

# Oedipus the king

Literature



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Oedipus the King - Research Paper In the fourth century B. C. , Aristotle formulated his own definition and concept of a tragedy, outlining the rules by which he thought a tragedy should follow. Corresponding with Aristotle's view of tragedy, Oedipus the King meets the strict and detailed standard of Aristotle's idea. The handling of the elements of plot is masterly, and even a modern audience has little difficulty in seeing this. In Oedipus the King, Sophocles presents us with a world in which fate is inevitable, pride can be dangerous or effective, good intentions are irrelevant, and sight and blindness may serve a similar purpose.

Aristotle points out that a tragedy must contain a protagonist that falls from power and from happiness, and that the protagonist must always be fallible in some way. Lewin writes, " Ultimately, while we can regard Oedipus as both admirable for his leadership skills and noble intentions and imperfect for his overconfidence and harsh treatment of others, he is a figure whose fate inspires pity and terror because of his ability to endure misfortune" (Lewin 1).

Sophocles' brilliance in utilizing cosmic irony, or irony of fate, causes Oedipus, the hero of the story, to fall from his throne and ultimately end up in exile. In the first scene of the play, Teiresias, a blind prophet, speaks with Oedipus, who is searching for a cure to the plague killing his people. Teiresias is stubborn at first, stating, " You are all ignorant" (Sophocles 1393). Later, after exchanging some unpleasant dialogue, Teiresias finally tells Oedipus, " You weave your own doom" (Sophocles 1394).

Here, it is clear that Sophocles uses foreshadowing through Teiresias' dialogue. In the conclusion, Oedipus realizes his guilt of patricide, "[d]amned

in the blood he shed with his own hand" (Sophocles 1414). Immediately, the chorus follows the revelation with their song. The song of the Chorus is not only a noble poem; it serves to point the theme. The Chorus does not blame Oedipus; instead, it comments upon the uncertainty of human life: the fact that " success" does not mean happiness, and the fact that fate cannot be tricked.

As we have seen, pity, cruelty, foresight, and bravery have all been employed in trying to circumvent fate, and have actually themselves been woven into the web of fate: the cruel decision of Laius and Iocaste to expose the baby Oedipus, the pity of the shepherd who found it, the decision of Oedipus to give up his life as a king's son by leaving Corinth - all have played their part in bringing about the fulfillment of the prophecy. In the third scene, the messenger from Corinth reveals to Oedipus that Polybos, whom Oedipus thought to be his true father, has died of natural causes.

This was to disprove the prophecy of Oedipus killing his father and marrying his mother, although Oedipus is still worried about the latter half of the prophecy: " That is true; only - if only my mother were not still alive! But she is alive. I cannot help my dread" (Sophocles 1409). Oedipus' dread here seems right, but the irony of the situation is that King Oedipus does not really know who his parents are, and that Merope, whom Oedipus incorrectly assumes is his mother, does not have any affiliation with the prophecy.

If the connections between these events seem too obvious, the complexity of Oedipus' hubris keeps the audience in suspense despite the foreshadowing. Since hubris describes excessive pride leading to overconfidence, it is Oedipus' largest " mistake" while also his greatest asset. At each turn of the

play, one can see both the strengths that earned him the title of King, and the weaknesses that will dethrone him from power.

Relating the Sphinx's riddle and Oedipus, De Quincey writes: [Oedipus] it was, in the most pathetic sense, that went upon four feet when an infant; for the general condition of helplessness attached to all mankind in the period of infancy, and which is expressed symbolically by this image of creeping, applied to Oedipus in a far more significant manner, as one abandoned by all his natural protectors, thrown upon the chances of a wilderness, and upon the mercies of a slave.

The allusion to this general helplessness has, besides, a special propriety in the case of Oedipus, who drew his very name (Swollen-foot) from the injury done to his infant feet. So, Oedipus has endured his own life from the beginning, solves the riddle of the Sphinx, and so his people turn to him during times of hardship: " Therefore, O mighty King, we turn to you: Find us our safety, find us a remedy, Whether by counsel of the gods or men" (1385).

