Oedipus Rex

Sophocles

Sophocles—Life And Works Life (496-406 B.C.)

Witness to Great Events

Sophocles was a native of Colonus on the outskirts of Athens. He was born in 496 B.C. and died in 406 B.C. Living through most of the fifth century B.C., he was a witness to such important events as the Persian invasions of Greece and their defeat, the growth of Athens as an imperial power and a centre of culture under the rule of Pericles, and the long and ruinous war with Sparta and her allies.

His father Sophillus was the owner of an arms factory. Sophocles took no active part in politics and had no special military gifts. In spite of that he was twice elected "Strategus" (a sort of military commander), and after the Sicilian disaster of 413 B.C., he was made one of the "Probouloi" (or special commissioners), no doubt by reason of his general fame and popularity.

A Lovable Person

Sophocles was a man of great charm, handsome, and well-to-do. Herodotus was one of his friends. Sophocles is regarded as having been a figure of ideal serenity and success. His life lay through the period of his country's highest prosperity. He was loved by everybody wherever he went. After his death he was worshipped as a hero. Aristophanes sums up his character in the words: "contented among the living, contented among the dead." He left two sons, one legitimate, and the other born of an illicit union. He was always comfortable in Athens and had no temptation to seek his fortune at foreign courts as some of his colleagues did.

Winner of Many Contests

Sophocles was an artist of the faultless type, showing few traces of the divine "discontentment". He learned music early in his life and at the age of sixteen he led a choir as harper in the thanksgiving for Salamis. He wrote some 120 plays and won many victories in dramatic contests. His first victory occurred in 468 B.C., when he defeated Aeschylus, being then only twenty-eight years old. The first defeat of a veteran like Aeschylus by a member of the younger generation gave rise to a lot of bitterness. Thereafter Sophocles won the first position in as many as twenty-four contests. He contributed a good deal to the expression of that culture in the theatre which was its prime temple, performing also public duties which were as much the province of the artist as of the man of action. A biographer describes the life of

Sophocles as "a picture of a childhood spent under the best influences of a prosperous and enlightened home, a youth educated in a harmonious physical and intellectual discipline and endowed with grace and accomplishment, a manhood devoted to the service of the State in art and public affairs, and in old age regarded with affectionate respect."

Family Difficulties

According to an anecdote, Sophocles had some family difficulties at the end of his life. These difficulties were due to his illicit connection with a woman named Theoris. His legitimate son Iophon tried to get a warrant for administering the family estate, on the ground of his father's mental incapacity. Sophocles read out to the Court an ode from his play *Oedipus at Colonus* which he was then writing, and was declared as having proved thereby his general sanity! He died a few months after his great colleague, Euripides, in whose honour he introduced his last chorus in mourning.

His Development as a Dramatist

Sophocles wrote pretty continuously for sixty years and he is believed to have given his own account of his development. He began by having some relation with the magniloquence of Aeschylus; next came his own "stern and artificial" period of style; thirdly he reached more ease and simplicity and seems to have satisfied himself. Perhaps, the most important change due to Sophocles took place in what the Greeks called the economy of the drama. Sophocles worked as a conscious artist improving details, demanding more and smoother tools, and making up by skilful construction, tactful scenic arrangement, and entire avoidance of exaggeration or grotesqueness, for his inability to walk quite so near the heavens as his great predecessor, Aeschylus. The stern and artificial period is best represented by the play, *Electra*. This play is artificial in a good sense through skill of plot, its clear characterisation, and its uniform good writing. It is also artificial in a bad sense. For instance, in the messenger's speech where all that is wanted is a false report of the death of Orestes, the dramatist has inserted a brilliant, lengthy, and quite undramatic description of the Pythian Games. This play is also stern because of some coldness and a natural taste for severity and dislike of sentiment.

A Certain Bluntness of Moral Imagination

There is in Sophocles a lack of speculative freedom. There is also in him a certain bluntness of moral imagination which leads, for instance, to one structural defect in *Oedipus Rex*. That piece is a marvel of construction; every detail follows naturally,

and yet every detail depends on the characters being exactly what they were, and makes us understand them. The one flaw, perhaps, is in Teiresias. That aged prophet comes to the King absolutely determined not to tell the secret which he has kept for sixteen years, and then tells it. Why? He tells it because of his uncontrollable anger at having been insulted by the King. An aged prophet, who does that, is a disgrace to his profession; but Sophocles does not seem to feel it.

