

How far do you agree that Sophocles "Oedipus the King" is nothing more than a detective story? In your answer, you should consider events in the play and the themes which Sophocles explores.

The play "Oedipus the King" is a Greek tragedy written by Sophocles in the early days of antiquity and is based upon an ancient story in Greek mythology. It was written around a time when Rome was in power and Athens was the centre of the world. In this time, people believed that the Gods controlled all and that fate and destiny could never be escaped.

Based on the title of this essay, I do believe that the play "Oedipus the King" contains some of the qualities that a detective story holds, however I do not think it entirely mirrors one.

As with any story, a good plot is essential. It is just as important for the effectiveness of the tale that the plot structure supports the plot and compliments it well. There are two types of plot structures, simple and complex. A simple plot structure is defined as being continuous and unitary but has a transformation, which occurs without any reversal or recognition. The reversal of a plot is defined as a complete swing in the direction of the action. This reversal is shown in "Oedipus the King" when the messenger who comes bringing news with the intention of helping the situation. Instead, he proves to be the start of many bad things to come. Recognition in a plot means a change from ignorance to knowledge. This is very true about Oedipus' character when the recognition comes as a result of him being told,

"Polybus is no kin of yours"

This is the catalyst for all the events that follow and lead to his dramatic downfall. A complex plot structure includes both the reversal and recognition, like the play "Oedipus the King" does.

"Oedipus the King" has a simple plot structure making it most effective and easy to understand. Sophocles manages to intertwine a main plot and a sub plot into one, making the story easy to understand.

The opening of the play begins with the terrible plague on the city of Thebes and all the troubles that have arisen as a result from that. Sophocles employs an ingenious method of having two storylines that run together to make one. No matter how abstract the combination may seem, the plague at the beginning of the play leads to the events at the end.

All good tragedies need a good tragic hero and Oedipus is the quintessential tragic hero possessing all the qualities that would make him such. He has the fatal flaw, which contributes to the downward spiral of events and subsequently his own ruin. It is arguable just exactly what his fatal flaw is, it may be his short temper, his hubris (intentionally dishonouring behaviour), and possibly his hamartia among other things. Hamartia is usually taken to mean a

moral fault such as pride and when things go wrong it is usually quoted as being the cause.

A tragic hero must not be "pre- eminently virtuous and just" which again applies to Oedipus. This tragedy is of the calibre that it is because the audience may sympathise with him because for all his faults Oedipus can be seen as a good man. His destruction does not only come as a result of the bad action that he did, namely the incest and patricide, but as a result of the goodness in him that spurs him on to rid the city of its "affliction". Of course the fact that Oedipus possesses the qualities that make him fit neatly the definition of the tragic hero mean that this play is undoubtedly convincing as an example of good tragedy.

Throughout "Oedipus the King," Sophocles utilises the literary device of dramatic irony very well. Dramatic irony is a good facet in many genres but even more so in tragedy. The dramatic irony in this play occurs when the audience is aware of something of vital importance that the characters are not aware of. An example of this could be when the audience knows that it was Oedipus who killed Laius whereas Oedipus is convinced it was someone else and is desperately trying to find the murderer. This heightens the sense of tragedy as it means that the audience being privy to information, which the character is not, increases sympathy and increases the suspense.

Perhaps, if Oedipus had known from the beginning that it was him who was the murderer, he would not have had to go through what he did. He might not have had the task of unwittingly condemning himself, loosing his wife and mother when she hung herself, blinding himself, and being separated from his children at the end of the play.

Dramatic irony instils the emotion in the audience that they wish they could help Oedipus. This tool is very effective in tragedy when used correctly, as it is in this play. The audience is aware that the character does not know what they know, and they can see that all the events will culminate in tragedy and their sympathy increases.

