

But his being dead can't increase the truth of the story, can't affect it one way or the other. I think I signal this, because the end of the story has been reached before old Phoenix gets home again: she simply starts back. To the question "Is the grandson really dead?" I could reply that it doesn't make any difference. I could also say that I did not make him up in order to let him play a trick on Phoenix. But my best answer would be: "*Phoenix* is alive."

The origin of a story is sometimes a trustworthy clue to the author—or can provide him with the clue—to its key image; maybe in this case it will do the same for the reader. One day I saw a solitary old woman like Phoenix. She was walking; I saw her, at middle distance, in a winter country landscape, and watched her slowly make her way across my line of vision. That sight of her made me write the story. I invented an errand for her, but that only seemed a living part of the figure she was herself: what errand other than for someone else could be making her go? And her going was the first thing, her persisting in her landscape was the real thing, and the first and the real were what I wanted and worked to keep. I brought her up close enough, by imagination, to describe her face, make her present to the eyes, but the full-length figure moving across the winter fields was the indelible one and the image to keep, and the perspective extending into the vanishing distance the true one to hold in mind.

I invented for my character, as I wrote, some passing adventures—some dreams and harassments and a small triumph or two, some jolts to her pride, some flights of fancy to console her, one or two encounters to scare her, a moment that gave her cause to feel ashamed, a moment to dance and preen—for it had to be a *journey*, and all these things belonged to that, parts of life's uncertainty.

A narrative line is in its deeper sense, of course, the tracing out of a meaning, and the real continuity of a story lies in this probing forward. The real dramatic force of a story depends on the strength of the emotion that has set it going. The emotional value is the measure of the reach of the story. What gives any such content to "A Worn Path" is not its circumstances but its *subject*: the deep-grained habit of love.

What I hoped would come clear was that in the whole surround of this story, the world it threads through, the only certain thing at all is the worn path. The habit of love cuts through confusion and stumbles or contrives its way out of difficulty, it remembers the way

even when it forgets, for a dumbfounded moment, its reason for being. The path is the thing that matters.

Her victory—old Phoenix's—is when she sees the diploma in the doctor's office, when she finds “nailed up on the wall the document that had been stamped with the gold seal and framed in the gold frame, which matched the dream that was hung up in her head.” The return with the medicine is just a matter of retracing her own footsteps. It is the part of the journey, and of the story, that can now go without saying.

In the matter of function, old Phoenix's way might even do as a sort of parallel to your way of work if you are a writer of stories. The way to get there is the all-important, all-absorbing problem, and this problem is your reason for undertaking the story. Your only guide, too, is your sureness about your subject, about what this subject is. Like Phoenix, you work all your life to find your way, through all the obstructions and the false appearances and the upsets you may have brought on yourself, to reach a meaning—using inventions of your imagination, perhaps helped out by your dreams and bits of good luck. And finally too, like Phoenix, you have to assume that what you are working in aid of is life, not death.

But you would make the trip anyway—wouldn't you—just on hope.

## Collaborating

Talk about Welty's response to students. Explore your own ideas and reactions to her comments.

## Log Entry 6

Write responses to passages from the essay that deal with some of the issues Welty discusses in her response to students. Use the following quotations or any others that helped you understand this story, the function of a writer, or the relationship between truth and fiction.

"As a reader, you are free to think as you like, of course."

"Certainly the artistic truth . . . lies in Phoenix's own answer to that question."

"But it is the journey, the going of the errand, that is the story . . ."

"The real dramatic force of a story depends on the strength of the emotion that has set it going."

## Work in Progress

Select one or more of these suggestions to include in your writing folder:

### Graphic and written journeys

- With one or two classmates, create a graphic representation of Phoenix Jackson's journey. Include references to other pieces of literature, television shows, or movies that deal with the idea of a person's journey.
- Write a research paper or reflective essay about journeys in literature, television shows, or movies.

### Journeys from nonfiction to fiction

- Think about some phase of your life that could be described in terms of a journey. Map it graphically; then write about it.
- Using some seed or germ of an idea from your own journey or your own observations, create a short story about a journey taken by a fictional character.
- Write a reflective essay on this quotation from Welty's response to students: "*It's all right*, I want to say to the students who write to me, for things to be what they appear to be, and for words to mean what they say. It's all right, too, for words and appearances to mean more than one thing—ambiguity is a fact of life."

# Truth in Fiction and Nonfiction,

## Life and Art

Think again about the question of nonfiction and fiction, true and false, real and made up. Reread this section of the story "Starting Out," which begins with Phil asking the writer/doctor a question.

"Have you ever read a book that really made a difference to you—a book you couldn't get out of your mind, and you didn't want to [get it out of your mind]?"

"Yes, I said". . . We got into a long talk about Dr. Williams's medical work with mostly poor and working-class people, about his effort through stories and poems to understand America's social history and moral values.

. . . I will never forget the direction of our discussion afterward. Phil wondered whether Williams would ever have been able to accomplish what he did, were he not inspired by what he saw all the time as a practicing physician. Then he wondered whether Mark Twain, whose life he had briefly studied, would have been able to do the kind of writing *he* did, had he not been such an inveterate wanderer before he found himself having much to say. The reason for Phil's interest in pointing out the connection between art and life was not too hard for me to comprehend—or for him, either.

## Log Entry 7

Reflect on the following ideas in your log.

- The connection between art and life is related to the connection between fiction and nonfiction. Do the distinctions begin to blur?
- How much of a writer's life is incorporated into the fictions that he or she creates?
- Is nonfiction any truer than fiction?

The Dr. Williams that Robert Coles refers to as he talks with Phil about books that had made a difference in his life is the poet/doctor William Carlos Williams. Although he was a lifelong doctor, a gen-

eral practitioner who made house calls, he was one of the most influential poets of his time. In addition to his many books of poems, he wrote a short autobiography called *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*. In this book, Williams talks about how books came to be important to him. Compare his experience with that of Phil, who was about the same age as Williams when he discovered his first important book. Was Williams born a poet? In this excerpt he answers that question.

### **I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet**

*William Carlos Williams*

Was he a born poet, wanting to write as far back as he could remember?

No, no. It began with a heart attack. I was sixteen or seventeen. There was a race. Mismanaged. I ran the eight laps. Someone called, "You've got another lap to run." I ran it. I was sick, vomiting sick, and my head hurt. When I got home my family called old Doc Calhoun. He said, "Heart murmur." Oh, I don't know, I may have had rheumatic fever without knowing it. Anyhow, it meant a complete change in my life. I had lived for sports like any other kid. They let me go to school. But no more baseball. No more running. I didn't mind the running too much . . . there was a boy up the street I never could beat. But the rest. Not being with the others after school. I was forced back on myself. I had to think about myself, look into myself. And I began to read.

In Uncle Billy Abbott's class at Horace Mann we read a book of Robert Louis Stevenson's—a travel book I think it was. There was a young man and an upset canoe and a line that said, "I never let go of that paddle." I was crazy about that line. I'd say it over and over to myself. I wrote a theme about it and Uncle Billy Abbott gave me an A—. The best mark I'd ever had. I was thrilled.

(The book referred to was *An Inland Voyage* and the line appears at the end of the chapter, "The Oise in Flood." Stevenson also appears to have been "crazy about that line"—he repeats it four times: "I still clung to my paddle." "And I still held to my paddle." "But there was my paddle in my hand." And finally, "On my tomb, if ever I have one, I mean to get these words inscribed: 'He clung to his paddle.'")

I don't remember learning any nursery rhymes, but I do remember my grandmother teaching me my prayer. It was:

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,  
 Look upon a little child  
 Pity my simplicity . . .

—and the rest of it. I can still say it word for word. But at one point I refused to say it every night. I must have been very little. I didn't see why I had to say it every night. I'd say, "I'm not going to say it tonight"—lying, looking up at the ceiling, expecting to be struck dead.

My father was an Englishman who never got over being an Englishman. He had a love of the written word. Shakespeare meant everything to him. He read the plays to mother and my brother and myself. He read well. I was deeply impressed. He read Negro dialect poems, too; simple poetry but it had swing and rhythm and quiet humor. I remember one poem, "Accountability." Paul Lawrence Dunbar wrote it. "Put on de kettle . . . I got one of mastah's chickens"—something like that. And Pop read passages from the Bible, over and over. Isaiah was my favorite. I was not influenced by the New Testament. I thought the most impressive thing in the church service was the doxology: "The Peace of God which passeth all understanding"—I used to feel that peace when I heard that line. Yet I wasn't really religious. I went to church to hear the readings and the music. But I'm afraid I *was* rather a sanctimonious young man.

My brother Ed who was later to become a distinguished architect was my first intimate. He was a year younger and bigger almost from the start. We grew up cheek and jowl together. It was nip and tuck with us when we found my mother's discarded oil colors in the attic, the old tubes half squeezed out. I remember the cobalt, smaller than the other tubes because it was expensive, and the palette showing heavy use. I might easily have become a painter and in some ways I regret that I did not go on with it except that the articulate art of poetry gave a more immediate opportunity for the attack.

At first, not even my brother knew about my new world of books. I didn't talk about it to anyone. My discovery of poetry began with the classics we read at school: "Il Penseroso," "L'Allegro," "Lycidas," *Comus*, "The Ancient Mariner." My, but I was excited. But my friends were my former baseball pals. They wouldn't have understood. So it was entirely my own for a long time. And I can't remember consciously thinking at this stage that I wanted to be a poet.

The first line I ever wrote came out of the blue, with no past.

A black, black cloud  
flew over the sun  
driven by fierce flying  
rain.

The thrill. The discovery. At once, at the same instant, I said to myself, "Ridiculous, the rain can't drive the clouds." So the critical thing was being born at the same time.

And now my brother was my confessor. I wrote him poems and sent him poems. He was at Massachusetts Institute of Technology studying architecture and I was at the University of Pennsylvania studying medicine. Ed spoke to Arlo Bates, his English professor, about me and arranged a meeting. It was the weekend of the Harvard-Penn game (which by the way Penn won and I remember I guessed the exact score in a pool and won the money). This was my Keats period. Everything I wrote was bad Keats. I arrived at Mr. Bates's house with my *Endymion* imitation, a big bulky manuscript I'd been slaving over; I don't even remember the name of it. A butler let me in Mr. Bates's bachelor apartment. He was sitting at a desk, the picture of a distinguished man. There was a step down and I tripped and dropped the manuscript. It rolled all over the floor. Mr. Bates was kind. He perused the sonnets and said, "I see you have been reading Keats." "I don't read anything else but him," I said. He said, "Well, you certainly have paid attention to how the sonnet is constructed. I'll tell you a little story. I myself write poems. When I've finished them to my satisfaction I place them in this drawer and there they remain. You may, I can't tell, develop into a writer, but you have a lot to learn. Maybe in time you'll write some good verse. Go on writing, but don't give up medicine. Writing alone is not an easy occupation for a man to follow." This was a turning point in my life. I didn't give up medicine but there was never a minute's thought of giving up writing.

## Collaborating

Talk about the similarities and differences between Williams's and Phil's experiences as they came to understand the value of books in their lives. Try to tie their experiences to any that you may have had.

## Log Entry 8

Write a reflective log entry on what truth means to you—in life and in art, in nonfiction and fiction.

## From Newspaper to Short Story

Though Stephen Crane had not witnessed a single battle before he wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* in 1895, the immense popularity of the novel helped establish a career for him as a leading war correspondent. Crane spent most of his remaining years traveling, despite ill health, to cover the Greco-Turkish, the Boer, and the Spanish-American wars.

“Stephen Crane’s Own Story” details his experiences during the wreck of the *Commodore*, a cargo ship carrying guns and ammunition to Cuban insurgents. His account of this event, as it appeared in the *New York Press* on January 7, 1897, follows. Note that he uses the word *filibusters* not to refer to the long-winded speeches made by congressmen, but to “an irregular military adventurer or buccaneer,” the original meaning of the word.

### Stephen Crane’s Own Story

*[He Tells How the Commodore Was Wrecked and How He Escaped]*

*Stephen Crane*

JACKSONVILLE, FLA., Jan. 6.—It was the afternoon of New Year’s. The *Commodore* lay at her dock in Jacksonville and Negro stevedores processioned steadily toward her with box after box of ammunition and bundle after bundle of rifles. Her hatch, like the mouth of a monster, engulfed them. It might have been the feeding time of some legendary creature of the sea. It was in broad daylight and the crowd of gleeful Cubans on the pier did not forbear to sing the strange patriotic ballads of their island.

Everything was perfectly open. The *Commodore* was cleared with a cargo of arms and munition for Cuba. There was none of that extreme modesty about the proceeding which had marked previous departures of the famous tug. She loaded up as placidly as if she



were going to carry oranges to New York, instead of Remingtons to Cuba. Down the river, furthermore, the revenue cutter Boutwell, the old isosceles triangle that protects United States interests in the St. John's, lay at anchor, with no sign of excitement aboard her.

### **Exchanging Farewells**

On the decks of the Commodore there were exchanges of farewells in two languages. Many of the men who were to sail upon her had many intimates in the old Southern town, and we who had left our friends in the remote North received our first touch of melancholy on witnessing these strenuous and earnest goodbys.

It seems, however, that there was more difficulty at the custom house. The officers of the ship and the Cuban leaders were detained there until a mournful twilight settled upon the St. John's, and through a heavy fog the lights of Jacksonville blinked dimly. Then at last the Commodore swung clear of the dock, amid a tumult of goodbys. As she turned her bow toward the distant sea the Cubans ashore cheered and cheered. In response the Commodore gave three long blasts of her whistle, which even to this time impressed me with their sadness. Somehow, they sounded as wails.

Then at last we began to feel like filibusters. I don't suppose that the most stolid brain could contrive to believe that there is not a mere trifle of danger in filibustering, and so as we watched the lights of Jacksonville swing past us and heard the regular thump, thump, thump of the engines we did considerable reflecting.

But I am sure that there were no hifalutin emotions visible upon any of the faces which fronted the speeding shore. In fact, from cook's boy to captain, we were all enveloped in a gentle satisfaction and cheerfulness. But less than two miles from Jacksonville, this atrocious fog caused the pilot to ram the bow of the Commodore hard upon the mud and in this ignominious position we were compelled to stay until daybreak.

### **Help from the Boutwell**

It was to all of us more than a physical calamity. We were now no longer filibusters. We were men on a ship stuck in the mud. A certain mental somersault was made once more necessary.

But word had been sent to Jacksonville to the captain of the revenue cutter Boutwell, and Captain Kilgore turned out promptly and generously fired up his old triangle, and came at full speed to our

assistance. She dragged us out of the mud, and again we headed for the mouth of the river. The revenue cutter pounded along a half mile astern of us, to make sure that we did not take on board at some place along the river men for the Cuban army.

This was the early morning of New Year's Day, and the fine golden southern sunlight fell full upon the river. It flashed over the ancient Boutwell, until her white sides gleamed like pearl, and her rigging was spun into little threads of gold.

Cheers greeted the old Commodore from passing ship and from the shore. It was a cheerful, almost merry, beginning to our voyage. At Mayport, however, we changed our river pilot for a man who could take her to open sea, and again the Commodore was beached. The Boutwell was fussing around us in her venerable way, and, upon seeing our predicament, she came again to assist us, but this time, with engines reversed, the Commodore dragged herself away from the grip of the sand and again headed for the open sea.

The captain of the revenue cutter grew curious. He hailed the Commodore: "Are you fellows going to sea to-day?"

Captain Murphy of the Commodore called back: "Yes, sir."

And then as the whistle of the Commodore saluted him, Captain Kilgore doffed his cap and said: "Well, gentlemen, I hope you have a pleasant cruise," and this was our last word from shore.

When the Commodore came to enormous rollers that flew over the bar a certain light-heartedness departed from the ship's company.

### **Sleep Impossible**

As darkness came upon the waters, the Commodore was a broad, flaming path of blue and silver phosphorescence, and as her stout bow lunged at the great black waves she threw flashing, roaring cascades to either side. And all that was to be heard was rhythmical and mighty pounding of the engines. Being an inexperienced filibuster, the writer had undergone considerable mental excitement since the starting of the ship, and in consequence he had not yet been to sleep and so I went to the first mate's bunk to indulge myself in all the physical delights of holding oneself in bed. Every time the ship lurched I expected to be fired through a bulkhead, and it was neither amusing nor instructive to see in the dim light a certain accursed valise aiming itself at the top of my stomach with every lurch of the vessel.

### **The Cook Is Hopeful**

The cook was asleep on a bench in the galley. He is of a portly and noble exterior, and by means of a checker board he had himself wedged on this bench in such a manner the motion of the ship would be unable to dislodge him. He woke as I entered the galley and delivered himself of some dolorous sentiments: "God," he said in the course of his observations, "I don't feel right about this ship, somehow. It strikes me that something is going to happen to us. I don't know what it is, but the old ship is going to get it in the neck, I think."

"Well, how about the men on board her?" said I. "Are any of us going to get out, prophet?"

"Yes," said the cook. "Sometimes I have these damned feelings come over me, and they are always right, and it seems to me, somehow, that you and I will both get out and meet again somewhere, down at Coney Island, perhaps, or some place like that."

### **One Man Has Enough**

Finding it impossible to sleep, I went back to the pilot house. An old seaman, Tom Smith, from Charleston, was then at the wheel. In the darkness I could not see Tom's face, except at those times when he leaned forward to scan the compass and the dim light from the box came upon his weatherbeaten features.

"Well, Tom," said I, "how do you like filibustering?"

He said "I think I am about through with it. I've been in a number of these expeditions and the pay is good, but I think if I ever get back safe this time I will cut it."

I sat down in the corner of the pilot house and almost went to sleep. In the meantime the captain came on duty and he was standing near me when the chief engineer rushed up the stairs and cried hurriedly to the captain that there was something wrong in the engine room. He and the captain departed swiftly.

I was drowsing there in my corner when the captain returned, and, going to the door of the little room directly back of the pilot house, he cried to the Cuban leader: "Say, can't you get those fellows to work. I can't talk their language and I can't get them started. Come on and get them going."

### **Helps in the Fireroom**

The Cuban leader turned to me and said: "Go help in the fireroom. They are going to bail with buckets."

The engine room, by the way, represented a scene at this time taken from the middle kitchen of Hades. In the first place, it was insufferably warm, and the lights burned faintly in a way to cause mystic and gruesome shadows. There was a quantity of soapish sea water swirling and sweeping and swishing among machinery that roared and banged and clattered and steamed, and, in the second place, it was a devil of a ways down below.

Here I first came to know a certain young oiler named Billy Higgins. He was sloshing around this inferno filling buckets with water and passing them to a chain of men that extended up the ship's side. Afterward we got orders to change our point of attack on water and to operate through a little door on the windward side of the ship that led into the engine room.

#### **No Panic on Board**

During this time there was much talk of pumps out of order and many other statements of a mechanical kind, which I did not altogether comprehend but understood to mean that there was a general and sudden ruin in the engine room.

There was no particular agitation at this time, and even later there was never a panic on board the Commodore. The party of men who worked with Higgins and me at this time were all Cubans, and we were under the direction of the Cuban leaders. Presently we were ordered again to the afterhold, and there was some hesitation about going into the abominable fireroom again, but Higgins dashed down the companion way with a bucket.

#### **Lowering Boats**

The heat and hard work in the fireroom affected me and I was obliged to come on deck again. Going forward, I heard as I went talk of lowering the boats. Near the corner of the galley the mate was talking with a man.

"Why don't you send up a rocket?" said this unknown man. And the mate replied: "What the hell do we want to send up a rocket for? The ship is all right."

Returning with a little rubber and cloth overcoat, I saw the first boat about to be lowered. A certain man was the first person in this first boat, and they were handing him in a valise about as large as a hotel. I had not entirely recovered from astonishment and pleasure in witnessing this noble deed when I saw another valise go to him.

### Human Hog Appears

This valise was not perhaps so large as a hotel, but it was a big valise anyhow. Afterward there went to him something which looked to me like an overcoat.

Seeing the chief engineer leaning out of his little window, I remarked to him:

"What do you think of that blank, blank, blank?"

"Oh, he's a bird," said the old chief.

It was now that was heard the order to get away the lifeboat, which was stowed on top of the deckhouse. The deckhouse was a mighty slippery place, and with each roll of the ship, the men there thought themselves likely to take headers into the deadly black sea.

Higgins was on top of the deckhouse, and, with the first mate and two colored stokers, we wrestled with that boat, which, I am willing to swear, weighed as much as a Broadway cable car. She might have been spiked to the deck. We could have pushed a little brick schoolhouse along a corduroy road as easily as we could have moved this boat. But the first mate got a tackle to her from a leeward davit, and on the deck below the captain corralled enough men to make an impression upon the boat.

We were ordered to cease hauling then, and in this lull the cook of the ship came to me and said: "What are you going to do?"

I told him of my plans, and he said: "Well, my God, that's what I am going to do."

### A Whistle of Despair

Now the whistle of the Commodore had been turned loose, and if there ever was a voice of despair and death, it was in the voice of this whistle. It had gained a new tone. It was as if its throat was already choked by the water, and this cry on the sea at night, with a wind blowing the spray over the ship, and the waves roaring over the bow, and swirling white along the decks, was to each of us probably a song of man's end.

It was now that the first mate showed a sign of losing his grip. To us who were trying in all stages of competence and experience to launch the lifeboat he raged in all terms of fiery satire and hammerlike abuse. But the boat moved at last and swung down toward the water.

Afterward, when I went aft, I saw the captain standing, with his arm in a sling, holding on to a stay with his one good hand and

directing the launching of the boat. He gave me a five-gallon jug of water to hold, and asked me what I was going to do. I told him what I thought was about the proper thing, and he told me then that the cook had the same idea, and ordered me to go forward and be ready to launch the ten-foot dinghy.

### **In the Ten-Foot Dinghy**

I remember well that he turned then to swear at a colored stoker who was prowling around, done up in life preservers until he looked like a feather bed. I went forward with my five-gallon jug of water, and when the captain came we launched the dinghy, and they put me over the side to fend her off from the ship with an oar.

They handed me down the water jug, and then the cook came into the boat, and we sat there in the darkness, wondering why, by all our hopes of future happiness, the captain was so long in coming over to the side and ordering us away from the doomed ship.

The captain was waiting for the other boat to go. Finally he hailed in the darkness: "Are you all right, Mr. Graines?"

The first mate answered: "All right, sir."

"Shove off, then," cried the captain.

The captain was just about to swing over the rail when a dark form came forward and a voice said: "Captain, I go with you."

The captain answered: "Yes, Billy; get in."

### **Higgins Last to Leave Ship**

It was Billy Higgins, the oiler. Billy dropped into the boat and a moment later the captain followed, bringing with him an end of about forty yards of lead line. The other end was attached to the rail of the ship.

As we swung back to leeward the captain said: "Boys, we will stay right near the ship till she goes down."

This cheerful information, of course, filled us all with glee. The line kept us headed properly into the wind, and as we rode over the monstrous waves we saw upon each rise the swaying lights of the dying Commodore.

When came the gray shade of dawn, the form of the Commodore grew slowly clear to us as our little ten-foot boat rose over each swell. She was floating with such an air of buoyancy that we laughed when we had time, and said: "What a gag it would be on those other fellows if she didn't sink at all."

But later we saw men aboard of her, and later still they began to hail us.

### **Helping Their Mates**

I had forgot to mention that previously we had loosened the end of the lead line and dropped much further to leeward. The men on board were a mystery to us, of course, as we had seen all the boats leave the ship. We rowed back to the ship, but did not approach too near, because we were four men in a ten-foot boat, and we knew that the touch of a hand on our gunwale would assuredly swamp us.

The first mate cried out from the ship that the third boat had foundered alongside. He cried that they had made rafts, and wished us to tow them.

The captain said, "All right."

Their rafts were floating astern. "Jump in!" cried the captain, but there was a singular and most harrowing hesitation. There were five white men and two Negroes. This scene in the gray light of morning impressed one as would a view into some place where ghosts move slowly. These seven men on the stern of the sinking Commodore were silent. Save the words of the mate to the captain there was no talk. Here was death, but here also was a most singular and indefinable kind of fortitude.

Four men, I remember, clambered over the railing and stood there watching the cold, steely sheen of the sweeping waves.

"Jump," cried the captain again.

The old chief engineer first obeyed the order. He landed on the outside raft and the captain told him how to grip the raft and he obeyed as promptly and as docilely as a scholar in riding school.

### **The Mate's Mad Plunge**

A stoker followed him, and then the first mate threw his hands over his head and plunged into the sea. He had no life belt and for my part, even when he did this horrible thing, I somehow felt that I could see in the expression of his hands, and in the very toss of his head, as he leaped thus to death, that it was rage, rage, rage unspeakable that was in his heart at the time.

