GREEK THEATER

Background Information for Oedipus
Origins of Greek Drama

- Drama emerged during Greece’s Golden Age (5th century B.C.)
- Greeks gathered in the spring during the Festival of Dionysus (god of wine) and performed plays in his honor.
- Drama was at the center of civic life—i.e. attending the plays was part of what it meant to be “Greek”
- First plays were lyrical recitations in which a chorus of fifty men would dance and sing in Dionysus’ honor.
PURPOSE OF GREEK DRAMA

- Dramas were presented by the state at annual religious festivals.
- Plays were supposed to be presented for the purpose of ethical and moral improvement of the spectators and to ensure the spiritual survival of the community.
- Winners (playwrights) of prizes were selected by ten citizens chosen by lots (lottery) for the duty.
First Dramatists

- Thespis = (thespian), father of drama, introduced first actor (separate from chorus)
- Aeschylus = elevated drama to what it is today by introducing a second actor, diminishing the size of the chorus
- Euripides = one of the three great Greek tragedians
- Sophocles = added a third actor and defeated Aeschylus in dramatic competition (held during the Festival of Dionysus in which dramatists presented a tetrology of three tragedies and one comedy)
  - Famous for his Oedipus Trilogy: *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*
MECHANICS OF GREEK DRAMA

- Actors were all male. They wore masks.
- Scenes of the drama were always outdoors; indoor actions were reported by messengers.
- There was no violence on stage
- There was “unity” in plot -- no subplots or irrelevancies.
- The action always took place in one day.
- There were no curtains or intermissions.
Greek Worldview

- **Worldview** = a person’s understanding of the meaning of life
- Greeks believed in many gods (polytheistic)
- They could not rely on the gods to rescue them because the gods were unreliable and changed their minds
- Offered sacrifices to the gods in order to appease or “bribe” them for help
- Greeks relied on wisdom and the power of the human spirit in order to succeed in life
- **Humanism** = the belief that man is the center of the universe (as opposed to God or the gods); glorification of the human body and human intelligence
- **Fate** = an impersonal force stronger than both the gods and men
The function of the chorus was to:
- set the mood of the drama
- interpret events
- relieve the tension
- generalize meaning of the action
- converse with and give advice to the actors
- give background information
- emphasize the beauty of poetry and dancing
- leader acted as spokesman for the group
Greek Masks

- The use of masks in ancient Greek theater draw their origin from the ancient Dionysian cult.

- The members of the chorus wore masks, usually similar to each other but completely different from the leading actors.

- Because the number of actors varied from one to three, they had to put on different masks, in order to play more roles.

- The actors were all men. The mask was therefore necessary to let them play the female roles.
Greek Masks

c. 380-235BC

1st-2nd Century AD
SUBJECT OF PLAYS

- The subject was almost exclusively taken from well-known myths.
- The plays explored the mysteries of life and the role of the gods in human affairs.
- The main purpose was ethical and religious instruction.
STYLE IN PLAYS

- There are long, wordy speeches (sometimes about current events or contemporary people).
Comedy and Tragedy

- In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defined *comedy* as a mode of drama that ridicules the vice of a certain character; in the end, the character and order of the community is restored.

- He defines *tragedy* as a mode of drama in which a tragic hero is brought low due to his own weakness or failing (tragic flaw). In the end, the audience ought to experience a catharsis (purging of emotions) consisting of feelings of pity and fear.
CONCEPT OF TRAGIC HERO AND TRAGEDY (from Aristotle)

- Tragedy arouses the emotions of pity, fear, wonder and awe.

- A tragic hero must be a man or woman capable of great suffering.

- Tragedy explores the question of the ways of God to man.

- Tragedy purifies the emotions (catharsis)

- Tragedy shows how man is brought to disaster by a single flaw in his own character.
Greek Theatre
The **orchestra** (literally, "dancing space") was normally circular. It was a level space where the chorus would dance, sing, and interact with the actors who were on the stage near the skene. The earliest orchestras were simply made of hard earth, but in the Classical period some orchestras began to be paved with marble and other materials.

In the center of the orchestra there was often a **thymele**, or altar, on which the Greeks sacrificed to Dionysus, the god of wine.

