

Portrayal of blindness in The Outsider and Oedipus the King

A primitive motif in Oedipus the King by Sophocles and The Outsider by Albert Camus is blindness. The protagonists in the novels are blinded to a personal truth, and are physically blinded as well. In The Outsider, Meursault's blindness is metaphorical, as he is negligent to his own absurdity, which he later becomes categorized as. On the other hand, Oedipus's blindness is literal, as he is ignorant to the truth of his life; and the fact that he is incapable of escaping the destiny that the Gods have set out for him, which resulted in him gouging his eyes out. The characters suffer an emotional and physical blindness, which leads to tragic irony in Oedipus the King and existential irony in The Outsider. In both the novels, it is only towards the end that the two protagonists release themselves from their crudeness of the truth.

The blindness that overcomes Meursault and Oedipus prevents them from seeing and understanding the lives that they are living. In Meursault's case, he oblivious to his own absurdity, as he only comes to terms with this ideology towards the end of the novel. As a student, he had ambitions; but as he came towards the end of his studies, he realized that "none of it really mattered". At that instant, his vision became clouded, as he began to realize that he was not dissatisfied with his life. He is also blind towards the indifferent universe which he inhabits, which is ironic because he would eventually become an absurd hero of this society. If the circumstances were different and Meursault did actually discern the uncaring universe and its callousness towards his absurdity, he could perchance foreshadow where his indifference would lead him. Salamano and his dog is an example of this uncaring universe as the pair has lived in a state of misery for a couple of years, and the dog suffers from mange and is very poorly taken care of. Salamano himself is not incomparable to his dog as he has "ended up looking like his dog with reddish scabs on his face and his hair is thin and yellow" (p.30). Salamano mistreats his dog and swears at it until it cringes in fear, to the point where they both "stop on the pavement and stare at each other, the dog in terror, the man in hatred" (pg.31).

Ironically, Meursault is blind and disregardful towards their desolate world and never comments on how miserable and unfeeling their situation is. Akin to Meursault, Oedipus is also blind towards accepting and understanding his life, and where he originated from. Astonishingly, given that Oedipus is given many hints that could lead him towards understanding his life, he still fails to detect them. The most distinct ironies in the two novels come from the blind prophet, as he is literally blind and yet he understands a great deal more than Oedipus, who was not physically blind at the time. Teiresias points this out to Oedipus very bluntly by saying "you have taunted me with blindness, you have your sight yet you cannot see where, nor with whom, you live, nor in what horror (411-413)." In The Outsider, the blinding light is constantly portrayed, and the main purpose of this would have been to highlight Meursault's mental blindness. The light is usually brought about in the parts of the novel where something important that would lead to Meursault's understanding takes place. There were countless

references to the sunlight during his mother's funeral and even to his sunstroke to the blazing light of the sun.

During the time of the murder of the Arab, the sunlight was also constantly referred to, as he talks about "cymbals of the sunlight". Although images of blindness in the two novels are brought about unintentionally, both Oedipus and Meursault distance themselves from reality intentionally. The cause of Meursault's blindfolding may be intentional due to his inability to accept that he is living in an absurd universe. He was not ready to accept the theories of existentialism, and he did not understand the concept of fate and destiny. In Oedipus's case, it is evident that he is letting himself become blinded at the end of the novel as he is finally coming to terms with the extent of his problems and allows his hubris to take over. He shows his hubris towards the end because he chooses to alienate himself from society, instead of facing reality like the hero that he should have been. Perhaps, just like Oedipus, Meursault's blindness was an escape; but in his case, it was an escape from having to show his own emotions. This is clear during his mother's vigil as he avoids showing his emotions by being blinded by a "sudden flash of light". In the description of Meursault killing the Arab, the alliteration of the letter 's' is evident and it shows how the sunlight gives off a searing sensation. This is shown in the phrases "cymbals of sunlight, dazzling spear, and scorching blade stabbed at my stinging eyes." Alliteration was used by Camus to evoke empathy in the readers and portray how the sunlight stroke Meursault like fire, thus blinding him from reality.

The theme of blindness in *The Outsider* and *Oedipus the King* is intermittent, and appears in a metaphorical and literal manner. The protagonist's blindness is portrayed through literary techniques such as repetition, diction, metaphors and alliteration. In *The Outsider*, it was ephemeral and brought about by sunlight, while in *Oedipus the King* it was a permanent issue and was brought about by Oedipus himself. However, the metaphorical blindness of both Oedipus and Meursault was an evolution throughout the novel, as they eventually come to terms with the philosophies in which Camus and Sophocles had in mind. At the end of both the novels, the character's blindness leads them to finally understand the circumstance in which they are in. When Meursault finally understands the meaning of his life, he becomes the absurd hero whereas Oedipus' outlook becomes more realistic and he ironically gorges his eyes out. Similar to Meursault, he intends to prove that he has not advanced to anything from his new found discoveries.

Bibliography:

Camus, Albert . The Outsider . Great Britain: Hamish Hamilton, 1982
Sophocles. Oedipus the King. Oxford University Press, New York, 1998