

Oedipus: his tragic flaw essay



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Analytical Analysis on "Oedipus" And his Tragic Flaw It has been said that all tragic heroes possess tragic flaws.

Whether this statement applies to Oedipus of "Oedipus" the King, written by Sophocles, is still a matter of much debate even centuries after its debut. If Oedipus bares a "tragic flaw," then he is a man, and therefore is able to exercise his free will in determining his fate. If, however, Oedipus is a tragic hero without a flaw, then he is said to be a mere "puppet" in his story; no matter what decisions he makes, he is helpless against whichever Supreme Being is working against him. Is Oedipus' treacherous fate the cause of extenuating circumstances, or is there an invisible force controlling his every whim? As the plot weaves in and out of scenes, what seems apparent at first glance shifts as the opposing view gains merit; what was is no longer, until the next scene when it becomes apparent again.

Though there is a clear concise victor in the end, arriving at a definitive conclusion amongst the array of possibilities is a tedious task which involves the step by step examination of each intricate detail. Before he inhaled his first breath, a cursed prophecy had been laid out upon Oedipus which foretold that he would slay his father and bare children with the very woman who bore him; in order to avert this tragedy, his parents cast him out and left him to die - "...his feet pierced so that no one [would] take him up" (Segal, 89). Since a child, innocent at birth, has no ability to condemn himself at such a tender age, it must be assumed that this was the work of the gods. What would have become of Oedipus had the prophecy not been revealed? Had he been raised by Jocasta and Laius, and had they not thrown him out to his death, would he still have grown to be his father's murderer and his

mother's husband? It seems much less likely that Oedipus would have fulfilled the prophecy in the event it had never been revealed, which poses the question then: Why did the gods reveal the prophecy to Laius? Was it in order to spare him from some evil tragedy, or was it, in fact, so that they could guarantee its fulfillment? Perhaps the gods knew precisely what would happen when they revealed the prophecy to Laius - perhaps this was their intention from the start. According to author Humphrey Kitto, Oedipus was not a victim of fate.

“ The gods' foreknowledge does not shackle his will,” he claims; “ His character makes his destiny. Had he been less irascible, less hasty in action, with less trust in his own impulses and judgment, all this [suffering] would not have happened” (Gale.) While this statement may apply to Oedipus in his later years, it certainly does not validate the ill treatment that he had received as an infant. And speaking of his infancy and the death sentence that he was charged with before he could walk, how was it that he was able to escape that unjustified punishment? The “ exposure of unwanted children was both frequent and legal in Athens,” so why would a shepherd deliberately disobey the orders from his king? (Gale) The fact that Oedipus was spared his untimely death was certainly through no fault or choice of his own; had he been given a choice in the matter, though, it is made quite clear by his statement: “ Why did you shelter me? When I was cast upon you, why did I not die? Then I should never have shown the world my execrable birth,” to the shepherd that rescued him what his choice would have been (Sophocles, 1420).

Another common opinion among critics is that Oedipus' lack-of-self-knowledge is his tragic flaw; hence, responsible for all of the misery he endures. If only he had made enquiry into his past to learn his roots, his ultimate suffering could have been avoided, they argue. Oedipus did, however, make inquiry about his origin to his benefactors, the king and queen of Corinth. While at a feast, " a drunken man maundering his cups [cried] out that [Oedipus was] not [his] father's son! " Oedipus recalls; "...I visited my father and mother, and questioned them. They stormed, calling it all the slanderous rant of a fool" (Sophocles, 1404). Though he was temporarily satisfied with the answer they gave him, rumors continued to fester, and Oedipus' suspicion grew; he then set out to Delphi to confront the prophet regarding the matter.

He tells Jocasta, " The god dismissed my question without reply; he spoke of other things" (Sophocles, 1404). It was not Oedipus carelessness that prevented his truth from being revealed to him; it was, however, that each time he asked for the truth, he was denied its access, and misguided by the only ones who knew it. Though it is understandable why the king and queen would want to conceal the truth, it makes no sense as to why the prophet would deny it. R.

P. Winning-Ingram believes that " Apollo is at work; the god who knows what is destined to happen is securing that it does happen" (137). If this is true, then it can be assumed that the prophet neglected to tell Oedipus who his parents were because if he had, Oedipus would have been able to do much more to avoid fulfilling the prophecy. Instead, the prophet revealed to him the curse of the twisted fate awaiting him - a story which prompted the

young man to flee the only home that he had ever known so that he might never see “ the evil sung by the oracle” (Sophocles, 1404).

This is the point at which some argue that it was Oedipus’ choice and not the mischief of the gods which brought Oedipus’ fate upon him – that by fleeing from Thebes, Oedipus exerted free will over divine intervention. “ Had he chosen to spurn the oracle when first he learned it by staying on where he was, he must have been saved” (Gale). There are far too many extenuating circumstances, however, that overshadow any possibility that Oedipus ever had a chance to act of his own free will. Oedipus may, however, been a victim of his character. Perhaps the gods knew that by revealing the prophecy to Oedipus, that he would act within the realm of his character’s nature, and would not disappoint them with his decision to flee. While Oedipus’ hasty decision to flee was “ insufficient to complete his doom, it was enough to lead him straight to parricide.

