

Oedipus the king

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Oedipus the King

Aristotle insisted the key ingredients of tragedy include a character with a fatal flaw, the character's realization of their flaw and their final reversal of fortune. For most ancient tragedies, this fatal flaw is excessive pride which drives the action of the play. Aristotle (1998) stated " the tragic hero falls into bad fortune because of some flaw in his character of the kind found in men of high reputation and good fortune such as Oedipus." In this statement, he indicates Oedipus had a flaw that, because of his high station, would ultimately cause his demise. In this essay I will argue how Oedipus from Oedipus the King by Sophocles is a protagonist possessing the tragic flaw of excessive pride.

In Oedipus the King, the action opens as Oedipus is approached by plague-stricken masses asking help from him as king. When he sees his people gathered around him as if he were a god, his response to them is " What means this reek of incense everywhere, / From others, and am hither come, myself, / I Oedipus, your world-renowned king" (4-8). His pride in his role as king is evident as he chides them for appealing to other forces than himself in their burning of incense to cloud the air. It is also obvious that Oedipus is not secure in his position as king. This is evidenced by his tendency to pronounce his greatness to the people, as if finding it necessary to remind them of his importance and of who he is in relation to themselves.

Throughout the action of the play, Oedipus' personality reflects pride and a determination to force things to go his way. When Oedipus received the prediction that he was doomed to kill his father and marry his mother, he was determined to avoid this fate by taking his future in his own hands. As a result, he left his homeland in Corinth for the further realm of Thebes. He

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experiences the typical dangers while on his travels, killing some men while on the road before answering the riddle of the Sphinx and winning his position as king of Thebes. Because he was able to do something no one else had done, his natural pride in his own abilities rose to a new level.

Oedipus is confident that he has outwitted fate because he and Jocasta have several children together and the people are happy, indications of prosperity and the blessing of the gods on his reign. However, in promising to find the murderer who has caused the plague, Oedipus shows that his pride has become so great he feels a mere announcement will be all it takes to bring the long-hidden murderer to justice: “ Well, I will start afresh and once again / Make dark things clear” (139-140). He seems to think he is better than all other men and even the gods. When the blind prophet Teresias, a highly respected counselor, is finally driven to indicate that Oedipus was the murderer of King Laius at the continued abuse of Oedipus himself and against Teresias’ better judgment, Oedipus’ pride again steps in his way, preventing him from believing the possibility of the truth. Despite this, that same pride urges him to continue solving the riddles of his own parentage, an undertaking that can only have unhappy consequences.

Thus, the theme of excessive pride is carried throughout the play as both the aspect of Oedipus’ character that drives him forward and leads him to destruction. It cannot be missed that Sophocles was trying to illustrate to his audience the dangers of an absence of humility and common sense. This fits Aristotle’s idea of the purpose of tragedy, which he describes as “ an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play ... through pity and fear

effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (Aristotle cited in Friedlander, 2005). By illustrating the various things that can go wrong when one believes, through their own excessive pride, that they are capable of anything, Sophocles hoped to make his audience more humble.

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