



**Chapter 2**

**Oedipus Rex by**

**Sophocles**

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### Oedipus Rex by Sophocles

This chapter is devoted to the detailed study of the *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles variously named as *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus The King* etc. It is an epoch-making tragedy produced by the mastermind expressing the unconfined imagination of Athenian society. It creates a penetrating shock to the established moral thought and discusses a human being's ultimate relationship to the universe. As T. R. Henn states,

“Tragedy more than any other form except epic must deal with ultimates...It can not handle the conflicts of the laws without raising moral issues.” (Henn, p.287)

The structure of *Oedipus Rex* is always considered by critics when discussing tragedy as a genre. Sophocles deals with his characters on a human level and shows how a character reacts under stress. He creates and treats the inevitable mysteries of human life through the ancient myth of Oedipus. Chong-Gossard aptly says:

“The theatre—the ‘seeing place’—as an institution was a means for men to embrace the ‘other’ by viewing or performing it in the public arena. By watching a mythical Oedipus crash from the heights of power to the depths of suffering, and by believing it to be real, we

come away from the experience of drama with a wider knowledge of the possibilities of change in that shared human existence of which we are all a part.”(Chong-Gossard, web)

Since classical times, critics have been always curious to label tragedians as “most religious” or “least religious” etc. The basis of this labelling is found in the character’s moral or immoral behaviour as per the contemporary standards interpreted by the playwright. The playwright’s religious view is judged by the relationship between crime and punishment as reflected through his characters which is in agreement with the audience’s religious beliefs. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides highlighted and interpreted the contemporary religious beliefs in existing theatrical convention, for example, *perjury* (pollution) and *asylum* (purification) are the concepts which were of religious concern to the fifth century Athenian audience. These religious concepts also helped the tragedians to build the image of the tragic heroes as well as to enhance the tragic vision of the audience.

Since most of the Greek tragedies were based on mythical and legendary stories, the dramatists exploited the popular beliefs to achieve literary and dramatic effect. The dramatist tried to fit the religious, political and social concepts and values in the stories of mythical past. This is a noteworthy fact for the modern readers. As Bernard Knox writes,

“The character of Oedipus is the character of  
the Athenian people.” (Knox, p.67)

Sophocles selected the myth of Oedipus who tried to escape the accomplishment of the prophecy of Apollo. Thinking that he was victorious, Oedipus mocked at the oracles and prophecies of gods. But to his great disappointment, he found at the end that he had accomplished the prophecy years ago. The oracles were a sacred religious institution in ancient Greece. They play a prominent part in the story within this play also. Although the Delphic oracle was still very popular in the times of Sophocles, it was by no means held in absolute reverence, for it was known to have given answers unfavourable to Athens and its interests. It is not exactly possible to know from *Oedipus Rex* as to what Sophocles' own attitude to the oracles was, unless it maintained that the attitude of the chorus is necessarily that of Sophocles himself.

The irreverence and impiety of Jocasta and Oedipus towards the sacred institution of the oracle seems to shock the chorus deeply. Although they love and esteem their king and queen, they cannot tolerate the casual attitude of people regarding the oracle of the gods for that would cut the very roots of Greek religion. They view the growing skepticism with alarm and pray to the gods to vindicate their prophecies and oracles if they want that people's faith in them should remain intact. Their words are quite impassioned:

“King of kings, if you deserve your titles

Zeus remember, never forget!  
You and your deathless, everlasting reign.  
They are dying, the old oracles sent to Laius,  
now our masters strike them off the rolls.  
Nowhere Apollo's golden glory now-  
the gods, the gods go down." (991-97)

With this spotlight, Sophocles coloured the whole story in the then current debatable religious issues. The very opening of the drama gives a horrified picture of the widespread devastation due to plague in the country. The group of priests is seen to appeal the king for the rescue from the grave situation. The first choral ode also prays the gods with the same intention by putting forth the picture of the havoc in the country-

“...children dead in the womb  
and life on life goes down  
you can watch them go  
like seabirds winging west...  
generations strewn on the ground  
unburied...the dead spreading death...”  
(198-208)

The Athenians knew the plague well as it recurred in the city for three or four years after the Spartan invasion of Attica. The poet brings forward Oedipus to the spectators as fully contemporary rather than a mythical or legendary figure.

In the plays of Sophocles, especially *Oedipus Rex*, there are references to various gods and goddesses, but the names that recur most often are those of Zeus, Apollo and Dionysus. To all intents and purposes, however, it is Apollo who rules the world of Sophocles' plays and in *Oedipus Rex* many of the names of this god occur. It seems that Sophocles regarded the gods to be all-powerful but not willfully malignant. Although it is very difficult to know the view of Sophocles himself from the plays, in *Oedipus Rex*, at least, the gods are not considered to be arbitrary. They are ruled by Necessity and Fate. Although the punishments that they visit upon erring mortals may be excessive; it is connected with the crime and is never without cause. Except once or twice, Oedipus does not blame the gods for the sufferings which he undergoes. He takes them as deserved retribution for his transgressions, although they were done in ignorance. He does not rebel or complain. In fact, he adds to divine punishment by blinding himself. Moreover, he is very particular that the bidding of the oracle should be carried out, and he should be turned out of the city of Thebes. H.D.F. Kitto says,

“Aeschylus is a profound religious dramatist,  
Euripides a brilliant, uneven representative of  
the new spirit which was so uncomfortable in  
the old forms, and Sophocles was an artist.”

(Kitto, p.117)

Aeschylus' dramas exhibit his greater prominence as a moral teacher rather than a dramatist. The progress of action in his dramas is

obstructed due to his over-emphasis on religious maxims. On the contrary, in Sophocles, though the dramatic interest is valued more, the religious element is not at loss. Sophocles' own attitude to the gods and religion, in so far as we can have an inkling of it in the plays, is that of a devout believer, who believes that due reverence must be paid to gods, and that human beings must not only be prepared to pay the full price of all their sins but also to embrace suffering even when they do not believe that they themselves are at fault.

Sophocles had profound knowledge of human psychology and was keen to depict the human passions and emotions of his characters without losing the religious impact of tragedy.

It is difficult to ascertain Sophocles' views about religion but the chorus in the play can be assumed as his mouthpiece. Unlike Aeschylus, Sophocles treated the myths and legends as amazing make-believe rather than expressions of religious truth. Sophocles treats the mythological stories with great care and elegance. His tone towards the gods and goddesses is always respectful and polite. These divine figures appear as the controllers of the human fate. That is why the oracle of Apollo foretells the fall of Laius and Oedipus, and drives Orestes to take revenge. Easterling P.E. explains,

“Like almost all tragedies before them, Sophocles' men and women believe in gods who are the source of everything in life-- evil as well as good. The universe controlled by

these gods is involved in a constant process of rhythmic change, but they themselves are outside time. 'Only to the gods comes neither old age nor death...' "Zeus is unraged by time." (Easterling & Knox, p.304-05)

It is maintained that Sophocles' purpose was to justify the ways of these gods to men. S. H. Butcher writes in a thoughtful essay published in 1891,

"Undeserved suffering, while it is exhibited in Sophocles under various lights, always appears as a part of the permitted evil which is a condition of a just and harmoniously ordered universe. It is foreseen in the counsels of the gods..." (Butcher, p.124)

Sophocles logically applied the conservative sanctity to the mythical story. With the skillful development of the plot, action of the tragedy naturally moves to the catastrophe. His motive permeates the whole tragedy. According to him, human life is boundless, complicated and enigmatic; human judgement is erring. Over – confidence in one's own judgement develops *hubris* that paves the path of disaster. Life is not unplanned though full of mysteries because the gods do exist and their laws do work. Storey and Allen state:

