

Over 2,000 years ago, one of the most celebrated dramatic works in the world was born: *Oedipus the King*. So remarkable was this piece, that even now this play is still discussed and performed. This essay attempts to show why this may be, by pointing out the features that may have contributed to the play's enduring worth and significance. First to be mentioned is the question raised in the play of whether it is Fate, Free Will or perhaps both, that play the most crucial part in the tragic undoing of the protagonist Oedipus. In considering the involvement of Free Will, the *Harmatia* or 'tragic flaw' of Oedipus's character, namely his pride and the traits stemming from such, will be examined.

In doing such, the techniques used to illustrate these characteristics and their effect on Oedipus's eventual ruin will be analyzed. These devices, namely use of dialogue and an effective play on narration (seen with the use of the Chorus), infused with excellent display of Symbolism and Irony – both Dramatic *and* Verbal, illustrate the insightful mastery of Sophocles in his creation of an exciting play based on an ancient Greek myth, using the fore-mentioned potion to tantalize his audience.

The debate over fate vs. free choice has been an intense one for a long time now. Many believe that fate dominates a person's entire life, and that all events are inevitable whereas others feel that we possess the freedom to make choices in life and that fate has absolutely no role in our lives. Then, there are some who believe that the ending is determined, but our free will decides how we get there. In Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus feared that a certain prophecy would come true, and that he was doomed. People

can always choose their own direction in life, but some things in life are unavoidable. Thus Oedipus comes to realize that his attempts to prevent the prophecy prove futile and ironically made it come true.

As a puppet of fate, Oedipus cannot affect the future that the oracle has predicted for him. This does in fact seem to be an important message of the story, as no matter what Jocasta says about the oracles' unreliability, their predictions all come true. In an attempt to alter fate, both Jocasta and Oedipus end up changing the structure of their families, in efforts to move as far away as possible from the relatives that threaten to ruin them. Yet in doing such, they set the course of the story into action. You cannot escape fate, no matter what you do. Jocasta's son whom she assumes dead will come back to kill his father. The safe haven Oedipus found away from his fated parents turns out to be the very ground where he is found to have killed his father and married his mother. The Chorus says, "Time sees all" and fate and the course of time seem more powerful than anything a mortal can do. However, is Oedipus's tragic end not also his fault, or he is merely a pawn in the celestial workings of fate?

Oedipus definitely must be viewed as more than merely a passive victim of fate and time. His *hamartia*, the tragic flaw that sets the events of the story into action plays a major role in his undoing. This flaw is his pride, a characteristic which Oedipus exhibits a vast amount of, to the point where it seems to border on sheer arrogance. This is demonstrated in the beginning of the play where he states, "I, Oedipus, whose name is known afar," and is reinforced by the priest's replies of, "Oedipus great and glorious ... O greatest of men." The traits of pride and determination have potential to be positive,

but it is these characteristics in Oedipus's case that lead to his eventual downfall.

Aristotle, a renowned philosopher echoes this in his work *Poetics*, stating that "the tragic hero falls into bad fortune because of some flaw in his character of the kind found in men of high reputation and good fortune such as Oedipus."

This *hamartia* is clearly reflected by the pride and determination significant in the protagonist's personality throughout the play. However, these characteristics figuratively blind Oedipus to the truth initially and eventually literally as he physically blinds himself when he is able to see it. When the blind prophet Tiresias states to Oedipus that it was he who is indeed the murderer of King Laius, and the 'traitor' upon which he levels curses, Oedipus's pride prevents him to accept this. In his pride, Oedipus is hasty and shows a lack of patience. Wishing to end this mystery of the death of Laius as quickly as possible and once again be the saviour of his people, Oedipus passes a decree to kill or exile anyone who withholds information. Tiresias tested Oedipus' patience in the beginning of the story with the information he was holding back, leading to the king's angry assault upon the priest. This impatient accusing of Tiresias proved to be detrimental, as Tiresias ironically foretells Oedipus's tragic ending.

Here Sophocles' use of dramatic and verbal irony come to fore. As Oedipus pronounces the sentence upon the head of Laius's murderer, he unwittingly self-inflicts himself with the curse and to the excitement of the audience, foreshadows later events to come. His statement proves to be a classic example of verbal irony. Oedipus, in thinking that he is directing his pronouncement upon some conspirator in his own interest, stating that he is protecting himself from possible future death from the said perpetrator, actually

places condemnation upon himself. Further examples of irony include his speech where he first answers the chorus "...Because of all these things I will fight for him as I would my own murdered father." The irony inherent in this lies for the most part in this single line, since the murdered King Laius *is* his father. Verbal irony is also seen in the metaphor of Sight vs. Blindness, where Oedipus taunts Tiresias's physical blindness. This proves ironic as, although Tiresias is blind he sees the truth from the beginning, whereas Oedipus, who has physical eyesight, is blind to his fate. Ironically, by the end of the play, Oedipus makes his eyes blind when he learns the truth and finally sees as the 'seer' did.

