

Analysis of The Theban Plays and The Matrix

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Literature is very important in the understanding of society. And not just today's society, but past society's as well. The writer's context is a combination of all that is happening in that particular society. This gives us the opportunity to use traditional literature as a window to the past, and by studying more contemporary texts we can theorise how society has changed over time. It is important that the two texts have similar themes, as this makes it easier to analyse differences and similarities in the author's representation of that particular story. Take the traditional text, The Theban Plays and the contemporary film, The Matrix. By analysing these texts we can see how society's representations of evil and good, and their attitudes towards destiny and religion, have changed over an extensive period of time.

The themes and issues raised in The Theban Plays are similar to those in The Matrix. The broadest common theme is that of the story of 'good versus evil'. On one hand we have Neo verses the Agents, and on the other we have a more complex situation involving several characters confronting their 'evil' destiny's. One might actually propose that there is no evil in The Theban Plays, yet it is clear that the protagonists do have opposing characters or situations that cause a form of evil to manifest. Other themes that exist in both The Theban Plays and The Matrix include the inevitability of destiny and the notion that good will always prevail.

If a statement claimed that the representation of evil in The Theban Plays and The Matrix was similar, a reader's first impression would be that this was incorrect. This is because the evil in The Theban Plays can not be clearly defined. Consider Oedipus in King Oedipus. There is no passage or sequence of events that lead us to believe that Oedipus is evil. In fact it is quite the opposite. Actions taken by Oedipus such as solving the Sphinxes riddle, swearing to avenge Laius' death and then voluntarily punishing himself when he comes to the realisation he was Laius' killer, leads us to view Oedipus as a protagonist. Oedipus' downfall is not due to him being evil, but by the foul prophesies spoken by the gods. One could go as far as saying that the gods, in particular Apollo, are responsible for the manifestation of evil in The Theban Plays. This does not mean to say that everything Oedipus did was good, but that the evil came from within him, a result of him trying to avoid his destiny. Similarly, in The Matrix the Agents are a result of the actions taken by mankind. In The Matrix it is explained that a short time after the turn of the millennium, mankind was rejoicing over the creation of Artificial Intelligence. The creation of machine's that had the power to think for themselves triggered a conflict between man and machine. It was man's arrogance that caused them to drop the first bomb, "we scorched the sky". Therefore it can be theorized that, by recognising that both texts represent evil as coming from within and as a result of a negative action, we can summarise that both The Theban Plays and The Matrix have similar representations of evil.

Stereotypically we would expect the protagonist to be the opposite of the antagonist. Or would we? Consider Neo, Trinity and Morpheus as the protagonists in The Matrix. Like the Agents, they dress in black, like the Agents they are aware of the Matrix and again, like the Agents they have the power to bend the rules of the Matrix. So it appears that there are fewer differences between Neo and Agent Smith than there are similarities. Yet we know that Neo is a hero of good, why? Perhaps the only feature of these characters that makes them good is what they fight for, the freedom of mankind. It is only because we approve of this value that we view them as the protagonists. Similarly in The Theban Plays all of the characters that are at some stage throughout the story portrayed as protagonists eventually contribute to an evil action. Oedipus killed his father, Creon betrayed his Lord and best friend and Polynices killed his brother. In King Oedipus all three of these characters are originally labelled as protagonists. It is only Antigone who we consider to be the true protagonist through all three plays. So it can be said that both The Matrix and The Theban Plays have similar representations of good where the protagonists are, instead of being the opposites of, similar to the antagonist. It is not what they do or how they act that separates them, but what they believe in and what we believe in and how the two coincide.

It is perhaps only the notion of fate, raised in both of these texts, that sets them apart. First we consider The Theban Plays. It is prophesised that the son of Laius and Jocasta will kill his father, that Thebes can only be saved by the banishing of Laius' killer, that Polynices and Eteocles will engage in mortal combat and slay one another and that Creon will meet his downfall if he does not allow the body of Polynices to be buried. All of these prophecies come true. So it is in The Theban Plays that destiny cannot be avoided, nor altered. It is interesting to note that knowledge of their destiny's does not aid them in their life, but prompt them to act irrationally, further advancing any evil in the play.

