

Insecurities and fears in oedipus rex

Literature



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Weak Character

It is a well-known fact of life that even the most accomplished people can feel insecure. They suffer self-doubt and, in some cases, are in constant need of support and assurance that they are the great people everyone else perceives them to be. Written by Sophocles, Oedipus Rex explores the profound insecurities of its main character, King Oedipus, whilst he searches for the killer of King Laios.

The play begins when Oedipus has already been crowned King. His great accomplishment of conquering the Sphinx has already been relegated to the distant past. Despite the obvious wealth and position Oedipus has achieved, he maintains an inner state of extreme emotional insecurity, and panics at the thought of losing all he has struggled so hard to gain – his very position as King. Oedipus reveals this fear when he attacks Kreon for bringing to him a blind seer who divulges what Oedipus considers false prophecies:

Oedipus: “ ‘ Do you think I do not know,

That you plotted to kill me, plotted to steal my throne?

Tell me, in God’s name: am I coward, a fool,

That you should dream you could accomplish this?

A fool who could not see your slippery game?

A coward, not to fight back when I saw it?’ ” (Sophocles 51).

Instead of calmly and rationally considering the situation, Oedipus selfishly pins the blame on Kreon, his own brother-in-law. He insults Kreon by slinging sinister and violent words at him, including “plotted”, “kill”, and “steal”. These nasty accusations show the audience the degree of outrage and emotional turmoil Oedipus is experiencing at that moment. His feelings are hurt and his reaction is immediate and childish. Oedipus retaliates without pausing to consider the consequences of his actions, and severs a close relationship with one of his most trusted family members. Kreon protests his innocence, but Oedipus is so hurt and insecure that he banishes Kreon. But, looking more closely at the hurtful words quoted above, in them is revealed Oedipus' insecurities; he cannot help but fear that everyone might see him as a coward and a fool.

New York Times reporter Sarah Boxer clarifies this idea by explaining further. She states, “Oedipus is not a man to be pitied for his unconscious crimes and his guilt, but a man who never understood the real crimes in his own story” (Boxer 1). This is an interesting claim, considering that Oedipus seems so surprised each time a new discovery (regarding the murder) is made in the play. As it is revealed later, Oedipus demonstrates no remorse when he tells his wife he had killed several men on his way to another city, which suggests that he was not capable of remorse to begin with. This seems to be evidence of a pathological and dangerous personality emerging.

Having now lost Kreon, Oedipus continues in his unstable emotional state, as he searches for the murderer of King Laios. Having revealed his fear of being perceived as a weakling, Oedipus must compensate by proving his bravery and power to the people by actively seeking out the killer. Oedipus boasts to

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the people of his land, “ Sick as you are, not one is sick as I. Each of you suffers alone, but my spirit groans for the city” (Sophocles 44). As people ask for the mighty king’s help in destroying the plague, Oedipus, unable to escape from his personal feelings, has to make the situation all about himself. Instead of focusing on the needs of his people, the king claims he is “ sicker” than the afflicted, and “ suffers more” than anyone else. How strange, but how selfishly human! The king, who lives in a palace in comfort, surrounded by the finest luxuries, happens to suffer more than anyone else in his city? Whilst Oedipus has food on the table to eat and a soft bed to sleep on, the people of his land die in the streets, and crops are too meager to feed them. This boast, of a kind of superiority of suffering, also inadvertently demonstrates to the audience the extent of Oedipus’s insecurity and, ironically, that he is, in a way, sicker – at least psychologically. This display of unconcern for his people’s sufferings makes the King come across as completely self-absorbed, because Oedipus could never truly help his citizens until he strips away his pride. It becomes apparent that the plague does not serve for him as a problem to be solved – rather it presents itself to the king as a chance to raise his status in the eyes of the people.

As a medical journal points out, this particular plague was taken very seriously in ancient Greek times. The journal states, “ The opening of the drama, with the city of Thebes in the midst of plague has often been, historically, taken as a reference to the plague that devastated Athens in the opening years of the Peloponnesian War” (Kosoulis et al 1). The level of

devastation this plague wrought on the Greek population only further demonstrates how little Oedipus cared about his subjects.

Although Oedipus seems all but oblivious to the plague attacking his subjects, he often uses his pride as a security blanket, as he clutches at any method of warding off self-doubt. This is best seen in the chorus's opinion, "The tyrant is a child of Pride, who drinks from his great sickening cup of recklessness and vanity" (Sophocles 55). Pride is what Oedipus uses to excuse his overbearing behavior when he accuses Kreon of treason, and the blind seer Teiresias of lying. Oedipus claims himself to be a 'great King' of many achievements, about which the audience is constantly reminded throughout the play. The conquering of the Sphinx is mentioned many times by citizens who seek to flatter him. The mere recalling of the event serves to support him when he feels insecure about the situation at hand, and about the people around him. Oedipus uses his achievements to ward off attacks on his character, as if these accomplishments were enough to balance out the evil deeds he had brought about, or to hide his disturbed personality.

Although many of the wrongdoings done to the people of the city and King Laios seem to have been caused by King Oedipus, Dr. Jeffrey Rubin, having studied the psychology of the main character in depth, makes a surprising claim. He states, "Oedipus Rex begins with parental aggression and abandonment, not filial patricide or incestuous relations between a son and a mother" (Rubin 1). This claim suggests that Oedipus's problems were initiated by his parents and not himself, therefore portraying Oedipus as a victim. If his parents had ignored the fated tale they had heard, Oedipus

might not have turned out to be the murderer and incestuous person he became.

Whether it is personal insecurity, pride, or even the sheer ignorance of not knowing his own faults, Sophocles does an excellent task of painting the tragic hero as a figure the audience can recognize as universal. Oedipus Rex's insecurities and fear of being seen as a coward in the face of his people, pushes him to the edge of ruin and sets up an unavoidable fate. Impressively written, the work leaves the audience with a bitter taste of what it means to fall disastrously from grace.