

1. King Oedipus: An Archetypal Hero

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Abstract:

Classic works of art are the ones read and analyzed by different scholars in academic discussion since they have always inspired the modern writers to produce their masterpieces. The story of King Oedipus is one of those stories which has been used, whether directly or indirectly, by famous writers to deepen the meanings of their writings. Though he is a failed man at the end, Oedipus can be considered a hero archetypally. By applying an archetypal analysis of the play King Oedipus, written by Sophocles, the present study tends to illustrate how, in spite of all those failures, he can be a hero.

Keywords:

Sophocles, King Oedipus, Archetypal Hero, Archetypal Criticism.

King Oedipus: An Archetypal Hero

Sophocles (496 B.C.-406 B.C.) was one of the best Athenian playwrights who wrote quite a hundred or more plays, seven of which have been completely survived. One of the masterpieces among his works is *King Oedipus*, a tragedy which Aristotle considered as the best example for a tragic composition. This play can be considered as one of the prominent literary works and as F. R. Hardin (1989) believes, “the archetypes manifest themselves in literature ...,” (p. 54) we can conclude that the archetypes can be traced in this work as well.

There are many definitions for the term “archetype,” three of which are presented in this section which relate to the overall schemata of this paper. As M. H. Abrams (1999) states, “in literary criticism the term archetype denotes recurrent designs, patterns of action, character-types, themes, and images which are identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myth, dreams, and even social rituals” (p. 12). Another definition as L. Coupe (1997) presents, “... for him [Jung] archetypes are permanent, eternal patterns of understanding. Though not representable in themselves, they are made manifest as ‘archetypal images’. These are universal motifs that come from the ‘collective unconscious’ and are the basic content of religions and mythologies. They emerge in individuals through dreams and visions” (p. 139). The other definition is what Jung mentions in a discussion with R. I. Evans (1979) when he states, “... the way in which a man should behave is expressed by an archetype” (p. 66).

The scope of archetype is broad; as a result, in this paper the researcher limits it just to ‘archetypal hero’ which is distinguishable in the play. *King Oedipus* presents an archetypal hero who tries to escape from the destiny which has been destined for him.

Oedipus is a hero because according to what S. F. Walker (2002) mentions, “hero myths frequently involve the killing of a monster,” (p. 71) as it is seen in the play and as J. L. Henderson (1978) says, “the universal hero myth, for example, always refers to a powerful man or god-man vanquishes evil in the form of dragon, serpents, monsters, demons, and so on who liberates his people from destruction and death” (p. 68).

In the discussion part of the paper the researcher presents a summary of the play, *King Oedipus*, and then by applying archetypal approach shows how the process of Hero Archetypes (Quest, Initiation, and Scapegoat) starts, continues, and ends in order that we can be able to call Oedipus an archetypal hero.

The last part is the conclusion of what has been discussed in discussion part.

Discussion:

King Oedipus: A summary

To king Laius, king of Thebes, and his wife, Jocasta, a son was born. Apollo's oracle prophesized that the son will kill his father and marry his mother. The family decided that the child should not live any longer, so they gave it to a shepherd to be abandoned at mountain, its feet cruelly pierced with an iron pin, so that it might not crawl to safety, in order that he die. The shepherd was not cruel enough to leave the baby alone on the mountain, so he delivered it to his fellow-labourer, a Corinthian shepherd, and wanted him to take the baby away from Thebes. The Corinthian, a servant of Polybus, king of Corinth who is childless, gave the baby to Polybus and he christened the baby Oedipus (swollen-foot) because of its painful treatment. Oedipus grew and one day by chance heard the prediction from Apollo's minister. He fled from Corinth, deciding not to come back to Corinth as long as his parents are alive. He went to Thebes where was distraughted by Sphinx, solved the riddle of Sphinx, and saved the land where its king had been killed by unknown robbers, then married Jocasta, widow queen of Thebes and became king.

Long time passed. Sons and daughters were born to them but gods could no longer tolerate king Laius' unpunished murderer(s) to live in prosperity, so plague and famine brought Thebes near extinction. People asked Oedipus to save the land for another time; as a result, Oedipus started looking for the murderers. He ironically came to be known as the murderer of king Laius, his father, and husband and son of Jocasta. In order to save the land and people he blinded and banished himself.

Hero Archetypes:

A. Quest: As W. L. Guerin (2005) believes, in the quest motif "the hero (savior, deliverer) undertakes some long journey during which he or she must perform impossible tasks, battle with monsters, solve unanswerable riddles, and overcomes insurmountable obstacles in order to save the kingdom," (p. 190) and if a reader refers to the play he can be able to find this evidences in it; for example, when Oedipus is being informed of the Prophecy of oracle about killing his father and marrying his mother "at this I fled away, putting the stars / between me and Corinth, never to see home again, / that no such horror should ever come to pass," (Oedipus, p. 47, 795-7) and this was the starting point of his journey.

