

Oedipus the King | Sample answer

2004 Higher Level Exam Question

Discuss Oedipus' qualities as ruler of Thebes in Sophocles' play Oedipus the King.

Oedipus has a range of different qualities that make him a brilliant king. The first two attributes are his intelligence and his determination. We know Oedipus is clever because he solved the riddle of the Sphinx. Before Oedipus came along, the creature was terrorising the city. She would ask people riddles and if they couldn't answer her, she would eat them. Oedipus was able to solve her riddle and destroy her. He was greeted as a hero when he arrived in Thebes. This shows his intelligence because he was smart enough to answer the tricky question saving the city from terror.

After ruling for almost fifteen years in Thebes, a plague has struck killing civilians indiscriminately. The people of Thebes have come to Oedipus to beg for his help. "Thebes is dying." He treats his people with great respect and love and listens to what they need. After hearing what his people have said, he sends his wife's brother Creon to the oracle at Delphi. He hopes that Apollo will be able to tell him what to do in this situation. When Creon returns, he informs Oedipus that the only way to get rid of the plague is to kill the murderer of the previous king Laius, or to have this person banished from the city. "To stop the plague we must pay back blood with blood." After hearing this, we see how determined Oedipus is to end the plague and to avenge the former king. Oedipus loves his people and he wants to be a saviour and a hero to them. He tells the people that he will track the murderer down and end this horrible plague. Little does Oedipus know that Laius is his true father.

On Creon's cue, Oedipus decided to recruit help from the prophet Tiresias so he can help them to solve the murder of king Laius. This is where we begin to see a change in character. When the prophet first arrives, Oedipus is very kind towards him. Tiresias is very hesitant because he does not want to reveal that Oedipus is the killer. This would mean that Oedipus would have to die or banish himself from the city leaving behind his wife and children. The more resistant Tiresias becomes, the angrier Oedipus grows. After insulting him multiple times, Tiresias is forced to reveal the truth.

Oedipus is so shocked and horrified that he turns against his own brother in law accusing him of wanting to steal the crown. “Is this conspiracy yours or his?” Here we start to see Oedipus start to become a tyrannical kind of leader where he demands answers and is very rude and quick to judge others. He continues to insult Tiresias calling him “scum of the earth.” Oedipus is clearly a man of high power and Tiresias and Creon are shocked to see him insult a man with power from the gods. However, Oedipus’ short temper forced him to get the answers he was searching for allowing him to stop the plague and keeping his word to his people as he promised.

Now that Oedipus knows he is responsible for the murder and that he has killed his father and married his mother, he is horrified. He cannot believe he has committed such a fowl crime. “The blackest things a man can do I have done them all.” Oedipus has just heard the news that his wife/ mother has committed suicide and he is heartbroken. He cannot bear to look at himself any longer. He takes the pins from Joacasta’s dress and he blinds himself. Now blind and exiled, he leaves the city as he promised which shows us that he is a leader who is true to his word no matter how difficult a situation may be.

Even though he killed his father and married his mother, he still ruled successfully for fifteen years. His bravery to leave the city after finding out he was the killer is courageous and brave. I think these qualities make him a brilliant ruler. I do not think many rulers would want to leave their life behind if they were in Oedipus’ situation.