

Unveiling The Layers of Dramatic Irony in Sophocles Oedipus, The King

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Abstract

The play *Oedipus, the king* by Sophocles is a masterpiece of Greek tragedy that employs dramatic irony to create tension, suspense, and an overwhelming sense of inevitability. This paper aims to explore the use of dramatic irony in *Oedipus*, analyzing its effects on the audience and the characters. Throughout the play, the audience is aware of Oedipus's tragic flaw, while the characters including Oedipus himself remain ignorant of the truth. The purpose of this paper is to examine the significant theme of fate versus free will. This is an attempt to study the use of dramatic irony in this play as it serves to highlight the human condition of being powerless to change one's fate.

Keywords: Dramatic Irony, Tragedy, Tragic Flaw.

Introduction: Tragedy

Tragedy is a genre of drama based on human suffering and mainly the terrible or sorrowful events that befall the protagonist. Tragedy as an element of the human experience has been subject to many of the great works of literature. For some, tragedy embodies the highest form of humanity. It is through suffering that we can reveal ourselves completely. Others see tragedy as an element of morality where we are to learn well the lesson of those who tempt the Gods. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle outlined a theory of tragedy as archetypal drama in his classic work *The Poetics*. Aristotle articulates that; Tragedy is an imitation(mimesis) of an action that is serious, complex, complete, and of a certain magnitude. Aristotle defines a tragedy must have six important elements – Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Dialogue, Spectacle, and Melody. The purpose of tragedy as Aristotle defines is to bring about a 'catharses of the spectators- to arose the sensation of pity and fear.' To purge them of these emotions so that the audience has the feeling of being uplifted, with a heightened understanding of the ways of God and man. This catharsis is brought about by witnessing some disastrous and moving changes in the fortunes of the play's protagonist. Aristotle recognizes that tragedy is an imitation, not of men but of actions, happiness, and misery.

Aristotle considered the play *Oedipus* by Sophocles as the standard model by which all other tragedies are measured. Aristotle's view is that it is the degree of complexity of the tragedy, which increases the suffering the heroic character undergoes. To achieve true tragic circumstances, a clear reversal of fortune is required to occur to the main character. This reversal of fortune, above and beyond negative events will then generate the feeling of pity and fear in the hearts of the audience. He states that the change of fortunes should be not from bad to good but reversely from good to bad. It should come not of the vice but of some great error or frailty in the protagonist. For Aristotle, a tragic hero is a person of high status who falls from grace is what makes the character tragic. Oedipus is born into royalty but fate intervenes and a horrific chain of events sets the downfall of him.

Hamartia: The unfortunate fate of Tragic Flaw

In Aristotle's analysis of tragedy, the hero of the tragic drama should be both highly renowned and prosperous but must also be in a position of tragic flow. This flaw presents itself in the form of either one who becomes inherently immoral or in the consequence of committing a tragic deed that would ultimately be the individual's downfall. An individual's strengths can eventually become their greatest weakness. A tragic flaw is a trait viewed as being favorable to a character at first but leading to their downfall. The character of Oedipus exemplifies these elements of strong personality embodied in tragic flow. It is his opinion that the fate of the tragic character must be reconciled with the audience. The suffering has some specific cause and purpose to resolve direct terms a catharsis. Without this resolution, the suffering would be for nothing and the tragedy has less meaning. Oedipus was not exempt from his flaws. Oedipus's possessed excessive amount of pride and desire for knowing the truth were advantageous to him in the beginning, yet were the very things that contributed to his tragic fall. Oedipus's pride which was once seen as favorable to him and destroyed him in the end.

Dramatic Irony: Fate versus Free Will

Dramatic Irony is a literary device where the audience or the readers are aware of the development of the plot that the characters are unaware of. Dramatic irony is most often associated with the theaters but examples of it can be found in literary and performing art. It is the structure of work rather than its use of words. The use of dramatic irony in the play creates tension and suspense. In Sophocles' *Oedipus, the king*, dramatic irony plays the role of a key element. The audience knows that Oedipus's acts are tragic mistakes long before he recognizes his errors. The audience is left waiting for Oedipus to discover the truth of his past. This is particularly evident in Oedipus's interaction with Tiresias, the blind prophet, who knows the truth about Oedipus's fate. Oedipus's arrogance and refusal to believe Tiresia's warnings despite the audience's knowledge of truth creates a sense of dramatic tension. Furthermore, the use of dramatic irony in Oedipus highlights the theme of fate versus free will. The conflict between fate versus free will is central to the play's plot and character development. Oedipus believes that he has free will and can choose his destiny, while the prophecy of his fate suggests that his choices are predetermined and he has no control over his proximate outcome.

As the play unfolds, Oedipus attempts to avoid his prophesized fate, his actions ultimately lead him to fulfill the prophecy. The audience's knowledge of Oedipus's fate serves to emphasize the power of destiny and the tragic consequences of attempting to deny it.