Worthy of Admiration

Sophocles is subject to a certain conventional idealism. He lacks the elemental fire of Aeschylus, the speculative courage and subtle sympathy of Euripides. Otherwise there can be nothing but admiration for him. Plot, characters, and atmosphere are dignified and Homeric; his analysis, as far as it goes, is wonderfully sure and true; his language is a marvel of subtle power; his lyrics are uniformly skilful and fine. Sophocles also shows at times one high power which only a few of the world's poets share with him. He feels, as Wordsworth does, the majesty of order and well-being; he sees the greatness of God, as it were, in the untroubled things of life. Few poets, besides him, could have shaped the great ode in *Antigone* upon the rise of man or the description in *Ajax* of the "Give and Take" in Nature. And even in the famous verdict of despair which he pronounces upon life in *Oedipus at Colonus*, there is a certain depth of calm feeling, unfretted by any movement of mere intellect.

Conclusion

A critic writes: "Sophocles was a prolific writer and one highly acclaimed during his own life-time. Several technical innovations in theatrical arts are attributed to him, including the introduction of scene-painting and the use of scenes involving three speaking parts; and he is said to have written a treatise on his art. He found time as well to hold several high public offices and to serve as a priest of a minor healing-god. He was honoured by those who knew him for his charm and his good temper."

Works

Of the more than 120 plays of Sophocles known to antiquity only seven tragedies have survived intact into modern times. These seven are:

(1) *Antigone*

(2) *Oedipus Rex*, also known as *Oedipus Tyrannus*

(3) *Electra*

(4) *Ajax*

(5) *Trachiniae*

(6) *Philoctetes*

(7) *Oedipus at Colonus.*

Not all of these can be dated with confidence. An ancient anecdote would date *Antigone* to about 442 B.C., and *Ajax* is generally placed somewhat earlier, for reasons of style. *Philoctetes* is known to have been produced in 409 B.C. and *Oedipus at Colonus* in 401 B.C., the latter after Sophocles' death. The dates of the remaining plays are uncertain but there are some grounds for dating Oedipus Rex to the years immediately following 430 B.C. Three of his extant plays deal with the legend of the Theban royal house. (They are the two Oedipus plays and *Antigone*). The main outlines of this legend he inherited. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* allude briefly to Oedipus. In the fifth century B.C. both Aeschylus and Euripides wrote Oedipus plays neither of which survives. In later ages the theme attracted numerous dramatists, among them Seneca, Corncille, Voltaire, and Gide. But in most minds the name of Oedipus is linked with the dramatist Sophocles.

Greek Tragedy

The Origin of Greek Tragedy

According to Aristotle, Greek tragedy developed out of the improvised speeches of the dithyramb with the satyric drama as an intermediate stage. This view has been widely accepted but challenged by some authorities as difficult to reconcile with the evidence of the facts. Aristotle, it is said, may have been theorizing from what he knew of the dithyramb and satyric drama in his own time, and of the primitive dithyramb whose leader might have been transformed into an actor.

It is more probable, according to this view, that dithyramb, satyric drama, and tragedy each followed its own line of development, and that the origin of tragedy is to be sought in an elementary choral and rustic form of drama in use in the village of Attica; that Thespis introduced into this an actor's part, and that it was adopted in the second half of the sixth century B.C. at the Great Dionysia at Athens. With this rustic drama was probably combined a solemn lyric element from the choral Dionysiac songs, invented perhaps by Arion. The subjects of tragedy, as of the dithyramb, were probably at first connected with the story of Dionysus;

later their range was extended to include the stories of heroes; they were only rarely drawn from history.

The word tragedy appears to be derived from ***tragodoi*** meaning probably a chorus who personated goats, or danced either for a goat as the prize or around a sacrificed goat. The later sense of the word "tragedy" resulted from the sorrowful character of the legends dealt with in plays thus described.

The Representation of Tragedies

The representation of tragedies in Attica was an incident of public worship and, until the Alexandrian period, appears to have been confined to the festivals of Dionysus. They were performed, that is, in winter and early spring, "the season when the world is budding but there is not enough to eat," a period of anxiety in a primitive community, of longing that the spirit of vegetation may duly be reborn. The altar of the god stood in the centre of the orchestra. The principal production of new tragedies was at the Great Dionysia on which occasion, during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., three poets were allowed to compete, each poet presenting three tragedies and one satyric play. These four plays (tetralogies) might be connected by community of subject but rarely were so. The contests were decided at first by popular acclamation, later by judges chosen by lot from an elected list. The winner of the contest was rewarded with a crown. The best actor among the protagonists also received a prize.

