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Seeing Oedipus Rex: Using the Chorus to Understand the Tragedy

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Overview

"Oedipus? Isn't he the one with the complex?" That's not an unusual response from students when I bring up the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. This year, I want to prepare a group of students to see the work from a different viewpoint—namely the Greek viewpoint; and we'll do that by looking at the tragedy from the point-of-view of the chorus.

Most people assume that students in most AP classes "get it" more easily than in most other general education classes. While this may be true for some students, many students struggle in my AP Language and Literature class. Students are often in these classes because they are motivated and they do the work, but this doesn't always mean that they have the skills to analyze literature. It is often the first time students have had to do this, rather than just following along with the plot. It can also be a struggle to notice symbolism, themes, and other literary devices writers use to deliver their messages. Students may become frustrated with an author's diction or the use of symbolic language that sometimes purposely obscures the message. That said, most AP students are excited at the prospect of gaining the skills required to analyze literature because they will need them to be able to pass the AP exam at the end of the year.

At the end of the first semester in AP Language and Literature, students read the play *Oedipus Rex* by the Greek tragedian Sophocles. *Oedipus Rex* is an outstanding example of a Greek tragedy, a genre that many of my students are unfamiliar with. Throughout the year we work on characterization, the use of literary devices and their purpose in diverse texts, and analytical essay writing, among other skills. Because *Oedipus Rex* is the third text we look at in the year, students have had some practice in honing these skills, but are still struggling to read more deeply than the plot action.

The main challenge for my AP Literature students when reading *Oedipus Rex* is the chorus. The verses that make up the chorus are fairly densely worded and difficult to understand, and sometimes I get the feeling that students think of the chorus almost like a side note—one they don't really have to pay attention to in order to get the drift of the story. The chorus doesn't always follow the plot, and so students have a hard time keeping track of what it is talking about. It's almost impossible to get my students to find meaning in it on their own, and in the past they've needed to have it spoon-fed to them. In this unit I'm attempting to teach the text *Oedipus Rex* by focusing mainly on the chorus and by teaching students about the incredibly important function of the chorus in classic Greek tragedy. We will use images of the Greek theatre as well as stills and

clips from productions of *Oedipus Rex* to examine the role and function of the chorus in the tragedy. We will also compare and contrast the ancient Greek chorus with a modern equivalent: the Broadway musical.

My AP Literature is a class of 32 students at Oceana High School in Pacifica, California. It's a small high school of around 650 students, and our staff is a supportive and collaborative group. For some reason, our school is not generally subjected to district curriculum demands, so we have the freedom to make our own, keeping a close eye on standards and the Common Core, of course. OHS is structured on a block schedule with three 100-minute classes each day. I see my classes every other day, and that fact may affect the way I plan and lay out classroom activities.

I get to know many of the students I have in AP Literature the year before, in an advisory class. I therefore know them fairly well before I teach them in AP. This will be the first AP class for all of them, and I know that many of them are fairly well-prepared because of our strong Humanities program. My AP students are like many other classes, however. Some of them like to speak up in class, and some are extremely quiet. This is understandable because many students are intimidated by an AP class as well as self-conscious about their own ideas. My challenge will be to achieve a balance for both types of students so that everyone's voice is heard and even the shy students become used to sharing ideas.

Rationale

In ancient Greece, the chorus was a very important part of Greek tragedies, if not the most important part. Daniels and Scully, authors of *What is Really Going on in Sophocles' Theban Plays*, say that "no feature of Greek tragedy is more intractable than the chorus." [1] Students need to know and understand why this is. It's not something that translates to students simply by reading the text. If students are able to understand the importance of the chorus before they even begin reading, they will be more engaged as they read. This will lead to better understanding of the meaning of the chorus, which is essential to interpreting the text. I want to focus this unit almost entirely on the role and function of the chorus as well as the message it gives the reader (or viewer) throughout the drama. This is an important way to read (or view) a tragedy, especially nowadays, because we interpret it very differently from the way in which the ancient Greeks did. For ancient Greeks, unlike my students, the chorus' role was an obvious one, and although the language was always in a formal dialect, it wasn't difficult to understand the chorus' message. [2]

I have found that my students like looking at images in my classes, be they video, photos, paintings or cartoons. Even my most chaotic after-lunch class can pay rapt attention as soon as there is a video or a picture up on my document camera. I think it's important to take advantage of their engagement with almost anything visual and use images in my unit to engage my students. I'll be using paintings of scenes in Greek tragedies as well as production stills in order to help students visualize the play instead of simply reading it.

