

The Meaning of Tragic Irony

Tragic irony is the name given to a device used originally in ancient Greek tragedy, and later almost in all tragedies, whereby a character's words and actions are seen to be wholly contradictory to the actual situation as known to some of the other characters or to the audience. Irony consists essentially in the contrast of the two aspects of the same remark or situation. A remark made by a character in a play may have one meaning for him and another meaning for some of the other characters and the audience, or one meaning for the speaker and the other characters and another meaning for the audience. Similarly, a situation in a play may have a double significance in the sense that a disaster or calamity may be foreseen by the audience while the characters concerned may be ignorant of it. The use of irony, whether it be in words or in a situation, heightens the tragic effect. Irony was used with striking effect by Sophocles in his plays.

Tragic Irony in Oedipus's Initial Proclamation

Oedipus Rex is replete with tragic irony. In fact, tragic irony is to be found in this play in most of the speeches and in most of the situations. There are many occasions on which the audience is aware of the facts while the speaker—Oedipus, or Jocasta, or the Corinthian messenger, or the Chorus, is ignorant of those facts. The awareness of the audience (and some character or characters) on the one hand, and the ignorance of the speaker and some other character or characters on the other hand, present a contrast which lends an increased emphasis to a tragic fact or to the ultimate tragic outcome. The very proclamation to Oedipus, for instance, that he will make a determined effort to trace the murderer of Laius and the curse that Oedipus utters upon the killer and upon those sheltering the criminal, possess a tragic irony in view of the audience's knowledge that Oedipus himself will ultimately prove to be Laius's murderer. In this connection it may be pointed out that the Greek audiences of those times knew

beforehand the myth pertaining to Oedipus. In other words, the audiences of those times had a prior knowledge of the facts of which Oedipus himself, speaking on the stage, was ignorant. Even the modern audience is well-acquainted with the myth of Oedipus before going to witness a performance of the play in the theatre, and the modern reader knows the story of the play in advance, so that the irony underlying Oedipus's proclamation is not lost upon either the audience or the reader. But, even when an audience or a reader does not have prior knowledge of the story of the play, this speech of Oedipus, like several others which follow, will be seen to possess tragic irony in the light of the later developments in the play. In other words, at a second reading or at a second visit to the theatre, the reader or the audience is bound to perceive the tragic irony of Oedipus's expression of his anger against the offender and his resolve to bring him to book. Oedipus proclaims that no home or house in Thebes is to provide shelter to the guilty man and that the gods will curse those who disobey his command in this respect. Thus, without knowing the real meaning of his words, Oedipus announces the sentence of banishment against the murderer and heightens the tragic effect of the discovery which comes towards the end of the play. Oedipus does not know that he himself is to become the victim of the punishment which he is proclaiming, but we, the audience, know it. In this contrast between Oedipus's ignorance and our knowledge of the true fact lies the tragic irony.

The Tragic Irony in the Scene of Quarrel between Oedipus and Teiresias

The scene between Oedipus and Teiresias is fraught with tragic irony throughout. Teiresias is the prophet who knows everything, while Oedipus is the guilty man who does not know himself as such. Teiresias would not like to disclose the secret that he knows, but Oedipus quickly loses his temper with the prophet, thus irritating him and provoking him to say

