

Oedipus the king



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Oedipus the King The Greek play Oedipus the King by Sophocles is a close study of the psychological perspective of the protagonist Oedipus and the mythical elements related to the collective psyche of his times. The tragic element of the play belongs to the classical tradition. The mythical analogy of a maimed king is well represented in the play. Though Oedipus emerges as a savior in the beginning to those in Thebes, it turns out later that he had committed unpardonable sins in his efforts to run away from his destiny. He had unknowingly killed his own father King Laius, married his mother Jocasta and even had children in her. All this happened because he tried to escape the predictions that he will commit these mistakes. He ran away from his foster parents, thinking that they were his real parents and ran into the horror all by himself.

Oedipus represents the basic predicament of human beings trapped in the unknown spheres of their own destiny. In the beginning, he laments the suffering of himself and everyone else in the afflicted city of Thebes, without realizing that the cause for it is his sinful actions:

But the soul inside me sorrows for myself,
and for the city, and for you—all together (74-75)

Oedipus can be seen as belonging to the Greek culture which operated on the pragmatic aspects of life which included action at the expense of introspection though the element of piety was a major element in their day-to-day existence. In a broad analysis, it is possible to analyze Oedipus as a Dionysian representation in Greek terms, exhibiting sudden action, excesses, violence, ruthlessness, and so on. The Apollonian representations, on the contrary would depict contemplative action with due emphasis on intelligence over impulse Terry Eagleton, in his *Holy Terror* (2005) observes

how in Sophocles's Oedipus at Colonus, Oedipus "is transformed into a tutelary deity, protecting the citizens of Athens from assault" (15) and states that the Dionysian impulse for violence is normally a reaction to "lack of piety" (16). In Oedipus the King, the question of morality is not strictly the concern of its protagonist, a man of action. He kills Laius where the three roads meet, because he was denied his freedom to proceed further. Even as he was troubled by the need to discover his identity, Oedipus does not try to find out the identity of the people whom he attacked and killed. He did not exhibit any sense of guilt even as he had to narrate this incident to Teiresias, after many years.

Even though Oedipus has committed his sins unknowingly, the thoughtless actions from his side are not to be discounted, especially as he was not sure about his identity. He failed to enquire about the people he had to kill or even about the person he married. Teiresias aims his incriminatory remarks at the misdeeds of Oedipus, namely, murdering his father, wedding his mother and having children in her, as follows:

...you have your eyesight, and you do not see
how miserable you are, or where you live,
or who it is who shares your household.

Do you know the family you come from? (496-499)

The Dionysian elements are reflected in Oedipus's life, while he is not someone who would have the intention to commit the sins he had to commit unwittingly. However, the fact that the marital relationship with his mother Jocasta is consummated and he had children in her is the stark reality that the psychoanalysts have to deal with in connection with the idea of repressed libidinal urges and their manifestations. The impulsive actions of

Oedipus, much in conformity with the Dionysian attributes, can also be interpreted as the external manifestation of the Oedipus complex. The archetypal elements in the play also confirm to the moral didactic purpose of the play.

Oedipus undergoes the ultimate suffering which seemed the only way to compensate for the unthinkable horror of his sins. However, as Eagleton points out, he becomes a tutelary deity, compensating for his sins and suffering for his subjects. Only his self-punishment and torment can wash the kingdom of its sins, and he bears it all like a true hero. He saves Thebes a second time by solving the riddle of his own existence and by paying dearly for the shocking revelations. He attains the state of a blind seer, much similar to Teiresias, as he realizes that his valorous deeds to save Thebes from the sphinx had in fact been the beginning of his peril. However, instead of running away from his predicament like Jocasta, he submits himself to the consequences of his sins like a true hero, not matter how tragic his life becomes due to this.

References

Eagleton, Terry. *Holy Terror*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*.

<http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/sophocles/oedipustheking.htm> November 7, 2007.