Night Journey

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Conceived and choreographed by Martha Graham (b.1894)
Music by William Schuman
Settings by Isamu Noguchi
Produced by Nathan Kroll
Directed by Alexander Hammid
Presented by Bethsabee De Rothschild

Director of Photography: Stanley Meredith
Editor: Miriam Arsham
Assistant to Producer: LeRoy Leatherman
Orchestra Conductor: Robert Irving
Recordist: Clair D. Krepps
Lighting: David Golden
Chorus Headdress and Mask: Umana

First performance: May 3, 1947, Boston (later revised)

Film Cast
Queen Jocasta: Martha Graham
King Oedipus: Bertram Ross
Tiresias: Paul Taylor
Leader of the Chorus: Helen McGehee

Chorus:	Ethel Winter	Mary Hinkson
	Linda Hodes	Akiko Kanda
	Carol Payne	Bette Shaler

Original Cast
Queen Jocasta: Martha Graham
King Oedipus: Erick Hawkins
Tiresias: Mark Ryder

Chorus:	Pearl Lang	Ethel Winter
	Yuriko	Natanya Neumann
	Joan Skinner	Helen McGehee

Choreography and music were originally commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation.

The myth

Because of the circularity which is at the basis of its tragedy, the Greek legend of Oedipus, on which Martha Graham's Night Journey is based, has no clear cut beginning point. Perhaps it is best to begin at the time the young man, Oedipus, leaves his supposed parents, the King and Queen of Corinth. Troubled by a prophecy declaring he was fated to kill his father and marry his mother, Oedipus resolves never to see them again and begins his wanderings.

At a crossroads he meets a man with four attendants who try to force him from the path. Angered, he kills the man and three of the attendants.

Continuing, he soon comes to the outskirts of the city of Thebes. The city is being held in a state of siege by a monster, the Sphinx, who poses a riddle to wayfarers and then devours them when they are unable to solve it. Oedipus, however, is able to solve the riddle and the Sphinx kills itself.

The triumphal Oedipus enters the city, liberated now, to great rejoicing. He is made King, marries the recently-widowed Queen, Jocasta, and begins a reign under which Thebes prospers.

After the passage of several years, however, plague and blight come to Thebes, and the oracles inform the people that their troubles will be ended only when the murderer of the previous king is punished.

Oedipus sets out to discover who the murderer was and calls in an old blind prophet, Tiresias, for advice. Tiresias tries to avoid answering Oedipus' questions but is badgered until he finally replies: the murderer is Oedipus himself.

Oedipus sends the old seer away scornfully and embarks on his own relentless quest to discover the truth. But as the evidence mounts, it ultimately becomes clear that Tiresias was correct and that a whole set of divinely-inspired prophecies, despite man's elaborate efforts to evade them, have been fulfilled. The man Oedipus killed at the crossroads was the former king; the parents Oedipus left in Corinth had adopted him; the baby they had adopted was the son of Jocasta and the former king; Jocasta and her husband had deserted the child on a lonely mountain in an effort to circumvent a prophecy that predicted the child would grow to be his father's murderer.

Shattered by the discovery, Jocasta hangs herself. Oedipus rushes to Jocasta's corpse, rips a broach from her gown, and blinds himself with it. He is led into exile.

Sophocles

Sophocles' play, Oedipus Rex, was written about 409 B.C. and has been described as a detective story in which the investigator discovers that he, himself, is the criminal. The play

takes up the story as King Oedipus, its central figure, starts his almost obsessive quest for the facts about the murder of the former king. The construction of the plot is astonishingly ingenious. Evidence is continually being brought forward in an effort to show that Oedipus was not the murderer or that he is not Jocasta's son, but each fact, on close examination, proves to support and to contribute to the final disclosures.

Besides Oedipus, Jocasta, and Tiresias, there are five characters in the play, most of them bearers of evidence and messages whose testimony Oedipus sifts as the plot inexorably unfolds. In addition, the play incorporates a chorus whose function it is to set the scene and to comment on, interpret, and react to the developments among the major characters.

Aristotle

Sophocles' play seems to have served as an almost perfect model of the kind of tragedy Aristotle favored in his treatise on aesthetics, Poetics.

One particular element in Aristotle's essay seems especially pertinent to a discussion of Graham's dance work. For Aristotle, a central element in the ideal tragedy was the downfall of a tragic hero. In the course of the drama his fortunes must change from happiness to misery and, to make the fall thoroughly visible, the hero must be a man who, at the start, enjoys great reputation and prosperity.