things which the prophet never wanted to say. Teiresias tells Oedipus that the guilty man he is seeking is he himself, and that he is living in a sinful union with the one he loves. The significance of these words is totally lost upon Oedipus. The accusations of Teiresias enrage him, and he insults the prophet by calling him a shameless, brainless, sightless, and senseless sot. A keener irony lies in the fact that, Teiresias, who is physically blind, knows the real truth, while Oedipus, who physically possesses normal eyesight, is at this stage in the story totally blind to that truth. Oedipus mocks at the blindness of Teiresias, in this way showing his own inner blindness. The irony here is not limited to the contrast between the blind but knowledgeable Teiresias, and Oedipus who, having his eyesight, is yet blind. There is irony also in the contrast between what Oedipus truly is and what he at this moment thinks himself to be. Actually he is ignorant of the facts, but to Teiresias he boasts of his exceptional intelligence, citing his past victory over the Sphinx as evidence of it. The predictions, that Teiresias goes on to make regarding the fate in store for Oedipus, also possess irony in the sense that, while we know their tragic import, Oedipus treats them as the ravings of a madman whom he dismisses from his presence with insulting words. These predictions are terrible but they become even more awful when we realise that they will prove to be true and valid. Every word of these predictions will be fulfilled. Teiresias warns Oedipus that the killer of Laius will ultimately find himself blind, destitute, an exile, a beggar, a brother and a father at the same time to the children he loves, a son and a husband to the woman who bore him, a father-killer and father-supplanter. Oedipus, of course, does not have the least notion that these threats have any reference to himself, though the prophet has at the same time clearly called him the killer he is searching for. Even the Chorus, ignorant of the facts, refuses to believe what Teiresias has said about Oedipus. After a few moments of perplexity, the Chorus dismisses the warnings and

predictions of Teiresias. Thus, in this scene, both Oedipus and the Chorus are unaware of the truth while Teiresias is fully aware of it, and so is the audience.

Tragic Irony in Oedipus's Tyrannical Attitude Towards Creon

Tragic irony is also to be found in the scene with Creon. Creon begs Oedipus not to think him a traitor and not to pass the sentence of death or banishment against him. But Oedipus, blinded by his authority and his anger, shows himself relentless. This situation is ironical when viewed in the light of the final scene in which it is Oedipus who becomes the suppliant and Creon who is the King. In the final scene the roles are reversed. There Oedipus begs Creon to look after his daughters, and entreats him to pass the order of banishment against him. Creon, of course, does not show himself to be arbitrary or unrelenting in that scene: Creon is a moderate type of man. Thus, although Oedipus makes a display of his temper and his authority as the monarch in the earlier scene, we can perceive the irony in that situation in the light of the final scene. The pathos of the final scene is in this way intensified.

Tragic Irony in Jocasta's Account of the Oracle

Then there is the scene with Jocasta. Here both Oedipus and Jocasta appear as persons ignorant of the true facts. Therefore, we the audience, who are aware of those facts, experience a deep sorrow at the fate which is going to overtake both these characters. Jocasta is sceptical of oracles. No man possesses the secret of divination, she says. And as a proof of the falsity of oracles, she gives an account of what she and her husband did to the child to whom she had given birth and, who, according to the oracle, was to kill his father. There is palpable irony in Jocasta's unbelief in oracles and her citing as evidence the very case which is to prove the truth of the oracle received by her and the late Laius. This irony deepens Jocasta's tragedy.

Tragic Irony in Oedipus's Account of the Oracle

There is irony also in the account of his life which Oedipus gives to Jocasta. Oedipus thinks himself to be the son of Polybus and Merope: he fled from Corinth after the oracle had told him of the crimes he would commit; he has all along been under the impression that he has avoided committing the crimes foretold by the oracle. But all the time Oedipus has been unknowingly performing certain actions leading to the fulfilment of the prophecies of the oracle. The greatest irony of the play lies in the fact that the actions of Oedipus lead to the fulfilment of those very prophecies which he had been striving to belie, just as King Laius had earlier taken desperate but futile measures to prevent the fulfilment of the prophecy which had been communicated to him by the oracle.

