

In cannot know the  
truth. it does not



\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

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1. [Blindness on Oedipus the King](#) \n \t
2. [Blindness in Hamlet](#) \n \t
3. [Conclusion](#) \n \t
4. [Works Cited](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

In literature, writers use different literal elements to expound their work. In Sophocles' Oedipus and Shakespeare's Hamlet, blindness is deeply explored. People may be physically blind wherein, they cannot see their surrounding; on the other hand, people may have physical sight but be 'blind' towards truth or reality. Interestingly, those with physical blindness in many cases have a special gift of seeing invisible things that those sighted cannot see. In most cases, the physically blind can see future events.

Ironically, sighted people are in most cases 'blind' to the future or the realities and truths of the present. In Oedipus the King and Hamlet, there is both physical blindness and inability to see and accept the truth amongst the sighted.

## **Blindness on Oedipus the King**

As aforementioned, Sophocles explores blindness from two angles, physical blindness, and inability to see the truth for the sighted. Teiresias is physically blind and happens to be a prophet; he stands for truth. On the other hand, king Oedipus is sighted; however, he cannot see the truth as the play starts even though he makes himself physically blind as the play ends. Similarly,

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Jocasta is physically sighted but blind to the truth, even after knowing the truth, she deliberately rejects it.

Therefore, in this play, the sighted like Oedipus and Jocasta are ‘blind’ to the truth whilst the blind like Teiresias can see the truth. Physical sight comes at the expense of truth whilst knowing the truth comes at the expense of sight. Oedipus confirms this when he gouges his eyes after knowing the truth. It appears that truth and physical sight cannot coexist. Nevertheless, king Oedipus is the biggest victim of ‘truth’ blindness.

As the play opens, Oedipus is doomed to tragedy. His life starts on a bad note after a prophecy reveals that he would marry his mother after killing his father. “An oracle foretold that the child born to him by his queen Jocasta would slay his father and wed his mother” (Johnston 2). However, his parents, Laius and Jocasta are blind to this truth and to escape reality, they deport Oedipus to mountains where they hope he will die hence nullify this prophecy. Luckily, for Oedipus, a shepherd rescues him and takes him to Polybus and Merope for adoption. After Oedipus discovers his prophecy, he escapes from his adopted parents thinking they are his true parents. Unfortunately, on his way, he meets his real father Laius and kills him instantly. Oedipus then goes on to become king of Thebes.

It is in his capacity as the king that he marries only to realize later that he married his own mother. The prophecy thus is fulfilled; ignoring the facts does not change them. As time goes on, a tragedy strikes Thebes and Oedipus consults Teiresias, the blind prophet who notes that the Theban woes come from a polluter within the Kingdom. Ironically, Teiresias notes,

“...Thou the accursed polluter of this land” (Sophocles Para. 45). The King is the polluter.

Oedipus blindness comes out clearly at this point as he refuses to accept this truth. Oedipus cannot contain such oracle. He says, “ Vile slanderer, thou blurtest forth these taunts” (Sophocles Para. 46). This heralds more ‘ blindness’ towards the truth.

After learning the truth, Oedipus decides to take away his sight; he gouges his eyes and becomes physically blind. From this short synopsis, it is true that Oedipus is blind in many ways. First, he is blind to the fact that Polybus and Merope were not his real parents, Laius and Jocasta were. He was so blind that he could not withstand anyone claiming that Laius and Jocasta are his parents (Bates Para. 6). Some critics argue that this is not blindness because Oedipus did not know.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that, Oedipus is blind for he cannot know the truth. It does not matter whether he knew and ignored the truth or not, he could not see or realize the truth hence blind. As the play rolls on, Oedipus starts realizing the truth and finally, it dawns on him that he is the polluter. He realizes that he killed Laius, his father and married Jocasta, his mother and this is the genesis of Thebes’ problems.

As this dawns on him and truth takes precedence, he takes away his sight. This explains why physical sight does not co-exist with acknowledgement of truth in this play. Oedipus physical blindness is important in this play. This play is a Greek tragedy and every Greek tragedy, “ was supposed to end with the main characters experiencing their own, personal tragedy” (Foster, <https://assignbuster.com/in-cannot-know-the-truth-it-does-not/>

111). Oedipus' physical blindness signifies his personal tragedy as part of this Greek tragedy. In discovering the truth and the eventual physical blindness, this Greek tragedy comes to fulfillment.