And then I saw Tom Smith, the man who was going to quit filibustering after this expedition, jump to a raft and turn his face toward us. On board the Commodore three men strode, still in silence

and with their faces turned toward us. One man had his arms folded and was leaning against the deckhouse. His feet were crossed, so that the toe of his left foot pointed downward. There they stood gazing at us, and neither from the deck nor from the rafts was a voice raised. Still was there this silence.

### **Tried to Tow the Rafts**

The colored stoker on the first raft threw us a line and we began to tow. Of course, we perfectly understood the absolute impossibility of any such thing; our dingy was within six inches of the water's edge, there was an enormous sea running, and I knew that under the circumstances a tugboat would have no light task in moving these rafts.

But we tried it, and would have continued to try it indefinitely, but that something critical came to pass. I was at an oar and so faced the rafts. The cook controlled the line. Suddenly the boat began to go backward and then we saw this Negro on the first raft pulling on the line hand over hand and drawing us to him.

He had turned into a demon. He was wild—wild as a tiger. He was crouched on this raft and ready to spring. Every muscle of him seemed to be turned into an elastic spring. His eyes were almost white. His face was the face of a lost man reaching upward, and we knew that the weight of his hand on our gunwale doomed us.

### **The Commodore Sinks**

The cook let go of the line. We rowed around to see if we could not get a line from the chief engineer, and all this time, mind you, there were no shrieks, no groans, but silence, silence and silence, and then the Commodore sank.

She lurched to windward, then swung afar back, righted and dove into the sea, and the rafts were suddenly swallowed by this frightful maw of the ocean. And then by the men on the ten-foot dingy were words said that were still not words—something far beyond words.

The lighthouse of Mosquito Inlet stuck up above the horizon like the point of a pin. We turned our dingy toward the shore.

The history of life in an open boat for thirty hours would no doubt be instructive for the young, but none is to be told here and now. For my part I would prefer to tell the story at once, because from it would shine the splendid manhood of Captain Edward Mur-



phy and of William Higgins, the oiler, but let it suffice at this time to say that when we were swamped in the surf and making the best of our way toward the shore the captain gave orders amid the wildness of the breakers as clearly as if he had been on the quarter deck of a battleship.

John Kitchell of Daytona came running down the beach, and as he ran the air was filled with clothes. If he had pulled a single lever and undressed, even as the fire horses harness, he could not seem to me to have stripped with more speed. He dashed into the water and dragged the cook. Then he went after the captain but the captain sent him to me, and then it was that he saw Billy Higgins lying with his forehead on sand that was clear of the water, and he was dead.

Crane's story, "The Open Boat," written a few months after his report on the sinking of the *Commodore* for the *New York Press*, was his second attempt to fictionalize his near disaster at sea. According to a fellow writer, Crane was so worried about accuracy that he wanted the captain of the wrecked vessel, Edward Murphy, to go over the manuscript. "The Open Boat" is an early attempt by a major American writer to use the speech of average men trapped in difficult circumstances. In his efforts to combine the crafts of journalism and literature, Crane helped set a new tone for fiction, one that could express, as he puts it in "The Open Boat," "humour, contempt, tragedy, all in one."

## **The Open Boat**

*Stephen Crane*

*A Tale Intended to Be After the Fact: Being the Experience of Four Men from the Sunk Steamer Commodore*

### **I**

None of them knew the colour of the sky. Their eyes glanced level, and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them. These waves were of the hue of slate, save for the tops, which were of foaming white, and all of the men knew the colours of the sea. The horizon narrowed and widened, and dipped and rose, and at all times its edge was jagged with waves that seemed thrust up in points like rocks.

Many a man ought to have a bathtub larger than the boat which here rode upon the sea. These waves were most wrongfully and barbarously abrupt and tall, and each froth-top was a problem in small-boat navigation.

The cook squatted in the bottom, and looked with both eyes at the six inches of gunwale which separated him from the ocean. His sleeves were rolled over his fat forearms, and the two flaps of his unbuttoned vest dangled as he bent to bail out the boat. Often he said, "Gawd! that was a narrow clip." As he remarked it he invariably gazed eastward over the broken sea.

The oiler, steering with one of the two oars in the boat, sometimes raised himself suddenly to keep clear of water that swirled in over the stern. It was a thin little oar, and it seemed often ready to snap.

The correspondent, pulling at the other oar, watched the waves and wondered why he was there.

The injured captain, lying in the bow, was at this time buried in that profound dejection and indifference which comes, temporarily at least, to even the bravest and most enduring when, willy-nilly, the firm fails, the army loses, the ship goes down. The mind of the master of a vessel is rooted deep in the timbers of her, though he command for a day or a decade; and this captain had on him the stern impression of a scene in the greys of dawn of seven turned faces, and later a stump of a topmast with a white ball on it, that slashed to and fro at the waves, went low and lower, and down. Thereafter there was something strange in his voice. Although steady, it was deep with mourning, and of a quality beyond oration or tears.

"Keep 'er a little more south, Billie," said he.

"A little more south, sir," said the oiler in the stern.

A seat in his boat was not unlike a seat upon a bucking broncho, and by the same token a broncho is not much smaller. The craft pranced and reared and plunged like an animal. As each wave came, and she rose for it, she seemed like a horse making at a fence outrageously high. The manner of her scramble over these walls of water is a mystic thing, and, moreover, at the top of them were ordinarily these problems in white water, the foam racing down from the summit of each wave requiring a new leap, and a leap from the air. Then, after scornfully bumping a crest, she would slide and race and splash down a long incline, and arrive bobbing and nodding in front of the next menace.

A singular disadvantage of the sea lies in the fact that after successfully surmounting one wave you discover that there is another behind it just as important and just as nervously anxious to do something effective in the way of swamping boats. In a ten-foot dinghy one can get an idea of the resources of the sea in the line of waves that is not probable to the average experience which is never at sea in a dinghy. As each slaty wall of water approached, it shut all else from the view of the men in the boat, and it was not difficult to imagine that this particular wave was the final outburst of the ocean, the last effort of the grim water. There was a terrible grace in the move of the waves, and they came in silence, save for the snarling of the crests.

In the wan light the faces of the men must have been grey. Their eyes must have glinted in strange ways as they gazed steadily astern. Viewed from a balcony, the whole thing would doubtless have been weirdly picturesque. But the men in the boat had no time to see it, and if they had had leisure, there were other things to occupy their minds. The sun swung steadily up the sky, and they knew it was broad day because the colour of the sea changed from slate to emerald green streaked with amber lights, and the foam was like tumbling snow. The process of the breaking day was unknown to them. They were aware only of this effect upon the colour of the waves that rolled toward them.

In disjointed sentences the cook and the correspondent argued as to the difference between a life-saving station and a house of refuge. The cook had said: "There's a house of refuge just north of the Mosquito Inlet Light, and as soon as they see us they'll come off in their boat and pick us up."

"As soon as who see us?" said the correspondent.

"The crew," said the cook.

"Houses of refuge don't have crews," said the correspondent. "As I understand them, they are only places where clothes and grub are stored for the benefit of shipwrecked people. They don't carry crews."

"Oh, yes, they do," said the cook.

"No, they don't," said the correspondent.

"Well, we're not there yet, anyhow," said the oiler, in the stern.

"Well," said the cook, "perhaps it's not a house of refuge that I'm thinking of as being near Mosquito Inlet Light; perhaps it's a life-saving station."

"We're not there yet," said the oiler in the stern.

## II

As the boat bounced from the top of each wave the wind tore through the hair of the hatless men, and as the craft plopped her stern down again the spray slashed past them. The crest of each of these waves was a hill, from the top of which the men surveyed for a moment a broad tumultuous expanse, shining and wind-riven. It was probably splendid, it was probably glorious, this play of the free sea, wild with lights of emerald and white and amber.

"Bully good thing it's an on-shore wind," said the cook. "If not, where would we be? Wouldn't have a show."

"That's right," said the correspondent.

The busy oiler nodded his assent.

Then the captain, in the bow, chuckled in a way that expressed humour, contempt, tragedy, all in one. "Do you think we've got much of a show now, boys?" said he.

Whereupon the three were silent, save for a trifle of hemming and hawing. To express any particular optimism at this time they felt to be childish and stupid, but they all doubtless possessed this sense of the situation in their minds. A young man thinks doggedly at such times. On the other hand, the ethics of their condition was decidedly against any open suggestion of hopelessness. So they were silent.

"Oh, well," said the captain, soothing his children, "we'll get ashore all right."

But there was that in his tone which made them think; so the oiler quoth, "Yes! if this wind holds."

The cook was bailing. "Yes! if we don't catch hell in the surf."

Canton-flannel gulls flew near and far. Sometimes they sat down on the sea, near patches of brown seaweed that rolled over the waves with a movement like carpets on a line in a gale. The birds sat comfortably in groups, and they were envied by some in the dinghy, for the wrath of the sea was no more to them than it was to a covey of prairie chickens a thousand miles inland. Often they came very close and stared at the men with black bead-like eyes. At these times they were uncanny and sinister in their unblinking scrutiny, and the men hooted angrily at them, telling them to be gone. One came, and evidently decided to alight on the top of the captain's head. The bird flew parallel to the boat and did not circle, but made short sidelong jumps in the air in chicken-fashion. His

black eyes were wistfully fixed upon the captain's head. "Ugly brute," said the oiler to the bird. "You look as if you were made with a jackknife." The cook and the correspondent swore darkly at the creature. The captain naturally wished to knock it away with the end of the heavy painter, but he did not dare do it, because anything resembling an emphatic gesture would have capsized this freighted boat; and so, with his open hand, the captain gently and carefully waved the gull away. After it had been discouraged from the pursuit the captain breathed easier on account of his hair, and others breathed easier because the bird struck their minds at this time as being somehow gruesome and ominous.

In the meantime the oiler and the correspondent rowed. And also they rowed. They sat together in the same seat, and each rowed an oar. Then the oiler took both oars; then the correspondent took both oars; then the oiler; then the correspondent. They rowed and they rowed. The very ticklish part of the business was when the time came for the reclining one in the stern to take his turn at the oars. By the very last star of truth, it is easier to steal eggs from under a hen than it was to change seats in the dinghy. First the man in the stern slid his hand along the thwart and moved with care, as if he were of Sevres. Then the man in the rowing-seat slid his hand along the other thwart. It was all done with the most extraordinary care. As the two sidled past each other, the whole party kept watchful eyes on the coming wave, and the captain cried: "Look out, now! Steady, there!"

The brown mats of seaweed that appeared from time to time were like islands, bits of earth. They were travelling, apparently, neither one way nor the other. They were, to all intents, stationary. They informed the men in the boat that it was making progress slowly toward the land.

The captain, rearing cautiously in the bow after the dinghy soared on a great swell, said that he had seen the lighthouse at Mosquito Inlet. Presently the cook remarked that he had seen it. The correspondent was at the oars then, and for some reason he too wished to look at the lighthouse; but his back was toward the far shore, and the waves were important, and for some time he could not seize an opportunity to turn his head. But at last there came a wave more gentle than the others, and when at the crest of it he swiftly scoured the western horizon.

"See it?" said the captain.

"No," said the correspondent, slowly, "I didn't see anything."

"Look again," said the captain. He pointed. "It's exactly in that direction."

At the top of another wave the correspondent did as he was bid, and this time his eyes chanced on a small, still thing on the edge of the swaying horizon. It was precisely like the point of a pin. It took an anxious eye to find a lighthouse so tiny.

"Think we'll make it, Captain?"

"If this wind holds and the boat don't swamp, we can't do much else," said the captain.

The little boat, lifted by each towering sea and splashed viciously by the crests, made progress that in the absence of seaweed was not apparent to those in her. She seemed just a wee thing wallowing, miraculously top up, at the mercy of five oceans. Occasionally a great spread of water, like white flames, swarmed into her.

"Bail her, Cook," said the captain, serenely.

"All right, Captain," said the cheerful cook.

### III

It would be difficult to describe the subtle brotherhood of men that was here established on the seas. No one said that it was so. No one mentioned it. But it dwelt in the boat, and each man felt it warm him. They were a captain, an oiler, a cook, and a correspondent, and they were friends—friends in a more curiously iron-bound degree than may be common. The hurt captain, lying against the water-jar in the bow, spoke always in a low voice and calmly; but he could never command a more ready and swiftly obedient crew than the motley three of the dinghy. It was more than a mere recognition of what was best for common safety. There was surely in it a quality that was personal and heart-felt. And after this devotion to the commander of the boat, there was this comradeship, that the correspondent, for instance, who had been taught to be cynical of men, knew even at the time was the best experience of his life. But no one said that it was so. No one mentioned it.

"I wish we had a sail," remarked the captain. "We might try my overcoat on the end of an oar, and give you two boys a chance to rest." So the cook and the correspondent held the mast and spread wide the overcoat; the oiler steered; and the little boat made good way with her new rig. Sometimes the oiler had to scull sharply to keep a sea from breaking into the boat, but otherwise sailing was a success.

Meanwhile the lighthouse had been growing slowly larger. It had now almost assumed colour, and appeared like a little grey shadow on the sky. The man at the oars could not be prevented from turning his head rather often to try for a glimpse of this little grey shadow.

At last, from the top of each wave, the men in the tossing boat could see land. Even as the lighthouse was an upright shadow on the sky, this land seemed but a long black shadow on the sea. It certainly was thinner than paper. "We must be about opposite New Smyrna," said the cook, who had coasted this shore often in schooners. "Captain, by the way, I believe they abandoned that life-saving station there about a year ago."

"Did they?" said the captain.

The wind slowly died away. The cook and the correspondent were not now obliged to slave in order to hold high the oar. But the waves continued their old impetuous swooping at the dinghy, and the little craft, no longer under way, struggled woundily over them. The oiler or the correspondent took the oars again.

Shipwrecks are apropos of nothing. If men could only train for them and have them occur when the men had reached pink condition, there would be less drowning at sea. Of the four in the dinghy none had slept any time worth mentioning for two days and two nights previous to embarking in the dinghy, and in the excitement of clambering about the deck of a foundering ship they had also forgotten to eat heartily.

For these reasons, and for others, neither the oiler nor the correspondent was fond of rowing at this time. The correspondent wondered ingenuously how in the name of all that was sane could there be people who thought it amusing to row a boat. It was not an amusement; it was a diabolical punishment, and even a genius of mental aberrations could never conclude that it was anything but a horror to the muscles and a crime against the back. He mentioned to the boat in general how the amusement of rowing struck him, and the weary-faced oiler smiled in full sympathy. Previously to the foundering, by the way, the oiler had worked a double watch in the engine-room of the ship.

"Take her easy now, boys," said the captain. "Don't spend yourselves. If we have to run a surf you'll need all your strength, because we'll sure have to swim for it. Take your time."

Slowly the land arose from the sea. From a black line it became a line of black and a line of white—trees and sand. Finally the cap-

tain said that he could make out a house on the shore. "That's the house of refuge, sure," said the cook. "They'll see us before long, and come out after us."

The distant lighthouse reared high. "The keeper ought to be able to make us out now, if he's looking through a glass," said the captain. "He'll notify the life-saving people."

"None of those other boats could have got ashore to give word of this wreck," said the oiler, in a low voice, "else the life-boat would be out hunting us."

Slowly and beautifully the land loomed out of the sea. The wind came again. It had veered from the north-east to the south-east. Finally a new sound struck the ears of the men in the boat. It was the low thunder of the surf on the shore. "We'll never be able to make the lighthouse now," said the captain. "Swing her head a little more north, Billie."

"A little more north, sir," said the oiler.

Whereupon the little boat turned her nose once more down the wind, and all but the oarsman watched the shore grow. Under the influence of this expansion doubt and direful apprehension were leaving the minds of the men. The management of the boat was still most absorbing, but it could not prevent a quiet cheerfulness. In an hour, perhaps, they would be ashore.

Their backbones had become thoroughly used to balancing in the boat, and they now rode this wild colt of a dinghy like circus men. The correspondent thought that he had been drenched to the skin, but happening to feel in the top pocket of his coat, he found therein eight cigars. Four of them were soaked with sea-water; four were perfectly scatheless. After a search, somebody produced three dry matches; and thereupon the four waifs rode impudently in their little boat and, with an assurance of an impending rescue shining in their eyes, puffed at the big cigars, and judged well and ill of all men. Everybody took a drink of water.

#### IV

"Cook," remarked the captain, "there don't seem to be any signs of life about your house of refuge."

"No," replied the cook. "Funny they don't see us!"

A broad stretch of lowly coast lay before the eyes of the men. It was of low dunes topped with dark vegetation. The roar of the surf was plain, and sometimes they could see the white lip of a wave as



it spun up the beach. A tiny house was blocked out black upon the sky. Southward, the slim lighthouse lifted its little grey length.

Tide, wind, and waves were swinging the dinghy northward. "Funny they don't see us," said the men.

The surf's roar was here dulled, but its tone was nevertheless thunderous and mighty. As the boat swam over the great rollers the men sat listening to this roar. "We'll swamp sure," said everybody.

It is fair to say here that there was not a life-saving station within twenty miles in either direction; but the men did not know this fact, and in consequence they made dark and opprobrious remarks concerning the eyesight of the nation's life-savers. Four scowling men sat in the dinghy and surpassed records in the invention of epithets.

"Funny they don't see us."

The light-heartedness of a former time had completely faded. To their sharpened minds it was easy to conjure pictures of all kinds of incompetency and blindness and, indeed, cowardice. There was the shore of the populous land, and it was bitter and bitter to them that from it came no sign.

"Well," said the captain, ultimately, "I suppose we'll have to make a try for ourselves. If we stay out here too long, we'll none of us have strength left to swim after the boat swamps."

And so the oiler, who was at the oars, turned the boat straight for the shore. There was a sudden tightening of muscles. There was some thinking.

"If we don't all get ashore," said the captain—"if we don't all get ashore, I suppose you fellows know where to send news of my finish?"

They then briefly exchanged some addresses and admonitions. As for the reflections of the men, there was a great deal of rage in them. Perchance they might be formulated thus: "If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees? Was I brought here merely to have my nose dragged away as I was about to nibble the sacred cheese of life? It is preposterous. If this old ninny-woman, Fate, cannot do better than this, she should be deprived of the management of men's fortunes. She is an old hen who knows not her intention. If she has decided to drown me, why did she not do it in the beginning and save me all this trouble? The

whole affair is absurd.—But no; she cannot mean to drown me. She dare not drown me. She cannot drown me. Not after all this work." Afterward the man might have had an impulse to shake his fist at the clouds. "Just you drown me, now, and then hear what I call you!"

The billows that came at this time were more formidable. They seemed always just about to break and roll over the little boat in a turmoil of foam. There was a preparatory and long growl in the speech of them. No mind unused to the sea would have concluded that the dinghy could ascend these sheer heights in time. The shore was still afar. The oiler was a wily surferman. "Boys," he said swiftly, "she won't live three minutes more, and we're too far out to swim. Shall I take her to sea again, Captain?"

"Yes, go ahead!" said the captain.

This oiler, by a series of quick miracles and fast and steady oarsmanship, turned the boat in the middle of the surf and took her safely to sea again.

There was a considerable silence as the boat bumped over the furrowed sea to deeper water. Then somebody in gloom spoke: "Well, anyhow, they must have seen us from the shore by now."

The gulls went in slanting flight up the wind toward the grey, desolate east. A squall, marked by dingy clouds and clouds brick-red like smoke from a burning building, appeared from the south-east.

"What do you think of those life-saving people? Ain't they peaches?"

"Funny they haven't seen us."

"Maybe they think we're out here for sport! Maybe they think we're fishin'. Maybe they think we're damned fools."

It was a long afternoon. A changed tide tried to force them southward, but wind and wave said northward. Far ahead, where coastline, sea, and sky formed their mighty angle, there were little dots which seemed to indicate a city on the shore.

"St. Augustine?"

The captain shook his head. "Too near Mosquito Inlet."

And the oiler rowed, and then the correspondent rowed; then the oiler rowed. It was a weary business. The human back can become the seat of more aches and pains than are registered in books for the composite anatomy of a regiment. It is a limited area, but it can become the theatre of innumerable muscular conflicts, tangles, wrenches, knots, and other comforts.

"Did you ever like to row, Billie?" asked the correspondent.

"No," said the oiler, "hang it!"

When one exchanged the rowing-seat for a place in the bottom of the boat, he suffered a bodily depression that caused him to be careless of everything save an obligation to wiggle one finger. There was cold sea-water swashing to and fro in the boat, and he lay in it. His head, pillowed on a thwart, was within an inch of the swirl of a wave-crest, and sometimes a particularly obstreperous sea came in-board and drenched him once more. But these matters did not annoy him. It is almost certain that if the boat had capsized he would have tumbled comfortably out upon the ocean as if he felt sure that it was a great soft mattress.

"Look! There's a man on the shore!"

"Where?"

"There! See 'im? See 'im?"

"Yes, sure! He's walking along."

"Now he's stopped. Look! He's facing us!"

"He's waving at us!"

"So he is! By thunder!"

"Ah, now we're all right! Now we're all right! There'll be a boat out here for us in half an hour."

"He's going on. He's running. He's going up to that house there."

The remote beach seemed lower than the sea, and it required a searching glance to discern the little black figure. The captain saw a floating stick, and they rowed to it. A bath towel was by some weird chance in the boat, and, tying this on the stick, the captain waved it. The oarsman did not dare turn his head, so he was obliged to ask questions.

"What's he doing now?"

"He's standing still again. He's looking, I think.—There he goes again—toward the house.—Now he's stopped again."

"Is he waving at us?"

"No, not now; he was, though."

"Look! There comes another man!"

"He's running."

"Look at him go, would you!"

"Why, he's on a bicycle. Now he's met the other man. They're both waving at us. Look!"

"There comes something up the beach."

"What the devil is that thing?"

"Why, it looks like a boat."

"Why, certainly, it's a boat."

"No, it's on wheels."

"Yes, so it is. Well, that must be the life-boat. They drag them along shore on a wagon."

"That's the life-boat, sure."

"No, by God, it's—it's an omnibus."

"I tell you it's a life-boat."

"It is not! It's an omnibus. I can see it plain. See? One of these big hotel omnibuses."

"By thunder, you're right. It's an omnibus, sure as fate. What do you suppose they are doing with an omnibus? Maybe they are going around collecting the life-crew, hey?"

"That's it, likely. Look! There's a fellow waving a little black flag. He's standing on the steps of the omnibus. There come those other two fellows. Now they're all talking together. Look at the fellow with the flag. Maybe he ain't waving it!"

"That ain't a flag, is it? That's his coat. Why, certainly, that's his coat."

"So it is; it's his coat. He's taken it off and is waving it around his head. But would you look at him swing it!"

"Oh, say, there isn't any life-saving station there. That's just a winter-resort hotel omnibus that has brought over some of the boarders to see us drown."

"What's that idiot with the coat mean? What's he signalling, anyhow?"

"It looks as if he were trying to tell us to go north. There must be a life-saving station up there."

"No; he thinks we're fishing. Just giving us a merry hand. See? Ah, there, Willie!"

"Well, I wish I could make something out of those signals. What do you suppose he means?"

"He don't mean anything; he's just playing."

"Well, if he'd just signal us to try the surf again, or to go to sea and wait, or go north, or go south, or go to hell, there would be some reason in it. But look at him! He just stands there and keeps his coat revolving like a wheel. The ass!"

"There come more people."

"Now there's quite a mob. Look! Isn't that a boat?"

"Where? Oh, I see where you mean. No, that's no boat."

"That fellow is still waving his coat."

"He must think we like to see him do that. Why don't he quit it? It don't mean anything."

"I don't know. I think he is trying to make us go north. It must be that there's a life-saving station there somewhere."

"Say, he ain't tired yet. Look at 'im wave!"

"Wonder how long he can keep that up. He's been revolving his coat ever since he caught sight of us. He's an idiot. Why aren't they getting men to bring a boat out? A fishing-boat—one of those big yawls—could come out here all right. Why don't he do something?"

"Oh, it's all right now."

"They'll have a boat out here for us in less than no time, now that they've seen us."

A faint yellow tone came into the sky over the low land. The shadows on the sea slowly deepened. The wind bore coldness with it, and the men began to shiver.

"Holy smoke!" said one, allowing his voice to express his impious mood, "if we keep on monkeying out here! If we've got to flounder out here all night!"

"Oh, we'll never have to stay here all night! Don't you worry. They've seen us now, and it won't be long before they'll come chasing out after us."