Choral and Dramatic Elements

Greek tragedy, as its history indicates, contained two elements, choral and dramatic. The former was expressed in a variety of lyric metres, arranged in strophes and antistrophes, occasionally with epodes added. The chorus was drawn up in a rectangular form (as distinguished from the circular chorus of the dithyramb) and its movements were based on this arrangement. It was accompanied on the flute. Its principal dance was of a dignified character. The number of persons in the chorus was probably twelve in most of the plays of Aeschylus, and was increased to fifteen by Sophocles. Choruses continued to form a part of tragedies through the fifth century and part at least of the fourth century B.C. after choruses in comedy has been discontinued.

Principal Parts of a Greek Tragedy

A Greek tragedy normally contained the following parts:

(a) The prologue, the part before the entrance of the chorus, in monologue or dialogue setting forth the subject of the drama and the situation from which it starts. In the earliest tragedies the play begins with the entrance of the chorus, who set forth the subject.

(b) The song accompanying the entrance of the chorus.

(c) The episodes, scenes in which one or more actors took part, with the chorus. The episodes might contain lyrical passages, lamentations, incidental songs by the chorus, etc.

(d) Songs of the chorus in one place, i.e., in the orchestra as opposed to the first song which accompanied the entrance of the chorus. These songs were originally reflections or expressions of emotion evoked by the preceding episode. But this connection was gradually severed, until Agathon finally substituted mere musical interludes between the episodes.

(e) After the last choral song came the final scene.

Divine Will and Human Will

Greek tragedy had always a religious background, in keeping with its religious character. The choruses in some cases show the survival of magic dances, intended to avert pestilence, bring rain, etc. A tragedy was originally the presentation of a single pathetic situation, with little action. Aeschylus introduced the idea of the divine will shaping the course of events. Sophocles added the further element of the human will, less powerful than the divine will, working in harmony with or in opposition to it, more at the mercy of circumstances. Hence developed the *peripeteia* the moment when the action of the tragedy changes its course, a knot or complication having arisen in the relations of the characters which has to be resolved. With Euripides, the *peripeteia* became more complicated, striking, and abrupt. The *anagnorisis* or "recognition" (occasionally used by Sophocles) frequently provided in the tragedies of Euripides the turning-point in question.

Dramatic Contests

Tragedies were presented in the Athenian theatre at certain annual festivals. At the principal festival held in the spring, the whole population assembled on a number of successive days in an open-air theatre accommodating thousands of spectators to witness a cycle of dramatic performances presented amid high civic splendour and religious ritual. On the practitioners of the dramatic art, therefore, rested a solemn responsibility. Competition was the order of the day and was not

felt to be inconsistent with the religious dignity of the occasion. Before a tragedy could be performed at all, it had to pass the scrutiny of a selection board. In performance it competed with the work of two other chosen authors. The victory in the whole contest was awarded by the votes of a committee of judges who were influenced to some extent by the reactions of the audience. For the purpose of this contest, the work of each author consisted of a group of four plays—three tragedies and a satyr play in lighter vein. Such were the basic conditions of the dramatist's art and within them was established a code of technique and convention.

"The Encounters of Man with More Than Man"

The origins of the art of drama lay not only in the human instinct for narrative and for impersonation but also in the instinct for the ritualistic expression and interpretation of the power of natural forces, the cycle of life and death, and the nexus of past, present and future. The elements of dance and song were essential to the nature of this art. Its prime function was the expression of the feelings and reasonings aroused by man's struggle with the eternal forces that appear to govern his life. Sophocles calls this struggle "the encounters of man with more than man". These two characteristics— namely, the choric element and the religious note— survive throughout the great period of Greek tragedy. In the earliest plays of Aeschylus the strictly dramatic element is scanty; the play is more or less a poem recited or sung by a chorus with one or two characters to personify its leading themes. Even with Euripides, the chorus is still the unifying and commenting interpreter of the drama.