One of the issues for students that keeps them from gleefully jumping headfirst into the text is the form of the chorus. Because the chorus (and the whole play for that matter; the chorus, however, is more obscure) is written in verse, sometimes students struggle with its meaning. If students know the structure of the chorus and the conventions of the chorus and Greek theatre in general, the purpose and the meaning will be easier to understand. Definitions of words like *strophe* and *antistrophe* that will also help them understand form and function.

Students complain that it's difficult for them to relate to the issues that Oedipus faces. Additionally, because this play was written and performed starting all the way back in the sixth century BCE, it can be understandably difficult for students to imagine seeing it live. This can be difficult even for scholars, simply because we don't have a lot of evidence to draw from. It is also difficult to disconnect students from their prior knowledge of *Oedipus Rex*, which can sometimes get in the way of seeing what's going on in the play. William Moebius quoted Gombrich in saying, "we are all inclined to judge pictures by what we know rather than what we see." [3] Throughout this unit I will be using strategies and activities to encourage students to do close reading of the text and let go of previous notions of the tragedy *Oedipus Rex*.

We do know quite a bit about how plays were staged and what happened on the stage, and it's important for students to be able to connect it with something they have experience with. To this end, I've been told by an expert in the field, Joe Roach, that choruses from Broadway musicals have a lot in common with the chorus in Greek tragedies, mainly in their look and actions; specifically the song "Oklahoma!" in the musical *Oklahoma*! [4] is very much how a chorus would look and behave. [5] Analyzing that performance and then comparing and contrasting it with the chorus from Oedipus will give students a frame of reference to come back to over and over, as well as a way to start imagining what a Greek tragedy would look like, a process that is key to understanding the message.

Objectives

My objective in teaching this unit is to give students a solid understanding of the role and function of the chorus in *Oedipus Rex*. I want them to be able to discuss the story and the messages therein and be able to analyze the differences in the ways in which we read and interpret the play and the ways in which it was interpreted by ancient Greeks. Before any discussion can happen, students need to understand the chorus and its role and meaning. My hope is that once they have more background information as well as the chance to compare and contrast ancient and modern choruses, each one of them will have a platform to start a discussion from.

Part of this discussion should be focused on looking at the play from the viewpoint of the ancient Greeks. This objective is important for students because there are many ways to view this play, and I want them to be able to look for more than just one way to interpret it. Although the AP exam is what we are ostensibly preparing for, I believe that looking at the text from different points of view will prepare them for college.

I also want students to be able to use this background knowledge and the class discussions to be able to analyze the play in essay form. A big part of the AP Literature course is timed writing in preparation for the AP exam at the end of the year, so I want students to practice timed writes as well as other writing strategies.

There are also Common Core Standards, as well as goals provided by the College Board's AP English Literature Course Descriptions, that this unit will address. (See appendix.)

Background

History and definition

Tragic drama began in Athens, Greece, in the sixth century BCE. [6] Performances of tragedies were a special occasion and always were planned to take place on festival days celebrating the Greek god Dionysus; these performances, however, were not religious. [7] A tragedy is always written in verse. [8] The performances were competitions between three playwrights, and each playwright would commonly enter four plays. These plays didn't need to relate to one another in any way, except that they all had to be tragedies. Sophocles won second-place when he wrote and produced *Oedipus Rex*. [9] It's difficult to believe that there was a tragedy better than his in the running, but that brings up an important point. There is evidence that thousands of tragedies were written, but we have manuscripts for only thirty-two in existence today. These tragedies have been widely read and performed over the last two thousand years. [10] This information will show students the stark contrast of ancient Greek tragedy to our modern day understanding of theatre and its purpose.

