

The exploration of sight, fate and grief in the three theban plays essay sample

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



\n[[Table of Contents](#)]\n

\n \t

1. [Antigone](#) \n \t
2. [Oedipus the King](#) \n \t
3. [Oedipus at Colonus](#) \n \t
4. [Works Cited](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

Sophocles was one of the most prescient and well-regarded playwrights of Greek drama, whose tragedies have established many literary and theatrical conventions that are still alive today. While Sophocles' work is indicative of the culture in which it was created, it is also a trenchant critique of human nature as well. This comes across especially clearly in his Theban plays – Antigone, Oedipus the King, and Oedipus at Colonus – in which he uses his stories and characters to reflect flaws and issues he sees with the human condition and its relationship with the gods. Exploring these critical aspects of Sophocles' Theban tragedies, Sophocles reveals mankind's potential for hubris when given power, and our inability to fully understand our lives or see our fates until it is too late – unless, of course, you are favored by the gods.

Antigone

Antigone tells the story of the titular character Antigone, a Greek woman who defies the orders of King Creon in order to allow her rebel brother to be buried honorably. Ostensibly a highly feminist work, Antigone features a

strong female protagonist that defies the proclamations of her king in order to act according to her own family obligations: “ the maid shows herself passionate child of passionate sire, and knows not how to bend before troubles” (Antigone). Antigone is one of the most vibrant and rebellious of Sophocles’ characters, remaining consistent in her beliefs and ethics straight to the end. Antigone flagrantly defies his decrees, refusing to allow Creon to dictate her behavior: “ He has no right to keep me from my own” (Antigone, line 48). Here, Sophocles places the law of the gods higher than the law of man, something that plays heavily into all of the Theban plays; Antigone’s fulfillment of the god’s wishes is shown to be righteous, defying Creon’s worldly demands and giving her a justified and virtuous death for a worthy cause. This also plays into the feminist perspective of the plays, as Antigone defies Creon’s decree to “ Better to fall from power, if fall we must, at the hands of a man—never be rated inferior to a woman, never” (Antigone, lines 759-761).

In this work, Sophocles reveals some of his most biting critique of the Greek state; the text of the play implies that natural law should be favored over the law of man. The Theban king Creon is revealed to be a stubborn, power-hungry ruler who does not understand that the laws of family should override those of the state. Creon’s central problem is hubris, the arrogance of believing that he is correct and must be obeyed. Sophocles wishes to use Creon as a means to explore the nature of man himself, using people in power to achieve more universal truths: “ No man can be fully known, in soul and spirit and mind, until he hath been seen versed in rule and law-giving” (Antigone, line 278). In doing so, Sophocles reveals Creon’s main

weaknesses as those of man – man always wishes to believe himself in control, fully aware of his dominance over the world and the people around them.

Creon's perspective could not be further from the truth; as he learns, the gods have true control over the world, as Tiresias warns him of a prophecy that would make him lose “ a son of [his] own loins” for his transgressions (Antigone). This warning comes too late, as his ignorance leads to the death of Haemon, Antigone, and Eurydice, Creon losing much of his family in the process. It is only at this point that Creon feels grief at his actions and asks for the help of his servants. Sophocles, through the Chorus, claims that wisdom comes through punishment, which helps explain the tragic nature of these plays – it is only through noticing these characters suffering for these flaws that we can recognize them within ourselves.

Oedipus the King

In this first play of the Theban tragedies, Oedipus is a young king who struggles with both his past and his future, finding himself investigating the murder of his own father (and the former king). Over the course of the play, Oedipus learns that it was, in fact, he who murdered King Laius, the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy in which he was destined to murder his father and marry his mother. Here, sight is introduced as a theme within the play, which affects many of the main characters and reflects man's inability to see his own future. Oedipus goes about his life never being able to see the truth of it – that his wife is his mother, and that the man he killed in a silly brawl was in fact his father. While he is a benevolent and kind king to his people, he

carries on unaware of this hidden darkness in his past, which gives his eventual fate even more pathos: “ I would be blind to misery not to pity my people kneeling at my feet” (Oedipus the King, line 14). Sophocles uses Oedipus’ inability to see the truth as his tragic failing, and one indicative of mankind’s own faults; even the best and most virtuous among us can make tragic, deadly mistakes.

Oedipus’ lack of sight is further symbolized at the very end of the play, in which he uses the pins of Jocasta’s dress (Jocasta having just killed herself in grief previous to that) to pierce out his own eyes. Because of his blindness, he makes himself literally blind to reflect it. This indicates Oedipus’ eventual understanding and acceptance of said blindness, though he hates that he has seen the truth; he finally sees, but wishes to see no more. With this gesture, Sophocles relates his belief that true sight and understanding can be too traumatic for some people to endure.

