

Women in oedipus



The role of women in King Oedipus; a play by Sophocles and Minimum of Two; an anthology by Tim Winton, play their own part in leading the action of these texts. Today I will be focusing on the way they do this, and how their traits change as their lives progress. I will also be exploring how they provide support for their husbands and families, and also the impact of the period of time in which the text was written.

The main female character from Sophocles' play, King Oedipus, in fact the only female character present, is Jocasta. Jocasta is the wife of Oedipus. She is exposed as a compassionate, competent and loyal woman to her husband; telling him " I will do nothing other than you wish". This is, of course, when she is unaware of the truth regarding Oedipus.

Throughout the play she acts as a stronghold for her husband, for as long as she can provide it and that he needs and wants her for it; because as the plot continues, she eventually is no longer able to act as an anchor of strength for him, and he becomes less reliant on her and more involved in solving the curse. Constantly she is trying to calm him, and provide a pathway for him that she believes is right, although he doesn't always agree, and often tries to take things into his own hands.

She is constantly urging him to reject Teiresias's prophecies, and to let go of this ever building mystery, which she feels will blow out of proportion and out of their control. ' No man possesses the secret of divination', she states, ' And I have proof.' She is so sure these prophecies are untrue, but feels that he is defying the Gods, attempting to be something bigger, and trying to take things under his own control.

She begs him to believe her, calling on the Gods; “ For the love of God, believe it, Oedipus!” At first we see her as a strong woman; one who seems to have control of the situation and of her life, for her first appearance is putting an end to a fight between Oedipus and her brother Creon. However, throughout the play we see her gradually decomposing as a person as the truth is slowly and painfully becoming apparent to her.

In the end see her at her weakest when she turns to suicide to ease the pain; “ We saw a knotted pendulum, a noose, a strangled woman swinging before our eyes”. The knotted pendulum with which she hung herself symbolizing the twisted and complicated life she led, torn between truth and fate, and what she felt was best.

From Tim Winton’s *Minimum of two* we have Rachel Nilsam, a wife and mother who knows she is capable of controlling her life, and deserves better. Rachel is Jerra’s wife, with whom she has a young son, Sam. Rachel appears to be struggling, depressed and constantly being pulled down by Jerra, who finds it immensely hard to let go of his past and move on, as he “ seemed to bear weights from the past” much to Rachel’s discontent.

Strangely, this anthology is not written in chronological order, but I have decided to look at the development of Rachel character in the order in which the stories are written in the text, because I feel that Winton obviously put them in that order for a reason.

The first time we are introduced to Rachel, is in *Forest Winter* when she suffers from a deadly asthma attack which almost led to her death. As the stories progress she becomes stronger and in *The Strong One*, we see her for

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who she really is “ She had survived something to become Rachel again”. This story is essential because it is when she manages to confront Jerra about what she wants and where she wants to go with her life.

However, through this she is always thinking of Jerra and Sam. She wants Jerra to be able to move forward with her, not just leave him behind. “ I’ve followed you round a long time now, Jerra... well, I reckon it’s time you followed me for a while.” We see her in control of her life, but at the same time thinking of what is best for her and her family. Rachel is described ‘ as though she was made from polished jarrah, this polished wood is the result of her long hard effort and the strength that has been developed.

Rachel’s personality is growing and growing as we read this anthology, and in the end she and the birth of Sam are what finally build the bridge between her and Jerra.

The way in which the husbands respond to their wives support relies, in my opinion, greatly on the time of writing. In King Oedipus, Jocasta doesn’t very often seem to be taken seriously by Oedipus, and is often being shrugged off like she is just nagging him to stop investigating further. However in Minimum of two it is obviously apparent that Rachel is accomplished enough and competent to be taking control over her life, and over Jerra.

There are certain points in both texts where we see the incline or decline of the characters and their power and strength. I’ve got a brief timeline of these particular events, to outline what I think is some of the essential character changing moments.