The amphitheater (called a *theatron*) that the tragedies were performed in was enormous. Evidence shows that up to fifteen thousand people could be seated in the theatre. [11] This doesn't seem like a large capacity compared to our sports stadiums that can hold upwards of 50,000 people, but it's important to remember that Greeks didn't have the ability to amplify or project sound and pictures, except through natural acoustics. It is hard to know exactly what these theaters looked like in the sixth century BC because many of the original ruins were covered up when later theaters were built on top of them. The stage was a circle about twenty meters in diameter (about sixty-five feet), [12] and the seats surrounded the stage on three sides and continued upward and outward. Although spectators in the upper sections probably couldn't see the actors and chorus very well, if at all, no one had any trouble hearing the actors because of the amazing acoustics. Actors also had to have very strong voices. The word was extremely powerful during the time when rhetoric was born, and this is obvious seeing the Greeks' design of theatres with the priority for was everyone to be able to hear during the plays. The scenery on the stage was very basic—often it was just the stage, which was built with columns and decorated in the Greek style.

In Greek theatre, just as in modern theatre, both actors and chorus members wore costumes—sometimes both were elaborate costumes, and sometimes chorus members wore ordinary Athenian dress. Unlike modern theatre, everyone on stage wore masks that covered the whole head. Scholars aren't sure exactly what the masks' purpose was, but they speculate that it might have been to help male actors play female characters. I would also guess that part of the function was to make the actors' features larger so that people far away could see the faces. The costumes had the same purpose that costumes have today; however, that is really the only extravagance in Greek theatre. For most of my students, it's almost impossible to imagine watching a play in which there are no special effects, no lights, and practically no scenery. I want them to understand, however, that for the Greeks, this was the highest form of entertainment and that most people went to plays and enjoyed them. Ordinary Athenians were often cast in chorus roles, so it could be said that they had a stake in going to see other plays. Often people would remember lines and sing them, just as we sing songs from the radio and even Broadway musicals. We will be looking at images from the nineteenth century that attempt to recreate the stage and costumes of ancient Greece.

Tragedy is a specific type of drama, and it has very specific characteristics. There could only be three actors on the stage at one time, and the chorus was made up of twelve to fifteen people (Sophocles raised the

number to fifteen). Only men could act in tragedies (or any Greek performance, for that matter). Tragedies were written in verse, and actors would either say or sing their lines. The chorus usually sang and danced between actors' lines. [13] In ancient Greece, the playwright was a choreographer and a composer in addition to being a playwright. He choreographed the dances for the chorus as well as composing the music that the chorus sang. [14] (add citation) Unlike today, when a playwright or a screenwriter will do only the writing and leave the music and movement to someone else or more likely to many others, the Greek playwright did all of these jobs, and he did them all at the same time, since the movements and the tempo of the song depended on the words the chorus was singing. The only musical accompaniments were the *aulos*, which is a double-reeded instrument, [15] and sometimes a harp-type instrument.

There were fairly strict rules for writing a tragedy. All main characters in tragedies had to be nobles, although sometimes they were disguised as beggars or some other unfortunate character. Gods often showed up in tragedies, not as physical characters necessarily but sometimes intervening on behalf of a character or criticizing others. The English word *tragedy* often refers to horrible events; and although this can also be true in Greek tragedies, *Oedipus Rex* for example, Greek tragedies don't always end sadly, contrary to popular high school belief. They sometimes have a happy ending, but it's usually after something horrible *almost* happens, for example, in Euripides' *Ion*, a mother and son nearly kill each other, but the tragedy is averted at the last minute. Some tragedies, for example, reunite families, as in Euripides' *Ion* and *Iphigenia among the Taurians*. [16]

Function and form of the Chorus

The chorus played an integral role in the Greek theatre. The closest translation to the concept of "directing a play" translates roughly in Greek to "teach a chorus." This in itself offers evidence of the centrality of the chorus to the drama. It was the director's job to teach normal Athenians how to sing and dance as members of the chorus, and doing so was probably more work than directing actors who already had some training. In the brief history that I share with students, I will be focusing specifically on the chorus' role in tragedies and even more specifically on its role in *Oedipus Rex*. The chorus had a few different purposes. One of their jobs was to provide background information that the spectator would need to know at the beginning of the play. This is not the case in *Oedipus Rex*; it is actually the priest whose sole function in the play seems to be giving the audience background information. The chorus can also function as the backup singers, in a sense. They often repeat what the actors are saying. The first time we see the chorus in this play, they are calling on the gods to help their poor city and describing just how bad things are in Thebes due to a plague. Although the priest has just told Oedipus practically the same thing, it's the chorus' job to reinforce for the audience the seriousness of the issues in the play.

