

Dependence on Conflict
in *Oedipus Rex*
By Robbie Paul

It is a fundamental truth that drama depends on conflict for its interest. In the play *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles, various levels of conflict enhance the audience's response. The way in which the main character and protagonist Oedipus is constructed brings about his tragic fall, the punishment decreed by the gods. Oedipus's search for the truth is opposed to a varied extent by each of the other characters - this is intentionally done by Sophocles to promote conflict and to intensify Oedipus' impulsive desire to seek the answer to the plague afflicting Thebes, ironically himself. The presence of a struggle between man and the gods is enhanced by the context of the Sophistic movement going on at the time. The context of the play enhances audience's response as the play was set during the Sophistic movement. Essentially Sophocles is encouraging the audience of that era to question the gods' actions in the play. Sophocles' use of these different levels of conflict is integral in *Oedipus Rex* - for drama is reliant on conflict for its interest.

The time in which Oedipus is set affects the audience's response to the struggle between the gods and man in *Oedipus Rex*. Sophocles involves the audience through the contextual relevance it would have had in that era. The play was performed around 430 BC, a time in which the Ancient Greeks were undergoing change in their way of thinking, referred to as the Sophistic movement. This is much supported by E.D Friedland, 'The Golden Age of Athens was a time for thinkers, scientists, inventors, and for people to share ideas freely. Greeks were very impressed with reason, and must surely have been asking whether they believe in their mythology' (www.pathguy.com/oedipus.htm, np.). The character Jocasta, in the third act, proclaims that Oedipus's apparent outwitting of the gods' prophecy a 'fig for divination', that she 'would not cross the road for any of it'. Jocasta's sceptical beliefs have been constructed by Sophocles to reflect the opinion of some of that era - a rising tendency to doubt traditional beliefs. The audience would have questioned the gods, whether they were within reason in their condemning of Oedipus to such a tragic fate. Thus the setting generates conflict between the audience and the gods of *Oedipus Rex*.

The way in which Oedipus has been constructed by Sophocles defines the sense of tragedy of his fate. Oedipus is compassionate, determined in his seeking to know and to be in control. His desire to solve the riddles of the prophecy, the Sphinx and the plague of Thebes, his constant questing for the truth, are his tragic flaws. 'The action of the play is dominated by the protagonist to an unusual degree. Oedipus is on stage almost throughout ... If tragic conflict can be seen as the clash of an irresistible force with the immovable object, Oedipus stands alone as the former, while everyone and everything else constitutes the latter' (H.W Lowe). In the first act his capacity to make rash actions is evident in his quickness to attack Teiresias when he accuses Oedipus of being the 'cursed polluter of this land', retorting that Teiresias is a 'shameless and brainless, sightless, senseless sot'. This illustrates how self assured he is - he is willing to attack a prophet of the gods for having questioning his grip on reality. 'Oedipus, their hope for salvation, is not the compassionate king they once knew, but is a creature of overbearing pride, bred of power.' (H.W Lowe) The hot-headedness he has been constructed with that leads to him fulfilling the prophecy - murdering his father at a cross roads on the basis of being 'roughly ordered' out of the way. The audience is led to believe in this case that it is his own hubris, un-godly pride, which causes his fulfilling of the prophecy he fights so hard against. Sophocles constructs Oedipus as such a proud, curious man so as to bring about the tragic circumstances which befall him, enhancing the conflict of the play.

The setting of *Oedipus Rex* in the plague afflicted city of Thebes triggers the central conflict of

the play and is relevant to the audience of that era as there was a plague in Athens at the time. Sophocles has utilised this setting to establish the conflict drama is dependent on. The pain being experienced by Oedipus' people, 'death in the fruitful flowering of her soil; /death in the pastures; death in the womb of woman'(p.26), sets in motion Oedipus' quest to find the murderer of Laius, the 'cursed polluter of this land' (Teiresias, p. 35). The pestilence Thebes is experiencing is as Teiresias says – ironically because of Oedipus' presence. H.W Lowe concurs with this in *Introduction to Oedipus the King*, 'The audience of course knows differently. The cold meaning of Teiresias' speech is quite plain'(p. 15). The plague afflicting Thebes is relevant to the audience of that period in time also, 'the dating argument hinges on possible relationships between the plague described in the play and an actual plague in Athens in 430 – 427 B.C.'(W.Walter, *Plays of Sophocles Oedipus The King*, p.1.) It is clear through the portrayal of *Oedipus Rex* in plague stricken Thebes that Sophocles intends the setting to lead Oedipus to bring his tragic flaw to the surface – his quest to find the murderer of Laius, the cause of the plague.

