

Oedipus Rex

Lecture

I. Social and Political—Athens 5th century BCE

Sophocles was born in Athens, Greece, in 497 BCE and was the best-known of the ancient Greek playwrights. The Athenian government was an “exclusionary democracy,” run by elected officials in the form of an open assembly. Only about ten percent of the population was eligible to participate. Women, slaves, and other “non-citizens” were excluded. Although he was a member of the ruling class, Sophocles was aware of the social inequalities in Athenian society. His plays include repeated attempts to warn his fellow Greeks of the divine retribution that would come to them as a result of their prejudices and injustice to the poor.

II. Religious Ideas

Contrary to common misconceptions, the Greek pantheon consisted of hundreds of deities in a complex hierarchy. The most familiar “Olympian” gods, perhaps the closest to humans, were a relatively small part of the overall scheme.

The gods, while immortal and powerful, were not *all*-powerful in the sense of our modern concepts of God. They were themselves subject to Fate and to each other’s will. We see much of this in *Oedipus Rex*, when the Delphic Oracle is the prophet of Oedipus’ doomed fate, but she is not the cause of it. Nor, really, is Apollo.

The Greeks did, to some extent, believe in Free Will, always accepting that a person would eventually have to face the human and cosmic consequences of his or her actions and decisions. Still, Free Will was not more powerful than Destiny, and Oedipus is a perfect example of the belief that, try as they might, people cannot avoid the destinies to which they are born.

Still, as Oedipus’ fate was the result of his father’s earlier misdeed (see Section V. Oedipus’ Backstory), human Free Will cannot be completely dismissed either.

III. Origins of Greek Drama

Sixth Century BCE—According to legend and recorded by Aristotle, **Thespis** essentially invented acting by stepping in front of the chorus and performing a solo. The word “thespian” has come to mean “actor.”

Fifth Century BCE—Athens made tremendous advances in philosophy, rhetoric, literature, science, architecture, and the visual arts. Tragedies were performed in an annual competition as a part of the Great Dionysia, one of Athens’ chief religious festivals, in honor of the god Dionysus.

Each playwright produced three tragedies and a satyr-play (a kind of farce intended to provide comic relief after the tragedies); all four plays were performed in a single day.

Sophocles, won twenty competitions (Aeschylus thirteen, and Euripides four). Sophocles “Theban plays,” *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*, while they are often anthologized together and in “chronological order,” are not a trilogy. In fact *Antigone* was written first and *Oedipus at Colonus* last—about forty years later. Each play, therefore, should be considered a separate work, not episodes in a serial.

Aeschylus (525-456 BCE) wrote the *Oresteia*, a tragic trilogy, and introduced the use of a second actor onstage, interacting with the first. He also began to develop a more complicated plot.

Sophocles (496-406 BCE) brought a third actor onstage and wrote *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*.

IV. Conventions of the Greek Theater

1. Use of dramatic irony—Since the audience was already familiar with the plots, taken from well-known myths, they always had more information about the action than the characters on stage did. The suspense, then, was in *how* the well-known events would transpire and in the audience’s actually watching the events unfold before their eyes in “real time.”
2. The plays were acted in the daytime, with minimal sets and props.
3. Actors were all male. They wore masks, wigs, and high-heeled boots, which increased their visibility to the audience and added to the formality of the experience.
4. To increase dramatic intensity, the plays observed three unities described by Aristotle:
 - unity of time*—all the action of the play took place within twenty-four hours, in continuous time; dialogue and the Chorus provided background information;
 - unity of place*—all of the action was limited to a single setting;
 - unity of subject*—one single main plot focused on the main character. There were no sub-plots.
5. Due to the religious intent and dignified style, no violence was shown on stage. The messenger ran on stage and spoke to the audience of any deaths or killings.
6. A Chorus was used to present exposition and to provide commentary on the action and characters:
 - 15 to 20 men represented the citizens.
 - They were always on stage, and they frequently sang and danced.
 - They always had a leader who carried on a dialogue with the main characters or with the rest of the chorus.

