

Fate and Ignorance in Oedipus Rex

Ten Works Cited Oedipus Rex is a story that can be interpreted on many different levels of thinking. The ancient tale has existed for centuries and has been subjected to countless forms of analysis. What is it that makes Oedipus the King such a fascinating story? Is it the suspense of a developing mystery that captivates the audience? Or perhaps the wonderful feeling the readers get after vicariously experiencing the horror Oedipus feels? And if not that, could it be that the reader is intrigued at Sophocles' description of one man's disbelief in the gods? Whichever way one looks at it, Oedipus Tyrannus was, and remains, one of the "most highly admired plays of all time" (Wood, et al, 163).

One way of interpreting this story is by looking at it as if it were a detective story. When initially reading the play, one can see that the whole plot is focused around Oedipus' search for the truth. On a more specific level, "Oedipus Rex involves a hero trying to clarify a situation involving a murder" (Shaw, 78). It's easy to think of him as a sort of Sherlock Holmes, focused on the ever-present knowledge that there is a murderer out there. Vincent Badger describes Oedipus Rex as "a mystery play. Showing to the characters on the stage the inexorable unfolding of a truth we knew from the beginning." (Badger, 1). From the very start you know that Oedipus is a supposedly good detective, as he had solved the riddle of the Sphinx years before the play takes place (Daniels and Scully, 17). However, knowing this, one would expect Oedipus to realize that there are many questions that he has failed to answer. For example, such obvious things as "Where did the scars on my ankles come from?" or, "Am I marrying my mother?" (Daniels and Scully, 25). These were simple things that he could have looked into. Had he done some simple investigation he would have learned the truth long before the events of the play took place.

A possible reason for his ignorance, and a fascinating twist, could be that Oedipus had originally believed that he was the murderer of Laius, and knew at the time of the story, that he had married his own mother (Daniels and Scully, 26). All the public cursing, the whole "Now my curse on the murderer" (Sophocles, 172) was really a spectacle to throw the suspicion off himself (Daniels and Scully, 26). However, most literary scholars don't believe this, as Oedipus does seem to display a great deal of remorse when he realizes that the prophecies about him are true. If it is all a setup by Oedipus, then he is both extraordinarily intelligent and stupid, by hiding the truth for so long and being self destructive at the same time (Daniels and Scully, 26). Most believe that "Oedipus has simply chosen to ignore a real possibility" (Daniels and Scully, 21). Howard Clarke said that "[Oedipus] reaches a point where he is, literally, the captive of what he is searching for." (Clarke, 593). He reached a "point in his search where he is carried along on the tide of his of his own discoveries" (Clarke, 593). A part from these interesting interpretations, Oedipus Rex can be read from cover to cover as a normal detective story with all the basic elements; suspects, crime, clues and an investigator. The whole plot rotates around one significant event, which was the killing of Laius. So now we have the crime stated, we simply need a hero. Enter Oedipus, the detective. He's brave, intelligent, and has previous experience. He first questions Tiresias in a sort of bad-cop manner, yelling at him and badgering him into giving him answers unwillingly. Like a scene straight out of

a police television program, Oedipus yells at Tiresias in hopes of uncovering the truth, "You, you scum of the earth, you'd enrage a heart of stone! You won't talk? Nothing moves you? Out with it, once and for all!" (Sophocles, 175). Oedipus then begins to point fingers, first at Tiresias, "now I see it all.