Western writers whose works are traditionally cited for this adoption of dramatic irony include William Shakespeare. William Shakespeare's *Othello* stands as one of the classic tragedies, where Iago has manipulated Othello. Othello has put all his faith in Iago considering him to be an honest person. However, Iago has been conspiring against Othello beyond his knowledge. But the audience and readers are aware of this conspiracy of Iago, who has been deceiving Othello, unfortunately, he does not know. Another significant tragedy of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In the play *Macbeth*, Macbeth is a brave and honorable general who is determined by ambition and desire for power. Macbeth pretends to be loyal to Duncan even while when he was planning his murder. Macbeth starts as a good man but his ambitions drive him to commit murder. His actions lead to his downfall and ultimately death. Apart from Shakespeare, this literary device has been impactfully used by other writers such as Voltaire, Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Thomas Hardy, Jane Austen, Henry James, and many others.

Oedipus, The king

Oedipus Rex, known by its Greek title *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Oedipus, the king* is an Athenian tragedy by Sophocles. This play was performed in Greek theatre around 429 BC. Sophocles was born a hundred years before Aristotle and perhaps was not aware that he wrote a perfect representation of the tragic genre. The dramatic irony was a tool for Sophocles to advance the notion of the tragic one step beyond the simple fate of the protagonist. The entire play is inundated with ironic connotations to which only the audience is privy. The play is centered around Oedipus, a tragic hero who unknowingly fulfills a prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. The main dramatic irony in *Oedipus* is the contrast between the hero Oedipus's limited understanding of his situation during the unfolding actions and how the audience is simultaneously aware of both perceptions. As the audience understands the full consequences of Oedipus's fate it also realizes his innocence will turn into horror as events reveal themselves. This play is the most powerful in its use of dramatic irony because it serves to emphasize the limitation of human understanding and the painful costs this lack of understanding forces upon the hero. A combination of human frailty in the face of fate shows the classic dramatic elements that allow for the tragic episode.

Sophocles chooses to open this play after Oedipus has been the king of Thebes, who is determined to find the cause of a deadly plague that is ravaging his kingdom. He sends his brother-in-law, Creon to consult the oracle at Delphi, who tells him that the plague is the result of a curse that was placed on the kingdom because the previous king's murderer has not been brought to justice. At this point, Oedipus has unknowingly committed the terrible deeds which he strives throughout the play to circumferent. The conscious act of committing these deeds makes Oedipus both a heroic and a condemned figure. The audience's first impression of him is that he embodies all of the attributes of a great leader and a perfect citizen. In the very first scene, he shows his commitment to his people by suffering alongside them and vowing to avenge the death of Laius. Unbeknownst to him but well known to the audience, the fateful decision to investigate the death of Laius will send him close to his destiny.

Oedipus vows to his people "Then once more I must bring what is dark to light. It is most fitting that Apollo shows as you do, this compunction for the dead. You shall see how I stand by you, as I should, to avenge the city and the city's god. And not as though it were for some distinct friend but for my own sake to be rid of evil." His words strike an emotional chord with the audience. They are instantly aware that he is celebrated by his subjects for his empathetic ear and keep a sense of justice. His unwavering motivation to reverse the curse of the plague allows the audience to get a sense of his strong character. The audience perceives these examples and then must remember all the circumvention that happened to bring Oedipus to this point. His royal bloodline and leadership abilities make him better than the average man but the audience knows these traits will not be able to save him.

Dramatic irony works most effectively in this play because the viewing audience is acquainted with the premise of the story, which involves many of the commonly held religious beliefs and historical traditions. The characters try to change imminent fate at every turn but at each futile attempt, they are thwarted by the god's predetermination of Oedipus's life. Attempts to prevent destiny make it appear to the audience that, every character makes poor decisions. Even so, it is in the simple act of choosing that the structure of the play is formed.

The first fateful choice accrues when it is prophesied that after Oedipus is born, he will kill his father and marry his mother. The prophecy was given to Laius, the former king of Thebes, who was warned by an oracle that his son will kill him. Jocasta's opinion on the oracle was that "an oracle was reported to Laius once. That his doom would be death at the hands of his son, his son born of his flesh and mine." To prevent the prophecy from coming true, Laius ordered his infant son to be abandoned on a mountain to die. His fate is sealed when his life has just barely begun. Receiving this news his biological parents decided to discard him, as still an innocent child, to rid themselves of the curse. His mother Jocasta is assured of his death and thus celebrates escaping her tragic fate. By not killing the child herself. However, she does not realize that he is still alive. This first failed attempt to change fate adds to the discrepancy between what the characters do not understand and what the audience already knows. However, Oedipus was found and raised by a childless couple king and queen of Corinth and he grew up believing that they are his biological parents.

The second attempt to change fate occurs years later when Oedipus has reached adulthood in Corinth. Oedipus hears elements of the same prophecy regarding the curse. Oedipus declared I grew up chief among the men of Corinth until a strange thing happened not worth my passion it may be but strange. At a feast, a drunken man maundering in his cups cries out that I am not my father's son!... I went to the shrine at Delphi. The god dismissed my question without reply, the spoke of other things some were clear, full of wretchedness, dreadful, unbearable: as that I should lie with my mother, breed children from whom all men would turn their eyes, and that I should be my father's murderer."