Sophocles, however does not reserve his use of irony to verbal irony, but also ranges into areas of dramatic irony. It must be noted, that indeed the entire play *Oedipus the King* is saturated with irony dramatic in nature. This is made evident by the fact that throughout the play, Oedipus is unaware of the fate that awaits him, whereas the audience is granted with the omniscient gift of the gods in their foreknowledge of the tragedy that will reduce 'Oedipus the King' into 'Oedipus the beggar'. This dramatic irony, is perhaps shown most clearly within the discourse between Oedipus and the 'seer' Tiresias, and the taunts Oedipus levies upon him. Thus the metaphor of sight vs. blindness is re-introduced and as with that of verbal, is linked to dramatic irony by Sophocles as the audience witnesses Oedipus's mockery of Tiresias's physical blindness with the fore-knowledge that the king himself will end up being blinded by his own hands and pride at the end of the play. Tiresias in his response to Oedipus, provides perhaps the greatest evidence of this form of irony. "So, you mock my blindness? Let me tell you this. You with your precious eyes, you're blind to the corruption of your life, to the house you live in, those you live with—who are your parents? Do you know? All unknowing you are the scourge

of your own flesh and blood, the dead below the earth and the living here above, and the double lash of your mother and your father's curse will whip you from this land one day, their footfall treading you down in terror, darkness shrouding your eyes that now can see the light!" Here the audience enjoys fore-knowledge that what the 'seer' says is indeed true, though unknown to Oedipus. Ironically, the king now figuratively blind to the truth that both the audience and Tiresias possess, eventually gouges out his eyes in the discovering of this ill-fated truth. Thus the idea of sight, critical in *Oedipus the King* is linked to the fore-sight of the audience. The audience and Tiresias see the truth from the beginning, while Oedipus is blind to his fate.

The majority of the features leading to this play's success have been analyzed, however one must now examine what binds all the fore-mentioned features together – the use of language. Already discussed is Sophocles' technique of Verbal and Dramatic irony, however, before drawing conclusion it is necessary to shed light on the importance of the use of dialogue and the Chorus as narrative and the role they play in making the play the lasting work it is.

*Oedipus Rex*, written in the style of a play thus seems to have no narrative point of view at all. For instance, instead of merely saying what is happening, Sophocles reveals the events transpiring through use of the dialogue between the characters, thus allowing the reader to draw his own conclusions with much more freedom than in a narrative where much of what is said is said with the taint of the author's bias and the reader can understand and judge characters on a more personal level. This use of dialogue also causes the reader to follow the story with a higher level of attention and excitement.

Characteristics are often displayed through a character's actions, in what is said about them, and what they themselves say. Strict narration often polarizes a character, casting them as black or white, good or evil, however in *Oedipus the King*, the speech of a character allows us to see the various shades of grey, thus portraying the character more fairly.

Despite the fact that the story apparently has no narrator, there is still a narrator of sort hidden within the confines of the story; a narrator already alluded to: the chorus. The effect of the chorus is somewhat wondrous in the play as it allows the freedom and advantages of a non-narrator / third person point of view story, but still allows the input of some of the views of the author and also allows the story to proceed without the need to divulge all the necessary details through medium of inter-character discourse. For instance, the author is able to insert some third person style information through the chorus, while maintaining the neutrality of a somewhat guileless point of view.

In conclusion, regardless of the way you read the play, *Oedipus the King* is indeed a powerful work of drama. Collapsing the events of the play into the moments before and after Oedipus's realization, Sophocles catches and heightens the drama. Using dramatic irony to involve the audience, the characters come alive in all their flawed glory. Oedipus becomes to the audience a man not unlike themselves, a man who is great but not perfect, who is a good father, husband, and son, and yet who unwillingly destroys his parents, wife and all around him. Oedipus is human, regardless of his pride, his intelligence, or his stubbornness, and we recognize this in his agonizing reaction to his wrongs. The wrongs

and eventual tragic undoing that not only his fate, but also his very personality – even in its potential to be of positive nature, have brought upon him. This play is powerful, because in its use of language and device, it captures its audience. It raises some of the most baffling issues of human existence, namely our confusion as to whether we really possess free will or rather puppets of fate. It shows our own blindness, our own difficulty of knowing what is true of the future or even our present, our surroundings and even ourselves and the difficulty of coming to terms with this truth after we finally do find it. This play is universal – it applies to people in general, regardless of age or time. The answer to the Sphinx's riddle shows this. This play shows no pretense, it shows the difficulties faced by man and the reality of their solutions, rather than portray these solutions as simple. Even in its fantastic nature based on a myth, *Oedipus the King* is yet realistic. Watching this, the audience is certainly moved to both pity and fear, pity for this unfortunate man, and fear that his tragedy could be our own. In each of us lies our own tragic flaw, however we each try to find solace in the hope that our fate is not as unfortunate, that our flaw does not lead us to the intense and tragic fate of this man – Oedipus, the King.