According to Dawe, this act was to confirm Teiresias' prophecy that Oedipus came to Thebes as a sighted man but would leave it as a blind man (3).

Oedipus' physical blindness restores his sight for the truth. By keeping him away from seeing his sins and mistakes, physical blindness gives Oedipus time to reflect on what he has done, how it connects to Teiresias words, and know the truth. In physical blindness, Oedipus has time to reflect on Laius death, Jocasta's marriage, and other things that he has done in life.

Nevertheless, Oedipus' two forms of blindness are connected. His physical blindness causes him pain just like his previous blindness to the truth. First, the physical pain he inflicts on himself is so great just like the pain he is causing himself due to his inability to see the truth.

Jocasta on her part has sight and she knows the truth; however, she deliberately chooses to ignore it. Jocasta knows the truth about Oedipus' prophecy; however, she thinks and believes that he is dead. Even though at first she does not know that, her new husband is her son Oedipus, after realizing it she chooses to ignore it altogether. This is blindness to truth. After realizing that she has participated in the whole saga, she dismisses the whole issue as 'hoax'. Nevertheless, she falls into another form of blindness viz. eternal blindness.

Upon realization that the prophecy about Oedipus has happened, she chooses to terminate her life; therefore, she enters into eternal blindness. “

Jocasta's blindness eventually led to her disgrace" (Bates Para. 14). In death, she cannot see or make choices.

Just as Oedipus loses his sight after knowing and acknowledging the truth, Jocasta loses her life after acknowledging the truth. On his part, Teiresias is physically blind; he cannot see his surrounding; however, he can see into the future and link it to the past. His physical blindness presents him with the gift of having visions. Due to this gift, he knows that Oedipus is the polluter of Thebes.

He knows that Oedipus killed Laius and Jocasta is Oedipus' mother.

Sophocles sought to insinuate that when it comes to knowing and acknowledging the truth, the sighted have no advantage over the physically blind. The sighted can see everything else except truth; the physically blind can see nothing else except the truth. Even after knowing the truth, people have the tendency of ignoring it; however, as aforementioned, ignoring the facts does not change them. This truth dawns on Jocasta as she realizes she cannot overlook the truth anymore; death is the only easy way out, unfortunately.

## **Blindness in Hamlet**

The characters in this play are blind to the truth. Shakespeare emphasizes on sight and blindness. As the play opens, issues pertaining sight dominate the scenes " Look where it comes again...Looks like not the king...See it stalks away" (Shakespeare Para.

6-9). Interestingly, despite the fact that these characters are emphasizing on seeing, they act blindly. For instance, Horatio refuses to agree to what

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cannot be asserted until he sees with his eyes something that he fails to accomplish. Throughout the play, many characters are seeing but cannot see the truth. Nevertheless, the most affected character in failure to see the truth is Hamlet. Due to his afflictions coupled with melancholy, Hamlet cannot see the truth or reality though he is physically sighted. This element makes him, “ to be the more exact and curious in pondering the very moments of things” (Bright 99). Hamlet’s ‘ blindness’ makes him pretend to establish the absolute truth behind every truth, something that obsesses him and fools him into thinking he can perform an ocular test on everything to establish the absolute truth in every truth.

The desire to establish the absolute truth through visual tests passes as Hamlet’s blindness and this leads him to inactivity on many occasions. After Claudius’ murders his father, hamlet fails to avenge this death because he cannot find empirical evidence to prove Claudius guilty. Many scholars have branded Hamlet, “ a man without eyelids – unwilling to see, yet unable to close his eyes” (Aronson 415). Actually, it appears that Hamlet is eyeless. This comes out clearly, after Ophelia meets him and concludes, “ Hamlet seems to find his way without his eyes” (Shakespeare Para. 99). This statement points out clearly to the nature of Hamlet.

He does not seem to see with his physical eyes; on the contrary, it appears that he uses the eye of his ‘ mind’ to see. This is true irrespective the fact that he continually claims to use his physical eyes. He is simply obsessed to establishing visual proofs through his “ mind’s eye” (Shakespeare Para. 201). This obsession enslaves his physical eyes to the mind’s eye for he cannot

ascertain anything through his physical eyes without letting it pass through ocular test of his mind's eye.