The chorus also provides opinions and points of view about the action in the play. Daniels and Scully note that the chorus is often on a "different plane; differentiated from the specific concerns and incidents of the action." [17] Often the chorus may be commenting on something that is happening in the action, but it could also be a comment that doesn't exactly relate to the current actions. A modern-day example to look at is the Broadway musical *Rent*, [18] during which, in some songs, the chorus is not singing about the action at hand, but rather expressing a supporting or sometimes opposing view than that of the lead singers. The song "La Vie Boheme" is a good example: in one scene the actors/singers are having dinner together, and the chorus is singing about different people and the different preferences they have. The message the chorus is sending while the characters are dining and supposedly celebrating, is that people are different, and it's not always easy to get along, but we're all human. This may not be a perfect example, and the content is very different to *Oedipus*

Rex, but it helps explain why the chorus can be difficult for my high-school students to read and to integrate the messages of the chorus into the rest of the action.

The chorus did essentially (with a few important differences, of course) what a chorus in a contemporary Broadway musical does—sings and dances to music. The chorus stood together on the stage with the other three actors (the most permitted by Greek rules of drama to be on stage at one time). [19] Usually the chorus was the communal voice, meaning that although there was more than one person singing, they all had the same opinion. The chorus always stayed physically near each other, in the center of the stage, and when they moved, everyone moved together. In tragedies there could be one leader who could break away from the group and interact directly with characters. The purpose of this character (who is simply titled *chorus* in the text, as opposed to *strophe* and *antistrophe*—see below for more information) is to give advice to one of the characters. Those are some of the easier lines of the chorus for students to understand because the language is clear and the intent is straightforward.

Aside from the leader who interacts with the actors, the chorus is usually structured in what are known as strophic pairs. The first part is called the *strophe*, and the second part is called the *antistrophe*. [20] These words in Greek literally mean "turn" and "turn against." The chorus would dance across the stage while singing the *strophe* and then turn around and come back across during the *antistrophe*. This is an interesting part of the play and I wasn't able to find out if there was symbolism for this act, or if it was just to add movement and dance. Some of the time these pairs present different points of view, and this can make it more difficult for students to keep up.

I've talked about the difficulty for students to understand the messages and point-of-view of the chorus. I want to take a strophic pair and discuss in more detail some of the difficulties students may have. The first time we hear from the chorus in *Oedipus Rex* is directly after Creon returns from the god Apollo with Apollo's message about how to save the city of Thebes from plague and ruin:

Strophe What is the sweet spoken word of God from the shrine of Pytho rich in gold that has come to glorious Thebes? I am stretched on the rack of doubt, and terror and trembling hold my heart, O Delian Healer, and I worship full of fears for what doom you will bring to pass, new or renewed in the revolving years. Speak to me, immortal voice, child of golden Hope. *Antistrophe* First I call on you, Athene, deathless daughter of Zeus, and Artemis, Earth Upholder, who sits in the midst of the market place in the throne which men call Fame, and Phoebus, the Far Shooter, three averters of Fate, come to us now, if ever before, when ruin rushed upon the state, you drove destruction's flame away out of our land. [21]

Students understand that the entire play is written in verse, but the strophic pairs are generally in more flowery and obscure verse than the actors' lines are. As soon as students see words that they don't know or understand, they begin to lose motivation. The *strophe* is reacting to the news from Apollo and in some ways foreshadowing the events to come when it says, "I am stretched on the rack of doubt," and it then uses words that express fear and foreboding, like "terror and trembling" and "full of fears" and "doom." This may seem quite apparent, but the language is full of metaphor and allusion, and this can be difficult for students to understand. The *antistrophe* is calling on the gods to help them. This presents a problem for students who haven't learned the names and stories of the gods being written about, especially because their myth or story has an impact on the meaning. Why does Sophocles pick these specific gods? If students haven't had the opportunity to learn about Greek myths, they have a harder time making the connections that they need to

make in order to understand these messages. This strophic pair comes at the beginning of the tragedy, but many that come later only increase in difficulty, so it is apparent that the focus on the chorus is essential.

