

**What qualities and features, in your opinion, make *Oedipus the King* an example of Greek tragedy at its best?**

**Okite Ahweyevu U6AM**

Tragedy is the genre of drama, which usually concerns itself with the downfall of a protagonist through a combination of their own flaws and often circumstances, which it seems, cannot be avoided, but all contribute to the tragic end. *Oedipus the King* is a prime example of this and all the facets of tragedy are incorporated in Sophocles' interpretation of this well-known tale. Oedipus, as we are made aware, is destined to sleep with his mother and murder his father; there is in effects nothing that he can do about this. Sophocles' employs many intricate and cleverly incorporated concepts, which make this tale an example of tragedy at its best.

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: "Pride breeds the Tyrant" (pg 49). Additionally, Aristotle in his *Poetics* commented on what he felt a good tragic hero should have. A tragic hero is only such if he is a "renowned and prosperous man...whose misfortune is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error and judgement". This is the case because tragedy is heightened by bad things that happen to good people. This leads to Aristotle's next point, a tragic hero must not be "pre-eminently virtuous and just" which again applies to Oedipus. If bad things happen to absolutely good people, this is not a good tragedy but it is in fact "repulsive" as Aristotle also says. 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 it "affliction" (pg 26). 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 doubly convincing as an example of good tragedy.

As with any story, a good plot is essential, but this it is equally as important for the effectiveness of any tale that the plot structure supports the plot and compliments it. There are two types of plot structure, simple and complex. A simple plot structure is defined as being "continuous and unitary but whose transformation occurs without reversal or recognition". Reversal is a "complete swing in the direction of the action", in *Oedipus the King* this comes when the messenger who comes bringing news with the intention of helping the situation but instead he produces the opposite effect and is the vehicle on which all the bad things arrive. Recognition is "a change from ignorance to knowledge". *The Poetics of Aristotle* states that this *Peripeteia* or recognition can bring the "characters into either a close bond, or enmity". In the case of Oedipus it is the latter, his mother and wife shouting her final words "Doomed man!" (Pg 55). The recognition that comes as a result of him being told, "Polybus is no kin of yours" (pg 53) is the catalyst for all the events that follow and lead to his downfall. A complex plot structure includes both reversal and recognition and this is the structure that Oedipus has. Aristotle is of the opinion that the most convincing and effective tragedy must incorporate both reversal and recognition and furthermore that these must "occur in direct conjunction" with each other. In Oedipus although these two devices are separate one must occur as a result of the other.

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Along similar lines is the fact that a good tragedy must have a single and not double plot structure. A play with a single plot structure has one plot rather than a multiplicity of plots (double plot structure) going on at one time, which just leads to confusion. *Oedipus the King* has a simple plot structure which is it would seem the most effective a view to which Aristotle would subscribe. Sophocles manages to intertwine a main plot and a sub plot into one, which means that the tale still has a simple plot structure that is easy to understand. The opening of the play begins with the plague and all the trouble that arises as a result of that, but by the end of the play, the plague is not even mentioned. Sophocles employs an ingenious method of having two storylines that run together to make one. The plague at the beginning leads to the events at the end no matter how abstract the combination may seem. Aristotle states that this simple plot structure (which he prefers) must include a “change from prosperity to affliction caused not by wickedness but by a great fallibility” of the individual.

Sophocles’ utilises the literary device of dramatic irony very well in this play. Dramatic irony is a good facet in many genres but even more so in tragedy. Dramatic irony occurs when the audience is aware of something of vital importance that the character is not. One example of this in *Oedipus the King* it is the paternity of Oedipus. The audience is aware of the implications of things that are said whereas the characters do not realise the importance. 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. For example, the audience know that Oedipus is the killer of Laius, but Oedipus does not. Perhaps, if Oedipus had known from the beginning he would not have had to go through 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 are aware that the character does not know what they know, and they can see that all the events will culminate in tragedy and the sympathy increases.

Just as with Shakespeare, the language employed too adds to the tragedy. These plays were to be performed they are not just written. Good language can have the audience captivated, and engrossed. The beauty of the words can intensify the notion of tragedy. This occurs a great deal when the chorus speak. When the chorus gives advice to Oedipus, one is inclined to scream at him, “Just listen” but that could be his *hamartia*. In the opening the audience is thrown into empathising with the Thebans in their plight, “Beyond all telling, the city reeks with death in her streets, death bringing. None weeps, and her children die, none by to pity. Mothers at every altar kneel. Golden Athena, come near to our crying” (pg 30-31). One is swept into the suffering of the Theban people, due to the sheer intensity of the language, it is hard not to sympathise. Oedipus too, uses wonderfully passionate language when he realises that he is the “unclean thing” that has been polluting the land: “Cithaeron! Foster mother! Did you shelter me for this? Could you not let me die that instant, instead of saving me to tell the world how I was got?” He goes on to ask, “Did you think what foul corruption festered under the bloom of your adopted son’s young loveliness?”

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Suffering is an important theme in this play. One of the most tragic notions of this play is not just the fact that Oedipus a good man has caused his own ruin due to his good nature and *homartia* but also the way in which his actions have affected those around him; the suffering does not end with Oedipus. One's sympathy is given almost freely to Oedipus because he is a victim of this prophecy, which means that 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 none the less he was in some way a victim of fate and destiny, so part of what happened to him he was not responsible for. This makes the fact that he suffered even more tragic.

But as was previously stated Oedipus was not the only one who Sophocles depicts as suffering. There is the obvious suffering of the Thebans in the opening. There is also the suffering of Jocasta when she realises what they have done, and can handle the shame or guilt no more that she hangs herself. Additionally there is the suffering that is to come for Antigone and his other children that we know shall come for Oedipus foresees it saying that they will be "lost waifs" who will end up "homeless and husbandless".

Additionally, the many questions that are raised as a result of the event that happens in the play mean that the audience may question whether or not they feel that Oedipus deserved all that happened. Does the fact that the incest at patricide was predetermined mean that he didn't 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? Questions arise and again sympathy is heightened for Oedipus.

Due to the way that *Oedipus the King* seems to incorporate all the things that 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. Both in terms of the devices that it utilises, the suspense, and effect that it has, it would seem that *Oedipus the King* is an example of tragedy at its best.