Objectives

1. Engage students in the plot, characters, themes, setting, and language of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* so that they are prepared to discuss and write about the excerpt and/or the entire play.

2. Practice and reinforce the following Grades 9 – 10 ELA Common Core Standards for reading literature, writing, and speaking and listening:

   **READING:** LITERATURE – RL.9-10.1-7, 9-10
   **WRITING** – W.9-10.1-10
   **SPEAKING AND LISTENING** – SL.9-10.1-6

Time

130 minutes (with up to an additional 240 minutes of extension possibilities)

Materials

SyncTV Premium Lesson on Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*

Overview

Attending a play in ancient Greece was a much different kind of event than it is today. Plays in the Greek tradition were religious festivals, portrayals of classic myths and legends staged before tens of thousands. When Sophocles’ second Theban play, *Oedipus Rex*, was first performed around 429 B.C.E., most of the people in attendance already knew the myth of Oedipus (it should be noted that Sophocles was not the creator of the myth itself). This excerpt, lines 300-428 of *Oedipus Rex*, features King Oedipus’s hostile interrogation of the blind prophet Teiresias and Oedipus’s initial confrontation with and denial of the charge that he is the murderer of the prior King of Thebes, Laius, and thus responsible for the curse that has befallen Thebes. Oedipus’s inevitable realization of this fact drives the plot of the rest of play. The excerpt raises issues of royal power and responsibility, fate, pride, humanity’s relations to the divine, and binaries of knowledge and ignorance, as well as sightedness and blindness. Close examination of this excerpt will prepare students to read the entire play, and to write thoughtful, informed, and textually-rooted responses, consistent with the ELA Common Core Standards for Grades 9-10.
Background (10 minutes)

1. **Watch the Preview** *(SL.9-10.1-2).* As a group, watch the video preview of the premium lesson. After viewing, use the following questions to spur a discussion:

   a. The narration cites the final lines of the play, “No man should be considered fortunate until he is dead,” as an ancient Greek maxim. What are the possible meanings of those words? What are some different ways to interpret these lines? What do they suggest about the action or themes of the play?

   b. What image or images stand out for you and why? What words come to mind after seeing the images in the preview? What do these images—along with the music and narration—tell you about the plot, setting and overall tone of Oedipus Rex?

   c. What role did prophecies and oracles play in classic tragedies? What are some of the other common tenets of classic Greek or Shakespearean tragedies? Discuss the common trademarks that come to mind when discussing the genre of tragedy.

Extension (additional 60 minutes)

   d. **Describe** *(ELL).* Ask English Language Learners to write one word to describe each individual image in the preview or to convey a feeling it produces. If possible, show them more images concerning ancient Greece and the myth of Oedipus.

   e. **Discuss** *(SL.9-10.1, 3-4, 6).* How does knowing the last lines, familiarity with the Oedipus myth, or an awareness that the play resolves tragically affect one’s reading of the play? Use this as a place to introduce the concept of dramatic irony. What is dramatic irony and what are some other examples of it, in literature and/or film?

   f. **Research** *(W.9-10.7, 9 and SL.9-10.1-3).* Have students research the term “Oedipus complex” as it is defined in the field of clinical psychology. Divide the class into small groups and have each group focus on a different element on this psychological concept (e.g., Freud, the controversy associated with this concept, living examples, etc.). What can we infer about the plot and themes of Oedipus Rex, based on a general understanding of this concept?

   g. **Read and Define** *(W.9-10.7, 9).* Aristotle’s Poetics is the oldest surviving outline of literary theory, written sometime around 335 B.C. and containing a foundational analysis of drama and tragedy that informs much of our understanding of these genres to this day. Have students go to [http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/ari/poe/poe07.htm](http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/ari/poe/poe07.htm) and read the excerpt, then define and discuss the characteristics of tragedy, according to Aristotle. (A good breakdown of Aristotle’s ideas, if students are struggling with the excerpt, can be found at [http://cuip.uchicago.edu/~ldernbach/msw/xhkaristrag.pdf](http://cuip.uchicago.edu/~ldernbach/msw/xhkaristrag.pdf).)

Engaging the Text (120 minutes)

2. **Read the Text** (30 minutes)

   a. **Read and Annotate** *(RL.9-10.1-6).* Have students read and annotate the introduction and excerpt. If students are completing as a homework assignment,
ask them to write any questions they have into the annotation tool—these questions are visible to you after the students submit their writing assignments or beforehand if you use the “Mimic” function to access the students’ accounts.

