

Sight and blindness in oedipus the king assignment



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The Irony of Sight and Knowledge in Oedipus the King People equate 'seeing' to gaining knowledge. Expressions such as "I see" and "seeing truth" are used to express understanding of something, but is seeing really the same as knowing? In Oedipus the King, Oedipus's inability to grasp the truth is despite the fact that he is physically able to see contrasts Teiresias's knowledge of the truth even though he is blind. The irony of the blind man being knowledgeable, and the seer becoming blind to the truth suggests that the idea that knowledge is not related to physical sight.

In the beginning of the play, Oedipus is able to see but does not know the truth about who killed Laius. At the conclusion of the play, Oedipus is physically blind but knows the truth, which is how Teiresias was throughout the play. The irony of Oedipus's blindness begins on the opening pages of the play, when he says, "I never saw the man myself," (4) while speaking about King Laius. Oedipus's ignorance is evident because he killed Laius, and Laius was his father, neither of which he knew. He however, states that he wants to correct this, and declares, "I must know it all, must see the truth at last" (34).

Here he uses the phrase "see the truth" again as if the physical means of sight will enable him to solve the mystery of who killed his father. This creates dramatic irony as Sophocles tries to foreshadow what will come and present the idea of physically seeing vs. understanding. Oedipus possesses the physical means to see, yet remains ignorant to the truth. Whilst fighting with the prophet Teiresias, he is naive enough to disregard himself as the possible murderer, and fights against Teiresias until Teiresias admits that it was Oedipus who killed King Laius.

This is ironic and Sophocles is trying to foreshadow what is to come and expose the reader to a world of seeing vs. understanding and being blindness vs. sight. There are also several other examples of Oedipus' plain ignorance, for example, the fact that he curses the killer of Laius, henceforth cursing himself, or scolding Teiresias saying that " Blind, lost in the night, endless night that nursed you! You can't hurt me or anyone else who sees the light-you can never touch me. " (10) Here Oedipus is suggesting that Teiresias is inferior to anyone who can see, including himself, and is not a threat to them. Oedipus is wrong because the fact that Oedipus has the advantage of sight over Teiresias is not comparable to the knowledge that Teiresias has. This is yet another example of dramatic irony. It may seem that Oedipus has the advantage over Teiresias because Teiresias is blind, but the knowledge of who Oedipus really is is far more important. A lot of the irony of Oedipus' blindness also occurs at the end of the play, when Oedipus makes himself physically blind. ..., he digs them down the sockets of his eyes, crying, ' You, you'll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused! Too long you looked on the ones you never should have seen, blind to the ones you longed to see, to know! Blind from this hour on! Blind in the darkness-blind! "' (46) At this point, Oedipus is confirming a line said early by Teiresias that " to see the truth when the truth is only pain to him who sees! " (6). Oedipus is now in exactly the same position that Teiresias was when he mocked him, physically blind but seeing the truth.

Teiresias, the blind prophet, happens to be one of the very few people to know who Oedipus really is and what he has done, however he wishes he did not know the truth, and this is evident when he says " How terrible ??? to see
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the truth when the truth is only pain to him who sees! ” (6). Teiresias wishes he did not know the truth because he knows it is traumatizing and will leave many people distraught when revealed. In contrast, Oedipus does not know and is desperate to.

Simultaneously, speaking in literal terms, Oedipus has the means to “ see the truth” whilst Teiresius does not. This quote on page 6 also using foreshadowing to hint to the audience that with truth comes pain, and at the end of the play, Oedipus gouges his eyes out. Teiresius tries to make several hints to Oedipus of what is coming his way, for example, when he says “ You with your precious eyes, you’re blind to the corruption of your life, to the house you live in, those who live with – who are your parents? (11). This is a direct reference to Oedipus being blind about who he is and where he comes from, however Oedipus perceives this as a direct attack from Teiresius. As a result of this, Oedipus tries to defend himself by mocking Teiresius about being blind. Teiresius replies with a line which contains strong foreshadowing, and clearly states what Sophocles is trying to tell the audience about blindness; “ You mock my blindness do you? But I say that you, with both your eyes, are blind” (33).

The definition of a seer is both a prophet and a person who has the physical ability to see. This creates another example of dramatic irony in the play that is not as obvious the other examples. Teiresius is a prophet, however he cannot see, on the other hand Oedipus can see, but does not know the truth until the seer (Teiresius) reveals it to him. Both Teiresius and Oedipus are blind seers in their own ways. Oedipus is a blind seer because he could at one point see, but was blind to the truth.

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Teiresius, is a blind seer in a literal definition, being a prophet who is blind. This phrase has several interpretations, adding to the dramatic irony of the play. Throughout the play, Teiresius progresses from the blind prophet to the all-knowing man who sees reveals the truth to the city, and Oedipus progresses from the admirable King of Thebes who is desperate to find the truth until it is finally revealed and he makes himself blind. The two characters' progressions throughout the play contrast each other, but are actually more similar than they seem initially.