You helped hatch the plot, you did the work, yes, short of killing him with your own hands - and given eyes I'd say you did the killing single-handed!" (Sophocles, 175). Teiresias, in return, gives Oedipus only a handful of vague clues, frustrating Oedipus more. He then blames Creon, accusing him of a conspiracy, "You - here? You have the gall to show your face before the palace gates? You, plotting to kill me, kill the king - I see it all, the marauding thief himself scheming to steal my crown and power!" (Sophocles, 181). Oedipus's investigative skills have to be questioned at this point, as it seems that he is merely pointing fingers at anyone, in a mad dash to save his own guilty soul. Then, of course, there are the plethora of clues given and people questioned. According to the Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms, "a basic rule of the detective story is that clues from which a solution can be obtained must be given to the reader precisely as and when the detective receives them." (Shaw, 78). Oedipus Rex exemplifies this in many places, for example when Jocasta reveals to Oedipus the prophecy that had been given to her during her marriage to Laius. This was a clue unbeknownst to Oedipus, and became known during the play. However, to say that Oedipus Rex completely meets this definition would be incorrect because the audience already knows the basic outline of the story before the play actually starts. All that is left to be discovered are the character's reactions to the information that we already know to be true. Oedipus is a detective story in the way that Oedipus's goal is to clarify a crime that had occurred. It shares a common theme with many contemporary mystery novels, which is the search for the truth.

A second form of interpretation of Oedipus the King is as a story exemplifying conflict between humanism and the Greek traditional religion. It is important to know that humanism is a belief that centers on man.

"It is an attitude of mind that concentrates upon the activities of man rather than upon the supernatural world." (Shaw 136). Greek religion, on the other hand, stressed the importance of the gods. The Greeks believed that the gods controlled all, that fate was what moved life. This is where you find the strong conflict in the story, where Oedipus' beliefs are tested. Bernard Knox says, "The play is a story of a man who rejects prophecy and therefore religion and who find out that he was wrong." (Clarke, 595). There is one character in Oedipus the King whose questioning of the gods is more apparent than others and whose strong beliefs change those around her; she is Jocasta, the wife and mother of Oedipus. Her feeling about the gods are quite contradicting at times. For example, she is seen praying to Apollo in hopes of saving the city and before her death she prays for forgiveness (Boyer, 1). At other times she seems quite adamant in denouncing the gods and their prophecies. Jocasta explains that the Delphic prophecy can not be true because of the original prophecy that had predicted her son would kill Laius and marry her. She says, "Listen to me and learn some peace of mind: no skill in the world, nothing human can penetrate the future." (Sophocles, 186). When the news of Polybus' death is brought forth, she becomes even more excited, determined to explain that the prophecy was

obviously untrue (Boyer, 1). By doing this "she attempts to hint that the oracles - and thus the gods - are false." (Boyer, 1). With her persistence, she begins to change other people's opinions of the gods, "Jocasta tested beliefs of those around her by feigning disbelief in the gods herself." (Boyer, 1). Oedipus is one of these people. Boyer says that, "by planting this doubt in Oedipus' mind, the gods are able to test his faith, and his ruling power, through Jocasta - a test which he fails until it is too late." (1).

However, many people believe that Sophocles' goal was to "show the Greek that they could not avoid the dealing of the gods, or they may be forced to conspire against the very people they should love most." (Boyer, 2). With this goal in mind, Sophocles took the famous tale of Oedipus and made it "a tremendous discussion of the great issue of the day - the conflict between new outlook and the old religious beliefs." (Knox, 543). Martin Nilsson says that, "The real point where belief and disbelief clashed was the opposition between the art of foretelling the future and the physical explanation of natural philosophy." (Knox, 193). It is Oedipus' stance on this issue that defines whether or not he is a humanist. Unfortunately, it is not very clear what Oedipus believes as his views are often fluctuating. At times he seems torn between his belief in the gods and other times he is willing to accept that the prophecies are false. Knox, on the other hand, believes that Oedipus was a "impassioned, radical humanist, confident of his powers and skeptical of the gods" (Clarke, 594). He goes on to say that, "The prophecies Oedipus was trying to beat were made by a god, and that means that the whole question of truth of religion was involved in his attempt to prove prophecies false." (Clarke, 595). I don't think that explanation is true, otherwise why would he take such extravagant steps to avoid the prophecies, such as leaving Corinth, if he didn't believe they were true? This fact alone is evidence enough to prove that Oedipus was merely ambivalent about the entire issue. It is tough to avoid, however, the fact that Oedipus could have stopped the search for the truth anytime during the play (Knox, 593). "The choice to start the inquiry and continue it was his and his alone. It is Oedipus who drives the action of the play forward." (Knox, 593). There is no direct evil, no person who is the cause of all the troubles in the play. The only thing to blame is the "limits of human understanding." (Badger, 1).