Extension (additional 20 minutes)

b. **Listen and Discuss** (SL.9-10.1-2). As a class, listen to the audio reading of the text. Ask students to share how their understanding of the text changed after listening. What additional images came to mind? How does the dramatization of the play’s dialogue alter their understanding of the scene? Ask them to identify at least two places in the reading where a speaker’s tone or speed was different than they expected during their initial reading.

c. **Comprehend** (RL.9-10.1-6). Have students complete the multiple-choice questions (in the lesson extension). Collect papers or discuss answers as a class.

3. **Watch SyncTV (30 minutes)**

a. **Watch**. Either watch the SyncTV discussion as a class or ask students to watch it on their individual computers.

b. **Focus** (*SL.9-10.1-3 and RL.9-10.3-5*). Use the portion of the SyncTV discussion from 0:27-1:32 and 1:39-1:49 to return to the concept of dramatic irony and as a model for how to discuss Prompt 1. Have your students expand on the SyncTV discussion in considering what the goal and effect of this style of irony is on the audience and how the characters perpetuate the irony even as they try to work around prophecies.

c. **Focus** (*SL.9-10.1-3 and RL.9-10.3, 5*). The SyncTV discussion from 1:49-2:49 raises the question of whether audience sympathies should lie with Oedipus or Teiresias. Where do you think the play intends to allocate sympathy and why? Where do your own sympathies lie and why?

d. **Focus** (*SL.9-10.1-3 and RL.9-10.2, 4*). Finally, focus on the SyncTV discussion from 4:35-5:38 as the students broach the play’s use of literal and figurative “blindness” and the sense of hubris: an arrogant pride that affronts the divine order. How might hubris serve as a justification for the tragedy that befalls Oedipus?

e. **Discuss** (*SL.9-10.1-5 and RL.9-10.1-6, 9-10*). After watching the model discussion, have a conversation with the class about the ideas discussed in the SyncTV episode. What new thoughts do they have after hearing the students’ discussion? Next, divide students into small groups (3-4 students). Move around the room monitoring groups as students follow the SyncTV episode as a model to discuss some of the following questions:

   i. The SyncTV students discussed hubris as an arrogance that offends the gods, and although Oedipus’s killing of his father and impregnating his mother does bring divine wrath upon him, hubris in ancient Greece more often had the connotation of a violent, perhaps sexual, assault that humiliated or degraded the victim for the pleasure or satisfaction of the perpetrator to the shame of both. Can one see overtones of this sort of hubris in Oedipus Rex?

   ii. What do the language, word choice, and line structures of the excerpt’s dialogue accomplish or evoke? What poetic features can you discern in the dialogue?
iii. How would you stage this scene for greatest effect? When and how would Oedipus, Teiresias, the Chorus, and Teiresias’s silent boy move and remain stationary? What should the lighting, costuming, and scenery look like?

iv. Consider the political context of Oedipus Rex. What sort of assumptions does this scene operate within in regards to the obligations and responsibilities of a monarch, the nature of bad governance, the role of patriotism, or the relation of an individual to the political community?

v. Who, if anyone, is to blame for the events that have befallen Oedipus and his kingdom? How do you decide who is guilty and who is innocent, or is that beside the point? Discuss.

Extension (additional 80 minutes)

f. Debate (RL.9-10.1-3, 9). In Poetics, Aristotle bases his idea of “the structure of the best tragedy” on Oedipus Rex with “the sort of man who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, and yet it is through no badness or villainy of his own that he falls into the fortune, but rather through some flaw in him, he being one of those who are in high station and good fortune.” Critics have debated whether Aristotle regards this flaw as both/either a moral failing and/or an intellectual error. Have the students debate what, if any, flaws Oedipus possesses in this excerpt. Possibilities could include pride, ignorance, his cursed origins, his hostility toward Teiresias, impatience, or wrathfulness.

g. Mock Trial (W.9-10.9 and SL.9-10.1, 3-6). Have the class stage a mock trial, wherein Oedipus is brought before judge and jury for the crimes he has committed. Assign students different roles in the proceedings, including prosecution, defense, jury, witnesses and even Oedipus himself. If desired, record or film the trial using a Flip Camera or iPad and share the final video online.

h. Interview (ELL). Place students in pairs and have them conduct an interview with Oedipus himself, recording their dialog using the podcast app. Together, students should come up with a series of questions that they would like to ask Oedipus. Then, with one student as the interviewer and the other as Oedipus, engage in a five minute question-and-answer session. Encourage creativity in the questions and answers, so long as they remain focused on the issues and themes in the excerpt.

4. Think (10 minutes)

   a. Respond (W.9-10.1, 4). Ask students to read the “Think” questions, watch the corresponding video clips, and respond to the questions, either in class or for homework.

5. Write (50 minutes)

   a. Discuss (SL.9-10.1). Read the prompt you have chosen for students, and then solicit questions regarding the prompt or the assignment expectations. Whichever prompt you have chosen, make sure you are clear about the assignment expectations and the rubric by which you and the other students will be evaluating them.
b. **Organize** (*RH.9-10.1-5, 10 and WHST.9-10.1-2, 5*). Ask students to go back and annotate the text with the prompt in mind. They should be organizing their thoughts and the points they’ll address in their writing as they make annotations. If you’ve worked on outlining or other organizational tools for writing, this is a good place to apply them.

c. **Write** (*WHST.9-10.1-2, 4-6, 8-10*). Have students go through the writing process of planning, revising, editing, and publishing their writing responses.

d. **Review** (*WHST.9-10.4-6*). Use the StudySync “Review” feature to have students complete one to two evaluations of their peers’ work based on your chosen review rubric. Have the students look at and reflect upon the peer evaluations of their own writing. What might you do differently in a revision? How might you strengthen the writing and the ideas?

**Extension (additional 80 minutes)**

e. **Write** (*W.9-10.1-2, 4-6, 8-10*). For homework, have students write an essay using one of the prompts you did not choose to do in class. Students should publish their responses online.

f. **Write Creatively** (*W.9-10.3-6*). Have students change the time period to update *Oedipus Rex* and rewrite this excerpt in a contemporary light: as a scene from an episode of their favorite TV show (or other modern framework, pending instructor approval). Ask them to alter the setting and tweak the personal relations to create a contemporary family dynamic in a situation of political, corporate, or criminal power; however, make sure they follow the play’s plot arc and keep its themes intact. Students can write their modern adaptations as a short story or play.
SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Key Vocabulary

1. **augury (n.)** – a divination of the future from auspices, omens, or portents
2. **melancholy (n.)** – a gloomy, depressed, or pensive state of mind that ancient medicine attributes to the accumulation of too much black bile in the human body
3. **adjure (v.)** – to solemnly command or enjoin, or to earnestly entreat or appeal
4. **tax (v.)** – to make difficult, extensive, or excessive demands on
5. **wroth (adj.)** – wrathful, angry, irate
6. **stint (v.)** – to restrict, limit, or stop
7. **forsooth (adv.)** – in truth, indeed
8. **calumny (n.)** – a maliciously false, slanderous statement
9. **gibe (n.)** – remarks that taunt, heckle, jeer, or deride
10. **empiry (n.)** – alternate spelling of empery, an archaic term for the status, dignity, absolute dominium, or lawfully-invested authority of an emperor

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What leads in Teiresias?
   a. a silent goat kid
   b. a silent boy
   c. a silent girl
   d. None of the above

2. Which word best describes Teiresias?
   a. penitent
   b. professor
   c. prince
   d. prophet

3. Oedipus is the monarch of which Greek city-state?
   a. Sparta
   b. Kolonos
   c. Thebes
   d. None of the above

4. According to Teiresias who had forgotten these old lines of lore: “Alas, alas, what misery to be wise / When wisdom profits nothing!”?
   a. Teiresias himself
   b. Oedipus
   c. Teiresias’s helper
   d. All of the above
5. According to Oedipus who would “thus withhold the word of prophecy”?
   a. A false prophet
   b. A traitor to Thebes
   c. A senile old person
   d. Both a and c

6. According to Teiresias, who “art the man”?
   a. I
   b. She
   c. Thou
   d. We

7. What best describes Oedipus’s reaction to Teiresias’s visit?
   a. rage
   b. sorrow
   c. thanksgiving
   d. all of the above

8. What best describes the Chorus’s response to Teiresias’s & Oedipus’s interaction?
   a. conciliatory
   b. pragmatic
   c. forward-looking
   d. all of the above

