

Module 3: Self-Discovery Through Change and Rebirth

Topic 2 Content: *Oedipus the King*, Prologue and Parodos

OEDIPUS: king of Thebes
 PRIEST: the high priest of Thebes
 CREON: Oedipus' brother-in-law
 CHORUS of Theban elders
 TEIRESIAS: an old blind prophet
 BOY: attendant on Teiresias
 IOCASTE: wife of Oedipus, sister of Creon
 MESSENGER: an old man
 SERVANT: an old shepherd
 SECOND MESSENGER: a servant of Oedipus
 ANTIGONE: daughter of Oedipus and IOCASTE, a child
 ISMENE: daughter of Oedipus and IOCASTE, a child
 SERVANTS and ATTENDANTS on Oedipus and IOCASTE

[The action takes place in Thebes in front of the royal palace. The main doors are directly facing the audience. There are altars beside the doors. A crowd of citizens carrying branches decorated with laurel garlands and wool and led by the PRIEST has gathered in front of the altars, with some people sitting on the altar steps. OEDIPUS enters through the palace doors]

OEDIPUS

My children, latest generation born from Cadmus,
 why are you sitting here with wreathed sticks
 in supplication to me, while the city
 fills with incense, chants, and cries of pain?*
 Children, it would not be appropriate for me
 to learn of this from any other source,
 so I have come in person—I, Oedipus,
 whose fame all men acknowledge. But you there,
 old man, tell me—you seem to be the one
 who ought to speak for those assembled here. 10 [10]
 What feeling brings you to me—fear or desire?
 You can be confident that I will help.
 I shall assist you willingly in every way.
 I would be a hard-hearted man indeed,
 if I did not pity suppliants like these.

PRIEST

Oedipus, ruler of my native land,
 you see how people here of every age
 are crouching down around your altars,
 some fledglings barely strong enough to fly
 and others bent by age, with priests as well— 20
 for I'm priest of Zeus—and these ones here,
 the pick of all our youth. The other groups
 sit in the market place with suppliant sticks
 or else in front of Pallas' two shrines, [20]

or where Ismenus prophesies with fire.*
 For our city, as you yourself can see,
 is badly shaken—she cannot raise her head
 above the depths of so much surging death.
 Disease infects fruit blossoms in our land,
 disease infects our herds of grazing cattle, 30
 makes women in labour lose their children.
 And deadly pestilence, that fiery god,
 swoops down to blast the city, emptying
 the House of Cadmus, and fills black Hades [30]
 with groans and howls. These children and myself
 now sit here by your home, not because we think
 you're equal to the gods. No. We judge you
 the first of men in what happens in this life
 and in our interactions with the gods.
 For you came here, to our Cadmeian city, 40
 and freed us from the tribute we were paying
 to that cruel singer—and yet you knew
 no more than we did and had not been taught.*
 In their stories, the people testify
 how, with gods' help, you gave us back our lives.
 So now, Oedipus, our king, most powerful [40]
 in all men's eyes, we're here as suppliants,
 all begging you to find some help for us,
 either by listening to a heavenly voice,
 or learning from some other human being. 50
 For, in my view, men of experience
 provide advice which gives the best results.
 So now, you best of men, raise up our state.
 Act to consolidate your fame, for now,
 thanks to your eagerness in earlier days,
 the city celebrates you as its saviour.
 Don't let our memory of your ruling here [50]
 declare that we were first set right again,
 and later fell. No. Restore our city,
 so that it stands secure. In those times past 60
 you brought us joy—and with good omens, too.
 Be that same man today. If you're to rule
 as you are doing now, it's better to be king
 in a land of men than in a desert.
 An empty ship or city wall is nothing
 if no men share your life together there.

OEDIPUS

My poor children, I know why you have come—
 I am not ignorant of what you yearn for.
 For I well know that you are ill, and yet, [60]
 sick as you are, there is not one of you 70
 whose illness equals mine. Your agony
 comes to each one of you as his alone,
 a special pain for him and no one else.