The psychoanalysts

In formulating their theories, Sigmund Freud, C.G. Jung and other psychoanalysts have proposed the existence of the "Oedipus complex," a concept that clearly influences Graham's dance interpretation of the Greek myth. According to some of these theorists, every boy is naturally invested with an erotic attachment to his mother. He quickly develops, therefore, an intense jealousy of his father whom he sees as a rival for the mother's affection. He comes to long for the death of his father who represents all of society's restrictions.

Gradually, however, the boy is able to overcome the Oedipus complex by repressing his desires and identifying with his father. In this way he develops traits associated with the male sex and adjusts finally to an accepted role in society in which he is able to direct his sexual yearning for his mother toward other women. The failure of some boys successfully to overcome the Oedipus complex, says Freud, is at the basis of much mental illness.

Graham's approach to the story

In dealing with the Oedipus story, Martha Graham has shifted the chief focus from the character of Oedipus to that of Jocasta. The drama is seen through her eyes, indeed it mostly takes place in her mind, and she remains on the stage for the entire course of the action.

The dance work takes up the story at the moment of Jocasta's suicide. The "night

journey" of the title is a flashback, typical of many Graham works, in which the Queen recalls her life with Oedipus from his arrival in Thebes to the final discovery of their guilt.

In choosing to view the story from Jocasta's perspective, Graham alters the dramatic impact of the tale to an extent. For Jocasta is a rather sympathetic character in the legend. By and large, she seems an innocent victim of a fate the gods have chosen to visit upon Oedipus, and her downfall is more pathetic (though not necessarily more tragic) than that of Oedipus.

In Sophocles' version, Oedipus is far from an entirely sympathetic character. He unjustly accuses Tiresias of being a murderer at one point, he treats some of his witnesses with arrogance and contempt, and without any evidence he harbors doubts about the motivations of Jocasta's brother and even, once, of Jocasta herself.

This youthful arrogance remains a clear feature of Oedipus' character in Graham's dance composition, but she seems to see it mostly as veneer. In addition, Oedipus is pictured as a bit of a simpleton, an attribute of many male heroes in Graham works. This element of the characterization finds no support in the Greek sources, for it is after all by his intellectual ability that Oedipus saves Thebes and through an unrelenting search for the truth that he discovers his own guilt.

Adopting something of a Freudian perspective to the tale, Graham seems to suggest in the dance composition that Oedipus and Jocasta were not entirely unaware of their incestuous attraction. Thus, the final revelation may be to a considerable degree a procedure that makes clear a relationship the couple already had perceived at least dimly or subconsciously.

Graham makes no attempt to express in the nonverbal medium of dance the argumentative nuances of Sophocles' play. Instead, the prophecies, evidence-gathering, and societal pressures are all represented by a single haunting character, the blind seer, Tiresias. There is also a chorus of seven women, sometimes called the Daughters of the Night, who contribute a danced commentary to the action of the tragedy. At times the leader of the chorus seems to detach herself somewhat from the chorus and actually enter the action of the drama.

In addition, Graham has rather personalized the drama, concentrating on the psychological agonies of Oedipus and especially of Jocasta. The more general messages in Sophocles' play about the futility of human efforts to defy the gods are nowhere transmitted in the dance work.

The dance composition

The introduction. After a brief, foreboding musical prelude, the dance work begins with Jocasta on stage, the rope she will use to strangle herself held high between her outstretched arms. She stands near a piece of sculpture that is taken to represent the bed of Oedipus and Jocasta. Its form suggests a male and a female body joined.

The blind seer, Tiresias, enters forcefully (50).[1] He is masked in the manner of Greek plays and guides himself with a heavy staff which he uses to great dramatic effect in his characteristic entrances and exits, swinging it overhead with both arms and planting it firmly and loudly with each swaying pace. Whenever on the stage, he is a commanding figure.

With his staff Tiresias pulls away Jocasta's rope and she topples to the ground. The chorus now makes its first entrance, moving around the two characters with a dance that seems to express fear and foreboding. Chorus members' hands are frequently cupped and placed over their mouths, and the dance takes place largely in percussive counterpoint to the rather uneventful music.

As the chorus exits, Jocasta begins a dance of anguish (220). In its course she once approaches Tiresias pleadingly, but he rejects her suit and she falls back, then staggers to the bed and lies down apparently resigned to her fate. Tiresias exits.[2]

Jocasta and Oedipus. At the conclusion of Jocasta's solo, while she is lying on the bed,

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[1] Numbers in the text refer to approximate film footage markings on the takeup reel. 100 feet of film covers a bit less than 3 minutes; 900 feet takes exactly 25 minutes.