Tragic Irony in the Scene with the Corinthian Messenger

When the Corinthian messenger arrives with the news of Polybus's death, Jocasta gets another opportunity to mock at the oracles. "Where are you now, divine prognostications?" she asks, without realizing that her mockery will turn against herself. There is irony also in the simple remark of the messenger that Jocasta is the "true consort" of a man like Oedipus. Neither the messenger nor Jocasta knows the awful meaning of these words which the audience understands. Jocasta tells Oedipus that the news brought by the Corinthian messenger proves the hollowness of oracles because Polybus, whom Oedipus believed to be his father, has died a natural death. Jocasta makes an exultant, though brief, speech on the desirability of living at random and on mother-marrying as merely a figment of the imagination. Jocasta makes this speech only a few moments before the real truth dawns upon her. The Corinthian, who wanted to free Oedipus of his fear of marrying his mother, ends by revealing, unknowingly, the fact that Jocasta's husband, Oedipus, is really her son, although this revelation is at this stage

confined to Jocasta. The tragic irony in this situation and in what is said by the Corinthian and Jocasta in this scene is evident.

Tragic Irony in a Song by the Chorus

The song of the Chorus after Jocasta has left, in a fit of grief and sorrow, is full of tragic irony. The Chorus visualises Oedipus as the offspring of a union between some god and a mountain-nymph. The Chorus thereby pays a tribute to what it thinks to be the divine parentage of Oedipus. There is a big contrast between this supposition of the Chorus and the actual reality. The arrival of the Theban shepherd is the prelude to the final discovery, the point in which the climax of the tragedy is reached.

No Room for Tragic Irony in the Concluding Part of the Play

After the discovery there is hardly any room for tragic irony and, accordingly, the concluding part of the play contains little or no tragic irony. This concluding part consists of a long account of the self-murder and the self-blinding, a dialogue between Oedipus and the Chorus, and a scene between Oedipus and Creon including the brief lament by Oedipus on the wretched condition of his daughters who have been brought to him. The concluding portion of the play is deeply moving and poignant, but there could hardly be any tragic irony in it, because all the facts are now known to all those concerned.

II

Tragic Irony in the Play

Oedipus Rex bristles with tragic irony. It opposes Oedipus—possessed of rumour, opinion, or error—against those who know (Teiresias, the Theban shepherd, both of them trying to withhold information because they know it to be bad while Oedipus insistently goes plunging forward, armed as he with his native wit). Where characters themselves are not omniscient, the audience is. The audience know the gist of the story and can be surprised only in the means by which the necessary ends are

achieved. They know, for instance, that Oedipus is, in all sincerity, telling falsehood when he says: "I shall speak, as a stranger to the whole question and stranger to the action." The falsehood is, however, qualified in the term stranger: the stranger who met and killed King Laius, the stranger who met and married Queen Jocasta, the stranger who was no true stranger at all. At the outset, he says: "For I know well that all of you are sick, but though you are sick, there's none of you who is so sick as I." Here he is, indeed, speaking the truth, but more truth than he knows, because he is using sickness only in a metaphorical sense while actually it is true of him in a literal sense. He only refers to his mental distress as a King worried by the plague, but the audience knows much more than that and can only wonder when the shock of the revelation will come to Oedipus.

Irony in the Inversion of the Action

In addition to this irony of detail, there is a larger irony in the inversion of the whole action. The homeless wanderer by delivering the city of Thebes from the Sphinx and marrying Jocasta became a King in fact and then was shown to be a King by right, but this revelation turned him once more into a homeless wanderer. But the wanderer, who had once gone bright-eyed with his strong traveller's staff, now uses the staff to feel the way before him, because he is now old, and blind.

The Role of the "Helpers"

The reversed pattern is seen again in the fact that the malignant oracles have their darkness moment just before they come clear. Jocasta's words mocking the prophecy of the gods are echoed and amplified in Oedipus's typical tyrant-speech of unbelief. The role of the helpers is another example. Sophocles provides at least one helper, or rescuer, for every act. The appeal in the prologue is to Oedipus, himself a rescuer in the past. Oedipus appeals to Creon who comes from and represents Apollo and Delphi. It is as a rescuer that Teiresias called Jocasta

intervenes to help. So does the Corinthian messenger, and the last helper, the Theban shepherd, is the true and original rescuer. Those who do not know the reality are eager to help; those who know are reluctant. But all the helpers alike push Oedipus over the edge into disaster