**Oedipus as ideal tragic hero**

In his famous "Poetics," the philosopher Aristotle laid the foundations for literary criticism of Greek tragedy. His famous connection between "pity and fear" and "catharsis" developed into one of Western philosophy's greatest questions: why is it that people are drawn to watching tragic heroes suffer horrible fates? Aristotle's ideas revolve around three crucial effects: First, the audience develops an emotional attachment to the tragic hero; second, the audience fears what may befall the hero; and finally (after misfortune strikes) the audience pities the suffering hero. Through these attachments the individual members of the audience go through a catharsis, a term which Aristotle borrowed from the medical writers of his day, which means a "refining" -- the viewer of a tragedy refines his or her sense of difficult ethical issues through a vicarious experious of such thorny problems. Clearly, for Aristotle's theory to work, the tragic hero must be a complex and well-constructed character, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. As a tragic hero, Oedipus elicits the three needed responses from the audience far better than most; indeed, Aristotle and subsequent critics have labeled Oedipus the ideal tragic hero. A careful examination of Oedipus and how he meets and exceeds the parameters of the tragic hero reveals that he legitimately deserves this title.

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| Oedipus' nobility and virtue provide his first key to success as a tragic hero. Following Aristotle, the audience must respect the tragic hero as a "larger and better" version of themselves. The dynamic nature of Oedipus' nobility earns him this respect. First, as any Greek audience member would know, Oedipus is actually the son of Laius and Jocasta, the King and Queen of Thebes. Thus, he is a noble in the simplest sense; that is, his parents were themselves royalty. Second, Oedipus himself believes he is the son of Polybus and Merope, the King and Queen of Corinth. Again, Oedipus attains a second kind of nobility, albeit a false one. Finally, Oedipus earns royal respect at Thebes when he solves the riddle of the Sphinx. As a gift for freeing the city, Creon gives Oedipus dominion over the city. Thus, Oedipus' nobility derives from many and diverse sources, and the audience develops a great respect and emotional attachment to him. |
| The complex nature of Oedipus' "hamartia," is also important. The Greek term "hamartia," typically translated as "tragic flaw," actually is closer in meaning to a "mistake" or an "error," "failing," rather than an innate flaw. In Aristotle's understanding, all tragic heroes have a "hamartia," but this is not inherent in their characters, for then the audience would lose respect for them and be unable to pity them; likewise, if the hero's failing were entirely accidental and involuntary, the audience would not fear for the hero. Instead, the character's flaw must result from something that is also a central part of their virtue, which goes somewhat arwry, usually due to a lack of knowledge. By defining the notion this way, Aristotle indicates that a truly tragic hero must have a failing that is neither idiosyncratic nor arbitrary, but is somehow more deeply imbedded -- a kind of human failing and human weakness. Oedipus fits this precisely, for his basic flaw is his lack of knowledge about his own identity. Moreover, no amount of foresight or preemptive action could remedy Oedipus' hamartia; unlike other tragic heroes, Oedipus bears no responsibility for his flaw. The audience fears for Oedipus because nothing he does can change the tragedy's outcome. |
| Finally, Oedipus' downfall elicits a great sense of pity from the audience. First, by blinding himself, as opposed to committing suicide, Oedipus achieves a kind of surrogate death that intensifies his suffering. He comments on the darkness - not just the literal inability to see, but also religious and intellectual darkness - that he faces after becoming blind. In effect, Oedipus is dead, for he receives none of the benefits of the living; at the same time, he is not dead by definition, and so his suffering cannot end. Oedipus receives the worst of both worlds between life and death, and he elicits greater pity from the audience. Second, Oedipus himself and the Chorus both note that Oedipus will continue after the tragedy's conclusion. Unlike, for example Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Orestes (the heroes in the Orestia trilogy), Oedipus' suffering does not end with the play; even so, the conclusion also presents a sense of closure to the play. This odd amalgam of continued suffering and closure make the audience feel as if Oedipus' suffering is his proper and natural state. Clearly, Oedipus' unique downfall demands greater pity from the audience. |
| Oedipus fulfills the three parameters that define the tragic hero. His dynamic and multifaceted character emotionally bonds the audience; his tragic flaw forces the audience to fear for him, without losing any respect; and his horrific punishment elicits a great sense of pity from the audience. Though Sophocles crafted Oedipus long before Aristotle developed his ideas, Oedipus fits Aristotle's definition with startling accuracy. He is the tragic hero par excellence and richly deserves the title as "the ideal tragic hero." |