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Oedipus the King, Part II, by Sophocles

Literary Analysis: Dramatic Irony and Suspense

Irony is a contrast or discrepancy between appearance and reality. **Verbal irony** contrasts what is said with what is meant. **Situational irony** contrasts what is expected with what happens. **Dramatic irony** contrasts information that an audience or reader possesses with information that a character does not possess.

Oedipus is built on irony. The very premise—Oedipus can help the city by discovering Laius' murderer—is ironic because Oedipus is the murderer. Sophocles layers the play with dramatic irony, and so the audience learns more and more about Oedipus. As Oedipus discovers his past, the layers are peeled away. Oedipus gains the information that the audience already possesses.

This process creates dramatic tension and **suspense**—uncertainty or anxiety about what will happen next. As the dramatic irony of Oedipus' situation unfolds, suspense mounts. Anxiety takes hold as the audience wonders when Oedipus will realize the truth.

DIRECTIONS: Each scene in the chart contains dramatic irony that creates suspense. In the second column, explain the irony in each situation. Then, in the third column, discuss how that irony contributes to the suspense mounting in the play.

Scene	Explanation of Dramatic Irony	Contribution of Suspense
1. Jocasta, worried about Oedipus' ability to save the city ("he's pilot of our ship and he is frightened"), prays to Apollo.		
2. The Messenger arrives to tell Oedipus that his "father," Polybus, is dead.		
3. Jocasta encourages Oedipus not to worry about the prophecy that he will marry his mother.		
4. Jocasta begs Oedipus not to pursue the clues about his birth. He disregards her, thinking she is worried that he was born to slaves.		
5. Oedipus threatens to torture the Herdsman to make him reveal what he knows.		