

Oedipus the King | Sample answer

2013 Higher Level Exam Question

A) What are the circumstances which lead Oedipus to send for Tiresias?

One of the reasons Oedipus has sent for Tiresias is because of the terrible plague that is terrorising Thebes. This plague is killing the civilians left right and centre indiscriminately. The thebans need to be rescued and they need to find out how to stop this horrible plague. The thebans come to Oedipus and beg him for help. "Act now we beg you best of men raise up our city." Oedipus is a good king and he wants to help his people. He knows he must do something to stop all the deaths. This is where Tiresias will be very useful to the king.

Another reason that leads Oedipus to send for Tiresias is because Creon advises him to. Creon, the brother and uncle of the king is very close to Oedipus and they really trust each other. "On Creon's cue I sent the escorts." It's clear that Oedipus trusts Creon's advice and has faith that he will not be wrong. Creon knows to send for a prophet because his trip to the oracle informed him that the only way to stop the plague is to find the murderer of the previous king Laius. They both hope that Tiresias will tell them who committed this crime so they can rid Thebes of the plague.

B) Describe the encounter between Tiresias and Oedipus.

When Tiresias first arrives he is very reluctant to fully enter the palace. He is scared of what will happen if he has to reveal the truth about the murder of the former king because he knows it was Oedipus. Oedipus tried to entice the prophet with compliments such as saying he is "the master of all mysteries of life" and telling him he is "the one saviour" they have. Tiresias doesn't care about the flattery and all that he says to Oedipus is "how terrible to see the truth when the truth is only pain to him who sees." This does not please Oedipus at all. He expected Tiresias to comply and just come straight out with it so he can save his people.

Oedipus' temper quickly emerges and the conversation becomes very heated. He becomes very impatient and starts to insult Tiresias. "You're bent on betraying us, destroying Thebes." Although Oedipus is making a horrible accusation, he is confused as to why the prophet will not tell him what he

came all this way off. Tiresias is left with no choice but to expose Oedipus as the murderer. Despite telling him exactly what he asked of the prophet, the answer is very unpleasant to the king. He begins to become extremely aggressive towards Tiresias. He also becomes disrespectful and says “if you didn’t look so senile the lash would teach you elegant your scheming means.” It is clear that Oedipus is getting very defensive because there is no way he wants to believe that what he is hearing is the truth.

Oedipus is thinking it is impossible that he could have committed such a terrible crime. He hastily jumps to the conclusion that Tiresias and crown are conspiring against him. He thinks they both want to overthrow him. He calls the prophet a liar and a fake. “Eyes peeled for his own profit.” Oedipus cannot accept the truth that he is the killer of the former king and so they only other portion is to blame the prophet, after all he is the king of Thebes and he killed the sphinx, he’s a hero.

Tiresias has grown weary and no longer feels he is welcome in Thebes. After predicting that Oedipus’ downfall (that he will become poor and lose all that he loves most) Oedipus is furious and is glad to have the prophet leave. “Yes take him away you’re a nuisance here.” It’s clear that the encounter didn’t not go at all as Oedipus had hoped.

C) What does the encounter reveal about Oedipus’ character?

This encounter exposes many things that we have never seen before. Oedipus can be very respectful and he is towards Tiresias at the beginning of the scene calling him “lord” and referring to him as a saviour. But things quickly escalate and we see Oedipus’ violent tempers which had been subdued for fifteen years before this encounter. Oedipus throws harsh insults at the prophet and this mad temper is completely different to the type of character we have interacted with thus far in the play. This is a very ugly side of Oedipus.

When Oedipus first sends for Tiresias, it seems the prophet is taking his time to arrive at the palace. This reveals Oedipus’ impatient side which we haven’t seen before. “I sent the escorts twice within the hour.” It is obvious that Oedipus is not a man who likes to be kept waiting. When the prophet finally arrives, Oedipus does not like what he is being told. He begins to jump to conclusion which is a new side we see to him. He blames freon and accuses him of wanting his crown. “So hungry to overthrow me.” Oedipus has exposed a very dark side to himself and we learn a lot more about his character from this encounter.