A third way of interpreting Oedipus Tyrannus is as a story that cleanses, or purges the audience of all their un-pure emotions. This is commonly known as catharsis. Aristotle, in his famous book Poetics, defined catharsis as the "purgation or purification of emotions." (Shaw, 47). Overall, the idea is that when an audience comes to see a play, all their "confusions and unhealthy emotions" are "psychologically cleansed" (Shaw, 48). This occurs because the audience views actions on the stage that, if they were to occur in their individual lives, would be harmful (Shaw, 48). When they see these actions they are essentially on the same level as the characters and realize that if they were in the same situation they would behave in the same manner as the characters (Badger, 1). It is the sort of emotional connections developed between the audience and the main characters that creates the first stirrings of catharsis. When an audience is viewing Oedipus Rex they are put on the same level as Oedipus and Jocasta, they vicariously experience the emotions that they feel. They understand the horror Jocasta feels when she realizes that the prophecies told about her are true. The audience relates to Oedipus' confusion, and his

persistence in the search for the truth. Sophocles chose emotions and feelings that all humans, one time in their lives, might experience. "Sophocles is able to make us identify ourselves emotionally with Oedipus, perhaps because he has so many good points, and because his plight is so pitiful. This complex emotional situation is one of Sophocles' greatest achievements..." (Wood et. Al, 164). In today's society we have a forum where the same sort of happenings occur. Stage productions have been replaced by major motion pictures, but audiences still leave theaters feeling as if they have lived the movie. Oedipus had, and still has the effect of catharsis on the millions of people who have read or seen the play.

The "power of Oedipus, according to Aristotle, lies in its characteristic tragic effect of arousing and cleansing pity and fear; this is produced by action involving family members or loved ones" (Segal, 56). Audiences can also relate to the human interactions associated with the emotions. When Oedipus is on his search for the true murderer of Laius, a sort of emotional crescendo occurs. He starts off calmly, wishing to help the people of Thebes. With the introduction of Apollo's new prophecy, Oedipus soon becomes frustrated and the original goal of helping Thebes is forgotten, replaced by a selfish desire to find out the truth. With each escalating phase of the plot, Oedipus goes from a calm king to a raging maniac; transitioning in small increments until the climax is reached. This is demonstrated by the changing ways Oedipus treats supporting characters such as Creon and Teiresias. He becomes defensive and increasingly agitated. Readers relate to this and as they continue reading they begin to pity Oedipus' situation and fear the consequences of their own similar emotions. Oedipus Rex does two things which characterize it as a play exhibiting catharsis, firstly, the "tragedy deeply affects the spectator by arousing the emotion of pity and fear," and secondly, "purifying and cleansing him of these emotions" (Sous, 628).

Oedipus Rex is indeed a play that can be interpreted on many different levels. From the basic classification of Oedipus Tyrannus as a detective story to the deeper investigation of it really being a thesis on humanism versus traditional religious beliefs. As well as being an example of Aristotle's philosophy of catharsis. Countless other analyses have been made about Sophocles' Oedipus Rex; famous philosophers have even based their thinking on it. Heading into the new millennium, these philosophies are still being used.

It is a timeless story of the horrors of human ignorance and the power of fate. Oedipus Rex evokes human emotions like many other plays have. Its power is universal and no questions remain about why it has sustained the ages. To this day literary scholars and common readers are still intrigued by the tale of Oedipus the King.

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