

What aspects of King Oedipus might contribute to the effect of inspiring pity and fear in the audience? Refer in your answer to plot, theme and characterization and any other elements of drama.

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World Literature 1

Line 4

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In *Oedipus Rex*¹, Sophocles uses a number of techniques in order to incite both fear and pity in his audience. Primarily Sophocles employs the technique of double entendre, filling the actor's lines and the play's happenings with deeper meaning in order to employ a sophisticated method of encouraging his audience to read into the events of *Oedipus Rex* and become more involved with the proceedings. This technique manifests itself through use of dramatic irony, dramatic foreshadowing and symbolism.

Sophocles utilizes the audience prior knowledge of the play in order to employ the literary technique of dramatic irony, used to create a sense of deeper meaning and advance *Oedipus Rex*'s dramatic tension. Sophocles was the first of the Attic Tragedians² to utilize this literary device, his use of this technique is exemplified in the play's beginning; when accused by the blind prophet Tiresias of being the murderer of Laius and the reason for the pestilence overrunning the city, Oedipus vehemently denies the accusation, choosing to make a mockery of the prophet, deriding him for his blindness, "*It has- but not for you; no not for you/Shameless and brainless, sightless and senseless sot!*"³ This serves as a subtle piece of both dramatic foreshadowing and dramatic irony, it is ironic inasmuch as Oedipus is deriding Tiresias for his lack of sight, whilst in reality Oedipus is guilty of being blind to the truth. Moreover, Oedipus resolved to prove a saving force for Thebes, announces that, "*I mean to fight for him now, as I would fight/ For my own father*"⁴ implying that Oedipus is committed to seeking out and punishing the killer of Laius with the utmost severity, even as if he were his own father, however this statement is inherently ironic because it is Oedipus himself, who is both the killer and Laius' son. Such extensive use of dramatic irony created a deeper meaning in all of Oedipus' lines, prompting the audience to read into what he says, resultantly inciting pity, for the blatant contradiction which is essential to dramatic irony, serves to illustrate how unaware Oedipus is of the terrible inescapable fate which awaits him.

Sophocles uses the technique of dramatic foreshadowing throughout *Oedipus Rex* in order to create an atmosphere of fear in his audience. The first instance of this, comes again in the plays first scene and involves the blind prophet Tiresias and his argument with Oedipus over his prophecy and accusation over the murder of Laius, "... *He that came seeing, blind he shall go... When you can prove me wrong; then call me blind!*"⁵ The passage contains excessive reference to being blind, which serves as a piece of dramatic foreshadowing towards the plays end, where disgusted at his fate, Oedipus rips out his eyes on stage. Furthermore Sophocles uses dramatic foreshadowing to foretell events of other parts of the Oedipus trilogy, most notably towards the end of *Oedipus Rex*

¹ Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, trans. by E.F Watling, Penguin Publishing, Ringwood Victoria, 1947

² According Charles Segal the Attic Tragedians were "Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides"

³ Sophocles, *op. cit.*, p. 36

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38

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where a despondent Oedipus is giving thanks for Creon, “*Heaven bless you, Creon, for this and make your way/ Smoother than mine has been.*”⁶ Oedipus’ reference to making sure Creon has a smoother way than his proves as foreshadowing to the trilogy’s last play; *Antigone* where Creon, now king of Thebes, finds himself making many of the same mistakes as Oedipus. Through referring to the play’s latter stages through use of dramatic foreshadowing, Sophocles gives his audience clues, and creates a mood of anticipation and fear as the inevitable is acted out. Throughout *Oedipus Rex* Sophocles weaves in references to Oedipus’ denouement which serves to advance dramatic tension and fear.

Sophocles makes use of symbolism to further his audience’s understanding and to ultimately create a higher level of profundity in the actions of *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus’ name literally is translated to mean “swollen foot”⁷, which in itself is a symbol used by Sophocles throughout *Oedipus Rex*. The swollen ankles which have proved an affliction for Oedipus since birth, were given to him by his birth father, Laius, in order to kill him from exposure, and prevent him from carrying out Apollo’s prophecy. Oedipus’ ankles symbolize the way in which fate has set him apart from the rest, and how since his first day on earth he has been the victim of fate, doomed to perpetrate one of the most horrible crimes imaginable. Moreover, the symbol of the three-way crossroads in *Oedipus Rex* serve as symbolic to the events of the rest of the play. Crossroads are usually symbolic of a major decision or a careful considered change in fate which a character has power over, however in *Oedipus Rex* they are representative of the power which fate has had over the life of Oedipus, at the crossroads Oedipus began to execute the horrifying prophecy, with little choice of his own in the matter.⁸ Sophocles’ use of symbolism in *Oedipus Rex* creates a deeper understanding with his audience that since his first day on the earth Oedipus’ life has been dictated by the whims of fate, thus creating a feeling of pity with his audience, towards the damned Oedipus.

Sophocles’ tale of the archetypal tragic character is aided by his extensive use of literary techniques. Through taking full advantage of his audience’s prior knowledge of the tale, Sophocles is able to use dramatic irony, dramatic foreshadowing and symbolism, to add new levels of complexity to the downfall of Oedipus, thus inspiring greater pity and fear in his audience.

⁶ Sophocles, *op. cit.*, p.66

⁷ C. Segal, *Sophocles’ Tragic World; Divinity, Nature, Society*, Harvard University Press, 1998

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 147