Structure of Greek tragedy

The structure of a tragedy is divided into six parts: exposition, complication, discoveries and reversals, *peripeteia*, climax and denouement. *Oedipus Rex* fits into this structure perfectly, giving it amazing economy in terms of plot and purpose. The structure plays a big role in the form of the tragedy, and it's worthwhile to look at the summary of the play in terms of this structure.

Oedipus Rex

Many tragedies, including *Oedipus Rex*, are based on traditional legend. [22] The name translates to Oedipus the King. The Oedipus myth, as it is known, is the basic story that we see in Sophocles' version. Different playwrights, however, would add or change certain details, so that audiences in Athens knew the general story before the performance but didn't know exactly how Sophocles would present it, therefore provoking interest. We can easily relate to this in our modern world—filmmakers often remake a classic with a new twist or remake it in a very similar way, but the audience is still very interested in seeing the remake, especially if they've seen the original.

Oedipus Rex is the story of a man who becomes the king of Thebes after solving the riddle of the Sphinx, who had taken over the city. The riddle the Sphinx asks is: what crawls on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening? Oedipus thinks a bit and then gives the correct answer: man. The fascinating part of this story is that Oedipus never actually says the answer. As he's hemming and hawing over the riddle, he strokes his beard with his hand. The sphinx takes this motion to mean that Oedipus is pointing at himself, thus answering her question. She is defeated and the city of Thebes is given to him. This image and explanation make sense to the reader because Oedipus is never portrayed as an especially intelligent man. This image is also very important to my unit because there is another image of Oedipus stroking his beard during the scene when he finds out the truth about his life, although he isn't ready to accept it until the last shred of evidence is shown to him. He strokes his beard as if to symbolically say, "it's me; I'm Laius' killer."

Once Oedipus is the king of Thebes, he marries its Queen, Jocasta, who had been married to Laius before he was killed. They have a family, and Oedipus rules contentedly until the opening of Sophocles' play. The tragedy opens on the scene of the priest asking Oedipus to help his people, who are suffering from the plague. Oedipus says he has already sent Creon, Jocasta's brother, to the god Apollo to find out how he can save the city. This is the exposition. When Creon returns he relays Apollo's news that in order to save the city, they must find and bring to justice the man or men who killed the former king, Laius. Oedipus vows to find whoever it was and immediately starts an investigation by asking questions about Laius' death. This is the complication in the story that starts the chain reaction of questions and answers that lead to the inevitable truth that he has unwittingly killed his father and married his mother.

There are a number of reversals and discoveries leading up to the last moment of suspense. For example, Teresias the prophet tells Oedipus that he is the murderer, but Oedipus doesn't believe him and ends up fighting with Creon. Another discovery happens when Jocasta tells Oedipus the story of Laius being killed at a crossroads. Jocasta tries to counsel and comfort Oedipus, and while trying to make him feel better about the prophecy he has heard, she tells him that Laius also received a prophecy that he would be killed by his son. The fact that as the story goes, Laius was killed by a band of people at a crosswords tells her that the prophecy couldn't possibly have been true. However, this is probably the worst news for Oedipus because he

knows that he once killed a man at a crossroads. Even though this might seem like enough information to convince the audience, Oedipus, who is still in denial, calls for the herdsman who was with Laius when he was killed.

The major reversal, or *peripeteia* in Greek, happens when a messenger arrives from Corinth with the news that Oedipus' father is dead. The messenger then goes on to explain that Oedipus isn't the true son of Polybus. He explains that he was ordered to take Laius and Jocasta's son to the mountains and kill him so that the prophey given to Laius that his son would kill him wouldn't be fulfilled. He tells them that he didn't kill the child, but instead gave him to another shepherd who then gave the child to the king and queen of Corinth. (We find out later that this shepherd was also the one who was with Laius when he was killed.) The messenger thinks this is good news, for it means that Oedipus can return to Corinth without fear of marrying his mother, because she isn't his real mother. The tragic irony is that in telling Jocasta and Oedipus this good news, Jocasta realizes that Oedipus is in fact her son. This is enough for Jocasta, and she goes into her room and hangs herself. Oedipus needs to know the final details from the shepherd who has been summoned and describes the death of Laius, before he can admit the truth, and this is the climax of the tragedy. Very soon after comes the *anagnorisis*, which in Greek refers to the big discovery—obviously this is Oedipus' discovery that he has unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. Some scholars add in the moment of catastrophe, a word that literally means fall down, to describe the reported suicide of Jocasta and Oedipus' act of blinding himself. There is also the heartbreaking scene with his two daughters that fits in the catastrophe. Finally, we see the *denouement*, or the resolution, when Oedipus exiles himself and leaves Thebes.

