

Appendix 1: The Hero



Figure 30: Odysseus the hero?

Philosophy

A hero in the time of Homer was very different from a hero in later history. Then, a hero was high-born and embodied virtues such as strength and courage, what might be called 'battlefield virtues'. In this regard it is worth noting that the word 'hero' comes from the Greek *heros* (pronounced **heh**-ross), which means 'defender, protector'. The heroes of Greek myth (e.g. Achilles, Heracles, Theseus, Perseus and, of course, Odysseus) were also often selfish, arrogant and without the virtues that would typify a hero in post-Christian times.

The German philosopher, Nietzsche, thought that this transformation didn't occur with the advent of Jesus but with Socrates who, he thought, was the first to advocate the moral virtues such as self-sacrifice, humility, subservience to truth, and so on, over strength and prowess on the battlefield. These days, you can find heroes of both sorts: from the action hero, such as Batman, James Bond, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, to the moral hero, such as Schindler,

Superman, George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*, Arthurian knights, and so on. Just spend some time listing how many of each you can think of. Which list is easier to fill? It seems that most examples of the latter are to be found in history rather than in fiction (e.g. Gandhi, Socrates, Jesus), although the extent to which the characters of these stories are fictional embellishments on historical figures is interesting in itself.

The question whether Odysseus is a hero, or a good man, is a question that can be found threaded throughout the stories of the *Odyssey*. That is why I like to come to this question at the *end* of the *Odyssey*. The children will have heard how he was willing to sacrifice himself to save his men from Circe, but they will also have heard how his hubristic pride brought on the wrath of Poseidon, a move that would endanger the crew. They will have been puzzled as to why he didn't attempt to save his crew but only himself when the ship was sunk by Zeus, and they may have considered his heroic attempt to return his men to Ithaca an abject failure given that they all died. Yet they will have been impressed at how his ingenuity often served him and his crew well.

By ancient or modern standards, the question as to whether Odysseus was a hero is a complicated one, and one that the class would do well to consider. What adds to his complexity is the fact that the character of Odysseus is a composite of many different authors from Homer to Euripides and Sophocles, each one portraying many of the same events but with a different angle, portraying him from heroic to roguish. Yet this only goes to show the complexity of any identity drawn from narratives, because one's own story has to be understood in the light of other's versions of the same story. Different people see the same events differently.



The Hero

The Task Questions for this section should be as follows:

- TQ 1: Was Odysseus a hero?
- TQ 2: Was Odysseus a good man?

Nested Questions

- Socratic Question: What is a hero?
- Are there different kinds of hero?
- Socratic Question: What is a good person?
- Is a hero the same as a good person?
- Can a hero be a bad person?

- Can a hero be flawed?
- Who is your hero? Why are they your hero?

A further important discussion for this section could also be:

TQ 3: Was Odysseus a good leader?

Nested Questions

- Socratic Question: What is a good leader?
- Can a good leader fail?
- Does a good leader always make the right decisions?

Here are some choice scenes from the *Odyssey* to refer to when answering these questions, though the children may well refer to other scenes not listed here:

- Odysseus the madman (as told by Demodocus). Page 141
- His devising of the wooden horse plan in the Trojan war. Page 30
- His advice to kill Astyanax (see below for this story).
- His attack on the Ciconians. Page 35
- His protection of Maron the Ciconian priest. Page 36
- His resistance of the juice of the Lotus Eaters. Page 44
- His ingenious escape from the island of the Cyclops. Page 51
- His declaration to Polyphemus of who he really is. Page 54
- His promise to return his crew home after the mutiny. Page 66
- His decision to try to retrieve his men from Circe. Page 82
- His actions passing the Sirens and then Scylla and Charybdis. Page 98 and 110
- Saving himself after the ship is sunk by Zeus. Page 123
- His resistance to Kalypso's offers. Page 131
- The winning of the discus prize. Page 139
- His treatment of the suitors (and disloyal servants). Page 147 and 154

Advanced Extension Activity

(Suitable for older students only)

Once the Greeks had tricked their way into the city walls of Troy using Odysseus' clever plan to hide inside a giant wooden horse, among the people of Troy found by the Greeks inside the city was a child called Astyanax (pronounced as-ty-a-nax). Astyanax was the baby boy of the now dead hero of the Trojans, Hektor, one of the sons of King Priam. Odysseus advised

the Greeks to kill Astyanax as he feared that if they did not, he would later, as a man, seek to avenge his father. The Greeks agreed with Odysseus and so Astyanax was murdered, though not by Odysseus. He was dropped from the top of the tallest tower in Troy by Neoptolemus (pronounced nee-op-**toh**-le-mus).