But the soul inside me sorrows for myself,
and for the city, and for you—all together.
You are not rousing me from a deep sleep.
You must know I've been shedding many tears
and, in my wandering thoughts, exploring
many pathways. After a careful search
I followed up the one thing I could find 80
and acted on it. So I have sent away
my brother-in-law, son of Menoeceus,
Creon, to Pythian Apollo's shrine, [70]
to learn from him what I might do or say
to save our city. But when I count the days—
the time he's been away—I now worry
what he's doing. For he's been gone too long,
well past the time he should have taken.
But when he comes, I'll be a wicked man
if I do not act on all the god reveals. 90

PRIEST

What you have said is most appropriate,
for these men here have just informed me
that Creon is approaching.

OEDIPUS

Lord Apollo, [80]
as he returns may fine shining fortune,
bright as his countenance, attend on him.

PRIEST

It seems the news he brings is good—if not,
he would not wear that wreath around his head,
a laurel thickly packed with berries.*

OEDIPUS

We'll know soon enough—he's within earshot.

[Enter CREON. OEDIPUS calls to him as he approaches]

My royal kinsman, child of Menoeceus, 100
what message from the god do you bring us?

CREON

Good news. I tell you even troubles
difficult to bear will all end happily
if events lead to the right conclusion.

OEDIPUS

What is the oracle? So far your words
inspire in me no confidence or fear. [90]

CREON

If you wish to hear the news in public,
I'm prepared to speak. Or we could step inside.

OEDIPUS

Speak out to everyone. The grief I feel

for these citizens is even greater
than any pain I feel for my own life. 110

CREON

Then let me report what I heard from the god.
Lord Phoebus clearly orders us to drive away
the polluting stain this land has harboured—
which will not be healed if we keep nursing it.

OEDIPUS

What sort of cleansing? And this disaster—
how did it happen?

CREON

By banishment— [100]
or atone for murder by shedding blood again.
This blood brings on the storm which blasts our state.

OEDIPUS

And the one whose fate the god revealed— 120
what sort of man is he?

CREON

Before you came, my lord,
to steer our ship of state, Laius ruled this land.

OEDIPUS

I have heard that, but I never saw the man.

CREON

Laius was killed. And now the god is clear:
those murderers, he tells us, must be punished,
whoever they may be.

OEDIPUS

And where are they?
In what country? Where am I to find a trace
of this ancient crime? It will be hard to track.

CREON

Here in Thebes, so said the god. What is sought
is found, but what is overlooked escapes. 130 [110]

OEDIPUS

When Laius fell in bloody death, where was he—
at home, or in his fields, or in another land?

CREON

He was abroad, on his way to Delphi—
that's what he told us. He began the trip,
but did not return.

OEDIPUS

Was there no messenger—
no companion who made the journey with him
and witnessed what took place—a person
who might provide some knowledge men could use?

CREON

They all died—except for one who was afraid
and ran away. There was only one thing
he could inform us of with confidence
about the things he saw. 140

OEDIPUS

What was that?
We might get somewhere if we had one fact— [120]
we could find many things, if we possessed
some slender hope to get us going.

CREON

He told us it was robbers who attacked them—
not just a single man, a gang of them—
they came on with force and killed him.

OEDIPUS

How would a thief have dared to do this,
unless he had financial help from Thebes? 150

CREON

That’s what we guessed. But once Laius was dead
we were in trouble, so no one sought revenge.

OEDIPUS

When the ruling king had fallen in this way,
what bad trouble blocked your path, preventing you
from looking into it?

CREON

It was the Sphinx— [130]
she sang her enigmatic song and thus forced us
to put aside something we found obscure
to look into the urgent problem we now faced.

OEDIPUS

Then I will start afresh, and once again
shed light on darkness. It is most fitting
that Apollo demonstrates his care
for the dead man, and worthy of you, too. 160
And so, as is right, you will see how I
work with you, seeking vengeance for this land,
as well as for the god. This polluting stain
I will remove, not for some distant friend,
but for myself. For whoever killed this man
may soon enough desire to turn his hand [140]
in the same way against me, too, and kill me.
Thus, in avenging Laius, I serve myself. 170
But now, my children, as quickly as you can
stand up from these altar steps and take
your suppliant branches. Someone must call
the Theban people to assemble here.
I’ll do everything I can. With the god’s help

this will all come to light successfully,
or else it will prove our common ruin.