A Note on Images

Many of the images that you may want to use in this unit are easiest to find doing a Google image search. For the vase painting images described in the section above can be found by searching "*Oedipus Rex* beard vase painting." The image is a circular painting that is from the Etruscan Museum in the Vatican. The image of Oedipus and Jocasta can be found by searching on Google Image for "Oedipus messenger." The image shows Oedipus and an old man in the center and then Jocasta is off to the left, while two small children are on the right and left of Oedipus. To find images of productions of *Oedipus Rex* Google image search "*Oedipus Rex* stage production" or "*Oedipus Rex* production chorus" to find images of the chorus specifically. Most songs to Broadway musicals are available on YouTube, including "La Vie Boheme" and "Oklahoma!"

Strategies

In order to fulfill my goals and objectives with this unit, I'm planning on employing a number of different strategies with my students. In regards to my objectives for class discussion, I'll use a few different discussion strategies, including small-group and whole-class discussions. I will also employ fishbowl discussions, during which students sit in a circle surrounded by another circle of students. Only students in the center can discuss, and students on the outside take notes on the discussion. Students then switch places. Both group and small-group discussions will be used, to give students an opportunity to share and learn in a whole-class style as well as in small group in order to allow students who generally don't like to talk in front of the whole class an opportunity to share. These small groups will also serve as Literature discussion groups. which give students the opportunity to talk in small groups about what they are reading. Each member of the group is assigned a role that rotates weekly: discussion director, literary illuminary, vocabulary enricher, summarizer, and

connector. These roles give students a responsibility within the group they are in and a reason to participate. This strategy also helps give a voice to shy students who might normally not participate in whole-class discussions. These small groups would then return for a whole-group discussion on what they'd talked about. [23]

In order to address my objectives for student writing, I will be employing several strategies including timed writes. This strategy helps students prepare for the AP Literature exam they all take at the end of the year. I give students a surprise prompt related to the text we are reading, and they have thirty minutes to construct and write an essay that answers the prompt. Most likely I will give them prompts about the main purpose and message of the chorus; I may also create a prompt that asks them about interpreting the play using both a modern and ancient Greek viewpoint. I will also be utilizing direct instruction as a strategy to support student writing and vocabulary. This will appear as a short lecture or PowerPoint presentation. I will use this strategy to give them specific vocabulary words that they will need throughout the unit, for example, dramatic irony, *strophe*, *antistrophe*, tragedy, etc. I will also use this strategy in a power point presentation to show students what a theatre in ancient Greek looked like, and what aspects make up a Greek tragedy. One last strategy involves taking a longer passage and distilling it down to the main message by asking students to restate the passage as a tweet, in no more than twenty-five words. This both engages my students, since many of them are active tweeters, and it requires them to interpret the passage in a clear, concise manner. Tweets will be voted on to decide which tells the message most clearly to add a competitive edge to the activity.

Another objective of this unit is to help students make connections, both with other types of literature and with other types of performance. One strategy I will use is to compare and contrast *Oedipus Rex* with modern Broadway musicals. Students will look at specific aspects of both and discuss the similarities and differences. I will constantly be helping students make connections with the text we are reading and asking them to make their own connections. These connections will help them more deeply understand the messages in the text and it will also help them write with more expertise in their essays. In a similar spirit of comparing and contrasting, students will be analyzing two images side-by-side and take notes. These notes will aid them in our discussion after the viewing. Depending on the subject and the day, we will have small-group or whole class-discussions. The point of this strategy is to compare and contrast (as with an image from a traditional Greek production and a modern Broadway musical) or to try to discover the theme between the two images (as with two images of *Oedipus Rex* in two different scenes).

