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Sight Vs. Blindness in Oedipus: A Battle of Figurative and Literal Proportions

Sight versus blindness is one of several major themes present in the play Oedipus Rex. Oedipus, Iocasta, and Teiresias are characters in the play who represent sight or blindness or a combination of both. While the most obvious example of sight versus blindness lies in the actual vision of the characters, their inability to “see” the truths around them also fits the theme. The figurative and literal sight or blindness of Oedipus, Iocasta, and Teiresias demonstrates their character strengths and weaknesses throughout the play as the theme is further developed.

At the beginning of the play, Oedipus is both figuratively and literally able to see. He has vision and at the same time, he is able to see, or recognize the answer to the Sphinx’s riddle. Using his sight to his advantage, Oedipus is able to lift the plague from Thebes and become the ruler of the Thebans. In the opening scene, the priest calls Oedipus to, “Look on us, who now stand before the altars—” (15). In the same passage, the priest characterizes Oedipus as “wise above all other men to read/ Life’s riddles” (33-34). By using the words “look” and “read,” the priest is associating Oedipus’ ability to see with his greatness as a ruler. Therefore, Oedipus’ sight, both literal and figurative, demonstrates his competency in life. In Oedipus, sight is a character strength that he uses to his advantage to rule his people.

However, both Oedipus and Iocasta are figuratively blind to the truths around them. Oedipus curses the murderer of Lauius, a man he never met, while never considering the identity of the man he himself killed. He professes to “defend [Lauius’] cause/ As if it were my father’s”

(263-264). The truth that Oedipus fails to see is that he is in fact defending his father's "cause," and that in cursing the murderer, he brings the curse upon himself twofold. At the same time, both Oedipus and Iocasta are blind to the truth of their relationship. In an attempt to convince Oedipus "that the prophetic art/ Touches our human fortunes not at all" (708-709), Iocasta relates the tale of the prophecy made about her son. Even after this story, both Oedipus and Iocasta do not yet see that they are related not only through marriage, but also through blood. Their continued inability to see the nature of their relationship proves that they are both weak and incompetent of admitting the obvious truths around them. The previous strength demonstrated in Oedipus' ability to see, is overpowered by the weakness present in his blinded view of the truths around him. Therefore, figurative blindness is a weakness in these characters because they purposely seek to avoid reality.

The presence of the wise, but literally blind Teiresias proves that physical blindness can be a strength. Although Teiresias is wise by definition because he is an oracle, his wisdom is so much more. Oedipus himself characterizes Teiresias by saying that he "know[s], although [he] cannot see" (302). However, Teiresias' attempt to withhold the shameful truth of Oedipus' situation enrages Oedipus and he curses Teiresias, accusing him of being "blind/ In eyes and ear and brains and everything" (370-371). Oedipus further insults Teiresias by asserting that he "can do no harm/ To...any man who has his eyes" (375-376). What Oedipus cannot see is that Teiresias' literal blindness does not impede his strength or wisdom. In Teiresias, blindness is a virtue for he is able to realize that "the truth will come to light, without [his]/ help" (341-342).

This theme of literal blindness as a strength is further developed when Oedipus gouges his eyes out after admitting to himself the horrible truths of his situation. This masochistic act serves as a way for Oedipus to externalize his internal sins. He reasons that he should not have

sight when “sight of nothing could give [him] pleasure” (1334). Oedipus’ strength and determination to make penitence for his sins lies in the fact that it was his own “hand that struck.../ And not another’s” (1331-1332). Additionally, by blinding himself, Oedipus may be trying to emulate the wise Teiresias whose fate could never be equal in suffering to Oedipus’. As a blindman, Oedipus “needs strength, And one to guide him” (1291-1292). He can no longer “Seek...to have [his] way in all things” (1524); he must become humble and accept the “softly but strongly” way of life that Teiresias lives. Therefore, the physically blind Oedipus is strong for he accepts the sins which he previously denied and in the process, transforms his disposition of righteousness into one of humility and interdependence.

The play Oedipus Rex proves that both strength and weakness can be found in sight or in blindness. Whether the sight or blindness is figurative or literal does not matter, the potential for good and bad remains the same. Through the victories and defeats of the characters Oedipus, Teiresias, and Iocasta, it is evident that neither blindness nor sight is better; instead, the acknowledgement of truth is the best choice for it leads to a tranquil soul.