"A more recent trend has been to regard the universe of Sophocles as profoundly



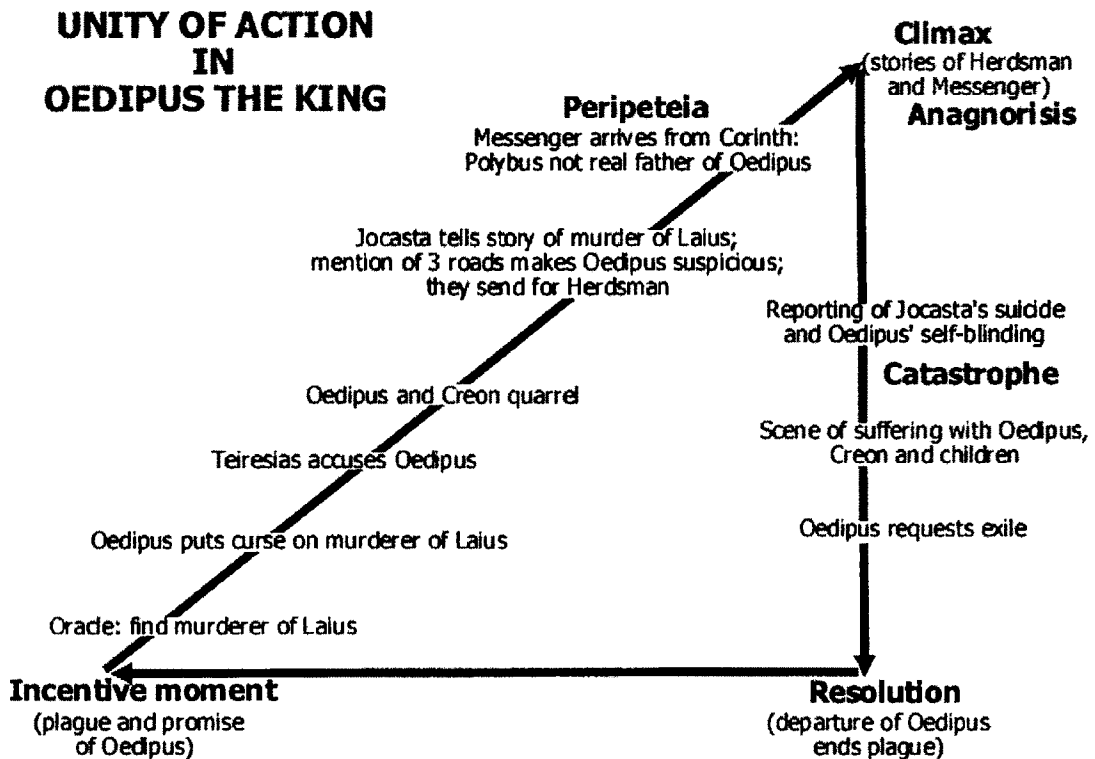
disturbing, without committing oneself either to divine providence or to human excellence.”

(Storey and Allen, p.128-29)

The ancient sources consider Sophocles no less than a light house in the history of tragedy. Aristotle rated Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* as the perfect example of tragic drama and extensively modelled his theory of tragedy on it. The reasons for its supremacy lay in the excellent management of plot and chorus, in the beauty of language, in the irony of situations and in the general nobility of conception. He cited *Oedipus Rex* for no less than eleven times in his *Poetics* which has an everlasting impact on the later critical tradition through ages. The due weightage given to Sophocles by Aristotle makes Aeschylus his primitive and Euripides his decadent in the history of tragic drama. Aristotle was hugely influenced by Sophocles' supreme talent as playwright who lived a century before him. Aristotle found the beginning of his theory of tragedy in Sophocles' works. Certainly, *Oedipus Rex* is a quintessential tragedy and can be best appreciated in the light of the cultural values and ideas of the fifth century Athens. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* offers the clearest example of the ideas of tragedy that Aristotle prescribes.

Aristotle considered plot as the arrangement of incidents in tragedy and *Oedipus Rex* as having the most ideal kind of plot. The German critic Gustav Freytag created a method of understanding the narrative structure in drama called Freytag's Triangle, also known as Freytag's

Pyramid because of its focus on the climax of the tale as the most important part of any story. McManus Barbara F. (web) presented Freytag's diagrammatic representation of the plot of *Oedipus Rex*.



In comparing Sophocles to Aeschylus as a way of charting the progression of Greek drama, it is noteworthy to point out that the characters in Sophocles' plays generally have longer speeches. Also, the motive and plot is not as linear as they are in Aeschylus's plays. The chorus remains the moral compass of society, but here they seem as much in the dark as the lead character and thus offer little insight or foreshadowing of Oedipus's ultimate fate. Aristotle's discussion on plot concludes with the remark:

“The Chorus should also be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action, in the manner not of Euripides but of Sophocles.”

(Poetics, Chapter 18, Cooper, p.38)

The plot of *Oedipus Rex* is incomparable as the story of the play is revealed naturally and gradually rather than being told. The functioning of fate finally leads to reveal the catastrophe. The incidents of the past help to elucidate the riddle of the present but cannot alter the course of the future.

Driver Tom F. says,

“The gods of Sophocles function in the universe as the forces which endow it stability and harmony. So, judgement is the work of fate. The inconsistencies of the story are devised to stress upon the concept of Order disturbed and Order restored.”

(Driver Tom F., p. 247)

It justifies the proverb, “Sins of the father visit the children”. The oracle of Delphi prophesied that a son would be born to Laius who would kill him. Wanting to escape the doom, Laius decided to have the child put to death but wanting to avoid the pollution, ordered that the infant should be abandoned on Mount Cithaeron, with his feet closely pinned together, so that it could not crawl away and would starve to

death. Thus the parents of Oedipus thought that they have uprooted the terror of fate. Later, it was the turn of Oedipus to become involved with the oracle of Delphi. Oedipus approached the oracle in order to know who his parents were, but instead of providing a direct answer to his question, the oracle offered a prediction that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus who had no reason to disbelieve that he was the son of Polybus and Merope, the king and queen of Corinth, decided that the best way to circumvent such fate would be not to return to Corinth. At the end of the play, Oedipus came to know that his deeds only pushed him forward to turn his fate into reality. As suggested by Aristotle, the moves of Oedipus are directly related to *anagnorisis*, as the Messenger and the Herdsman help him to solve the riddle of his life and achieve the knowledge he was short of. The *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* cause Oedipus' *catastrophe*.

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* was based on the famous mythical story of King Oedipus to which the Greek audience was very much familiar. However, the plot of *Oedipus Rex* achieves perfection because it successfully handles the various devices which make a plot interesting. The story line progresses as if the reader is peeling off an onion.

Aristotle, in his analysis of the tragic art, lays down as a rule that the plot is of more importance than the characters. This statement is hardly true, as applied to Sophocles, in whose dramas for the most part, the incidents are subordinate to human passions. Harold Bloom

(p.1) rightly points out that though Sophocles is otherwise recognized as a religious man, he never uses any magical hoax or the literary device such as *dues ex machina* to solve the complication of the plot. Bloom states that we cannot read *Oedipus the King* as we read the *Iliad* of Homer, where the gods matter enormously. Sophocles' action of the plot though very dramatic and catchy, emerges from the characters and acceptable human behavior. But Aristotle was possibly led to take this view by his admiration for the plot of *Oedipus Rex*, which he regarded as a model drama, and in which the plot is undoubtedly the chief source of drama intertwined inextricably with its character.

The characters in *Oedipus* exemplify Aristotle's requirements such as they are true to their type and realistic. The character of Oedipus, too, fulfils the criteria of Aristotle's ideal tragic hero. He is of noble birth and has a *hamartia* with which he meets his catastrophe. Oedipus' character flaw is *hubris* or ego. This is made evident in the opening lines of the Prologue when he states,

"Here I am myself -  
you all know me, the world knows my fame:  
I am Oedipus." (7-9)

Oedipus is seen to be proud, over-confident, stubborn, impulsive and disrespectful in various incidents of the play. Oedipus impulsively curses the murderer of Laius without making any investigation in the

matter. Not only referring to the oracles but also while conversing with  
Tiresias:

"You,

you scum of earth ...

Out with it, once and for all." (380-381, 383)

and

"Enough such filth from him? Insufferable-

what still alive? Get out-

faster, back where you came from – vanish!"

(490-492)

When Oedipus comes to know that Polybus had died due to old age,  
he says,

"So!

Jocasta, why, why look to the prophet's

hearth ...

all those prophecies I feared ...

They are nothing, worthless."

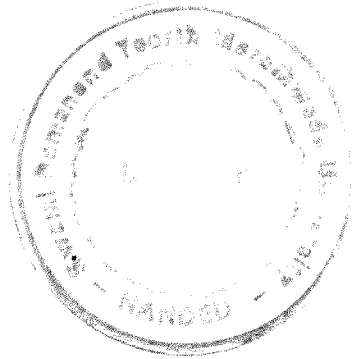
(1054, 1062, 1064)

Oedipus' strong willingness to unveil the mystery of his own birth  
reaches to the level of stubbornness and he finally threatens the  
shepherd:

"You are a dead man if I have to ask again...

I am at the edge of hearing horrors,

yes, but I must hear!" (1281, 1285)



After his recognition (*anagnorisis*) and reversal (*peripetia*), Oedipus exclaims:

"...the hand that struck my eyes was mine...

I did it myself!" (1469, 1471)

Here Oedipus talks about the various events that paved his wreck.

Creon later comments:

"...its better to ask precisely what to do."

(1578)

Oedipus' behaviour in the above-mentioned incidents may be condoned as sheer mistakes when each incident is considered separately. Yet when considered together, a motif comes out which talks about hidden character flaw of Oedipus. His *hamartia* may be noted down through his mistakes, but the root cause of his mistakes is his inherent ego. For Oedipus, *hamartia* certainly refers to a flaw. Aristotle says that a man cannot become a hero until he can see the root of his own downfall. To use Cooper's rendering:

"...There comes, then, the case of the man intermediate between these extremes: a man not superlatively good and just, nor yet one whose misfortune comes about through vice and depravity; but a man who is brought low through some error of judgement or shortcoming, one from the number of highly renowned and prosperous."

