned to Thebes, she does not accept Creon's refusal when it goes against her promise to bury Polynices, because she knows that breaking an oath is an offense to the gods.



Important Quotes

Lines 1-576 Quotes

Off and gone from the land—before you fix some greater penalty on our city.
— Chorus, 250–251 (Fagles)

Look through all humanity: you'll never find a man on earth, if a god leads him on, who can escape his fate.
— Oedipus, 266–268 (Fagles)

Never honor the gods in one breath and take the gods for fools the next
— Oedipus 298–299 (Fagles)

Lines 577-1192 Quotes

Never, I tell you, I will never shrink from a stranger, lost as you are now, or fail to lend a hand to save a life. I am only a man, well I know, and I have no more power over tomorrow, Oedipus, than you.
— Theseus, 636–641 (Fagles)

Oh Athens, praised above any land on earth, now turn your glowing praises into action!
— Antigone, 818–819 (Fagles)

Now, by our fathers' gods, listen to me, hide your own disgrace, consent—return to Thebes, the house of your fathers!
— Creon, 859–861 (Fagles)

That's precisely how your offers strike me now: your words like honey—your actions, drawn swords.
— Oedipus, 890–891 (Fagles)

Given time, you'll see this well, I know: you do yourself no good, not now, not years ago, indulging your rage despite the pleas of loved ones—blind rage has always been your ruin.
— Creon, 973–976 (Fagles)

You have come to a city that practices justice, that sanctions nothing without law, but you, you flout our authorities, make your inroads, seize your prizes, commandeering at will! Tell me, did you imagine Athens stripped of men, peopled by slaves? Myself worth nothing?
— Theseus, 1040–1045 (Fagles)

My isolation leaves me weak, however just my cause. But opposing you, old as I am, I'll stop at nothing, match you blow for blow. A man's anger can never age and fade away, not until he dies. The dead alone feel no pain.
— Creon, 1089–1094 (Fagles)

And if, once I'd come to the world of pain, as come I did, I fell to blows with my father, cut him down in blood—blind to what I was doing, blind to whom I killed—how could you condemn that involuntary act with any sense of justice?
— Oedipus, 1112–1117 (Fagles)

So now I cry to those Great Goddesses, I beg them, I storm them with my prayers—Come to the rescue, fight for me, my champions! So you can learn your lesson, Creon, learn what breed of men stands guard around this city.
— Oedipus, 1155–1159 (Fagles)

Lines 1193-1645 Quotes

Like a seer I sense the glory in these struggles—Rush me, wing me into the whirlwind. O dear god, like a dove at the thunderheads of heaven I'd look down I'd scan these struggles, I would see their glory.
— Chorus, (1226–1229)

May the gods reward you just as I desire, you and your great country. Here among you, you alone of all mankind—I have discovered reverence, humanity and lips that never lie.
— Oedipus, 1275–1279 (Fagles)

And how the fight was won—why fill the air with empty boasting?
— Theseus, 1303–1304 (Fagles)

It isn't good for men with a decent cause to beg too long, or a man to receive help, then fail to treat a fellow victim kindly.
— Antigone, 1366–1368 (Fagles)

Show me a man who longs to live a day beyond his time who turns his back on a decent length of life, I'll show the world a man who clings to folly.
— Chorus, 1378–1380 (Fagles)

Not to be born is best when all is reckoned in, but once a man has seen the light the next best thing, by far, is to go back back where he came from, quickly as he can.
— Chorus, 1388–1391 (Fagles)

You—die!
Die and be damned!
I spit on you! Out!—your father cuts you off! Corruption—scum of the earth!—out!—and pack these curses I call down upon your head: never to win you mother-country with your spear, never return to Argos ringed with hills—Die!
Die by your own blood brother's hand—die!—killing the very man who drove you out!
So I curse your life out!
— Oedipus, 1567–1574 (Fagles)

Goodbye, dear ones. You'll never look on me again, alive.
— Polynices, 1631–1632 (Fagles)