Note: There are some extremely moving passages in the *Iliad*, also by Homer (6.466–74, 6.467–81, 24.725–37), and Euripides' *The Trojan Women* (749–60, 1173–93) that describe the event of Astyanax's death and its effects on other characters in the story. (References taken from the *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* by Jenny March.)

Related thought experiments (also for older students only):

- Would it be morally right to kill a baby if he or she was going to commit terrible acts as an adult? (For example, Hitler.)
- Would what you know about the situation make a difference?
- Would it be morally right to kill a baby Hitler if you did not know what he was going to grow up to do?
- Would it be morally right to kill a baby Hitler if you did know what he was going to grow up to do?
- See online supplement to this chapter, Moral and Prudential Goods, and also see online supplement for Chapter 6: When in Rome ... (The Laestrygonians) for a discussion of relativism/absolutism.

Appendix 2: Introduction to Ancient Greek

Our Hero

Before beginning the stories, and only if you are planning to do the course in Ancient Greek with the children, begin by writing the word 'Odysseus' in Ancient Greek. This can either be done by writing it on the board like so, Ο δ υ σ σ ε υ ς, or, you can write each letter on a piece of A4 paper, nice and big, and have them scattered randomly in the centre of the floor. I recommend you practice writing them yourself beforehand, if you are going to teach them.

The children then have to try to ascertain the following bits of information through questioning you. You should try to get them to answer all these questions with educated guesses and a few clues from yourself:

- What are these symbols? (They make a word.)
- Why are they here? (To *transliterate*. Explain the difference between this and 'translation'.)
- What language are they from? (Ancient Greek.)
- What country is the language from? (Greece.)
- What English letter does each symbol correspond to? (Literally: 'O', 'd', 'u', 's', 's', 'e', 'u', 's'.)
- What does it mean? (It is the name of the main protagonist of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus. Once they have transliterated it they may guess this.)

Rules of Ancient Greek and possible points of confusion that you must be aware of for this activity:

- When translating we replace some – but not all – 'u's with a 'y'. The word 'Odysseus' has both kinds of 'u' – one we replace with a 'y' and one we don't.
- An 's' at the beginning or middle of a word is written 'σ' but if an 's' ends a word then it looks like this: 'ς'.

If using the board, then, once you are ready to begin with the transliteration, write numbers 1 to 8 above the symbols for ease of reference, like so:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Ο δ υ σ σ ε υ ς

If using the paper method, then get them to write, on a piece of A4, the English letters they think go with the Greek letters and have them place these letters below the Greek. I ask them to do this in pairs where they both have to agree, between them, what the corresponding English letter is. Ask other members of the class to correct any matches they don't think are correct.

'Philosophy'

A similar activity can be done with the word 'philosophy' though you may prefer to do these two activities at different times, making sure they are both done before you reach the Ancient Greek Workshop (see Appendix 3):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
φ ι λ ο σ ο φ ι α

Begin the second activity by getting the class to spell 'philosophy' in English on the board first, so that they have something to compare with when transliterating. Say it in clear, phonetic syllables to help them with the spelling: 'fih-loh-soh-fee-ya'. The aim of this activity is to place the symbols in the correct order.

Here are some further Greek points to be aware of that may cause confusion:

- The single phi symbol ϕ captures two English symbols, 'ph', but only one sound, 'fuh'.
- The translation changes the last two letters of the transliteration 'i' and 'a' into one letter: 'y' (as in 'Italia' to 'Italy').

See if you can find a way to get the children to solve these problems for themselves. For instance, they will often try to find an 'h' for the second letter. If they try to do this, then ask them what they think the second letter is. If they say 'h', then say, 'The second letter is not an 'h', though that is a very good guess. So, if it's not an 'h', what do you think the second letter will be?' You could also ask them why they think it is not an 'h'. Or you could ask this at the end.