The Role of the Chorus

Sophocles stands midway between Euripides and Aeschylus in this respect. For him the dramatic action is vital and goes to a great extent realistic; but the chorus is also essential to the play both in its capacity as actor in the events of the drama and as presenter of its dominating theme in lyric terms. A subtle and interesting feature of his technique is the way in which the chorus, clearly described as "elders of Thebes", "people of Colonus", etc. bridge the footlights, as it were, between spectator and stage. The persons of the chorus and their participation in the acted events increase the vividness and urgency of the action. With them we, the audience, are citizens of Thebes, witnesses of the passion of Oedipus, the martyrdom of Antigone, etc. The conflict of these characters was not only to be fought out but had to be fought out in public and submitted to the scrutiny and judgement of their fellowmen. Sometimes, indeed, this double function of the chorus, as actors and as commentators, leads to a glaring inconsistency. The chorus of *Antigone*, in their

dramatic character, must express a submissive, if rather unenthusiastic, loyalty to King Creon, and are heard to rebuke Antigone as having gone to the farthest limit of daring and stumbled against the "enthroned law". But in the greater detachment of their lyric utterances they are instinctively aware that the truth of the situation, and of the tragedy, lies deeper than that, for it is here a question of two obstinate wills, each loyal to a principal good in itself, but each pressing that loyalty to the point at which it breaks against the other, and on both the disaster falls. Yet there is a plausibility and a dramatic necessity in this convention. The tragedy, whatever its subject, is the tragedy of all of us. We, like the chorus, are both in it and spectators of it. And while the tragedy is being enacted, we identify ourselves now with this character and now with that—inconsistent, wavering mortals that we are. But the tragedy is not fully enacted and the story is not fully told until we have looked the whole matter squarely in the face and commented on it impartially. It is thus in the chorus as persons, and in their more impersonal lyric interludes, that we chiefly observe that religious approach to the dramatic theme which is an essential characteristic of Greek tragedy.

Prior Knowledge of the Story

Another consequence of this religious approach is noteworthy. The Greek dramatists could, no doubt, have written plays of ordinary life depicting the tragic aspects of human ambition or perversity against a contemporary background. But it was at that time taken for granted that the play should tell some already established story of the legendary and heroic past. In fact, it was not necessary that the play should tell a complete and self-contained story. Since the audience was already aware of the main facts of the story, the dramatist could rapidly come to whatever situation in it he had selected for the exposition of his theme. Some element of narrative, of course, remained as well as much scope for originality in the design of the incidents within the selected field. But the attention of the audience was not chiefly to be held by the element of suspense or the desire to know what happened next. And this was the most fitting condition for an art-form which was to attract not a passing curiosity but a profound contemplation of eternal truths. On the technical side, it gave the dramatist that powerful and subtle weapon of dramatic irony which Sophocles used with skill. Because of the use of this weapon, the audience could judge every speech and action of the play in the light of their prior knowledge of the situation. In other words, the audience all the time listened to a tragedy somewhat in the matter of a Christian audience of today listening to a play dealing with a Biblical theme with which it is already familiar. In this way the audience was better equipped to understand and to criticise the particular

interpretation offered by the author and to be impressed by any out-of-the-way incident or a new emphasis in his treatment of the subject. It is also reasonable to suppose that part of the function of the drama was to keep alive the old stories. The younger members of the audience often found in the theatre their first introduction to those old stories presented in a clear and exciting manner.

The Plays of Sophocles

1. "OEBPIUS REX" (OR, "OEDIPUS TYRANNUS")

Synopsis

Oedipus Rex, also called *Oedipus Tyrannus*, is regarded by many as Sophocles's masterpiece. It was particularly admired by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. It deals with that portion of the story of Oedipus in which he is the king of Thebes and husband of Jocasta, when the discovery that he is the son and murderer of Laius and son of Jocasta leads him to blind himself, and Jocasta to take her own life.

This play illustrates the Greek conception of human impotence in the presence of destiny which may hurl a man, for no fault of his own, from the height of prosperity to a terrible misery. A striking feature of the play is the eagerness with which Oedipus himself pursues the inquiry that is to bring about his ruin. He learns from the Delphic oracle that a plague which has fallen on the city of Thebes is due to the presence there of the murderer of King Laius. Oedipus calls upon all those who have any knowledge of the matter to come forward. Teiresias, the blind prophet, is first summoned. He knows the dreadful truth but at first refuses to disclose it. Accused by Oedipus of plotting with Creon against him, he partly reveals the facts: it was Oedipus himself who murdered Laius. Still utterly unsuspicious of his own guilt, Oedipus next turns against Creon whom he charges with trying to oust him from the kingship. He is deeply disturbed by Jocasta's description of the scene of Laius's death and of the persons who were accompanying Laius at that time. Jocasta's description tallies with the circumstances of a fight in which Oedipus had once killed a man. On one point light now comes to him: he is not, as he is supposed to be, the son of Polybus, the king of Corinth. A messenger comes from Corinth to announce the death of Polybus and the election of Oedipus to succeed him. Oedipus, dreading the oracle that he is to marry his own mother, shrinks from returning to Corinth but the messenger reveals that he himself had brought the infant Oedipus, given to him by a shepherd of Mt. Cithaeron, to Polybus and his queen Merope. Whose son then is he? An old shepherd, who has been sent for, as the only survivor present at the death of Laius, now completes the disclosure. It was he who had carried the infant Oedipus,

son of Laius and Jocasta to Mt. Cithaeron and had from pity given it to the Corinthian. Oedipus rushes into the palace, to find that Jocasta has hanged herself, and he then blinds himself.

