

## Sophocles

Sophocles arose from relatively humble beginnings to become the most popular tragic playwright in fifth century Greece. He was born around 495 BC in the *deme*, or district, of Colonus. Aristoxenus, a fourth-century BC historian, records that Sophocles' father was a carpenter or a bronze-worker. Later historians, however, have argued that in fifth century Greece, Sophocles could never have enjoyed the popularity and respect that he did if he had come from such a low social station. These arguments have led many to believe that his father was a merchant who dealt with bronze, or possibly weapons.

From the writing of playwrights and poets who lived during Sophocles' life, it is clear that he was a very friendly, good-natured, and charismatic person.

Sophocles was active in politics, and held various important political posts during his lifetime. He was elected to be one of ten military generals for Athens during the years 441-440 BC, served as Treasurer of the Imperial Fund, and was on the board of special commissioners of the city of Athens.

Yet it is not for his political career that he is remembered today. Sophocles' most important achievements were in the literary realm. In 468 BC, at the age of 28, Sophocles entered his first play in the Great Dionysia. This was an annual springtime festival held in Athens, and was the main place where tragic theater was performed. Sophocles won first place for his play, defeating the legendary playwright Aeschylus.

Sophocles was not only a popular but also a prolific author. He went on to write over 120 plays, and win first prize in the Great Dionysia at least 17 more times. Of his numerous plays, however, only seven have survived to this day.

The popularity of Sophocles' plays has often been attributed to the strength and passionate nature of his characters. His plays are dominated by a range of strong-willed, stubborn characters who face difficult personal challenges, and question the bounds of traditions. In *Oedipus Rex*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*, the tormented King Oedipus struggles with the subject of escaping personal fate, or accepting one's destiny. In *Antigone*, a spirited young woman wrestles with the conflicting demands of earthly law, and religious convictions.

Sophocles' plays address the concerns of individuals struggling to follow a path of morality, and finding little guidance from their societies. Over the past 25 centuries, they have proved themselves to be fascinating and exciting explorations of human psychology, which are still valuable today.

Sophocles lived a long and full life. He died around 406 BC, leaving behind him the still unpublished script of *Oedipus at Colonus*. His grandson Ariston, also a talented playwright, produced his grandfather's last play in 401 BC.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Comprehension**

Read the following questions based on the text, and select the best answer.

1. Which of the following statements is NOT true?
  - a. Aristoxenus wrote that Sophocles' father was a bronze-worker.
  - b. Sophocles's father was born in 495 BC.
  - c. Sophocles was born in the deme of Colonus.
  - d. Historians argued that Sophocles' father was not a carpenter.
  
2. Why do historians disagree about Sophocles' background?
  - a. Colonus was not a good neighborhood.
  - b. In Sophocles' time, the son of a carpenter might not have been elected to positions of political power.
  - c. Historians do not respect Sophocles because his father may have been a bronze-worker.
  - d. Sophocles' father was a merchant who dealt in weapons.
  
3. Which of these political positions did Sophocles NOT hold during his life?
  - a. governor of Athens
  - b. military general
  - c. Athenian Special Commissioner
  - d. Treasurer of the Imperial Fund
  
4. Why was Sophocles' first play so important?
  - a. He was 28 when he wrote it.
  - b. It was written in 468 BC.
  - c. He won first prize for it, defeating Aeschylus.
  - d. He entered it in the Great Dionysia, a competition for tragic literature.
  
5. Why is Sophocles described as a 'prolific' author?
  - a. His plays were very well-liked.
  - b. Only seven of his plays have survived to this day.
  - c. He won at least 18 first prizes for his plays.
  - d. He wrote over 120 plays.
  
6. Which BEST describes the characters in Sophocles' plays?
  - a. strong-willed characters who struggle to be moral
  - b. stubborn, tormented characters who explore psychology
  - c. passionate characters who discuss religion and psychology
  - d. strong, stubborn characters who debate earthly laws
  
7. About how old was Sophocles at the time of his death?
  - a. 100
  - b. 90
  - c. 80
  - d. 70

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Answer Key for Sophocles

1. b
2. b
3. a
4. c
5. d
6. a
7. b