

Oedipus the king summary essay



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Oedipus Rex has an extremely unusual plot but it has a recognizable beginning. Oedipus the King relates the story of Oedipus who reached Thebes, having killed on the way an old man with whom he picked a quarrel. The city of Thebes was then suffering terribly because of the monster, the Sphinx. He solved her riddle and citizens of Thebes offered him the kingdom as city is afflicted with the loss of their king, who had been murdered while on a pilgrimage. So he assumed the power and married the widowed queen. Here the tragedy of Oedipus takes its final course. As a character, Oedipus is larger than life character. There are certain qualities that distinguish him as a man.

The most striking of these, of course, is his intelligence and the great faith that he and others put in it. By solving the riddles of sphinx, he has provided a verified and verifiable evidence of his wisdom. He is a highly successful king who is devoted to his subjects, regarding them as his children and they also esteem and love him. We see in the prologue of the play that Oedipus is very careful about the interest and welfare of his subjects and take all the appropriate measures he can to eradicate their troubles. Oedipus seems to be obsessed with his own intelligence and this leads him to very unfortunate and uncomfortable situations.

This human weakness^[1] of Oedipus laps over with his pride as he is extremely proud of the fact that he was able to solve the riddle of the Sphinx which had proved too much for any other person. He thinks that Gods has capacitated him with intelligence and wisdom to solve riddle that the Thebes is afflicted with. Self-confidence and pride in his own wisdom is an

outstanding feature of his character that also brings his tragedy. Here Oedipus also fulfills the traits of Aristotelian tragic hero as he possesses a noble tragic flaw. The man who sets out on his new task by sending first for the venerable seer is not lacking in pious reverence; but we also observe that Oedipus manifests unrestrained arrogance in his own intellectual achievement. No seer found the solution, this is Oedipus boast; no bird, no god revealed it to him, he “ the utterly ignorant” had to come on his own and hit the mark by his own wit.

This is a justified pride but it amounts too much. It can be said that the tragedy of Oedipus is the result more of his good qualities than his bad ones. It is his love for Thebes which makes him send Creon to Delphi to consult the Oracles. It is the same care for his subjects which makes him proclaim a ban and a curse on the murderer of Laius.

It is his absolute honesty which makes him include even himself within the curse and the punishment. He is angry with Tiresias because he is unable to tolerate the fact that although the prophet says that he know who the murderer of Laius is , he refuses top give the information to the king. His rage and rashness is due to the fact that the masses are suffering and Tiresias does not provide the murderer’s name. Oedipus cannot but regard this as a clear manifestation of the seer’s disloyalty to his city. To Oedipus the discovery of truth is more important than his own good and safety. Even when it seems that the investigation that he is carrying on will not produce any result which will be him, he decides to carry on with it.

He is so honest with himself that he inflicts the punishment of self-blinding and banishment from the city of Thebes. So his moral goodness also seems as a tragic flaw that brings his ruin. He replies by saying “ Sick as you are, not one is sick as I, each of you suffers in himself...but my spirit Groans for the city, for myself, for you”. (62-62)Sophocles is a master of irony; Oedipus Rex is rich in irony at all levels. There is basic irony in the fact that Oedipus whose own birth and parentage are a riddle to him, becomes famed as a solver of riddles and takes pride in this fact. The efforts of Oedipus to escape his destiny, as foretold by oracle, are also ironical because they land him in the exact place which he ought to have avoided most of all.

Many of the speeches of Oedipus are highly ironical e. g. he says that avenging the death of Laius, he would be acting on his behalf as well as on that of Thebans, not knowing how true this words are, for he would be avenging the death of his own father—and he would have to avenge it on himself since he is the real murderer. There is another manifestation of this irony i.

e. intellectual myopia of Oedipus. Oedipus possesses faultless physical vision throughout play except in the end but he remains blind to the reality regarding himself. At one point in the play, he has the ability to see but he is not willing to do so. He intellectual vision comes with his physical loss of sight but he is unable to cast away the psychological “ slings and arrows” and mental sufferings that intellectual blindness has afflicted on him.

So his blindness, both intellectual at the start of the play and physical at the end of the day, is the worst. Theme of blindness interweaves with the main

plot from the very start of the play when Oedipus says, “ I would be blind to misery not to pity my people kneeling at my feet. (14)” It manifest that he refers to blindness that if he will not recognize the distress of his people. This shows his physical sight but intellectual blindness as he himself was the cause of those afflictions. Later he acknowledges that although Tiresias is physically blind but has prophetic power when he says, “ Blind as you are, you can feel all the more what sickness haunts our city. (344)”.