Critical Comments

The outstanding feature of this play is its skilful construction. From the very first scene the action moves straight and undistracted towards the catastrophe. The interest turns, not on what the characters do but on their finding out what they have done, and one of the most powerful scenes is made by the husband and the wife deliberately and painfully confessing to each other certain dark events of their lives which they had hitherto kept concealed. The plot has the immense advantage of providing a deed in the past—unintentional murder of the father and equally unintentional marriage with the mother—which explains the hero's self-horror without making him lose our sympathies. And, as a matter of fact, the character of Oedipus, his determination to have the truth at any cost, his utter disregard of his own suffering, is heroic in itself and comes naturally from the plot. Jocasta was difficult to portray; the mere fact of her being twice as old as her husband was an awkwardness but there is a stately sadness, a power of quiet authority, and a certain stern outlook on life which seem to belong to a woman of hard experiences. Of course, there are glaring improbabilities about the original story but, as Aristotle points out, they fall outside the action of the play. In the action everything is natural except the very end. Why does Oedipus blind himself? Jocasta realises that she must die, and she hangs herself. Oedipus himself meant to kill her if she had not anticipated him. Why did he not follow her? Any free composition would have made him do so; but Sophocles was bound by the original story, and the original story required Oedipus to remain alive and blind a long time afterwards. As a mere piece of technique, this play deserves the position given to it by Aristotle as being a typical example of the highest Greek tragedy. There is deep truth of emotion and high thought. There is a wonderful grasp of character, and an equally wonderful imaginative power. For pure dramatic strength and skill, there are few things in any drama so profoundly tragic as the silent exit of Jocasta, when she alone sees the end that is coming.

2. "OEDIPUS AT COLONUS"

Synopsis

Oedipus, blind and banished, has wandered, attended by his daughter Antigone, to Colonus, a dominion of Attica. He is warned by the inhabitants to depart but, having learnt from an oracle that this is the spot where he is to die, refuses to go. An appeal is made to Theseus, King of Athens. The King assures Oedipus of his protection and of a burial-place on Attic soil; thereby his spirit will be a protection to Athens. Ismene joins Oedipus and tells him of the dispute between his sons Eteocles and Polynices for the throne of Thebes. The news makes Oedipus extremely angry with his sons. Creon arrives to seize Oedipus. Ismene and Antigone are carried off and Creon is about to seize Oedipus himself when Theseus intervenes, rescuing Oedipus and both the maidens, Ismene and Antigone. Meanwhile, Polynices has arrived and, with expressions of repentance, asks for his father's favour in struggle with his brother Eteocles. Oedipus scolds him and invokes on his two sons the curse that they would die by each other's hand. Peals of thunder warn Oedipus that his hour is at hand. He blesses his daughters; withdraws to a lonely spot; and, in the presence of Theseus alone, is borne away to the gods.

Critical Comments

Oedipus at Colonus is a play of the patriotic-archaeolgoical type. Oedipus learns after his long wanderings in the company of his daughter, Antigone, that his dead body will remain supernaturally pure and will be a divine protection for the country possessing it. Consequently, the Thebans intend to capture him, keep him close to their border till he dies, and then keep control of his grave. Oedipus has in the meantime reached Colonus, in Attica, where he knows that he is doomed to die. This is the only play in which Sophocles has practically dispensed with a plot, and the experiment produces some of his very highest work. However, a mere situation could not be made to fill a whole play. Sophocles had to insert the episodes of Creon and Polynices, and to make the first exciting by a futile attempt to kidnap the princesses, the second by the utterance of the father's curse. The real appeal of the play is to the burning, half-desperate patriotism of the end of the war time. The glory of Athens, the beauty of the spring and the nightingales at Colonus, the holy Acropolis which can never be conquered, represent the modern ideals of that patriotism; the legendary root of it is given in the figure of Theseus, the law-abiding, humane, and religious King; in the eternal reward won by the bold generosity of Athens; in the rejection of Argos and the curse laid for ever on turbulent and cruel Thebes. The spiritual majesty of Oedipus at the end is among the great things of Greek poetry; and the rather harsh contrast, which it offers with the rage of the curse-scene, could perhaps be made grand by sympathetic acting. Though not one of the most

characteristic of Sophocles's plays, it is perhaps the most intimate and personal of them. Exquisite are the following lines of Oedipus to Theseus:

"Fair Aigeus' son, only to gods in heaven

Comes no old age nor death of anything;

All else is turmoiled by our master Time.