(Poetics, Chapter 13, Cooper, p. 39-40)

The thought includes the themes and dialogues of the play. Aristotle's explanation about thought is exhibited in *Oedipus Rex*. The various features of the characters are revealed through dialogue as in the incident when Oedipus charges Creon of hatching a plot of seizing his crown with the help of Tiresias:

"if the two of you had never put heads  
together,  
we would never heard about *my* Liaus."

(639-40)

Pursuit of knowledge, fate vs. free will, sight vs. brightness, light vs. darkness and guilt and punishment are considered as the major themes of *Oedipus Rex*.

The metaphoric patterns of *Oedipus Rex* support the plot. The major patterns of imagery are sickness and pollution, the ship of state, blindness vs. sight, light vs. darkness, illuminate the action. These images work as examples of a kind of foreshadowing for which the play is justly famous.

Melody involves the chorus of the drama. The chorus sings five odes throughout the drama and its melody is one of the attractions of the *Oedipus Rex*.

According to Aristotle, the spectacle is produced by the poet and not by the costume designer or actors; spectacle refers most to the way that the dramatic text is written. Even though a good majority of the



roles in Greek tragedy are for women, no women were allowed to act on stage. Instead men played their roles. With no special effects, no fancy lighting, three actors, supported by a chorus in one play, kept the attention of audience through the costumes they wore, the extravagant masks they put on to denote different characters and the power of the words they spoke. Drama being a product of its age, its spectacle always bears the mark of the social and cultural traditions. The Greek drama was performed in an amphitheatre to an audience of a few thousand Athenians. Because everyone in the audience could not see the facial expression of the actors, it was more of a listening nature.

Greeks used to banish all kind of horrors on the stage such as stabbings, murders, suicides, bloodshed. Even in *Oedipus Rex*, the suicide of Jocasta and blinding of Oedipus take place *off stage*.

*Oedipus Rex* is a very significant play for a discussion of the emotional impact of tragedy. The fate of Oedipus, who always wished for the welfare of his people, inspires the audience and keeps it wondering at the mystery of human life in which a man may suffer even with the best of intentions. It gives a feeling that fate is inexorable and that no one can escape its decrees. This is pointed out by the examples of Laius, Jocasta and Oedipus, all of whom try to evade the predictions of the oracle. For a time, it seems to them that they have succeeded, but in time they are sadly disillusioned. Even kindness and

compassion sometimes produce a very cruel effect as shown by the Theban shepherd to the infant who was given to him to destroy.

There are many incidents in the play which evoke a sense of strong pity right from the opening of the play. The Priest of Zeus gives a vivid description of the sufferings of the poor Thebans. He points them out to Oedipus:

“Thebes is dying. A blight on the fresh crops  
and the rich pastures, cattle sick and die,  
and the women die in labor, children  
stillborn,  
and the plague, the fiery god of fever hurls  
down  
on the city...                      devastating  
the house of Cadmus! And black Death  
luxuriates  
in the raw, wailing miseries of Thebes.”

(31-34, 36-38)

The picture is further filled in and made grimmer by the description of the suffering citizens which is contained in the *epode*, sung by the chorus, in which they say that the sufferings of Thebes are beyond description:

“Here are boys,  
still too weak to fly from the nest,  
and here the old, bowed down with the years,

the holy ones-a priest of Zeus like myself-and  
here  
the picked, unmarried men, the young hope  
of Thebes.” (18-22)

The chorus appeals to the gods to take pity on the suffering of the people and hearts of the readers and spectators are also filled with pity. There is, of course, a sense of great pity for Oedipus who has in vain been searching for his parents all that while who has tried to avoid doing wrong to them by leaving Corinth and who yet finds that he has unconsciously become guilty of the gravest offences against both of his parents. Pity is aroused also by the fate of poor Jocasta who has all her life been caring only for the happiness and prosperity of Laius and Oedipus, and who ultimately finds that she has not only failed in both but has been guilty of marrying her own son. The description of her last moments by the attendant is truly heart-rending. The plight of the children of Oedipus is pitiable especially the helpless daughters whose wretched condition is graphically brought out by Oedipus himself. Last but not the least, is the utmost pity felt at the exile of blind Oedipus.

Along with pity, there is also the great feeling of terror evoked in the play. In fact, there is some element of terror in the feeling of pity. It strikes the audience with terror that the poor Thebans should be suffering so miserably for no fault of theirs. Similarly, the sufferings of Oedipus and Jocasta seem to be largely undeserved. This mystery of

undeserved suffering does inspire a sense of terror in the audience. The unexpected way in which the various oracles come true also inspires terror. The audience shares the terror of Oedipus when he exclaims that some malignant god is pursuing him and turning his own words against him. He is terrified to think that the old blind prophet seems to have been blessed with an inner eye, which clearly showed to him the shape of future events. There is also terror exhibited in Oedipus' step by step progress of the discovery of Laius's murderer. The discovery not only reveals himself as the murderer, but also that the murdered man was his own father and that, consequently, Oedipus has become guilty of the most horrible crimes against both his parents. The complete reversal by which the king who was esteemed by everyone turns into a homeless beggar and outcast whose very sight is polluting, is truly productive of terror. The prophesy of Tiresias that Oedipus, who came to Thebes blessed with eyesight but would go out of it as a helpless blind man, has come true in a most terrible way. Oedipus has been searching for truth-about the murderer of Laius as well as about his identity, but the knowledge brings nothing but dismay and suffering, and he makes an exclamation which arouses great terror in the reader and spectator:

"O marriage,  
you gave me birth, and once you brought me  
into the world  
you brought my sperm rising back, springing  
to light

fathers, brothers, sons-one murderous breed-  
brides, wives, mothers. The blackest things  
a man can do, I have done them all!"

(1538-42)

However, the play does not produce a final impression of gloom. On the other hand, the acceptance of suffering and defeat which Oedipus displays inspires great respect for the indomitable spirit of man. Apart from pity and fear, there is a wide range of emotions witnessed in the play. For example, irritation with Oedipus for his irreverence towards Tiresias, and for his accusations against the loyal Creon; liking for Jocasta for her devotion towards Oedipus; praise for Oedipus for his unyielding chase of truth and so on. Thus, the effect of *Oedipus Rex* is more complex than a production of mere pity and terror, although these are two of the dominant emotions which the tragedy creates.

It is generally supposed that classical Greek drama observed the three unities – the Unity of Action, the Unity of Time and Unity of Place. The observance of the three unities has been insisted upon the high authority of Aristotle but he, nowhere in the *Poetics* insisted upon all the three unities. He was only concerned with the unity of Action and for the remaining two he did not discuss at length.

Because Aristotle was a product of his age, his ideas originated from and were related to the Greek drama of his era. In addition to this fact, the Greek plays themselves were an outcome of the stage conditions of the fourth and fifth century B.C. While examining the

beginning and the authenticity of Aristotle's concepts regarding the three unities, the stage conditions and the characteristics of the production of the Greek drama must be considered. The Greek plays were performed in the open air amphitheatre either in the sunlight or torchlight to an audience of five thousand people with a fixed stage setting. That is why the quick scene changing was not possible as is done in the modern theatre. So Aristotle considered the three unities essential for the exhaustive dramatic experience and especially for the *cathartic* impact of tragedy on the audience. It can safely be concluded that Aristotle's theory of the three unities justified the contemporary Greek stage conditions and performance.

Unity of Action is an organic unity which gives form and meaning to the tragedy. It makes the plot concrete and significant. It does not admit the plurality of action.

About unity of time, he makes a general remark on the basis of the observed facts that

"the writers of tragedy endeavor to represent the action as taking place within a period of twenty-four hours (that is within a period of one apparent revolution of the sun) as far as possible to continue itself to a single revolution of the sun or but slightly to exceed that limit."

(Poetics, Chapter 5, Cooper, p. 15)

It is not a law of Aristotle, he merely states the common practice observed by Greek dramatists like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

But strange is Aristotle's silence about the unity of place. It finds no place in *Poetics*. It appears that the unity of place was invented by critics like Scalinger, Cantilevers; and Sidney imported it into English criticism from Italy.

*Oedipus Rex* followed all the three unities. It has unity of action as there are no sub-plots and everything contributes to the play as a whole. It follows the tragic rise and fall of Oedipus as he attempts to escape the oracle's prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. As the unity of time requires, the story of *Oedipus Rex* portrays the happenings of just one day, though it refers to past events. As far as the unity of place is concerned, *Oedipus Rex* has only one scene outside the palace of Thebes.

Therefore, from the manner in which Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* contains all the six basic elements of *Poetics*: Plot, Character, Melody, Diction, Thought and Spectacle, it can be described as a classic Aristotelian tragedy.

