

Dramatic irony in oedipus king

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Dramatic irony in Oedipus King

Dramatic irony can be one of the most useful tools in any play, and the Greeks, who ostensibly invented it, probably used it to the greatest effects of all. Dramatic irony is essentially the idea that the audience knows the implications of a situation better than the characters on stage themselves, so many of their lines have double meanings – one to the characters and an added one for the audience. Oedipus King is one of the best examples of dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is used to great effect throughout the play, and allows Sophocles to give Oedipus's downfall two completely incongruent dimensions simultaneously: fate-like inevitability and intense suspense. The first thing that Sophocles is able to do with dramatic irony in Oedipus is create an intense sense of inevitability of Oedipus's downfall. The very irony itself, by reminding the audience that a line has a double meaning, reinforces the fact that Oedipus is going to suffer his downfall. One of the best examples of this occurs in the opening lines of the play, in probably the most quoted example of dramatic irony ever. Oedipus says that “ Upon the murdered I invoke this curse – whether he is one man and all unknown, or one of many – may he wear out his life in misery to miserable doom (Sophocles, l. 246-9). The word doom here is especially important – doom has the double meaning of “ death, destruction” but also can simply mean “ fate.” This line, by invoking fate directly and reminding the audience about the eventual downfall that will befall Oedipus, makes it seem like nothing could ever be done to alter the course of events. Sophocles uses dramatic irony to remind the audience that Oedipus does not actually have any agency, making his downfall completely inevitable – like watching a terrible but unavoidable accident in torturously slow motion.

<https://assignbuster.com/dramatic-irony-in-oedipus-king/>

Dramatic irony, however, does not only make the fate of the characters seem inevitable, but also draws the audience into suspense as to how the inevitable conclusion will play out. The quote used above is another good example of this – the audience wants to know how miserable Oedipus's life will be. But probably the better example of the suspense building effect of dramatic irony comes near the opening of the play, on lines 76-77. Here Oedipus says “ But when he [the murderer] comes, then, may I prove a villain, if I shall not do all the God commands [i. e. cleanse the city]” (Sophocles). This line creates suspense by making the audience wonder which portion of Oedipus's declaration will end up being more true. They certainly know he will be a villain on the one hand, because he is the villain who committed the murder, but on the other he may prove the hero who cleanses the city (albeit of himself). This line draws the audience in to the story, creating suspense for the audience who desperately want to know what Oedipus will do when he finds he is the murderer – do what he should and cleanse himself, or renege.

Sophocles uses dramatic irony to incredible effect in Oedipus King. He is able to use it to both make the hero's downfall seem completely inevitable, sapping suspense out of the play, while at the same time creating a different kind of suspense as the audience waits to see how Oedipus will react when the truth becomes apparent to him.

Works Cited

Sophocles. *Sophocles' Oedipus Rex*. Trans. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 2007. Print.