

The Relevancy of Oedipus

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Oedipus the King (also known as *Oedipus Tyrannos* or *Oedipus Rex*) is one of the seven plays of Sophocles that have survived throughout the years. The play was written in Athens around 430 B.C. and was well known by theatergoers. This play is still studied and read in many classes because its themes and lessons are timeless. Aspects of the play continue to be relevant in today's society.

The play begins after the town of Thebes is struck by a plague and the king of Thebes, Oedipus, wants to know why. Creon then tells Oedipus that the plague was brought on by the murder of the previous king, Laios. Oedipus curses the murderer, "I pray that that man's be consumed in evil and/ wretchedness" and says he will do everything he can to find the culprit (*Oedipus*. Scene I. Lines 31-32),. Oedipus does not know, however, that when he utters this curse, he is actually cursing himself since he was the one who killed Laios. Unbeknownst to Oedipus, he had fulfilled the terms of a prophecy that stated he would kill his father (Laios) and marry his mother (Iocaste). After much denial and then finally realizing what he has done, Oedipus gouges his eyes out and exiles himself from Thebes because of the "wretchedness of [his] life" (Scene I. 198).

The most prevalent lesson in *Oedipus* and in many Greek tragedies is that one's future is predetermined by fate or destiny and that a person has no control over what happens. Greeks

believed that whatever the prophets predicted would eventually become reality. In Oedipus, "Apollo said through his prophet that I [Oedipus] was the man/ who should marry his own mother, shed his father's/ blood/ with his own hands" (Scene III. 81-83). Even though Oedipus left Corinth to prevent his supposed fate from coming true, this precaution actually aided in the fulfilling of his prophecy.

Today, the argument of fate versus free will is still in debate, especially in religions. For example, Buddhists believe in karma which is their way of explaining free will. They believe that every person is in control of his actions and in turn those actions either come back to aid or hurt them later in life. On the other side, Presbyterians believe in predestination and that God figures out one's life before birth.

Another obvious theme in Oedipus is willingness to ignore the truth. When Teiresias tells Oedipus in Scene I, lines 145-146 that he is "the murderer whom you seek", Oedipus doesn't believe him and curses him and his "infantile riddles [and] damned abracadabra" (Scene I. 224). Oedipus is so sure that he is not Laios' murderer that he accuses Creon of bringing Teiresias, a "prophet fraud" (Scene I. 171) to him to try to destroy him.

This ignorance and unwillingness to confront the truth can be compared to some parents today. For example, some parents never utter the word "no" to their kids and they still wonder why their kids are so misbehaved and spoiled. Either the parents are really that ignorant or they suppress the fact that these two events are, in fact, correlated. Unlike these parents, in the end Oedipus finally accepts that he has fulfilled his terrible fate and that he has just been denying it all along: "I think I myself may be accurst by my own ignorant edict" (Scene II. 247-248).

The archetype of a stubborn leader who refuses to listen and eventually has a downfall is seen not just in Oedipus but also in many other literary characters and real people. One person in history who was an Oedipus-type figure was General George Patton, a famous World War II general. He was known for his intemperate manner and how his failure to listen to what others told him to do. Patton was convinced that he knew best and that he could overcome any obstacle with the force of his will, regardless of the consequences. His willfulness and single-mindedness lead, however, to his downfall. He was, nonetheless, regarded as one of the most successful United States field commanders of any war, just like Oedipus was considered the "powerful King of Thebes" (Prologue. 16).

Oedipus is a superb example of a play that has stood the test of time. Not only do many people continue to read it, they also can see how many of its lessons relate to their lives. When Sophocles wrote this play in 430 B.C., it is not likely that he imagined it would still be read in 2011, but to his credit, it remains a very pertinent piece of literature.

Works Cited

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