Oedipus The King Essay, Research Paper

Oedipus the King – Tragic Justice of Fate

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Oedipus the King is one of the most famous and influential of Sophocles’ plays. On the surface of this drama there is, without a doubt, a tone of disillusionment. Dramatic irony is a much-used literary device in this play and its unusual structure serves as an explanation for its enduring popularity. Oedipus is portrayed as a character of social conscience whose tragedy stresses the vulnerability of human beings whose suffering is brought on by a combination of human and divine actions. The central theme is the incest of Oedipus with his mother; and then, the killing of his father. Depending on how one reads the intricacies and vagueness of Athenian culture and the author’s questionable character, Sophocles, in this play about King Oedipus, is viewed as either virtuous or immoral.

The most common interpretation of Sophocles’ Oedipus the King maintain that the incestuous conduct that takes place between Oedipus and his mother and the murderous act he commits against his father are viewed morally. Consequently, the notion is given that Oedipus commits a sin by sleeping with his mother and killing his father, and is punished because of it. Others will argue that this sort of moral interpretation is, in fact, wrong as further research into the translation of the play reveals a rationalization of an entirely different perspective. In his individual analysis of Oedipus the King, D.W. Myatt articulates in his introduction that, “The essence of this particular Greek tragedy lies in the realm of the gods, with the relationship between individuals, their communities, and the gods. The incest in particular is merely an interesting incident which occurs to a particular mortal and whose importance lies in the realm of prophecy – in what prophecy says about the will of the gods and the fate of mortals” (paragraph 3). On Oedipus’ morality Myatt offers this interpretation:

“The tragedy lies in the fact that Oedipus was not initially disrespectful of the gods – he tried to avoid killing his father, and sleeping with his mother; and when he learns that the oracle at Delphi has said that the plague which is killing the people of Thebes is the result of a defilement which has not been cleaned [the blood is still on a killer's hand] then he is ready to do all that the god says is necessary” (paragraph 5).

Myatt’s translation of this Sophoclean tragedy concludes, “mortals cannot be delivered from the misfortunes of their fate” (paragraph 5). This analysis shed a new light on what should have been most obvious to any reader of Greek mythology. I found this interpretation of Oedipus the King both intriguing and interesting in that it heightened my awareness that the Greek Myths are our window into the distant past; a view of a world that existed not only in the mind of the Greek playwrights but in the hearts of the humble and long suffering natives of ancient Greece.

Many critical theories can be applied to Sophocles’ Oedipus the King. Some may view the Sophoclean scholarship as historical in orientation as they view Sophocles’ work not in the light of universal values but in the light of ancient Greek past, particularly that of Sophocles himself in the Periclean Athens of the fifth century. Another theory to consider is the archetypal approach in that Sophocles never suggests that Oedipus had brought his destiny on by himself but rather was simply a hapless being who had been cursed by a fate beyond that of his control. Hence the prophecies that led him into disaster, for reasons unbeknownst to all, was put in to place by the gods. Consequently, heroism describes the courage with which Oedipus searches to find the truth about what he has done and the acceptance of his fate is the sacrifice he makes upon learning the truth. In an overview of Oedipus the King J. Michael Walton’s psychological theory points out that the irony of this play by Sophocles appealed to none other than Freud himself for its way of demonstrating through myth the most basic of all relationships, those between a child and its parents (paragraph 1). The Encyclopedia Britannica further maintains that, “Sigmund Freud chose the term ?Oedipus complex? to designate a son’s feeling of love toward his mother and that of jealously toward his father, although these were not emotions that motivated Oedipus’ actions or determined his character in any ancient version of the story” (paragraph 4). The majority of reader-response approaches to “Oedipus the King” go one of two directions — Oedipus either receives just punishment in exchange for his corrupt behavior, or he is regarded as a blameless creature of god undeserving of the sentence that he receives. In my own reader-response theory to “Oedipus the King” I see a righteous man with a good heart who, by seeking justice in the truth, faces devastation and is destroyed. Therefore, it’s pity that is felt as a result, as Freud tells us, because at some level, his fate could be our own (Walton, paragraph 7).

Tragedy is commonly filled with ironies because there are so many instances in the plot when what appears to be turns out to be entirely different from what actually is. Greek tragedy is traditionally more apt to be public than private and the fate of the entire community is often linked with that of the protagonist. Oedipus, the protagonist of this Greek tragedy, was looked upon as exceptional rather than typical; a prominent man brought from happiness to misery. His character?s stature is important because it makes his fall all the more horrific. In today?s world, newscasts are filled with daily reports of tragedies, such as a child being struck and killed by a car; an airplane crash; or a devastating fire. According to The Bedford Introduction to Literature, these types of unexpected instances of suffering are commonly and accurately described as tragic, but they are not tragedies in the literary sense of the term (page 1221). A literary tragedy ?presents courageous individuals who confront powerful forces within or outside themselves with a dignity that reveals the breadth and depth of the human spirit in the face of failure, defeat, and even death? (page 1221). When real events are compared to a Greek tragedy it is almost always this play which lurks behind the comparison.

Many biographies have been written about the life and writings of Sophocles. The criticism has been made that Sophocles was a brilliant artist and nothing more (The Encyclopedia Britannica). He struggled with neither religious problems or with intellectual ones. He accepted the gods of Greek religion in a spirit of undeniable principle, and in his writing he took pleasure in presenting human characters and human conflicts. To Sophocles “the gods” appear to have represented the natural forces of the universe to which human beings are unsuspectingly or reluctantly subject. Consequently, he believed that human beings live for the most part in the shadow of ignorance because they are cut off from these permanent, unchanging forces and structures of reality. Yet it is pain, suffering, and the endurance of tragic crisis that can bring people into valid contact with the universal order of how things appear to be and how things really are. In the process, a person can then become more genuinely human, more genuinely himself. Sophocles’ extraordinary style and ability to portray exceptional characters under stress was his trademark. His dramas were built around strong-willed, highly principled, and passionate characters that encounter seemingly insurmountable ethical and moral circumstances. Sophocles thus created characters of heroic magnitude but his plays also demonstrated that having a heroic persona might very well lead to disaster.

Whatever perspective is taken of Sophocles and his writing of “Oedipus the King”, there is no doubt about the depth, conviction, and art with which he expresses his philosophy. These qualities have always been admired, and, as a result, the form in which Sophocles has cast the myth has often been imitated and admired. Some of Sophocles’ finest choral writing is to be found in this play as “Oedipus the King” illustrates the significance of his total dramatic accomplishments. Structured within it, and suggested with exceptional dramatic diplomacy, are all the basic questions of tragedy, which are presented in such a way as almost to define the form itself. The unpredictability of fate and the way in which the individual character plays a part to that fate is what makes Oedipus the King one of the true reference points in drama and in all others aspects of literature.