

# Sight, blindness and darkness in oedipus rex essay examples

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



In Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, the young king Oedipus must deal with demons from his past and the uncertain nature of his future, as he learns the fate of the previous king and the ways in which he is inextricably tied with his own parentage (and marriage to the former king's bride). Oedipus Rex, being a tragedy, deals primarily with the phenomenon of dramatic irony, in which the main character does not know things that will inexorably change their point of view once they know it. Oedipus is directly contrasted with the prophet Tiresias, who is without eyesight but has a much better sense of 'perception' than he does, thus making Oedipus the character who is truly 'blind.' As more facts come to light over the course of Oedipus' investigation, the tragic nature of his blindness leads him to greater doom. To that end, there is a great deal of archetypal and thematic material regarding blindness and sight, as well as darkness, within the play that highlights Oedipus' journey from virtuous king to incestuous murderer.

As a theme, Oedipus Rex plays directly with the themes of sight and blindness, and how they contrast each other. The play makes clear that true 'sight' is not the physical ability to see things, but instead a clear perception of yourself, who you are, and what the truth of your life is. Oedipus the King is the perfect example of someone who is blind to the evils his life represents; at the start of the play, he experiences good fortune as the king of Thebes. He does not suffer himself from the plague, which leaves him open to investigate his people's problems when they start taking ill: "I would be blind to misery not to pity my people kneeling at my feet" (Sophocles, line 14). He believes he is a benevolent king, but is in incredible denial about the kind of person he really is, and the self-fulfilling nature of his destiny.

Throughout the play, he refuses to see what is in front of his face, making himself unable to truly understand what his people are going through. The prophet Tiresias, on the other hand, is a blind prophet – physically unable to see but carrying with him a greater perception of the godly forces at work in the world of the play. While Tiresias gives threatening portents to Oedipus not to investigate the death of the previous king, Laius, Oedipus does not believe anything bad will happen to him: “ Blind as you are, you can feel all the more what sickness haunts our city” (Sophocles, line 344). The very nature of Tiresias’ blindness echoes Oedipus’ blindness to his own true nature, something which Tiresias bluntly warns him about: “ So, you mock my blindness? Let me tell you this. You with your precious eyes, you’re blind to the corruption of your life” (Sophocles, line 469). Oedipus steadfastly believes that he is in control of his destiny, but he is blind to the idea that free will is an illusion, and his fate has already been sealed for him. When Oedipus is told about the terrible fate that awaits him, he dismisses it out of hand. Tiresias’ reply illustrates the problematic nature of that choice: “ 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” (Sophocles, line 517). Here, Oedipus is said to be blind to the truth out of choice, as he refuses to accept Tiresias’ warnings and continue his investigation.

The contrast between light and dark is also used to great effect within Oedipus Rex, to showcase the blurred lines between good and evil, especially with regards to Oedipus’ character. Of central importance to Oedipus’ character is his perception of himself as a good man; as a king, he wishes to be benevolent and kind to his people, as evidenced by his search

for an explanation or treatment for the plague that befalls Thebes. He even declares that, in his search for answers, he will “start afresh and once again / Make dark things clear” (Sophocles, lines 139-140). His dismissal of Tiresias is at least partly based in his overly cryptic prose: “Thou lov'st to speak in riddles and dark words” (Sophocles, line 456). However, as per Tiresias' warnings, Oedipus cannot truly escape his dark past, as a man who actually killed his own father and married his own mother without even realizing it. The denial of his dark nature, instead choosing to wallpaper over it with the façade of the benevolent king, is Oedipus' true crime – it ends up costing him the life of his mother/wife, who kills herself when she finds out as well. The link between sight/knowledge of oneself and morality is fairly consistent throughout the play, as Oedipus' ability to know himself makes him less hypocritical as the play goes on.

The themes of light/dark and blindness/sight are both closely interrelated as indicators of truth in Oedipus Rex. The truths exposed in this play are what highlight the difference between blindness and sight in the play; facts are exposed from the darkness (Oedipus' murder of his father and marriage to his own mother) that illustrate Oedipus' blindness to the truth. As these facts come to light, the darkness of Oedipus' character (that he did not even realize) starts to assert itself into the narrative, Oedipus eventually rejecting his former self and stabbing his own eyes out. It is in this highly symbolic gesture that Oedipus finally owns up to being blind, making his physical form match his character's ignorance of the truth. At the end of the play, he is much like Tiresias; physically blind, but with a better 'sight' and understanding of his own life and the truth about himself.

In conclusion, Oedipus Rex becomes a tale of how the difference between blindness and sight, as well as light and dark, is much more complex than we might realize. Oedipus is a physically sighted man who is ignorant of his own darkness that he cannot see. Despite the warnings of Tiresias, a man without sight who perceives the truth of things better than he, Oedipus himself must learn the truth by forcing facts from darkness into light through his own investigating. As he does, however, it completely unseats his ignorant understanding of the world as he knows it, making his struggle toward sight an excruciating and painful one. It actually plunges his own world into darkness, but he steps away from the play with at least a better understanding of the truth of his existence.

## **Works Cited**

Sophocles. Oedipus the King.