The **theatron** (literally, "viewing-place") is where the spectators sat. The theatron was usually part of hillside overlooking the orchestra, and often wrapped around a large portion of the orchestra. Spectators in the fifth century BC probably sat on cushions or boards, but by the fourth century the theatron of many Greek theaters had marble seats.
The **skene** (literally, "tent") was the building directly behind the stage. The skene was directly in back of the stage, and was usually decorated as a palace, temple, or other building, depending on the needs of the play. It had at least one set of doors, and actors could make entrances and exits through them.

The **parodoi** (literally, "passageways") are the paths by which the chorus and some actors (such as those representing messengers or people returning from abroad) made their entrances and exits. The audience also used them to enter and exit the theater before and after the performance.

The **chorus** was a group of men who functioned as the nucleus of the play, were the voice of the people, performed odes, introduced new characters and scenes, and commented on the action of the play.
Conventions of the play

- Aristotelian unities = time, place, action
  - Time = the play must occur in one day’s time
  - Place = the play must take place in one location (Thebes)
  - Action = the play must focus on one central action (discovering the reason for the plague in Thebes)

- Irony
  - Dramatic = the audience knows something the actors do not know
  - Situational = what occurs is the opposite of what is expected
  - Verbal = what is said is the opposite of what is true
GREEK THEATRE TERMS

- **exodus** -- final action of the play
- **Dionysus** -- God of drama
- **parados** -- chorus marching in from the left or right
- **catharsis** -- beneficial effect the tragedy has on the audience.
• **prologue** -- opening scene (introduction)

• **episode** -- act or scene

• **stasimon** -- choral ode (end of each episode)

• **proscenium** -- level area in front of the skene on which most of the plays action took place

• **choral ode** -- lyric sung by the chorus which develops the importance of the action

• **sphinx** -- a female monster, usually represented as having the head and breast of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of an eagle
- **strophe** -- a turning, right to left, by chorus
- **antistrophe** -- a turning, left to right, by chorus
- **choragás** -- leader of the chorus
- **epode** -- the part of a lyric ode following the strophe and antistrophe
- **hubris** -- Greek word for excessive pride or arrogance
- **hamartia** -- Greek word for error in judgment, especially resulting from a defect in the character of a tragic hero; the tragic flaw
- **rhetoric**— in speech, an argument; bombastic statement
- **character foil**— a character that emphasizes opposite traits in another character
- **aphorism**— a brief statement which expresses an observation intended to be wise
- **understatement**— a statement which lessens or minimizes the importance of what is meant
- **hyperbole**— figure of speech in which an overstatement or exaggeration occurs
- in media res – beginning a story in the middle
- allegory – part of a story illustrating an idea or moral principle in which objects take on symbolic meanings
- archetype – an inherited unconscious idea, pattern of thought, etc present in individual psyches
- epiphany – a sudden, intuitive perception or insight into the reality or meaning of something – usually initiated by a simple experience
- euphemism – a substitute or mild expression for one thought to be offensive or harsh
Background on Oedipus

- *Oedipus the King* is one of a series of 3 plays: *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus* complete the trilogy
- All 3 deal with the curse of Oedipus and how it affects his family for generations
- **Curse:**
  - Prophecy to the king and queen of Thebes that their son will kill his father and marry his mother
- “Oedipus Complex”
• a tragedy written in 442 BC by Sophocles
• chronologically the second of the three Theban plays
  – *Oedipus the King*
  – *Oedipus at Colonus*
  – *Antigone*
Why study *Oedipus*?

- Ancient Greek Drama is the basis for all modern drama and film.
- The story gives many important clues to the Ancient Greek culture and character.
- Tragedies still contain the basic elements of their original forms.
Essential Questions

1. Is it more important to be right than to be happy?

2. What price should a person be willing to pay if he/she breaks an unjust law?

3. Can a leader show uncertainty and maintain leadership?
Pathos

- Pathos appeals rely on emotions and feelings to persuade the audience.
- They are often direct, simple, and very powerful.
Logos

- “Logos appeals” rely on the audience’s intelligence to persuade them.
- Education causes audiences to be more skeptical of emotional arguments and more receptive to logos.
Ethos

- Ethos is a person’s credibility with a given audience. It can mean sincerity, authority, expertise, faithful, or any adjective that describes someone you can trust to do the right thing.
What is rhetoric?

- Aristotle defines rhetoric as The faculty or ability to discover all available means of persuasion in a given situation.
- Rhetoric is the counterpart of “dialectic,” a type of formal reasoning that leads to truth. Rhetoric is what allows us to communicate these truths.