

## AP English Literature – Summer Reading Guide

### *The Three Theban Plays*

#### *Oedipus the King*

1. In what sense is Oedipus, though a king, also an "everyman" figure? In other words, how might this play be said to explore something fundamental about the limitations involved in being human?
2. From lines 1-89, what qualities do the people attribute to Oedipus? What heroic qualities does he attribute to himself? Aside from saving Thebes, what is Oedipus being called upon to do?
3. From lines 169-245, what assumptions do the Chorus make about the relationship between humans and the gods? How does Oedipus contradict them immediately afterwards?
4. From lines 340-526, Oedipus engages with the blind prophet Tiresias. What is the basis of Oedipus' appeal to Tiresias--how does he try to get the truth from him? How is Oedipus' attitude towards Tiresias and the kind of knowledge he represents inconsistent?
5. From 527-72, why do the Chorus not accept the charges Tiresias has leveled against Oedipus? What *would* constitute proof for them?
6. From 573-750, Oedipus and Creon argue--how does Creon interpret Oedipus' anger? What charges does he make against the king, what prediction does he offer about Oedipus' future?
7. From 751-953 Jocasta inquires about the disagreement between Oedipus and her brother Creon. What information does she pass on to Oedipus that only makes his misery worse? What does Oedipus reveal about his past, and how much does he now understand about his guilt?
8. From 954-97, the Chorus assess the situation as it stands. What makes them anxious? How do their remarks affect your understanding of their trustworthiness as judges of the drama unfolding before them?
9. From 998-1182, first Jocasta and then she and Oedipus hear unexpectedly from a Corinthian Messenger. What does his information about Polybus at first lead both to assume about the power of prophecy and the course of human life, and what subsequent revelation proves devastating to them? How is this scene "ironic"?
10. From 1183-1350, Oedipus carries on to the bitter truth, which he hears from the old Herdsman mentioned by the Corinthian Messenger. Why doesn't he stop the process of unconcealment? What lesson does the Chorus draw from his ruin?
11. From 1351-1449, a Messenger describes what happened when Oedipus entered the palace and saw that Jocasta had hanged herself. How might *hearing* this event rather than seeing it

change an audience's perspective on the events?

12. Regarding the same episode, what symbolic implications emerge from Oedipus' blinding himself? Do you find his action courageous and heroic, or do you interpret it some other way? Explain.

13. From 1450 on, Oedipus laments and seeks exile. How does he understand what has happened to him? Why is it necessary that the audience hear him after all that has occurred?

14. By the end of the play, what is the status of Oedipus as a tragic hero? Do you think that an audience would pity him, or judge him harshly? What do you think of the Chorus' final pronouncement? Explain.

### ***Oedipus at Colonus***

1. From lines 1-141, when Oedipus first arrives at Colonus, what sort of reception does he receive, and what are his expectations? What does he offer the people of Thebes?

2. From lines 142-336, how does Oedipus explain his ordeal and present circumstances to the chorus? What problem does he have in persuading them?

3. From lines 337-518, what is the state of relations between Oedipus and his children? Why is Oedipus still important to Thebes?

4. From lines 577-616, what reason does the Chorus give for extracting from Oedipus the story of his past? How does he defend himself? What role does the complex metaphor of "sight" or "vision" play in his defense?

5. From lines 617-817, why does Duke Theseus of Athens accept the request of Oedipus? What does Oedipus promise he can do, and under what circumstances? What role does the Chorus play at the end of this section?

6. From lines 818-1008, during the argument with King Creon of Thebes, what powers does Oedipus ally himself with against his former kingdom? How does Creon try to undercut Oedipus' self-defense?

7. From lines 1009-1192, Creon faces the wrath of Theseus and Oedipus. How does Theseus contrast his own and his city's principles with Creon's actions? How does Creon counter the charges?

8. From lines 1193-1414, Oedipus is constrained to accept the will of Theseus and his daughters and see Polynices. Why are they all so insistent that he greet his hated son, and how is the situation ironic considering Oedipus' previous statements? Why is this section an appropriate point for the Chorus' observations about human existence?

9. From lines 1646-1893, Oedipus receives his summons and goes to meet his death. What is the character of that death? What does Oedipus bid Theseus of Athens do in order to avert destruction by Thebes ?

10. From lines 1894-end, Antigone and Ismene lament their father's death and their present circumstances. This makes psychological sense, but why is it important in understanding the significance of Oedipus' tragic life and mysterious death?

11. To what extent does Oedipus' insight during his exile and at the point of death compensate him for the ruin of his house and the pain he has suffered? In other words, to what extent does Sophocles offer his audience an “answer” to the problem of the relationship between humans and the gods?

