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Reflection upon Oedipus Rex

While depicting the greatness of human being, richness of his intellectual and moral forces, at the same time Sophocles draws his powerlessness, limitation of human possibilities. With the greatest brightness this problem is developed in the tragedy *Oedipus Rex* which admitted at all times, along with *Antigone*, a masterpiece of dramaturgic skill of Sophocles.

In Sophocles' brilliant interpretation of the myth, Laius, the king of Thebes, ordered to pierce feet to the newborn son. Laius was frightened by a prediction promising to be killed by his own son. However, king ordered to leave his baby on the Mount Kitheron. The boy was adopted by Polybus, the king of Corinth. Polybus called him Oedipus. Oedipus knew nothing about the origin. One Corinthian in a state of intoxication called him the fake son of Polybus. Oedipus decided to find out the truth and went in Delphi with the question to the Pythian house of Apollo. The oracle didn't give the direct answer, but told that Oedipus can kill the father and marry his own mother. Oedipus decided not to come back to Corinth and went to Thebes, because he does not want to commit the predicted crimes. On the road, he had a quarrel with the unknown old man. Oedipus killed him. Later he would find out that it was his own father Laius. Then Oedipus released Thebes from the winged monster called Sphinx. Oedipus received an award from citizens – the throne of Thebes. He also married Jocasta, the widow of Laius. However, Oedipus married his own mother, and had children. For many years they quietly ruled Thebes. In the tragedy, those measures which Oedipus accepts to avoid the predicted destiny, actually lead only to implementation of his fate. The king stands in the way of perception. This contradiction between a subjective plan of human words and deeds, and their objective sense penetrates the whole Sophocles' tragedy. The main theme of the tragedy is not the involuntary

crimes of Oedipus, but his subsequent self-exposure. The action of the tragedy is considerably based on the gradually revealing the truth for Oedipus. At the same time, the truth is already known to the viewer who is familiar with the myth. One of the most effective methods for the intensification of the tragic atmosphere is the usage of the dramatic irony, a situation in which words and actions of the character are seen to be wholly contradictory to the actual situation known to some other characters or to the audience ("Use of Dramatic Irony 1). Sophocles knows exactly how to create the tense atmosphere. He manages to keep the attention of the audience with the help of dramatic irony in his tragedies, particularly in *Oedipus Rex.*

The chorus, Oedipus, Creon, Jocasta and Messenger do not see the whole picture of the tragedy that is taking place in front of their eyes. Only blind prophet Teiresias knows the truth. That is why all the speeches contain the dramatic irony, especially Oedipus words.

The tragedy begins with a solemn procession. Young and aged men gather before the Royal palace of Thebes to ask Oedipus, glorified by a victory over the Sphinx, to rescue the city again. They want him to relieve it of the terrible pestilence. The irony appears when the viewer first meets with Oedipus, when he speaks with people. His first words were: "I, Oedipus, whose name is known afar" (Sophocles 2). King Oedipus cannot resist reminding his audience of his own renown. Sophocles uses these words to describe the character of the main hero. From the very beginning of the tragedy one can understand that Oedipus is very proud of himself and vain. At the same time, one can see that he is smart, because he has already sent the brother-in-law Creon (the son of Menoeceus) in Delphi with the question to the Pythian house of Apollo.

In spite of being king, Oedipus forgets about the hospitality, and hurries Creon up with the answer "Oedipus: And the answer? You hold me between fear and hope" (Sophocles 3). Such behavior proves that king Oedipus is not ideal, that he can make mistakes. Creon transfers the answer: the reason of the spreading pestilence is "the shedding of blood" — the murderer of Laius stays in Thebes. This murderer is known to nobody. The only one man from Laius' servants is alive; it was he who announced to citizens that the king and

other servants were killed by a group of robbers. Oedipus vigorously undertakes searches the unknown murderer and betrays him to a solemn damnation. Sophocles depicts the ironic situation, where Oedipus damns himself.

At first, the investigation undertaken by Oedipus goes on a wrong way. On this false way it is directed by openly stated truth. Oedipus addresses to prophet Teiresias with a request to show the murderer. At first, Teiresias wants to spare the king, but angry reproaches and Oedipus's suspicions make him amid the accusation: "Your enemy is yourself" (Sophocles 8). Oedipus, certainly, becomes indignant: he believes that Creon conceived with the help of Teiresias of becoming the king of Thebes. Creon stays calm. He takes away charge, but the belief in the prophet is undermined. The conversation between Oedipus and Teiresias shows that blindness can be physical or spiritual. The ability to see the world does influence the possibility to see the truth. Teiresias claims: "You are pleased to mock my blindness. Have you eyes, / And do not see your own damnation? Eyes, / And cannot see what company you keep" (Sophocles 9)? Sophocles explains that blindness can be physical and spiritual.

Jocasta tells Oedipus about unfulfilled, in her opinion, prophecy given to Laius. Nevertheless, this story installs alarm in Oedipus. "There is a palpable dramatic irony in Jocasta's unbelief in oracles and she provokes the prognostications of the oracles" ("Use of Dramatic Irony" 1).

The scene with Jokasta marks a change in action development. However, Sophocles usually premises to accident still some delay, for an instant promising happy end. The messenger from Corinth reports about death of the king Polybus. Corinthians invite Oedipus to become Polybus' successor. Oedipus triumphs: the prediction for patricide wasn't executed. Nevertheless, he is confused by the second half of the prediction, with a marriage on his own mother. Oedipus continues his investigation. His obstinacy and personal pride lead to the horrifying results.

Oedipus continues the investigation. The witness of Laius murder appears to be that shepherd who gave the Corinthian the newborn baby,

Oedipus. It becomes obvious that the story about the group of the robbers, which has attacked Laius, was false. Oedipus finds out that the murderer of the father and the husband of the mother is the son of Laius. The chorus sums up with the song full of deep participation to the former deliverer of Thebes. Sophocles ends this part of the tragedy with the words about Oedipus' destiny, reflecting on purity of human happiness and about court of all-seeing time.

The end of the tragedy Oedipus Rex is the most terrible. From the very beginning of the tragedy, the viewers know that the truth will be discovered. The dramatic irony leads to the horrible climax – Oedipus tears out his eyes and Jocasta commits suicide. Oedipus' character changes a lot. Now he knows the truth and accepts the whole responsibility for his deeds. Oedipus decides to become blind as he was all his life. He does not understand what for he needs eyes:

> OEDIPUS: Where is there any beauty
> For me to see? Where loveliness
> Of sight or sound? Away!
> Lead me quickly away
> Out of this land. I am lost,
> Hated of gods, no man so damned.
> (Sophocles 24)

Works Cited

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