

# oedipus irony

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### Irony in *Oedipus Rex*

Irony is the expression of one's meaning by using language that usually signifies the opposite. Dramatic irony is a literary technique, originally used in Greek tragedies, by which the full significance of a character's words or actions are realized by the audience but not the characters themselves. One the most famous surviving Greek tragedies is Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*. In this play, the tragic hero, Oedipus, despite his best efforts to avoid his prophecy of doom, cannot escape his fate and suffers a most tragic and total downfall, committing patricide and incest. The tragedy of Oedipus remains one of the best examples of the Greek use of irony.

The most obvious irony in the play is the title itself, which was originally *Oedipus Tyrannos*. To the ancient Greeks, a tyrant was someone who came to the throne not through inheritance, but by intelligence, force, and influence. Oedipus becomes the king of Thebes by defeating the Sphinx, "that flinty singer," (*Oedipus Rex*. Prologue I. line 39) and thus saving the city. He then proceeds to marry the queen, Iocaste, and assume all kingly responsibilities. However, as the play progresses, the audience characters discover that Oedipus is actually the son of Laius and Iocaste and the true ruler by inheritance. He is the "old defilement we are (Thebes) sheltering/ It is a deathly thing, beyond cure" (Prologue. 100-101). Oedipus is not a tyrant at all. Ironically, his true parentage reveals how he has fulfilled the horrific Delphic prophecy of killing his father and marrying his mother.

One of the strongest instances of irony is the opening of the play. The people of Thebes bemoan to the king of the ravaging plague, famine, and drought that torments them. A priest pleads to him, "O mighty King, we turn to you:/ Find us our safety, find us a remedy" (Prologue. 43-44). The oracle reports that the cause of the torment is the harboring of Laius's, the former king, murderer. Oedipus puts a curse in this man. He declares that no one must harbor or help this vile poisonous thing, "I solemnly forbid the people of this country,/ Where power and throne are mine, ever to receive that man/ Or speak to him, no matter who he is, or let him/...I decree that he be driven from every house,/ Being, as he is, corruption itself to us"(Scene I. 20-25). The murderer must be either exiled or executed. This declaration turns out to be Oedipus's own sentence, as it is he who killed his father, Laius.

Teiresias, the blind prophet, sets up several ironic depictions of Oedipus when he accuses Oedipus of being the perpetrator, the murderer of the former king. He charges Oedipus to abide by his proclamation. "You (Oedipus) yourself are the pollution of this country" (Scene I, 136). Although Oedipus mocks Teiresias for his blindness, the prophet declares that Oedipus is more blind than he because Oedipus cannot even see himself or the sins that he has committed. "You can not see the wretchedness of your life,/ Nor in whose house you live, no, nor with whom" (Scene I. 196-200). Later, when Oedipus sees his wife and mother dangling from the ceiling after hang herself, he gauges his eyes out with her brooches and truly becomes blind. Although, his physical blindness occurred only after his mental vision became clear.

A striking example of irony, one that especially speaks to the modern conception of irony, is when the priest praises Oedipus. The priest describes the king as "the man surest in mortal ways/ And wisest in the ways of God" (Prologue. 37-38). Although this depiction of Oedipus by the priest does show how the king developed his hubris, it obviously contrasts with

Oedipus's immoral incest and contempt for the divine. Oedipus claims that he solved the Sphinx's riddle all by himself and that he has avoided his fate by fleeing his homeland. The gods teach Oedipus the true meaning of destiny in his sick realization of his parentage. A similar irony is demonstrated in Iocaste's attitude towards the gods. She sacrificed her only son, left him to die in the wilderness, on account of a negative prophecy. And yet, when Oedipus expresses concern over his own Delphic curse she assures him that fate is all nonsense: "If it is a question of soothsayers, I tell you/ That you will find no man whose craft gives knowledge/ Of the unknowable" (Scene II. 184-186). Both the king and queen are portrayed with the artful use of irony.

Sophocles, and other writers of Ancient Greece, used irony to place emphasis on certain morals and plot developments. Although the audience generally knows what is going on, suspense builds as the reaction of the characters remain unknown. *Oedipus Rex* rests upon dramatic irony as the audience discovers the truth behind the words to light upon the themes of trusting in the gods, knowing thyself, and never tempting fate.

Works Cited

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