

Oedipus the King is the perfect example of a tragedy. It contains a complete combination of all the features of a tragedy. Aristotle in his *Poetics*¹ defines Oedipus as being 'a definite example of the form and purpose of tragedy'. In tragedies the Greeks dramatized climactic events in the lives of heroes, and Oedipus' story is no exception. By using many different literary devices it brings moral dilemmas of action and motive to the public stage. The action is set out over the timeframe of one day, which will according to the prophet Tiresias will bring Oedipus' 'birth' and 'destruction'.

King Oedipus is the central protagonist and within his character lies a tragic flaw. He is unintentionally the architect of his own downfall. The strengths that once lead him to solve the riddle behind the sphinx later lead him to his own downfall. In the words of the priest; 'you helped us stand, only to fall once more'. Oedipus' hamartia is his anger. It lies at the root of the plot. It was fury that lead him to kill Laius. He was about to thrust Oedipus off the road one night, so Oedipus 'paid him back with interest' by murdering him. Another flaw is a persistent desire to discover the truth. His 'mindless stubbornness' motivates him to seek the truth about Laius' killer and who his father is. This search leads to the turn of events that take place throughout the play.

Despite constant denial of his fate he cannot deny the work of the gods. Tiresias delivers him a prophecy of this fate. Oedipus' circumstances are far beyond his own control. No matter what he attempts to do or alter every path leads the same way. He finds himself 'always terrified Apollo's' oracle might come true'. However he is determined to seek out the Kings murderer to punish him. This search interlinks with the search for his father. Jocasta also tries to deny destiny believing that 'nothing human can penetrate the future'. She claims to believe that 'It's all chance, chance rules our lives'. However fate inevitably takes over. Through the process of anagnorsis Oedipus discovers he is in fact the very criminal he seeks. Along with this he realises further truth in the prophecy, that he is married to his mother. Jocasta also comes to realise the same truth. By the end of the play his final downfall along with hers is inevitable.

Tragic irony flows throughout the play in the form of sight. Oedipus brings a cloud of despair on the people with his curse. This is described metaphorically as sight; 'you bring down night upon my eyes'. Oedipus doesn't believe the blind prophet who 'with the eyes of Lord Apollo' can see the truth. Later he gouges his eyes with Jocastas brooches. The realisation of the truth forces him to do this as a form of self inflicted punishment. He believes that blinding himself will make him oblivious to all that surrounds him. There is further irony when Oedipus refers to Laius, 'I never saw the man myself'. We know that he has already seen him when he killed him.

Tragedy is not directly intended to be humorous. It is the knowledge which the onlooker has that portrays the protagonists' situation as ironical. The audience relates to this as opposed to the character. Throughout the play Oedipus consistently says

¹ W.B. Worthen, *The Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama*, 3rd Edition (USA, Harcourt College Publishers, 2000), p 72.

things without realising the truth behind them. He says he will fight for Laius 'as if he were my father'. Jocasta unknown to herself also speaks the truth. She describes how Laius bears a resemblance to Oedipus, 'his build...wasn't far from yours'. The audience can connect to this because they can see the truth behind these statements.

Oedipus as the tragic hero moves us to a state of pity. Just as the Shepard 'pitied the little baby master' because of his innocence we also feel a sense of pathos for him. Since he is not an evil man his misfortune is greater than he deserves. He is genuine in that he honestly 'fears for these, my people'. The tragic effect is heightened by the sense of the hero being greater than we are. We know Oedipus is superior when he says to his people 'I can grant your prayers'. He also moves the audience to fear because we recognise similar possibilities of error such as in our inferior and imperfect selves. This therefore allows catharsis to occur.

The chorus is a main feature of Tragedy. It represents the ordinary citizens by being both a commentator and character. It is constantly there to draw attention to the plays underlying issues. As a character it proves to be the voice of reason. It tells Oedipus to respect Creon because 'he's been no fool in the past and now he's strong with the oath he swears to god'. At the end of the chorus serves as being a summary speaking as a commentator.

'People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus.
He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance,
He rose to power, a man beyond all power.
Who could behold his greatness without envy?
Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him,
Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day,
Count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.'

By serving these vital purposes it is evident that the chorus is important in the play, adding to the tragic effect

There a stark contrast between the two times Oedipus states 'I am Oedipus. In the beginning he says;

'Here I am myself – you all know me, the world knows my fame: I am Oedipus'

This portrays his days of glory. After the course of action he similarly repeats who he is but now under a different context.

'Now loathed by the gods, son of the mother I defiled coupling in my fathers bed, spawning lives in the loins that spawned my wretched life. What grief can crown this grief? It's mine alone, my destiny – I am Oedipus!'

These two statements show the peripeteia of Oedipus' life. Once a hero basked in glory, he has now succumbed to his destiny. In turn he is lowered to a truly pathetic state.

His altered state serves to highlight the reversal of fortune he undergoes. His tragic flaw leads him to acknowledging his fate. Oedipus' downfall comes as he tries to escape fate but cannot. The audience knows this as does the chorus and we can only watch.

Oedipus the King contains nothing outside of the definition; it's just pure Tragedy at the very core. It also confirms to Aristotle's theory of Tragedy. It obeys all the rules and the elements of Tragedy mentioned throughout. These features entwine together to create the ultimate work of Tragedy. From all of this it is unquestionable that the word 'tragedy' is a usefully accurate description of Sophocles' play Oedipus the King.