The shore grew dusky. The man waving a coat blended gradually into this gloom, and it swallowed in the same manner the omnibus and the group of people. The spray, when it dashed uproariously over the side, made the voyagers shrink and swear like men who were being branded.

"I'd like to catch the chump who waved the coat. I feel like socking him one, just for luck."

"Why? What did he do?"

"Oh, nothing, but then he seemed so damned cheerful."

In the meantime the oiler rowed, and then the correspondent rowed, and then the oiler rowed. Grey-faced and bowed forward, they mechanically, turn by turn, plied the leaden oars. The form of the lighthouse had vanished from the southern horizon, but finally a pale star appeared, just lifting from the sea. The streaked saffron in the west passed before the all-merging darkness, and the sea to the east was black. The land had vanished, and was expressed only by the low and drear thunder of the surf.

"If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees? Was I brought here merely to have my nose dragged away as I was about to nibble the sacred cheese of life?"

The patient captain, drooped over the water-jar, was sometimes obliged to speak to the oarsman.

"Keep her head up! Keep her head up!"

"Keep her head up, sir." The voices were weary and low.

This was surely a quiet evening. All save the oarsman lay heavily and listlessly in the boat's bottom. As for him, his eyes were just capable of noting the tall black waves that swept forward in a most sinister silence, save for an occasional subdued growl of a crest.

The cook's head was on a thwart, and he looked without interest at the water under his nose. He was deep in other scenes. Finally he spoke. "Billie," he murmured, dreamfully, "what kind of pie do you like best?"

## V

"Pie?" said the oiler and the correspondent, agitatedly. "Don't talk about those things, blast you!"

"Well," said the cook, "I was just thinking about ham sandwiches and—"

A night on the sea in an open boat is a long night. As darkness settled finally, the shine of the light, lifting from the sea in the south, changed to full gold. On the northern horizon a new light appeared, a small bluish gleam on the edge of the waters. These two lights were the furniture of the world. Otherwise there was nothing but waves.

Two men huddled in the stern, and distances were so magnificent in the dinghy that the rower was enabled to keep his feet partly warm by thrusting them under his companions. Their legs indeed extended far under the rowing-seat until they touched the feet of the captain forward. Sometimes, despite the efforts of the tired oarsman, a wave came piling into the boat, an icy wave of the night, and the chilling water soaked them anew. They would twist their bodies for a moment and groan, and sleep the dead sleep once more, while the water in the boat gurgled about them as the craft rocked.

The plan of the oiler and the correspondent was for one to row until he lost the ability, and then arouse the other from his sea-water couch in the bottom of the boat.

The oiler plied the oars until his head drooped forward and the overpowering sleep blinded him; and he rowed yet afterward. Then he touched a man in the bottom of the boat, and called his name. "Will you spell me for a little while?" he said, meekly.

"Sure, Billie," said the correspondent, awaking and dragging himself to a sitting position. They exchanged places carefully, and the oiler, cuddling down in the seawater at the cook's side, seemed to go to sleep instantly.

The particular violence of the sea had ceased. The waves came without snarling. The obligation of the man at the oars was to keep the boat headed so that the tilt of the rollers would not capsize her, and to preserve her from filling when the crests rushed past. The black waves were silent and hard to be seen in the darkness. Often one was almost upon the boat before the oarsman was aware.

In a low voice the correspondent addressed the captain. He was not sure that the captain was awake, although this iron man seemed to be always awake. "Captain, shall I keep her making for that light north, sir?"

The same steady voice answered him. "Yes. Keep it about two points off the port bow."

The cook had tied a life-belt around himself in order to get even the warmth which this clumsy cork contrivance could donate, and he seemed almost stove-like when a rower, whose teeth invariably chattered wildly as soon as he ceased his labour, dropped down to sleep.

The correspondent, as he rowed, looked down at the two men sleeping underfoot. The cook's arm was around the oiler's shoulders, and, with their fragmentary clothing and haggard faces, they were the babes of the sea—a grotesque rendering of the old babes in the wood.

Later he must have grown stupid at his work, for suddenly there was a growling of water, and a crest came with a roar and a swash into the boat, and it was a wonder that it did not set the cook afloat in his life-belt. The cook continued to sleep, but the oiler sat up, blinking his eyes and shaking with the new cold.

"Oh, I'm awful sorry, Billie," said the correspondent, contritely.

"That's all right, old boy," said the oiler, and lay down again and was asleep.

Presently it seemed that even the captain dozed, and the correspondent thought that he was the one man afloat on all the oceans. The wind had a voice as it came over the waves, and it was sadder than the end.

There was a long, loud swishing astern of the boat, and a gleaming trail of phosphorescence, like blue flame, was furrowed on the black waters. It might have been made by a monstrous knife.

Then there came a stillness, while the correspondent breathed with open mouth and looked at the sea.

Suddenly there was another swish and another long flash of bluish light, and this time it was alongside the boat, and might almost have been reached with an oar. The correspondent saw an enormous fin speed like a shadow through the water, hurling the crystalline spray and leaving the long glowing trail.

The correspondent looked over his shoulder at the captain. His face was hidden, and he seemed to be asleep. He looked at the babes of the sea. They certainly were asleep. So, being bereft of sympathy, he leaned a little way to one side and swore softly into the sea.

But the thing did not then leave the vicinity of the boat. Ahead or astern, on one side or the other, at intervals long or short, fled the long sparkling streak, and there was to be heard the *whirroo* of the dark fin. The speed and power of the thing was greatly to be admired. It cut the water like a gigantic and keen projectile.

The presence of this biding thing did not affect the man with the same horror that it would if he had been a picnicker. He simply looked at the sea dully and swore in an undertone.

Nevertheless, it is true that he did not wish to be alone with the thing. He wished one of his companions to awake by chance and keep him company with it. But the captain hung motionless over the water-jar, and the oiler and the cook in the bottom of the boat were plunged in slumber.

## VI

"If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?"



During this dismal night, it may be remarked that a man would conclude that it was really the intention of the seven mad gods to drown him, despite the abominable injustice of it. For it was certainly an abominable injustice to drown a man who had worked so hard, so hard. The man felt it would be a crime most unnatural. Other people had drowned at sea since galleys swarmed with painted sails, but still—

When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with his jeers.

Then, if there be no tangible thing to hoot, he feels, perhaps, the desire to confront a personification and indulge in pleas, bowed to one knee, and with hands suppliant, saying, "Yes, but I love myself."

A high cold star on a winter's night is the word he feels that she says to him. Thereafter he knows the pathos of his situation.

The men in the dinghy had not discussed these matters, but each had, no doubt, reflected upon them in silence and according to his mind. There was seldom any expression upon their faces save the general one of complete weariness. Speech was devoted to the business of the boat.

To chime the notes of his emotion, a verse mysteriously entered the correspondent's head. He had even forgotten this verse, but it suddenly was in his mind.

*A soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers;  
There was lack of woman's nursing, there was dearth of woman's tears:  
But a comrade stood beside him, and he took that comrade's hand,  
And he said, "I never more shall see my own, my native land."*

In his childhood the correspondent had been made acquainted with the fact that a soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers, but he had never regarded the fact as important. Myriads of his school-fellows had informed him of the soldier's plight, but the dinning had naturally ended by making him perfectly indifferent. He had never considered it his affair that a soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers, nor had it appeared to him as a matter for sorrow. It was less to him than the breaking of a pencil's point.

Now, however, it quaintly came to him as a human, living thing. It was no longer merely a picture of a few throes in the breast of a poet, meanwhile drinking tea and warming his feet at the grate; it was an actuality—stern, mournful, and fine.

The correspondent plainly saw the soldier. He lay on the sand with his feet out straight and still. While his pale left hand was upon his chest in an attempt to thwart the going of his life, the blood came between his fingers. In the far Algerian distance, a city of low square forms was set against a sky that was faint with the last sunset hues. The correspondent, plying the oars and dreaming of the slow and slower movements of the lips of the soldier, was moved by a profound and perfectly impersonal comprehension. He was sorry for the soldier of the Legion who lay dying in Algiers.

The thing which had followed the boat and waited had evidently grown bored at the delay. There was no longer to be heard the splash of the cutwater, and there was no longer the flame of the long trail. The light in the north still glimmered, but it was apparently no nearer to the boat. Sometimes the boom of the surf rang in the correspondent's ears, and he turned the craft seaward then and rowed harder. Southward, someone had evidently built a watch fire on the beach. It was too low and too far to be seen, but it made a shimmering, roseate reflection upon the bluff in back of it, and this could be discerned from the boat. The wind came stronger, and sometimes a wave suddenly raged out like a mountain cat, and there was to be seen the sheen and sparkle of a broken crest.

The captain, in the bow, moved on his water-jar and sat erect. "Pretty long night," he observed to the correspondent. He looked at the shore. "Those life-saving people take their time."

"Did you see that shark playing around?"

"Yes. I saw him. He was a big fellow, all right."

"Wish I had known you were awake."

Later the correspondent spoke into the bottom of the boat. "Billie!" There was a slow and gradual distanglement. "Billie, will you spell me?"

"Sure," said the oiler.

As soon as the correspondent touched the cold, comfortable seawater in the bottom of the boat and had huddled close to the cook's life-belt he was deep in sleep, despite the fact that his teeth played all the popular airs. This sleep was so good to him that it was but a moment before he heard a voice call his name in a tone that demonstrated the last stages of exhaustion. "Will you spell me?"

"Sure, Billie."

The light in the north had mysteriously vanished, but the correspondent took his course from the wide-awake captain.

Later in the night they took the boat farther out to sea, and the captain directed the cook to take one oar at the stern and keep the boat facing the seas. He was to call out if he should hear the thunder of the surf. This plan enabled the oiler and the correspondent to get respite together. "We'll give those boys a chance to get into shape again," said the captain. They curled down and, after a few preliminary chatterings and trembles, slept once more the dead sleep. Neither knew they had bequeathed to the cook the company of another shark, or perhaps the same shark.

As the boat caroused on the waves, spray occasionally bumped over the side and gave them a fresh soaking, but this had no power to break their repose. The ominous slash of the wind and the water affected them as it would have affected mummies.

"Boys," said the cook, with the notes of every reluctance in his voice, "she's drifted in pretty close. I guess one of you had better take her to sea again." The correspondent, aroused, heard the crash of the toppled crests.

As he was rowing, the captain gave him some whiskey-and-water, and this steadied the chills out of him. "If I ever get ashore and anybody shows me even a photograph of an oar—"

At last there was a short conversation.

"Billie!—Billie, will you spell me?"

"Sure," said the oiler.

## VII

When the correspondent again opened his eyes, the sea and the sky were each of the grey hue of the dawning. Later, carmine and gold was painted upon the waters. The morning appeared finally, in its splendour, with a sky of pure blue, and the sunlight flamed on the tips of the waves.

On the distant dunes were set many little black cottages, and a tall white windmill reared above them. No man, nor dog, nor bicycle appeared on the beach. The cottages might have formed a deserted village.

The voyagers scanned the shore. A conference was held in the boat. "Well," said the captain, "if no help is coming, we might better try a run through the surf right away. If we stay out here much longer we will be too weak to do anything for ourselves at all." The

others silently acquiesced in this reasoning. The boat was headed for the beach. The correspondent wondered if none ever ascended the tall wind-tower, and if then they never looked seaward. This tower was giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent. It is, perhaps, plausible that a man in this situation, impressed with the unconcern of the universe, should see the innumerable flaws of his life, and have them taste wickedly in his mind, and wish for another chance. A distinction between right and wrong seems absurdly clear to him, then, in his new ignorance of the grave-edge, and he understands that if he were given another opportunity he would mend his conduct and his words, and be better and brighter during an introduction or at tea.

"Now, boys," said the captain, "she is going to swamp sure. All we can do is to work her in as far as possible, and then when she swamps, pile out and scramble for the beach. Keep cool now, and don't jump until she swamps sure."

The oiler took the oars. Over his shoulders he scanned the surf. "Captain," he said, "I think I'd better bring her about and keep her head-on to the seas and back her in."

"All right, Billie," said the captain. "Back her in." The oiler swung the boat then, and, seated in the stern, the cook and the correspondent were obliged to look over their shoulders to contemplate the lonely and indifferent shore.

The monstrous inshore rollers heaved the boat high until the men were again enabled to see the white sheets of water scudding up the slanted beach. "We won't get in very close," said the captain. Each time a man could wrest his attention from the rollers, he turned his glance toward the shore, and in the expression of the eyes during this contemplation there was a singular quality. The correspondent, observing the others, knew that they were not afraid, but the full meaning of their glances was shrouded.

As for himself, he was too tired to grapple fundamentally with the fact. He tried to coerce his mind into thinking of it, but the mind was dominated at this time by the muscles, and the muscles said they did not care. It merely occurred to him that if he should drown it would be a shame.

There were be no hurried words, no pallor, no plain agitation. The men simply looked at the shore. "Now, remember to get well clear of the boat when you jump," said the captain.

Seaward the crest of a roller suddenly fell with a thunderous crash, and the long white comber came roaring down upon the boat.

"Steady now," said the captain. The men were silent. They turned their eyes from the shore to the comber and waited. The boat slid up the incline, leaped at the furious top, bounced over it, and swung down the long back of the wave. Some water had been shipped, and the cook bailed it out.

But the next crest crashed also. The tumbling, boiling flood of white water caught the boat and whirled it almost perpendicular. Water swarmed in from all sides. The correspondent had his hands on the gunwale at this time, and when the water entered at that place he swiftly withdrew his fingers, as if he objected to wetting them.

The little boat, drunken with this weight of water, reeled and snuggled deeper into the sea.

"Bail her out, cook! Bail her out!" said the captain.

"All right, Captain," said the cook.

"Now, boys, the next one will do us for sure," said the oiler. "Mind to jump clear of the boat."

The third wave moved forward, huge, furious, implacable. It fairly swallowed the dinghy, and almost simultaneously the men tumbled into the sea. A piece of life-belt had lain in the bottom of the boat, and as the correspondent went overboard he held this to his chest with his left hand.

The January water was icy, and he reflected immediately that it was colder than he had expected to find it off the coast of Florida. This appeared to his dazed mind as a fact important enough to be noted at the time. The coldness of the water was sad; it was tragic. This fact was somehow mixed and confused with his opinion of his own situation, so that it seemed almost a proper reason for tears. The water was cold.

When he came to the surface he was conscious of little but the noisy water. Afterward he saw his companions in the sea. The oiler was ahead in the race. He was swimming strongly and rapidly. Off to the correspondent's left, the cook's great white and corked back bulged out of the water; and in the rear the captain was hanging with his one good hand to the keel of the overturned dinghy.

There is a certain immovable quality to a shore, and the correspondent wondered at it amid the confusion of the sea.

It seemed also very attractive; but the correspondent knew that it was a long journey, and he paddled leisurely. The piece of life-preserver lay under him, and sometimes he whirled down the incline of a wave as if he were on a hand-sled.

But finally he arrived at a place in the sea where travel was beset with difficulty. He did not pause swimming to inquire what manner of current had caught him, but there his progress ceased. The shore was set before him like a bit of scenery on a stage, and he looked at it and understood with his eyes each detail of it.

As the cook passed, much farther to the left, the captain was calling to him, "Turn over on your back, cook! Turn over on your back and use the oar."

"All right, sir." The cook turned on his back, and, paddling with an oar, went ahead as if he were a canoe.

Presently the boat also passed to the left of the correspondent, with the captain clinging with one hand to the keel. He would have appeared like a man raising himself to look over a board fence if it were not for the extraordinary gymnastics of the boat. The correspondent marvelled that the captain could still hold to it.

They passed on nearer to shore—the oiler, the cook, the captain—and following them went the water-jar, bouncing gaily over the seas.

The correspondent remained in the grip of this strange new enemy—a current. The shore, with its white slope of sand and its green bluff topped with little silent cottages, was spread like a picture before him. It was very near to him then, but he was impressed as one who, in a gallery, looks at a scene from Brittany or Holland.

He thought: "I am going to drown? Can it be possible? Can it be possible? Can it be possible?" Perhaps an individual must consider his own death to be the final phenomenon of nature.

But later a wave perhaps whirled him out of this small deadly current, for he found suddenly that he could again make progress toward the shore. Later still he was aware that the captain, clinging with one hand to the keel of the dinghy, had his face turned away from the shore and toward him, and was calling his name. "Come to the boat! Come to the boat!"

In his struggle to reach the captain and the boat, he reflected that when one gets properly wearied drowning must really be a comfortable arrangement—a cessation of hostilities accompanied

by a large degree of relief; and he was glad of it, for the main thing in his mind for some moments had been horror of the temporary agony. He did not wish to be hurt.

Presently he saw a man running along the shore. He was undressing with most remarkable speed. Coat, trousers, shirt, everything flew magically off him.

"Come to the boat!" called the captain.

"All right, Captain." As the correspondent paddled, he saw the captain let himself down to bottom and leave the boat. Then the correspondent performed his one little marvel of the voyage. A large wave caught him and flung him with ease and supreme speed completely over the boat and far beyond it. It struck him even then as an event in gymnastics and a true miracle of the sea. An overturned boat in the surf is not a plaything to a swimming man.

The correspondent arrived in water that reached only to his waist, but his condition did not enable him to stand for more than a moment. Each wave knocked him into a heap, and the undertow pulled at him.

Then he saw the man who had been running and undressing, and undressing and running, come bounding into the water. He dragged ashore the cook, and then waded toward the captain; but the captain waved him away and sent him to the correspondent. He was naked—naked as a tree in winter; but a halo was about his head, and he shone like a saint. He gave a strong pull, and a long drag, and a bully heave at the correspondent's hand. The correspondent, schooled in the minor formulae, said, "Thanks, old man." But suddenly the man cried, "What's that?" He pointed a swift finger. The correspondent said, "Go."

In the shallows, face downward, lay the oiler. His forehead touched sand that was periodically, between each wave, clear of the sea.

The correspondent did not know all that transpired afterward. When he achieved safe ground he fell, stiking the sand with each particular part of his body. It was as if he had dropped from a roof, but the thud was grateful to him.

It seemed that instantly the beach was populated with men with blankets, clothes, and flasks, and women with coffee pots and all the remedies sacred to their minds. The welcome of the land to the men from the sea was warm and generous; but a still and dripping shape was carried slowly up the beach, and the land's welcome for it could only be the different and sinister hospitality of the grave.

When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on the shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters.

There are many ways to think about this story, not only in its relationship to the experience that stimulated it, but also to the intricacies of it as an artistic work of fiction. By now you have had enough experience with the topic of truth and its relation to fiction to assess your own response to Crane's two accounts of the wreck of the *Commodore* and the hours at sea in the open boat. You may find some suggestions useful, however, for your extended considerations of the story.

One way for the whole class to work toward an understanding of the story is to have each working group take one of the seven sections of "The Open Boat." Each of you should first complete Log Entry 9 and then meet in your groups.

## Log Entry 9

Individually, make some notes, using the following as a guide.

1. Examine the literal aspect of your section. What happens? How is this action related to the action of the whole? (Note what went on before and after your section.) Write out a literal account of your section in a few sentences.
2. Look at the newspaper account ("Stephen Crane's Own Story") and see whether you can find anything there that provides specific information for your section. Did Crane use a phrase from the newspaper account that appears in the story? Jot down anything you find.
3. Imagine that you are a fifth passenger on the boat. What do you feel during this part of the experience? Toward the ocean? Toward the other people in the boat? Toward yourself? Do you identify with the correspondent? With another of the characters? Write this response in a few sentences. At what point (lines and phrases) are these feelings most intense? Jot them down.



## Collaborating

As a group, create a graphic. Reach some consensus as to the content and effect of your section of the story. To create your group graphic, follow these steps:

1. Sketch a graphic that captures the experience of your section. If there are shifts in time, setting, or mood, show them. You are not illustrating the action; you are representing it—literally, metaphorically, symbolically. Use color meaningfully; that is, decide which colors are most appropriate for which events or feelings.
2. Select words, phrases, whole lines from the story and weave them into your graphic to validate your interpretation.
3. Put the finishing touches on your graphic. Remember that your goals are
  - to convey the total impact and effect of your section.
  - to convey any changes in the section or shifts in your own understanding, or to show the static quality of your section.
  - to show how your section relates to the whole—how it furthers what preceded and leads to what follows.
4. Together, compose a statement (no more than a page) about your graphic, telling how it reflects the meaning and effect of your section. Write this on a single page, with your section number at the top.

If your classroom has a large bulletin board, you should clear it before you begin to share your graphics with the whole class. The Section I group should put its graphic up on the board, using it as a touchstone to talk about the interpretation of that section and ways that the newspaper account relates to it. Section I group members should field questions from the class. The written statement prepared by the group should then be placed on the board beside the graphic. Each section should follow in turn until the entire story is presented visually, with opportunities for questions and elaborations in group discussion.

## Work in Progress

Choose one or more of the following options to draft for your writing folder.

- Write an interpretive paper in which you examine the meaning and effect of your section in relation to the whole.
- Select a situation you were involved in, and write up an account of this situation for a newspaper. You might select a time when you were part of a closely knit group of people who cooperated to achieve an end, which may or may not have worked out as you planned. Or, you might select a time when you battled against the elements of nature.
- Remaining true to the factual aspects of the incident as described in your account, write a short story based on the event.

## Building Your Course Portfolio

Your portfolio will contain your final reflective essay from this chapter (guidelines are in the second Portfolio Entry below) and a selection of other writing from this chapter as well. It may also include graphics or works in other modes, such as video or film, if you used these media. It should represent your best work and provide the basis for an assessment of your work over the course of this chapter. You may want to review the introduction to the portfolio in the first chapter of this book.

## Portfolio Entry

Alone or with a partner, create a graphic portraying, with color, design, and words, how truth fits into your thinking about nonfiction and fiction, about art and life. Use quotations from and references to the stories, poems, and essays in this section as well as those you have read earlier. You may want to include references to other art forms—painting, music, dance, or film.

## Portfolio Entry

Explore the connections you see between art and life. Use your graphic and your own experiences to probe into this question. This should be an explorative, reflective essay, not an argumentative one. Ground your ideas in examples, but let your own ideas determine the organization and style of your paper. For this essay, because it should represent your best thinking and writing, use your writing group to test early drafts and give you feedback on whether you are communicating your ideas effectively.

## Revising and Editing

Using your log, works in progress from your writing folder, and portfolio entries, look at all the possibilities you have generated during your work in this chapter. Some pieces may well be finished already; other promising pieces may just be notations in your log. Because the portfolio represents your best work, the texts you want to share with others, your goal now is to select those pieces that you want to work on. You may want to include some of your log entries as well as the poems, memory writings, stories, or essays that you wrote. Include responses to different works of literature so that your portfolio will be representative of your writing in the whole chapter.



5

# Transforming Texts Through Performance

Theatergoers today generally expect plays to entertain them or to arouse their emotions in some way. Most modern plays do this by presenting real people in real situations. Although plays have not always been realistic, they have, throughout the history of drama, been concerned with representing our deepest emotions—both tragic and comic. Appearing first as the dramatization of ancient rituals closely associated with the worship of a god or gods, plays evolved through the comedies and tragedies of William Shakespeare, to the seemingly nonsensical Theater of the Absurd, to the realism of today. Today, we can expect to see plays from every age and of every kind; a seventeenth-century farce might be playing next door to a contemporary American musical. And next week, there might be a classical Greek drama opening on one of those stages.

Through their dramas, playwrights have taken stories old and new and transformed them into performances wherein the stories live anew each time they are performed. Playwrights have adapted and modified characters and events to fit their own time, audience, and/or purpose. When the plays are produced, directors often transform the texts further by changing settings or cutting lines. These transformations are part of the process of creation.

In this chapter, you will have opportunities to explore the idea of transformation through performance by reading a classic tragedy and some modern poetic transformations of the story. *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, a famous Greek play, tells a story of love and fear, of blindness and truth. Throughout the ages, playwrights and poets have transformed this story into texts that address the issues of their time against the background of universal concepts such as fate vs. free will and knowledge vs. blindness.

In reading this play, you will have opportunities to think about how we, as readers, create texts out of the texts of others. That is, as we read, we build the story in our minds, and the stories that each of us creates are slightly different because they depend in part on the background experiences we bring to the text. As a reader or a viewer of *Oedipus Rex*, we follow the events, knowing what the outcome will be. In addition to being an observer of the events, we may also take an active role in questioning the values, assumptions, judgments, or beliefs that we see acted out. But what we see and what we question are partially determined by who we are; that is one important element of interpretation.

We may also search out the stories that are not told in the text. For example, there are certainly stories within the story of Oedipus that are not dealt with in the play—Jocasta's story, their children's stories, and the stories of those people who must have been touched daily by the lives of the royal family. You will be encouraged to imagine those additional stories and to respond to the stories that modern poets have created to fill the gaps that the text leaves for us.

