“Oedipus Rex”

By Sophocles

496-405BC
A Journey into the Nature of Traditional Tragedy

- think about some of the wider issues surrounding the play
- make some initial links with your later text ‘Hamlet’ [another ‘giant’ in the realm of Tragedy]
- consider your own & others’ interpretations of the nature, characters and the messages of “Oedipus Rex”
Was the climate of the time conducive to the creation of tragedy?

- society questioning the importance of people - their significance and power, in the world in which they live
- human beings are capable of extraordinary accomplishments

But –

- man’s endeavours are essentially meaningless, in a cruel and unjust world - whether that cruelty and injustice is as a result of the designs of the gods, or man’s own situation
**Humanistic**

- **Sophocles:**
  “Numberless are the wonders of the world,
  But none
  More wonderful than man.”

- **Protagorus:**
  “Man is the measure of all things.”

**Fatalistic**

- **Oedipus:**
  “............... .......... Away!
  Lead me quickly away
  Out of this land. I am lost,
  Hated of gods, no man so damned.”

- **Shakespeare’s Hamlet (Humanistic):**
  “What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In
  form, in moving, how expressive and admirable! In action how like an angel! In
  apprehension how like a god!”

- **Shakespeare’s King Lear (Fatalistic):**
  “As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;
  They kill us for their sport.”
The two indispensable sides of the tragic equation:

[1] the power of human endeavour

[2] the seeming insignificance of such
Aristotle’s impact, ‘The Poetics’:

- “A tragedy then is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, on having magnitude, complete in itself… with such incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions”
  (catharsis – a purging of the emotions such as pity, awe, horror, fear, leading to a purification; a balancing and bringing into due proportion – a restoration of a proper equilibrium)

- ‘The change in the hero’s fortunes must be… from happiness to misery: and the cause of it must lie not in any depravity, but in some error on his part.”
“In Greek tragedy, as in Shakespeare, mortal actions are encompassed by forces which transcend man… man is ennobled by the vengeful spite of the gods.”

“The business of tragedy is not with the average, the familiar, the everyday, it is with ultimates - ultimate lengths, ultimate depths, the best and the worst in human nature.”

“Any realistic notion of tragic drama must start from the fact of catastrophe… tragedy is irreparable.”
The Athenian audience would have held two seemingly contradictory views - co-exist

- Oedipus could not change his fate – in fleeing Corinth he could not avoid/avert his fate
- He could also exercise ‘free will’ – choose his own actions – he had the right to choose to fight – to try to avoid, evade his horrible fate

They would have admired his courage in doing so.

The Greeks believed that no matter what a person’s fate was – the way they came to it was an open question. Thus, it can be argued that Oedipus’ choices and decisions also bring about his inescapable fate, not only the gods.

Human attempts to control/avoid fate are illusory and pointless - universality
Oedipus - a rational being, an empiricist, a seeker of ‘truth’, a solver of riddles, a reader of clues: “There was a riddle tooo deep for common wits /A seer should have answered it… I… stopped the riddler’s mouth, guessing the truth / By mother wit.”

Ironically claims to be “the child of Fortune”

But later seems to be accepting of his fate - “I was not snatched from death
That once, unless to be preserved
For some more awful destiny. Be it so.”

Jocasta:
“Chance rules our lives, and the future is all unknown”

having previously made offerings to the gods

How far does Oedipus’ human skill get him? → Sophocles commenting on the champions of the Greek Enlightenment and their confident affirmation of human sufficiency

Is there criticism of man’s vanity?

