

*The play Oedipus Rex may be viewed as a classic Greek tragic drama. Discuss*

The play "Oedipus Rex" is often viewed as an example of a classic Greek tragic drama because it contains both tragic and dramatic elements. The main character, the protagonist; Oedipus, due to his hubris, makes errors in judgement which lead to his eventual downfall. This process contains many instances of dramatic irony, which build up tension in the audience and leads to the catharsis, the final realisation by the audience.

Greek tragedies were played at religious festivals, thus the audience knew the basic storyline, and so to keep the audience involved and entertained, dramatic irony had to be used. The words spoken take on double meanings only apparent to the audience, and thus keep their attention until the tragic end. This is clearly evident in Oedipus Rex as some of the first words he speaks is "the world knows my fame, I am Oedipus". Of course, the world is well aware of his fame, but as someone who was prophecised to kill his father and murder his mother, whereas Oedipus thinks he is famous for having rid Thebes of the Sphinx. Not only is this an instance of dramatic irony, it also shows Oedipus' nature and personality as an arrogant and confident ruler. Another typical aspect of Greek tragic drama reflected in the first scene is that none of the characters are aware of the fact that Oedipus is the cause of the corruption in Thebes and Creon's words "Drive the corruption from this land...don't nurse it in your soil – root it out" foreshadows what will eventually happen, which add to the dramatic irony.

Throughout the play, various scenes and speeches build up and reflect Oedipus' character, which causes many instances of hamartia, leading to his tragic downfall. He is shown as arrogant, confident and headstrong; unwilling to stop even when he knows it may lead to dire consequences. After he is told that to rid Thebes of contamination, he must find the killer of Laius, Oedipus first curses the killer, "let the man drag out his life in agony", then himself, "Should he be an intimate of our house". This shows his willingness to act swiftly in order to save Thebes; an important quality in a leader, but also one of his downfalls as he acts too quickly. These two lines are also ironic as the audience knows the real story. Oedipus attempts to cajole; "We beg you on our knees", and then threaten; "Mock me for that, go on and you'll reveal my greatness," the blind prophet Tiresias to tell him just who is responsible for the plague in Thebes, and Tiresias leaves him with a clue. He says, "This day will bring your birth and destruction." It foreshadows the events about to occur and is a hint to Oedipus; however, Oedipus misses his point. Thus this is one of many instances of error in his judgement. Another is the instance when Jocasta realises a possibility of the truth and begs Oedipus not to pursue the matter further; "Oh no, listen to me, I beg you, don't do this", but he ignores her and this leads to the truth being told to Oedipus and eventually leading to his downfall. The audience at this stage realises that Oedipus eventually does find out the truth, but still clings on to a faint hope that he does not. However,

the climax of the play is when Oedipus threatens the shepherd with death so that he may be told the truth. This not only shows Oedipus' character as determined and willful because he pursues the matter so far, but is also the peripeteia of the play, the point where a complete reversal of the situation occurs. This is when Oedipus says, "I stand revealed at last, cursed in birth...marriage...the lives I cut down..." At this, the audience is certain of the outcomes of the play and is somewhat sated if not content with the results as Oedipus does eventually learn the truth. This leads to the audience reflecting upon the process of the play and the eventual catharsis when any tension or doubts they may have had are resolved.

Oedipus' downfall is due to his overbearing personality. He is so confident in himself that he believes he can challenge the Gods, fate and defy the prophets. Oedipus is regarded as the hero that saved Thebes, a confident ruler of the city who tried to save himself by challenging fate, but the riddle he answered brought salvation only to the city of Thebes and not to Oedipus himself. He believed that he didn't kill his father because he did not know the whole story. He saved Thebes, but was then condemned for it. Oedipus is portrayed as the victim to a certain extent; however, he is still in some ways responsible. Thus, the audience sympathises with Oedipus because of the instances of paradox exhibited in the play.

A further dramatic element of the play is the presence of symbolism. Oedipus' name literally means "sore foot" which foreshadows his earlier predicament. Oedipus eventually blinds himself, this is symbolic of the fact although throughout the play, he could see, he was "blind" to the truth, and is juxtaposed with the blind prophet Tiresias, who, although blind, could "see" the truth. This adds to the many instances of dramatic irony already present in the play, his self punishment reflects his lack of insight and is linked to his headstrong nature. Mount Cithaeron is used to symbolise Oedipus' life. It was where his troubles began when he was left there as a child, and presumably, where it will end as he says, "let me live on the mountains, on Cithaeron." He was cast away on the mountains as a child, and will be cast away again as an older man.

Through the personality flaws of the main character, a tragedy is derived. Oedipus displays many errors of judgment, and an overbearing hubris which makes this play the tragedy it is. Sophocles uses dramatic irony and symbolism to emphasise the extent of the tragedy, that and the presence of the peripeteia and catharsis leads to the play Oedipus Rex being regarded as a classic Greek tragic drama.