

Sophocles: Biography

Learning Target: I can identify essential details in the life of Sophocles by summarizing the important events in his early years, education, public service, literary writing, and honors and awards.

Directions: Read the following paragraphs about the life of Sophocles. After each, provide a short summary of the paragraph identifying the essential pieces of information provided.

Early Years

Information about Sophocles' life is at best sketchy and incomplete, but some important details survive. Most of what scholars know about the playwright comes from two sources: the *Suda Lexicon*, a tenth-century Greek dictionary, and the anonymous *Sophocles: His Life and Works*, an undated manuscript found in the thirteenth century. Sophocles was born about 496 B.C. at Colonus, a village just outside Athens, Greece. His father, Sophillus, was a wealthy weapons-maker and a leading citizen. Both birth and wealth, then, set Sophocles apart as someone likely to play an important role in Athenian society.

Summary:

Education

Like other Greek boys from wealthy families, Sophocles studied poetry, music, dancing, and gymnastics — subjects regarded as the basis of a well-rounded education for a citizen. His early schooling prepared him to serve as a leader in all aspects of public life, including the military, foreign policy, and the arts. The young Sophocles showed great skill at music and dancing. In fact, at age 15, he won the great honor of leading the boys' chorus in the victory *paean* (joyful song) celebrating the Athenian naval victory over the Persians at the battle of Salamis. This achievement foreshadowed the leadership role Sophocles would have in society, both as an active member of the government and as an influence on Greek arts.

Sophocles lived during the Classical Period (500 to 400 B.C.), a time of transition for Greece, when political and cultural events were changing and shaping Athenian culture. As a dramatist, Sophocles played an important part in this creation of a civilization, which included looking backward to ancient traditions and the first epic poetry of Greece, written by Homer. His great Greek epics *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* profoundly influenced Sophocles. An anonymous biographer of the time called him "the pupil of Homer" — suggesting that Sophocles' great power came to him from the greatest of Greek poets. Sophocles probably also studied under the Greek playwright Aeschylus. If so, then Sophocles' first dramatic success had a very personal significance. In 468 B.C., his play *Triptolemus* took first prize for tragedy, while Aeschylus' play came in second.

Summary:

Public Service

Over many years, Sophocles actively participated in Athenian political and cultural life, often in positions of great responsibility. Besides his contributions as playwright, Sophocles served as a diplomat, general, and even a priest of Alscepius, a minor god of healing. While some of his public service may seem beyond his professional experience as a dramatist, Athenian democracy nevertheless demanded that its citizens take part in all aspects of government.

In 443 B.C., the great Athenian leader Pericles chose Sophocles to be treasurer of the Delian Confederation. As *Hellenotamias* — his official title — Sophocles collected taxes from the states under the control of Athens. In effect, he represented the power of the entire Athenian empire in his office, and the funds he collected bolstered Athenian glory at home and around the Mediterranean.

In 440 B.C., Sophocles served as a general in the siege of Samos, an island that challenged the authority of Athens. He may have served another term as a general in either 426 B.C. or 415 B.C., and he later took part in a special commission to investigate the Athenian military defeat in Sicily in 413 B.C. During the crucial Peloponnesian War, Sophocles conducted negotiations with Athenian allies.

Despite all his public service, though, Sophocles remained first and last a dramatist. His death in 406 B.C. inspired a national cult that worshipped him as a cultural hero at a shrine dedicated to his memory.

Summary:

Literary Writing

Athens in the fifth century B.C. was a golden age of drama for Greece and the world. For Sophocles to emerge as the most popular playwright among his contemporaries — the older Aeschylus and the younger Euripides — attests to his genius for moving audiences with powerful poetry and stagecraft.

Sophocles wrote more than 120 plays, but only seven complete tragedies survive. Of the rest, only some titles and fragments remain. As late as 1907, a papyrus with several hundred lines of a Sophoclean play called *The Ichneutae* turned up in Egypt.

Perhaps someday other lost plays will come to light, although the prospect seems unlikely. But for now, Sophocles' modern reputation rests on the seven surviving plays: *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Electra*, *Oedipus the King*, *The Trachinae*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Originally produced around 445 B.C., *Ajax* tells the story of the legendary Trojan War hero who is driven mad by the vengeful goddess Athena. In *Antigone* (440 B.C.), Sophocles dramatizes a tragic conflict between human and divine law in the story of Oedipus' daughter and King Creon. *Electra* (440 B.C.) takes for its subject the revenge of Agamemnon's children on their father's killers.

Oedipus the King (430 B.C.), generally regarded as Sophocles' masterpiece, presents the myth of Oedipus, the man fated to kill his father and marry his mother. Sophocles dramatizes the story of the death of Hercules in *The Trachinae* (413 B.C.) and returns to the subject of the Trojan War in *Philoctetes* (410 B.C.). Sophocles' last work, *Oedipus at Colonus*, presents the death of Oedipus; it was produced in 401 B.C., five years after the playwright's own death.

Of all the surviving plays, the tragedies of the Oedipus Trilogy — *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* — are the best known and most often produced. Although all three plays are part of the same story, Sophocles did not create them to be performed as a single theatrical production. Instead, the three tragedies represent separate dramas on related subjects.

Many people choose to read the plays of the Oedipus Trilogy in the chronological order of the story — *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone* — while others prefer the order in which Sophocles wrote them — *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*. In any order, readers will note the unique qualities in each drama, especially the important differences in character and tone.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle writes that the purpose of tragedy is to arouse pity and fear in the audience, and so create a catharsis — or cleansing of emotions — that will enlighten people about life and fate. Each of the plays of the Oedipus Trilogy achieves this catharsis that Aristotle defined as the hallmark of all tragedy.

Summary:

Honors and Awards

Athens held a dramatic competition every year, at the Festival of Dionysus. At this time, three playwrights would each present a *tetralogy* — four tragedies as well as a "satyr play," a kind of short, rough comedy — on three successive days. At the end of the festival, ten judges would award first, second, and third prizes for the best drama. The prize itself is not known, although it was probably money and a symbol of some sort; but the true glory of winning first place was the approval of the Athenian public.

Sophocles won first prize at the Festival of Dionysus 18 times, frequently over such competitors as Aeschylus and Euripides. Some of Sophocles' plays won second prize — *Oedipus the King*, for example — but none ever came in third. Year after year, Sophocles' tragedies gained recognition as among the best dramas written at a time when competition was at its highest.

Perhaps Sophocles' greatest achievement is his enduring popularity as a dramatist. The fact that his works are studied today, approximately 2,400 years after they were written, is a testament to the power of his words and the impact those stories have on current culture.

Summary: