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The Real Oedipal Complex: Why Oedipus Rex Still Matters

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Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* is one of the towering works of the human imagination; a play that has captivated audiences and readers alike for centuries. In [Freud](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/freudian-psychology)’s hands the play became an illustration of the supposedly universal “Oedipus complex”—a son’s wish to possess his mother and eliminate his father—a cornerstone, according to Freud, of human development and the psychoanalytic edifice.

I don’t doubt that there are some children who wish to be more closely aligned with their opposite [sex](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/sex) parent and feel antagonistic toward the one who is viewed as a threat— or misattuned—to them. But Freud misread *Oedipus Rex*—which does not illustrate the Oedipus complex— and distorted its meaning to suit his theoretical preconceptions. A new world opens up, however, when we focus on the psychological implications of Sophocles’ haunting story, rather than on Freud’s theory—or his errors.

Before Oedipus was born, his father Laius was informed by an Oracle\* that if he had a son, Laius would die at his hand. Three days following his birth, Oedipus was given by his mother Jocasta to a shepherd, with instructions that he be cast away to perish. In other words: she abandoned her infant son to die. Discovered by another shepherd on a mountainside, Oedipus was brought to the childless King of Corinth, Polybus and his wife Merope, who raised him as their own son. Oedipus did not know that he was adopted.

When Oedipus was a young man he consulted the Oracle at Delphi who informed him that he was fated to be “the slayer of the sire who begot him” and “to defile his mother’s bed.” Attempting to escape his destiny, and believing that Polybus and Merope were his biological [parents](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/parenting), Oedipus fled Corinth, hoping “to never see the fulfillment of the infamies foretold by his [evil](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/ethics-and-morality) doom.” In other words: he tried to protect his parents, not [sleep](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/sleep) with one and murder the other.

\*an **oracle** was a person or agency considered to provide wise and insightful counsel or prophetic predictions or precognition of the future, inspired by the gods.

After he left his adoptive parents, Oedipus was rudely accosted on the road from Delphi to Thebes by the herald of a man in a carriage. Oedipus struck down the driver and then dueled with and killed his boss—whom he didn’t know was Laius, his biological father.

After Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx, the Sphinx “threw herself upon the rocks and perished” and the Thebans made Oedipus their King and gave him Jocasta, whom he didn’t know was his biological mother, for a wife.

What Freud willfully omitted from his theory of the Oedipus complex were two terribly important facts about Sophocles’ play: *Oedipus Rex* begins with parental aggression and abandonment, not filial (of or due from a son or daughter) patricide (killing of a father) or incestuous relations between a son and a mother. And the son with supposedly lustful wishes and murderous impulses actually tried to protect his parents and avoid the very fate Freud attributed to him.

The real power of *Oedipus Rex* lies not in the fact that it illustrates the Oedipus complex—that Oedipus was oedipal—but that it depicts a troubling and seemingly universal dimension of human behavior; the way we unwittingly create the fate we [fear](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/fear) and abhor. Oedipus, like most of us, falls victim to what he frantically strove to avoid. We identify with Oedipus not because we wish to possess one parent and eliminate the other, but because we too end up precisely where we didn’t want to—the woman who was abused as a child chooses partners who mistreat her; and the boy who was crushed by his marginal status in his family of origin unwittingly orchestrates his life so that as an adult he is repeatedly unseen and underappreciated. What Oedipus could teach us is how magnetic the pull is to repeat what we desperately wish to escape.

And a reading of *Oedipus Rex* shaped by a contemporary psychoanalytic [understanding](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/empathy) of human development can illuminate why. Fewer of us now share the ancient Greek belief that human beings are the playthings of the Gods. But increasing numbers of therapists realize that people are inextricably shaped by the specific relational contexts in which they are raised and later inhabit. In D. W. Winniocott’s evocative words, “there is no such thing as an infant”—there are only specific babies/children raised by particular caregivers. If we are not beguiled by Freud’s symptomatic misreading of the play and examine the particular familial context of Oedipus’ life—his parents abandoned him and left him for dead—then what was done to him by his parents rather than something innate and troublesome inside of him (the wish to sleep with his mother and kill his father), is the real “complex” Oedipus labors under.

And when we greet the particular wounds and [traumas](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/trauma) we experience with the incomparable power of human understanding, it then becomes possible for us to comprehend and integrate what was done to us in the past instead of endlessly repeating it.

Answer all questions in complete sentences.

1. How does Sigmund Freud define the “Oedipus complex?”

2. Is Freud’s reading of *Oedipus Rex* correct? Why or why not?

3. Before Oedipus is born, what does Laius learn?

4. What happens 3 days after the birth of Oedipus?

5. a. Who adopted Oedipus?

b. What did they not reveal to Oedipus?

6. a. After consulting the Oracle at Delphi, what does Oedipus learn?

b. As a result of the words of the Oracle, what does Oedipus do?

7. When he kills the man who accosts him on the road from Delphi to Thebes, what does Oedipus not realize?

8. How does Oedipus become the King of Thebes and marry Jocasta?

9. What are the two facts that Freud ignores from the play?

a.

b.

10. Why are we able to identify with Oedipus in this play (opposed to the “Oedipus complex”)?