

Oedipus Rex as a Classical Tragedy

Oedipus Rex is a typical classical tragedy because it has the element of tragic setting, atmosphere and mood, tragic character with tragic hamartia, tragic plot design moving to tragic disintegration, and therefore the tragic realization by the character and audience.

The dialogue as well as the language of the chorus also emphasizes the tragic message about the tragic life of the ill-fated Oedipus.

Oedipus Rex is an ancient Greek tragedy which is so typical of the classical tragedies that Aristotle took it as an example to define and illustrate the qualities of a tragedy. Aristotle's definition is a descriptive one (and not prescriptive); the definition of tragedy has been modified because many great tragedies have been written since without being confined to the Aristotelian features. However, it is feasible to first see this tragedy in terms of Aristotle's definition.

Aristotle defined tragedy in terms of its plot, character and action. The plot of a tragedy must consist of one, great and complete action. Each part of the play must contribute to the final tragic consequences and effect. The cause and effect must be logically linked: no external force must intervene. The main tragic character must possess great status and ideal qualities; but he must also have a weakness, though not a moral flaw —this weakness is called 'hamartia'. The consequence of the character's own error of judgment or of his wrong action must bring the fall, from which there is no escape. This should give us the sense of inevitability, making us accept and realize the reality and the weakness of the character. The reversal and discovery must reveal to the character and the audience the cause of the character's undoing and downfall. It should not be the doing of the external forces, like supernatural forces or of fate and chance.

Besides the tragic plot, we have a typically tragic character, Oedipus. Oedipus is a tragic character because he is a great man with some ideals and with a commitment to find out the truth and cure the problem besetting his country. But like a tragic character, he has a tragic weakness. His tragic weakness is that in the confidence of what he knows or can know he becomes too careless and disrespectful towards the gods, the fate that the oracles have disclosed for him: he defies to any inner voice and wisdom with regards to fate and destiny.

Another tragic element in the play *Oedipus Rex* is its tragic atmosphere. From beginning to end, we are exposed to very serious and frightening situations. The dramatic conflict among the characters and the dramatic tension that builds in our minds never settles down; and there is no comic element, even like in

Shakespearean tragedies. Like in a typical tragedy, the dramatist has designed even the dialogue so carefully as to create and sustain a very serious tone and mood throughout. The hopes that always lead us to fear, and the anxiety that always leads us to frustration finally contributes to the catharsis. Our false hopes and wishes as prompted and guided by the chorus finally collapse into the tragic purification of emotions, which is called catharsis or purgation (in the audience), along with the tragic change in the characters. The chorus is also a corollary element that contributes considerably in the tragic characteristics of this drama.

A Drama played a central role in the life of Greek people. It is in Greek times that the greatest tragedies were written. Greek tragic vision is reflected through these tragedies. Since they were religious people they saw the great role of fate in making life happy or sorrowful.

The divine power was the key force behind the disintegration of man. Those who didn't practice moderation and crossed the limits of life would be punished by the divine force. The role of characters was also taken into account. However the redemptive power of tragedy provided wisdom through suffering. A study of Sophocles *Oedipus Rex* can give us insights into this Greek tragic vision.

Every human being has certain limits and he should conduct life within those limits. A person cannot accomplish everything. Arrogance in excess will ultimately bring out the downfall of the person concerned. Moderation is a virtue that people should practice in order to avoid the possible catastrophe in life. The hubris is a weakness in the character of a protagonist and his fall is made inevitable because fate operates in collaboration with the weakness in the personality to bring about the downfall of that person. These two forces operate in such a way that the catastrophe is made to seem inevitable. Before the final moment comes the protagonist has to pass through a series of testing circumstances that try his power, patience, and endurance. The suffering is so great and intense that the people watching can't help feeling pity and fear. The suffering is not in proportion to the crime committed. Oedipus is a noble character, but his fall is made inevitable because of his arrogance and the fate was operating invisibly.

While in power Oedipus acted bossy rebuking and accusing people who were under his authority as a king. Oedipus shouldn't have acted arrogantly while at the peak of fortune and should have thought about the potential misfortune that could befall him any time in future. This is the lesson imparted by the play. Oedipus's suffering is so intense and heartrending that we are deeply moved by it. The whole plot of the play is built around irony. Oedipus's parents had handed him down to a shepherd so that they would be able to avoid the terrible fate, according to which the infant would later

kill his father and marry his mother. In keeping with the proverb, 'What is looted can't be blotted', Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother. The greatest irony is that father thinks he is moving away from the terrible fate. So, *Oedipus Rex* is rightly called the tragedy of fate. As a king Oedipus couldn't see his people's suffering. So he was determined to find out and punish the defiler of the city. Did he really have to take the investigation to its logical conclusion? To find an answer to this question we have to go to the question of fate. The circumstances of the play evolve in such a way that his fall is made inevitable. When Oedipus comes to know that he himself was the murderer of his father, he accepts the reality bravely. He doesn't face his fate like a coward. He encounters it like a hero. There lies his greatness as a hero. The suffering he has endured now makes him a wise person. He has suffered so much that he has become a saint and no human suffering can touch him now. He has in one way, gained redemption through his suffering.

So, Greek tragic vision incorporates the idea of the role of fate and the hubris that exists in the character of the people. Though the final disintegration is too much to bear, one has to accept one's moral responsibility, though the tragedy was mostly because of fate. One has to practice moderation in order to avoid any potential tragedy. Suffering is redemptive and the wisdom gained through it makes one mature.