## Reading as a Performer

In addition to your response to the words of the play, another important element of interpretation is the means by which you experience the play. In this chapter, you will be reading the play from an angle that may not be familiar to you—as a performer. As you see it here, the play is merely words on the page. Yet you know that plays are more than that. When reading plays, you must stage them in “the theater of your mind,” using your imagination to see the action and to hear the dialogue. When plays are performed, directors and actors interpret the playwright's words, scenic designers set them on a meaningful stage, and audiences provide necessary feedback for live performers. The play on the page is like the tip of an iceberg; you see only one-tenth of what is there while the other nine-tenths remains submerged. As a performer, you will focus on the entire iceberg. We will call the remaining nine-tenths of the play the “subtext.” Subtext includes all of the nuances of meaning—pacing, tone, emphasis, silence, and blocking—that make a performance more than just written dialogues.

Before you read the play, spend a little time with the following exercises that will introduce you to some tools for reading as a performer.

### Reading the Subtext

In this section, improvisations will give you a chance to study the subtext of a playwright's words. As you know, the way that words are spoken is often more important than the words themselves. Try saying “I didn't mean it” in the following ways:

- as a small child who realizes he has hurt his sister's feelings
- as a sulky teenager forced to apologize to an adult
- as a surprised adult who discovers her 6-year-old son has taken something she said literally
- as a lover apologizing for saying or doing something hurtful

Even in saying those four words, you may have found yourself changing several aspects of the subtext—pacing, tone, emphasis, and silence. When you add actors on a stage, you also consider the grouping of those people—where they stand in relation to others. Actors and directors call that “blocking.” After brief explanations of each of these elements, you will get a chance to try them out in a scene.

The *pacing* or timing of a line or scene influences the mood or atmosphere. You could, of course, read lines as rapidly as possible to get through the play. Or, you could read them all the same way. But you wouldn't be reading as a performer if you did that. Performers and directors know that pacing is a powerful tool for revealing what is going on inside the actors in a situation at any given time. To better understand this, you might compare pacing to the tempo of a song. Even without the words, you know whether a song is upbeat or in a minor key. You know the mood the songwriter wants to express from the rhythm of the song before you even hear the lyrics. As you read lines of a play, be conscious of the effect you can create through varied pacing.

The sound of your voice expresses your attitude toward your subject—either a person or situation. This attitude is often called *tone*. Usually equated with emotions, tone may be described as happy, sad, jubilant, satiric, ironic, resigned, and so forth. For example, lines may be said in a laughing, menacing, matter-of-fact, or surprised way.

## Collaborating

Work in small groups of three or four.

1. Quickly brainstorm with two or three other students as many words as you can that describe emotions. All of you should write



down all of the words on a sheet of paper. See how many you can get in five minutes.

2. Check with other groups, either informally or in class discussion, to get words you didn't think of.

## Performance

Choose a partner and write a ten-line dialogue (five lines per person) that demonstrates two tones. For example, you might have an employer firing an employee who was consistently late to work. The employer will probably speak angrily while the employee may offer numerous excuses in a whining tone or agree with the employer in a resigned tone. Present your dialogues to the class and have others guess what tone you are using. (Be conscious, also, of the variations in pacing used by each pair. It is difficult to separate one aspect of the subtext from another, except for ease of description.)

Just as you will not read every line at the same rate or in the same tone, you should not read every word with the same degree of *emphasis*. Scenes should appear to be building to a climax, and your use of emphasis can create that tension. You can achieve emphasis with your voice through stressing particular words, varying your pace, and pausing at significant points.

## Performance

Read aloud the following speech by Cyrano de Bergerac. You may be familiar with the story of Cyrano from reading the play or from seeing Steve Martin's adaptation of the story in the film *Roxanne*. If you have read the play, you know that Cyrano is a seventeenth-century swordsman, poet, and philosopher who would seem to have everything. However, he feels no woman will ever love him

because of his huge nose. If you have seen only the film *Roxanne*, you still know how Cyrano feels about his “distinctive feature.”

As you read aloud, concentrate on building the emotional intensity with which the speech ends. You'll need to vary your tone, pace, and emphasis on individual words or phrases throughout the speech.

### **Cyrano de Bergerac**

*Edmond Rostand, translated by Brian Hooker*

My old friend, look at me,  
And tell me how much hope remains for me  
With this protuberance! Oh I have no more  
Illusions! Now and then bah! I may grow  
Tender, walking alone in the blue cool  
Of evening, through some garden fresh with flowers  
After the benediction of the rain;  
My poor big devil of a nose inhales  
April . . . and so I follow with my eyes  
Where some boy, with a girl upon his arm,  
Passes a patch of silver . . . and I feel  
Somehow, I wish I had a woman too,  
Walking with little steps under the moon,  
And holding my arm so, and smiling. Then  
I dream—and I forget. . . . And then I see  
The shadow of my profile on the wall!

In achieving emphasis, you probably used *silence*. Effectively employed, silence can give the audience time to react to a situation, emphasize the line that has just gone before, or provide suspense that prepares us for the next line. In comedy, silence also gives the audience a chance to laugh. Used properly, it signals or gives the audience permission to laugh at the previous line or situation. A poorly done comedy leaves silences that are either too long or too short. How do you know how long to be silent? In comedy, it's a matter of practice and a feeling for the timing. In drama, there is at least one guideline—the more powerful the preceding line or action, the longer the silence should be.

From your play-viewing experiences, you may already realize that the manner in which an actor moves, the gestures used, and

even the part of the stage on which he or she stands all indicate subtle qualities of the character and contribute to the meaning of the play. Although these movements and groupings should look natural, they have all been carefully planned as the directors and actors rehearse the *blocking*.

Before deciding on the blocking, a director sketches a rough design of the acting area, indicating entrances, exits, and placement of furniture or other objects. Given the shape of the stage where the play will be performed, directors plan each actor's steps with a purpose, visualizing the play as a series of stage pictures. Usually the director tries to make sure that the actor who is speaking gets the visual attention. To create a center of attention, directors can use some of the following techniques:

- Specify the actor's body position. Facing the audience calls more attention to the actor. Standing is usually more powerful than sitting, and sitting is more powerful than lying down.
- Direct the other actors to look at the center of interest. The audience's eyes will focus there, too.
- Put the speaking actor in a strong area of the stage. The drawing on the next page shows the nine areas of a proscenium arch stage and their relative strength. In drama terminology, "down" is closest to the audience, and "right" and "left" are from the actors' point of view. Some people feel that areas of the stage have emotional value and that certain scenes should be played in those areas. You need not follow slavishly these guidelines for areas of the stage—directors don't—but they are offered as a starting point. You could adapt them, too, if you're using a different setup where the audience is seated on three or four sides of the stage.

*Down Center:* climactic scenes where emotions explode

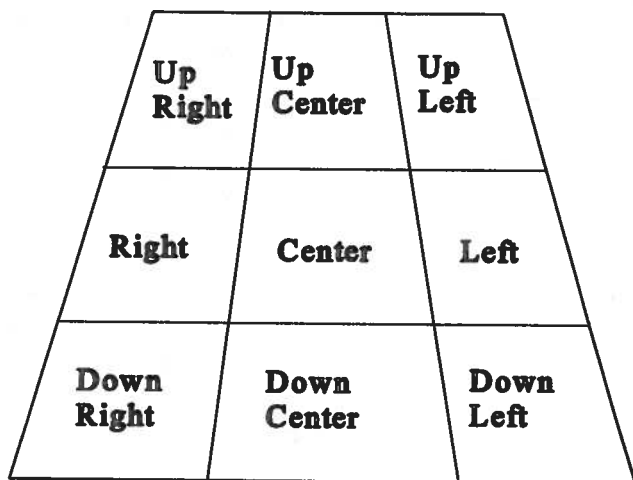
*Up Center:* scenes of dignity, royalty, or formality

*Down Right:* love scenes

*Down Left:* routine scenes, soliloquies, scenes to build tension

*Up Right:* eavesdropping or foreshadowing events

*Up Left:* horror scenes, ghosts, unreality



Just as the actor's stage position communicates certain meanings, so does the actor's relationship to other actors. For example, two people sitting on a couch will sit differently depending on whether they are gossips, lovers, or enemies. You will have an opportunity to experiment with some of these blocking ideas as you read *Oedipus Rex* and the poems that follow.

## *Reading Oedipus Rex*

*Oedipus Rex* explores ideas about a person's place in the universe and relationships between people. Sophocles, in the fashion of Greeks of his time, gives his words much weight. The play is mostly talk—even the goriest scenes take place offstage and are described by a messenger. To a modern reader, this may not seem very exciting, but we can experience the same recognition of human emotions—expectation, love, frustration, fear, and despair—as the fifth-century Greek audience did. Although they probably knew the basic story of the play before they came to the theater, they were interested in how the playwright would work out the hows and whys of the transformation of the traditional story. Sophocles wanted his viewers actually to *experience* the working out of fate as they understood that individuals cannot always know everything that they seek to know.

Reading a classic play presents some challenges and opportunities that reading a modern play does not. First, we must try to put

ourselves in the seats of audience members who lived nearly 2,500 years ago—a daunting task in itself. We cannot really know what they knew or think as they thought. In fact, our view of the Greek people has been shaped by historians and others who have read the writings they left behind and studied the culture, but we can never re-create their experience.

So, why do the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes continue to be read and performed? Because they offer us insights into our own character, just as they did the Greeks 2,500 years ago. Although cultural trappings, literary styles, and theaters may change, drama then, just as drama now, dealt with basic human emotions—jealousy, fear, pride, determination, love, revenge. Besides, we all want to see the working out of a good story. *Oedipus Rex* has it all.

In addition to its universal themes, you will probably notice some aspects of the play that are uniquely Greek. If you view these as opportunities for a modern director, rather than as obstacles for a modern reader, you may begin to understand why this play was popular in the theatrical contests of the time.

You may know that Greek drama, from which we get many of our own theatrical traditions, actually evolved from choral festivals, where groups of men sang or chanted odes (a form of lyric poem) to the god Dionysus. Eventually, the narrative element in such odes took precedence, becoming what we would recognize as a *play*. By Sophocles' time, three actors performed all of the speaking parts, assisted by the chorus, a remnant from the drama's origins, and possibly attended by a number of "extras." The chorus, led by a single person (the *choragos* in this translation), provided a commentary on the play's characters and actions, raising questions about what was to come and sending entreaties up to the gods. In *Oedipus Rex*, the chorus represents ordinary citizens, who comment on events as they unfold. All of the actors were mature men who wore masks and long robes. Their appearance, their relationship to the other characters, and their dialogue indicated whether they were playing the role of a man or a woman.

The traditional staging for a Greek play makes it ideal for classroom reading and performance because it doesn't require much movement. Consider a modern outdoor amphitheater or arena and the sound and lighting equipment it takes to stage a concert or play in such a setting—the modern technology required to amplify voices and movements, to make them bigger than life. Now think of

the same amphitheater 2,500 years ago, without such equipment. How might actors and chorus in Athens stage a drama, keeping the audience rooted for hours to unyielding stone benches?

Not all technology needs to be electronic to be effective. The Greeks created solutions from materials at hand. Plays were performed during the day so no special lighting effects were necessary. Actors wore shoes with built-up soles (*buskins*) that made them tall enough so that even those sitting farthest away could see them—and some of the audience members could be quite distant in amphitheaters that held up to 15,000!

To create the illusion of several different characters, the three professional actors had to change appearance and mannerisms for each character. To make the task easier, they wore masks. So that everyone could hear, masks were built with small megaphones to amplify the actor's voice. As you might expect, this heavy equipment made movement somewhat difficult.

Because the Greeks felt that drama should provide a heightened view of life, the slow movement added to the regal nature of the entire play. Actors spoke in poetry and their gestures were large and deliberate.

## The Story of the Play

The Greek audience probably would have known the story of Oedipus, which goes as follows. Because of a curse on his grandfather, Labdakos, all of his descendants are fated to die tragic deaths. Oedipus, doomed to kill his father and marry his mother, is taken away as an infant and left to die on a hillside. A kind-hearted shepherd takes him in and raises him as his own son. When the adolescent Oedipus hears of the prophecy, he runs away from the people he believes to be his mother and father. On the road he meets an elderly man with few attendants and, in a quarrel over the right-of-way, Oedipus kills the man and all except one attendant. Oedipus does not know that the dead man is King Laios, his real father. Oedipus goes on to Thebes, where the Sphinx has besieged the town, allowing no one to enter who cannot answer her riddle: What creature walks on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three at night, and moves most slowly when it has the most feet? Only Oedipus escapes death by knowing that the answer is "Man," who begins life by crawling, continues unsupported, and relies on a cane in old age. Saving the

city, Oedipus receives the throne from a grateful Thebes and, with it, as was the custom of the times, the recently widowed queen Iokaste. (In some translations, her name is spelled Jocasta.)

Many years later, the kingdom of Thebes is plague-ridden, and the Oracle at Delphi has said that the cause is the unsolved murder of King Laios. To lift the curse from the city, the murder must be avenged. Where do the necessary clues lie? Here in Thebes, the oracle indicates; their discovery requires no more than an attentive search.

## The First Reading

Reading the play aloud will require more than an average-length class period. Depending on your experience with reading plays, you might want to read through the first time primarily to get a sense of the story. If so, omit the choral odes, even though they are rich with emotion and reaction. They should not be omitted in the next reading of the play, but you can get an initial sense of the story without them on your first reading. Then, as you reread, try to determine what the choral odes add to the theme of the play.

When you read aloud *Oedipus Rex*, you might arrange your chairs to create a stage in the classroom. What will the acting area look like? Where will the entrances and exits be? There are brief directions at the beginning of the play, but you'll need to add details in your mind or your classroom as you read.

We have provided a few prompts—questions that may guide your initial reading. If you find it helpful to stop at points in your reading and spend a few minutes reflecting on the play in writing, look for the prompts at the end of the play (Log Entry 1) before you begin reading. If you prefer to read without interruption the first time, you may want to omit the prompts for now.

### **Oedipus Rex**

*Sophocles*

#### **Characters**

OEDIPUS, King of Thebes, supposed son of Polybos and Merope, King and Queen of Corinth

IOKASTE, wife of Oedipus and widow of the late King Laios

KREON, brother of Iokaste, a prince of Thebes

TEIRESIAS, a blind seer who serves Apollo

PRIEST

MESSENGER, from Corinth

SHEPHERD, former servant of Laios

SECOND MESSENGER, from the palace

CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS

CHORAGOS, leader of the Chorus

ANTIGONE and ISMENE, young daughters of Oedipus and Iokaste. They appear in the Exodus but do not speak.

SUPPLIANTS, GUARDS, SERVANTS

*THE SCENE. Before the palace of OEDIPUS, King of Thebes. A central door and two lateral doors open onto a platform which runs the length of the facade. On the platform, right and left, are altars; and three steps lead down into the orchestra, or chorus-ground. At the beginning of the action these steps are crowded by suppliants who have brought branches and chaplets of olive leaves and who sit in various attitudes of despair. OEDIPUS enters.*

### Prologue

OEDIPUS. My children, generations of the living

In the line of Kadmos,<sup>1</sup> nursed at his ancient hearth:

Why have you strewn yourselves before these altars

In supplication, with your boughs and garlands?

The breath of incense rises from the city

With a sound of prayer and lamentation.

5

Children,

I would not have you speak through messengers,

And therefore I have come myself to hear you—

I, Oedipus, who bear the famous name.

(To a PRIEST) You, there, since you are eldest in the company,

10

Speak for them all, tell me what preys upon you,

Whether you come in dread, or crave some blessing:

Tell me, and never doubt that I will help you

In every way I can; I should be heartless

Were I not moved to find you suppliant here.

15

PRIEST. Great Oedipus, O powerful king of Thebes!

You see how all the ages of our people

Cling to your altar steps: here are boys

Who can barely stand alone, and here are priests

By weight of age, as I am a priest of God,

20

And young men chosen from those yet unmarried;

<sup>1</sup>Legendary founder of Thebes.



As for the others, all that multitude,  
 They wait with olive chaplets in the squares,  
 At the two shrines of Pallas,<sup>2</sup> and where Apollo<sup>3</sup>  
 Speaks in the glowing embers. 25

Your own eyes

Must tell you: Thebes is tossed on a murdering sea  
 And can not lift her head from the death surge.  
 A rust consumes the buds and fruits of the earth;  
 The herds are sick; children die unborn,  
 And labor is vain. The god of plague and pyre 30  
 Raids like detestable lightning through the city,  
 And all the house of Kadmos is laid waste,  
 All emptied, and all darkened: Death alone  
 Battens upon the misery of Thebes.

You are not one of the immortal gods, we know; 35  
 Yet we have come to you to make our prayer  
 As to the man surest in mortal ways  
 And wisest in the ways of God. You saved us  
 From the Sphinx,<sup>4</sup> that flinty singer, and the tribute  
 We paid to her so long; yet you were never 40  
 Better informed than we, nor could we teach you:  
 A god's touch, it seems, enabled you to help us.  
 Therefore, O mighty power, we turn to you:  
 Find us our safety, find us a remedy,  
 Whether by counsel of the gods or of men. 45  
 A king of wisdom tested in the past  
 Can act in a time of troubles, and act well.  
 Noblest of men, restore  
 Life to your city! Think how all men call you  
 Liberator for your boldness long ago; 50  
 Ah, when your years of kingship are remembered,  
 Let them not say *We rose, but later fell*—  
 Keep the State from going down in the storm!  
 Once, years ago, with happy augury,  
 You brought us fortune; be the same again! 55

<sup>2</sup>Athena, goddess of wisdom, patroness of Athens.

<sup>3</sup>God of the sun, music, and medicine.

<sup>4</sup>A winged monster, with the body of a lion and the breasts and head of a woman.

No man questions your power to rule the land:  
 But rule over men, not over a dead city!  
 Ships are only hulls, high walls are nothing,  
 When no life moves in the empty passageways.

OEDIPUS. Poor children! You may be sure I know 60

All that you longed for in your coming here.

I know that you are deathly sick; and yet,

Sick as you are, not one is as sick as I.

Each of you suffers in himself alone

His anguish, not another's; but my spirit 65

Groans for the city, for myself, for you.

I was not sleeping, you are not waking me.

No, I have been in tears for a long while

And in my restless thought walked many ways.

In all my search I found one remedy, 70

And I have adopted it: I have sent Kreon,

Son of Menoikeus, brother of the queen,

To Delphi, Apollo's place of revelation,

To learn there, if he can,

What act or pledge of mine may save the city. 75

I have counted the days, and now, this very day,

I am troubled, for he has overstayed his time.

What is he doing? He has been gone too long.

Yet whenever he comes back, I should do ill

Not to take any action the god orders. 80

PRIEST. It is a timely promise. At this instant

They tell me Kreon is here.

OEDIPUS. O Lord Apollo!

May his news be fair as his face is radiant!

PRIEST. Good news, I gather! he is crowned with bay,

The chaplet is thick with berries.

OEDIPUS. We shall soon know; 85

He is near enough to hear us now.

(Enter KREON.)

O prince:

Brother: son of Menoikeus:

What answer do you bring us from the god?

- KREON. A strong one. I can tell you, great afflictions  
Will turn out well, if they are taken well. 90
- OEDIPUS. What was the oracle? These vague words  
Leave me still hanging between hope and fear.
- KREON. Is it your pleasure to hear me with all these  
Gathered around us? I am prepared to speak,  
But should we not go in?
- OEDIPUS. Speak to them all, 95  
It is for them I suffer, more than for myself.
- KREON. Then I will tell you what I heard at Delphi.  
In plain words  
The god commands us to expel from the land of Thebes  
An old defilement we are sheltering. 100  
It is a deathly thing, beyond cure;  
We must not let it feed upon us longer.
- OEDIPUS. What defilement? How shall we rid ourselves of it?
- KREON. By exile or death, blood for blood. It was  
Murder that brought the plague-wind on the city. 105
- OEDIPUS. Murder of whom? Surely the god has named him?
- KREON. My lord: Laios once ruled this land,  
Before you came to govern us.
- OEDIPUS. I know;  
I learned of him from others; I never saw him.
- KREON. He was murdered; and Apollo commands us now 110  
To take revenge upon whoever killed him.
- OEDIPUS. Upon whom? Where are they? Where shall we find a clue  
To solve that crime, after so many years?
- KREON. Here in this land, he said. Search reveals  
Things that escape an inattentive man. 115
- OEDIPUS. Tell me: Was Laios murdered in his house,  
Or in the fields, or in some foreign country?
- KREON. He said he planned to make a pilgrimage.  
He did not come home again.

- OEDIPUS. And there was no one,  
No witness, no companion, to tell what happened? 120
- KREON. They were all killed but one, and he got away  
So frightened that he could remember one thing only.
- OEDIPUS. What was that one thing? One may be the key  
To everything, if we resolve to use it.
- KREON. He said that a band of highwaymen attacked them, 125  
Outnumbered them, and overwhelmed the king.
- OEDIPUS. Strange, that a highwayman should be so daring—  
Unless some faction here bribed him to do it.
- KREON. We thought of that. But after Laios' death  
New troubles arose and we had no avenger. 130
- OEDIPUS. What troubles could prevent your hunting down the killers?
- KREON. The riddling Sphinx's song  
Made us deaf to all mysteries but her own.
- OEDIPUS. Then once more I must bring what is dark to light.  
It is most fitting that Apollo shows, 135  
As you do, this compunction for the dead.  
You shall see how I stand by you, as I should.  
Avenging this country and the god as well,  
And not as though it were for some distant friend,  
But for my own sake, to be rid of evil. 140  
Whoever killed King Laios might—who knows?—  
Lay violent hands even on me—and soon.  
I act for the murdered king in my own interest.  
Come, then, my children: leave the altar steps,  
Lift up your olive boughs!
- One of you go 145
- And summon the people of Kadmos to gather here.  
I will do all that I can; you may tell them that.
- (Exit a PAGE.)*
- So, with the help of God,  
We shall be saved—or else indeed we are lost.
- PRIEST. Let us rise, children. It was for this we came, 150  
And now the king has promised it.

Phoibus<sup>5</sup> has sent us an oracle; may he descend  
Himself to save us and drive out the plague.

*(Exeunt OEDIPUS and KREON into the palace by the central door. The PRIEST and the SUPPLIANTS disperse right and left. After a short pause the CHORUS enters the orchestra.)*

### Parados<sup>6</sup>

#### *Strophe 1*

CHORUS. What is God singing in his profound  
Delphi of gold and shadow? 155  
What oracle for Thebes, the sunwhipped city?  
Fear unjoints me, the roots of my heart tremble.  
Now I remember, O Healer, your power, and wonder:  
Will you send doom like a sudden cloud, or weave it  
Like nightfall of the past? 160  
Speak to me, tell me, O  
Child of golden Hope, immortal Voice.

#### *Antistrophe 1*

Let me pray to Athene, the immortal daughter of Zeus,  
And to Artemis her sister  
Who keeps her famous throne in the market ring, 165  
And to Apollo, archer from distant heaven—  
O gods, descend! Like three streams leap against  
The fires of our grief, the fires of darkness;  
Be swift to bring us rest!  
As in the old time from the brilliant house 170  
Of air you stepped to save us, come again!

#### *Strophe 2*

Now our afflictions have no end,  
Now all our stricken host lies down  
And no man fights off death with his mind;  
The noble plowland bears no grain, 175  
And groaning mothers can not bear—  
See, how our lives like birds take wing,  
Like sparks that fly when a fire soars,  
To the shore of the god of evening.

<sup>5</sup>Phoebus Apollo, god of the sun, whose oracle was at Delphi.

<sup>6</sup>The Parados is the poetic song of the entering Chorus.

*Antistrophe 2*

The plague burns on, it is pitiless, 180  
 Though pallid children laden with death  
 Lie unwept in the stony ways,  
 And old gray women by every path  
 Flock to the strand about the altars  
 There to strike their breasts and cry 185  
 Worship of Phoibos in wailing prayers:  
 Be kind, God's golden child!

*Strophe 3*

There are no swords in this attack by fire,  
 No shields, but we are ringed with cries.  
 Send the besieger plunging from our homes 190  
 Into the vast sea-room of the Atlantic  
 Or into the waves that foam eastward of Thrace—  
 For the day ravages what the night spares—  
 Destroy our enemy, lord of the thunder!  
 Let him be riven by lightning from heaven! 195

*Antistrophe 3*

Phoibos Apollo, stretch the sun's bowstring,  
 That golden cord, until it sing for us,  
 Flashing arrows in heaven!  
 Artemis, Huntress,  
 Race with flaring lights upon our mountains!  
 O scarlet god, O golden-banded brow, 200  
 O Theban Bacchos in a storm of Maenads,<sup>7</sup>

*(Enter OEDIPUS, center.)*

Whirl upon Death, that all the Undying hate!  
 Come with blinding torches, come in joy!