Therefore, in principle, Hamlet is physically blind. Those who cannot see using their physical eyes have no advantage over those who cannot see at all. Hamlet falls in this category, though he has eyes, he cannot see sufficing his blindness. As the play closes down, it is apparent that Hamlet has lost considerable amount of his sight. Nevertheless, Shakespeare sought to expose another form of blindness. According to Hoy, as the play opens, Hamlet appears possesses sound judgment with proper knowledge of what can hinder someone from making sound decisions (214). He says, “ Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not ‘ seems/ ‘ Tis not alone my inky cloak, good-mother, Nor customary suits of solemn black, Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief , That can denote me truly.

These indeed ‘ seem’, for they are actions that a man might play, But I have that within which passeth show –, these but the trappings and the suits of woe” (Shakespeare Para. 21-6). From this conversation, it is clear that Hamlet can tell what ‘ seems’ from what ‘ is’.

What ‘ seems’ can be true or false; however, what ‘ is’ remains the reality; the truth. Something therefore must have gone wrong for this prince to lose this insight of differentiating truth from illusion. Hamlet's meeting with the ghost can explain the emergence of this abrupt blindness in making judgments. The ghost points out that Hamlet is, “ by a brother's hand, of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched...sleeping within his orchard...that one may smile and smile and be a villain” 59-109).



These utterances changes Hamlet's ability to see physically. According to Greenblatt, the ghost makes Hamlet realize his external state is not a direct reflection of his internal self and this sets him on the path of proving everything he sees to make sure it complies with what he knows (98). He wants to unite the external with the internal and this marks the end of usefulness of his eyes thus becoming 'blind'. This blindness robs him judgment; for instance, he can see the picture of his dead father in his mind, and he cannot believe it when a friend tells him that he saw Hamlet's father the previous night.

He does not differentiate between mind images and reality. He takes what he sees in his mind's eye to be the truth. For instance, he is convinced that his father is living in a form of a ghost even before he sees the ghost because, in his mind's eye, he has already seen the ghost. Therefore, this mind's eye continually replaces his physical eyes and instead of using his physical eyes to make judgment, he relies on this mind's eye thus making his physical eyes useless hence, blind. As aforementioned, there are some instances when Hamlet portrays his blindness by preferring his mind's eye to his physical eyes. In probing his father's death to establish Claudius' guilt, he stages a show whereby, " players / Play something like the murder of his father" (Shakespeare Para.

361-3). In this play, he hopes that his uncle will appear suspicious thus betray him for murdering Hamlet's father. This is inconsequential as Hamlet fails utterly in his bid to prove Claudius' guilt empirically.

He deceptively thinks that the inside is connected to the outside and hopes that Claudius would bring forth that which is hidden in the inside. This does not happen; nevertheless, the issue of blindness comes out clearly, because Hamlet cannot see the reality. He even doubts his sight and he calls Horatio to observe how Claudius behaves during the play. Shakespeare uses this element deliberately to show that, even though people have sight, they misuse it in many occasion for they see what they want to see not the reality. Finally, Hamlet's inability to see the reality comes out clearly in scene three of the play. Even though he sees Claudius kneeling down to pray and asks for forgiveness of his sins of killing Hamlet's father, he chooses to reflect on the issue and concludes that Claudius cannot be killed at that moment.

Aronson points out " to see is to perceive evil just as not to see is to be at the mercy of evil" (424). Surely, Hamlet refuses to see because he cannot see evil in Claudius for he cannot prove him guilty. Therefore, his sight becomes only useful in seeing evil, otherwise he does not see. " Although the prince exhibits an intense preoccupation with establishing visual proof of his uncle's guilt, he is the equal of a man without eyes since he is unable to truly see" (Byrne Para. 9).

## **Conclusion**

The theme of physical blindness and blindness to truth comes out clearly in the plays Oedipus the King and Hamlet. Oedipus cannot see the truth. He does not know his true parents, marries his mother, and kills his father because of this blindness.

After gaining sight of ' truth' he gouges his eyes becoming physically blind. Jocasta on her part knows the truth but chooses to ' blind' herself towards the same; she kills herself as a result. Teiresias is physically blind but he can see the truth. In Hamlet, Hamlet can see but he chooses to use his mind's eye instead of his physical eyes. Consequently, his physical eyes become useless thus becoming blind.

Sighted people can choose to be blind to the truth and reality.

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