The function of the chorus was to:

- set the tone
- give background information
- recall events of the past
- interpret and summarize events
- ask questions
- offer opinions
- give advice, if asked
- stay objective, in the sense that it did not disagree with the leading character
- act like a jury of elders or wise men who listened to the evidence in the play and reached a moralistic conclusion at the end.

The Chorus performed in song with a highly formal and stylized back-and-forth movement that heightened the emotion of their performance:

strophe—the first part of a choral ode or *kommos*, during which the Chorus moves from left to right, or east to west, across the stage.

antistrophe—the part of a choral ode or *kommos* that follows the strophe and during which the Chorus performs its return steps from right to left or west to east.

epode—the third part of a choral ode, following the strophe and antistrophe and completing the Chorus's movement.

Often a character onstage (or characters onstage) will engage in dialogue with the Chorus. This would also be in a song called a *kommos*.

Tragedy—Greek tragedy focuses on the reversal of fortune (**peripeteia**) and downfall of the *tragic hero* and the events leading to that downfall. As in *Oedipus Rex*, both fate (destiny) and free will (tragic flaw) played a role illustrating that, while on the one hand, a man could not completely control the circumstances of his life, still he was subject to the consequences of the choices he did make. This tension between fate and free will, and the destruction of an otherwise good man due to a single misstep and an angry deity were what made tragedy so powerful for the ancient Greek audience.

As the hero accepts the consequences of his errors, he teaches the audience some truth about life. The audience experiences a heightening of emotions, as they watch the hero suffer, and they identify with his problems. In the end, the audience has a **catharsis**, feeling purged or drained of its emotions, and better able to understand life.

The tragic condition was often the result of the tragic hero's **hamartia**. Often, the hamartia is defined simply as the tragic flaw, the character trait (like wrath or pride) that leads to the tragic hero's downfall. More accurately, however, the hamartia is an error in judgment or perception, the hero's inability to see his flaw or to accurately foresee the consequences of his decisions or actions. Often, the misperception is the result of a character flaw: the hero is blinded by his anger to who his friends really are; the hero's pride will not allow him to back down and avoid a fatal fight.

One common trait associated with hamartia is **hubris**.

Hubris, or **hybris**, is exaggerated self pride or self-confidence, which often results in fatal retribution.

One extremely well-known example of hubris is Achilles' dragging Hector's corpse around the wall of Troy in Homer's *Iliad*. Creon commits hubris in refusing to bury Polynices in Sophocles' *Antigone*. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra hopes to bring about her husband's destruction by seducing Agamemnon to commit the act of hubris and walk a purple carpet. Of course, the most pertinent example is Oedipus. While on the road to Thebes, Oedipus meets King Laius of Thebes and kills him over which of them has the right of way. This rash and arrogant act is also the act by which Oedipus fulfilled the prophesy of killing his father, thus sealing his doom.

Hubris against the gods is generally regarded as a character flaw of the heroes in Greek tragedy and the cause of their destruction.

V. Oedipus' Backstory

Sophocles' audience would most likely already have known the events leading to the curse of Laius and his descendents that resulted in Oedipus' tragic destiny, and the playwright's intent was clearly to illustrate the downfall of the great Oedipus and not chronicle the family saga, so he does not share the backstory with us.

Laius, Oedipus' birth father, was the son of Labdacus, the King of Thebes. When Labdacus died, Laius was raised by his mother, who ruled Thebes as his regent. Two cousins (Amphion and Zethus) usurped the throne and plotted to kill young Laius, so he was smuggled out of Thebes and given to Pelops, King of Pisa, to raise.

Laius eventually became the tutor of Pelops' favorite son, Chrysippus, whom he abducted and took back to Thebes. Amphion and Zethus having died, Laius claimed his throne and kept Chrysippus captive. Pelops raised an army to demand the return of his son, but it was discovered that Chrysippus was already dead.

Because of his poor treatment of his host and his host's son, Laius and his house were cursed. When he married Jocasta, he was warned not to have children by her because his son by Jocasta would one day kill him. One night, while drunk, Laius imprudently disregarded the prophesy—some sources say Jocasta intentionally got Laius drunk—and Oedipus was conceived.

Thus, while Oedipus is, to a large extent, a pawn of Fate, at the root of that ill destiny is an act of Free Will that went against nature and angered the gods.