Let them know that some of the letters are very obvious but others are not so obvious, so make sure they know that they don't have to do them in order.

That way you should encourage them to do the easy ones first. A process of elimination should then aid them with the harder ones.

A starting definition of 'philosophy'

Once they have translated 'philosophy', explain that it is made of two words in Ancient Greek, 'philo' and 'sophia', and that *philo* means *love* or *friendship* ('love' as in 'when you *love* doing something like football or drawing'), and that *sophia* means *wisdom* or *learning*. So, all together, it means 'love of wisdom' or 'friendship of learning'. This means that a philosopher is someone who loves learning, thinking and exploring ideas, but it also means that they like to learn, think and explore ideas with other people and not just on their own. Before saying all this you could do *Break the circle* (see page 15) on *wisdom*.

Here is the Ancient Greek alphabet (upper and lower case) complete with pronunciation guide:

Name	Upper	Lower	Pronunciation
Alpha	A	α	a as in father
Beta	B	β	b as in English
Gamma	Γ	γ	g hard, as in get
Delta	Δ	δ	d as in English
Epsilon	E	ε	e as in set
Zeta	Z	ζ	'sd' as in wisdom
Eta	H	η	e long, as in hair
Theta	Θ	θ	th as in thin
Iota	I	ι	i as in hit
Kappa	K	κ	k as in English
Lambda	Λ	λ	l as in English
Mu	M	μ	m as in English
Nu	N	ν	n as English
Xi	Ξ	ξ	x as in English
Omicron	O	ο	o as in hot
Pi	Π	π	p as in English
Rho	P	ρ	r as in English
Sigma	Σ	σ (or ς)	s as in sister
Tau	T	τ	t as in English
Upsilon	Υ	υ	oo as in too
Phi	Φ	φ	ph as in philosophy
Chi	X	χ	ch as in loch
Psi	Ψ	ψ	ps as in lapse
Omega	Ω	ω	au as in caught

Appendix 3: Ancient Greek Workshop

This workshop takes either an entire morning or an entire afternoon. Alternatively, you could spread it over several sessions, doing one activity each time. It is best approached when the children have already completed the tasks in Appendix 2 to translate ‘Odysseus’ and ‘philosophy’. That way they already have a knowledge of some symbols, and it is probably better to remind them (or have them remind themselves) of what they learnt in those two tasks before beginning the workshop.

The pedagogical principle that underpins this workshop is what you might call *scaffolding*. That is to say, the workshop has been carefully put together so that the children can work out the new information at each stage. The teacher should refrain from giving answers as much as possible to encourage the children to teach themselves.

There are a few exceptions where the teacher may need to teach, such as the rule that the ‘s’ (ς) in Ancient Greek is different at the end of words from the ‘s’ at the beginning or in the middle of words (σ). It is still possible for them to work this out if you question them well, making use of information they may already have gleaned. For instance, when you come to ‘eureka’ they are likely to say that the third letter ρ is a ‘p’, as it looks like one. However, they should notice, with or without prompting from the teacher, that they have already done a ‘p’ earlier in ‘Oidipous’ and that the ‘p’ was the *pi* symbol π. If they do need prompting then here’s a good prompter-question: ‘Is there anything already on the board that can help you with this?’ You could suggest that they complete the rest of the word, the remaining letters of which should be familiar, and then return to the unknown symbol ρ. If they spot the English word, *eureka*, then they are likely to be able to work out that it is an ‘r’.

There should be a similar way that you can get the children to teach themselves what the unfamiliar symbols are in each new word, using a combination of previous knowledge, elimination and educated guessing. Once they have been reminded of the symbols that they already know from the words ‘Odysseus’ and ‘philosophy’, then proceed through the following stages of the workshop:

- 1 *Spot the hero:* Before you begin the story, write up and number each letter as you did for 'Odysseus' and 'philosophy' (see Appendix 2):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Ο ι δ ι π ο υ ς

- 2 When you reach the riddles and you stop the story, have the children transliterate the word on the board, identifying which English letter goes under each Greek letter. As with the earlier, similar tasks, encourage them to do the obvious ones first such as 'ο', 'ι', 'υ' and 'ς', leaving 'δ' and 'π' until last. When (and *if*) they think they know what the word is, then they can work out what 'π' stands for. If they don't, then teach it to them. The transliteration is 'Oidipous' but the translation I have opted for is 'Oidipus'.