Due to the huge impact of Freud's psychological analysis of *Oedipus Rex*, the modern spectators are inclined to link Oedipus with Oedipus complex. Even Freud himself accepted the fact that Oedipus, the son, never even thought of substituting his father and acquiring his

mother. Oedipus commits both the *sins* towards his parents totally unintentionally, unknowingly and being unaware of their identities. Though Freud asserts that the theme of Oedipus complex perpetually runs throughout the play on a subconscious level and partly contributes to the outstanding fame of the play, Oedipus' behaviour with Jocasta does not reflect even a tinge of being "Oedipal" due to his complete innocence of the fact. Another considerable factor is that the play is not based upon how Oedipus killed his father and married his mother but in the pursuit of his true identity years later. This pursuit of truth of Oedipus' own identity creates various probing aspects of the play. Solving one riddle gives birth to another, for example, in the beginning, an attempt of finding a remedy for the plague; a need arises to investigate the murderer of Laius which in turn paves way for Oedipus' discovery of his own identity. This leads *Oedipus Rex* to be read as the first detective story in Western Literature.

The exploration of the real identity of Oedipus also creates the enquiry of the authenticity of oracles. In the pivotal scene of the play, Jocasta says victoriously that the child who was predicted by the gods to become the killer of his father himself died, and the father was killed by some alien robbers. From this, she concludes that the prophecies of oracles are of no worth and she induces her husband to pay no heed to them. In her words, it is a chance and not the will of gods, which rules human life and she seeks to convert her husband also to



this view which is a direct contradiction of Greek religion and morality:

“Fear?

What has a man to do with fear? It is all  
chance,  
chance rules our lives. Not a man on earth  
can see a day ahead, groping through the  
dark.  
Better to live at random, best we can.”

(1069-72)

She seems to be further confirmed in her view when she learns that Polybus, Oedipus' father, had died a natural death. She then explains that divine prognostications are completely without application. She seems overjoyed, but probably because her husband has been saved from a horrible fear rather than her view of the falsity of oracles has come true:

“You prophesies of the gods, where are you  
now?  
This is the man whom Oedipus feared for  
years,  
He fled him not to kill him-and now he is  
dead.  
quite by chance, a normal, natural death,  
not murdered by his son.” (1036-40)

Oedipus also joins her in her irreverent reference to the oracles. This skepticism on their part would have originated intense argument among the contemporary spectators and philosophers. But Sophocles used these skeptical remarks by Jocasta and Oedipus only to strengthen the audience's religious belief. Thus, Sophocles is successful on both the fronts of showing the newly emerging rationality of the Greek society as well as its deeply rooted religious faith. Sometimes *Oedipus Rex* is marked as a play that awakens the burning issues of the time more than a play related to firm religious beliefs. To judge the validity of this statement, it is essential to discuss what "Greek Enlightenment" in the later fifth century is.

The Greek Enlightenment can be well compared to the European Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth century. The late sixth and the fifth centuries in Greece were noted as a period of fruitful friction in the realms of philosophy, art, literature as well as religion for the conventionally established ideas started getting argued. The tragedy under consideration describes as well as manifests the unrest, confusion and paradox of the enlightenment itself. Sophocles' tragedy becomes a part of the enlightenment though it is judgemental of the then new Sophistic learning. Robert Fagles aptly elaborates:

"The figure of Oedipus represents not only the techniques of the transition from savagery to civilization and from slavery to political achievements of the newly settled society but

also the temper and methods of the fifth-century intellectual revolution. His speeches are full of words, phrases and attitudes that link him with the “enlightenment” of the Sophocles’ own Athens.” (Fagles, p.142)

Oedipus serves as a child of the enlightenment underscoring the Greek inventions in the fields like Mathematics and Medicine. His is a curious and intellectual mind that asks for logical explanations of problems. “One can’t equal many” (934) is a mathematical axiom used by him. The play is rich in Mathematical and Medicinal imagery.

Enlightenment, as the word itself suggests, clarifies, unveils and discovers. To be enlightened also means to make a discovery. Oedipus, too, makes a discovery about his own self. The observations of light and darkness, sight and blindness permeate Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*.

Someone who is suddenly enlightened *sees* the truth either about herself or himself or about the surrounding world of people and things for the first time. Such experiences of enlightenment also signify forward motion and elevation; from blindness to sight, darkness to light and ignorance to knowledge. The play progresses from his expedition of knowing the true identity of his parents and himself and ends in complete ruin. Thus an onward movement of the play indicates a breach with past traditions, opinions, ideas and with the restrictions of Nature. Enlightenment assures release from nature,

from one's origin, tradition, history and fate. The major theme of *Oedipus* is the confusing nature of enlightenment which exposes and opposes in the form of fate and freedom, civilization and savagery.

Ancient Greeks were intensely interested in gaining knowledge. They thought of truth as a central and crucial idea however brutal it was. The theatre was a medium of evaluation of knowledge and truth. Self-recognition was one of the popular themes used by the Greek tragedians and Sophocles was no exception to it. He remodels Oedipus through the discovery of truth in a well-knit plot and marks the major theme of *Oedipus Rex*. This theme of self-realization denotes man's place in the universe. Oedipus finds out the bitter truth about himself as well as the meaning of being human only after making the investigation in his own past. But the cost of this knowledge is very high as he has to renounce his throne, forsake his children and go into self-exile in a blind state. He gains a better insight after losing his physical sight.

Through the horrible realization of his own self, Oedipus' attitude seems to be changed gradually. At the opening of the play, Oedipus stands as an egoistic and valiant king, in the middle, he turns into a gradual negation of a tyrant and at the end, he is a man humiliated by fate.

In the beginning of the play, Oedipus seems to be a self-assured and a brave hero. There are certain qualities that make him distinct. The

most striking of these, of course, is his intelligence and the great faith that he and others put in it. He pompously tells the chorus, which implores the gods, for deliverance from the city plague, "you pray to the gods? Let me grant your prayers" (245). Oedipus is a highly successful king. He is devoted to his subjects, regarding them as his children, and they also esteem and love him. They are full of gratitude to him because he saved them from the ravages of the horrible Sphinx. As the Priest of Zeus says, Oedipus has given such a brilliant proof of his intelligence that it is natural for his subjects to expect that he would be able to find a remedy to each of their problems:

"You freed us from the Sphinx, you came to  
Thebes  
and cut us loose from the bloody tribute we  
had paid  
that harsh, brutal singer. We taught you  
nothing,  
no skill, no extra knowledge, still you  
triumphed." (44-47)

They do not, of course, regard him as equal of gods, but they consider him to be above other men. We see in the prologue of the play that Oedipus is very careful about the interests and welfare of his subjects and takes all steps he can in order to eradicate their troubles. For their sake, he makes a proclamation announcing a dire punishment for the source of the city's pollution and shows his entire sincerity by specifically including himself within the scope of the punishment.

As the play progresses, over- confident Oedipus gradually builds up a negative image of his own. To free the city from plague, he declares to find out the polluter. Oedipus is surprised that the Thebans have left the murder of their king unavenged and uninvestigated. He declares that he must get to the root of the matter and award due punishment to the offender. When Jocasta relates account of Laius' murder, Oedipus remembers his own acts in the past and is shocked at heart:

"Strange,  
hearing you just now...my mind wandered,  
my thoughts racing back and forth." (801-03)

Still Oedipus is not ready to accuse himself for the murder and tries to put the blame on others. When Tiresias discloses that the murderer the king is looking for is he himself, Oedipus makes a counter attack on Tiresias charging him of Laius' murder:

"You helped hatch the plot,  
you did the work yes, short of killing him  
with your own hands-" (394-396)

He further accuses Creon of conspiring against his life and crown:

"I see it all, the marauding thief himself  
scheming to steal my crown and power!"  
(597-98)

Subsequently, Oedipus also threatens the Corinthian messenger furiously to answer all his queries. He not only insults Tiresias but also invites the fury of gods. The chorus alarms him of the retribution of the gods:

"But if any man comes striding, high and  
mighty,

in all he says and does,  
no fear of justice, no reverence  
for the temples of the gods –  
let a rough doom tear him down,  
repay his pride, breakneck, ruinous pride!"

(972-77)

Thus, Sophocles depicts Oedipus as a saviour of Thebes and its polluter too—a boon of the city turned into its bane.

Finally, in a pursuit of self-knowledge, Oedipus falls into an ignoble state by a brutal blow of tragic fate. Sophocles, as theorized by Aristotle later, exhibits the sudden change in the fortune of the hero. Oedipus denounces himself:

"I stand revealed at last-  
cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage,  
cursed in the lives I cut down with these  
hands!"

(1308-10)

The act of Oedipus' self-blinding leads to the thorough transformation of his character. Thus blinding of Oedipus fulfils the prophecy made by Tiresius in addition to the oracle of Delphi, namely: "He that came seeing, blind shall he go." Oedipus mentions several motives and reasons for his act of self-blinding:

"What good were eyes to me?"

Nothing I could see could bring me joy."

(1472-73)

Oedipus was humbled by the humiliation of fate. Even his approach towards Creon is thoroughly changed and he very modestly speaks to him at the end:

"Oh no, what can I say to him?

How can I ever hope to win his trust?

I wronged him so, just now, in every way.

You must see that I was wrong, so wrong."