**Scene 1**

OEDIPUS. Is this your prayer? It may be answered. Come,  
 Listen to me, act as the crisis demands, 205  
 And you shall have relief from all these evils.

<sup>7</sup>Bacchos: the god of wine and revelry. Maenads were female attendants of the god.

Until now I was a stranger to this tale,  
 As I had been a stranger to the crime.  
 Could I track down the murderer without a clue?  
 But now, friends, 210  
 As one who became a citizen after the murder,  
 I make this proclamation to all Thebans:  
 If any man knows by whose hand Laios, son of Labdakos,  
 Met his death, I direct that man to tell me everything,  
 No matter what he fears for having so long withheld it. 215  
 Let it stand as promised that no further trouble  
 Will come to him, but he may leave the land in safety.  
 Moreover: If anyone knows the murderer to be foreign,  
 Let him not keep silent: he shall have his reward from me.  
 However, if he does conceal it; if any man 220  
 Fearing for his friend or for himself disobeys this edict,  
 Hear what I propose to do:  
 I solemnly forbid the people of this country,  
 Where power and throne are mine, ever to receive that man  
 Or speak to him, no matter who he is, or let him 225  
 Join in sacrifice, lustration,<sup>8</sup> or in prayer.  
 I decree that he be driven from every house,  
 Being, as he is, corruption itself to us: the Delphic  
 Voice of Apollo has pronounced this revelation.  
 Thus I associate myself with the oracle 230  
 And take the side of the murdered king.  
 As for the criminal, I pray to God—  
 Whether it be a lurking thief, or one of a number—  
 I pray that that man's life be consumed in evil and  
 wretchedness.  
 And as for me, this curse applies no less 235  
 If it should turn out that the culprit is my guest here,  
 Sharing my hearth.  
 You have heard the penalty.  
 I lay it on you now to attend to this  
 For my sake, for Apollo's, for the sick  
 Sterile city that heaven has abandoned. 240  
 Suppose the oracle had given you no command:  
 Should this defilement go uncleansed for ever?

<sup>8</sup>lustration: ritual purification.

You should have found the murderer: your king,  
A noble king, had been destroyed!

Now I,

Having the power that he held before me, 245  
Having his bed, begetting children there  
Upon his wife, as he would have, had he lived—  
Their son would have been my children's brother,  
If Laios had had luck in fatherhood!  
(And now his bad fortune has struck him down)— 250  
I say I take the son's part, just as though  
I were his son, to press the fight for him  
And see it won! I'll find the hand that brought  
Death to Labdakos' and Polydoros' child,  
Heir of Kadmos' and Agenor's line.<sup>9</sup> 255  
And as for those who fail me,  
May the gods deny them the fruit of the earth,  
Fruit of the womb, and may they rot utterly!  
Let them be wretched as we are wretched, and worse!  
For you, for loyal Thebans, and for all 260  
Who find my actions right, I pray the favor  
Of justice, and of all the immortal gods.

CHORAGOS.<sup>10</sup> Since I am under oath, my lord, I swear  
I did not do the murder, I can not name  
The murderer. Phoibos ordained the search: 265  
Why did he not say who the culprit was?

OEDIPUS. An honest question. But no man in the world  
Can make the gods do more than the gods will.

CHORAGOS. There is an alternative, I think—

OEDIPUS. Tell me. 270  
Any or all, you must not fail to tell me.

CHORAGOS. A lord clairvoyant to the lord Apollo,  
As we all know, is the skilled Teiresias.  
One might learn much about this from him, Oedipus.

<sup>9</sup>The royal line of descent: Kadmos = Polydoros = Labdakos = Laios = Oedipus.

<sup>10</sup>The Choragos is the leader of the Chorus.



OEDIPUS. I am not wasting time:

Kreon spoke of this, and I have sent for him—

275

Twice, in fact; it is strange that he is not here.

CHORAGOS. The other matter—the old report—seems useless.

OEDIPUS. What was that? I am interested in all reports.

CHORAGOS. The king was said to have been killed by highwaymen.

OEDIPUS. I know. But we have no witnesses to that.

280

CHORAGOS. If the killer can feel a particle of dread,

Your curse will bring him out of hiding!

OEDIPUS.

No.

The man who dared that act will fear no curse.

*(Enter the blind seer TEIRESIAS, led by a PAGE.)*

CHORAGOS. But there is one man who may detect the criminal.

This is Teiresias, this is the holy prophet

285

In whom, alone of all men, truth was born.

OEDIPUS. Teiresias: seer: student of mysteries,

Of all that's taught and all that no man tells,

Secrets of Heaven and secrets of the earth:

Blind though you are, you know the city lies

290

Sick with plague: and from this plague, my lord,

We find that you alone can guard or save us.

Possibly you did not hear the messengers?

Apollo, when we sent to him,

Sent us back word that this great pestilence

295

Would lift, but only if we established clearly

The identity of those who murdered Laios.

They must be killed or exiled.

Can you use

Birdflight<sup>11</sup> or any art of divination

To purify yourself, and Thebes, and me

300

From this contagion? We are in your hands.

There is no fairer duty

Than that of helping others in distress.

<sup>11</sup>The flight patterns of birds were used to foretell the future.

TEIRESIAS. How dreadful knowledge of the truth can be  
 When there's no help in truth! I knew this well, 305  
 But did not act on it: else I should have not come.

OEDIPUS. What is troubling you? Why are your eyes so cold?

TEIRESIAS. Let me go home. Bear your own fate, and I'll  
 Bear mine. It is better so: trust what I say.

OEDIPUS. What you say is ungracious and unhelpful 310  
 To your native country. Do not refuse to speak.

TEIRESIAS. When it comes to speech, your own is neither temperate  
 Nor opportune. I wish to be more prudent.

OEDIPUS. In God's name, we all beg you—

TEIRESIAS. You are all ignorant.  
 No; I will never tell you what I know. 315  
 Now it is my misery; then, it would be yours.

OEDIPUS. What! You do know something, and will not tell us?  
 You would betray us all and wreck the State?

TEIRESIAS. I do not intend to torture myself, or you.  
 Why persist in asking? You will not persuade me. 320

OEDIPUS. What a wicked old man you are! You'd try a stone's  
 Patience! Out with it! Have you no feeling at all?

TEIRESIAS. You call me unfeeling. If you could only see  
 The nature of your own feelings . . .

OEDIPUS. Why,  
 Who would not feel as I do? Who could endure 325  
 Your arrogance toward the city?

TEIRESIAS. What does it matter?  
 Whether I speak or not, it is bound to come.

OEDIPUS. Then, if "it" is bound to come, you are bound to tell me.

TEIRESIAS. No, I will not go on. Rage as you please.

OEDIPUS. Rage? Why not!  
 And I'll tell you what I think: 330  
 You planned it, you had it done, you all but  
 Killed him with your own hands: if you had eyes,  
 I'd say the crime was yours, and yours alone.

- TEIRESIAS. So? I charge you, then,  
 Abide by the proclamation you have made: 335  
 From this day forth  
 Never speak again to these men or to me;  
 You yourself are the pollution of this country.
- OEDIPUS. You dare say that! Can you possibly think you have  
 Some way of going free, after such insolence? 340
- TEIRESIAS. I have gone free. It is the truth sustains me.
- OEDIPUS. Who taught you shamelessness? It was not your craft.
- TEIRESIAS. You did. You made me speak. I did not want to.
- OEDIPUS. Speak what? Let me hear it again more clearly.
- TEIRESIAS. Was it not clear before? Are you tempting me? 345
- OEDIPUS. I did not understand it. Say it again.
- TEIRESIAS. I say that you are the murderer whom you seek.
- OEDIPUS. Now twice you have spat out infamy. You'll pay for it!
- TEIRESIAS. Would you care for more? Do you wish to be really angry?
- OEDIPUS. Say what you will. Whatever you say is worthless. 350
- TEIRESIAS. I say you live in hideous shame with those  
 Most dear to you. You can not see the evil.
- OEDIPUS. Can you go on babbling like this for ever?
- TEIRESIAS. I can, if there is power in truth.
- OEDIPUS. There is:  
 But not for you, not for you, 355  
 You sightless, witless, senseless, mad old man!
- TEIRESIAS. You are the madman. There is no one here  
 Who will not curse you soon, as you curse me.
- OEDIPUS. You child of total night! I would not touch you;  
 Neither would any man who sees the sun. 360
- TEIRESIAS. True: it is not from you my fate will come.  
 That lies within Apollo's competence,  
 As it is his concern.



- You can not see the wretchedness of your life, 400  
 Nor in whose house you live, no, nor with whom.  
 Who are your father and mother? Can you tell me?  
 You do not even know the blind wrongs  
 That you have done them, on earth and in the world below.  
 But that double lash of your parents' curse will whip you 405  
 Out of this land some day, with only night  
 Upon your precious eyes.  
 Your cries then—where will they not be heard?  
 What fastness of Kithairon<sup>12</sup> will not echo them?  
 And that bridal-descant of yours—you'll know it then, 410  
 The song they sang when you came here to Thebes  
 And found your misguided berthing.  
 All this, and more, that you can not guess at now,  
 Will bring you to yourself among your children.  
 Be angry, then. Curse Kreon. Curse my words. 415  
 I tell you, no man that walks upon earth  
 Shall be rooted out more horribly than you.
- OEDIPUS. Am I to bear this from him?—Damnation  
 Take you! Out of this place! Out of my sight!
- TEIRESIAS. I would not have come at all if you had not asked me. 420
- OEDIPUS. Could I have told that you'd talk nonsense, that  
 You'd come here to make a fool of yourself, and of me?
- TEIRESIAS. A fool? Your parents thought me sane enough.
- OEDIPUS. My parents again!—Wait: who were my parents?
- TEIRESIAS. This day will give you a father, and break your heart. 425
- OEDIPUS. Your infantile riddles! Your damned abracadabra!
- TEIRESIAS. You were a great man once at solving riddles.
- OEDIPUS. Mock me with that if you like; you will find it true.
- TEIRESIAS. It was true enough. It brought about your ruin.
- OEDIPUS. But if it saved this town?
- TEIRESIAS. (*to the PAGE.*) Boy, give me your hand. 430

<sup>12</sup>A mountain range near Thebes where the infant Oedipus was left to die.

OEDIPUS. Yes, boy; lead him away.

—While you are here

We can do nothing. Go; leave us in peace.

TEIRESIAS. I will go when I have said what I have to say.

How can you hurt me? And I tell you again:

The man you have been looking for all this time,

435

The damned man, the murderer of Laios,

That man is in Thebes. To your mind he is foreign-born,

But it will soon be shown that he is a Theban,

A revelation that will fail to please.

A blind man,

Who has his eyes now; a penniless man, who is rich now;

440

And he will go tapping the strange earth with his staff.

To the children with whom he lives now he will be

Brother and father—the very same; to her

Who bore him, son and husband—the very same

Who came to his father's bed, wet with his father's blood.

445

Enough. Go think that over.

If later you find error in what I have said,

You may say that I have no skill in prophecy.

(Exit TEIRESIAS, led by his PAGE. OEDIPUS goes into the palace.)

### Ode 1

#### Strophe 1

CHORUS. The Delphic stone of prophecies

Remembers ancient regicide

450

And a still bloody hand.

That killer's hour of flight has come.

He must be stronger than riderless

Couriers of untiring wind,

For the son of Zeus<sup>13</sup> armed with his father's thunder

455

Leaps in lightning after him;

And the Furies hold his track, the sad Furies.<sup>14</sup>

#### Antistrophe 1

Holy Parnassos' peak of snow

Flashes and blinds that secret man,

<sup>13</sup>Apollo.

<sup>14</sup>Avenging goddesses.

That all shall hunt him down: 460  
 Though he may roam the forest shade  
 Like a bull gone wild from pasture  
 To rage through glooms of stone.  
 Doom comes down on him; flight will not avail him;  
 For the world's heart calls him desolate, 465  
 And the immortal voices follow, for ever follow.

*Strophe 2*

But now a wilder thing is heard  
 From the old man skilled at hearing Fate in the wing-beat  
 of a bird.  
 Bewildered as a blown bird, my soul hovers and can not find  
 Foothold in this debate, or any reason or rest of mind. 470  
 But no man ever brought—none can bring  
 Proof of strife between Thebes' royal house,  
 Labdakos' line, and the son of Polybos;<sup>15</sup>  
 And never until now has any man brought word  
 Of Laios' dark death staining Oedipus the King. 475

*Antistrophe 2*

Divine Zeus and Apollo hold  
 Perfect intelligence alone of all tales ever told;  
 And well though this diviner works, he works in his own night;  
 No man can judge that rough unknown or trust in second sight,  
 For wisdom changes hands among the wise. 480  
 Shall I believe my great lord criminal  
 At a raging word that a blind old man let fall?  
 I saw him, when the carrion woman faced him of old,  
 Prove his heroic mind. These evil words are lies.

**Scene II**

KREON. Men of Thebes: 485  
 I am told that heavy accusations  
 Have been brought against me by King Oedipus.  
 I am not the kind of man to bear this tamely.  
 If in these present difficulties  
 He holds me accountable for any harm to him 490  
 Through anything I have said or done—why, then,

<sup>15</sup>Oedipus is mistakenly assumed to be Polybos's son.

I do not value life in this dishonor.  
 It is not as though this rumor touched upon  
 Some private indiscretion. The matter is grave.  
 The fact is that I am being called disloyal 495  
 To the State, to my fellow citizens, to my friends.

CHORAGOS. He may have spoken in anger, not from his mind.

KREON. But did you not hear him say I was the one  
 Who seduced the old prophet into lying?

CHORAGOS. The thing was said; I do not know how seriously. 500

KREON. But you were watching him! Were his eyes steady?  
 Did he look like a man in his right mind?

CHORAGOS. I do not know.  
 I can not judge the behavior of great men.  
 But here is the king himself.  
*(Enter OEDIPUS.)*

OEDIPUS. So you dared come back.  
 Why? How brazen of you to come to my house, 505  
 You murderer!

Do you think I do not know  
 That you plotted to kill me, plotted to steal my throne?  
 Tell me, in God's name: am I coward, a fool,  
 That you should dream you could accomplish this?  
 A fool who could not see your slippery game? 510  
 A coward, not to fight back when I saw it?  
 You are the fool, Kreon, are you not? Hoping  
 Without support or friends to get a throne?  
 Thrones may be won or bought: you could do neither.

KREON. Now listen to me. You have talked; let me talk, too. 515  
 You can not judge unless you know the facts.

OEDIPUS. You speak well: there is one fact; but I find it hard  
 To learn from the deadliest enemy I have.

KREON. That above all I must dispute with you.

OEDIPUS. That above all I will not hear you deny. 520

KREON. If you think there is anything good in being stubborn  
 Against all reason, then I say you are wrong.



OEDIPUS. If you think a man can sin against his own kind  
And not be punished for it, I say you are mad.

KREON. I agree. But tell me: what have I done to you? 525

OEDIPUS. You advised me to send for that wizard, did you not?

KREON. I did. I should do it again.

OEDIPUS. Very well. Now tell me:  
How long has it been since Laios—

KREON. What of Laios?

OEDIPUS. Since he vanished in that onset by the road?

KREON. It was long ago, a long time.

OEDIPUS. And this prophet, 530  
Was he practicing here then?

KREON. He was; and with honor, as now.

OEDIPUS. Did he speak of me at that time?

KREON. He never did,  
At least, not when I was present.

OEDIPUS. But . . . the enquiry?  
I suppose you held one?

KREON. We did, but we learned nothing.

OEDIPUS. Why did the prophet not speak against me then? 535

KREON. I do not know; and I am the kind of man  
Who holds his tongue when he has no facts to go on.

OEDIPUS. There's one fact that you know, and you could tell it.

KREON. What fact is that? If I know it, you shall have it.

OEDIPUS. If he were not involved with you, he could not say 540  
That it was I who murdered Laios.

KREON. If he says that, you are the one that knows it!—  
But now it is my turn to question you.

OEDIPUS. Put your questions. I am no murderer.

KREON. First, then: You married my sister?

- OEDIPUS. I married your sister. 545
- KREON. And you rule the kingdom equally with her?
- OEDIPUS. Everything that she wants she has from me.
- KREON. And I am the third, equal to both of you?
- OEDIPUS. That is why I call you a bad friend.
- KREON. No. Reason it out, as I have done. 550
- Think of this first: Would any sane man prefer  
Power, with all a king's anxieties,  
To that same power and the grace of sleep?  
Certainly not I.
- I have never longed for the king's power—only his rights. 555  
Would any wise man differ from me in this?  
As matters stand, I have my way in everything  
With your consent, and no responsibilities.  
If I were king, I should be a slave to policy.  
How could I desire a scepter more 560  
Than what is now mine—untroubled influence?  
No, I have not gone mad; I need no honors,  
Except those with the perquisites I have now.  
I am welcome everywhere; every man salutes me,  
And those who want your favor seek my ear, 565  
Since I know how to manage what they ask.  
Should I exchange this ease for that anxiety?  
Besides, no sober mind is treasonable.  
I hate anarchy  
And never would deal with any man who likes it. 570  
Test what I have said. Go to the priestess  
At Delphi, ask if I quoted her correctly.  
And as for this other thing, if I am found  
Guilty of treason with Teiresias,  
Then sentence me to death. You have my word 575  
It is a sentence I should cast my vote for—  
But not without evidence!
- You do wrong  
When you take good men for bad, bad men for good.  
A true friend thrown aside—why, life itself  
Is not more precious!

- In time you will know this well: 580  
 For time, and time alone, will show the just man,  
 Though scoundrels are discovered in a day.
- CHORAGOS. This is well said, and a prudent man would ponder it.  
 Judgments too quickly formed are dangerous.
- OEDIPUS. But is he not quick in his duplicity? 585  
 And shall I not be quick to parry him?  
 Would you have me stand still, hold my peace, and let  
 This man win everything, through my inaction?
- KREON. And you want—what is it, then? To banish me?
- OEDIPUS. No, not exile. It is your death I want, 590  
 So that all the world may see what treason means.
- KREON. You will persist, then? You will not believe me?
- OEDIPUS. How can I believe you?
- KREON. Then you are a fool.
- OEDIPUS. To save myself?
- KREON. In justice, think of me.
- OEDIPUS. You are evil incarnate.
- KREON. But suppose you are wrong? 595
- OEDIPUS. Still I must rule.
- KREON. But not if you rule badly.
- OEDIPUS. O city, city!
- KREON. It is my city, too!
- CHORAGOS. Now, my lords, be still. I see the queen,  
 Iokaste, coming from her palace chambers;  
 And it is time she came, for the sake of you both. 600  
 This dreadful quarrel can be resolved through her.
- (Enter IOKASTE.)
- IOKASTE. Poor foolish men, what wicked din is this?  
 With Thebes sick to death, is it not shameful  
 That you should rake some private quarrel up?

(To OEDIPUS.) Come into the house.

—And you, Kreon, go now:

605

Let us have no more of this tumult over nothing.

KREON. Nothing? No, sister: what your husband plans for me  
Is one of two great evils: exile or death.

OEDIPUS. He is right.

Why, woman I have caught him squarely  
Plotting against my life.

KREON. No! Let me die  
Accurst if ever I have wished you harm!

610

IOKASTE. Ah, believe it, Oedipus!  
In the name of the gods, respect this oath of his  
For my sake, for the sake of these people here!

### *Strophe 1*

CHORAGOS. Open your mind to her, my lord. Be ruled by her, I  
beg you!

615

OEDIPUS. What would you have me do?

CHORAGOS. Respect Kreon's word. He has never spoken like a fool,  
And now he has sworn an oath.

OEDIPUS. You know what you ask?

CHORAGOS. I do.

OEDIPUS. Speak on, then.

CHORAGOS. A friend so sworn should not be baited so,  
In blind malice, and without final proof.

620

OEDIPUS. You are aware, I hope, that what you say  
Means death for me, or exile at the least.

### *Strophe 2*

CHORAGOS. No, I swear by Helios, first in heaven!  
May I die friendless and accurst,  
The worst of deaths, if ever I meant that!  
It is the withering fields  
That hurt my sick heart:  
Must we bear all these ills,  
And now your bad blood as well?

625

OEDIPUS. Then let him go. And let me die, if I must, 630  
 Or be driven by him in shame from the land of Thebes.  
 It is your unhappiness, and not his talk,  
 That touches me.

As for him—  
 Wherever he goes, hatred will follow him.

KREON. Ugly in yielding, as you were ugly in rage! 635  
 Natures like yours chiefly torment themselves.

OEDIPUS. Can you not go? Can you not leave me?

KREON. I can.  
 You do not know me; but the city knows me,  
 And in its eyes I am just, if not in yours.

*(Exit KREON.)*

### *Antistrophe 1*

CHORAGOS. Lady Iokaste, did you not ask the King to go to his 640  
 chambers?

IOKASTE. First tell me what has happened.

CHORAGOS. There was suspicion without evidence; yet it rankled  
 As even false charges will.

IOKASTE. On both sides?

CHORAGOS. On both.

IOKASTE. But what was said?

CHORAGOS. Oh let it rest, let it be done with!  
 Have we not suffered enough? 645

OEDIPUS. You see to what your decency has brought you:  
 You have made difficulties where my heart saw none.

### *Antistrophe 2*

CHORAGOS. Oedipus, it is not once only I have told you—  
 You must know I should count myself unwise  
 To the point of madness, should I now forsake you— 650  
 You, under whose hand,  
 In the storm of another time,  
 Our dear land sailed out free.  
 But now stand fast at the helm!

IOKASTE. In God's name, Oedipus, inform your wife as well: 655  
Why are you so set in this hard anger?

OEDIPUS. I will tell you, for none of these men deserves  
My confidence as you do. It is Kreon's work,  
His treachery, his plotting against me.

IOKASTE. Go on, if you can make this clear to me. 660

OEDIPUS. He charges me with the murder of Laios.

IOKASTE. Has he some knowledge? Or does he speak from hearsay?

OEDIPUS. He would not commit himself to such a charge,  
But he has brought in that damnable soothsayer  
To tell his story.

IOKASTE. Set your mind at rest. 665  
If it is a question of soothsayers, I tell you  
That you will find no man whose craft gives knowledge  
Of the unknowable.

Here is my proof:  
An oracle was reported to Laios once  
(I will not say from Phoibos himself, but from 670  
His appointed ministers, at any rate)  
That his doom would be death at the hands of his own son—  
His son, born of his flesh and of mine!

Now, you remember the story: Laios was killed  
By marauding strangers where three highways meet; 675  
But his child had not been three days in this world  
Before the king had pierced the baby's ankles  
And left him to die on a lonely mountainside.

Thus, Apollo never caused that child  
To kill his father, and it was not for Laios' fate 680  
To die at the hands of his son, as he had feared.  
This is what prophets and prophecies are worth!  
Have no dread of them.

It is God himself  
Who can show us what he wills, in his own way.

OEDIPUS. How strange a shadowy memory crossed my mind. 685  
Just now while you were speaking; it chilled my heart.

IOKASTE. What do you mean? What memory do you speak of?

OEDIPUS. If I understand you, Laios was killed  
At a place where three roads meet.

IOKASTE. So it was said;  
We have no later story.

OEDIPUS. Where did it happen? 690

IOKASTE. Phokis, it is called: at a place where the Theban Way  
Divides into the roads toward Delphi and Daulia.

OEDIPUS. When?

IOKASTE. We had the news not long before you came  
And proved the right to your succession here.

OEDIPUS. Ah, what net has God been weaving for me? 695

IOKASTE. Oedipus! Why does this trouble you?

OEDIPUS. Do not ask me yet.  
First, tell me how Laios looked, and tell me  
How old he was.

IOKASTE. He was tall, his hair just touched  
With white; his form was not unlike your own.

OEDIPUS. I think that I myself may be accurst 700  
By my own ignorant edict.

IOKASTE. You speak strangely.  
It makes me tremble to look at you, my king.

OEDIPUS. I am not sure that the blind man can not see.  
But I should know better if you were to tell me—

IOKASTE. Anything—though I dread to hear you ask it. 705

OEDIPUS. Was the king lightly escorted, or did he ride  
With a large company, as a ruler should?

IOKASTE. There were five men with him in all: one was a herald;  
And a single chariot, which he was driving.

OEDIPUS. Alas, that makes it plain enough!  
But who— 710  
Who told you how it happened?