- 3 *Guess the pair:*

(a) Write up, only in ancient Greek symbols, the following words: 'elephas' (ελεφας), 'idea' (ιδεα), 'Olympic' (Ολυμπια), 'balle' (βαλλε).

(b) Ask them to transliterate and to guess what English words they correspond to. These words are Ancient Greek words and have been chosen especially because they are so similar to their English equivalents. It helps to really illustrate to children how much of our language is of Ancient Greek origin.

(c) To help with the latter task (especially for the younger ones), you could write up the English words in a different order on the opposite side of the board so that their job is to find the corresponding pairs:

- ιδεα = idea
- βαλλε = throw (hint: say: 'It's not a ball, though that is a good guess; *balle* is the Ancient Greek for ... Here's a clue: what do you *do* with a ball?')
- ελεφας = elephant
- Ολυμπια = Olympic

- 4 *Looking for 'phi' (φ):* Explain that there are many words in English that come from Ancient Greek words like the ones above, but if they want a quick way to find English words that come from Ancient Greek then suggest that they look for words that have a 'ph' for a 'fuh' sound. Ask them to list as many as they can. You are likely to hear, 'phone', which means 'sound' and is part of 'telephone' where 'tele' means 'distant' so together it makes 'distant-sound'.

This is a good opportunity to explain that many Greek words are often two smaller words put together to make bigger ones (there are English equivalents that you could ask them to pick out such as ‘sunhat’ or ‘fireman’). Other words you are likely to hear are: ‘physical’ (physis = nature); ‘photo’ (light); ‘television’ – which may get a mention when you say ‘telephone’ (tele = ‘distant’, as before, but ‘vision’ actually comes from the Latin for ‘to see’, so it is an interesting mixture of Greek *and* Latin origins, which is fairly common in English). ‘Philosophy’ may of course come up (philo = love and sophia = wisdom), and it is a good example of a longer word made of two smaller ones. Don’t worry about words you don’t know the origins for – these make excellent ‘research words’ for the class. Make a list such as this:

- Telephone
- Photogenic
- Graph
- Geography
- Biography
- Autobiography
- Telegraph
- Monograph

5 (Optional) *Ancient Greek Boggle*: Boggle is a game where you have a random selection of 16 letters and you have to find as many words as you can using the letters. Using any selection of the Greek words you have on the board, such as *idea*, *balle*, *oidipous*, *elephas* and *olumpia*, give them a time limit, such as five minutes, to find as many English words as they can but using the Greek symbols, so λ, ε, α, π spells ‘leap’, and σ, ε, λ, λ spells ‘sell’, and so on. Get them to do this activity in pairs or small groups. You could make this competitive.

6 *Ancient Greek words*: It is important to introduce the words in the order I’ve presented them here as each word has been chosen to borrow most letters from the ones already known but to introduce something new, usually not so obvious, for them to work out. Have them transliterate each word and then have them try to work out what they think the word is:

- (a) β ι β λ ο ς (*book* as in ‘bible’ which simply means ‘book’)
(b) σ κ ο π (*look* as in ‘scope’)

- (c) τ ε λ ε (*distant*. Encourage them to put this together with another word on the board to make a familiar English word: ‘telescope.’)
- (d) ε υ ρ η κ α (*Eureka!* as in ‘I’ve got it!’ Literally: ‘I have found [it]!’)
- (e) π α ρ α δ ε ι σ ο ς (*garden* in Greek but more familiar as ‘paradise’ in English, probably from the biblical paradise, the garden of Eden.)
- (f) π ε ρ ι (‘around’ as in ‘*perimeter*’. Encourage them to put this together with another word already on the board to make an English word to do with submarines: ‘periscope.’)

(IMPORTANT: 7 and 8 should not be done until you have read or told the story *Winged Words* (App. 4) to the class and reached the point where the riddles are found by Oidipus.)