(1553-56)

Thus, Oedipus alters his disposition for the third time in the play. The eradication of Oedipus' ignorance generates his calamity at a very heavy price. Ironically, Oedipus' name is similar to the Greek word *Oida* ("I know") which is continuously repeated by Sophocles. Oedipus, who knew so much, did not even know who his parents were. But ignorance can be rectified, and the vitality of the new knowledge and truth make him comprehend his own position in a stronger manner: Man is not the criterion for the unreasonable change in the universe. This knowledge provides him with the energy to exist in his despair as well as the courage to live even in a very wretched condition.

Oedipus' life was bliss in ignorance and knowledge came as a curse to him. A proclamation by Socrates reads,

"The unexamined life is not worth living,"

(Plato, web)



which can be better understood in the light of Oedipus' case. Had Oedipus not made an investigation for his origin, or had he not left Corinth, his life would have been flourishing and prolonged. But the examination made his life humble though grievous.

The proclamation was made by Socrates after many years of Sophocles' production of the Theban trilogy. In the then contemporary context, life was to be examined and thought upon, understood and explored for its enrichment by each individual. Socrates' proclamation can be applied to Sophoclean drama, especially *Oedipus Rex* in a broader sense. The unexamined life is dismal and uncertain to the events in the future. Oedipus' life too was unexamined to the point of hearing the comment in the tavern of Corinth; but it was, satisfactory and glamorous. To Socrates, Oedipus was a man, who wanted to perceive more, a man who was not obliged. However, in a much less metaphysical sense, Oedipus' life was complete, in that he had all that he needed, and was living a happy and fruitful life. As the action of the drama proceeds, he exactly comes to know the hidden meaning of his birth and this examination makes him bear the torments of his fate. He chases the Socratic order of investigation and results into misery and distress. But Oedipus' "quest for truth and knowledge" makes him a complete man and leads him to attain the height and grace of a tragic hero. Anders Zachrisson rightly states:

"It this complex character of Oedipus and the intensity of his conflict-ridden struggle for

self-knowledge that has made the tragedy to the rich source of inspiration for psychoanalytic concept formation and understanding both of emotional and cognitive development up to our own time.”

(Zachrisson, web)

Fate is a theme often occurring in Greek plays in general and tragedies in particular. This tragic play is a blend of fate and free will. Both the ideas of fate and free will resulted in the doom of Oedipus. Up to some measure, Oedipus was destined to be demolished. Celestial arbitration was a propelling energy behind many Greek cultural traditions. The Greeks were polytheistic and had faith in the concept that they are observed in all the ins and outs of their lives by gods. The natural calamities were thought to be the divine punishments for the mortal mistakes. In the Oedipus cycle, the theme of fate vs. free will is thoroughly examined through the tragedies of Oedipus, Jocasta and several other characters. While dealing with the myth of Oedipus, Sophocles asserts his faith in fate. Most characters in *Oedipus Rex* lean on the words of the prophets. The plot of the play is governed by two major oracles; the myth itself starts with a shocking prophecy. Jocasta narrates the prophecy that was told to Laius before the birth of Oedipus. Laius was told only of the patricide, not of the incest:

"An oracle came to Laius one fine day

(I won't say from Apollo himself

but his underlings, his priests) and it  
declared  
that doom would strike him at the hands of a  
son,  
our son, to be born of our own flesh and  
blood.” (784-88)

The Oracle is inherently dependent: Laius is predicted to be killed by his own son; if he had a son, so in any case, Laius is not a victim of fate. He knowingly fathers a child and endures the foretold results. Jocasta's narration reminds Oedipus of the Delphic oracle he obtained soon before he departed from Corinth:

“And so  
unknown to mother and father I set out for  
Delphi  
and the God Apollo spurned me, sent me  
away  
denied the facts I came for,  
but first he flashed before my eyes a future  
great with pain, terror, disaster-I can hear  
him cry,  
“You are fated to couple with your mother,  
you will bring  
A breed of children into the light no man can  
bear to see-

You will kill your father, one who gave you  
life." (868-75)

Due to the modern conception of fate and fatalism, most critics of Sophocles have agreed that Oedipus is morally innocent. If this fact is linked to the fact that the doom that overtook him was inescapable, it would appear that Oedipus was no better than a puppet in the hands of fortune. This would make the play a tragedy of destiny. The Greeks did not think of determinism and free will as clear cut alternatives. It is wrong to think that because the gods know in advance what human actions are going to be, that these actions are going to be predetermined. Even a divine prediction may be fulfilled by an act which is a result of free choice, rather than by something which the person is compelled to do. It means that the gods know the future but they do not order it. In his essay "*On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex*", E.R. Dodds (p.43) compares the prophecy regarding Oedipus with the prophecy of Jesus at the last supper that Peter would deny him three times that night. Jesus knows that Peter will do this – but he in no way compels him to do so. Same is the case of Oedipus.

A complete negation of human liberty in front of fortune is loathsome to humanistic and Christian wisdom. E.R. Dodds (p.45) very effectively identifies the elucidation of *Oedipus Rex* based on destiny as nothing less than a "heresy". E.R. Dodds (p.42) further notes that though Oedipus' past actions (i.e. his patricide and incest) were fate-bound," here he makes a distinction:

“everything (Oedipus) does on stage from first to last, he does as a free agent.” (Dodds, p.42)

But when Dodds substantiates this claim with a list of Oedipus' allegedly free actions, the very language he uses to describe each of these actions paradoxically undercuts his own argument. Dodds asserts:

“Oedipus freely chose to consult Delphi because pity of the Thebans "compelled" him to; he freely chose to act on the Delphic response because piety and justice "required" him to; he made the free choice to extort the damning truth from the herdsman because we "can not rest content with a lie, he *must* away the last veil from the illusion", finally he freely decides not heed the advice of Teiresias, Jocasta and the herdsman to stop the investigation because he *must* read the ... riddle of his own life." (Dodds, p.43)

The mandatory adverbs - "compelled", "required", "cannot", "must" –do not indicate celestial fatalism, but mean that Oedipus acted impulsively as per his will and wish. The man as he was could only operate as he did and not otherwise.

This notion of character as a determining force in Oedipus' tragedy is part of Sir Maurice Bowra's interpretation. With Dodds, Bowra agrees

that the patricide and incest were fixed in Oedipus' fate before he was born. The oracle of Laius shows that. But contrary to Dodds, Bowra asserts (p.168) that all of Oedipus' other actions both before and during the action on stage were the work of a *daimon* carrying out Apollo's will. It could not be otherwise.

Apollo wavers around the action of the play. Apollo's oracle to Laius resolved Oedipus' lying bare at the mountainside just after his birth. As the chorus states, Mount Cithaeron is the holy precinct of Apollo from where the baby Oedipus' life was liberated and saved. Oedipus, after listening to the comments of drunkards regarding his being bastard, goes to Delphi exactly at the same time when his real father Laius has decided to visit Delphi. It is not just by fluke but there is a deeper meaning behind this chance.

Apollo's priestess does not reply to Oedipus' query about his real parentage; on the contrary, she briefs him that he will kill his father and marry his mother. This ambiguous knowledge leads him to leave Corinth and guides him to the destination of his devastation- Thebes. Here Stephen Halliwell points out,

“...too coincidental to be anything but divine design: Oedipus arrives at Thebes precisely when the Sphinx was afflicting the land with its riddle – a test of intelligence was irresistible to Oedipus. Too coincidental, furthermore, is Oedipus' arrival to unriddle

the Sphinx *precisely the right time* to win Jocasta's hand as reward –neither before Creon announced this prize, nor after someone else had won it...And how to explain the inexplicable delay of the plague until Oedipus' children had reached adulthood and the clues to Laius' murder had grown very cold? Oedipus' triple pollution should have incurred the plague immediately. Apollo, bringer of plague, obviously delayed it to fulfill his own design.” (Halliwell, p.188)

At the outset of the play, Oedipus' first action to overcome plague was to consult Apollo at Delphi. It was again, the oracle's counsel that Oedipus should curse the murderer of Laius with banishment. Teiresias says, “I am not your slave. I serve Apollo,” (467) and that by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus has invited disaster on his head. Tiresias' denial to guide him for finding a solution of the plague instigates Oedipus' anger. This extends into Oedipus's politically justified accusation of mutiny against Creon. Besides this, Jocasta reveals the location of Laius' murder to disprove the authenticity of oracles in an ironic manner.

Jocasta's prayer to Apollo regarding pacifying the mind of Oedipus is instantly granted by the unexpected arrival of the Corinthian messenger with the news of Polypus' "coincidental" death in Corinth.

In addition to this, the Corinthian messenger accidentally drops in at the same time when the herdsman does; by means of which the terrible secret of Oedipus' birth could be exposed. Even this is an evil chance that the Corinthian messenger and the herdsman are the same two men who meet Oedipus to unriddle the mystery of his origin on his dooms day are the same two saviours of baby Oedipus at the Mount Cithaeron. A strong warning given by Apollo in the temple of Delphi is "Know thyself," which seems to be coherently related to Jocasta's appeal to Oedipus - "You're doomed-may you never fathom who you are!" (1172-73). This may be considered as the proof of Sophocles' purpose to underscore the hidden manoeuvre of the god.

