Study Guide: *Oedipus the King*

Following is the study guide for *Oedipus the King*. Many of the numbers have multiple questions. You must answer all of the questions, thoroughly. If you don’t answer any part of a question, you will forfeit the entire point. It is essential that you complete this study guide as we read the. I will be collecting them randomly, so fill it out after every class. Line numbers are provided for the sections of the play, and some questions target specific lines; those numbers are provided.

The oracle given by Delphi to Laius, King of Thebes:

"Laius, son of Labdacus, you seek for a rich family of children. Let a beloved son be given to you. But it is fated for you to depart the daylight at the hands of your son. For Zeus, son of Kronos has granted this, moved by the hateful curses of Pelops, whose dear son [Laius] stole away. For HE indeed prayed all of these things for you.

Possible themes of the play. Pay attention to these issues as you read:

- Truth vs. the appearance of truth
- Blindness vs. vision (sometimes second sight)
- Curiosity vs. ignorance (sometimes willful)
- Knowledge vs. misunderstanding
- Fate and free will: do the gods dictate these awful deeds?

**Prologue (1-151):**

1. All call upon the Healer Apollo. What does Apollo have to do with healing? Why should Oedipus consult this god's oracle? Why does Apollo have an oracle?

2. How does Oedipus characterize himself?

3. What is his attitude toward the suppliants?
4. List at least two reasons why the people of Thebes have such regard for Oedipus (14-57)

5. Why is Oedipus’ suffering so much greater than that of his people? (58-78)

6. Why does Oedipus call his people “children”? What does that say about his character?

7. Creon is late. For the ancient Greeks traveling to the original Olympic games, there were only three legitimate excuses: sickness, war, and pirates. None of these apply to Creon. Speculate as to why he might be late. If he is not late, what does Oedipus’ response say about him? If he was willfully late, why might this be? (69-78)

8. Why does Oedipus insist on letting all hear Creon’s news even after Creon offers a private audience? What does that say about his character?

9. It’s interesting too that the people of the city forgot Laius so quickly: “Out of sight out of mind.” Do you believe this possible? What does that say about the people?
10. Consider: does Oedipus strike you as arrogant in this scene and others, or is Oedipus a case of the saying of that great philosopher and baseball great Dizzy Dean -- "It ain't bragging if you can do it"? Explain.

11. What is the dramatic purpose of the prologue?

Parodos: Prayer to Zeus (151-215):

12. The Chorus calls on a series of gods for help. Who are they and why does the chorus invoke these gods in particular?

13. What is the reaction of the Chorus to the advice of Apollo?

14. What conditions in Thebes does the Chorus describe (170-182)?

First Episode/Scene (216-462) Oedipus and Teiresias:

15. Why does Teiresias refuse to help Oedipus? Could there be more than one motive?

16. Note the complexity of Oedipus' character. Is he paranoid, eager to save the city, angry, frightened, proud, courageous, emo? Why is he having such a tough time understanding Teiresias?
17. Explain the following ironies in Oedipus' speech:
   • 219-220
   • 234-249
   • 250-253
   • 258-267

18. What is Teiresias' reaction to Oedipus' request for help (316-341)? At this point, do you believe he is acting in the best interests of Oedipus, Teiresias, or the Thebans?

19. How does Oedipus view Teiresias' behavior (345-349)?

20. What suspicion does Oedipus begin to harbor about Creon (385-389)? Does he have grounds?

21. Oedipus is responding to more than just Teiresias the character; he is responding to what Teiresias represents. What is this and what does it say about Oedipus, religion, fate, and chance?

22. What is the function in the drama of the seer Teiresias? In what way is his presence connected with Oedipus' failings as a human being and a monarch?
First Stasimon/Ode: Strophe and Antistrophe (463-511):

23. What is the Chorus' view of Teiresias' accusations against Oedipus (483-495; 497-511)?

Second Episode/Scene (512-963) Oedipus and Creon:

24. What motivates Creon's entrance at the beginning of this episode (513-522)? How does he respond to this? How do you characterize him?

