

Oedipus: Tragically a Tragic Hero

by Matt Sullivan

WORD COUNT	925
CHARACTER COUNT	4436

TIME SUBMITTED	27-JAN-2011 01:25PM
PAPER ID	168425818

1776

Ms. Owen

ENC 1141

28 January 2011

Oedipus: Tragically a Tragic Hero

Aristotle defined a tragic hero as someone of noble birth, having a tragic flaw that leads to his downfall, drawing sympathy from the audience. Tragic heroes are common throughout ancient literature and theater. Odysseus of Homer's *Odyssey* and Romeo of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* are some of the best known tragic heroes. Oedipus of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, is one of the oldest and most noted tragic heroes, because he has several flaws that eventually lead to his downfall. Oedipus' main flaws are that he is impulsive, stubborn, and overconfident. These flaws lead Oedipus to one of the saddest and most disturbing lives in literature.

Oedipus Rex begins with Oedipus, the new king of Thebes walking outside his palace to hear a procession of priests and citizens complain of the terrible plague that has decimated Thebes. Creon, Oedipus' brother-in-law, tells him that the plague will end when the citizens of Thebes punish the murderer of their former king, Laios. Oedipus curses the killer of Laios, unknowingly cursing himself, because he does not know that he had killed King Laios. Oedipus has also married Queen Jocasta, who is his mother. Both the killing of his father and the marriage with his mother fulfill a prophecy that was given when Oedipus was born. When Oedipus finds out his parents are Laios and Jocasta and that he has fulfilled the prophecy, Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus blinds himself, leaving his daughters/sisters and brother/sons in the care of his uncle/brother-in-law Creon.

Though he has very good intentions for his people, Oedipus is too quick to make decisions. When Oedipus finds that the people have to punish King Laios' murderer, he quickly announces in front of all of his people that "whether it be a lurking thief, or one of a number—I pray that that man's life be consumed with evil and wretchedness" (*Oedipus*. Scene I. 31-33). Though Oedipus has good intentions, his quick, impulsive decision to curse the killer proves to be his downfall. At this point in the story, Oedipus does not know that he has killed the previous king of Thebes. Oedipus believes that he is once again rescuing the people of Thebes from a terrible tragedy. However, he has condemned himself because he is Laios' murderer. Oedipus is also rather rash in his decision to find the shepherd who the messenger gave him to when he was a baby. When he discovers the news of this shepherd, Oedipus frantically calls out saying "Does anyone here know this shepherd [the messenger] is talking about? Have you seen him in the fields, or in the town? If you have, tell me" (Scene III, 128-131). Oedipus does not see any harm in finding the identity of the shepherd, but his decision leads to his downfall. If Oedipus had taken his time to reflect on his past and think through the situation, he might not have cursed himself, which caused his demise.

In addition to his impulsiveness, Oedipus can be rather hard-headed. In an attempt to find the killer's identity, Oedipus sends for the blind prophet Teiresias. Teiresias tells Oedipus "How dreadful knowledge of the truth can be when there is no help in the truth! I knew this well, but made myself forget" (Scene I. 101-103). Oedipus responds by saying "What you are saying is ungracious and unhelpful to your native country. Do not refuse to speak" (Scene I. 107-108). Oedipus does not realize that Teiresias is only trying to help him. Jocasta realizes later on that Oedipus is her son; she tells Oedipus "Listen to me, I beg you; do not do this thing...Everything I say is for your own good!" (Scene III. 145-147). Jocasta is trying to help Oedipus by telling

him that if he tries to find out who his real parents are, then he will suffer the awful truth.

Oedipus believes that "the Queen, like a woman, is perhaps ashamed to think of my low origin.

But I am a child of luck; I cannot be dishonored" (Scene III. 159-161). Oedipus does not understand that Jocasta's persistence is for his own sake, not hers. Oedipus' stubbornness leads to his ultimate destruction and banishment.

Oedipus' final and greatest flaw is that he is very overconfident; he has shown his ego through his other flaws. When he condemned the mystery killer of Laios, Oedipus thought that he could save Thebes again. He tells the people of Thebes that "Once again, I must bring what is dark to light" (Prologue. 134). Oedipus is referring to when he had figured out the riddle of the sphinx, which had plagued Thebes before he had arrived. Likewise, when Jocasta attempted to tell Oedipus not to seek out the identity of his true parents, Oedipus stated that "I am a child of luck; and I cannot be dishonored" (Scene III. 160-161). Oedipus thinks that nothing bad can happen to him, but in both of these instances, his ego gets in the way of his logic.

Oedipus is one of the most famous and most evident tragic heroes in all of literature. A tragic hero has flaws that lead to a character's demise. Oedipus has a good heart, but his hastiness, stubbornness, and his ego get in the way of his decision making. *Oedipus Rex* has survived this long because the character Oedipus fits and helped create the archetype of the tragic hero.

Works Cited

Delban co, Nicholas, and Alan Cheuse. Oedipus. Literature: Craft and Voice. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2010.