This is enough to motivate him to leave both his parents and exile himself from Corinth. The audience knows that this attempt is pointless. Regardless of the character's actions, there is no way to affect the future that the gods have put forth for them. Oedipus's departure from his adoptive parents is to spare them the consequences of his curse. This unintentionally makes him a pawn with

which the gods play. He ironically believes he is doing what is best for himself and his family. When in reality he is walking right into a trap.

The third intersection of fate and prophesy occurs when Oedipus meets his biological father on the road while in exile from Corinth. “Three highways were coming together at a palace I passed, and their herald came towards me, and a chariot drawn by horses, with a man such as you describe seated in it. The groom leading the horses forced me off the road at his lord’s command, but as this charioteer lurched over towards me, I struck him in my rage. The old man saw me and brought his double goad down upon my head as I came abreast. He was paid back and more swingingly my club in his right hand I knocked him out of his car and he rolled on the ground. I killed him”. On his travels, he unknowingly killed his father. Unknowingly acting most likely in self-defense, Oedipus has killed his biological father. Later, he marries his mother Jocasta. He sets himself up to fulfill the second terrible part of the prophecy, making him able to marry his mother, due to her being without a husband. This fateful choice created as a result of defending himself leads to overwhelming consequences the need to survive in the face of danger is transformed with an iconic spin into tragic fate.

The last ironic combination of prophesy and reality occurs when Oedipus reaches Thebes. It is here that Oedipus is challenged to solve the riddle of the Sphinx which has been plaguing Thebes for some time. Sophocles heightens the stakes of this last challenge by drawing upon the powers of intellect and courage to build up his hero even more. Sophocles elects Oedipus's personality traits of high intelligence and courage to embody Aristotle's "tragic flaw" Sophocles illustrates Oedipus's intelligence by his ability to answer the great riddle. His courage is shown in his ability to face the Sphinx knowing the fate of those who had failed the riddle before him. Ironically it is also his indolence and courage that win him the right to marry the queen of Thebes. It is his ignorance of not knowing that she is his birth mother, not his lack of intelligence which commits him to his fate. The same traits that have given him riches and power are the ones that have led him to his demands.

The audience preassembly knows the answer to the classically traditional riddle of the Sphinx: “what is it that walks on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening?”. The answer to this riddle is Man, in infancy, a human crawl on all four, in adulthood man walks upright on two legs, and in old age, he uses a cane or other object as support to walk, which symbolically represents a third leg. Oedipus solves the riddle which had been posed by the Sphinx, a mythical creature with the head of a woman. Wings of a bird and the body of a lion. This Sphinx had been terrorizing the city of Thebes and Oedipus was able to defeat her by correctly answering her riddle. This victory made Oedipus a hero in Thebes. This is another one of Sophocles’ dramatic ironies. Sophocles stretches the audience another layer of meaning to ponder.

Sophocles leaves us with one more classic example of irony. However, excessive pride leads Oedipus to make several critical mistakes. First, he refuses to listen to the warnings of Teiresias, who tells him that he is the murderer he is seeking. Oedipus dismisses his warning as the ravings of a madman, convinced that he is right and Teiresias is wrong. Later Oedipus discovers his own identity: that he is the son of King Laius and queen Jocasta, his mother. He learns that he has unknowingly fulfilled the prophecy of killing his father and marrying his mother. It is a pivotal moment in the play and in Oedipus's tragic downfall. Oedipus exclaims that “Ah God! It was true! All the prophecies! now o light may I look on you for the last time! I Oedipus, Oedipus, damned in his birth, in his marriage damned. Damned in the blood he shed with his own hand!”

Conclusion

Jocasta, upon realizing that she has married her own son and borne him children, hangs herself. Oedipus upon learning the truth blinds himself in horror and shame of what he has done. He blinds himself with his own mother's golden brooches. The play ends with Oedipus being exiled from Thebes and left to wander the world as a blind and broken man, cursed by his actions and the fate that he could not escape. Until the end of his life, Oedipus is condemned to wander the earth as a blind old man who will forever walk with the use of a cane. This is the third foot to which the Sphinx referred inevitably by answering the riddle correctly. Oedipus has become the riddle himself. This situation is perhaps the greatest example of the power of contrasting degrees of awareness. Oedipus is unaware of his fate in which he is destined to marry his mother after defeating Sphinx. The audience, however, long familiar with the ancient myth, is mindful that in solving the riddle Oedipus further condemns himself.

These choices lead to the ultimate climax where Oedipus blinds himself and wonders about the earth as punishment for his actions. The lack of knowledge of his fate combined with the audience's total familiarity with the myth provides the greatest deferential between knowing and not knowing. Dramatic irony, used throughout the play to emphasize the power of fate is ultimately used as the closing statement of man’s frailty in the face of infinite justice. The tension and suspense generated by this knowledge gap help to drive the play’s plot and make it a classic example of great tragedy in ancient Greek drama.

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