

Classical Civilization (Tragedy) Context Question.

- (a) Who is Tiresias? What events have led up to him being summoned and what has done to anger Oedipus?
- (b) This passage contains references to sight and blindness. Analyse in detail how Sophocles uses these themes in the passage. What dramatic effect do these references have?
- (c) Describe how Oedipus is portrayed in this passage. Compare this portrayal with his portrayal in the rest of the play. In your answer, you should consider his actions and the way he talk to other characters.

ANSWERS

(a) Tiresias is an important character in the play. This is because he is physically blind but is still mentally sighted. “Blind as you are, you can feel all the more what sickness haunts our city” He is a highly respectable prophet in the play. “ Master of the mysteries of our life” He serves as a means of communication between the gods and the people of Thebes, as he interprets the omens sent to people by the gods.

(ii) Oedipus, as a dedicated leader, has decided to root out the cause of the plague, which has been affecting the people of Thebes. This has led him to send Creon, his In-law and unknown uncle to Delphi to find out the cause in order to find the solutions to their problems. On getting there, he is told, that the miasma is due to the presence of the murderer of Laius, Oedipus’ predecessor and father, in their city and that the only way to stop the plague is to banish this murderer. Oedipus then wants to get to the root of this issue, as it is the only way to stop the plague. He decides to seek assistance from the gods by praying for guidance. He gives comforting words to his people, as a responsible and committed leader and then sends for Tiresias.

On Tiresias’ arrival, he questions him about the presence of this murderer. Tiresias approach is hesitant, as he clearly knows that the person responsible for the city’s misfortune is the King Oedipus himself. Oedipus’ eager nature is made evident when he forces out the truth from Tiresias. Oedipus portrays a more negative attitude when he concludes that Tiresias is responsible for the death of Laius in conspiracy with Creon. These then outbursts in an argument between Tiresias and Oedipus, which eventually brings us to this point of the play.

(b) The theme of sight and blindness in this passage basically emphasizes the fact that Oedipus is physically able to see, but is mentally blind, while Tiresias, who is physically blind is able to see the true situation of things. This is made evident by the regular references in this passage. For instance, “You can’t hurt me or anyone who *sees* the light”.

In the passage, Sophocles uses the theme of sight and blindness through irony. He uses words to express something different from and often opposite to their meaning. This is built through the character of both Oedipus and Tiresias. For instance, Oedipus refers to Tiresias as “*eyes* blind as a stone”. This portrays the theme

of sight as blindness as Oedipus is the character who is actually mentally blind. On the other hand, Tiresias says when addressing Oedipus that “you cannot *see* the how far you have gone in guilt” as if he himself physically sighted. This might bring about comic effect from the present tragic situation in which the play is set.

The theme of sight and blindness in the passage also portrays Sophocles skilful ability to write plays. This is made evident by his impressive way of interweaving this theme in simple sentences without losing sight of ideas, which he is trying to pass across to the audience. “Blind, lost in the night, endless night that nursed you”. By this, not only is he saying that Tiresias is blind, but also that it is the cause of lack of correct knowledge.

The use of the theme of sight and blindness in the passage helps the audience build our perspectives on the characters involved- Tiresias and Oedipus, as they are able to develop. When Tiresias illustrates that Oedipus is mentally blind by telling him that he is “the murderer you hunt”, we are able to notice Oedipus’ aggressive nature when he starts to insult Tiresias simply because he reveals the Omens of Apollo as seen. “It does but not for you, old man. You’ve lost your power, stone-blind, stone-deaf – senses, eyes blind as stone!” and on the other hand, we see Tiresias’ self control as he is able to withhold his anger after he is being insulted. “I pity you, flinging at me the very insults each man here will fling at you so soon”

These references to sight and blindness thereby contribute to the dramatic effect of the play, as emphasize the elements of tragedy that were known to be loved by the Greeks such as Peripeteia because Oedipus’ lack of mental sight is what leads to his reversed fortune from as well respected King to the person accountable for the downfall of his Kingdom (miasma). Also the use of irony will also create a dramatic and a sort of sympathy, as the audience are already aware of the future of Oedipus.

(c) The portrayal of Oedipus in this particular passage contrasts mostly to the character of Oedipus in other aspects of the play.

The character of Oedipus is portrayed through his conclusive behaviour and his uncontrollable temper. Oedipus is obviously very angry when Tiresias reveals to him that he is the cause of the pollution in his Kingdom. His