The earth's strength fades and manhood's glory fades,

Faith dies, and unfaith blossoms like a flower.

And who shall find in the open streets of men

Or secret places of his own heart's love

One wind blow true for ever?"

3. "ANTIGONE"

Synopsis

Creon, ruler of Thebes, has forbidden the burial of the body of Polynices. Anyone disobeying this command will suffer the penalty of death. Antigone makes up her mind to defy the outrageous command of the King and perform the funeral rites for her brother. She is caught doing this and brought before the indignant King. She defends her action as being in accordance with the higher laws of the gods. Creon, unrelenting, condemns her to be shut alive in a cave without food or water and allowed to die. Her sister, Ismene, who has refused to share in her defiant act, now claims a share in her guilt and in her penalty, but is treated by Creon as insane. Haemon, the son of Creon, who is betrothed to Antigone, pleads in vain with Creon. He goes out, warning his father that he will die with her. The prophet Teiresias threatens Creon with the fearful consequences of his violation of the divine laws. Creon, at last moved, sets out hurriedly for the cave where Antigone had been imprisoned. He finds Haemon clasping her dead body, for Antigone has hanged herself. Haemon attacks Creon with a sword but misses him and then kills himself. Creon returns to the palace to find that his wife Eurydice has taken her own life in despair.

Critical Comments

Antigone is perhaps the most celebrated drama in Greek literature. The plot is built on the eternally interesting idea of martyrdom, the devotion to a higher unseen law, resulting in revolt against and destruction by the lower visible law. Apart from

the beauty of detail, one of the marks of daring genius in this play is Antigone's vagueness about the motive or principle of her action; it is because her guilty brother's cause was just, or because death is enough to wipe away all offences, or because it is not her nature to join in hating though she is ready to join in loving, or because an unburied corpse offends the gods, or because her own heart is rally with the dead and she wishes to die. In one passage she explains, in a helpless and false way, that she only buried him because he was her brother and that she would not have buried her husband or son. Another wonderful touch is Antigone's inability to see the glory of her death: she is only a weak girl cruelly punished for a thing which she was bound to do. She thinks that the almost religious admiration of the elders is mockery. Creon also is subtly drawn. He is not a monster though he has to act like one. He has staked his whole authority upon his command. Finding it disobeyed he has taken a position from which it is almost impossible to retreat. Then it appears that his niece Antigone is the culprit. It is hard for him to withdraw his command; and she gives him not the slightest excuse for doing so. She defies him openly and contemptuously. Ismene, bold in the face of a real crisis, joins her sister. Creon's own son, Haemon, at first moderate, soon becomes insubordinate and violent. Creon seems to be searching for a loophole to escape. After Haemon leaves him, he cries in desperation that he would stick to his decision. Both sisters must die! "Both"! say the chorus, "You never spoke of Ismene!" "Did I not?" he answers with visible relief, "No, no, it was only Antigone!" And even on her he will not do the irreparable. With the obvious wish to get breathing time he orders her to be shut in a cave without food or water. When he repents, it is too late.

4. "ELECTRA"

Synopsis

Orestes arrives at Mycenae, with Pylades and an aged attendant, to avenge the death of his father, in obedience to the Pythian oracle. The attendant is sent on to inform Clytemnestra that Orestes has been killed in a chariot race, and Orestes and Pylades prepare to follow disguised, carrying an urn supposed to contain the ashes of Orestes. Meanwhile Clytemnestra, warned by an ominous dream, has sent her daughter Chrysothemis to pour libations on the tomb of Agamemnon. Electra, who is living a wretched life, bullied by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus on account of her loyalty to her father, meets Chrysothemis and persuades her to substitute for the offerings of Clytemnestra, others more acceptable to their father's tomb. Clytemnestra appears and scolds Electra, but is interrupted by the arrival of the messenger and learns with ill-concealed joy the news of the death of Orestes. Electra, on the other hand, is plunged in despair. The announcement of Chrysothemis

that she has found a lock of hair, probably that of Orestes, on Agamemnon's tomb seems only to mock her sorrow. She determines, now that the expected help of Orestes is lost, to kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus herself. The more prudent and plaint Chrysothemis refuses to share in the deed. Orestes and Pylades now approach, and Orestes gradually reveals himself to Electra. He and Pylades enter the palace. The death-shriek of Clytemnestra is heard. Aegisthus then approaches. He is lured into the palace to see what he supposes to be the dead body of Orestes, but finds it to be that of Clytemnestra. He is driven at the point of his sword to the room where Agamemnon was slain, and there killed. The chorus of Mycenean women rejoice at the passing of the curse which has rested on the house of Atreus.