Evidently, Sophocles strongly aimed at Apollo's impact on each and every move of Oedipus to be watched by the audience. Many critics agree to the influence of Apollo on the actions of Oedipus except his self-blinding.

"Apollo, friends, Apollo-  
he ordained my agonies- these pains and  
pains!

But the hand that struck my eyes was mine,  
mine alone-no one else-

I did it myself!" (1467-71)

This fundamental theme was overlooked on the plea that the antithesis between fate and free will, fortune and co-incidence, bent and revealed universe is categorically designed till Sophocles' time, in



the philosophical discussions of late fourth and third centuries. Sophocles' friend Herodotus in his *Histories*, wrote various stories in poetic form such as the myth of Oedipus that talks about the flight from the foretold fortune. As Levi-Strauss (qtd. in Fagles, p.144) has so brilliantly demonstrated, that one of the aims of myth in the preliterate societies is to raise deeply disturbing problems that will later demand more precise formulation. One cannot be blamed for the deeds performed under some external pressure and as per Greek faith this pressure used to be exerted by some superhuman powers. Fagles Robert illustrates,

“When Agamemnon, in Homer's *Iliad* makes his apologies to Achilles for the harsh treatment which led to the death of so many heroes, and he tries to evade responsibility he is claiming in other words, that he did not act freely..(It) suggests that this is merely an excuse..But the negative implication of this and many similar passages is clear: that a man is responsible for those actions which are not performed under constraint, which are the expression of his free will. The question of Oedipus' responsibility (and what has happened) is posed in the play it is also discussed much later, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, which deals with Oedipus' old age and death.”

(Fagles, p.144)

It is a noteworthy fact that the then contemporary Greek stoic philosophers discussed their views regarding fate and free will in a vague manner and surprisingly they too exemplified their theories with the oracles predicted to Laius and Oedipus. The stoics believed in determinism.

As Cicero says in *On Fate*,

“If it is your fate to recover from this illness, you will recover, regardless of whether or not you call the doctor. And one or the other is your fate. Therefore, it is pointless to call the doctor.” (qtd. in Long and Sedley, p.339)

Chrysippus criticizes this argument by stating:

“For some things are simple some conjoined. ‘Socrates will die on that day is simple,’ whether he does anything or not, the day of death is fixed for him. But if it is fated ‘Oedipus will be born to Laius,’ it cannot be said ‘whether Laius lies with a woman or not.’ For the events are conjoined and co-fated. For that is how he refers to it, since it is fated thus, *both* that Laius will lie with his wife *and* that Oedipus will be produced by her.”

(qtd. in Peterboom, p. 9)

Chrysippus' view stated in *On Providence* can also be understood from the following text:

“They too (Zeno and Crysippus) affirmed that everything is fated, with the following model: When a dog is tied to a cart, if it wants to follow it is pulled and follows, making its spontaneous act coincide with necessity but if it does not follow, it will be compelled in any case. So it is with men too: even if they do not want to, they will be compelled in any case to follow what is destined.”

(qtd. in Long and Sedley, p.62)

Carneades did not agree with the linking of incidents and fate events and was of the opinion that

“not even Apollo is able to pronounce on any future events unless it were those the cause of which are already contained in nature, so that they would happen necessarily. Therefore Apollo could not predict anything about Oedipus, there not being the requisite causes in nature owing to which it was necessary that he would kill his father or anything of this sort.” (qtd. in Peterboom, p.9)

Alexander of Aphrodisias also examines the problem and states that various things which are in capacity of human beings but they may

behave in an opposite manner upon which praise and blame depends. St. Augustine asserts in his *On Free Choice of the Will (De Libero Arbitrio)* although god anticipates whatever is going to take place, and god's vision is never false, we are, however, responsible for the kind of free will needed for moral responsibility. He further argues that god's goodness is harmonizing and because god brings free-willed human beings into existence, who, He foreknows, are going to sin because He feels that their existence is better than their non-existence. This discussion of fate and free will is seen to be continued for centuries and reflects even in Milton's notable account of the intellectual bliss of the fallen angels:

[they] reason'd high  
Of providence, foreknowledge, will and fate,  
Fixt fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute  
And found no end, in wand'ring mazes lost.

(Milton, ed. Geese p.31)

In the modern age, Bergson, Croce and Frederich Engels have given their insights to the problem and have added value to the discussion. Bergson, in his *Time and Free Will*, (p.185) appreciates individual efforts. Croce (Roberts, web) presents a humanistic conception of man as a responsible creature with free will. According to Engels (Spirkin, web), it is ridiculous to fight against the relentless law of fate. Free will is associated with indeterminism and thus, in effect, identified with arbitrariness.

In the light of the above discussion, the problem of fate in *Oedipus Rex* can be considered. Since his birth, or, in fact, even before his birth, he was a victim of fate. Fatality figures prominently in most of the tragedies of Sophocles in general and *Oedipus Rex* in particular. The central idea of the play is that through suffering a man learns to be modest before the gods, and he must accept his own insignificance. Oedipus was left in the wilderness, where he could die. But destiny decreed otherwise. He was saved by the herdsman and was brought up by Polybus, the King of Corinth. In the course of time, he came to know that he would kill his father and marry his mother came true. It was the triumph of fate, and man with all his resources, could not overcome it. Oedipus was at the height of material prosperity, but his *hubris* must be punished. It was pride that was Oedipus' *hamartia*. The man who had a loving wife, and no less loving children, fabulous wealth and property, honour and reputation, and all that makes life worth living, was reduced to a life of abject shame and humiliation.

There are various outside forces in this world which cannot be changed with our own will and such forces can even be a part of the dramatic action too. But the hero's will should not be influenced by such factors. Here the case of Macbeth can be relevantly discussed. It is Macbeth's own ill-willed reliance on the witches that led him towards catastrophe. It is the error his in judgement-*hamartia*-to trust the prediction of the witches. Of course, witches do ensnare him but it

is his own free-willed decision to rely upon them. Here Macbeth's comment is quite contemplating:

"Or art thou but  
A dagger of the mind, a false creation  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?  
I see thee yet, in form as palpable as this  
which now I draw.  
Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going  
..."

(II, i, 37-42)

He *was going* his way. The witches prophesy; but their prophecy gives definite shape to the dark thoughts that have already been smouldering in Macbeth's mind. The thought of assassinating Duncan occurs to him independently of the witches. Macbeth himself is responsible for the sufferings that he has endured. It is his illogical reliance on the equivocal warnings of the apparitions that makes the impossible conditions possible. It is he who makes it possible for Birnam wood to come to Dunsinane by shutting himself in the castle; and it is he who by senselessly murdering Macduff's family rouses Macduff - who is "none of woman born" -for revenge. The supernatural elements contribute to a sense of fate operating in Man's life in *Macbeth*. At the same time, it is made clear that the effect would be different if Man did not succumb to the evil within him. Had it not been so, *Macbeth* wouldn't have been a tragedy; but would have been reduced to a story of a man hypnotized by the witches. In that case, the audience may have *sympathized* with him but may not have

emotionally linked up with him. If Macbeth or Oedipus would be purely *fated* to do what they have done, their fall would not appear tragic and not even dramatic. But it may be stated that Man's actions are not isolated but closely connected to the various forces operating in the universe.

But one thing is for sure that Oedipus committed all the loathsome acts in complete ignorance of the fact. The hero of the play, therefore, had very little responsibility of unknowingly committed sin. The same thing cannot be said of Laius. The Delphic oracle told him that he should die at the hands of his own child, if he did beget any. But he fathered a child with Jocasta and invited his own ruin and eventually the ruin of Oedipus; "The sins of the father visit the child", as it is said.

It is this fact that has led quite a number of critics to believe that the *Oedipus Rex* is a tragedy of destiny. Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* is a strong advocate of this view:

"*Oedipus Rex* is what is known as a tragedy of destiny. Its tragic effect is said to lie in the contrast between the supreme will of the gods and the vain attempts of mankind to escape the evil that threatens them. The lessons, which, it is said, deeply moved spectator should learn from the tragedy is the

submission to the divine will and realization  
of his own impotence.” (Freud, p.296)

This, however, does not mean that all actions of man are predetermined. Man can also act as a free agent. E. R. Dodds is an able exponent of this idea. He believes that as a free agent Oedipus did many things voluntarily, which led to his fall.

The audience is not able to relate with the hero if he cannot be held responsible for his own downfall. If this is the case, the hero should not be preordained for his actions; even Aristotle prescribes *hamartia* for the otherwise noble character of the tragic hero. If the plot of the play is closely observed, it may be concluded that the actual action of the play displays Oedipus to be a free agent. It is his decision to leave Corinth; it is his impulsive reaction to kill Laius; it is his decision to accept the intellectual challenge of the Sphinx and answer its riddle; it is his decision to marry a woman at least double his age; it is his decision to consult the Delphic oracle and Tiresius for providing remedy for the plague in Thebes; and last but not the least, it is his decision to find out the truth regarding his birth. The action of the play includes his investigation of truth which proves that he has already made the oracle come true. This disclosure is the result of his free will for the investigation. In any condition, Oedipus was thoroughly free to discover or not to discover the truth. But Oedipus is fired with a love of truth, which he seems determined to pursue whatever it might cost him. He would never have anything half-done,



or pursue half-hearted measures in order to accomplish it. As he exclaims, his attitude is:

“I’m at the edge of hearing horrors, yes but I  
must hear.” (1287)

Oedipus can, in fact, be regarded as a symbol man’s insatiable desire to know who he is and what his position in the universe is. The investigation would prove Oedipus himself to be guilty; he carries on with it relentlessly. Though the only freedom he avails in the play leads him to the catastrophe, he demonstrates it to be the most heroic kind of freedom.

