

# Wings - motif in oedipus: symbols

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Wings. The sacred objects allowing mere mortals to reach the realm of Gods.

Wings embody the freedom to fly anywhere and soar across the sky.

However, for Oedipus in Oedipus the King, the winged being he faces are agents of fate: able to chase him to the ends of the Earth. Each beast he faces is more invincible than the one before leading to his fall from the famous slayer of the Sphinx to a blind beggar traveling through Greece. In Sophocles' Oedipus the King, despite his attempts to evade his destiny, Oedipus ends up following the winged agents of fate down that very path.

As Oedipus arrives in Thebes and defeats the winged Sphinx he takes his first step in following the fate he attempted to leave behind. He defeats the "she-hawk" and the Chorus notes that they "saw with our own eyes his skill". This victory is a moment dear to Oedipus and he mentions it frequently telling Tiresias "I stopped the Sphinx!" with nothing but "the flight of my own intelligence". Oedipus is emboldened, having fled Corinth and soon learning Polybus, the man he believed to be his father, died of sickness. He now believes that he has succeeded in defying the prophecy when he has only sealed his fate. Without defeating the Sphinx, Oedipus would never marry Jocasta, his mother. Without the Sphinx, his prophecy would never have been realized. His supposed victory over the Sphinx was no victory at all, rather a fateful step towards his tragic destiny.

Reassured by his feelings of success, Oedipus strays farther down his inexorable fate by ignoring the prophecies of Tiresias for being mere foolish discussions with birds. He notes his own success was "with no help from the birds". He references the Greek tradition of talking to birds to read the future, an action he clearly dismisses. "Why scan the birds / that scream

above our heads?" he asks Jocasta, finally confident that the birds have no control over his life. However, it is his failure to heed the warnings of Tiresias' bird prophecies that leads to his downfall. He refuses to even consider that the prophet and his birds could be telling the truth, immediately accusing him of colluding with Creon to take him off the throne of Thebes. This rash decision leads to Oedipus on a frantic search for the murderer of Laius ending with his realization that he is the murderer. Oedipus has made the greatest mistake a mortal could make: believing that he is more powerful than the will of the Gods. The false sense of triumph he gained from defeating the Sphinx and learning of Polybus' natural death has made Oedipus egotistical, sure of his own power. It is this egotism that further seals his destiny, preventing him from understanding the full power of the warnings of the birds.

Finally Oedipus, clearly broken by his tragic fate, he remains burdened by the Furies, winged embodiments of his torment. He is chased by "the grim unerring Furies/closing for the kill" whose "dark wings beating around him shrieking doom". The Furies, the winged manifestation of evil in ancient Greek culture, are the final enemy Oedipus faces. However, this time he is truly powerless to fight against demons - immortal and older than the Olympian Gods. "Where's my voice?/winging, swept away on a dark tide" laments Oedipus as he exiles himself from Thebes. Oedipus has officially reached his lowest point, blind and left with him. At last, he has met the destiny that became inevitable when he delivered his fateful answer to the Sphinx's riddle. The Sphinx could be defeated, the birds' warnings heeded, but the wrath of the Furies is a never ending reminder of the power of fate.

Through the progression of Oedipus the King, Oedipus, escorted by fate, turns from a confident king to a blind beggar. However, Sophocles portrays Oedipus' fall from grace as more than just an inevitable fall. Oedipus' aggressive adherence to prophecies leads directly to the slaying of the Sphinx and the reveal of murder of his father. Nevertheless, it is his inability to respect prophecies following his success that leads to his greatest mistake of ignoring Tiresias' pleas. In the end, Sophocles illustrates that while fate may seem undefeatable, one's own action can still decide their destiny.