Remained always aching in my mind;  
 I knew there was talk; I could not rest;  
 And finally, saying nothing to my parents,  
 I went to the shrine at Delphi. 745

The god dismissed my question without reply;  
 He spoke of other things.

Some were clear,  
 Full of wretchedness, dreadful, unbearable:  
 As, that I should lie with my own mother, breed  
 Children from whom all men would turn their eyes; 750  
 And that I should be my father's murderer.

I heard all this, and fled. And from that day  
 Corinth to me was only in the stars  
 Descending in that quarter of the sky,  
 As I wandered farther and farther on my way 755  
 To a land where I should never see the evil  
 Sung by the oracle. And I came to this country  
 Where, so you say, King Laios was killed.

I will tell you all that happened there, my lady.  
 There were three highways 760  
 Coming together at a place I passed;  
 And there a herald came towards me, and a chariot  
 Drawn by horses, with a man such as you describe  
 Seated in it. The groom leading the horses  
 Forced me off the road at his lord's command; 765  
 But as this charioteer lurched over towards me  
 I struck him in my rage. The old man saw me  
 And brought his double goad down upon my head  
 As I came abreast.

He was paid back, and more!  
 Swinging my club in this right hand I knocked him 770  
 Out of his car, and he rolled on the ground.

I killed him.

I killed them all.  
 Now if that stranger and Laios were—kin,  
 Where is a man more miserable than I?  
 More hated by the gods? Citizen and alien alike 775  
 Must never shelter me or speak to me—  
 I must be shunned by all.

And I myself

Pronounced this malediction upon myself!  
 Think of it: I have touched you with these hands,  
 These hands that killed your husband. What defilement! 780

Am I all evil, then? It must be so,  
 Since I must flee from Thebes, yet never again  
 See my own countrymen, my own country,  
 For fear of joining my mother in marriage  
 And killing Polybos, my father.  
 Ah, 785

If I was created so, born to this fate,  
 Who would deny the savagery of God?  
 O holy majesty of heavenly powers!  
 May I never see that day! Never!  
 Rather let me vanish from the race of men 790  
 Than know the abomination destined me!

CHORAGOS. We too, my lord, have felt dismay at this.  
 But there is hope: you have yet to hear the shepherd.

OEDIPUS. Indeed, I fear no other hope is left me.

IOKASTE. What do you hope from him when he comes?

OEDIPUS. This much: 795  
 If his account of the murder tallies with yours,  
 Then I am cleared.

IOKASTE. What was it that I said  
 Of such importance?

OEDIPUS. Why, "marauders," you said,  
 Killed the king, according to this man's story.  
 If he maintains that still, if there were several, 800  
 Clearly the guilt is not mine: I was alone.  
 But if he says one man, singlehanded, did it,  
 Then the evidence all points to me.

IOKASTE. You may be sure that he said there were several;  
 And can he call back that story now? He can not. 805  
 The whole city heard it as plainly as I.  
 But suppose he alters some detail of it:  
 He can not ever show that Laios' death  
 Fulfilled the oracle: for Apollo said

My child was doomed to kill him; and my child— 810  
 Poor baby!—it was my child that died first.

No. From now on, where oracles are concerned,  
 I would not waste a second thought on any.

OEDIPUS. You may be right.

But come: let someone go  
 For the shepherd at once. This matter must be settled. 815

IOKASTE. I will send for him.

I would not wish to cross you in anything,  
 And surely not in this.—Let us go in.

*(Exeunt into the palace.)*

## Ode II

### *Strophe 1*

CHORUS. Let me be reverent in the ways of right,  
 Lowly the paths I journey on; 820  
 Let all my words and actions keep  
 The laws of the pure universe  
 From highest Heaven handed down.  
 For Heaven is their bright nurse,  
 Those generations of the realms of light; 825  
 Ah, never of mortal kind were they begot,  
 Nor are they slaves of memory, lost in sheep:  
 Their Father is greater than Time, and ages not.

### *Antistrophe 1*

The tyrant is a child of Pride  
 Who drinks from his great sickening cup 830  
 Recklessness and vanity,  
 Until from his high crest headlong  
 He plummets to the dust of hope.  
 That strong man is not strong.  
 But let no fair ambition be denied; 835  
 May God protect the wrestler for the State  
 In government, in comely policy,  
 Who will fear God, and on His ordinance wait.

*Strophe 2*

Haughtiness and the high hand of disdain  
 Tempt and outrage God's holy law; 840  
 And any mortal who dares hold  
 No immortal Power in awe  
 Will be caught up in a net of pain:  
 The price for which his levity is sold.  
 Let each man take due earnings, then, 845  
 And keep his hands from holy things,  
 And from blasphemy stand apart—  
 Else the crackling blast of heaven  
 Blows on his head, and on his desperate heart.  
 Though fools will honor impious men, 850  
 In their cities no tragic poet sings.

*Antistrophe 2*

Shall we lose faith in Delphi's obscurities,  
 We who have heard the world's core  
 Discredited, and the sacred wood  
 Of Zeus at Elis praised no more? 855  
 The deeds and the strange prophecies  
 Must make a pattern yet to be understood.  
 Zeus, if indeed you are lord of all,  
 Throned in light over night and day,  
 Mirror this in your endless mind: 860  
 Our masters call the oracle  
 Words on the wind, and the Delphic vision blind!  
 Their hearts no longer know Apollo,  
 And reverence for the gods has died away.

**Scene III**

(Enter IOKASTE.)

IOKASTE. Princes of Thebes, it has occurred to me 865  
 To visit the altars of the gods, bearing  
 These branches as a suppliant, and this incense.  
 Our king is not himself: his noble soul  
 Is overwrought with fantasies of dread,  
 Else he would consider 870  
 The new prophecies in the light of the old.

He will listen to any voice that speaks disaster,  
And my advice goes for nothing.

*(She approaches the altar, right.)*

To you, then, Apollo,  
Lycean lord, since you are nearest, I turn in prayer.  
Receive these offerings, and grant us deliverance 875  
From defilement. Our hearts are heavy with fear  
When we see our leader distracted, as helpless sailors  
Are terrified by the confusion of their helmsman.

*(Enter MESSENGER.)*

MESSENGER. Friends, no doubt you can direct me:  
Where shall I find the house of Oedipus, 880  
Or, better still, where is the king himself?

CHORAGOS. It is this very place, stranger; he is inside.  
This is his wife and mother of his children.

MESSENGER. I wish her happiness in a happy house,  
Blest in all the fulfillment of her marriage. 885

IOKASTE. I wish as much for you: your courtesy  
Deserves a like good fortune. But now, tell me:  
Why have you come? What have you to say to us?

MESSENGER. Good news, my lady, for your house and your husband.

IOKASTE. What news? Who sent you here?

MESSENGER. I am from Corinth. 890  
The news I bring ought to mean joy for you,  
Though it may be you will find some grief in it.

IOKASTE. What is it? How can it touch us in both ways?

MESSENGER. The word is that the people of the Isthmus  
Intend to call Oedipus to be their king. 895

IOKASTE. But old King Polybos—is he not reigning still?

MESSENGER. No. Death holds him in his sepulchre.

IOKASTE. What are you saying? Polybos is dead?

MESSENGER. If I am not telling the truth, may I die myself.

IOKASTE. (*to a MAIDSERVANT*). Go in, go quickly; tell this  
to your master.

900

O riddlers of God's will, where are you now!  
This was the man whom Oedipus, long ago,  
Feared so, fled so, in dread of destroying him—  
But it was another fate by which he died.

(*Enter OEDIPUS, center.*)

OEDIPUS. Dearest Iokaste, why have you sent for me?

905

IOKASTE. Listen to what this man says, and then tell me  
What has become of the solemn prophecies.

OEDIPUS. Who is this man? What is his news for me?

IOKASTE. He has come from Corinth to announce your  
father's death!

OEDIPUS. Is it true, stranger? Tell me in your own words.

910

MESSENGER. I can not say it more clearly: the king is dead.

OEDIPUS. Was it by treason? Or by an attack of illness?

MESSENGER. A little thing brings old men to their rest.

OEDIPUS. It was sickness, then?

MESSENGER. Yes, and his many years.

915

OEDIPUS. Ah!

Why should a man respect the Pythian hearth, or  
Give heed to the birds that jangle above his head?  
They prophesied that I should kill Polybos,  
Kill my own father; but he is dead and buried,  
And I am here—I never touched him, never,  
Unless he died of grief for my departure,  
And thus, in a sense, through me. No. Polybos  
Has packed the oracles off with him underground.  
They are empty words.

920

IOKASTE. Had I not told you so?

OEDIPUS. You had; it was my faint heart that betrayed me.

925

IOKASTE. From now on never think of those things again.

OEDIPUS. And yet—must I not fear my mother's bed?

IOKASTE. Why should anyone in this world be afraid,  
Since Fate rules us and nothing can be foreseen?

A man should live only for the present day.

930

Have no more fear of sleeping with your mother:  
How many men, in dreams, have lain with their mothers!  
No reasonable man is troubled by such things.

OEDIPUS. That is true; only—

If only my mother were not still alive!

935

But she is alive. I can not help my dread.

IOKASTE. Yet this news of your father's death is wonderful.

OEDIPUS. Wonderful. But I fear the living woman.

MESSENGER. Tell me, who is this woman that you fear?

OEDIPUS. It is Merope, man; the wife of King Polybos.

940

MESSENGER. Merope? Why should you be afraid of her?

OEDIPUS. An oracle of the gods, a dreadful saying.

MESSENGER. Can you tell me about it or are you sworn to silence?

OEDIPUS. I can tell you, and I will.

Apollo said through his prophet that I was the man  
Who should marry his own mother, shed his father's blood  
With his own hands. And so, for all these years

945

I have kept clear of Corinth, and no harm has come—  
Though it would have been sweet to see my parents again.

MESSENGER. And this is the fear that drove you out of Corinth?

950

OEDIPUS. Would you have me kill my father?

MESSENGER. As for that

You must be reassured by the news I gave you.

OEDIPUS. If you could reassure me, I would reward you.

MESSENGER. I had that in mind, I will confess: I thought  
I could count on you when you returned to Corinth.

955

OEDIPUS. No: I will never go near my parents again.

MESSENGER. Ah, son, you still do not know what you are doing—

OEDIPUS. What do you mean? In the name of God tell me!

MESSENGER. —If these are your reasons for not going home.

OEDIPUS. I tell you, I fear the oracle may come true.

960

MESSENGER. And guilt may come upon you through your parents?

OEDIPUS. That is the dread that is always in my heart.

MESSENGER. Can you not see that all your fears are groundless?

OEDIPUS. Groundless? Am I not my parents' son?

MESSENGER. Polybos was not your father.

OEDIPUS.

Not my father?

965

MESSENGER. No more your father than the man speaking to you.

OEDIPUS. But you are nothing to me!

MESSENGER.

Neither was he.

OEDIPUS. Then why did he call me son?

MESSENGER.

I will tell you:

Long ago he had you from my hands, as a gift.

OEDIPUS. Then how could he love me so, if I was not his?

970

MESSENGER. He had no children, and his heart turned to you.

OEDIPUS. What of you? Did you buy me? Did you find me by chance?

MESSENGER. I came upon you in the woody vales of Kithairon.

OEDIPUS. And what were you doing there?

MESSENGER.

Tending my flocks.

OEDIPUS. A wandering shepherd?

MESSENGER.

But your savior, son, that day.

975

OEDIPUS. From what did you save me?

MESSENGER.

Your ankles should tell you that.

OEDIPUS. Ah, stranger, why do you speak of that childhood pain?



MESSENGER. I pulled the skewer that pinned your feet together.

OEDIPUS. I have had the mark as long as I can remember.

MESSENGER. That was why you were given the name you bear. 980

OEDIPUS. God! Was it my father or my mother who did it? Tell me!

MESSENGER. I do not know. The man who gave you to me  
Can tell you better than I.

OEDIPUS. It was not you that found me, but another?

MESSENGER. It was another shepherd gave you to me. 985

OEDIPUS. Who was he? Can you tell me who he was?

MESSENGER. I think he was said to be one of Laios' people.

OEDIPUS. You mean the Laios who was king here years ago?

MESSENGER. Yes; King Laios; and the man was one of his herdsmen.

OEDIPUS. Is he still alive? Can I see him?

MESSENGER. These men here 990  
Know best about such things.

OEDIPUS. Does anyone here  
Know this shepherd that he is talking about?  
Have you seen him in the fields, or in the town?  
If you have, tell me. It is time things were made plain.

CHORAGOS. I think the man he means is that same shepherd 995  
You have already asked to see. Iokaste perhaps  
Could tell you something.

OEDIPUS. Do you know anything  
About him, Lady? Is he the man we have summoned?  
Is that the man this shepherd means?

IOKASTE. Why think of him? 1000  
Forget this herdsman. Forget it all.  
This talk is a waste of time.

OEDIPUS. How can you say that,  
When the clues to my true birth are in my hands?

IOKASTE. For God's love, let us have no more questioning!

Is your life nothing to you?

My own is pain enough for me to bear.

1005

OEDIPUS. You need not worry. Suppose my mother a slave,

And born of slaves: no baseness can touch you.

IOKASTE. Listen to me, I beg you: do not do this thing!

OEDIPUS. I will not listen; the truth must be made known.

IOKASTE. Everything that I say is for your own good!

OEDIPUS.

My own good 1010

Snaps my patience, then; I want none of it.

IOKASTE. You are fatally wrong! May you never learn who you are!

OEDIPUS. Go, one of you, and bring the shepherd here.

Let us leave this woman to brag of her royal name.

IOKASTE. Ah, miserable!

1015

That is the only word I have for you now.

That is the only word I can ever have. (*Exit into the palace.*)

CHORAGOS. Why has she left us, Oedipus? Why has she gone

In such a passion of sorrow? I fear this silence:

Something dreadful may come of it.

OEDIPUS.

Let it come!

1020

However base my birth, I must know about it.

The Queen, like a woman, is perhaps ashamed

To think of my low origin. But I

Am a child of Luck; I can not be dishonored.

Luck is my mother; the passing months, my brothers,

1025

Have seen me rich and poor.

If this is so,

How could I wish that I were someone else?

How could I not be glad to know my birth?

### Ode III

#### *Strophe*

CHORAGOS. If ever the coming time were known

To my heart's pondering,

1030

Kithairon, now by Heaven I see the torches

At the festival of the next full moon,  
 And see the dance, and hear the choir sing  
 A grace to your gentle shade:  
 Mountain where Oedipus was found, 1035  
 O mountain guard of a noble race!  
 May the god who heals us lend his aid,  
 And let that glory come to pass  
 For our king's cradling-ground.

*Antistrophe*

Of the nymphs that flower beyond the years, 1040  
 Who bore you, royal child,  
 To Pan of the hills or the timberline Apollo,  
 Cold in delight where the upland clears,  
 Or Hermes for whom Kyllene's heights are piled?  
 Or flushed as evening cloud, 1045  
 Great Dionysos, roamer of mountains,  
 He—was it he who found you there,  
 And caught you up in his own proud  
 Arms from the sweet god-ravisher  
 Who laughed by the Muses' fountains? 1050

**Scene IV**

OEDIPUS. Sirs: though I do not know the man,  
 I think I see him coming, this shepherd we want:  
 He is old, like our friend here, and the men  
 Bringing him seem to be servants of my house.  
 But you can tell, if you have ever seen him. 1055

*(Enter SHEPHERD escorted by SERVANTS.)*

CHORAGOS. I know him, he was Laios' man. You can trust him.

OEDIPUS. Tell me first, you from Corinth: is this the shepherd  
 We were discussing?

MESSENGER. This is the very man.

OEDIPUS. *(to SHEPHERD)*. Come here. No, look at me. You must  
 answer

Everything I ask.—You belonged to Laios? 1060

SHEPHERD. Yes: born his slave, brought up in his house.

OEDIPUS. Tell me: what kind of work did you do for him?

SHEPHERD. I was a shepherd of his, most of my life.

OEDIPUS. Where mainly did you go for pasturage?

SHEPHERD. Sometimes Kithairon, sometimes the hills near-by. 1065

OEDIPUS. Do you remember ever seeing this man out there?

SHEPHERD. What would he be doing there? This man?

OEDIPUS. This man standing here. Have you ever seen him before?

SHEPHERD. No. At least, not to my recollection.

MESSENGER. And that is not strange, my lord. But I'll refresh 1070

His memory: he must remember when we two

Spent three whole seasons together, March to September,

On Kithairon or thereabouts. He had two flocks;

I had one. Each autumn I'd drive mine home

And he would go back with his to Laios' sheepfold.— 1075

Is this not true, just as I have described it?

SHEPHERD. True, yes; but it was all so long ago.

MESSENGER. Well, then: do you remember, back in those days,

That you gave me a baby boy to bring up as my own?

SHEPHERD. What if I did? What are you trying to say? 1080

MESSENGER. King Oedipus was once that little child.

SHEPHERD. Damn you, hold your tongue!

OEDIPUS. No more of that!

It is your tongue needs watching, not this man's.

SHEPHERD. My king, my master, what is it I have done wrong?

OEDIPUS. You have not answered his question about the boy. 1085

SHEPHERD. He does not know . . . He is only making trouble . . .

OEDIPUS. Come, speak plainly, or it will go hard with you.

SHEPHERD. In God's name, do not torture an old man!

OEDIPUS. Come here, one of you; bind his arms behind him.

SHEPHERD. Unhappy king! What more do you wish to learn? 1090

OEDIPUS. Did you give this man the child he speaks of?

SHEPHERD. I did.

And I would to God I had died that very day.

OEDIPUS. You will die now unless you speak the truth.

SHEPHERD. Yet if I speak the truth, I am worse than dead.

OEDIPUS. (to ATTENDANT) He intends to draw it out, apparently— 1095

SHEPHERD. No! I have told you already that I gave him the boy.

OEDIPUS. Where did you get him? From your house? From somewhere else?

SHEPHERD. Not from mine, no. A man gave him to me.

OEDIPUS. Is that man here? Whose house did he belong to?

SHEPHERD. For God's love, my king, do not ask me any more! 1100

OEDIPUS. You are a dead man if I have to ask you again.

SHEPHERD. Then . . . Then the child was from the palace of Laios.

OEDIPUS. A slave child? or a child of his own line?

SHEPHERD. Ah, I am on the brink of dreadful speech!

OEDIPUS. And I of dreadful hearing. Yet I must hear. 1105

SHEPHERD. If you must be told, then . . .

They said it was Laios' child;

But it is your wife who can tell you about that.

OEDIPUS. My wife!—Did she give it to you?

SHEPHERD. My lord, she did.

OEDIPUS. Do you know why?

SHEPHERD. I was told to get rid of it.

OEDIPUS. Oh heartless mother!

SHEPHERD. But in dread of prophecies . . . 1110

OEDIPUS. Tell me.

SHEPHERD. It was said that the boy would kill his own father.

OEDIPUS. Then why did you give him over to this old man?

SHEPHERD. I pitied the baby, my king,

And I thought that this man would take him far away  
To his own country.

He saved him—but for what a fate!

1115

For if you are what this man says you are,  
No man living is more wretched than Oedipus.

OEDIPUS. Ah God!

It was true!

All the prophecies!

—Now,

O Light, may I look on you for the last time!

1120

I, Oedipus,

Oedipus, damned in his birth, in his marriage damned,  
Damned in the blood he shed with his own hand! (*He  
rushes into the palace.*)

#### Ode IV

##### *Strophe 1*

CHORUS. Alas for the seed of men.

What measure shall I give these generations

1125

That breathe on the void and are void

And exist and do not exist?

Who bears more weight of joy

Than mass of sunlight shifting in images,

Or who shall make his thought stay on

1130

That down time drifts away?

Your splendor is all fallen.

O naked brow of wrath and tears,

O change of Oedipus!

I who saw your days call no man blest—

1135

Your great days like ghosts gone.

##### *Antistrophe 1*

That mind was a strong bow.

Deep, how deep you drew it then, hard archer,

At a dim fearful range,

And brought dear glory down!

1140

You overcame the stranger—  
 The virgin with her hooking lion claws—  
 And though death sang, stood like a tower  
 To make pale Thebes take heart.  
 Fortress against our sorrow! 1145  
 True king, giver of laws,  
 Majestic Oedipus!  
 No prince in Thebes had ever such renown,  
 No prince won such grace of power.

*Strophe 2*

And now of all men ever known 1150  
 Most pitiful is this man's story:  
 His fortunes are most changed, his state  
 Fallen to a low slave's  
 Ground under bitter fate.  
 O Oedipus, most royal one! 1155  
 The great door that expelled you to the light  
 Gave at night—ah, gave night to your glory:  
 As to the father, to the fathering son.  
 All understood too late.  
 How could that queen whom Laios won, 1160  
 The garden that he harrowed at his height,  
 Be silent when that act was done?

*Antistrophe 2*

But all eyes fail before time's eye,  
 All actions come to justice there.  
 Though never willed, though far down the deep past, 1165  
 Your bed, your dread sirings,  
 Are brought to book at last.  
 Child by Laios doomed to die,  
 Then doomed to lose that fortunate little death,  
 Would God you never took breath in this air 1170  
 That with my wailing lips I take to cry:  
 For I weep the world's outcast.  
 I was blind, and now I can tell why:  
 Asleep, for you had given ease of breath  
 To Thebes, while the false years went by. 1175

## Exodos

*Enter, from the palace, SECOND MESSENGER.*

SECOND MESSENGER. Elders of Thebes, most honored in  
this land,

What horrors are yours to see and hear, what weight  
Of sorrow to be endured, if, true to your birth,  
You venerate the line of Labdakos!

I think neither Istros nor Phasis, those great rivers, 1180  
Could purify this place of all the evil  
It shelters now, or soon must bring to light—  
Evil not done unconsciously, but willed.

The greatest griefs are those we cause ourselves.

CHORAGOS. Surely, friend, we have grief enough already; 1185  
What new sorrow do you mean?

SECOND MESSENGER. The queen is dead.

CHORAGOS. O miserable queen! But at whose hand?

SECOND MESSENGER. Her own.

The full horror of what happened you can not know,  
For you did not see it; but I, who did, will tell you  
As clearly as I can how she met her death. 1190

When she had left us,

In passionate silence, passing through the court,  
She ran to her apartment in the house,

Her hair clutched by the fingers of both hands.

She closed the doors behind her; then, by that bed 1195  
Where long ago the fatal son was conceived—

That son who should bring about his father's death—

We heard her call upon Laios, dead so many years,

And heard her wail for the double fruit of her marriage,  
A husband by her husband, children by her child. 1200

Exactly how she died I do not know:

For Oedipus burst in moaning and would not let us

Keep vigil to the end: it was by him

As he stormed about the room that our eyes were caught.

From one to another of us he went, begging a sword, 1205

Hunting the wife who was not his wife, the mother



Whose womb had carried his own children and himself.  
 I do not know: it was none of us aided him,  
 But surely one of the gods was in control!  
 For with a dreadful cry 1210  
 He hurled his weight, as though wrenched out of himself,  
 At the twin doors: the bolts gave, and he rushed in.  
 And there we saw her hanging, her body swaying  
 From the cruel cord she had noosed about her neck.  
 A great sob broke from him, heartbreaking to hear, 1215  
 As he loosed the rope and lowered her to the ground.  
  
 I would blot out from my mind what happened next!  
 For the king ripped from her gown the golden brooches  
 That were her ornament, and raised them, and plunged  
 them down  
 Straight into his own eyeballs, crying, "No more, 1220  
 No more shall you look on the misery about me,  
 The horrors of my own doing! Too long you have known  
 The faces of those whom I should never have seen,  
 Too long been blind to those for whom I was searching!  
 From this hour, go in darkness!" And as he spoke, 1225  
 He struck at his eyes—not once, but many times;  
 And the blood spattered his beard,  
 Bursting from his ruined sockets like red hail.  
  
 So from the unhappiness of two this evil has sprung,  
 A curse on the man and woman alike. The old 1230  
 Happiness of the house of Labdakos  
 Was happiness enough: where is it today?  
 It is all wailing and ruin, disgrace, death—all  
 The misery of mankind that has a name—  
 And it is wholly and for ever theirs. 1235

CHORAGOS. Is he in agony still? Is there no rest for him?

SECOND MESSENGER. He is calling for someone to open the  
 doors wide

So that all the children of Kadmos may look upon  
 His father's murderer, his mother's—no,  
 I cannot say it!

And then he will leave Thebes, 1240  
 Self-exiled, in order that the curse

Which he himself pronounced may depart from the house.  
 He is weak, and there is none to lead him,  
 So terrible is his suffering.