From the beginning of the play, the audience already knows who the murderer is. This in my opinion is quite different from how the plot of a detective story is unfolded. Throughout the detective story, there would be many twists just like "Oedipus the King" but the audience would not be aware of who the murderer was; they would go throughout the book still having questions and doubts in their mind as to who it could be. The fact that Sophocles allows the readers and audience to figure out it is Oedipus from the beginning does not make it entirely a detective story. However, the use of dramatic irony used throughout employs a detective feel, it offers numerous twists and role reversals in the play showing a plot development and a change in expectations.

One of these changes in expectations which shows a strong role reversal is that of the chorus. Although the chorus still shows pity for Oedipus, they also show fear towards him.

" I pity you but I can't bear to look.

... but you.... I shudder at the sight."

Oedipus speaks to the crowd,

"Touch the *man of grief*.

Do. *Don't be afraid*".

Here Oedipus is almost *begging* the chorus to touch him, it shows the chorus' pity and sorrow they have for him as well as their *fear*. They show Oedipus to be isolated; they are a group of people, stood in front of one lonely man who is scared and afraid. They are afraid Oedipus shall also pollute them if they touch him, they wish *not too out of fear* of the terrible things he has done.

Expectations also change towards the end of the play, especially in the character Oedipus. Sophocles uses a device called *anagnorisis*, meaning a change in character from ignorance to knowledge. This helps to employ the sense of a detective story as Oedipus has realised for himself what all the other characters realised before him. We see how Oedipus has changed and we see the dramatic irony of how he actually is alike Tiresias now, the blind seer prophet.

Earlier in the play, when Tiresias revealed the truth to Oedipus, he did not believe it and called Tiresias blind. The irony here is that sight has two meanings. Oedipus was blessed with the gift of perception, as he was the only man who could solve the Sphinx's riddle, yet he could not see what was right before his eyes. This shows him as blind to the truth. Yet Tiresias, an old, blind man shows his presence in the play to be very important. He foresees Oedipus' own future causing Oedipus to mock him, showing even more dramatic irony to the audience. Tiresias is a man who understands the truth without the use of his sight; later Oedipus is quite the contrary. He is a sighted man who is blind to see the truth right before him. Further on in the play, Oedipus switches roles with Tiresias, becoming a man who sees the truth and loses his sense of sight. The theme of sight and blindness is introduced again, ultimately ending in dramatic irony as Oedipus will eventually end up blinding himself.

It is true that the audience know Oedipus is the murderer, proving it not to be a detective story. However, as the Gods and fate were against Oedipus from the start, is it really a murder that he committed or could it be manslaughter?

"Oedipus the King" shows us that no matter how much free will a person has in controlling their lives, fate is the inevitable determining factor in the end result. Fate and destiny is a major theme, which runs from the beginning of the play until the end.

Oedipus was a victim of fate and there was no escaping his future. Even before Oedipus was born, the Gods had control of his destiny. The prophecy claimed that Oedipus would murder his own father, King Laius, and would marry his mother Jocasta. Frightened of this prophecy, Oedipus was abandoned by them and was left for dead. The child was found by a shepherd man and was presented to King Polybus and Queen Merope who raised him as their own. Oedipus was unaware of this, although some suspicions did arise in his life about who his parents really were.

Oedipus did try to run away from the worry of what could happen, he did not want to commit what the prophecy was saying. There is irony as to who is responsible for Oedipus' agony at the end of the play showing that the play is similar to a detective story as there is maybe more than just Oedipus involved in Laius' murder. Could the Gods be equally as responsible as Oedipus? Indeed it was Oedipus that actually carried out the murder, but it was the Gods who predicted it would happen, Oedipus had no chance of escaping what was already written to take place. Could Jocasta and Laius, Oedipus' real parents be blamed as well? If they hadn't had been so scared of this oracle, would Oedipus have been left to die as a young boy alone? Oedipus also blames Apollo,

"Apollo, friends, Apollo

he ordained my agonies - these, my pains on pains."