Another level of conflict in the play lies upon a higher plane, the orchestrations of the plot stemming from the gods, who preordain man's fate. Oedipus has been constructed as such that he tries to exert his own control over his fate - he attempts to outwit the gods, creating much conflict as a result. We as the audience are interested watching this unseen supernatural power lay out Oedipus' future – supported by H.W Lowe in *Introduction to Oedipus the King*, 'the action of the gods is very important in this play. For what they have ordained they will carry out.' Frequent dramatic irony throughout Oedipus gives a clear indication the events which befall him are the work of the gods. This is supported in the text through his being made aware in Corinth, prior to his journey to Thebes, of the prophecy made about him: 'To the question I asked, having heard instead a tale, /Of horror and misery: how I must marry my mother /And become the parent of misbegotten brood, /An offence to all mankind - and kill my father.' After hearing this he flees from Corinth, his first act in his struggle to outwit the gods' prophecy. The level of control fate has upon Oedipus is conveyed even more by the fact he is 'the inheritor of his father guilt. For Laius, cursed by Pelops for sinning against his host's son, was forbidden by the Delphic Oracle to beget children lest he be destroyed by them.' Oedipus was condemned to his fate by Laius' actions even before birth. Teiresias, the 'closest man to Apollo' (E.D Friendland) proclaims Oedipus is the 'cursed polluter of this land', 'he that came seeing, blind shall he go'. The prophet foreshadows what is to befall Oedipus – the self-mutilation Oedipus will inflict upon himself in the final act. His self-mutilation is to be the gods' bidding, punishment they have deemed sufficient. That is, he has not taken his own fate into his own hands; he has mutilated himself because of the character traits he has been constructed with by the gods. Sophocles describes Oedipus' mutilation with such imagery - 'bloody tears running down his beard – not drops /But in full spate a whole cascade descending /In drenching cataracts of scarlet rain'. The audience is made aware of the severity of Oedipus' self inflicted blinding. Sophocles utilises the actions of the gods in order to add to the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*, to the effect that the audience reflects that his fate was not of his own doing, but of the gods' malicious machinations.

Creon, brother in law of Oedipus, serves to establish the conflict between Oedipus and himself, whilst also acting as a catalyst of Oedipus's quest for the truth. He establishes the necessary conflict drama depends on through his unwillingness to back down to Oedipus' accusations. 'The condemnation of Creon ... draws a strong portrait of Oedipus' (H.D.F Kitto). Creon seems to the audience a voice of reason in contrast with Oedipus's rash, impulsive nature. He has an air of calm, highlighting Oedipus' rash nature in contrast. In the final act of *Oedipus Rex*, he states 'Oedipus, I am not here to scoff at your fall, /Nor yet to reproach you for your past misdeeds' (p. 65). Later he is eager however to banish Oedipus and remove his children from him, as indicated by his short dialogue. He is 'secretly envious of the king's prerogatives and seeks them for himself' (W.Walter – *Plays of Oedipus the King*, p. 5). This is illustrated in *Oedipus at Colonus*

through his feigning of kindness to coerce Oedipus into returning to Thebes. Oedipus retorts, 'Once more you come, /And, seeing me kindly welcomed in this land /By all her people, try to drag me back, /Covering your hate with a cloak of seeming affection...You come for me – not to conduct me home, /But to install me on your frontier, /To save your city from falling out with Athens' (p. 94). Creon is Oedipus's antithesis - he works on a more secretive level, later in *Oedipus at Colonus* showing his true manipulative colours. It is therefore through his construction that his role in *Oedipus Rex* is made clear – to bring Oedipus' rash nature to the fore, and to be an agent of Oedipus' tragic fall.

Throughout the play *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles has scintillated the audience with a variety of conflicts. This has been achieved through characterisation, setting, imagery and theme. Characterisation represents Sophocles' intent to use conflict to promote the central struggle around fate. The moral codes alone were not enough to create drama. Sophocles enhanced the idea of predestination with plagues, prophecies and hubris to create the conflict that is essentially the truth of drama.