But you will see:

Look, the doors are opening; in a moment 1245  
 You will see a thing that would crush a heart of stone.

*(The central door is opened; OEDIPUS, blinded, is led in.)*

CHORAGOS. Dreadful indeed for men to see.

Never have my own eyes  
 Looked on a sight so full of fear.

Oedipus! 1250

What madness came upon you, what daemon  
 Leaped on your life with heavier  
 Punishment than a mortal man can bear?

No: I can not even  
 Look at you, poor ruined one. 1255

And I would speak, question, ponder,  
 If I were able. No.  
 You make me shudder.

OEDIPUS. God. God.

Is there a sorrow greater? 1260  
 Where shall I find harbor in this world?  
 My voice is hurled far on a dark wind.  
 What has God done to me?

CHORAGOS. Too terrible to think of, or to see.

### *Strophe 1*

OEDIPUS. O cloud of night, 1265  
 Never to be turned away: night coming on,  
 I can not tell how: night like a shroud!  
 My fair winds brought me here.

O God. Again

The pain of the spikes where I had sight,  
 The flooding pain 1270  
 Of memory, never to be gouged out.

CHORAGOS. This is not strange.

You suffer it all twice over, remorse in pain,  
 Pain in remorse.

OEDIPUS. Ah dear friend 1275  
 Are you faithful even yet, you alone?  
 Are you still standing near me, will you stay here,  
 Patient, to care for the blind?  
The blind man!  
 Yet even blind I know who it is attends me,  
 By the voice's tone— 1280  
 Though my new darkness hide the comforter.

CHORAGOS. Oh fearful act!  
What god was it drove you to rake black  
Night across your eyes?

OEDIPUS. Apollo. Apollo. Dear  
Children, the god was Apollo.  
He brought my sick, sick fate upon me.  
But the blinding hand was my own!  
How could I bear to see  
When all my sight was horror everywhere?

OEDIPUS. And now what is left?  
 Images? Love? A greeting even,  
 Sweet to the senses? Is there anything?  
 Ah, no, friends: lead me away. 1295  
 Lead me away from Thebes.  
 Lead the great wreck  
 And hell of Oedipus, whom the gods hate.

### Antistrophe 2

OEDIPUS. Death take the man who unbound  
 My feet on that hillside  
 And delivered me from death to life! What life?  
 If only I had died,  
 This weight of monstrous doom  
 Could not have dragged me and my darlings down.

CHORAGOS. I would have wished the same.

OEDIPUS. Oh never to have come here

With my father's blood upon me! Never

To have been the man they call his mother's husband!

Oh accurst! Oh child of evil,

1310

To have entered that wretched bed—

the selfsame one!

More primal than sin itself, this fell to me.

CHORAGOS. I do not know what words to offer you.

You were better dead than alive and blind.

OEDIPUS. Do not counsel me any more. This punishment

1315

That I have laid upon myself is just.

If I had eyes,

I do not know how I could bear the sight

Of my father, when I came to the house of Death,

Or my mother: for I have sinned against them both

1320

So vilely that I could not make my peace

By strangling my own life.

Or do you think my children,

Born as they were born, would be sweet to my eyes?

Ah never, never! Nor this town with its high walls,

Nor the holy images of the gods.

For I,

1325

Thrice miserable! Oedipus, noblest of all the line

Of Kadmos, have condemned myself to enjoy

These things no more, by my own malediction

Expelling that man whom the gods declared

To be a defilement in the house of Laios.

1330

After exposing the rankness of my own guilt,

How could I look men frankly in the eyes?

No I swear it,

If I could have stifled my hearing at its source,

I would have done it and made all this body

1335

A tight cell of misery, blank to light and sound:

So I should have been safe in my dark mind

Beyond external evil.

Ah Kithairon!

Why did you shelter me? When I was cast upon you,

Why did I not die? Then I should never  
Have shown the world my execrable birth. 1340

Ah Polybos! Corinth, city that I believed  
The ancient seat of my ancestors: how fair  
I seemed, your child! And all the while this evil  
Was cancerous within me!

For I am sick 1345  
In my own being, sick in my origin.

O three roads, dark ravine, woodland and way  
Where three roads met: you, drinking my father's blood,  
My own blood, spilled by my own hand: can you remember  
The unspeakable things I did there, and the things 1350  
I went on from there to do?

O marriage, marriage!  
The act that engendered me, and again the act  
Performed by the son in the same bed—

Ah, the net  
Of incest, mingling fathers, brothers, sons,  
With brides, wives, mothers: the last evil 1355  
That can be known by men: no tongue can say  
How evil!

No. For the love of God, conceal me  
Somewhere far from Thebes; or kill me; or hurl me  
Into the sea, away from men's eyes for ever.  
Come, lead me, You need not fear to touch me. 1360  
Of all men, I alone can bear this guilt.

*(Enter KREON.)*

CHORAGOS. Kreon is here now. As to what you ask,  
He may decide the course to take. He only  
Is left to protect the city in your place.

OEDIPUS. Alas, how can I speak to him? What right have I 1365  
To beg his courtesy whom I have deeply wronged?

KREON. I have not come to mock you, Oedipus,  
Or to reproach you, either.  
(To ATTENDANTS) —You, standing there:  
If you have lost all respect for man's dignity,  
At least respect the flame of Lord Helios: 1370  
Do not allow this pollution to show itself

Openly here, an affront to the earth  
 And Heaven's rain and the light of day. No, take him  
 Into the house as quickly as you can.  
 For it is proper 1375  
 That only the close kindred see his grief.

OEDIPUS. I pray you in God's name, since your courtesy  
 Ignores my dark expectations, visiting  
 With mercy this man of all men most execrable:  
 Give me what I ask—for your good, not for mine. 1380

KREON. And what is it that you turn to me begging for?

OEDIPUS. Drive me out of this country as quickly as may be  
 To a place where no human voice can ever greet me.

KREON. I should have done that before now—only,  
 God's will had not been wholly revealed to me. 1385

OEDIPUS. But his command is plain: the parricide  
 Must be destroyed. I am that evil man.

KREON. That is the sense of it, yes; but as things are,  
 We had best discover clearly what is to be done.

OEDIPUS. You would learn more about a man like me? 1390

KREON. You are ready now to listen to the god.

OEDIPUS. I will listen. But it is to you  
 That I must turn for help. I beg you, hear me.  
 The woman in there—  
 Give her whatever funeral you think proper: 1395  
 She is your sister.

—But let me go, Kreon!

Let me purge my father's Thebes of the pollution  
 Of my living here, and go out to the wild hills,  
 To Kithairon, that has won such fame with me,  
 The tomb my mother and father appointed for me, 1400  
 And let me die there, as they willed I should.  
 And yet I know  
 Death will not ever come to me through sickness  
 Or in any natural way: I have been preserved  
 For some unthinkable fate. But let that be. 1405

1410

1415

1435

Engendered you at the fount of his own existence!  
That is what they will say of you.

Then, whom 1440  
Can you ever marry? There are no bridegrooms for you,  
And your lives must wither away in sterile dreaming.

O Kreon, son of Menoikeus!  
You are the only father my daughters have,  
Since we, their parents, are both of us gone for ever. 1445  
They are your own blood: you will not let them  
Fall into beggary and loneliness;  
You will keep them from the miseries that are mine!  
Take pity on them; see, they are only children,  
Friendless except for you. Promise me this, 1450  
Great prince, and give me your hand in token of it.

(KREON *clasps his right hand.*)

Children:  
I could say much, if you could understand me,  
But as it is, I have only this prayer for you:  
Live where you can, be as happy as you can— 1455  
Happier, please God, than God has made your father.

KREON. Enough. You have wept enough. Now go within.

OEDIPUS. I must; but it is hard.

KREON. Time eases all things.

OEDIPUS. You know my mind, then?

KREON. Say what you desire.

OEDIPUS. Send me from Thebes!

KREON. God grant that I may! 1460

OEDIPUS. But since God hates me . . .

KREON. No, he will grant your wish.

OEDIPUS. You promise?

KREON. I can not speak beyond my knowledge.

OEDIPUS. Then lead me in.



KREON. Come now, and leave your children.

OEDIPUS. No! Do not take them from me!

KREON. Think no longer

That you are in command here, but rather think 1465

How, when you were, you served your own destruction.

*(Exeunt into the house all but the CHORUS; the CHORAGOS chants directly to the audience.)*

CHORAGOS. Men of Thebes: look upon Oedipus.

This the king who solved the famous riddle

And towered up, most powerful of men.

No mortal eyes but looked on him with envy, 1470

Yet in the end ruin swept over him.

Let every man in mankind's frailty

Consider his last day; and let none

Presume on his good fortune until he find

Life, at his death, a memory without pain. 1475

## Log Entry 1

Questions about your initial responses:

1. (end of Prologue): Write down five words that come to you as you think about the Prologue. What questions do you have?
2. (end of Scene I): What words represent your reaction now? What questions do you have? What do you predict will happen next?
3. (end of Scene II): What questions have been answered for you? What additional questions do you have? Was your prediction confirmed? What do you think comes next?
4. (end of Scene III): What five words would describe your view of Oedipus at this point? What five words would describe Iokaste?
5. (end of Scene IV and Exodos): Do you think Oedipus could have done anything different to cause a different outcome? What

could he have done, and how would that have changed the outcome? How did the actual outcome compare to your predicted outcome? What do you think about the fairness of the ending?

## Log Entry 2

Read or re-read the odes now. After you've read them, respond to the following questions in your log:

1. What seems to be the purpose of the odes?
2. What themes or patterns can you trace through them?
3. How are they different from the rest of the text?
4. What modern devices (sound, lights, other actors, special effects, and so on) fill the roles of the chorus in today's plays and films?

## Questioning the Play

After an initial reading of *Oedipus Rex*, you may still have several questions about the events of the play. Modern readers often want to know why Iokaste would marry someone young enough to be her son or why she did not notice the scars on Oedipus's ankles. What do you wonder about?

In presenting a concept through the actions of characters, Sophocles has omitted details that were not essential to his idea. His decision leaves gaps in the story that modern readers want filled. Filling those gaps is an act of interpretation, just as responding to the actual words and performance of the play is. Your wondering and the answers you supply offer additional angles of vision for understanding the play.

## Log Entry 3

Before you read the play a second time, list several details that you wonder about. As you re-read, cross off those details that Sophocles reveals. After your second reading of the play, read the poems at the

end of the chapter to see how current poets deal with gaps that they identify. Be cautious, though. Don't think that the modern poets are telling us about the characters as Sophocles conceived of them. Remember that these are modern transformations, not to be taken as the rest of the story that Sophocles knew but omitted. There are suggestions at the end of the chapter for ways in which you might want to deal creatively with one or more of the details that remain on your list.

## Performance

Although it may be an unusual practice for those of us who are worried about doing as much as possible in too little time, a second reading of certain works of literature often leads to greater understanding of the text. As a performer/director, you should re-read the entire play, looking for the subtext, the other nine-tenths of the iceberg, that Sophocles does not state explicitly. You have two large questions to answer: What might have been Sophocles' purpose in presenting the traditional story in the way he did in this play, and what emotions would you like an audience to feel as they view the play today? As you explore Sophocles' purpose, you also explore some of the decisions he must have made in writing the play. Why, for example, does he continue the play beyond Oedipus's realization and blinding? Some critics suggest it should have ended there. And, as you think about the emotions you would like to create in a contemporary audience, you must make your own decisions about the ways the subtext can be used to accomplish your purposes.

## Collaborating

In a group of three to five, discuss the following questions after re-reading the play.

- What are some of the implications of Sophocles' use of the imagery of blindness and insight? How does he use them ironically? What are other uses of irony in the play?

- The play is something of a detective story but with a twist—the detective is also the criminal he seeks. To us it may seem odd that the truth dawns on other people before it does on Oedipus. What effect does Sophocles achieve by revealing the truth in the way that he does?
- How does Kreon feel toward Oedipus? What values does he represent? Do his feelings change during the play? In what ways might Kreon be adversely or positively affected by the revelations at the end?
- What single line contains one of the themes of the play? Why do you think so?

## Performance

Put your increased understanding of the play to work now. By performing one segment of *Oedipus Rex*, you can reveal the subtext, present your interpretation to others, and, in the process, enlarge your concept of the play.

- Select one small part of the play to perform. Select a significant segment; it may represent a theme, reveal the nature of one or two characters, or advance the plot through an important conflict or through the revelation of an important piece of information.
- Find other people to take the parts in your segment—in most cases, you will need only one or two others. Together examine the segment for ways to reveal the print message through non-print means: pacing, tone, emphasis, silence, and blocking.
- After you have spent some time preparing, you will present your segment for the class. Don't worry if another group selects the same segment—that provides an excellent opportunity to discuss the ways different directors present a play.
- If you have plenty of time, you may want to memorize your lines. If you do not memorize your speeches, though, be sure to practice them frequently so you need not rely on the script the

whole time. In fact, the performance will look better if you put your lines on small notecards instead of carrying the entire book to the front of the room.

## Log Entry 4

Considering the following questions may help you plan your performance.

- What is significant about the segment you have chosen?
- What is the relationship between (or among) the characters? How will you show this relationship?
- Where will the characters move during the segment? Draw a floor plan to record your ideas.
- What has occurred earlier in the play that affects this segment?
- In presenting your segment, will you modernize it or will you stay with the traditional form?
- What are the most important words and phrases in this segment? How will you indicate those?
- If there is a conflict in your segment, how will you play that?
- How will you deal with irony if it exists in your segment?

If you can make copies of your segment, you can mark on those, recording your decisions. If not, you could use sticky notes in the margins of the textbook.

## Transforming *Oedipus Rex*

Linda Yee was a high school student in California when she wrote "Oedipus in Exile." Her poem is based on metaphors that she created for Oedipus as she strove for a fuller understanding of his character. Metaphors are useful tools for transformations, as you learned in

Chapter 2, because they enlarge our view of a character. As you read the poem silently first, then aloud, think about the additional interpretations you gain through the metaphors and the mood that Yee creates.

### **Oedipus in Exile**

*Linda Yee*

A dolphin's low moan  
Echoes in the night.  
The sound, like tidal waves  
That bash against jagged cliffs,  
Irritates the ears  
Of suppliants  
Who must not hear.

The slick blue fish  
Tangles in the meshy trap, is  
Plucked from the water.  
The grey, still air suffocates.  
He twists, wavers back and forth,  
Then delivers a  
Single acrid cry  
Above the tuna's  
Floundering splashes.

The brilliant, burning sun  
Scorches his eyes.  
He can only listen  
To the crystal chimes  
Of a distant buoy.  
They arouse shadows  
Of a bright, purple past.

Once, in a dream,  
He was a bull,  
With horns as swift and sharp  
As a diamond's edge.  
His head, a flickering ember,  
A brute, "whom all . . . call the great,"  
Stands as stout as an oak tree  
Ready to crush  
Commoner or king.

The gates snap open.  
He shoots into the ring.  
Loud screams muffle his ears.  
Run, capture the waving red cloak.  
Horns lunge forward  
For the kill.

It's gone. He stumbles  
And flinches.  
A sword grates  
Through his eyeballs.

A wave rushes back  
Up on shore  
and falls  
Again and again.  
The pain's bitter resonance:  
Prickly pine tree thorns  
Pinching at the eyes and joints.

This poem can give us a fuller view of Oedipus. But what about Iokaste? What did Sophocles tell us about her as a wife, mother, or woman? What is her role in the downfall of Oedipus? Ruth Eisenberg, a drama teacher in New York state, was curious about what Sophocles did not include. In fact, she became so intrigued by this one character that she wrote a poem giving Iokaste's version of the story. That poem, along with Eisenberg's explanation of her writing process, may fill in some of the details that you wondered about. Eisenberg uses a traditional English spelling when she writes of "Jocasta."

## **Jocasta**

*Ruth Eisenberg*

### I

When she learned the king's power,  
Jocasta lost delight in being queen.  
Laius was a cold, dry man. Looking at him  
brought the image of her baby, his feet  
pierced and bound, her baby left to die  
on the mountain slope. They would  
have no other children.

I remember Laius drunk that night, crying  
for Chrysippus, the source of his curse.  
Wanting his boy, he took me instead  
and threw me on my back to have his way.  
I am fifteen and afraid to resist  
and tell myself it is my husband's right;  
the gods decree a wife obey her spouse.

Sober, Laius recalls Apollo's threat:  
our son will kill him, beget upon me.  
Nine months drag like oxen ploughing.  
With icy eyes Laius watches me swell.  
I fear the gods and beg Hera for a girl,  
but as foretold, I give birth to a son.  
Laius takes the child to bind its feet.  
The baby cries, and Laius turns away.  
He summons a servant and orders me to hand  
my baby over, threatening me when I cry.  
The king will keep his own hands clean.

At the public altar, Laius  
offered bulls and lambs in ritual  
slaughter. The everburning fire raged  
so the offerings charred, and Jocasta  
trembled at the gods' displeasure.

Upon the gates this dawn, a strange creature  
appeared and woke all Thebes. In raucous voice  
she cried, "A riddle. Who'll solve my riddle?"  
At first our people came to gawk, then marvel.  
Some trembled, children hid their heads and cried.  
I've heard old tales the minstrels sing of her,  
and never did expect to live to see  
a Sphinx—part woman, bird, and lion too . . .  
And what she asks is strange as well: four legs,  
then two, then three. What can it be? No one  
knows the answer. No one.

The Sphinx brought pestilence and  
drought. Rivers and streams ran dry, vines  
shriveled. But until her riddle was solved,



the creature would not leave. On the gates  
she sat, her destructive song echoing  
from empty wells.

My life is a toad. All day and all night  
the Sphinx. We cannot escape her song.  
Song! More like wail or whine or scream.  
Laius is useless as always. Deceitful  
man, I hate him, hate his touch.

The land is parched; flocks die. Our people  
haggard, starving, plead to ease their distress.  
What can we do? Mortals cannot make the rain.  
I suggest Laius seek Apollo's help.  
To get away, he welcomes the idea to go  
to Delphi and proclaims a pilgrimage.

On the sunswept road to Delphi,  
Laius was killed. The servant reporting  
the death begged Jocasta to let him tend  
flocks in the hills. Sending him on his way,  
she shut herself in the palace.

The prophecy was false. If gods control  
all things, how can that be? For surely chance  
does not . . . No, no. Yet Laius killed our son  
and not the other way. That sin diseased  
his soul. I bless the gods that I,  
at last, am free.

I dream of my baby night after night.  
He is dancing for the gods with bound feet.  
I do not understand how he can dance so.  
When he jumps, he trips, falling in a heap.  
The gods just laugh and turn away to drink.  
I sit ravelling knots. The knots become rope.  
I wake shaking and muffle my tears in the sheets.

## II

"Man" answered the young stranger  
whose red hair caught the sun's rays,  
and the riddle was solved. True to her

promise, the Sphinx dashed herself to death. Thebes was free.

Hailing their hero, the people  
elected Oedipus king. Gratefully,  
he accepted the rule and with it the hand  
of Thebes' queen, Jocasta.

I see young Oedipus in radiant  
sunlight, Apollo blinding me to all  
but young and vital strength. Deep in myself  
I feel a pulsebeat, something asleep  
begins to wake, as though a dormant seed  
sends up a shoot, opens a leaf. That's how  
Aphrodite touches me. I love this youth.  
My sun, I rise to him and rise with him.

From a land of rock and misery, Thebes  
became a bower. Brilliant poppies  
dotted the land. The wells filled, crops  
flourished, and the flocks grew fat again.

Before the people's eyes, Jocasta  
became young. Her dark hair gleamed, her  
eye was bright and her laughter cheered  
the halls of the palace.

Oedipus has become my Apollo warming  
my days and nights. I am eighteen again  
with poppies in my hair. I am the poppies,  
bright little blooms with milk in them.  
Like them, I seem to spring from rocky ground.  
Like their color and his hair, our love flames.

Sweet Aphrodite, you rush through me, a stream  
until you burst like foam that crests the sea.  
Your blessing washes what was once a barren  
ground. I walk among the roses, feel  
your blush upon my cheeks. Oh lovely goddess,  
I send you swans and doves.

Thebes prospered these years:  
the gnarled olive bent lower with fruit.  
Lambs frisked in the fields and pipers'

songs rang through the hills. Jocasta had  
four children. Psalms of joy were sung  
and danced for the gods.

With four children, the hours run away.  
Their hunger, games and tears take all my time.  
In bed, with Oedipus, I sleep in peace.  
He was at first my headstrong bull, but now  
he is what a man, a king, should be.

I like to see him walking in the yard,  
his stiff, funny gait, his hair burnished  
by Apollo's brilliant rays.

Mine turns gray but he doesn't seem to mind.  
Our love has brought to me the joy I missed  
when I was young and thought I'd never know.

At last, I lay to rest my little boy,  
his shadow vanished now from all my dreams.

### III

Years of plenty at an end, Thebes  
was inflicted with drought. The earth  
burned as crops withered, cattle and  
sheep sickened.

While days were once too short, now each one drags  
a slow furrow, the earth heavy with heat,  
lament and prayer. When I go to the fields  
the women clutch my gown and plead my help.  
Too many children sicken. The healthy droop.  
At home, the girls sit listless, my sons tangle  
while Oedipus complains his ankles twinge.  
He limps and growls just like a wounded pup.

Jocasta, very gray now, walked  
with a more measured step. More than  
a loving wife, she was also counselor  
to Oedipus.

Blaming himself because the land is parched,  
Oedipus frets, alarmed he's failed the gods

somehow, that they are punishing Thebes.  
 In turn I pray, lighting fire after fire,  
 but none burns true. I call on Aphrodite  
 and offer her doves, but they flap their wings  
 and peck each others' eyes. When I ask Apollo  
 to dim his eye, his answer scalds.

No relief at hand, Oedipus sought  
 aid from Delphi. The report came back  
 a confusing riddle about Laius' death.  
 Suspecting treason, Oedipus feared  
 conspiracy against his own throne.

Oedipus needs someone to blame. He calls  
 Creon traitor, Tiresias false seer.  
 I take him in my arms and stroke his hair.  
 He tells me what Tiresias has foreseen.

I laugh and tell him I too once believed  
 that prophecy controlled our lives, that seers  
 had magic vision the rest of us did not.  
 I tell the story of Laius, how it  
 was foretold he would die at his son's hand  
 and how that baby died when one week old.

As I speak I feel so strange, as though my tale  
 came from another life about someone else.

My words do not comfort, they flame new fears.  
 He relates what drove him from home, tales that he  
 would kill his father and bring rank fruit  
 from his mother's womb. He fears he has  
 been cursed. Dear gods, how can I comfort him?

#### IV

From Corinth, a messenger  
 brought news of Polybus' death,  
 the king whom Oedipus called father.

You say that Polybus is dead. Dare I  
 greet death with joy? Can that be blasphemy?  
 My heart flies into song: His father's dead—  
 my Oedipus lives safe. His prophecy

is false. Is false as Laius' was. Oh bless  
your fate, dear love. You need no longer fear.

Corinth wished Oedipus to return  
and rule. Fearing he would sleep with  
his mother, Oedipus refused. Nothing  
to fear, the messenger assured. Merope  
was a barren woman.

Jocasta began to tremble. Her hands  
rose to cover her mouth.

What's this? What's this? What words do I hear?  
How can I shut his silly mouth, tell him  
Go. Leave. We will not heed your words.  
My tongue stops, rooted in my mouth.  
I look at Oedipus. He does not see  
me watching him. His face is strained, his eyes  
are glaring blue. I try to stop the questions.  
"Oedipus, I beg you, do not hear this out."

When Oedipus insisted, the  
messenger told the story of the king's  
infancy—how he, a shepherd then,  
had helped to save the king's life  
when a baby, a baby with bound feet.

Oh God. Oh cold, gold God. Apollo,  
you chill me. My mind is ice, and I hear  
my mouth say freezing words to Oedipus.  
To my husband. My son. "God keep you from  
the knowledge of who you are. Unhappy,  
Oedipus, my poor, damned Oedipus,  
that is all I can call you, and the last thing  
I shall ever call you."

V

Her face ashen, Jocasta rushed  
into the palace, her hands showing her  
the way to her own quarters. She  
ordered the guards to let no one in.  
Ignoring all offers of help, she commanded  
her women to leave her alone.

I can't believe. I can't believe. Oh God,  
He is my son. I've loved my son but not  
as mothers should, but in my bed, in me.  
All that I loved the most, his youth that made  
our love the summer sun, wrong, all wrong.  
Vile. He caressed me here and here. And I  
returned his touch. Odious hands. My flesh  
crawls with worms.

My god, we've had four children.