Here Oedipus still blames himself for the physical pain he is suffering,

"But the hand that struck my eyes was mine,

mine alone-no one else

I did it all myself."

However, he maybe blames Apollo for the mental pain he is suffering.

Suffering is an important theme in this play. Oedipus, a man who was honoured by the people of his city Thebes, and acknowledged by the Gods as a good man has now found the actions to affect all these things. He has caused himself his own ruin due to his own good nature and hamartia. The audience freely sympathises with Oedipus, his suffering does not end when he realises the oracle is actually true. He is a victim of the prophecy, to a certain extent what happened to him was not justified. Of course, the fact that he did not have to pursue the matter to the lengths that he did, but he was a victim of fate and destiny shows that part of what happened to him he was not responsible for. This makes the fact that he suffered even more tragic.

However, it was not only Oedipus that Sophocles depicted as a character that was suffering. It is also true that other characters did, in particular Jocasta. She realises what they have done, realises how shameful it is and can handle the guilt she is feeling no more. Her guilty conscience plays a huge part in her decision to hang herself. This causes even more suffering to Oedipus. As well as the suffering of Jocasta, there is also the obvious suffering of the Thebans. This is apparent in the opening of the play when their city is being destroyed by the terrible plague. There could also be some suffering if the play continued, this would be of Oedipus' children, perhaps when they realise he was their father who blinded himself, and their mother Jocasta who killed herself.

The use of the theme of suffering that Sophocles uses in the play is a strong theme, which causes lots of dramatic irony and effect.

Additionally, another factor that helps to contribute the detective story that "Oedipus the King" could be classed as, is the many questions that are raised throughout the play. The result of the events that happen in the play mean that the audience may question whether or not they feel that Oedipus deserved what happened to him. Does the fact that the incest and patricide was predetermined mean that he did not deserve all that happened to him?

Although it may be the case that it was with his own free will that he pursued the matter, the course of events meant that the likely conclusion was that his heritage would have been discovered anyway, subsequently he still would have had to be punished; is that fair? He was destined to kill his father and sleep with his mother, should he then get punished for something that he could not help? Oedipus is not intrinsically good, this is in keeping with good tragedy; but neither is he intrinsically bad, so does he deserve it and does ignorance warrant punishment? These questions arise throughout the play, not only by the audience but also by the reader. This I think contributes to the fact the "Oedipus the King" could be a detective story.

The play also installs some important morals and lessons, which we as readers could possibly learn from. It teaches us that no matter how hard we try, we cannot avoid fate or cheat destiny. The theme of sight and blindness runs throughout the play, it shows the moral that just because a person is physically blind does not mean that they miss things of importance. It equally means that because a person can physically see, they do not always see everything of huge importance. This is apparent in Oedipus' character; dramatic irony is once again enforced. There are views about the God's, given to us by characters in the play. It shows their contact with the characters through oracles and how they depend on the meaning of them. Could this be compared to how we compare our lives with the horoscopes we read? However vague and ambiguous the horoscopes are, we aim to make the events fit to them. This can lead to problems though, as shown by the character Jocasta, who shows that having guidance from a God or an oracle doesn't always help you in your future.

Due to the way that "Oedipus the King" seems to incorporate all the things I have discussed, it would seem that this play is an example of Greek tragedy at its best. The play stirs up the emotions and rouses sympathy for the characters and its protagonist. It motivates the audience and readers by arising questions, and uses devices that utilise the suspense and the effect of dramatic irony.

It is true that many of the aspects of this play could maybe conclude in it being classed as a detective story. Although there are some points that could class it as one I do not consider it entirely a detective story. This is due to the fact that the audience is already aware of Oedipus' fate at the start of the play; they can already see the dramatic irony that Oedipus cannot see. I think that Sophocles is trying to engage his audience, trying to make them wonder and question aspects of the play. He indeed enforces some important lessons, but overall I think that "Oedipus the King" is much more than just a detective story.