Critical Comments

Electra shows skill in the plot and a clear characterization. There is, however, a certain artificiality in the messenger's speech where the dramatist inserts a lengthy and undramatic description of the Pythian Games, while all that was wanted was a false report of Orestes's death. This play is also "stern", to use Sophocles's own word. Electra and Orestes show no sense of horror of the deed they feel called upon to perform. The play closes, too, with an expression of entire satisfaction. It is this spirit that makes this play, brilliant as it is, so typically uncharming. The explanation, perhaps, lies in some natural taste for severity and dislike of sentiment in Sophocles. It seems certainly also to be connected with his archaism (both as regards his language and his conceptions).

5. "TRACHINIAI"

Synopsis

Trachiniai deals with the death of Heracles. Heracles has been absent from his home for fifteen months. He had told his wife Deianira that at the end of this period the crisis of his life would come and that he would either perish or have rest from all his troubles. Deianira sends Hyllus, their son, in search of his father. As she reflects over her anxious lot, a messenger announces the arrival of Heracles in Euboea nearby. This is soon confirmed by the report of a herald who brings with him a train of captive women taken by Heracles when he sacked the city of his enemy Eurytus. Deianira discovers that her husband Heracles has transferred his love to one of these, namely Iole, daughter of Eurytus. The centaur Nessus, when dying, has left her a love-charm. With this she decides to win back the love of Heracles, and smears with it the robe of honour that she sends to him. Too late she discovers that the charm is in fact a deadly poison. Hyllus returns, describes the agony of Heracles tortured by the robe, and denounces his mother as a murderess. Deianira goes out

in silence, and presently her old nurse appears to say that she has taken her own life. Dying Heracles is brought home and bids Hyllus to carry him to Mt. Oeta and there burns him on a pyre before the agony returns. Thereafter Hyllus is to marry Iole. Hyllus reluctantly consents, bitterly reproaching the gods for their pitiless treatment of his father. (The scene is laid at Trachis and the title of the play is taken from the chorus of Trachinian maidens).

Critical Comments

Like Philoctetes, this play shows the influence of Euripides. There are some definite imitations, in this play, of Euripides's Heracles, apart from the Euripidean prologue and subtly dramatic situation between Deianira and her husband's unwilling mistress. The Dorian hero, a common figure in satyr-plays, had never been admitted to tragedy till Euripides's Heracles, where he appears as the lusty, conquering warrior, jovial and impulsive, with little nobleness of soul to fall back upon. There could also be some connection between the writing of Trachiniai and the history contained in Antipptone's speech on poisoning.

Who was Heracles?

Heracles, more commonly known as Hercules, was one of the most famous of Greek heroes. He was noted for his strength, courage, endurance, good nature, and compassion; he was also known for his good appetite and lust. A large number of campaigns, combats, and miscellaneous undertakings are attributed to him, among them the "Twelve Labours" that were imposed upon him by Eurystheus.

6. "AJAX"

Synopsis

Ajax was the son of Telamon, King of Salamis. He was the leader of the Salaminians at the siege of Troy, and is depicted by Homer as a man obstinate in his bravery to the point of stupidity. After the death of Achilles, Ajax and Odysseus contended for the hero's arms. When these were awarded to Odysseus, Ajax was maddened by resentment and slaughtered a flock of sheep in the belief that they were his enemies. Afterwards, from shame, he took his own life. The play by Sophocles centres round these incidents.

Ajax, the son of Telamon, demented by resentment because the arms of Achilles have been awarded to Odysseus, has given vent to his wrath by slaughtering a flock of sheep, taking them for his enemies. He is first seen in his madness, then after his recovery, stricken with grief and shame, while his slave, Tecmessa, and the

chorus of Salaminian sailors try to soothe him. He calls for his son Eurysaces, gives him his shield, and leaves his last instructions for his brother Teucer. He then takes his sword, to bury it, as he says, and goes to purge himself of his guilt by the sea. Teucer has now returned from a foray and has learnt from the seer Calchas that, to avert calamity, Ajax, who has annoyed the gods by his arrogance must be kept within his tent for that day. But it is too late. Ajax is found killed by his own sword. Menelaus forbids his burial, as an enemy to the Greeks, and Agamemnon confirms the decision, but is persuaded by Odysseus to relent, and Ajax is carried to his grave.