The notion of the inevitability of destiny is challenged in the contemporary film, The Matrix. Whilst on the surface it seems that The Matrix has a similar representation of fate, we can only begin to interpret the complexity of the situation. Unlike The Theban Plays, The Matrix explores the concept of bending and manipulating one's destiny. Consider the scene in which the Oracle tells Neo not to worry about the vase, stimulating an urge in Neo to turn around, and in doing so he knocks the vase off the table. Had knowing his destiny affected the outcome of his choices? Would he still have turned around if the oracle had not mentioned the vase? Or would he have broken the vase eventually, as it was his destiny? We can also look at what the Oracle tells Neo concerning him being the 'one'. She tells Neo that he "hasn't got it in him. Your waiting for something, maybe you will be in another life." This destiny is not fulfilled, as Neo does have it in him. So now we look at The Matrix as presenting destiny as guideline to life, not a script. It explores the notion that destiny can be altered by your choices.

We can also speculate as to why the destinies of Morpheus and Trinity were fulfilled yet Neo had the power to alter his. This fits in with the rules of the Matrix program. Where Trinity and Morpheus can only bend the rules, Neo can break them. So we assume that destiny is merely another rule generated and controlled by the Matrix. Taking into consideration that everyone's destiny in The Theban Plays is controlled by the gods, it becomes possible to compare the gods to the Matrix program. In The Theban Plays the characters look to the gods for guidance on every issue. All prophecies and advice given by the gods are considered to be the unbreakable law. Similarly, in The Matrix mankind is under the control of the Matrix program, and it can bend their wills to make them do as the antagonist pleases. The Matrix is a reflection on the advancements of our technological knowledge, the true ruler in the 21st century. Unlike in The Theban Plays, there are characters in The Matrix that can oppose the Matrix program, or the gods in comparison to The Theban Plays. It is these two differences, destiny and religion, that allow us to theorize changes in society over the last 2500 years.

The Theban Plays were written between 442 B.C and 425 B.C. From analysing the differences between The Theban Plays and The Matrix (1999) we can speculate on a number of issues. It is important to keep in mind that, not only are these texts separated by time, but by culture and geography as well. Firstly, in the era of The Theban Plays, destiny is portrayed as unwavering. Destiny is a message sent from the gods and can in no way be avoided. However, we can note through The Matrix that the society of the 20th century sees destiny more as something you believe in that is altered by choices. This can be directly linked to the notion of obeying your gods, where as over time our lives have become less dependent on religion and more dependent on understanding and technology. This is due to the magnitude of a number of conflicts in the world that are religion based. Perhaps the best example is the holocaust in World War 2. Hitler was only discriminative against the Jewish because of their religious beliefs. The same principle applies to the ongoing Palestinian Israeli conflict. During the 21st century we have learnt to place our faith in technology, as a substitute for religion. It is these reason why in today's society we are striving for equality, and in doing so have adopted the belief that there are more advantages in knowledge and technology then there are in believing that god will save us all .a

We can also speculate on the absence of change of society over time. In both of these texts we recognise that evil is represented as being a manifestation of the errors of mankind. This does however have two separate, but similar reflections on society. The Theban Plays and The Matrix are not only written in different eras, but in different cultures. When we consider that The Theban Plays is a tale from the mythological century in Greece, we theorize that attempting to avoid your destiny was considered a crime in itself, remembering it was as close to disobeying a direct instruction from the gods as possible. This sort of act must have been considered evil at the time. We take the representation of evil in The Matrix to reflect the lack of trust in authorities and the destined failure of our civilisation if we are unable to fix our faults.

The importance and value of modern literature is deeply imbedded in the comparisons we make between it and more traditional texts. As we have seen, by studying two texts with similar themes we can begin to theorize how society has changed over time. The realisation that we place so much importance in technology may come as a shock to someone who is very religious, but it is the truth. As time goes on we can only begin to imagine what sorts of technology we will develop. It is in this flaw, our persistence to make life completely automotive, that we will meet our demise. We spend too much time worrying about what we believe to be the 'evil' in this world that we are blind to the fact that it is in us that the true evil lies. Simple acts, like running a car or purchasing food, may on the surface seem harmless, but it is doing damage to the world, and if we are not careful there won't be a world left to protect. Technology is all very useful, but there will come a time when we need more than just a computer that can think, there will come a time when we need to look deep within ourselves and realise that the answers don't lie in technology or religion, they lie within our faith for one and other.