[2] For Graham's notes for this solo, see Notebooks, pp. 156-57 and 371-72. It is clear that she sometimes has direct verbal equivalents for some of the gestures--for example, the notations, "lifts foot as in a scream," and "break arms in wild despairing way." One should not, however, always strain for specificity in interpreting individual gestures. As Merce Cunningham recalls, "Once, when we were rehearsing "Appalachian Spring," I had a passage that Martha said had to do with fear, or maybe with ecstasy--she wasn't sure which--and she said why didn't I go and work on it and see what I came up with... It's always seemed to me that...Martha herself has a basic respect for the ambiguity in all dance movement" (Tomkins, pp. 246-47.)

It should probably be noted at this point that Martha Graham on this film is dancing in her late 60s a role choreographed when she was in her middle 50s. Although she still had many of her theatrical powers at the time the film was made, she seems unable to communicate the full intensity of her part and thus the viewer must strain a bit to get a feeling for the full choreography of the role. An example can be seen in the solo in the Graham "back shoulder fall," where she falls directly backward, bending only at the knees, her upper back hitting the ground first. Graham was once capable of executing this movement at lightning speed. In this, the filmed solo, however the fall is slow and she must use her arm to break her fall. She also has to use her arm in struggling up again.

A fairly direct comparison is afforded by a still photograph from 1948 published in a book by Olga Maynard. The photograph shows Graham in a movement used several times in the dance work, both in this solo and later, in a brief solo just before the "fall" of Oedipus. In the movement, referred to as a "high contraction kick" in the Notebooks, she kicks one leg violently forward, her gut sucked in and up (the Graham contraction), one arm thrown up, the other out, her head bowed forward. The force of the movement, so powerfully represented in the photograph, is suggested but not nearly duplicated in the filmed performance.

time shifts backwards. We are taken to the time Oedipus entered Thebes after conquering the Sphinx, and the middle section of the dance work is devoted to an exploration of the relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta.

Surrounded by the chorus bearing branches of laurel, the Greek symbol of fame and victory, Oedipus strides on stage, confident, arrogant, and mighty (300). Shrugging off warnings by the leader of the chorus, he mounts Jocasta's bed. As the chorus flees, Oedipus raises Jocasta up and carries her off, almost as an earned trophy.

Seating her on a stool, he performs for her a revelatory solo of almost comic youthful exuberance that partially functions as the beginning of a mating ritual. He leaps with some curious earthbound bounces; he struts from side to side; he slaps his hip and his raised knee; he thrashes his cap around. Then, striding toward her, he mounts the stool from behind and stands over her in a position of complete dominance. A comparatively tender moment follows this pose as he leans over to kiss her, but then he is off again, bounding away. As he reaches toward her from a distance, she reacts in the foreground and in profile with three percussive contractions.

Jocasta responds to Oedipus now (500). As the music turns more gentle, she slowly and somewhat hesitatingly moves toward him bearing two laurel branches, sometimes hiding her face almost coyly behind them. Quietly and modestly bowing low, she deposits one branch at his feet (this action is not entirely clear on the film) and then backs off to await his reaction.[3] Oedipus confidently reaches down, picks up the proffered laurel branch and strides toward Jocasta, raising her up and swinging his cape around so that it covers them both. The mating ritual concludes with a brief joint processional, possibly to suggest their wedding.

There now follows a truly remarkable duet, its beginning marked as the leader of the chorus appears on stage briefly and stamps her foot twice (600). The duet, suggesting the private intimacies of Jocasta and Oedipus, serves also to express their double relationship.

It begins, somewhat in the manner of their earlier duet, with Oedipus clearly in the dominant position. To very loud and authoritative music, he lies on Jocasta, then jumps to his feet with gestures suggesting a roar of satisfaction. But soon, as the music turns tender, he spins around, rather dazedly falling across her lap, and she quietly rocks him as she would a baby. This idea is repeated as the couple moves across the floor, with Oedipus emerging once as a lover and once, after a set of contractions by Jocasta--suggestions of labor pains perhaps--as a baby being nursed.

Finally, they move into a position in which the ambiguity of their relationship is expressed with astonishing choreographic ingenuity. The squat facing each other and rock gently. But because Jocasta's gown is covering the lower parts of their bodies, it becomes

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[3] For Graham's notes for this solo, see Notebooks, pp. 158 and 372-73. She refers to one movement as a "jubilation step."

impossible to tell who is rocking whom. In this position they sometimes nuzzle their faces together as lovers and sometimes relate as mother and son, Oedipus softly resting his head on Jocasta's breast.

This duet actually seems to suggest, then, that Jocasta and Oedipus are not entirely unaware of their double attraction. They may not be fully conscious of it, but the choreography suggests, proceeding from the arguments of the psychoanalysts, that the appeals between mother and between lovers clearly coexist in this pair.

The duet also serves to show us more about Oedipus' character. Before, in his public appearances and in the mating ritual he was all bluster, an arrogant young peacock. In this private duet, however, he is seen to soften. He is capable of tenderness, and he evinces a considerable insecurity. Jocasta before seemed willing to tolerate his forceful domination. But now it seems clear that she, in her maturity, saw through his authoritative facade.