On the way to Thebes he encounters with his real father who does not know him and whom he does not know, and this is the place where he performs the impossible task, which is, killing a real king and his companions:

Oedipus: When I came to the place where three roads join, I met
 A herald followed by a horse-drawn carriage, and a man
 Seated there in, just as you have described.

The leader roughly ordered me out of the way;
 And his venerable master joined in with a surly command.
 It was the driver that thrust me aside, and him I struck,

.....
 And every man of them there I killed. (Oedipus, p. 48, 801-13)

It is called an impossible task because naturally a single person would not be able to kill a king who is being accompanied by some of his soldiers.

He continues his journey till he faces with Sphinx, solves the riddle, and saves the city and the kingdom as W. L. Guerin (2005) says, “in the quest motif, Oedipus, as the hero, undertakes a journey during which he encounters the Sphinx, a supernatural monster with the body of a lion and the head of a woman; by answering her riddle, he delivers the kingdom and marries the queen” (p. 195).

According to what which has been discussed till here, the completion of the process of the quest by Oedipus is quite clear in the play so that discussion about the other part of the Hero Archetypes which is initiation is started.

B. Initiation: W. L. Guerin (2005) clarifies the concept and process of initiation by mentioning that in initiation,

The hero undergoes a series of excruciating ordeals in passing from ignorance and immaturity to social and spiritual adulthood, that is, is achieving maturity and becoming a full-fledged member of his or her own social group. The initiation mostcommonly consists of three distinct phases: (1) separation, (2) transformation, and (3) return. Like the quest, this is a variation of the death-and-rebirth archetype. (p. 190)

This movement from immaturity to maturity and completing these three phases of separation, transformation, and return can be traced in the play. At first, Oedipus’ eagerness for maturity is noticeable where he states, “I will start afresh; and bring everything into the light,” (Oedipus, 29, 34) and “I must unlock the secret of my birth,” (Oedipus, p. 55, 78) both of which show that he is desirous to find the truth and gain knowledge in order to get away from immaturity. In the second place, the significance of these three phases come to surface to be discussed. It is interesting to know that each of these phases occurs two times in the play; it means that in the first process we can see first separation, first transformation, and first return and then in the second process we can recognize second separation, second transformation, and second return.

First Separation: As Y. Guo (2009) states, “the process of Oedipus’ truth-seeking [separation from ignorance] comes to a climax when he is obsessed with such ignorance to find out the murderer of the former king of Thebes so that he can save Thebes from the plague as the oracle prophesies” (p. 47). The first time we see this eagerness when he says,

Oedipus: ...my kinsman
 Creon, the son of Menoeceus, has been sent
 To the Pythian house of Apollo, to learn what act



Or word of mine could help you. (Oedipus, p. 27, 69-72)

This is the first time that Oedipus in order to show his desire for uncovering the secret of the death of Laius and come out of the state of immaturity and ignorance sends Creon to the house of Apollo to bring him the cause of this catastrophic plague.

First Transformation: Oedipus' strife to gain knowledge and truth brings a kind of change in his mood. When he hears from Tiresias, the blind prophet, that he himself was the murderer of Laius, his overall disposition alters and he condemn Tiresias' claim as a kind of plot which has been made by the help of Creon against this dynasty, so he says, "you dare to say it! Have you shame at all? / And do you expect to escape the consequence?" (Oedipus, p. 35, 354-355).

He continues to complete the process of his first transformation by asking some questions about the place where Laius has been murdered,

Oedipus: My wife, what you have said has disturbed me.
My mind goes back ... and something in me moves ...

.....
Oedipus: Did you not say that Laius was killed
At a place where three roads meet?

.....
Oedipus: O God, what wilt thou do to me! (Oedipus, p. 46, 726-39)
Oedipus does not transform completely in this stage. He is still hopeful of being acquitted from Accusation when he hears from Jocasta that a shepherd talked about robbers who killed Laius.

First Return: When Oedipus hears from Jocasta that a shepherd talked about robbers who killed Laius, he returns to his previous state of ignorance and this state prepares him for his second separation, transformation, and return to gain truth;

Oedipus: This is my only hope; to wait the shepherd.

.....
Oedipus: This: if we find his story fits with yours,
I am absolved.