Lines 1646-2001 Quotes

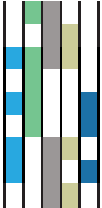
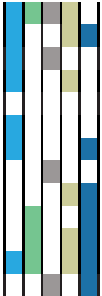
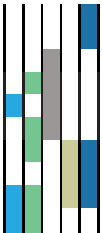
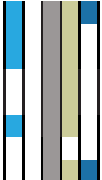
Dearest friend, you and your country and your loyal followers, may you be blessed with greatness, and in your great day remember me, the dead, the root of all your greatness, everlasting, ever-new.
— Oedipus, 1761–1765 (Fagles)

God of eternal sleep, I call to you, let Oedipus rest forever.
— Chorus, 1788–1789 (Fagles)

And then, quickly, we see him bow and kiss the ground and stretch his arms to the skies, salute the gods of Olympus and the power of the Earth in one great prayer, binding both together.
— Messenger, 1875–1879 (Fagles)

ThemeTracker™

The LitCharts ThemeTracker is a mini-version of the entire LitChart. The ThemeTracker provides a quick timeline-style rundown of all the important plot points and allows you to track the themes throughout the work at a glance.

Themes	Lines
	<p>Back-story</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> After learning that he has unknowingly killed his father and married his mother, Oedipus blinds himself and asks to be banished from his kingdom, Thebes. For years he wanders in poverty, accompanied by his daughter, Antigone.
	<p>1 – 576</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oedipus, blind and hobbled, dressed in rags, arrives at the grove of the Furies with his daughter Antigone. A citizen of Colonus tells them they need to move. Oedipus asks the citizen to bring Theseus, the king of Athens. Oedipus says that this place was prophesied as the location of his life's final chapter. Ismene, Oedipus's other daughter, arrives on horseback with news that Oedipus's two sons are fighting for control of Thebes. Polynices has been banished by Eteocles, but has raised an army to attack Thebes. Ismene says the leaders of Thebes want him to return, because the oracles say his presence would protect the city. Oedipus curses his sons, and asks the chorus to help defend him against Thebans who will try to take him away.
	<p>577 – 1192</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oedipus reluctantly tells the chorus about his terrible deeds (killing his father and marrying his mother) but defends himself as having acted unwittingly. Theseus, king of Athens, arrives. Oedipus says if Theseus agrees to let him be buried at Colonus, and protects Oedipus against anyone who tries to take him away, then Oedipus's presence will be a great service to Athens after he is dead. Theseus welcomes Oedipus to stay and guarantees that no one will take him away against his will. Creon, Oedipus's brother-in-law, arrives. He says he has suffered thinking of Oedipus's misfortune and now he's come to persuade Oedipus to come home. Oedipus is furious. He knows he's being used as part of the power struggle in Thebes. He tells Creon to leave. Creon's guards kidnap Antigone and Ismene and take them away. Creon tries to take Oedipus by force, but the chorus cries out for help, and Theseus comes to the rescue. Theseus sends his army to retrieve Antigone and Ismene. Creon is defiant, but Theseus forces Creon to take him to where the girls are being held. Theseus promises to return the girls safely. Oedipus blesses him for this promise.
	<p>1193 – 1645</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The chorus imagines a battle taking place and prays for Athenian victory. Antigone and Ismene return safely, escorted by Theseus. Theseus says a man claiming to be related to Oedipus is waiting nearby to see him. Oedipus knows its his son Polynices but doesn't want to see him. Theseus and Antigone convince Oedipus to see his son. Polynices asks for forgiveness for neglecting his father for so long. He asks for Oedipus's support in defeating Thebes and overthrowing his brother, Eteocles. Oedipus curses Polynices and sends him away with the prophecy that Polynices will fail and will die while killing Eteocles. Before he leaves, Polynices asks his sisters to give him a proper burial. She promises to do just that.
	<p>1646 – 2001</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thunder and lightning frighten the chorus and convince Oedipus that he is going to die soon. He sends for Theseus. When Theseus arrives, Oedipus says he will lead Theseus to his (Oedipus's) final resting place. Theseus must never reveal the location of the place to anyone. If Theseus does this, Oedipus's resting place near the city will bless and defend Athens in the future. At his time of death, Oedipus vanishes miraculously and supernaturally. Antigone and Ismene return, wailing and grieving. Theseus enters and tells the daughters not to cry. Antigone asks if she and her sister can be sent back to Thebes. Theseus promises to grant their wish.

Theme Key

 Fate and Prophecy

 Guilt

 Old Age and Death

 Redemption and Atonement

 Justice