The first time we see Jocasta is her stopping an argument, showing that she is strong enough to be able to control two men superior to her. This second point is when we see Jocasta beginning to urge and convince Oedipus that it isn't true and he really has nothing to be concerned about. Jocasta's power begins to decline, as Oedipus begins to take things into his own matter, basically taking no notice of Jocasta or the advice she is giving him

When the true story finally begins to become apparent, Jocasta attempts to stop Oedipus from investigating further, pleading hopelessly "What does it matter...It makes no difference now ...". She is ultimately overruled by Oedipus, who disregards her completely and sends for the shepherd, not even considering to review Jocasta's opinion. She shouts at Oedipus that "this is my last and only word to you", and in the end, Jocasta results to suicide as her only way out of this guilt.

In forest winter, Rachel is physically weak, but I think this is also a symbol of her weakness mentally, and is also the first impression people see of Rachel and her struggling family. In Gravity, Rachel shows her disappointment in Jerra after he arrives home late with Sam when they are having a party, because he was thinking of his father's recent death. This shows the strained relationship between her and Jerra and her view of him.

This quote basically says it all. This story could be considered the turning point of the whole anthology because it is when we really see Rachel turn from weak and a follower, to strong and taking control. The action of Rachel confronting Jerra is significant because it shows her control and that she is fed up of following him around.

The relationship begins to build between the two, Rachel trying to be more supportive of Jerra and his past, using his mother's words " be better not bitter". The fact that they are his mother's words really show a semantic bond forming between them. The birth of Sam is what requires the most strength from Rachel, and she really brings it out in Blood and Water.

A natural, painful birth a symbol of hard work needed to re-build this relationship which needed some love and care. I feel that the way in which the husbands respond to this support from their wives can be explained by the traditions and cultures of the place and time when they were written. In Ancient Greek life, women were excluded from most forms of public action and discussion in Athens. Greek tragedies were written and performed by men and aimed at a prominently male audience.

In Ancient Greek tragedies, the role of women in Greek life was considered to be insignificant compared to that of men. It is just their words and actions that play an essential element of Greek plays because they are used to shape the plots. The theme of masculinity is a very common theme for a Greek Tragedy, and this is often explored through female characters, which in this case is similar to Oedipus's hubris and power over Jocasta being exposed through ignoring and not taking notice of her.

However, Rachel has a much more important role in steering the plot and direction of their lives. Unlike Jocasta, she is the one who takes control of it. Her actual character and presence is much more obvious and prominent. The voice of the woman is equally heard to that of the man, whereas in King

Oedipus we never really get an insight into how Jocasta is feeling about her life and the circumstances of the play.

Minimum of two was published in 1987, the times being very different, thus having an impact on the role of the woman. Nowadays it is very common for women to prioritise a career as a main part of their lives, something which Rachel has decided to do, and is powerful enough to stand up to Jerra and tell him what she wants. Although their significance in relation to the period in which the text was written differs, both provide a similar sort of support, under similar circumstances.

The problems which Jocasta and Rachel are faced with are somewhat alike. Both of them are almost always thinking of what is best for their family and the people around them. Jocasta tells Oedipus “ I know I am right. I am warning you for your own good.” And even though the viewer is thinking to themselves ‘ you’re wrong, you’re wrong’, she is trying to be a good wife to Oedipus, and does not want to see him hurt.

Rachel also knows that she must keep her family together and strong, and whilst her and Jerra are arguing, “ Suddenly, Sam seemed alarmed and reached for her. She smiled to reassure him.” displaying that when she is trying to sort things out with Jerra, she knows she must also be looking after Sam.

Both characters’ husbands are also struggling through a similar problem, the need to let go, to move on and stop lingering in the past. “ Such things must be forgotten, if life is to be endured”, pleads Jocasta, similar to the words of Rachel “ You do it like an old man who can’t handle the present.”

Although the way of speaking is vastly different, both are implying the same message to them, and approach things in the same fashion. Both are desperate to see their husbands let go of the problems which need to be left in the past.

Hopefully, I have managed to apprise you about the main female characters in King Oedipus and Minimum of two. The time of the writing has, without a doubt, shown to have an impact on the way the males respond and act on this support. The role of women, although not the most apparent theme or motion in the texts, plays an important part in the development of the male characters, and also developing their own characters and knowing themselves. Having said that, for some this, 'discovery of themselves and the people around them', isn't always for the better.