The conclusion. The last part of Night Journey is tightly constructed from a dramatic point of view, and frequently two or more important events are occurring simultaneously as the dance work sweeps to its tragic conclusion.

The intimate mood of the duet is shattered as the chorus enters (700) to harsh and discordant music. Hands over eyes, its members seem horrified by the inevitable tragedy they foresee. Their forceful dance, for the most part closely allied to the music (sometimes almost too closely), is a stunning example of the use of the Graham vocabulary (contractions, back falls, abrupt angularities, percussive thrashings) for expressive purposes.

Meanwhile Jocasta and Oedipus are intertwining themselves with the rope Jocasta had been holding at the outset of the work. The rope, which we know will be used by Jocasta to hang herself, has now acquired a new, symbolic meaning: it is to be taken to represent an umbilical cord.

The lovers have assumed a laced pose with the rope at the foot of the bed as the chorus finishes its dance of horrified foreboding. Now Tiresias enters (using his staff rather as a pogo stick, a choreographic invention that does little to support the mood). He seems at times to regret his mission, but nonetheless finally moves determinedly toward Jocasta and Oedipus. He mounts the bed behind them and slowly brings his staff and foot between them, breaking the symbolic tie that binds them. As he does so, the difference in perception and maturity between Jocasta and Oedipus seems once more to be suggested. For while Oedipus is looking softly away, seemingly unaware of what is going on, Jocasta looks up and sees what is about to happen. As in a nightmare, she raises her arm in a pathetic effort to block Tiresias' action, sees it is hopeless, and brings her hand down to cover her face.

When the rope is symbolically cut, the lovers break apart from each other and topple to the floor. Tiresias exits with his wide, swinging, deliberate gait (875). Members of the chorus are scattered around the stage, each huddled in grief.

Jocasta now rises and has a short solo that repeats the high contraction kick used in her earlier solo. At its conclusion she sinks to the bed lies down in a position identical to the one she was in earlier when the flashback to Oedipus' entry took place.

Oedipus now struggles to his feet and strives frantically to disentangle himself from the rope. This accomplished, he pitches it away from him in a gesture of utter revulsion.

There follows what must surely be one of the most powerful moments in all of dance. From the Aristotelian standpoint, Oedipus' fall is now complete. He has plunged from a position of high honor and total confidence to one of utter degradation. All that remains is a symbolic recognition of his wretchedness through his self-mutilation and exile.

Graham seems to have chosen to summarize this philosophic and tragedic "fall" with a physical one. Oedipus turns and mounts the bed. Rising to his full height, arms outstretched and fingers splayed, he screams soundlessly and falls in slow motion (because his momentum is restrained by members of the chorus) chin first to the ground. In the foreground, the leader of the chorus accompanies the fall with a gestural simulation of an agonized whimper of grief.

The tragedy now complete for them, the chorus members, except for the leader, march in solemn procession across the prostrate body of the totally degraded Oedipus, and then continue off the stage.

The leader of the chorus rises clutching a laurel branch, the now-ironic symbol of glory. She thrashes it on a stool and then twirls with it around the stage tracing a mad spiral until she is seen no more.

Meanwhile Oedipus slowly gets to his feet and draws his hand across his eyes in anticipation of what is to happen next. In what can be taken as a flash-forward from Jocasta's point of view, he moves to the bed and bends, tenderly for a moment, over the reclining body of Jocasta. Then he pulls a broach from her gown and places it over his eyes. Groping pathetically, he slowly backs off stage.

The journey of recall (and anticipation) now ended, Jocasta rises almost somnambulistically from the bed. She casts her gaze to the floor and to the rope that waits there. She shrugs off her cape, scoops up the rope, twists it around her neck, and falls backward to the floor. The music concludes quietly. Tiresias enters and slowly strides across the stage, the hammering of his staff echoing through the silence.

An evaluation of the film

The film of Night Journey, winner of a Berlin Film Festival Award, seems to transmit ably the sweep and intensity of the dance drama. The camera work is intelligently planned and mostly unobtrusive, and the lighting is excellent.

There are times, however, so typical of dance films, when the camera moves in too close so that some of the spatial relationships between the characters are blurred. The chorus passages, in particular, suffer in this regard, and the full breadth of the movement is somewhat obscured.

Beyond these fairly minor complaints, the film suffers, as noted above, for the fact that Martha Graham was so far past her prime when it was finally made. Nevertheless, the shape of her choreography for Jocasta is clear and it is valuable to have preserved even this inadequate performance. The other performances are first rate, those of Paul Taylor and Helen McGehee stunning.