(Gale) It was on his journey that he and Laius’ paths would cross, and it would be at that meeting that Oedipus would make the fatal binding mistake of killing his father. Oedipus recounts the details of his and Laius’ meeting to Jocasta. He tells a tale of the pompous man he encountered; “ The groom leading the horses forced me off the road at his lord’s command; but as this charioteer lurched over towards me I struck him in rage,” he recalls. “ The old man saw me and brought his double goad down upon my head” (Sophocles, 1404). Some believe that, “ Oedipus, knowing the oracle, should never have attacked any man sufficiently far in years to be his father,” but being struck in the head by a double goad was no pleasant experience!

(Gale) Many critics attest that under these conditions, it would have been almost unnatural for Oedipus not to retaliate.

“ Athens would have thought meekness so extreme not only unheroic, but a positive offense against that genuine meekness which not only moderates anger but forbids excessive submission to ‘ external’ evils” (Gale). One can’t help but to wonder, also, how much of heir union was coincidence and how much of it had been arranged by the gods. How much of what happened that fateful day was left to sheer chance of the men’s free will? How much of it was a result of the curse, and was contributed to by elements beyond either of their controls? Imagine the conditions: The hot sun abusively pounding down on both men’s noble brows – the irritability they both must have felt after such long journeys – the lack of tolerance they would have expressed toward aggravation of any kind; were all these factors mere coincidence? Or were they factors exploited by the gods in order to instigate the situation? If their fateful paths had never crossed, or if they had at least not been so battered and beaten by the elements when finally they did, the two men might not have engaged in combat which would not only bring about the death of King Polybos, but result in partial fulfillment of the scripture, as well. Although Oedipus’ decision to leave Corinth and to strike back at the king played a major role in his sorrow to follow, “... the Sphinx’s intervention was imperative” to his ultimate demise. Many had attempted to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, but none prevailed; and death was the punishment for failure. When Oedipus stumbled upon the Sphinx, she riddled, “ What goes on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three at evening? ” Oedipus’ answered, “ Man” (Sophocles, 1383).

The irony of this riddle, according to author Charles Segal, is that “ Oedipus solved the riddle by seeing through its metaphor of feet of motion through life. But of course, [unbeknownst to him] his own feet hold the secret or riddle of his life” (87). Throughout the play, Oedipus seems ignorant by all accounts. He is unable to piece together his own puzzle while everyone around him seems to know the truth. He displays behavior not of an intellect, but of a child in many cases, such as his ignorant cursing of Tiresius, and his irrational decision to kill Laius.

His meeting with the Sphinx is the only instance throughout the entire story where he displays intellect. How is it possible that a man, who appears to be so blind to his own truth, simultaneously possesses the intellect to defeat an immortal creature like the Sphinx? Was it truly his intellect that helped him answer the riddle, or was it the interference of a supreme being, once again, ensuring Oedipus remain steadfast on his path toward destruction? It is argued that “ had [Oedipus] been less sharp-witted, he would have failed to guess the riddle, and therefore never have become king of Thebes and his own mother’s husband” (Gale). Perhaps, however, it could be argued that if he had been more sharp-witted, he would have realized that to solve the riddle was not within his mind’s normal capacity, and he may have proceeded with a bit more caution. Oedipus reward for solving the riddle was the marriage to his mother, and the throne to Thebes.

Together, he and his mother ruled Thebes for sixteen years without incidence, but now, all of a sudden, the people were starving and impoverished—a sickness had taken over the land, a sickness which caused barrenness in fertile women, and babies to be born without life. Oedipus was

determined to end his people's suffering, and he was relentless in his investigation to seek out the defilement in Thebes. The gods knew, but he [did] not, that the outcome of his efforts was going to be stupefyingly different from what he could [have] possibly [guessed]" (Gould, 63). Many tried to intervene: Teiresias had pleaded with Oedipus not to make him disclose the truth; the shepherd did as well. Jocasta, too, pleaded with him, " Listen to me, I beg you: do not do this thing! " their efforts were all in vain (Sophocles, 1411).

The truth finally made itself clear to Oedipus, and both his fate and his world came crashing down around him. Why now? Why, sixteen years later, did a plague fall on the city to which Oedipus was the apparent cause? How could a human being possibly cause the famine, poverty, sickness and death which were the supposed results of Oedipus' own personal sins? How could a human being be capable of such destruction through anything less than supernatural means? The answer is that he could not, not without the intervention of some supernatural power. No one, except for the gods, knew that Oedipus was living in sin, not even himself. Many people live in sin, but sin alone is not capable of manifesting into external devastation. This phenomenon proves, hands down, that the gods wanted Oedipus' sins to be exposed to him – to everyone. If the gods wanted to stop the game at any time, they could have, but they waited.

They dangled Oedipus from their strings and when he was at the pinnacle of his life – just when he had reached the point where he thought he could live free from the threat of the curse, the rug was ripped out from beneath where he stood, and all of his failures were made known to him. Segal indicates

that although “ The plot which unfolds this situation may look like a iabolical trap set up for Oedipus by the gods, Sophocles lets us see these events as the natural result of an interaction between character, circumstances in the past, and mere chance combinations in the present” (77). It is very doubtful, however, that Oedipus’ willful hand or freedom of choice was the binding cause to any of his misery in the end. He was set up for failure from the beginning - a cursed man doomed to live out a horrendous fate. The more he tried to escape it, the more he was driven toward carrying it out. The more substantiated opinion, then, is that a supreme being, much like a father teaching his son to ride a bicycle, played the part of the silent force which kept Oedipus on track and moving forward toward the ultimate design.

His fate was not the cause of some tragic flaw of his. It is the opinion of this author that Oedipus was, in fact, the victim of fate; and a “ puppet” in his own story. Work Cited Segal, Charles. “ Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge. ” Oedipus Tyrannus.

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