[OEDIPUS and CREON go into the palace]

PRIEST

Let us get up, children. For this man
has willingly declared just what we came for.
And may Phoebus, who sent this oracle, 180
come as our saviour and end our sickness. [150]

[The PRIEST and the CITIZENS leave. Enter the CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS]

CHORUS

Oh sweet speaking voice of Zeus,
you have come to glorious Thebes from golden Pytho—
but what is your intent?
My fearful heart twists on the rack and shakes with fear.
O Delian healer, for whom we cry aloud
in holy awe, what obligation
will you demand from me, a thing unknown
or now renewed with the revolving years?
Immortal voice, O child of golden Hope, 190
speak to me!

First I call on you, Athena the immortal,
daughter of Zeus, and on your sister, too, [160]
Artemis, who guards our land and sits
on her glorious round throne in our market place,
and on Phoebus, who shoots from far away.

O you three guardians against death,
appear to me!
If before now you have ever driven off
a fiery plague to keep away disaster 200
from the city and have banished it,
then come to us this time as well!

Alas, the pains I bear are numberless—
my people now all sick with plague,
our minds can find no weapons [170]
to serve as our defence. Now the offspring
of our splendid earth no longer grow,
nor do our women crying out in labour
get their relief from a living new-born child.
As you can see—one by one they swoop away, 210
off to the shores of the evening god, like birds
faster than fire which no one can resist.

Our city dies—we've lost count of all the dead.
Her sons lie in the dirt unpitied, unlamented. [180]
Corpses spread the pestilence, while youthful wives
and grey-haired mothers on the altar steps
wail everywhere and cry in supplication,

seeking to relieve their agonizing pain.
Their solemn chants ring out—
they mingle with the voices of lament. 220
O Zeus' golden daughter,
send your support and strength,
your lovely countenance!

And that ravenous Ares, god of killing,
who now consumes me as he charges on
with no bronze shield but howling battle cries,
let him turn his back and quickly leave this land,
with a fair following wind to carry him
to the great chambers of Amphitrite*
or inhospitable waves of Thrace. 230
For if destruction does not come at night,
then day arrives to see it does its work.
O you who wield that mighty flash of fire, [200]
O father Zeus, with your lighting blast
let Ares be destroyed!

O Lyceian lord,* how I wish those arrows
from the golden string of your bent bow
with their all-conquering force would wing out
to champion us against our enemy,
and the blazing fires of Artemis, as well, 240
with which she races through the Lycian hills.
I call the god who binds his hair with gold,
the one whose name our country shares, [210]
the one to whom the Maenads shout their cries,
Dionysus with his radiant face—*
may he come to us with his flaming torchlight,
our ally against Ares,
a god dishonoured among gods.

Notes

The numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text; the numbers without brackets refer to the English text.

**Cadmus*: legendary founder of Thebes. Hence, the citizens of Thebes were often called children of Cadmus or Cadmeians.

**Pallas*: Pallas Athena. There were two shrines to her in Thebes. *Ismenus*: A temple to Apollo Ismenios where burnt offerings were the basis for the priest's divination.

**cruel singer*: a reference to the Sphinx, a monster with the body of a lion, wings, and the head and torso of a woman. After the death of king Laius, the Sphinx tyrannized Thebes by not letting anyone into or out of the city, unless the person could answer the following riddle: "What walks on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?" Those who could not answer were killed and eaten. Oedipus provided the answer (a human being), and thus saved the city. The Sphinx then committed suicide.

**berries*: a suppliant to Apollo's shrine characteristically wore such a garland if he received favourable news.

**Ares*, god of war and killing, was often disapproved of by the major Olympian deities.
Amphitrite: was a goddess of the sea, married to Poseidon.

**lord of Lyceia*: a reference to Apollo, god of light.

*. . . *among gods*: Dionysus was also called Bacchus, and Thebes was sometimes called Baccheia (belonging to Bacchus). The *Maenads* are the followers of Dionysus.

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