

SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS: THE VICTIM OF INELUCTABLE FATE OR THE VICTIM OF HIS OWN IRRATIONALITY

MOHAMMAD IDREES

Assistant Professor, Department Of English, NWFP Agricultural University, Peshawar

ABSTRACT

Although the workings of fate influence the destiny of Oedipus, above all it is Oedipus himself who is the architect of his own fate through his own actions. He is rash and impatient, unfair and irrational. There is a quiet dignity, without any taint of boastfulness. He is wide-awake and conscientious as a king. He has unwittingly cursed himself in his proclamation before the Thebans. He is guilty of patricide and incest. The motive of his self-blindedness consists of his averseness to seeing the ugly reality around him. His self-blindness proves that he still retains some freedom of initiative, far from being reduced to helplessness and to an abject insignificance, is not a puppet in the hands of gods. Oedipus becomes twice tormented—in the flesh as well as in the spirit. Human life is of no consequence; human happiness is only an illusion. Oedipus climbed the very heights of fortune, but now he has fallen from those heights of glory. He is now an outcast beggar. He has now become the very example of human misfortune. It is pride, which gives birth to tyranny, but the pride, which swells with its ill-gotten prosperity, is humbled and falls down to the pit. His downfall shows that one cannot avoid his fate, and that efforts to evade it would only achieve the reverse of what one desires. Human intelligence and wisdom are illusory. Man is essentially ignorant, but one who is only proud of his intelligence would only turn out to be more ignorant than others. But man is not entirely a plaything of destiny, for he has the freedom of choice in action, though the results of those actions may be predetermined.

Oedipus is regarded as one of the most heart-rending tragedies in literature. Oedipus, the young Prince of Corinth, wanting to know the identity of his parents, went to the Delphic oracle, where, instead of getting answer to his question, he got a horrible prediction concerning the future relations between him and his parents. Oedipus learns from the oracle that he is destined to kill his father and marry his mother. Horrified by the prediction and determined if possible to prevent its fulfillment, he abandons his home, leaving the king and Queen whom he believes to be his parents. In the course of his wanderings he meets an old man riding in a chariot who roughly orders him out of the way and strikes him as he goes past. Oedipus strikes back and kills him, killing also or routing his attendants. Traveling on, he approaches the city of Thebes, whose inhabitants are being terrorized by a ferocious monster, the Sphinx. Oedipus succeeds in guessing the riddle, which the Sphinx sets its intended victims, and so destroys its power. He is welcomed by Thebes as its deliverer and elected King in succession to the old king Laius, who has met his death obscurely while on a journey. Oedipus marries the widowed queen, Jocasta, has children by her,

and enjoys some fifteen years of happy and prosperous rule. But human happiness is just an illusion. Man suddenly plunges from prosperity and power to ruin and ignominy. Macbeth's magnificent qualities of mind, extreme courage, and poetic imagination raise the villainies above common meanness, but Oedipus is essentially innocent, but his innocence is obscured. The slaying of his father is done in ambiguous circumstances and in ignorance of Laius identity. "His innocence is disguised, not really flawed, in his hasty blow of retaliation against an unprovoked assault" (Norwood, 1953a)

At the end of that time plague and famine break out in Thebes. Jacasta's brother, Creon, is sent to consult the oracle of Apollo and brings back word that the cause of the disaster is the presence of an unclean thing in Thebes. This 'unclean thing', concludes Creon (the figment of his own imagination), must be the undetected killer of King Laius, whose death so long ago has never been cleared up or avenged. Oedipus swears to discover the criminal and punish him, and from that point the whole truth is gradually made clear through his own inquiries that ultimately lead Oedipus to realize that it was he