

Candidate Name: Nele Maria Palipea

Candidate Number: 001408- 023

IB English A1 HL

**World Literature Assignment 2**

**An examination of why lines 370- 447 form a key passage  
in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex***

Word count: 1511

The passage is significant to the play as a whole because it enables the audience to have an insight to its central themes relatively close to the beginning. In particular, it portrays the protagonist's ignorance of his fate which characterizes him for the large part of the play. It's important to note that the myth behind this play was well known amongst Ancient Greeks. Therefore, *Oedipus*' ignorance was constantly accompanied with dramatic irony in that time. Moreover, this passage reveals the King's difficult and hubris filled nature to which some critics accredit his demise. Interestingly, Sophocles used a very unconventional but original style in this play where he concentrated on character development rather than action. By applying this different approach, Sophocles solved the issue of captivating his audience who had repeatedly seen the myth of *Oedipus Rex* produced as a play. This originality was and still is the reason behind the success of this play. This essay examines the character development of the protagonist, and the motif of ignorance and dramatic irony that it surfaces.

This passage is a turning point in the audience's view of *Oedipus*' character, and foreshadows his approaching downfall. When *Teiresias* states that 'Oedipus will not forget [his] insults... when all men throw the same at [him] (372-373), it foretells the fact that the King would be treated the same way in the future as he treats the prophet in the present. This reminds the reader of the proverb 'What comes around, goes around' which teaches that everything one does to others comes back in a circle. The statement creates dramatic irony in the audience as they know that *Oedipus*'s fate is to be ashamed for his immoral life. The reason for the prophet to come forward with this lies in the King's insult '[He's] blind in eyes and ears and brains and everything' (370-371), previous to the passage. Here, *Oedipus* is portrayed talking highly disrespectful to a man that's older than him, and who's regarded to be 'The only man whose heart is filled with truth.' (299) This is contrasting to the manner he addresses the prophet before in the line 'No other man but you, my lord, can save us' (304), where *Oedipus* uses respectful diction further emphasized by the title 'my lord'. He gives *Teiresias* high status and attributes to his ability to communicate with Gods as only "he can interpret their ways" (305). One implied reason for *Oedipus*'s change of attitude is his belief of being smarter than others as suggested by the line '[I] put the Sphinx to flight, Thanks to my wit' (397-398). His attitude of the city as his "children" might also imply this as children are regarded less intelligent due to their lack of experience. The arrogant implication of his words to *Teiresias* 'That you seem old, I'd teach you...' (402) suggest an insolent opinion about the elderly, as well. It's ironic,

however, as it goes against the conventional notion that older people are more intelligent due to experience. Furthermore, the audience knows well that the concept of 'blindness' presented in this insult becomes the paramount portrayal of *Oedipus*'s own ignorance, as it's ironical that *Oedipus* attacks *Teiresias*' disability of sight when he, himself, doesn't see 'what horror [he lives in]' (414). This motif is particularly effective on the viewer when the King symbolically takes his own sight at the end of the play representing that he finally knows 'the burden of knowledge' (316), too. This attacks the prophet's senses, however, suggesting a malfunctioning of *Teiresias*'s senses and creates a senile depiction of him. The King might use this as justification for his disrespectful behavior, too. On the other hand, the root of *Oedipus*'s insult might lie in anger coming from his fierce nature. It's hard to determine the character's feelings in this play, however, as there are no stage instructions other than to indicate the chorus. Yet, the flowing syntax of his words coming from the use of the connective 'and,' suggests heightened emotions in reaction to the prophet's impudence. Nonetheless, the audience notes again the contrast in his behavior to before where he says 'you know, although you cannot see' (302). He's respectful to both his age and intelligence here despite his disability. This childishness and insulting manner also contrasts with the noble, fair and fatherly view the audience develops of him with his use of 'My children' (1). This creates a particularly profound contrast as it's also the opening sentence of the play.