One of the other characters that embody this theme of sight is Tiresias, the blind prophet who can nonetheless see all. This juxtaposition between his physical blindness and metaphysical sight hammers home Sophocles’ notions of fate, as Tiresias gives ‘ sight’ through prophecy, a greater sense of understanding coming through the gods rather than through our own senses: “ Blind as you are, you can feel all the more what sickness haunts our city,” says Oedipus to Tiresias (Oedipus the King, line 344). Acting as an agent of fate and the gods, he gives Oedipus his prophecy and intended fate; however, Oedipus, in his blindness, rejects it completely. This leads Tiresias to respond, “ Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich, he will grope his way toward a foreign soil, a stick tapping before him step by step”

(Oedipus the King, line 517). This prefaces the events of Oedipus at Colonus, and proves our inability to see or anticipate the future.

Oedipus at Colonus

In this follow-up to Oedipus the King, a blind, old Oedipus, having been led by Antigone to the village of Colonus, comes to understand that he will die there. While here, awaiting his death, he contemplates the nature of his own crimes and the life he has led, speaking with King Theseus, his son Polynices, and others about his tragic story. This play, the last one Sophocles wrote before he died, is much more contemplative, with much less plot and more focus on Oedipus as a character. This play acts as an epilogue of sorts for the Oedipus character, who spends much of his time reflecting on the events of Oedipus the King, and his own culpability in the death of his father. Here, Sophocles takes a much milder approach to humanity, claiming that mankind must not be too harsh on itself for things it could not anticipate. Perhaps the most important revelation that occurs within this third play is Oedipus' discovery that he has unjustly placed blame and grief on himself for the crimes he committed in Oedipus Rex. Believing that he could not have had any way of changing his behavior to prevent his fate, he comes to terms with it. While mankind is criticized for not having foresight and ignoring prophecy, a now-redeemed Oedipus is forgiven for his blindness and allowed to die in peace.

While the other two Theban plays have an undercurrent of mourning and excessive emotion due to their drama, Sophocles advocates for an attitude of acceptance in Oedipus at Colonus. At the end of the play, after the tale of

Oedipus' mysterious death has been told, Theseus says to his people, " Stop, my children, weep no more. Here where the dark forces store up kindness both for living and the dead, there is no room for grieving here—it might bring down the anger of the gods" (Oedipus at Colonus, lines 1970-1974). It is here that Sophocles, through Theseus, asks for a stop to the excessive grieving that has taken place over the course of the three plays – between Antigone, Haemon, Eurydice, Jocasta and now Oedipus, many characters have died or suffered in myriad ways, as per the cruel view of human nature and fate that Sophocles has established in his work.

With Theseus' speech, Sophocles breaks this tradition by noting that all of this mutual and ongoing suffering must stop with Oedipus' death. While this may seem contradictory to the pathos of his first two works, Sophocles, in his old age, seems to let go of the ongoing pain and grief that comes with loss and advocates for an end to the whole enterprise. The whole play has a funereal quality to it, as Sophocles' main concern is the finite nature of man: " Oh Theseus, dear friend, only the gods can never age, the gods can never die. All else in the world almighty Time obliterates, crushes all to nothing" (Sophocles 1984, p. 322). To that end, as a trilogy, the Theban plays explore the need for us to overcome our human frailties and learn to accept our lack of understanding and the inevitability of death and decay.

These three plays combined reveal a consistent critique of mankind and its foibles – Creon and Oedipus alike are punished for their hubris and lack of sight, while characters like Antigone are rewarded for performing the true bidding of the gods and their families. It is only when Oedipus loses everything and reflects back on his life that he learns to accept his fate and

redeem himself through a greater understanding of his responsibility.

Sophocles explores the nature of knowledge, sight, truth and fate to show the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of mankind in the Theban plays, demonstrating the need to place one's faith in the gods and accept our inability to understand our place in the universe.

In conclusion, the three Theban plays reveal Sophocles' preoccupation with both celebrating and critiquing Greek culture and priorities, including the necessity of familial duty, the self-fulfilling nature of prophecy, and the honor that comes in one's acceptance of death. Oedipus goes from proud, arrogant king to a humbled, disgraced figure in *Oedipus the King*, only to be redeemed in *Oedipus at Colonus* with the realization that his guilt is lessened by the unforeseeable nature of his actions. With Antigone's brave sacrifice in *Antigone*, King Creon reevaluates his priorities and his lust for power, humbling himself in a way. Through these plays, Sophocles sought to understand the attitude of the Greek spirit, especially in relation to fate and the gods – using Antigone as a shining example of familial rebellion, in which the gods favored her actions more than the King of Thebes. Often, these messages are dispensed in the form of prophecy from the character of Tiresias, who brings dire portents to characters who violate Sophocles' moral code.

Works Cited

Sophocles. *Antigone*. Trans. David Grene. University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Sophocles. *Oedipus the King*. Filiquarian Publishing, 2006.

Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Books, 1984.