25. Why does Oedipus accuse Creon of conspiracy (555-556; 572-573)?

26. How does Creon defend himself against Oedipus's accusation (583-602)?

27. What does Oedipus threaten to do (618-630)? Do you think he is reasonable in some of his defense?

28. Is Creon especially admirable here? Compare his actions and wishes to Oedipus'.

29. Jocasta enters the scene attempting a truce. Whose side does she support? Is she acting as a good Greek wife? As a good Greek queen?
30. Read carefully Jocasta's account of her lost child that begins at 707 and then Oedipus' reaction to it. Consider this in light of the almost identical story he tells later in the same scene. Why doesn't Oedipus make a connection?

31. Pay close attention to Jocasta's denunciation of oracles. What does she say and why might this be important?

Second Stasimon/Ode: Strophe and Antistrophe (863-910)

32. What wish does the Chorus express in the strophe (863-872)? Why are these laws so important and what is ironic about them?

33. In Greek the word tyrannos is a synonym for “king,” but here it is used in conjunction with pride (hubris). In your opinion is Oedipus a tyrannical ruler? Is he guilty of hubris? Is he responsible for his own fate?

34. What is the Chorus’ view of the oracle? What do think Oedipus’ view of the oracle is?

35. Why does the Chorus threaten to not join in the sacred dance (worship) (894)
Third Episode/Scene (911-1085) Jocasta, Messenger, Oedipus:

36. Jocasta says that Oedipus “yields himself to any who speaks fear” (917). Is this a common response? What does it say about Oedipus? Can you think of any current leaders who have had similar responses? Are they sometimes justified?

37. Look closely at Jocasta’s prayer. To whom does she pray and for what? What is the answer she receives?

38. Note: lines 980-2 are underlined in the German translation of this play that Freud owned. Why might this be noteworthy for Freud?

39. At what point do you think that Jocasta begins to suspect the truth? What is her response? What does this say about her character?

43. When Jocasta runs off the stage, Oedipus thinks she is afraid he will be proven a peasant. Why does this idea make him so happy (1076)? How is this an example of dramatic irony? At this point, how do you characterize Oedipus? Willfully clueless? Explain.
Third Stasimon/Ode: Strophe and Antistrophe (1086-1109)

40. There is certainly a break in the action here, an appeal to Apollo. Why? What’s the purpose of this interruption and why Apollo?

41. The Chorus takes Oedipus' hope and runs with it, imagining him to be the foundling son of a god. Why would they do this? What would it mean to them?

Fourth Episode/Scene (1215-1310) Oedipus, Shepherd, Messenger:

42. Aristotle believed this was the finest tragedy because the protagonist's recognition of the truth coincides with the reversal of his fortunes. Where, exactly, does this occur in the play? Provide the EXACT line.

Fourth Stasimon/Ode: Strophe and Antistrophe (1186-1222):

43. What general comment on human life does the Chorus make based on the example of Oedipus (1186-1196)?

44. The chorus laments the situation of Oedipus and ends their song with “And now, life is death.” What information do we learn immediately after that?

Exodus (1223-end):

45. What was Oedipus trying to do when he finds his wife-mother dead? What does that tell you about him? Do you understand his actions?
46. Is blinding an appropriate punishment? Why doesn't he commit suicide?

47. Oedipus says it wasn’t his idea to take his sight. Whose was it? Why is this significant?

48. Oedipus also blames others for his predicament. Who are they? Is he right?

49. How would you describe Oedipus' state of mind and attitude here? Does anything surprise you about the way he views his disaster?

50. Think about the Chorus' near panic about Oedipus, their complete inability to respond coherently to his presence. What does that say about their role?

51. How does Oedipus feel about Creon at this point (1419-1421)?

52. What requests does Oedipus make of Creon (1436-1437;1446-1467)?
53. Are you liking Creon now, or is he a problematic character? Why?

54. Why are Oedipus' daughters in particular so special to him?

55. Does Oedipus have a tragic flaw? If so, what is it?

56. In what respects is Oedipus a “good king”? Who thinks so? Who says so, in the play?

57. In what respects is Oedipus a “good man”? What are his personal virtues?

58. Is Oedipus legally guilty of murder? Does he have a valid defense for killing his father?

59. Is Oedipus legally guilty of incest? Is there any defense?

60. What is the part played in this play by the god Apollo of Delphi? In Oedipus' life? In the family of Labdacus?