7 *Translate the coded riddles*: Hand out the *Winged Words* worksheets (online) to the children, in either pairs or groups, for them to try to complete. They should look at the riddles first, then use the Ancient Greek alphabet to transliterate, and then write down what they think is the English letter onto the ‘Transliteration’ sheets. There is one tricky bit where the ‘theta’ (θ), though only one letter in Greek, will need two letters, ‘t’ and ‘h’, in English to make the singular sound ‘th’. You could explain this or allow some of the children to figure it out and then give them the job of going around the class to explain this to the others. Either give both riddles to all the groups/pairs or divide the riddles up so that half the children do one riddle and the other half do the other.

8 *Solve the Sphinx’s riddles*: Once the riddles have been decoded, the next task is to see if the children can solve the riddles. It is quite likely that there will be some children that have heard the first of the two riddles. Ask anyone who knows it to refrain from saying anything until the others have had a go. You could always ask those that know the riddle to think of a clue to give the others to help them. It is not essential that the children solve the riddles. What is essential is that they break the code in order for the story to continue.

Appendix 4: Winged Words (Oidipus and The Riddle of The Sphinx)

Philosophy

There are several riddles in this story. There are the two riddles spoken by the Sphinx and asked of all her victims, the first of which, The Creature, is very well known. I have not yet come across a class of children where at least one of them had not heard the first of the two riddles before, in one form or another. The second of the two riddles, The Sisters, is not so well known but was apparently included in some tellings of the story. I have included them both, for fun, and for more transliteration opportunities. The third riddle is a philosophical riddle and although brought out here by the author, it is a puzzle that is riddled throughout Greek mythology: that of how to make sense of the often whimsical way in which the gods threw obstacles in the way of the human characters. I have symbolised this with the use of the goddess *Tyche*, justified, I think, because the various versions of the story have different gods send the Sphinx. And, for reasons of simplicity, I have omitted the complex reasons given for the gods punishing the Thebans, making it, in this case, a random, reasonless event. Given this amendment, I thought it right to appeal to the appropriate deity. *Tyche* is the goddess of chance events. This also allows for the philosophical issues surrounding *chance* to make an appearance.

Using the Ancient Greek Workshop

If you use the story to frame the Ancient Greek Workshop, then tell the story until Oidipus finds the parchment – at which point stop the story and give out the Winged Words worksheets available online. Take them through the workshop plan in Appendix 3, the last activity of which is to transliterate the riddles. They are in English but with Greek symbols, so it is an exercise in relating the Greek symbols to the English ones. Once they have transliterated the riddles, spend some time trying to solve them. Like Oidipus, you may want to help them by giving clues to help overcome the metaphors ‘in the morning’, ‘in the afternoon’, and so on.



Figure 31: Tyche, goddess of chance events



Storykit

Names to learn in this story

- **Oidipus** (oi-di-pus – I have stuck to the phonetic pronunciation, as opposed to the usual ee-di-pus, to help with transliteration): Oidipus is one of the great Greek heroes but who comes to a tragic end in the canonical versions of his story – he unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother, fathering four children by her, only to gouge out his eyes and wander off into the wilderness when he realises what he has done. He typifies the human who is utterly ruined by the unseen outcomes of fate, and therefore a fitting hero for association with Tyche.
- **Tyche** (ti-kay): Goddess of fortune, luck and chance. Her Roman counterpart, *Fortuna*, is more familiar. She was invoked to account for unexplained events, particularly calamities. Both Tyche and Fortuna were often depicted standing on the wheel of fortune, holding in one hand a cornucopia, symbolising what fortune can give in one's favour, and in the other hand, a ship's rudder, showing how quickly and unexpectedly she may change one's fortune from good to bad or from bad to good.
- **Sphinx** (sfinx): A mythical creature with one foot in the mythology of several civilisations, and is probably best known in her Egyptian form. In contrast to the Greek depiction, the Egyptians depicted the Sphinx as benevolent and male.
- **Thebes** (theebs): One of the chief Greek cities.
- **Phikion** (fi-kion): The mountain beside Thebes where the Sphinx comes to rest and guard the entrance to the city.

Keyword list

- Tyche's whim.
- The Sphinx.
- The imprisoned people .
- Reward.
- The brothers.
- Parchment.
- Oidipus.
- The riddles.
- Answers.
- The death of the Sphinx.
- King of Thebes.