Lewin states, " The scene establishes Oedipus as a ruler not with divine intuition (the Priest also says 'You are not one of the immortal gods, we know') but with the intellectual prowess to ameliorate Thebes's grave situation" (Lewin 1). The people elect Oedipus as their king; because they believe that he is their savior. Lewin also writes, " It is generally acknowledged, however, that he is to be admired for many reasons, and specially for demonstrating, as a responsible leader, his desire - from the very opening lines of the play - for honesty and directness in approaching the problem of Thebes' plague" (Lewin 1). This shows Oedipus' self-

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confidence to be a great help, as well as a strong and steady presence in times of danger. His very diligence, however, and his consciousness of his own clean hands and good intentions, provide his one blind spot: he will allow none of the evidence to reflect upon him in the slightest degree, and any delay or hesitancy by witnesses angers him.

Irritated by Teiresias' reluctance to speak, he is prompt to assign the worst motives to him, and once he is really angry he can be quite unreasonable in attributing the worst possible motives to Creon. However, as Sophocles presents it, all of Oedipus's conduct is quite "natural" that no one in his position, could possibly suspect himself, and that therefore the accusation leveled against him quite properly makes him furious, one can only agree.

But this observation does not alter the fact that Oedipus is possessed by a kind of overweening confidence in the power of human reason - in this case, his own reason. On the matter of his self-confidence, the anger of Oedipus is quite revealing: he has evidently never had too much faith in Teiresias as a prophet - which is why he is so easily convinced that Teiresias has trumped up a charge against him; he is very proud of his ability to solve riddles without help, for he taunts Teiresias with failing to answer the Sphinx.

He is also immediately suspicious of Creon and blames him bitterly for even having suggested appealing to Teiresias. At the same time, it is perfectly understandable that Teiresias is not willing to reveal an unpleasant truth that he knows will be rejected by a man so confident in his own tightness as Oedipus is. The actions of both men are completely plausible in terms of their initial assumptions: it is the initial assumptions that clash, and this clash is pointed up in the angry words between the two men.

Oedipus taunts Teiresias with being a mystery monger, and Teiresias taunts Oedipus in return for his confidence in rationality. The numerous references to sight and blindness serve a similar purpose: they anticipate the conclusion without predicting it. For instance, during the first conversation between Oedipus and Teiresias, Oedipus states: " You sightless, witless, senseless blind old man! " (Sophocles 1394) After the two exchange some dialogue, Teiresias responds: You mock my blindness, do you?

But I say that you, with both your eyes, are blind" (Sophocles 1395). This scene ultimately sets the foundation preparing for a future irony in the story. Walton writes, " Only when he has become physically as blind as Teiresias does Oedipus appreciate the enormity of the situation" (Walton 1). When locaste hangs herself, Oedipus uses the pin of her brooch, blinding himself; so, going back to the first conversation between Oedipus and Teiresias, it is evident that the blind prophet Teiresias could actually see what was waiting for Oedipus.

Conversely, although Oedipus could see, he was unable to put the puzzle together, and this costs him dearly. According to Walton, " We pity Oedipus, as Freud tells us, because, at some level, his fate could be our own" (Walton 1). One of the most prevalent ironies in the play is that Oedipus himself is blind to accurate measurement and truth until he blinds himself. If the play does constitute a critique of rationalism, the ironies of the play become deeply meaningful. The heart of irony is the contrast between the expected or the desired, or the ideal experience and the actual experience.

The ironic insight always shocks the audience by reversing normal expectancies. As we have seen, this play is an example of such ironies:

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Oedipus, by attempting to circumvent his fate, has insured its realization. Oedipus, who saves Thebes from the Sphinx, cannot save himself. Iocaste's attempts to alleviate her husband's fears actually inflame those fears; the messenger from Corinth whose message "proves" that the oracle has been false unwittingly brings the real proof of its truth.

Oedipus' curse upon the murderer of Laius has unconsciously been a curse on himself; Oedipus attains the wisdom of Teiresias, whose blindness he has earlier mocked, only by becoming himself blind. But these ironic reversals are not used merely for the more superficial theatrical effects (though some of them function admirably as dramatic effects), properly understood, they underline the critique of human knowledge which is made by the play as a whole.

The simplest explanation, which covers all the facts, may be the one in which the human mind is necessarily constrained to accept; however, the simplest explanation may not be the true explanation. Oedipus king research paper fourth century Aristotle formulated definition concept tragedy outlining rules which thought tragedy should follow corresponding with Aristotle view tragedy Oedipus king meets strict detailed standard Aristotle idea handling elements plot masterly even modern audience little difficulty seeing this Oedipus king Sophocles.