Activities

Chunking the chorus

This activity will likely take two hundred-minute class periods. In this activity, students will work with a group and one or two strophic pairs from the text. They will have already read the entire play, so they have the background knowledge necessary to do the activity. Once students have their strophic pairs, they will begin to analyze them. They will need to do this with the full text so that they have all the necessary context in order to analyze the verses of the chorus. Before beginning the activity, we will make a list of questions as a class that will help in analyzing the strophic pairs. I will take input from the class, but I'm imagining the questions will be similar to:

Are there allusions present in the ode?

Are there metaphors in the ode?

What are they and what are they referring to?

What is the point of view of the chorus?

What other literary devices are present and what is their purpose?

Student will come up with other helpful questions as a class.

Once students have worked together to analyze the strophic pairs and answer the questions set out, they will work together to create a visual depiction of the strophic pair or pairs. (Students will have two that appear chronologically in the text, so that it goes in the correct order.) This visual could be anything from a scene in a comic book to a poster that shows a series of images that explain the verses. Doing this will help each group of students reach a better understanding of their parts of the chorus, and they will also need to work together to decide what type of visualization will work best to explain the verses. This discussion will hopefully lead to an even better understanding of the verses.

After all of the visuals have been created, we will create a gallery of all of the visuals in the order that they appear in the play. At this point, we'll do a "gallery walk" in which students walk around and look at each strophic pair and the visual that was created with it in order. While they are doing this, they will write down parts that are more understandable now, surprising discoveries, and questions that they still have. Finally, we will have a whol- class discussion about the activity and students will have a chance to bring up the questions they still have and ask each other questions about other groups' visuals.

Side-by-side viewing

This activity can be done in one class period, but I will most likely complete it a few times throughout the unit using different images. This activity involves showing students two images side-by-side. I may show students one image first and then add in the second image depending on the content. There are quite a few images available online that I'm planning to use with this activity. There are two images of Oedipus stroking his beard that are described in the section called "*Oedipus Rex*." There are two vase paintings that illustrate these images. (See resources.) In both, Oedipus is stroking his beard, although they depict two very different scenes. Oedipus regards the Sphinx in one, and in the other he is depicted with a herdsman, Jocasta and their two daughters, Antigone and Ismene.

I will ask students to look first at the image with Oedipus and the Sphinx and take five minutes to write as much as they can about the image. They can write what they see, what they think it means, anything. After the five minutes we will discuss in class what they wrote down. Next I will show them the other image of Oedipus with his family, presumably when he and Jocasta find out the news from the first messenger. I won't give any information to the students, and again they will have five minutes to write down their interpretations, observations, and anything else they see. Again we will discuss the image with the class.

At this point I will show students the images side-by-side, and I will again have them write for five minutes. I will ask them to write about how the images interact with each other, or to compare and contrast them, or to write about what they mean together. We will then discuss again as a class, and at the end of the discussion I will have students write the opening sentence to an essay they would write about the two images. (I probably

won't have them actually write the essay, but it's a great way to practice thesis statements.) There are other images that I will do the same activity with, including images of different types of productions of *Oedipus Rex* as well as images of Oedipus that are very different from the two that I have described above.

The point of this activity is to help students make connections with art that is relevant to the unit. It also helps students practice looking at and analyzing art. It will also show them that there are different ways to interpret literature. It also helps them practice writing, an activity that is very helpful for students preparing for the AP exam.

Performance

This will be the culminating activity of the unit. I will divide the class into two groups of sixteen students each. Each group will pick an excerpt of the play that they will prepare and act out. Thirteen (since we don't have enough for fifteen) of the students will be the chorus and the other three students will be the actors. The task is to change the original language into modern language but to keep all of the meaning and the messages intact. The length will need to be about one act.

Students will have to work together to divide up the act and interpret and change the language into a modern style. I'm planning this as the culminating activity because at this point they hopefully have a good handle on the play as well as on the messages of the chorus. This activity pulls together the chorus-chunking activity as well as all of the work they will have done in class interpreting the play. Once they have changed the language, they will turn their versions in to me so I can be sure they have understood and kept the meaning of the original text. Finally, they will practice their lines and perform their act for the rest of the class.

Bibliography: Resources for Teachers and Students

Bloom, Harold. *Oedipus Rex*. Updated ed. New York: Infobase Pub., 2007. This is one of the foremost collections of interpretations of the text. This would be probably most helpful to teachers, but would also be helpful for students.

