Greek Tragedy Background

Aeschylus
- Most conservative, patriotic, and religious of the three tragedians
  - Believed Zeus led people from suffering into truth
- Greatest poet – often compared to Shakespeare

Sophocles
- Most popular of the three tragedians
- Not as religious as Aeschylus
  - Skeptical about how involved the gods were in humans’ daily experiences
- Oedipus Rex is widely considered the greatest Greek tragedy

Euripides
- Most private and least popular of the three tragedians during his lifetime
- Less religious than Aeschylus or even Sophocles
  - Skeptical of the existence of the gods
  - Believed people used gods as scapegoats for powerful emotions/natural forces

Athens in 5th century B.C.
- Golden age of Greece
- By modern standards, Athens was small, crowded, and dirty
  - Population 300,000
  - No running water in homes, no central heat, inadequate light
- In spite of these obstacles, foundations of modern Western civilization were established
  - European philosophy, history, drama, architecture, and sculpture
- Keys to success
  - Confidence - Athens was victorious against Persians at Battle of Marathon
  - Direct democracy – Athens was the first democracy in the world
  - Progressiveness – Athenians were directly involved in the community

Characteristics of Greek Theater
- In addition to democracy, Greeks also invented the theater
  - Began as dance
  - Oldest element of Greek drama was the chorus
    - In Greek, chorus means dance, hence the word choreographer
  - Began as celebration of Dionysus (god of living/growing things)
- Drama and religion were connected
- Plays were usually based on stories known by the audience
  - The audience knew the outcome from the beginning
- Chorus presented odes to illustrate broader social/religious issues
- Tragic plays illustrate that dramatists were deeply aware of life’s pain and sorrow

Aristotle on Tragedy
- Tragedy is an imitation of things as they should be, not as they are
- Plot is the most important element of tragedy
  - The plot should imitate real life (mimesis)
- Goal of tragedy is to bring about a cleansing of emotions (catharsis) in the audience
  - Audience should experience pity and fear before being uplifted
- Hero experiences changes and becomes aware of his/her limitations (sophrosyne)
- His/her misfortune is brought about by an error in judgment or frailty (hamartia)
  - This frailty is often hubris, or pride
- Dramatic unities
  - Unity of action – one main action, few subplots
  - Unity of place – single physical space
  - Unity of time – action should take place within a single day
The Legend of Oedipus

- Like most Greek tragedies, Oedipus is based on a legend that was familiar to ancient Greeks
- According to this legend:
  - Oedipus was the son of King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes.
  - An oracle warned them that their son would kill his father and marry his mother.
  - To prevent this, Laius ordered a servant to pin their baby boy’s feet together and leave him on a mountain to die.
  - The servant felt sorry for the baby and gave him to a shepherd, who gave the boy to the childless king and queen of Corinth – Polybus and Merope.
  - They named him Oedipus, meaning “swollen foot,” and raised him as their son.
  - When Oedipus was a young man, a drunk person told him that his parents were not his biological parents.
  - Curious to learn the truth, Oedipus asked the oracle.
  - The oracle did not answer his question, but told him that he would kill his father and marry his mother.
  - Afraid of this fate, Oedipus left Corinth.
  - As he was traveling, he killed a man (road rage?).
    - This man was Laius, Oedipus’ biological father. He had no idea.
  - Oedipus soon arrived at Thebes, and he found the city under the control of a sphinx.
  - The sphinx ate anyone who could not answer her riddle. (What walks on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening?)
  - Oedipus solved the riddle (man), and saved Thebes.
  - In gratitude, Thebans named him king and he married the recently widowed Queen Jocasta. He had no idea she was his biological mother.
  - Oedipus ruled in peace for 20 years, until another plague came to Thebes.
  - This is where Sophocles’ play begins. The audience knows much more than Oedipus.

Terms to Know from Aristotle’s Poetics

The famous Greek philosopher Aristotle analyzed tragedy in great detail. His rules for its construction, recorded in Poetics, have been debated throughout time. As we read Oedipus, Antigone, and Medea, identify the following elements. Ultimately, you will decide whether each play qualifies as an Aristotelian tragedy.

Mimesis - imitation of real life
- In a tragedy, characters should act realistically

Catharsis - cleansing of emotion
- Tragedy arouses pity and fear in its audience
- In an effective tragedy, the audience is left with a feeling of renewal because of a shift in emotion at the end of the play

Hamartia – fatal flaw
- Error of judgment or frailty (i.e. hubris)

Hubris – excessive pride

Sophrosyne – modesty, temperance, awareness of one’s limitations
- Well-balanced individuals demonstrate sophrosyne

Eusebeia – reverence
- Once a character demonstrates sophrosyne, he/she is ready to show eusebeia

Phronesis – wisdom
- After achieving sophrosyne, phronesis becomes a possibility

Anagnorisis – when the protagonist realizes the true nature of his situation
- The character’s reaction to this realization tells us a great deal about him/her