### *Antigone*

1. What is the pre-history of the play? What has just happened that led to the deaths of Eteocles and Polyneices?

2. In the prologue, what is the tension established between Antigone and Creon? What is Creon's decree? How does Antigone plan on responding to that decree?

3. What is Antigone's reaction to being held captive? Why did she defy Creon's decree? Why is Antigone upset with Ismene in this scene?

4. How is Haemon related to Antigone? What is his reaction when he hears the news that she is to be put to death? What does he tell Creon about the people's allegiance to Creon? How do the people feel about Antigone's crime?

5. What does Tiresias come to tell Creon? What is the cause of the gods' anger? How does Tiresias react? How does this compare to Oedipus' reaction to Tiresias in *Oedipus Rex*? What is Tiresias' final warning to Creon?

6. What does the messenger tell Creon in the final scene? What has transpired at the tomb? Who is Eurydice and what has happened to her?

7. What message do you believe Sophocles is trying to express to us the audience through these three plays? Is there one cohesive vision? Or are there separate messages for each play?

**\*Edition:** Sophocles. *Three Theban Plays*. Trans. Robert Fagles. NY: Penguin, 2000. ISBN: 0140444254.

## *Atonement, Ian McEwan*

To help you enjoy your reading more and to suggest some points to consider as you read, we provide these ideas. Look them over closely before and during your reading. Take notes about them as you think about the book. Come back to school prepared to discuss these and other ideas that strike you as you read.

We begin with a brief comment from Ian McEwan about novels as a literary form:

Q: Briony's writing is seen as a way for her to exercise a level of control over her life. What do you personally consider to be the purpose of the Novel?

IM: I think, of all literary forms, and perhaps of all artistic forms, it is the most adept at showing us what it is like to be someone else. The novel is famously good at revealing, through various literary conventions, a train of thought, or a state of mind. You can live inside somebody else's head. Within one novel you can live inside many different people's heads, in a way that you of course cannot do in normal life. I think that quality of penetration into other consciousnesses lies at the heart of its moral quest. Knowing, or sensing, what it's like to be someone else I think is at the foundations of morality. I don't think the novel is particularly good or interesting when it instructs us how to live, so I don't think of it as moral in that sense. But certainly when it shows us intimately, from the inside, other people, it then does extend our sensibilities. It is also, as form, very good at marking out that relationship between the individual and a society, or the working out of a relationship – the interpersonal is very much its subject. *Atonement*, in particular for me, has been about the description of a character, particularly Briony. I think she is perhaps my fullest invention, as a person -deeply flawed and yet I hope still sympathetic.'

A. Do you sympathize with Briony? Can you understand why she acted as she did? A passion for order, a lively imagination, and a desire for attention seem to be Briony's strongest traits. In what ways is she still a child? Is her narcissism — her inability to see things from any point of view but her own — unusual in a thirteen-year-old? Why does the scene she witnesses at the fountain change her whole perspective on writing? What is the significance of the passage in which she realizes she needs to work from the idea that "other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value" [p. 38]? Do her actions bear this out? Briony also harbours delusions of adulthood which are challenged both by the homecoming of her newly graduated sister and the arrival of her glamorous cousin, Lola. To what extent do her feelings of inferiority brought on by these events drive Briony to make the rape allegations? Why does she substitute Cecilia and Robbie as the victim and the assailant? Why does Briony choose to enter nursing and turn her back on her family? As an elderly lady Briony reveals that much of what she has told the reader is not true. Is this atonement of the title

for her benefit or for ours? Is it too late for her to be asking for forgiveness?

B. What sort of social and cultural setting does the Tallis house create for the novel? What is the mood of the house as it is revealed in ch.12? What emotions and impulses are being acted upon or repressed by its inhabitants? How does the careful attention to detail affect the pace of Part One, and what is the effect of the acceleration of plot events as it nears its end?

C. Having read Robbie's note to Cecilia, Briony thinks about its implications for her new idea of herself as a writer: "No more princesses! . . . With the letter, something elemental, brutal, perhaps even criminal had been introduced, some principle of darkness, and even in her excitement over the possibilities, she did not doubt that her sister was in some way threatened and would need her help" [pp. 106–7]. How do the events that result from this letter compare with the romantic ideals of love as harboured by young Briony in her play?

D. A literary quest depicts a character searching for an elusive goal, meeting many obstacles en route, and finally reaching some type of self-discovery. Consider this in terms of the primary characters of Parts Two and Three.