

DRAMATIC IRONY IN OEDIPUS REX

Oedipus Rex is a Greek tragedy written by Sophocles in the early days of antiquity and is based upon an even more ancient story in Greek mythology. Sophocles, knowing that his audience is aware of the outcome of the play, utilizes that knowledge to create various situations in which dramatic irony plays key roles. To begin with, dramatic irony is when the audience knows the tragic truth before the characters do. Through Sophocles's use of irony he manages to avoid retelling an old tale, even though the audience is aware of the story's ending, they are intrigued by the irony present in the story.

From the beginning of the play, Oedipus is ignorant of the dreadful acts he has committed: the murder of his father and marrying his mother. But the audience, watching the play, is already well aware of these facts. Therefore, every word and every reaction of Oedipus' with regard to the murder leads itself to dramatic irony.

The story revolves around two different attempts to change the course of fate: Jocasta and Laius' killing of Oedipus at birth and Oedipus's flight from Corinth later on. In both cases, an oracle's prophecy comes true regardless of the characters' action. Jocasta kills her son only to find him restored to life and married to her and Oedipus leaves Corinth only to find that in doing so, he has found his real parents and carried out the oracle's words. Both Oedipus and Jocasta impulsively exult over the failure of oracles, only to find that the oracles were right after all. Each time a character tries to avert the future that the oracles have predicted for them, the audience knows their attempt is useless, creating the sense of irony that permeates the play. *The way in which Oedipus and Jocasta express their disbelief in oracles is ironic. Jocasta, in an attempt to comfort Oedipus, tells him that oracles are powerless. However, in the beginning of the next scene, the audience can see her praying to the same gods whose powers she had mocked previously. Oedipus rejoices over Polybus' death as a sign that oracles are weak and infallible, yet he refuses to return to Corinth for fear that the oracle's statements concerning Merope could still come true. Despite of what they say, both Jocasta and Oedipus continue to suspect that the oracles might be right and that the gods can predict and affect the future.

Another dramatic irony is the frequent use of references to eyes, sight, light, and perception throughout the whole play. When Oedipus refuses to believe Tiresias when he reveals the truth, the king accuses Tiresias of being blind. The irony is that sight here has two different meanings. Oedipus is blessed with the gift of perception, since he was the only man who could solve the Sphinx's riddle, yet he cannot see what is right before his eyes. He is blind to the truth, for all he seeks it. Tiresias' presence in the play is very important because as a blind old man, he foreshadows Oedipus' own future, and the more Oedipus mocks him, the more ironic he sounds to the audience. Tiresias is a man who understands the truth without the use of his sight and Oedipus' is just quite the contrary because he is a sighted man who is blind of the truth right before him. Later, the king switches roles with Tiresias, becoming a man who sees the truth and loses his sense of sight.

Using dramatic irony to involve the audience, the characters come alive in all their flawed glory. The play achieves that catharsis of which Aristotle speaks of a tragic hero by showing the audience a nobleman who is great, but not perfect, who is a good father, husband, and son that in the end unwillingly destroys his parents, wife, and children. There are two ways to read the story of Oedipus. One is to say that he cannot change his fate where he is incapable of doing anything to change the destiny that fate has stored for him. Another is to say that the events of the play occurred because of his fault, that he possesses the flaw that sets these events to action. The use of irony in a play allows playwrights to make audiences want to see how the events occurring mentally affect the main character, even if they already are aware of the story. The case of dramatic irony enables the audience of the play to sympathize with the ignorant and ill-fated protagonist. The effect of the tragedy is therefore more profound, long lasting, and much more alluring.