



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 8.4
IJAR 2022; 8(5): 358-359
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 07-03-2022
Accepted: 27-04-2022

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Sophocles 'Oedipus Rex' as an ideal tragedy

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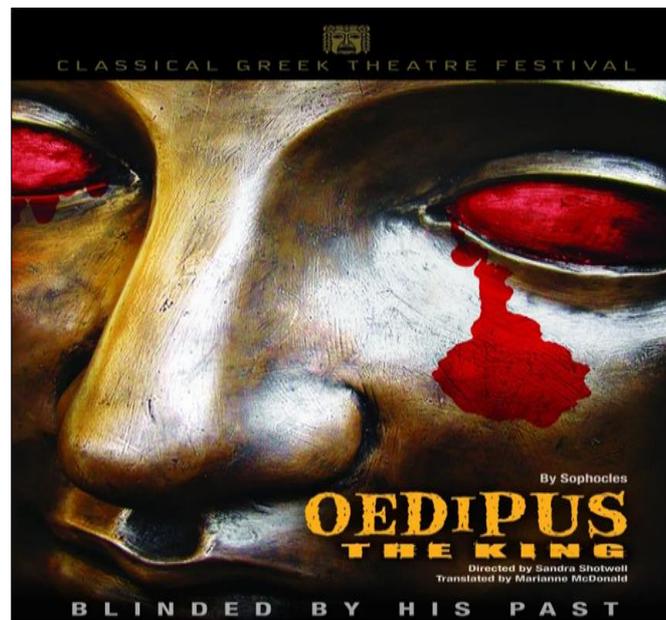
Abstract

This paper might help reader in understanding that various factors which can be held responsible downfall of Oedipus in Sophocles' masterpiece 'Oedipus Rex'. One can never be sure of the exact meaning of a play performed thousands of years ago but this paper is an attempt to understand the socio-cultural context of the play as well as to peep into psychology of the playwright. Interpretation of the tragedy have been done on the basis of Religious, Moral and Political ground which is also relevant in modern times.

Keywords: Oedipus rex, ideal tragedy, Oedipus in Sophocles, religious, moral and political ground

Introduction

Sophocles' 'Oedipus Rex' follows almost all the conventions of Greek tragedy, comprising of prologos, scenes, exodus, each scene are separated by choral songs etc. The most prominent features of Greek tragedy are the spectacle and mystery of human suffering which is also present. The phenomenon of suffering is omnipresent and universal and it shakes the intellect as well as the heart of the audience. Thus, it can be read as an example of Ideal tragedy though it has many other dimensions but the main focus of this paper is on describing it as an ideal tragedy.



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Various arguments can be made to present this play as an ideal tragedy using different set of themes like law, fate, human will, morality, politics etc. but these are not exclusive, they all develop a dynamic and interdependent relationship which throws light on the meaning of tragedy. It can be interpreted as pessimistic work of art in which greatness of character is unfairly punished by the god while those who holds moralistic view of the play considers the hero's fall to be a tragic consequence of his character.

Storey and Allan remark the play as 'A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama', they write about the world of Oedipus "as profoundly disturbing without committing oneself either to divine providence or to human excellence". Whitmen regarded the play as "the fullest expression of this conception of tragedy". We can have three main angles through which we can interpret it as a tragedy and these are religious angle, Moral angle and Political angle.

Now let us understand the tragedy from the religious point of view which stresses the role of external force like curse, oracle in the tragedy. Religious pollution can be interpreted as one of the causes for the tragedy where the violation of primal religious codes has caused the indignation of the divine force which led to catastrophic consequence for the city of Thebes. According to Teiresias, Oedipus is the single source and cause of the disease. "You are the man; the unclean thing; The dirt that breeds disease." Though the play question such religious belief and oracular prophecies through the speech of Jocasta, when she tries to stop such quest but again the tragic end puts question in front of us whether man is able to escape his destiny?

"Listen to me in heaven's name,
Listen if you want to stay alive
This search must end."

Things which Oedipus has done unknowingly and with no criminal intent proved to be most horrific crime against the sacred order of things and the hero is proved guilty from the point of view of religion. There is a common maxim in Greek "no man should be considered fortunate until he is dead" and it suits to some extent as the life of Oedipus was pre destined to be unfortunate. Mythological truism can be the base for this interpretation.

Another view in contrast to this is that fault lies with the god and Oedipus suffers unjustly. Sigmund Freud has also talked about this, he said that Sophocles depicted what was fated and did not think about Oedipus' free moral choice. "Oedipus Rex is known as tragedy of destiny. Its tragic effects are said to lie in the contrast between the supreme will of the gods and the vain attempts of mankind to escape the evil that threatens them. The lesson which, it is said, the deeply moved spectator should learn from the tragedy is submission to the divine will and realization of his own impotence." (Freud, 1996, p.102) [4]. From the lens of fate and fatalism, "Oedipus is a mere puppet controlled by greater forces, a man crushed by god and fate for no good reason".

Second interpretation of the play as a tragedy can be made from a humanist angle which considers the character's intelligence and morality as the key determinants in the unfolding of the events and discovery of the truth. According to this, Oedipus' heroic character is primarily responsible for his tragic downfall and indirectly he is responsible for crimes like patricide and incest. His stubborn behavior was also responsible for this, he was warned by Teiresias and Jocasta to stop searching for the truth but he was adamant. Oedipus speaks to Teiresias:

"It's your duty.
To say what you know. If it must come,
You must tell me!"

Generally, the Greek tragedy has two conceptual components—the material itself and the ideas generated by the onstage action. Writers of tragedy took their material from legend and myth— sources that lent themselves to variations in the retelling. Oracle and prophecies can be the part destined thing, concept of blindness of Oedipus is also taken as material thing from another source. While the action, morality and deeds of the character falls under the category which takes place on stage.

We also have a political interpretation in support of the argument that the play is a tragedy, in this Oedipus behavior and overall attitude towards his responsibility and citizens, in order to establish whether the quality of his leadership and exceptional nature as an individual has caused his downfall. In political context one must take lesson for authoritarian and over-confident leaders. Oedipus' tragic end shows that we can not have one-man rule in democratic world.

On the other side, if we consider it as tragedy from view of religious crime then suffering at the end can be seen as repentance but if consider it as a tragedy where characters are mere puppet in the hands of fate then reaction at the end can be seen as a protest against God. Oedipus, repeatedly stabbing his eyes with Jocasta's brooches, passes judgment not so much upon seeing as upon the seen, and so upon the light by which we see. It can be interpreted as his protest against Apollo, which brings both the light and the plague.

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