.....
Oedipus: You said he spoke of robbers -
That robbers killed him. If he still says robbers,
It is not I: One is s not more than one. (Oedipus, p. 49, 884-92)

Second Separation: It is in this stage that Oedipus starts to look for the whole truth in order to save the city. About this eagerness of Oedipus towards truth B. M. Knox (1966) maintains, "he [Oedipus] will never rest content with less than the full truth; against this temper both Tiresias' and Jocasta's attempts to stop him from pressing on to the end have no chance of success. A striking example of his instance on full understanding is the last question he asks the shepherd ... 'why did you give the child to this old man?'" (pp. 18-19). We can see this state of separation in the play when Oedipus says, "you are right. Still, let us have the shepherd here. / Send one to fetch him" (Oedipus, p. 49, 71-2).



Though he has been convinced enough to some extent by Jocasta not to continue, he decides to be sure of what he heard about robbers by sending to fetch the shepherd.

Second Transformation: By completing a process of asking questions and receiving answers from the shepherd, Oedipus completely transforms and gains the truth and secret of his birth and Laius' murder,

Oedipus: Where did it come from? Your home or another's?

Shepherd: Not mine. Another man's.

Oedipus: What man? What house?

Shepherd: By all the gods, master, ask me no more!

Oedipus: Answer! If I must speak again, you die!

Shepherd: It was ... a child of Laius' house.

.....
Shepherd: It was his [Laius'] child, they said. Your Lady could tell the truth of it.

Oedipus: She gave it you?

Shepherd: Yes, master.

Oedipus: To what purpose?

Shepherd: To be destroyed.

Oedipus: The child she bore!

Shepherd: Yes, master. They said 'twas an account of some wicked spell.

Oedipus: What spell?

Shepherd: Saying the child should kill its father.

Oedipus: In God's name, what made you give it to this man?

Shepherd: I hadn't the heart to destroy it, master ...

Oedipus: Alas! All out! All known, no more concealment!

O light! May I look on again

Revealed as I am, sinful in my begetting,

Sinful in marriage, sinful in shedding of blood! (Oedipus, p. 58, 1162-91)

Now that he has been informed of the truth, it is the time of returning. How does he accept this truth?

Second Return: Knowing the truth and finding the suicide of Jocasta, Oedipus blinds himself and starts mourning, trying to tolerate and accept the truth,

Oedipus: O agony!

Where am I? Is this my voice

That is borne on the air?

What fate has come to me?

Chorus: Unspeakable to mortal ear,

Too terrible for eyes to see.

Oedipus: O dark intolerable inescapable night

That was no day!

Cloud that no air can take away!

O and again

The piercing pain,
Torture in the flesh and in the soul's dark memory. (Oedipus, p. 62, 1310-20)

By knowing and accepting the truth his (Oedipus') state of immortality and ignorance faded away and his process of initiation completely finished. Now it is the time to elaborate on another stage of Hero Archetypes to see whether or not we can consider him as a scapegoat.

The Sacrificial Scapegoat: W. L. Guerin (2005) states that a sacrificial scapegoat is the one or "the hero, with whom the welfare of the tribe or nation is identified, must die to atone for the people's sins and restore the land to fruitfulness" (p. 190). As it is seen in the play, at first, the welfare of the nation is guaranteed by Oedipus when he solves the riddle of Sphinx but because he kills his father he is corrupted and as C. Higgins (2000) maintains, "calamity and corruption in the king causes famine in his domain ... [and] in some early societies, a famine or pestilence on the land was enough to arouse people to kill their king and choose another _hopefully purer_ ruler whose ascent to power could restore the fertility of the land;" (p. 16) accordingly, this corruption of the king brings famine to the land, so he should be sacrificed to save the land.

One should not forget that Oedipus himself, though at first is not aware of what he is doing with his life as C. H. Whitman (1966) believes, "... he will not spare the murder even to help himself (theme of self-destruction)," (p. 126) when he is informed of his destiny he does this heroic action of self-punishment in order to save his land and people as we see in the play, "... I would willingly do anything to help you [people] ," (Oedipus, p. 26, 11) and elsewhere in the play Oedipus wants Creon to "cast me away this instant / and live upon the mountains _ and die there" (Oedipus, p. 66, 1451-2).

Conclusion:

As it was discussed in this paper, king Oedipus, by completing the characteristics and processes of the Hero Archetypes, can be considered as an archetypal hero. He is a hero who starts his quest, goes through initiation to gain knowledge and at last sacrifices himself to save his land and people from plague and famine. He is the king of Thebes. He can refuse punishing, blinding, and banishing himself and can keep his dynasty but his people and fertility of land are much more important for him than any other thing, so he decides to leave in order that his people can live.

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Footnote:

ⁱAll references to King Oedipus are from the Richard Clay edition, (1976) and abbreviated as (Oedipus, page number(s), line number(s)).

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