Daniels, Charles B., and Sam Scully. What Really Goes on in Sophocles' Theban plays. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996. This is a very helpful book for both teachers and students. It covers the history and goes into the themes of the three plays as well as looking at Greek viewpoints.

Frey, Nancy, and Douglas Fisher. *Teaching Visual Literacy: Using Comic Books, Graphic Novels, Anime, Cartoons, and More to Develop Comprehension and Thinking Skills*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008. This book would be very helpful to a teacher looking to use more images in her classroom.

Grene, David.Sophocles I: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone. 2nd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Harsh, Philip Whaley. A Handbook of Classical Drama,. Stanford University, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1944. This book describes specifically the history of Greek tragedy (among other forms of classical drama) and goes into detail about every aspect of Greek tragedy.

Howells, Richard. Visual Culture. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003. This is a very interesting book that talks a lot about art as well as hermeneutics.

Langer, J. A. "Beating The Odds: Teaching Middle And High School Students To Read And Write Well." American Educational Research Journal 38, no. 4 (2001): 837-880. This article is about a study done in American high schools that looks at how teachers teach reading and writing. It has great ideas for strategies that work well.

Papapostolou, A. "*Oedipus Rex* Theatre Performance in Pakistan," *Greek World Reporter.* Jan., 2009. http://world.greekreporter.com/2011/01/09/%E2%80%9Coedipus-rex-play-in-pakistan/ This article has an image of a production of *Oedipus Rex* that is very interesting and would be great to discuss with students.

Puppi, Lionello. Il Teatro Olimpico. Vicenza: Pozza, 1963. This book has many photos and information about the Olympic Theatre, which was designed to look as close as possible to theaters of Ancient Greece. This will be very helpful for classroom materials.

Scodel, Ruth. An Introduction to Greek Tragedy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. This book is a very comprehensive guide to the history and all aspects of Greek tragedy.

Sheehan, Sean. Sophocles' Oedipus the *K*ing: a *Reader's Guide*. London: Continuum, 2012. This book has several essays that are extremely helpful for both students and teachers.

Appendix A

Common Core Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

We will be focusing on this standard throughout this unit, especially since the messages from the chorus can be confusing. Students will be looking directly at the text for evidence in the text as well as making inferences when the text is confusing or uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2

Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

This will be one of the main goals in this unit—although we are focusing on the chorus, we are doing so in order to interpret the main messages in the text. Students will write an essay that both summarizes the text and looks at the main messages and analyzes how they interact with one another.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where

to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

Students will be studying the structure of tragedy and how it affects the action and theme in the play *Oedipus Rex*.

Notes

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1. Daniels and Scully, What Really Goes on in Sophocles' Theban plays?, xii.

2. Scodel, An introduction to Greek tragedy, 4.

3. William Moebius, "Introduction to picturebook codes." Word & Image 2, no. 2 (1986): 148.

4. Oklahoma, Musical, written by Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein (1943; New York City: Broadway), Live.

5. Joseph Roach, interviewed by Sara Delman, July 10, 2013.

6. Scodel, An Introduction to Greek Tragedy, 2.

7. Daniels and Scully, What Really Goes on in Sophocles', xiv.

8. Scodel, An Introduction to Greek tragedy, 3.

9. Harsh, A Handbook of Classical Drama, 4.

10. Scodel, An Introduction to Greek Tragedy, 12.

11. Ibid.

12. Daniels and Scully, What Really Goes on in Sophocles', xii.

13. Scodel. An Introduction to Greek Tragedy, 3.

14. Harsh, *A Handbook of Classical Drama,* 5.

15. Ibid. 3

16. Ibid. 5-7.

17. Daniels and Scully, What Really Goes on in Sophocles', xii.

18. Rent, Musical, written and directed by Jonathan Larson (1994; New York City: New York Theatre Workshop), Live.

19. Scodel, An Introduction to Greek Tragedy, 3

20. Ibid. 4.

21. Grene, *Sophocles I,* 17-18.

22. Ibid. 3.

23. J. A. Langer. "Beating The Odds: Teaching Middle And High School Students To Read And Write Well." American Educational Research Journal 38, no. 4 (2001): 859.