This difficult character is the reason behind *Oedipus*' ignorance and advancing ruin. *Creon* comments at a point in the play that 'natures such as [Oedipus]' give most vexation to themselves' (674-675) foreshadowing that the King's character is the reason for his downfall. This links back to when *Oedipus* describes *Teiresias* as 'nothing but vexation' (445-446) and creates irony as, in the end, he's inquisitive but 'blind' personality is one to himself, just as *Creon* predicts. Additionally, the surfacing of *Oedipus*'s stubbornness develops the concept of 'blindness'. *Teiresias*'s exasperation of the King results in him refusing to listen to the prophet any further although the prophet is straightforwardly indicating the King's guilt. The audience also experiences dramatic irony in *Oedipus*' insult towards *Teiresias*' senses as he remains 'blind in ears' to the truth, himself. *Creon* comments on this aspect of him, as well. He says, 'if [Oedipus believes]... insensate stubbornness is worth having, [he's] wrong' (549-550) when *Oedipus* repeatedly refuses to 'reason' with him after accusing him of treason. In contrast, *Oedipus* seems very understanding in the beginning of the play. At one point, he says 'Creon

advised me, and already I have [done as he suggested] (287) indicating a willingness to listen and learn. However, there are other factors about *Oedipus's* character that contribute to his 'blindness.' *Teiresias's* behavior also evokes and hurts the King's hubris. His claim that 'commanding arts outstrip all other arts in life' (380) suggests that by putting down the reliability of the 'prophetic arts', *Oedipus* tries to mend his hurt pride and praise himself, being the wielder of 'the commanding arts.' Due to this, he also pushes aside the obvious truth in *Teiresias's* words.

Additionally, the passage brings out *Oedipus's* selfishness. When his parents are mentioned in lines 435- 436, the audience witnesses a shift in priority from 'Nothing I will leave undone to find the man who killed [Laius]' (264-265) to steadily pursuing his origins and seemingly neglecting the previous. This is indicated by proceeding events where everything starts to revolve around '[his] birth... [which he's] resolved to find' (1076-1077). By doing so, he is endangering the safety of his people for selfish reasons. This is in contrast to the previous where he claimed that '[his] heart is heavy with the city's pain' (63), and to the fatherly image created of him in the beginning of the play through addressing the city as his children (6). Furthermore, this passage also reveals his fierceness and illogical thinking portrayed in his quickness to come to hasty conclusions. For instance, he immediately links *Teiresias's* impudent behavior with plotting against him (378), and accuses *Creon* of treason without second thought claiming that he's 'clearly proven to have sought [his] life' (534-535) despite having any proof.

The King's ignorance and his difficult nature offers the audience much dramatic irony. The most prevailing example is when *Teiresias* speaks of a prophecy soon after mentioning his parents, which perfectly overlaps with the prophecy the Oracle of Apollo had given *Oedipus* years before. It 'foretold him that he'll mate with his mother, and murder his father' (790- 794) which means that he should have picked up on *Teiresias's* comments when he talks of 'a father's and a mother's curse' (417) and 'you [are] one with your children' (425-426). When this could be justified by anger of *Teiresias* 'blinding' his judgement, then his character can't be the reason when speaking to *Iocasta*. She also recalls a prophecy where 'should [King Laius, her former husband] have a son by [her], that son would take [the King's]... life' (713-

714). This is also controversial to the quick-witted *Oedipus* who is 'Wise above all other men to read life's riddles' (33-34) portrayed in the beginning of the play. *Teiresias*' mocks and questions his intelligence by asking 'Do you not excel in reading riddles?' (440) amused at *Oedipus*' inability to see the obvious when this 'has brought [him] glory' (441).

In conclusion, this passage is significant to the rest of the play because it portrays the King's true nature to the audience. They are also introduced with the protagonist's 'blindness' and ignorance to the truth which stems from his stubborn and hubris-filled character. This difficult personality grants the audience the enjoyment of strong and numerous sources of dramatic irony as they see him moving towards his demise merely thanks to himself. Therefore, this passage is crucial in the audience's understanding of the rest of the play representing the most prevailing themes, and remaining emphatic of Oedipus's ignorance throughout.

Bibliography:

Sophocles

*Oedipus the King*

Translated by H. D. F. Kitto

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994