Synopsis for Winged Words

The people of Thebes are made to suffer for no good reason by the goddess Tyche. She has a Sphinx placed at the city gates, barring entrance to or exit from the city. Anyone who tries must answer the Sphinx's riddles or be consumed by her. No one is able to answer the riddles. Two brothers eventually try to write down the riddles so that they can be worked out. They do not survive but they do manage to write down the riddles. The parchment containing the riddles is blown by the wind to Oidipus who is on his way to Thebes. Using the parchment, and his own wit, he is able to work out the answer to the riddles. He approaches the Sphinx and answers her riddles correctly. She is wounded by his answers and takes herself back to her lair where she devours herself. Oidipus is rewarded by being made king of Thebes. But that is another story ...

Story

Sometimes, and for no reason at all, the gods like to make difficulties for humans, like children playing with toys. When freak events take place and no discernible cause can be identified, such events are attributed by the Greeks to Tyche, goddess of fortune, luck and chance. One day Tyche devised a terrible plan to bring difficulty to the people of Thebes because ... well, for Tyche, there was no 'because'. A Sphinx was summoned to besiege the city and trap its hapless inhabitants. The Sphinx flew towards the city on her enormous wings and came to settle on the side of Mount Phikion which overlooked the road in and out of the city. She was an impressive creature with the lower body of a lion, the wings of a giant eagle and the head and upper body of a beautiful, but vengeful woman.

Whenever somebody tried to enter or leave Thebes, she would glide down from the mountainside, casting a vast shadow over them, and bringing herself to land before them, barring their way into or out of the city. With a voice that whispered, screeched and roared at the same time, she would suggest, demand and declare a riddle. If the unfortunate traveller was unable to answer her riddle successfully then she would lift herself up from the ground with her huge wings and carry him up to her lair on the mountainside where she would first strangle her victim – the word ‘sphinx’ means ‘throtler’ – and then she would devour them limb by limb.

The people of Thebes were imprisoned in their own town, and because none who ventured along the road survived, no one knew what the riddle was. Each person who met with the Sphinx had to think about the riddle whilst they stood before the terrifying creature, and they had to think quickly, but none yet had been able to think quickly enough!

At first, some brave citizens ventured forth to confront the Sphinx but as the death count increased, there seemed to be fewer and fewer brave citizens left in the city. The king of Thebes had to begin offering rewards to those willing to try their luck, but the reward had to be increased with each passing day that they remained trapped.

One day, two brothers, between them, found the courage to meet the merciless Sphinx. But they had a plan – a very noble plan. They thought that if they approached her as two, one of them might be able to write down the riddle and perhaps escape back into the city with the riddle written down. Then they would let their wisest citizens pore over the words and solve the puzzle, releasing the people of Thebes from the curse.

The two brothers were never seen nor heard from again, but they had managed to scribble down the riddle on parchment before they met their end. They discovered a terrible surprise that the Sphinx had for her puzzlers, but they managed to warn whoever would find their message of the surprise. As the Sphinx consumed their bodies, the piece of parchment on which the words had been scribbled was blown away from Thebes by the capricious wind.

The wind blew the parchment this way and that, here and there until, at length, it came to rest at the feet of a travelling man called Oidipus. He saw the wind bring him the parchment and so picked it up to see what was written on it. This is what he saw. The parchment, splashed with the blood of the noble brothers, read:

What κρεατῦρε has φουρ λεγς ιν θε μορνινυ, two ιν θε αφτεροοον
ανδ θρεε ιν θε evening, ανδ θε μορε λεγς ιτ has, θε weaker ιτ ισ;
(a semicolon ‘;’ serves as a question mark ‘?’ in English)

The terrible surprise that the brothers had discovered was that the Sphinx was not asking one riddle but two! The second one read:

θερε αρε two σιστερς, ονε gives βιρθ το θε οθερ ανδ she, ιν τυρν,
gives βιρθ το θε φιστ. What αρε they;

Before Oidipus could do anything, he would have to understand what was written on the parchment.