The theological view says that Oedipus’ tragedy was a vindication of the ways of god to man. Sophocles is essentially a teacher. “Remember, you are not a god but a human being,” seems to be Sophocles’ watch-word. *Oedipus Rex* emphasizes the importance of *sophrosyme* i. e. virtue and condemns *hubris* i.e. pride. It is *hubris* that brings about the downfall of Oedipus, although he is endowed with so many kingly virtues. Oedipus is humbled and reduced to dust. The spectators stand awe-struck before the grand spectacle, and realized the truth that a man, however powerful, is subject to limitations. Oedipus is exalting over his *past* achievements-his emancipation of Thebes, his burning patriotism, his tender solicitude towards his subjects, for, his heroism and his greatness are manifest in diverse spheres. But his grim present lays bare all the human

limitations, which completely crush him. The chorus recognizes this truth and says:

“You are my great example, you, your life  
Your destiny Oedipus, man of misery-  
I count no man blest.” (1317-19)

Fate does prevail in *Oedipus Rex*. Yet Oedipus remains a noble man. He commits grievous errors, for which he is alienated from the society. He is abused and condemned, ridiculed and ostracized. But in spite of excruciating suffering, he remains serene. It is the alienation from the society that gives him unbelievable serenity. His pride is humbled down for he is travailing for perfection. Like King Lear of Shakespeare, he becomes a completely regenerated man. The wheel of Fate has come a full circle, but cannot completely crush him.

It is difficult to agree with C. M. Bowra that in *Oedipus Rex* that the will of the gods has prevailed and that man must accept his insignificance and utter helplessness. He states,

“...Oedipus has lived in a ‘private universe’  
which is broken when the ‘common universe’  
of the gods and reality comes into conflict  
with it...And his failure is a lesson on the  
omnipotence of the gods and the insecurity of  
man.” (Bowra, 209)

It is difficult to accept the theory that Oedipus is only a toy, a plaything of destiny. Contrary to Bowra’s view, H. D. F. Kitto suggests,

“...Nevertheless the whole texture of the play is vividly naturalistic that we must be reluctant to interpret it as a bleak determinism. These people are not puppets of higher powers; they act in their own right. Nor, I think, does this texture encourage us to accept Bowra’s explanation.” (Kitto, p.140)

Dorothy Mills aptly observes,

“He (Sophocles) represents in literature the spirit that Athena Parthenos represented on the Acropolis: a spirit of reverence of the serenity that comes when the conflict is over and the victory is won and of triumphant belief in all that is good and beautiful and true.” (Mills, p.392)

In *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles explores the themes of sight and blindness and light and darkness, to underscore the tragic destiny of his hero. A tragic irony lies in the fact that the hero cannot see the truth with open eyes and when he sees the truth he plucks out his own eyes and faces eternal darkness. The sight and blindness metaphor shows its signs right from the beginning of the play when Oedipus says: "I would be blind to misery not to pity my people..... I see .....how could I fail to see what longings bring you here." (159,162). Though he stands tall in the sunlight and thinks that he has achieved gigantic power

comparable to gods but cannot understand the dark fact that he is the culprit behind the plague.

Light and darkness (sight and blindness) acquire three different forms throughout the play; the first form refers to knowledge, the second to physical light and the third to truth. The three forms are used interchangeably and they occasionally refer to multiple interpretations at the same time.

Oedipus is spiritually and morally blind in the dark and god's every move is designed to open his eyes and move him into the light. The ultimate self-blinding of Oedipus is, in fact, the mark of his enlightenment. He has come to *see* morally and physically and to accept that blindness is the proof of what he has seen and what he has done. Early in the play Oedipus asks, "Whose fate does Apollo bring to light?" (164), not seeing that it will be his own fate. Unknowingly he declares, "I'll bring it to light myself" (150). Repeatedly, Sophocles refers to the fact that Oedipus is blind to the truth just as Tiresius is blind to the world. Tiresius charges Oedipus, "You with your precious eyes, you are blind to the corruption of your life" (470-471); he makes a reference not to his physical state but to his mental state. Tiresius utters a horrid prophesy referring to Oedipus' unknown incestuous relationship and the murder of his father and warns him thus, underscoring his own mental vision:

"Go in and reflect on that, solve that.

And if you find I have lied

from this day onward call the prophet blind.”

(523-526)

Oedipus is obviously intelligent but he lacks the knowledge of his past, which for Greeks, meant he had no future. The use of light and darkness to represent truth is also an important part of the play. The first example is seen when Oedipus says to Tiresius as they argue, "You child of endless night! You can not hurt me or any other man who sees the Sun." To which Tiresius responds, "True". Sophocles' use of light and darkness, sight and blindness to portray truth would not have been seen as metaphorical to his original audience as it is seen today but would have been part of the lexicon of his contemporaries.

Darkness and light are tightly bound up with the theme of sight and blindness in Sophocles' play. After Oedipus finds out what has happened, he bemoans the way everything has indeed "come to light". With this theme, sight and blindness operate both literally and metaphorically within the play. Indeed, literal sight is juxtaposed with 'insight' or 'foresight'.

*Oedipus Rex* is one of the most complex and fascinating tragedies as various levels of meanings lie below its surface. It raises several questions regarding man's existence and his relations with the cosmos. It handles issues which are moral and profound as well as deeply tragic. Here, destiny is exhibited as a rival of the protagonist. Michael J. O'Brien (p.21) accurately says that *Oedipus Rex*, in barest outline, is the story of a man's discovery, through persistent inquiry,

that he is guilty of unwitting patricide and incest, and his horrified reaction to that discovery. Right from the beginning, Oedipus is portrayed as exceptionally intelligent, confident and powerful. It is seen in the way he answers the riddle of the Sphinx, assures the Thebans to rescue them of plague, inquires Laius' murderer and last but not the least, solves the puzzle of his own life. Such a man Oedipus is totally broken by the callous blows of fate.

This brings to light various issues regarding guilt or crime and punishment of Oedipus; as well as the proportion of crime and punishment. A sin is an act that breaks the religious or moral law; a crime is an offence against the state and is punishable by law; and guilt is the feeling of having done something wrong. A sin is a mental while crime is a physical state whereas guilt is a psychological feeling. Oedipus' story is a sad combination of all the three states of sin, crime and guilt though committed innocently.

Oedipus is punished by gods, by his parents as well as by himself. The very first punishment of Oedipus is given to him by his parents who pin his ankles together and expose him at the mountainside just after his birth. The gods punish him for his *hubris* by making him recognize that instead of being regarded as the wisest of men, he must now be looked upon as the most ignorant person who married his own mother after murdering his father. The last punishment is self-inflicted by Oedipus with his own blinding and banishment. This

underlines Oedipus' remorse and indicates his feeling to overcome his guilt conscious. Easterling P. E. observes,

“The question of crime and punishment is not central to Sophoclean tragedy. His characters are caught in complex destructive situations which-being human- they have helped to create for themselves, but the issue never turns on their guilt: in tragedy, as in life it is common for a man's suffering to go beyond what he morally deserves.”

(Easterling, p.309-10)

As man's existence depends on the predecessors, certain vibes govern him and his later deeds are based on the same. The tragic sense underlines the enigma that the human actions are uncontrollable and Oedipus bears the guilt of the actions he tried to escape.

When the case of Oedipus is examined, it is a clear fact that the crimes he committed were done in complete innocence or ignorance of the fact on his part, yet he feels a need to punish himself with self-blinding and self-banishment. Psychoanalytically his emotions behind this are interpreted by Freud as:

“The guilt of Oedipus was not palliated by the fact that he incurred it without his knowledge and even against his intention.”

(qtd. in Hartocollis, p.315, web)

So, Fraud means that though the immoral act is done by Oedipus ignorantly, the unlawful and unnatural act makes him feel intensely remorseful and guilty. This guilt is precisely the reason he feels to punish himself.

Apart from Freud, there are other critics like Schorske who think that Fraud's view regarding Oedipus' self-inflicted punishment is reasonable but he has neglected a few notable details, especially Oedipus' position as a king (qtd. in Salberg, p. 197). Hartocollis states this different view by saying,

"...it was shame and not guilt that prompted Oedipus to blind himself, the feeling one has when exposed for a shameful act to the public rather than when one is haunted by a bad conscience." (Hartocollis, p.315, web)

Another critic to support this idea of shame is Caparrotta who states that Oedipus has this idea of himself as a powerful king who saved a city, then is forced to discover his true identity, an identity that leaves him

"exposed and vulnerable. This exposure causes him to think everyone could see shame, which forces him to want to become literally invisible to himself, a desperate act of disappearance and self-extinction."