Is the play a critique of rationalism?
Greek Tragedy

- *Human situation* based on known story [myth] legendary figures

- Illuminate it, posing immense questions about life – not necessarily providing all the answers – the audience learned about life – *their* life – and were exhausted but exalted by the experience of watching the play

- Tragic irretrievability - disastrous consequences do not rest entirely on the ‘flaws’ of the protagonist – other forces have to be recognised

- The gods are felt to control the situations, although the characters act autonomously - Humankind’s subjection to the gods

- Human drama in foreground is played out against background of divine activity → focus on the gods and obedience to the unwritten laws of World Order as the Greeks conceived them
- A central tragic protagonist/hero [of stature - an extraordinary person] who stands not only as an individual but who, due to their importance, is also a symbol for an entire culture or society
- Wide-ranging results of evil acts, willed or unwilled – that innocent acts can have terrible results
- Life is not chaotic, random but is based on obedience to an unwritten law - the ‘World Order’, that injustice is in the nature of things – suffering is part of this ‘order’
- The possibility of growth through immense and knowing suffering
- The possibility of redemption – in the recognition of human guilt
What questions are posed by Tragedy?

Tragedy asks the most basic questions about human existence:

- Why is the world so unjust?
- Why are people so cruel to one another?
- Why are men and women called on to endure such suffering in their lives and **what are the limits** of human suffering and endurance?
- To what heights of courage, strength, generosity and integrity can human beings arise?
- In the midst of cruelty and despair, what are the possibilities of human achievement?
- Is the universe indifferent to human concerns and often cruel or malevolent?
The Effects of Tragedy

Tragedy appears to produce two contradictory reactions simultaneously:

1. **Pessimistic** – the heroes are ‘damned if they do and damned if they don’t’ - world is a cruel despairing place
2. **Optimistic** – that even in the bleakest tragedy there is affirmation.

This paradox gives much of traditional tragedy its resonance and meaning and helps to explain why we are both devastated and exhilarated by it - why we can have such a powerful cathartic release – be purged of such emotions as pity, fear and hatred.
The Philosophy of Sophocles

How dreadful knowledge of the truth can be
When there’s no help in truth!

Excerpt from Oedipus Rex
There was no place for progressive thinking in Sophocles’ view of the World Order

He looked at the human situation as fixed and governed by laws which do not and cannot change

- Characters’ actions [and others outside the immediate drama] combine = result that is inevitable

- The idea that there is a rational “design” behind life

- Unwritten law governing human life BUT people choose to act as they please – the gods predict, but do not compel people to act
The consequences of man’s hubris and vanity were dire.

“Pride breeds the Tyrant; swollen with ill-found booty…

Shall he escape his doomed pride’s punishment?

………………… who casts out right for wrong?

……… old oracles are out of mind;

Apollo’s named denied, his glory fading;

There is no godliness in all mankind.”

Wrongdoing brings its own punishment – disaster often seems unjustified – not just, but part of life

There is a need for reverence and wisdom in life

The sense of the dignity of being human
The Structure of the Play

Essentially a ‘climactic’ play rather than ‘episodic’

- constricted and compressed on all fronts - fundamental approach of condensed time scale (hrs/days) – maintains the unities of action – action, time and place

- linear plot beginning late in the story – with a cause and effect line (a chain of events – closely linked in sequence of logical, almost inevitable developments) building to a dramatic climax – Oedipus’ cry of despair / exit to palace

- few solid extended scenes

- no subplots

- one location
few characters
little or no extraneous material

Simultaneous movement backward and forward in time as revelation of the past move Oedipus ever nearer to his doom in the present [e.g. Oedipus’ backward explanation of time in Corinth]

Exposition takes place concurrent to the action as time moves forward to the future [e.g. Teiresias is, in time, driven to tell the truth, the pace of the 4th episode, involving the Corinthian messenger and the Theban shepherd]

Unusual – resolution scene is the longest in the play – shift – what will Oedipus do now that he knows the truth? – King → man/father – ennobling process furthered
And finally…

Plays of a similar time, genre or theme

- The other plays in this collection – *The Theban Plays* – *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone* – which complete the immediate cycle – the enormity of the tragedy is more impressive when all the plays are considered.

- Aeschylus – *The Oresteian Trilogy* [The Oresteia 458BC] - one of the few other surviving Greek tragedies – useful to gain a broader perspective on Greek tragedy.

- Stephen Berkoff – *Greek* (1979) - Berkoff uses the Oedipus legend, shifting it ironically from heightened nobility to blaspheming working class, to comment aggressively on women (particularly mothers) and marriage. It is an updated version of the myth with strong messages for the modern audience.