In her chamber, she looked at her  
bed, sat on it, then jumped up as though  
stung. Covering her eyes with her hands,  
she shook her head back and forth, again  
and again, her body rocking.

Oh, Oedipus, what good was our love if  
it comes only to shame? To children whom  
all Thebes can curse? Such children, even ours,  
are rightly damned.

Although we could not know who we were  
and loved in innocence, still we are monsters  
in the eyes of god and man. Our names will mean  
disgrace and guilt forever.

Walking to her dressing table,  
she stood before it picking up small  
objects: combs, a gold box, a pair of  
brooches. Noticing a bracelet given her  
by her father when she was a bride,  
she let forth a dreadful groan.

Oh Laius, Laius, you brought this on me.  
My fate was sealed my wedding day. Chrysippus  
was innocent as I; for you this curse  
was uttered, a curse that falls on me. Oh,  
that I must bear the shame, that I must be  
destroyed by your corruption. And our son,  
because you sinned, is ruined, damned.

My marriage day . . . what choices did I have?  
As many as the night you came to me.

The only choice a woman has is that she wed  
accepting what the gods and men decree.  
It is not just. It never can be right.

Moving decisively, she walked to the  
doors and bolted them, straining against  
their heavy weight. The women on the other  
side called to her, but again she bade them  
go away.

Falling on her knees, she pummeled  
her stomach as though to punish her  
womb. As she did, she called her child-  
ren's names, one name, Oedipus, again  
and again.

I thought him buried, forgotten. But no,  
for countless days and nights these many years  
he's thrust himself on me instead. My bed  
once stained with birthing blood is now forever  
stained; what once was love become a rank  
corruption.

Rising painfully, sore, she turned  
to the small altar in her chamber.  
Smashing a jar which held incense, she  
began in a voice of char to call on  
Apollo and Aphrodite.

As she raised her eyes, she raised  
her fist and shook it against  
the silent air.

Apollo, you blinded me to his scars,  
his age, any resemblance to Laius.  
And you, Aphrodite, cruel sister of the sun,  
set my woman's body afire, matching my  
ripe years and hungers with his youth and strength.  
Paralyzing my mind, you inflamed my heart.

The years I prayed to you and praised you  
were all charade. You so enjoyed my dance.  
We are your fools to trifle with, your joke.

We tremble to question what the future holds.  
As though it matters, we think asking spoils  
our luck. But your injustice mocks all hope.

I hear a chant pounding inside my head.  
Five babies. Five abominations.  
As though a chorus raises call to prayer.  
Five babies. Five abominations.

No call to prayer. It is a call to curse  
the gods. No longer will I be their fool.

From her robe, she removed her  
braided belt. As she looped its strands,  
she heard, from the courtyard, a man's  
voice scream in anguish. Undeflected, she  
tied the necessary knots, slipping the loop  
back and forth. Satisfied, she settled  
the noose around her neck.

Five babies cursed by heavenly whim,  
cursed in their lives without chance or hope.  
Mothers ought not to love their children so.

Gathering up her skirts, she climbed  
up on the stool.

And wives be more than merely bedside pawns.  
Those who cannot shape their lives are better  
dead.

She stepped onto the air.

Ruth Eisenberg, author of "Jocasta," speaks about her process of writing and revising the poem:

I needed to hear the poem. For me poetry is a spoken art, and as I write I always say the lines out loud. But to hear the poem in a voice other than mine, to hear the responses of others to the lines, would be, I knew, a great help. When it happened, interestingly enough, three women read the poem. My imaginative director friend, Joan Thorne, saw *Jocasta* as three women in one: the innocent, the queen, and the wife-mother. She also saw the five sections in two different



ways: first as musical themes, and secondly as a progressive movement towards a woman's interior life.

The reading revealed weaknesses in Sections III and IV. They were the least dramatically alive: the most narrative, most derivative, and the least felt. At this revelation I became aware of how intimidated I was by the play. How dare I to have trespassed on sacred ground? For me *Oedipus Rex* is the greatest play ever written. How could I challenge Sophocles on his own turf?

Then I realized I wasn't challenging him, that my turf and his were different. He was concerned with Oedipus. Jocasta's lines were for his reaction; she was his foil, and in her recognition scene, his antagonist. Sophocles didn't even give her many lines in that scene. Therefore, anything I had added didn't challenge him; rather, I had accepted an opportunity to fill in the blanks. I added new verses in her voice. Jocasta goes through an absolute roller coaster of feeling when she hears the words of the messenger from Corinth, from a sense of false reassurance to horror. She tries to protect Oedipus from the knowledge (he, if you recall, turns on her and mistakes her motive) and stands not just awed but appalled at the work of the gods.

## Collaborating

Using both poems, the play, your own scenes, and the interpretations of others in your class, think about the following questions. Discuss them with a small group of three to five.

- How would you describe the central characters of the play now? What are their hopes, their fears, their motivations?
- How do the later transformations in poetry shape your view of Sophocles' theme? If Sophocles wanted to present the idea that we cannot control everything because we cannot know everything, how does either of the subsequent poems add light to his theme? If Sophocles wanted people to see what happened when someone tried to defy the power of the gods, how does either poem contribute to that theme?
- Is there any relevance for modern viewers of the story of *Oedipus Rex* as told by Sophocles? If so, do the poems increase or detract from the relevance you identify?

## Building Your Course Portfolio

Select one or more of the following options to complete as portfolio entries. Your poem, essay, or video should demonstrate your understanding of how performing a text can transform it from words on a page into living people working out meaningful issues. Your portfolio entry should also represent your abilities to comprehend drama and to compose your thoughts effectively.

Save these entries to include in your final course portfolio.

### Portfolio Entry

- Read what critics have said about this play. Then do a persuasive essay or speech showing where you disagree with one of the critics and give reasons for your opinion.
- One motif that some people have identified in the play is duality—two apparently opposite terms that exist together, creating dramatic tension. Make a three-column chart, identifying dual elements and indicating their impact on the plot, characterizations, or themes of the play. Your columns would be labeled, from left to right: “first term,” “opposite term,” “impact.” For example, in *Oedipus Rex* you might have:

First Term	Opposite Term	Impact
sight	blindness	Although he is blind, Teiresias is the only person who can “see” the entire truth—irony heightens characterization of Oedipus’s “blindness”

Then write an essay about the effects of duality on your understanding of the play.

- Find another play to read, and select a segment to perform, analyzing it as you did in this chapter. The play could be any style; it need not be Greek. Include a videotape of the performance, along with all of your performance notes, for your portfolio.
- Write a poem or a scene that fills in one of the gaps in a play that you select. For example, if you choose *Oedipus Rex*, you might reinterpret Iokaste or turn part of Eisenberg's poem into a scene for a different version of the play. You could also show Kreon talking with Teiresias about Oedipus's puzzling behavior.



# 6

## Death and Transformation

**I**n Chapter 1, we asked you to look at a poem from seven angles of vision. These angles, in one way or another, have formed the basis for the reading and writing activities we have suggested throughout this book. We now ask you to work through all seven angles as you read and study an essay written by Annie Dillard. Reading an essay requires essentially the same processes as reading a poem. However, it often seems different because of the special demands of the essay as well as our own different purposes for reading this kind of writing.

## Angles of Vision on an Essay

Although the word *literature* generally evokes the idea of poems, stories, novels, and plays, it also includes that very large category we call the *essay*. An essay may be interpretive, persuasive, or argumentative; it may be speculative, meditative, or reflective. Annie Dillard's essay "Death of a Moth" falls into this latter category, but it contains a great deal of close observation as well.

As you read, use a double-entry log to note ideas that you find provocative, or jot down questions or ideas that relate to your experiences. Making quick drawings or sketches is a good way to register your response. Record words or phrases that you like or that you want to go back to later. Don't be too analytical on your first reading; read the essay with an eye toward making connections, or just to get the overall sense. You may find it helpful to reread the essay several times as you did the poem in Chapter 1. We hope that you will do so.

---

### Death of a Moth

Annie Dillard

I live on northern Puget Sound, in Washington state, alone. I have a gold cat, who sleeps on my legs, named Small. In the morning I joke to her blank face, Do you remember last night? Do you remember? I throw her out before breakfast, so I can eat.

There is a spider, too, in the bathroom, with whom I keep a sort of company. Her little outfit always reminds me of a certain moth I helped to kill. The spider herself is of uncertain lineage, bulbous at

the abdomen and drab. Her six-inch mess of a web works, works somehow, works miraculously, to keep her alive and me amazed. The web itself is in a corner behind the toilet, connecting tile wall to tile wall and floor, in a place where there is, I would have thought, scant traffic. Yet under the web are sixteen or so corpses she has tossed to the floor.

The corpses appear to be mostly sow bugs, those little armadillo creatures who like to travel flat out in houses, and die round. There is also a new shred of earwig, three old spider skins crinkled and clenched, and two moth bodies, wingless and huge and empty, moth bodies I drop to my knees to see.

Today the earwig shines darkly and gleams, what there is of him: a dorsal curve of thorax and abdomen, and a smooth pair of cerci<sup>1</sup> by which I knew his name. Next week, if the other bodies are any indication, he will be shrunk and gray, webbed to the floor with dust. The sow bugs beside him are hollow and empty of color, fragile, a breath away from brittle fluff. The spider skins lie on their sides, translucent and ragged, their legs drying in knots. And the moths, the empty moths, stagger against each other, headless, in a confusion of arching strips of chitin like peeling varnish, like a jumble of buttresses for cathedral domes, like nothing resembling moths, so that I should hesitate to call them moths, except that I have had some experience with the figure Moth reduced to a nub.

Two summers ago I was camping alone in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. I had hauled myself and gear up there to read, among other things, James Ramsey Ullman's *The Day on Fire*, a novel about Rimbaud that had made me want to be a writer when I was sixteen;<sup>2</sup> I was hoping it would do it again. So I read, lost, every day sitting under a tree by my tent, while warblers swung in the leaves overhead and bristle worms trailed their inches over the twiggy dirt at my feet; and I read every night by candlelight, while barred owls called in the forest and pale moths massed round my head in the clearing, where my light made a ring.

Moths kept flying into the candle. They would hiss and recoil, lost upside down in the shadows among my cooking pans. Or they would

<sup>1</sup> Plural of cercus, posterior feeler of an insect.

<sup>2</sup> French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891) himself began writing at age sixteen and produced his major work before he was twenty. Ullman's novel was published in 1958.

singe their wings and fall, and their hot wings, as if melted, would stick to the first thing they touched—a pan, a lid, a spoon—so that the snagged moths could flutter only in tiny arcs, unable to struggle free. These I could release by a quick flip with a stick; in the morning I would find my cooking stuff gilded with torn flecks of moth wings, triangles of shiny dust here and there on the aluminum. So I read, and boiled water, and replenished candles, and read on.

One night a moth flew into the candle, was caught, burnt dry and held. I must have been staring at the candle, or maybe I looked up when a shadow crossed my page; at any rate, I saw it all. A golden female moth, a biggish one with a two-inch wingspan, flapped into the firs, dropped her abdomen into the wet wax, stuck, flamed, frazzled and fried in a second. Her moving wings ignited like tissue paper, enlarging the circle of light in the clearing and creating out of the darkness the sudden blue sleeves of my sweater, the green leaves of jewelweed by my side, the ragged red trunk of a pine. At once the light contracted again and the moth's wings vanished in a fine, foul smoke. At the same time her six legs clawed, curled, blackened, and ceased, disappearing utterly. And her head jerked in spasms, making a spattering noise; her antennae crisped and burned away and her heaving mouth parts crackled like pistol fire. When it was all over, her head was, so far as I could determine, gone, gone the long way of her wings and legs. Had she been new, or old? Had she mated and laid her eggs, had she done her work? All that was left was the glowing horn shell of her abdomen and thorax—a fraying, partially collapsed gold tube jammed upright in the candle's round pool.

And then this moth-essence, this spectacular skeleton, began to act as a wick. She kept burning. The wax rose in the moth's body from her soaking abdomen to her thorax to the jagged hole where her head should be, and widened into a flame, a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk. That candle had two wicks, two flames of identical height, side by side. The moth's head was fire. She burned for two hours, until I blew her out.

She burned for two hours without changing, without bending or leaning—only glowing within, like a building fire glimpsed through silhouetted walls, like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God, while I read by her light, kindled, while Rimbaud in Paris burnt out his brains in a thousand poems, while night pooled wetly at my feet.



And that is why I believe those hollow crisps on the bathroom floor are moths. I think I know moths, and fragments of moths and chips and tatters of utterly empty moths, in any state. How many of you, I asked the people in my class, which of you want to give your lives and be writers? I was trembling from coffee, or cigarettes, or the closeness of faces all around me. (Is this what we live for? I thought; is this the only final beauty: the color of any skin in any light, and living, human eyes?) All hands rose to the question. (You, Nick? Will you? Margaret? Randy? Why do I want them to mean it?) And then I tried to tell them what the choice must mean: you can't be anything else. You must go at your life with a broadax. . . . They had no idea what I was saying. (I have two hands, don't I? And all this energy, for as long as I can remember. I'll do it in the evenings, after skiing, or on the way home from the bank, or after the children are asleep. . . .) They thought I was raving again. It's just as well.

I have three candles here on the table which I disentangle from the plants and light when visitors come. Small usually avoids them, although once she came too close and her tail caught fire; I rubbed it out before she noticed. The flames move light over everyone's skin, draw light to the surface of the faces of my friends. When the people leave I never blow the candles out, and after I'm asleep they flame and burn.

## Angle 1: Initial Response

### Log Entry 1

Read through the double-entry log you created as you read "Death of a Moth," and review your initial impressions. As Log Entry 1, make a summary statement about your first impressions of this essay.

## Angle 2: Story Threads

One of the ways we construct meaning as we read is to try to find connections between what is in the text and what is in our own

lives. Dillard begins "Death of a Moth" in a very down-to-earth way, describing in minute detail the spider that lives in her bathroom and the corpses that litter the area beneath its web. It isn't until the second paragraph that she turns to the narrative of the moth.

Recall an observation of something small, or think of an occasion when you became absorbed in watching something very small, something alive. Go back to that time in your mind and recreate the scene. What were you doing at the time? What caught your attention? What actually happened? What thoughts did the observation trigger? Why do you think you have remembered it?

## Log Entry 2

Record your recollected observations in close detail. Include a sketch of what you saw. Make any connections you can between your own observations and Dillard's in "Death of a Moth."

## Angle 3: Shifting Perspectives

In the last two paragraphs, Dillard refers to the people in her writing class. "They had no idea what I was saying," she writes. Imagine that you are in her class. You have listened to her talking about the moth that flew into the candle. She has used a lot of religious words and phrases, like "immolating monk" and "flamefaced virgin." You've just heard her say, "You must go at your life with a broadax." What is she talking about?

## Log Entry 3

Write an account of this class session with Dillard. Choose one of the following options for your account or make up your own scenario.

- Answer the question: What is she talking about?
- Write up your observations of the class for a friend who was sick and unable to attend class that day.
- Write a response to Dillard's remarks to hand in as your next assignment for the class.

Another way to shift perspectives when looking at a piece from different angles is to consider the title; what if this essay were to have a different title? Select alternative titles and indicate their implications in your log. Label this Log Entry 3A.

## Collaborating

Share your ideas with other members of your group. Talk about the similarities and differences in how each of you perceived what Dillard said in the hypothetical class. Compare the alternative titles you gave this essay, explaining your reasons for selecting them.

### Angle 4: Connecting with the Writer

It is often useful to know something about the background of an essayist. Annie Dillard's most famous work is her first book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a book of personal, reflective essays stemming from the very close observations of a small creek that ran behind her house. That book won her many readers and the Pulitzer Prize. She has also written a novel, a book of poems, other collections of essays, a book of literary theory, and an autobiography, *An American Childhood*. In reading "Death of a Moth," you learn something about Dillard's approach to writing as well as to life.

## Log Entry 4

Imagine that you were to interview Ms. Dillard about how she came to write the moth essay. What kinds of questions would you ask? How do you think she would respond? Use your own experiences of observing something in nature and any clues you might have from this essay to make up your response.

## Angle 5: Language and Craft

## Log Entry 5

One angle of vision that helps us get an overall picture of a complex work—essay, poem, or story—is a map. For this essay, construct a map that shows how the essay is developed. You may work with one partner and use any organizational pattern you find workable. You might begin by figuring out what you see as the central image or primary idea. (There is no right answer to this activity; you decide and then substantiate your decision with appropriate quotations.) Spider webs would be one appropriate organizational metaphor; think of others. Use images, symbols, sketches, and drawings as they illustrate your concept of the whole essay—organization and ideas.

## Collaborating

Put your graphics on the board and use them as a basis for a class discussion of this essay by Annie Dillard.

## Angle 6: Recasting the Text

### Log Entry 6

Dillard herself, as you know, wrote both poetry and prose. There are a lot of poems hidden in this essay. Select an image or an idea that you find provocative and read through the essay recording words and phrases that pertain to the subject you have chosen. Then recast the essay into a poem or a sequence of poems. Don't try to include everything. Focus on only one image or idea for each poem you try, but limit yourself basically to Dillard's words. Think of it as a puzzle, and try to construct a meaningful poem. Give it a title, but again, choose words for the title that you find somewhere in the essay. Share your first drafts and help each other refine your poems. Here is a sample from Fran Claggett's log.

#### **Reading a Novel About Rimbaud**

*Fran Claggett*

I think I know moths,  
the flames that move light  
the color of skin.

Gold cat,  
barred owl,  
a spider: moth-essence.

Is this what we live for?  
Is this the only final beauty?

## Angle 7: You, the Text, the World

As we've emphasized throughout this book, it is important to know that you do not need to come to a conclusion about the meaning of a work of literature. You may need to form your ideas about the meaning a work has for you at a particular moment, when you are

asked to write an interpretive or analytic essay, for example. Another day, however, when you are in a different mood or have had an experience that relates to the events in the work, you may find your understanding or envisionment of the text has changed.

Every step you take toward creating richer meaning involves changing perspectives, making connections, and facing new possibilities. You make interpretive decisions each time you look through a different lens. By looking at a work from different angles, your reading becomes more imaginative, intellectual, and emotional.

As a way of providing a richer context for your reading of Dillard's piece, we're including a final piece, "The Death of the Moth," a very well-known essay by Virginia Woolf, one of the most distinguished and influential writers of the early twentieth century. Those familiar with the Woolf essay might wonder whether it was in some way responsible for Dillard's attention as she observed and later wrote about her encounter with the death of a moth—whether Dillard's essay was in a sense a recasting of Woolf's.

### **The Death of the Moth**

*Virginia Woolf*

Moths that fly by day are not properly to be called moths; they do not excite that pleasant sense of dark autumn nights and ivy-blossom which the commonest yellow underwing asleep in the shadow of the curtain never fails to rouse in us. They are hybrid creatures, neither gay like butterflies nor somber like their own species. Nevertheless the present specimen, with his narrow hay-coloured wings, fringed with a tassel of the same colour, seemed to be content with life. It was a pleasant morning, mid-September, mild, benignant, yet with a keener breath than that of the summer months. The plough was already scoring the field opposite the window, and where the share had been, the earth was pressed flat and gleamed with moisture. Such vigour came rolling in from the fields and the down beyond that it was difficult to keep the eyes strictly turned upon the book. The rooks too were keeping one of their annual festivities; soaring round the tree-tops until it looked as if a vast net with thousands of black knots in it has been cast up into the air; which, after a few moments sank slowly down upon the trees until every twig seemed to have a knot at the end of it. Then, suddenly, the net would be thrown into the air again in a wider cir-

cle this time, with the utmost clamour and vociferation, as though to be thrown into the air and settle slowly down upon the tree-tops were a tremendously exciting experience.

The same energy which inspired the rooks, the ploughmen, the horses, and even, it seemed, the lean bare-backed downs, sent the moth fluttering from side to side of his square of the window-pane. One could not help watching him. One was, indeed, conscious of a queer feeling of pity for him. The possibilities of pleasure seemed that morning so enormous and so various that to have only a moth's part in life, and a day moth's at that, appeared a hard fate, and his zest in enjoying his meagre opportunities to the full, pathetic. He flew vigorously to one corner of his compartment, and, after waiting there a second, flew across to the other. What remained for him but to fly to a third corner and then to a fourth? That was all he could do, in spite of the size of the down, the width of the sky, the far-off smoke of houses, and the romantic voice, now and then, of a steamer out at sea. What he could do he did. Watching him, it seemed as if a fiber, very thin but pure, of the enormous energy of the world had been thrust into his frail and diminutive body. As often as he crossed the pane, I could fancy that a thread of vital light became visible. He was little or nothing but life.

Yet, because he was so small, and so simple a form of the energy that was rolling in at the open window and driving its way through so many narrow and intricate corridors in my own brain and in those of other human beings, there was something marvelous as well as pathetic about him. It was as if someone had taken a tiny bead of pure life and decking it as lightly as possible with down and feathers, had set it dancing and zigzagging to show us the true nature of life. Thus displayed one could not get over the strangeness of it. One is apt to forget all about life, seeing it humped and bossed and garnished and cumbered so that it has to move with the greatest circumspection and dignity. Again, the thought of all that life might have been had he been born in any other shape caused one to view his simple activities with a kind of pity.

After a time, tired by his dancing apparently, he settled on the window ledge in the sun, and the queer spectacle being at an end, I forgot about him. Then, looking up, my eye was caught by him. He was trying to resume his dancing, but seemed either so stiff or so awkward that he could only flutter to the bottom of the window-pane; and when he tried to fly across it he failed. Being intent on

other matters I watched these futile attempts for a time without thinking, unconsciously waiting for him to resume his flight, as one waits for a machine that has stopped momentarily to start again, without considering the reason for its failure. After perhaps a seventh attempt he slipped from the wooden ledge and fell, fluttering his wings, on to his back on the window-sill. That helplessness of his attitude roused me. It flashed upon me that he was in difficulties; he could no longer raise himself; his legs struggled vainly. But, as I stretched out a pencil, meaning to help him to right himself, it came over me that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death. I laid the pencil down again.

The legs agitated themselves once more. I looked as if for the enemy against which he struggled. I looked out of doors. What had happened there? Presumably it was midday, and work in the fields had stopped. Stillness and quiet had replaced the previous animation. The birds had taken themselves off to feed in the brooks. The horses stood still. Yet the power was there all the same, massed outside indifferent, impersonal, not attending to anything in particular. Somehow it was opposed to the little hay-coloured moth. It was useless to try to do anything. One could only watch the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an oncoming doom which could, had it chosen, have submerged an entire city, not merely a city, but masses of human beings; nothing, I knew, had any chance against death. Nevertheless after a pause of exhaustion the legs fluttered again. It was superb this last protest, and so frantic that he succeeded at last in righting himself. One's sympathies, of course, were all on the side of life. Also, when there was nobody to care or to know, this gigantic effort on the part of an insignificant little moth, against a power of such magnitude, to retain what no one else valued or desired to keep, moved one strangely. Again, somehow, one saw life, a pure bead. I lifted the pencil again, useless though I knew it to be. But even as I did so, the unmistakable tokens of death showed themselves. The body relaxed, and instantly grew stiff. The struggle was over. The insignificant little creature now knew death. As I looked at the dead moth, this minute wayside triumph of so great a force over so mean an antagonist filled me with wonder. Just as life had been strange a few minutes before, so death was now as strange. The moth having righted himself now lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed. O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am.



## Log Entry 7

Compare this essay to Dillard's. What likenesses do you see? What differences? Do the essays come to similar or different conclusions?

## Building Your Course Portfolio

Read through your logs and think about the various activities you've done with this chapter on essay. Talk with your partner about how your understanding and appreciation of the Dillard essay have changed or deepened as you have looked at it from different angles, as you have talked, written about, and mapped or drawn your ideas.

- What new questions can you ask now?
- Which angles of vision gave you the most insight and the most pleasure as you worked with Annie Dillard's essay, "Death of a Moth"?
- What else can you say about your understanding of Woolf's essay?

Using your logs, the texts, your graphics, events in your own experience that you feel are relevant, write and/or draw your reflections. Use any form—essay, graphic, poem—to convey your own thoughts about the ideas of Dillard and Woolf.

After you have written or drawn this reflection, decide which pieces you have drafted for this study could become portfolio entries. After you have selected, revised, and polished them, include them in your course portfolio. Refer to Chapter 1 for full instructions on preparing the portfolio and for written, graphic, and performance options that you could develop.

Complete your course portfolio by writing a preface in which you introduce yourself and your work. Also include a final self-assessment in which you detail how well you have met your initial goals and what further goals you would like to achieve. Put this all together in a sturdy, attractive package of some sort and celebrate your growth in inquiring, comprehending, and composing.



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