Class Activity: Ancient Greek Workshop

Stop the story here and commence the workshop in Appendix 3. Make sure you are ready with the worksheets for the workshop. Neither Oidipus nor the children can continue until the riddles are understood. Some of the English words have been left in for two reasons: it offers some guidance for the children, and they are words with no direct Ancient Greek equivalent such as ‘y’ or ‘v’.

Story continued ...

Now, Oidipus had heard tell of the Sphinx that stood guard at the gates of Thebes, and of the riddle that remained unanswered, and had begun to make his way to the city intent on defeating her. Upon seeing the riddles and the blood, he was able to surmise that this was an ill-fated attempt by someone to write the riddle down. And now it had found its way into his hands, perhaps by the guiding hand of a god or perhaps merely by chance, but nevertheless he now held the key to the city. Oidipus decided to head towards Thebes and to think about the riddles on the way. All he knew was that he must have an answer before he reached the road into the city.

The road into Thebes remained silent and dusty, with not a soul to be seen on this once bustling route. Then, in the distance, the tiny figure of a man appeared, making its way towards the city. It was Oidipus. He drew closer to the city and as he passed the mountainside, just outside the city gates, the sky suddenly darkened. He looked up at the spectacle of the Sphinx as she descended gracefully towards him, silently gliding down to sit before him, her lion’s tail curling up as she addressed him with her winged words: ‘To pass by me you must first solve this riddle: “What creature has four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon and three in the evening, and the more legs it has, the weaker it is?”’

Oidipus pretended to think about it, then he looked at her and said, 'Well, your words are puzzling indeed, but I think you didn't literally mean in the morning and in the afternoon and in the evening. You mean in the morning of the creature's life. So the creature you speak of has four legs when an infant, it has two when an adult, and – this one's tricky – it has three legs when old ... because it needs a stick to get around. The creature is a human.'

The Sphinx hissed as the words struck her like a sword to the heart. Then she whispered, screeched and roared, 'You have been lucky and have answered the first of my two riddles, but will Luck be with you for the second or will she abandon you? Now answer the second riddle, if you can!' Then she delivered the second riddle with a faint but unpleasant smile: 'There are two sisters: one gives birth to the other and she, in turn, gives birth to the first. What are they?'

Oidipus feigned deep thought again and then said, almost as if to himself, 'Well, when I realised that you didn't literally mean 'in the morning' in the first riddle, I wonder if the same trick is being used in the second. At first it seems impossible: how can two sisters also be each other's mothers? But last night, I could not sleep so I lay and looked up to the sky as day turned into night, and I lay all night looking up to the stars until night then turned into day. It's as if day gives birth to night and then it's as if night gives birth to day in an endless cycle of motherhood. Yet they stand next to each other like sisters locked in an eternal dance. Could it be that the sisters are ... night and day?'

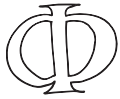
The Sphinx hissed at him: 'You speak as though you have had time to think about my words. How could you have known the riddles as you lay and looked at the stars for assistance?'

Oidipus held up the parchment and said, 'I have struck you in the heart but not with a sword; I have wounded you with winged words instead, brought to me on the wind like a death spell for you. It was with words that you hoped to entrap me and it is with words that I have defeated you.'

She screeched like a dying animal and lifted herself up into the air with giant movements of her wings. She took herself to her lair, and, just as she had devoured the unhappy men who had failed to answer her riddles, paradoxically, akin to the sisters night and day, she devoured herself. She was finally free from her vengefulness, free from the whimsical commands of the gods and free from having to strangle the hapless inhabitants of Thebes. Her screeching and her riddles vanished forever.

Oidipus strode through the gates of Thebes, the emaciated people of which looked at him disbelieving as they witnessed the first person to enter their city in a long time. By now, and out of desperation, the reward was for no less than the throne of Thebes itself. The adventure, however, was far from over for Oidipus.

The true riddle of the Sphinx put to the people of Thebes had remained unanswered, however, even with the death of the Sphinx. It was this: 'Why? And why us?'



Destiny, fate and chance

TQ: Why do bad things happen?

Nested Questions

- Do things happen for a reason?
- Why do the gods make things difficult for the characters in the myths?
- Can bad things that happen be good for us in any way?
- Why don't the gods just make good things happen?