

Irony in depiction of holden and oedipus

Literature



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Irony has been a major component of major works of literature for centuries. By definition irony is “ a figure of speech in which words are used in such a way that their intended meaning is different from the actual meaning of the words” (“ Irony”). There are various forms of irony that authors use such as situational, dramatic, verbal irony, etc. Irony also plays a tremendous role in theme, author purpose, and reader interpretation. Through various forms of irony J. D. Salinger, the author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Sophocles, the author of *Oedipus the King*, express ideas such as key themes and character traits that often change the opinions of the reader.

The novel *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger is full of irony that is demonstrated by the protagonist Holden Caulfield. By many readers Holden is considered a hypocrite because in many instances he describes everyone as being phonies, when in reality he is the real phony. For example in the novel Salinger describes Holden’s date with an old friend named Sally who he claims he does not even like, but he acts like he does anyway, “ I told her I loved her and all. It was a lie of course, but I meant it when I said it” (Salinger 139). He is a very confusing young man to understand because he always goes back and forth on himself. One minute he is in love with Sally and wants to run away with her, and the next he hates her guts and wants to have nothing more to do with her. Holden exhibits this fakeness throughout the entire novel, so the reader can never really believe Holden when he expresses his opinions. The question often arises if Holden is really expressing his true feelings or if he is just telling himself what he wants to hear.

This trait of hypocrisy that Holden possesses is a major factor on the whole theme, which is preserving innocence. Throughout the whole novel Holden is trying to slow the process of maturing while also protecting his younger sister from the troubles of the adult world. Holden claims that he does not want to be an adult, but he does many adult things like going to clubs, drinking, and smoking. Holden tries presenting himself in an adult matter even though the last thing he wants to do is grow up,

I ordered a Scotch and soda, and told him not to mix it—I said it fast as hell, because if you hem and haw, they think you ‘re under twenty-one and won ‘t sell you any intoxicating liquor. I had trouble with him anyway, though. “ I ‘m sorry, sir,” he said, “ but do you have some verification of your age...I gave him this very cold stare, like he ‘d insulted the hell out of me, and asked him, (Salinger 78)

Also Holden tries protecting his younger sister Phoebe from the adult world, but in reality Phoebe knows more about how the world functions than Holden does. “ Because you don’t. You don’t like any schools. You don’t like a million things. You don’t” (Salinger 187), Phoebe is berating Holden about how immature he is for getting kicked out of school and how he is just irresponsible and ridiculous all the time.

The entire story of Oedipus the King by Sophocles is based off of dramatic irony that is set in the beginning of the tale. Dramatic irony is best defined as when “ the characters are oblivious of the situation but the audience is not” (“ Irony”). The story begins with Oedipus’s parents, Laius and Jocasta getting a fortune from the Oracle of Delphi predicting how that their newborn

son will eventually grow to kill his father and then marry his mother. They sentence their newborn son to death, but their servant could not leave an infant to die so he gave Oedipus away to a shepherd. Oedipus eventually grew up in another kingdom, came to Thebes, unknowingly killed his father, defeated the Sphinx, became King of Thebes, and then married his own mother. In *How to Read Literature like a Professor* by Thomas Foster it mentions how literary theorist Northrop Frye describes the “ironic mode”, “That is, we watch characters who possess a lower degree of autonomy, self-determination, or free will than ourselves” (Foster 236). This applies to the protagonist Oedipus because he does not have control of his fate, his future was already laid out before him by the Oracle at Delphi before he was even born.

The dramatic irony of the story kicks in when a plague has struck the city of Thebes, and the only way to stop it is by exiling the murderer of previous king Laius, who still lives amongst them. Oedipus offers all kinds of rewards and promises of no punishment to those who step forwards or can provide information, then Oedipus sets a curse on the murderer who ends up being himself,

Now my curse on the murderer. Whoever he is, a lone man unknown in his crime or one among many, let that man drag out his life in agony, step by painful step—I curse myself as well... if by any chance he proves to be an intimate of our house, here at my hearth, with my full knowledge, may the cruse I just called down on him strike me! (Sophocles 172)

Oedipus calls the curse down upon himself if the murderer is in a position of power, but little did he know that he already cursed himself since he is the murdered.

Sophocles ran this tale off of this irony to create a climax of epic proportions. The end of the story can be compared to dominos falling, as one new piece of information was discovered another one was revealed until everything was out in the open. Oedipus brought this fortune upon himself as he heavily inquired about the murdered of Laius, he called for the slave Tiresias who really pushed Oedipus to his limits, “None of you knows—and I will never reveal my dreadful secrets, not to say your own” (Sophocles 175). Tiresias refuses to reveal what he know and that angers Oedipus to the point of threatening his life if he continues to refuse. Tiresias finally reveals his information and that plants a seed in Oedipus’s head about how he could be the possible murderer. This drives Oedipus nuts and sends him on a rampage trying to discover the full truth, which results in the suicide of his wife and mother Jocasta, as well as Oedipus gouging out his own eyes.

In conclusion various forms of irony affect the protagonists of these two different stories. Both of these stories are driven by the irony that molds them. Both Holden’s and Oedipus’s lives are affected by the presence of irony, Oedipus’s fate is nearly decided and Holden cannot deal with the fact that he is the true phony. The irony in both of these stories is significantly related to the theme, author purpose, and reader interpretation. The intricate system of irony in both of these stories is what separates them from many other works of literature and makes them prime examples of ironic works.

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