

The Use of Religious Beliefs in Oedipus and The Stranger

Religion often plays an important role in works of literature. The methods through which religious themes are included may be complex, but ultimately, it is the opinion of the author that is expressed. This is the case when concerning Sophocles's Greek play Oedipus and Camus's The Stranger. Both authors use the same methods – the inclusions of their protagonists' rejection of a higher power and their anger in the presence of religious figures – to present opposite opinions on the value of religion in their societies. In a cultural setting where there are rising numbers of people ignoring the power of the gods, Sophocles encourages people to succumb to their will. On the other hand, Camus, in an atmosphere of Catholicism, brings up the possibility of social oppression through religion.

In Oedipus, Oedipus rejects the power of the gods, and believes that he can overcome their will. When he travels to Delphi to hear the truth of his fate, Apollo shows him that he is doomed to murder his father and sleep with his mother. Hearing this, “[he] [flees] Corinth, measuring [his] progress by the stars, searching for a place where [he] would never see those words, those dreadful predictions come true” (p.59). The fact that he believes that he can change his fate, immediately after having it being shown to him by Apollo, shows that he has more faith in his own power than the power of the gods. It is thus apparent that Oedipus rejects the power of the gods over the outcome of his life. The reader later realizes that it is his defiance of the gods that leads to his ultimate removal from society. When Oedipus finally realizes that the will of the gods has prevailed and that his attempts to thwart their will have failed, he is exiled from Thebes and other characters are shown to distance themselves from him. The chorus leader “wish[es] [he] had never seen [him]” (p.79), and Kreon states that “[he] has no power anymore” (94). Oedipus himself realizes that due to his dreaded misconception that he was powerful enough to defy his fate, he is “more hated by the gods than any other man, ever” (p.85). The power of the gods triumphs and he is punished for his false belief. Sophocles is thus attempting to uphold the value of the gods – he argues that no one, not even the mighty Oedipus, can overcome their will. Ultimately, everyone must succumb to their authority, and those who do not are punished accordingly.

Camus also includes his protagonist's rejection of a higher power. Like Oedipus, Meursault displays a lack of belief in God. He also is found to dismiss the credibility of religion. Upon being asked by the examining magistrate whether or not he believes in God, “[he] [says] no” (p.69). Although he believes that to ask himself whether or not he is sure that he does not believe in god “seems unimportant” (p.116), he still does not hide his atheistic beliefs. When the chaplain comes to speak to him about God, he tries to explain to him “that [he] [has] only a little time left and [he] [does not] want to waste it on God” (p.120). It is therefore obvious that both Oedipus and Meursault exhibit a lack of religious belief. Furthermore, for this approach to God, Meursault, very much like Oedipus, is forced out of society. After the magistrate's first meeting with Meursault, where he learns of Meursault's atheism, he “never really [pays] much attention to [him]” (p.70). He “seem[s] to [lose] interest in [him]” (p.70), and also seems to have reached “some sort of decision about [his] case” (p.70). This lack of interest in his case indicates that he does not feel his innocence is even worth fighting for. His reference to Meursault as “Monsieur Antichrist” (p.71) is a further sign of his apprehension towards him. After the chaplain meets with Meursault, he also believes that “[his] heart is blind” (p.120). Although the methods that Sophocles and Camus use are alike, the reasons for which they use them are quite opposite. While Sophocles upholds the value of religion, Camus denounces it. Religion has very little to do with Meursault's murder case, yet the magistrate and the

chaplain focus on it more than the case. The fact that Meursault is atheist should be irrelevant, but the religious society surrounding him grasps it and uses it as one of the reasons to sentence him to death. Unless one conforms to society's beliefs, one is labeled as an outsider. Camus therefore portrays the unforgiving oppression that society inflicts through religion, and thus he wishes readers to see its value denounced.

However, this is not the only method that Sophocles and Camus both use to reach different goals. They also include their protagonists' anger in the presence of religious figures in order to fulfill their respective purposes. In *Oedipus*, for example, Oedipus is angered by and distances himself from Teiresias. The "godlike prophet" (p.37) is truthful, but due to Oedipus's stubborn belief that he is above the fate given to him, he dismisses Teiresias as a "stubborn old fool" (p.38). He is angered to the extent that he accuses Teiresias of being "involved in the murder of Laios" (p.39). He mocks him for his blindness, saying that he is "blind in [his] mind" (p.40). The holy prophet tells Oedipus that "the curse of [his] mother, the curse of [his] father, will whip him" (p.42), yet Oedipus refuses to listen to him and is ignorant. Again the arrogance of Oedipus is quite effectively portrayed. There is an utter lack of respect shown to Teiresias, and this drastically lowers Oedipus's image in the minds of the readers. Sophocles portrays Teiresias as an old, frail, and wise man, and Oedipus's discourteous verbal abuse assists the reader to believe that Oedipus is the oppressor, and not society's belief in a higher power. The reader is sympathetic towards Teiresias, and since he is a religious figure, has a sense that religion is being oppressed by those who are arrogant enough. Again, the value of religion is upheld.

Like Sophocles, Camus includes his protagonist's anger in the presence of religious figures in order to portray his opinion on the value of religion in his society. There is a visible parallel between the characters of Oedipus and Meursault – they both openly express their discontent when confronted by religious figures. For instance, when the magistrate lectures Meursault about God, he seems to "want to get rid of" (p.69) him and he is "not really listening to" (p.69) him. He shows that he does not care what the magistrate is saying. However, when they do not talk about God, their conversations are described to be "much more cordial" (p.70). This indicates a level of discomfort when God is mentioned. Furthermore, Meursault refuses to see the chaplain because "[he] [does not] believe in God" (p.116). The last time he meets the chaplain, his insistence to talk about God "begin[s] to annoy [him]" (p.118) and causes his presence, to Meursault, to be "grating and oppressive" (p.119). The culmination of the conversation, of course, is a verbal explosion by Meursault. Meursault's discontent with religious figures throughout the text is thus visible. Sophocles and Camus have therefore used the same literary technique – however, they use it for vastly different reasons. Sophocles again upholds the value of religion, and Camus again denounces it. While Sophocles portrays Teiresias as a wise old man, Camus portrays the magistrate as a wildly melodramatic man. This trait is presented through his sudden brandishing of the cross, an action that, to the reader, seems to be quite startling. It is again displayed through the unfounded accusations that he makes, such as claiming that Meursault believes "[his] life [is] meaningless" (p.69). He is thus portrayed as the opposite of a wise old man – he is a man that will do anything in order to force his views onto another person. The chaplain also seems to be unable to accept that Meursault does not harbor the same religious beliefs as him. He "refuse[s] to believe [him]" (p.119) when he learns that Meursault's beliefs are different to his own. Therefore, where Oedipus's arrogance can be translated into his oppression of society's religious beliefs, the magistrate and chaplain's arrogance can be translated

into their oppression of an individual that does not conform to society's religious beliefs.

Thus, the two authors both use the same methods – the inclusions of their protagonists' rejection of society's religious beliefs and their anger in the presence of religious figures – in order to effectively present their individual opinions of the value of religion in their societies. Sophocles, in a society where people are turning away from the power of the gods, upholds the value of religion. Camus, in a society of imposing Catholicism, denounces its value. Religion therefore plays an important role in Oedipus and The Stranger – the authors' opposite opinions have undoubtedly made it possible for new opinions to be derived.

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