

Oedipus

This makes a good first P4C session with KS4 pupils and for English teachers is a good way of introducing the ideas of tragedy, fate and hubris before tackling Shakespeare. If you can't provoke a reaction with arguably the greatest story ever told, involving incest, child abandonment and road rage parricide, you may as well follow the example of the sphinx and jump off a cliff.

I find using the presentation version of the story works best: the images help secure the plot, and you are more likely to get questions and guesses as to what is happening if you tell rather than read the story. Take a few minutes to solve the riddle of the sphinx: you can use it to set a precedent for getting kids to use their own riddles as warm-ups, because it's a very natural way of getting dialogue going.

Warm up

A "Vote With Your Feet" game in which the four crimes in the story are laid out around the circle, and participants stand by the one they think is worst. Some interesting principles come out here – can any crime be worse than murder? Is an attack on a child especially heinous? Is following orders an excuse?

Discussion - Themes and Questions

Fate – "Can you escape your fate", "Is your life mapped out for you?" – This can be rather a loose, opinion-swapping enquiry, so a couple of facilitation strategies to have in waiting are **looking back** for evidence that would support those opinions and **looking forward** to what the implications are of the different answers. Should it alter the way you live your life if you feel it is already mapped out, or is your own responsibility? If your life is mapped out for you, does that imply a conscious being doing the mapping? Could thinking your life isn't mapped out for you be mapped out for you?

Guilt – If you don't know you've done something, can it still be a crime? In law, yes – there are "strict liability" offences where having a "guilty mind" is irrelevant – the "guilty act" by itself is a punishable crime – such as selling alcohol to under 18s. Why does the law work like that in some cases? Is it fair? Can something be unfair on an individual but still fair in the round?

Incest – you may find that your group vote for a question on this topic out of sheer devilment, but if you are confident enough to facilitate such a discussion, there's some rich territory here. Are there some things all societies would have to agree were crimes whatever else they disagreed on? How connected are the notions of what is "moral" and what is "natural"? Isn't it natural for the strong to lord it over the weak – and yet moral codes seem to challenge that element of the "natural order"? Why are traditional and religious systems of ethics so preoccupied with sexual morality rather than issues of social fairness?

Adoption/step-children vs. biological children – Who were his real parents – his birth parents or the ones that brought him up? Into deep territory here which may bring up some personal stories, or lead to people clamming up because the subject is too sensitive for them. Celebrity adoption cases may provide an option for a "distancing" technique. Is the question one that is decided by children – who they identify with – or by the parents – who do you think is your child? Does a child become yours in virtue of spending time with them? How is a child or parent being "yours" different to a material possession belonging to you?

Prediction – is it possible to predict the future? On one level, you might have an enquiry about the veracity of horoscopes, or whether they are too vague and open to interpretation.* How are horoscopes different to scientific predictions? On another, the possibility that predictions can become self-fulfilling prophecies, as appears to be the case with the slippery oracle in many Greek stories. Can predicting the future influence it?

*Many years ago before I acquired scruples, I attempted to start a business selling computer generated horoscopes. But I got so few customers I had to write to them saying that we had ceased trading due to unforeseen circumstances.

The king and queen of Thebes had a baby son. This should have made them happy, but the king was troubled. He had visited the oracle, who had the power to predict the future. The oracle made a terrible prophecy about the boy: "He will kill his own father and marry his own mother."

Desperate to escape the prophecy, the king considered killing his son. But he thought the gods might punish him for such an unnatural crime. He wanted the boy dead, but did not want to be the one to kill him. So he had a metal pin hammered through the boy's feet, and told one of his shepherds to take him into the mountains and leave him there to die.

But the shepherd took pity on the boy. He gave him to another shepherd, who came from Corinth on the other side of the mountain. That shepherd in turn gave the boy to the king of Corinth, who was childless. The king named him "Oedipus" which means "swollen foot", and raised him as his own son. So far as Oedipus knew, he was the prince of Corinth.

But eighteen years later, a drunk at a party accused him of not being the king's son. So Oedipus went to ask the oracle if that was true. Instead of answering his question, the oracle made the prophecy again, this time to Oedipus himself: "You will kill your father and marry your own mother."

Oedipus was desperate to stop the prophecy coming true. To save the king and queen he knew as his father and mother, he fled from Corinth. But he fled towards Thebes, where the father and mother he knew nothing about were king and queen.

As he came towards Thebes, at a place where three roads met, a man coming the other way in a chariot ordered him to get off the road. Oedipus refused; they fought; and Oedipus killed the man.

Next he met the sphinx, a monster that was terrorising the city of Thebes. She had the body of a lioness and the head of a woman. She asked each traveller this riddle: "What goes on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?" All those who guessed wrong, she killed.

But Oedipus guessed right. The sphinx jumped off a cliff and died, and Oedipus entered Thebes in triumph. The king had recently been killed, so they made Oedipus king in his place, and he married the queen.

Oedipus and the queen had four children. Gradually, Thebes fell victim to a terrible plague which killed the children, the animals and the crops. Oedipus, full of pride, promised to save the city. He asked the oracle why the gods were angry with Thebes. They answered that the plague would last until the murderer of the previous king, was caught. Oedipus cursed the killer and vowed to find and punish him, whoever he was.

But then Oedipus heard where the old king had died: at a place where three roads met. Remembering his fight at such a place, he suspected he might be the killer himself. So he sent for the witness to the murder.

Before the witness arrived, there was another caller: a messenger from Corinth, bringing Oedipus the news that his father, the king of Corinth, had died. He would now rule both Thebes and Corinth. If his father was dead, there was no way he could kill him, so Oedipus thought he had escaped that half of the prophecy. Even so, he could not return to Corinth while his mother lived, in case the other half came true.

"But the queen of Corinth is not your mother, nor was the king your father," the messenger revealed. For he was the same man who, when he was a shepherd, had received Oedipus as a baby from another shepherd, and presented him to the King of Corinth.

Then the witness to the murder of the old king of Thebes arrived. He had once been the shepherd to whom the king had entrusted the task of killing his baby son. But he had pitied the boy, and passed him on to start a new life in Corinth. The king, thinking the shepherd had done as he asked, made him a trusted servant. Years later, he had been with the king on the day he died. He now recognised the killer – Oedipus himself!

Realising what had happened, the queen hanged herself in shame. Oedipus found the body of the woman who was both his wife and his mother. He took two pins from her dress, and gouged out his own eyes.

**Killing your own
father.**

**Marrying your
own mother.**

**Hammering a
stake through the
feet of your own
baby.**

**Carrying out
someone else's
order to kill his
child.**