9. In response to Oedipus’s royalty, what prerogative does Teiresias claim?
   a. Free conscience
   b. Free speech
   c. Free love
   d. Both a and c

10. With whom does Oedipus suspect Teiresias is in league?
    a. Creon
    b. Antigone
    c. Jocasta
    d. Apollo

Answer Key

  1. B
  2. D
  3. C
  4. A
  5. B
  6. C
  7. A
  8. D
  9. B
  10. A
Further Assignments

1. This excerpted scene comes from a public domain verse translation of *Oedipus Rex* by Francis Storr (1912). Have the students read the excerpt in a different translation in a different form. Possibilities include Richard Jebb’s prose translation, William Butler Yeats’s mixed prose and verse translation (1928), or Anthony Burgess’s mixed translation (1972). Have students discuss how different translations and different forms affect the mood, meaning, and reception of the play. *(RL.9-10.1 and SL.9-10.1, 3-4, 6)*

2. After reading the play, have students research the history and circumstances of the performance of tragedy in ancient Athens. Have them discuss and write about how the historical context of *Oedipus Rex* shapes the play itself. *(RL.9-10.6 and W.9-10.7-9)*

3. *Oedipus Rex* is often cited, sometimes jokingly, as the first detective story with its central mystery, closed circle of suspects, preoccupation with past crime, and twist revelation. Have students read or view a detective narrative that explicitly references *Oedipus* and discuss and write about how the proliferation of Oedipal themes in popular culture affect our reception of the play and the challenges for writers and directors in incorporating Oedipal themes into new and different contexts. Two promising examples are Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “Thou Art the Man!” (1844) and Alan Parker’s Faustian film *Angel Heart* (1987). *(RL.9-10.6-7, 9 and W.9-10.1-2, 4, 6-9)*

4. After reading the play, have students read this famous passage from psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899):

   “If the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is capable of moving modern men no less than it moved the contemporary Greeks, the explanation of this fact cannot lie merely in the assumption that the effect of the Greek tragedy is based upon the opposition between fate and human will, but is to be sought in the peculiar nature of the material by which the opposition is shown. There must be a voice within us which is prepared to recognise the compelling power of fate in *Oedipus*, while we justly condemn the situations occurring in...tragedies of later date as arbitrary inventions. And there must be a factor corresponding to this inner voice in the story of King Oedipus. His fate moves us only for the reason that it might have been ours, for the oracle has put the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. Perhaps we are all destined to direct our first sexual impulses towards our mothers, and our first hatred and violent wishes towards our fathers; our dreams convince us of it. King Oedipus, who has struck his father Laius dead and has married his mother Jocasta, is nothing but the realised wish of our childhood. But more fortunate than he, we have since succeeded, unless we have become psychoneurotics, in withdrawing our sexual impulses from our mothers and in forgetting our jealousy of our fathers. We recoil from the person for whom this primitive wish has been fulfilled with all the force of the repression which these wishes have suffered within us. By his analysis, showing us the guilt of Oedipus, the poet urges us to recognise our own inner self, in which these impulses, even if suppressed, are still present.”

   Have students read that excerpt and conduct an in-class debate on its claims. Questions to consider could include: Should we understand *Oedipus Rex* as revealing a universal historical condition or being a document of a particular time? What in the play might suggest Freud’s developmental theory of childhood? What in the play might suggest the suppression of the inner impulses that Freud describes? *(SL.9-10.1, 3-4, 6)*

5. Have the students read about a different portion of the Oedipus myth, like his encounter with the sphinx or his death at Colonus, and view a text that draws on this additional mythic material: possibilities include Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s painting *Oedipus*
and the Sphinx (1808), Gustave Moreau's painting Oedipus and the Sphinx (1864), Max Ernst’s surrealist painting Oedipus Rex (1922), and Lee Breuer’s African-American musical The Gospel at Colonus (1985). The students should discuss and write about how knowledge of these additional mythic material alters or expands their understanding of Oedipus Rex (RL.9-10.6-7, 9 and SL.9-10.1-2 and W.9-10.7-9).

6. Ask students to rewrite a dialogue scene in Oedipus Rex in more contemporary verbal style. Have students focus on the grammar and punctuation in dialogue. After students have written their dialogues, pair them up and have them read their dialogues together, focusing on the way that spoken dialogue illuminates characters in drama. (ELL)