

Oedipus as a Tragic Hero

Oedipus, the main character of the drama, is a great king with ideal traits in his individual personality also; but he is tragic due to a tragic flaw in terms of his moral disposition. That mixture makes us have the tragic experience of catharsis at the end of the drama when all the good of Oedipus is 'wasted' in his struggle against the bad.

In his struggle against the evil of his life, written by his fate, he invites the very doom he has always struggled to escape from.

The name of Oedipus, which means "swell foot" in Greek, comes from his swollen feet. Oedipus is that ill-fated tragic character whose parents had to throw him away on the third day of his birth, because it was told that he would kill his father and marry his mother. He is that tragic man who was unfortunately pitied by the shepherd who was supposed to throw him in the mountains of Kithairon. And instead of "dying that fortunate little death", he was given to the shepherd of another king Polybos. He got that name and the terrible, tragic mark on his swollen feet because of the skewer that his parents had used to pin his feet together before throwing him. And since he was destined to kill his father, he grew up in Corinth and ran away from there, on hearing the rumors of his evil fate, precisely to come to Thebes, kill his father and marry his mother, without knowing that he was running into the doom he thought he was escaping from.

King Oedipus can be taken as a typical hero of classical tragedies. Aristotle, the first philosopher to theorize the art of drama, obviously studied Oedipus and based his observation about the qualities of a tragic hero upon the example of Oedipus. In Aristotle's conception, a tragic hero is a distinguished person occupying a high position, living in prosperous circumstances and falling into misfortune because of an error in judgment. Aristotle used the word "hamartia" to indicate the protagonist's tragic weakness. According to Aristotelian percepts about tragedy, a tragic hero would be a man of noticeable qualities of behavior, intelligent and powerful, but by no means perfect. The fall of a totally saint like figure or a totally depraved rogue would violate the moral expectation and the audience would think such fall designless, chaotic and unjustifiable. Oedipus is neither a saint nor a rogue. Despite his qualities, he falls because of his mistakes. His position is indeed as frail as ours, and he fails like common men in one sense, and such frailty of human position is what tragedy has to make us realize.

In terms of the Aristotelian theory of tragedy, Oedipus is a tragic hero because he is not perfect, but has tragic flaws. Aristotle points out that Oedipus' tragic flaw is

excessive pride (hubris) and self-righteousness. He also points out certain characteristics that determine a tragic hero. Using Oedipus as an ideal model, Aristotle says that a tragic hero must be an important or influential man who commits an error in judgment, and who must then suffer the consequences of his actions. The tragic hero must learn a lesson from his errors in judgment, his tragic flaw, and become an example to the audience of what happens when great men fall from their high social or political position.

Oedipus is a great and good king. The opening scene shows Oedipus in his magnificence, as a king who is so concerned about the welfare of his people. He addresses them as "my children" as behooved of the good kings of those times. He is a great man with respectable moral value and personality. As a man, he is dedicated to fighting and avoiding evil. His quest for truth is in fact the cause of downfall, and that is one of the most tragic things. As a king, he is an epitome itself. He loves his people. He gives his best to everything he does as a person and as a king. He is so worried by the problem of plague that he hasn't been sleeping: indeed, he says that he is suffering for the whole city alone. He has been walking restlessly instead of properly sleeping. He says that he will not talk to people through messengers and will not send messengers to them; he comes to them himself. He is a king of excellence, command and esteem. The priest glorifies the king as a man "Surest in mortal ways and wisest in the ways of god". He is a man who has become the king as much through the intelligence as through his power. It is he who solved the Sphinx's riddle and saved all citizens from the monster. He has always become the ultimate and almost the only rescue and hope at the time of misfortune.

Oedipus is also a morally good personality, to a great extent. It is so good of him to try to avoid the unbearable fate that he hears of we see that Oedipus is not only too confident in his own analysis and understanding of reality, he is also always afraid of doing wrong. He is adamant in his quest for the truth and the welfare of the people. He surrenders to the power of fate at the end. He is respectful towards the oracles, in the sense that he has been afraid of what they have told him, and he does respect Teiresias before he is insulted by the apparently unjust and false charges against him.

But as a tragic character, Oedipus has his typical tragic flaw or "hamartia". Obviously pride is his hamartia. He is too proud and arrogant, and presumes too much about his own understanding and his powers to control his life. But he can't control reality, chances, fate and time. He has a bad temper and wrong judgment: the error of a

tragic character is basically the "error of judgment" according to Aristotle. Oedipus wrongly judges his situation. It may be debatable as to whether the murder of a life-threatening stranger and the marriage of a consort are crimes. But, due to his presumption about his abilities, he has disobeyed the gods and his destiny. In his confidence upon what he knows and can do, he escapes from the professed evil fate, he kills a man old enough to be his father, and he marries a woman old enough to be his mother, without even doubting his wits.

His defiance of his predestined fate would be, in the time of Sophocles, a great crime. At least, we can clearly understand that Sophocles seems to be rather conservatively suggesting that the modern men of his time were wrong in trying to put too much emphasis on human potentials and powers of Understanding, action and shaping of their own lives. Whatever our twenty-first evaluation of the actions of Oedipus, the evaluation of his own creator Sophocles (and of the tellers of the myth in ancient times) is that it is morally wrong to fight against what fate has predetermined for us.

It seems that Oedipus could have avoided his ill-destiny if he had taken certain precautions. If he could promise of never laying a hand on a man and marrying an aged woman, he would have done better. From a human and the more prudent point of view, it can be concluded that Oedipus falls because he remains blind at many circumstances. In any case, he is a tragic character because he is humanly frail, morally intermediate, and good, but not unflawed by a tragic weakness, and therefore identifiable to us and our own inescapable human condition even today. Sophocles tragic character Oedipus is a unique tragic character that is entangled in the moral paradox of human life and reality. His life embodies the paradox of the human situation in which such things as tragedies are not only inevitable but also inescapable.

Oedipus as a tragic character is heroic because of his struggle, pitiable because of his weakness before the forces of his destiny, and his tragedy arouses fear in us, because he is in the same predicament (difficult situation) like us, though he was a great man otherwise. The irony of his fate is that fate has done what it wanted to before he started actually believing in it. The tragedy of Oedipus is that of the realization of his failure. The tragedy of Oedipus is a tragedy of the human situation.