(Caparrotta, p. 345)



Whitman-Raymond Lee (p.347, web), too, takes into consideration the fact that Oedipus is pushed to see himself as a completely different person than a wise and powerful king. It is Oedipus' hidden wish for fame and identity which propels him for self-punishment as he would hereafter be known as someone shameful and not powerful. Destiny, just like the Sphinx, threatens Oedipus to solve the riddle or be ready for the doom. Oedipus brilliantly and confidently succeeds in Sphinx's test but fails emotionally. Thomas De Quincey (qtd in Bloom, vii) says that the true answer to the riddle of the sphinx was not Man, but Oedipus himself. Thus, it is regarded as a tragedy where emotions overpower intellect.

Oedipus, though an honorable character, is guilty. His extraordinary complex guilt can be seen on two levels: on the level of the Gods, and on the level of the law. Oedipus has clearly broken laws and taboos through his unwholesome behaviour. More importantly, however, Oedipus has offended the Gods. He has attempted to alter the most important and immutable constant of Greek philosophy: Fate. By avoiding fate early in life through feeble means (leaving his parents), Oedipus angers the Gods, and eventually pays for his wrong doing through his own punishment. Though Oedipus is guilty, his self-binding and self-banishment relieve his guilt and redeem his character. Throughout the drama, Oedipus relentlessly strives to discover two seemingly polar entities, the murderer of Laius, and his true identity, in the end of his tragic downward spiral of truth,

however, Oedipus discovers their equality. Oedipus' own seemingly beneficial characteristic of determination inevitably causes his tragic fall from dignity and grace.

*Oedipus Rex* also marks a major step in the anthropological development of human beings when man started of thinking about morality and the sanctity of man- woman relationship. Antonis A. Kousoulis et.al.(web) discuss another dimension of the anthropological value of the play to unravell clinical features of the historical epidemic of plague in the contemporary Athens.

It is after the Greek Oedipus that Sigmund Freud has coined the term Oedipus complex in his theory of psychosexual stages of development to describe a male child's unconscious desire for the sole love of his mother. This complex defines a boy's feelings to grab his mother's affection and attention in competition with his father. This goes to an extent of wishing to murder the father and to sleep with the mother. Freud describes the source of this complex in his *Introductory Lectures* (21<sup>st</sup> lecture):

“...For at bottom, it is an immoral play: it sets aside the individual's responsibility to social law and displays divine forces ordaining the crime and rendering powerless the moral instincts of the human being which would guard him against the crime. It would be easy to believe that an accusation against destiny

and the gods was intended in the story of the myth...But with the reverent Sophocles there is no question of such an intention; the pious subtlety which declares it the highest morality to bow to the will of the gods, even when they ordain a crime, helps him out of the difficulty. The reader reacts to the secret meaning and content of the myth itself. He reacts as though by self-analysis he had detected the Oedipus Complex in himself, and had recognized the will of the gods and the oracle as glorified disguises of his own unconscious; as though he remembered in himself the wish to do away with his father and in his place to wed his mother, and must abhor the thought.” (Freud, p.278-79)

This passage is marked as a turning point in the history of modern psychological literary criticism. Oedipus complex has become a catchy phrase and achieved huge popularity among the modern crowd of readers, thinkers, critics and audiences. It has turned into an interesting idea though acceptable or not and also led to the overwhelming influence of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in the modern age. The crude and basic desires and phobia which are of Freud's consideration are founded deeply in the myth of Oedipus.

Thus, Sophocles' play puts forward the sense of universal fears and apprehensions which act as a starting point of psychoanalytical theory as well as presents a paradigm that Man faces a mysterious future which is beyond his control. Patrick Lee Miller rightly observes:

“The cost of the self-knowledge that is sought in psychoanalysis, in other words, would appear to be tragic if it is sought in the manner of Oedipus the king. Demanding complete transparency, this Oedipus is analogous to the Freudian demand to make the unconscious conscious, the irrational rational.”

(Miller, web)

Though Freud formed various theories by taking the Greek tragedy as a base, he has polluted the Oedipus story because it is used to arouse psychological interest in the censored subject of incest. Although Freud accepts the moral innocence of the mythical Oedipus, the modern audience looks at his story as a loathsome one. This sad fact has become a real tragedy in the modern world.

Erich Fromm examines Freud's interpretation and points out fallacies in it:

“If Freud's interpretation is right, we should expect the myth to tell us that Oedipus met Jocasta without knowing that she was his

mother, fell in love with her and then killed his father, again unknowingly. But there is no indication whatever in the myth that Oedipus is attracted by or falls in love with Jocasta. The only reason we are given for Oedipus' marriage to Jocasta is that she, as it were, goes with the throne." (Fromm, p.33)

Fromm then gives his own interpretation of the myth:

"The myth can be understood as a symbol not of the incestuous love of mother and son but of the rebellion of the son against the authority of the father in the patriarchal family; that the marriage of Oedipus and Jocasta is only a secondary element, only one of the symbols of the son's victory who takes his father's place and with it all his privileges." (Fromm, p.34)

The comparison between Sophocles' Oedipus and Shakespeare's Hamlet is done by the psychoanalysts on the plea that Oedipus complex is observed in the character of Hamlet. According to psychoanalysis, innocently and unknowingly, Oedipus commits patricide and incest and unconsciously Hamlet tries to act on the similar lines and that leads him to the procrastination for his mission. Sigmund Freud writes:

“In *Oedipus Rex* the basic wish-phantasy of the child is brought to light and realized as it is in dreams; in *Hamlet* it remains repressed, and we learn of its existence - as we discover the relevant facts in a neurosis - only through the inhibitory effects which proceed from it.”

(Freud, p.364)

Following Freud's commentary on the Greek tragedy, a disciple of Freud, Ernest Jones published an article on *The Oedipus Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery: A Study in Motive* in 1910 which he later expanded into a book *Hamlet and Oedipus*. Jones describes Hamlet's inexplicable procrastination as a consequence of Oedipus complex: Hamlet as a son is found in such a state of psychodynamic situation that he unconsciously identifies his uncle with himself. Though he hates his uncle, unconsciously he feels that his uncle has executed his own desire to kill his father and marry his mother. This is the reason of his procrastination to seek revenge of his uncle by killing him. The heart of Jones' argument says:

“The call of duty to kill his stepfather cannot be obeyed because it links itself with the call of his nature to kill his mother's husband, whether first or second; the absolute “repression” of the former impulse involves the inner prohibition of the latter also. It is no

chance that Hamlet says of himself that he is prompted to his revenge "by Heaven and hell."

(Jones, p.90)

The tragic drama of Sophocles especially, tends to end, not with the death of the hero, but with the community's reflections upon the significance of the life which has just come to an end. In this respect Oedipus is unusual, since he is not dead (although his blindness and his expulsion from the human community indicate that his life in Thebes as a leading citizen is, in effect, over). The tragic hero's death (real or living death) also invites a community celebration, but it tends to be something much more muted than community's attempts to come to terms with what the hero reveals about how the cosmos really works.

The play concludes with the chorus reminding the audience not to call a person happy until that person's death. The Greeks appear to have taken this phrase seriously and exhibited it in their art. Though the saying is commonly attributed to Aristotle in reference to King Priam of Troy, this remark can be applied to all the other tragic Greek characters.

Unlike comedy, which can be seen arising in many different cultures often in very similar ways, tragic drama seems to have been unique to Greece in the Western world, and it is one of the most distinctively Western traditions passed on the moderns. Marjorie Barstow tries to state the relevance of *Oedipus Rex* for the moderns:

“...the modern reader coming to the classic drama not entirely for the purpose of enjoyment, will not always surrender himself to the emotional effect. He is apt to worry about Greek ‘fatalism’ and the justice of the downfall of Oedipus, and finding no satisfactory solution for these intellectual difficulties, loses half the pleasure that the drama was intended to produce... After all, the fundamental aim of the poet is not to teach about these matters, but to construct a tragedy which shall fulfill its proper function...there is a simple answer in the ethical teaching of the great philosopher in whose eyes Oedipus Rex appears to have been well-nigh a perfect tragedy.”

(Barstow, web)

The later history of tragedy is a complex business. As one can imagine, the tragic vision of experience (as exemplified in Sophocles) is not compatible with the much more optimistic fatalism of Christianity, with its emphasis on the good life as one of faith, hope and charity within the Christian community and an eternity of joy or punishment afterwards. Many Christian writers used the term *tragedy* for relatively simple morality plays in which tragic figures are essentially



great sinners whose death reinforces Christian doctrine, something very different in emphasis from Sophocles vision.

Interestingly, even after the passage of around two thousand years, in the European Renaissance, something like the old vision reappears in the great tragedies of Shakespeare which is studied in detail in the next chapter.

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