Critical Comments

Ajax is a stiff and very early play. It is only in the prologue and in the last scene that it has three actors and it does not only really know how to use them, as they are used, for instance, in *Electra* and *Antigone*. The last five hundred lines are occupied with the question of the burial of Ajax, his great enemy Odysseus being eventually the man who prevails on the angry generals to do him honour. The finest things in the play are the hero's speeches in his disgrace and the portrayal of his mistress, the enslaved Princess Tecmessa whom he despises and who is really superior to him in courage and strength of character, as well as in unselfishness.

7. "PHILOCTETES"

Philoctetes is living wretchedly on Lemnos, suffering from his wound, supporting himself by shooting birds with his beloved bow of Heracles. Odysseus and Neoptolemus arrive to carry him to the siege of Troy. Odysseus reveals to Neoptolemus his plan; Neoptolemus is to pretend that he has quarrelled with the leaders of the Greek Army and is on his way home; he is to heap abuse on Odysseus and to try to possess himself of the bow. Neoptolemus, though at first unwilling to lead himself to the deceit, consents. He meets Philoctetes and tells his story. Philoctetes makes a pathetic appeal to him to take him to Greece, and Neoptolemus agrees. But Philoctetes is seized with a fit of pain after which he is likely to fall asleep. He entrusts his bow to Neoptolemus. When he wakes up, Neoptolemus, feeling ashamed of his conduct, confesses the plot. He is on the point of returning the bow when Odysseus intervenes. Odysseus and Neoptolemus depart to the ship, carrying off the bow. Philoctetes is left lamenting his loss while the chorus of sailors try to persuade him to join them. They are about to leave him when Neoptolemus returns, determined to give back the bow but pursued by Odysseus. Philoctetes having regained the bow seeks to shoot Odysseus but is prevented by Neoptolemus who again tries to persuade Philoctetes to accompany them to Troy. He fails, and

reluctantly decides to fulfil his promise of carrying Philoctetes home. At this point Heracles appears in a vision; he bids Philoctetes to go to Troy, and Philoctetes yields to the voice of one whom he cannot disobey.

The play presents a profoundly tragic situation, and it ends in Euripidean style with Heracles appearing as a divine reconciler *ex machina*.

[Who was Philoctetes?

Philoctetes was the man to whom Heracles or Hercules had given his bow and arrow as a compensation for agreeing to light the pyre on which Heracles wanted to be burnt to death. In course of the expedition to Troy, Philoctetes was bitten in the foot by a serpent, and this produced so painful a wound and his cries were so terrible that the Greeks landed him on the uninhabited island of Lemnos. Sophocles' play begins some time after this incident.]

Sophocles As a Dramatist

His Contribution to Greek Tragedy

Sophocles was an innovator in tragedy. He introduced the third actor; he introduced or at least greatly developed stage scenery; he increased the number of chorus from twelve to fifteen; and he abandoned the practice of connected tetralogies, making each play an artistic whole in itself. In his tragedies man's will plays a greater, and that of the gods a lesser, part than in those of Aeschylus.

The course of his dramas is determined by the characters of the protagonists, the influence they undergo, the penalties they suffer, not by external incidents. Sophocles is no philosopher or speculator on the deeper problems of life; he accepts the conventional religion without criticism. His principal characters, though subject to human defects, are in a general way heroic and actuated by lofty motives. This is perhaps what Sophocles meant by saying that he portrayed people as they ought to be while Euripides portrayed them as they were. Among his notable achievements are his great heroines, Antigone and Electra, in whom he depicts a combination of womanly gentleness and superb courage. His lyrics form a less important element in the plays than do those of Aeschylus; they combine charm with grandeur, without the mystery and terror of Aeschylus, or the "descriptive embroidery" of Euripides. The dialogue of Sophocles is dignified,

appropriate to his idealised characters. The whole is marked by a powerful simplicity. According to his own account of his poetic development, he abandoned the magniloquence of Aeschylus and passed to his own harsh and artificial period of style (as exemplified perhaps in the *Electra*), and finally attained greater ease and simplicity.

The high estimation in which Sophocles was held in antiquity has been shared in modern times, for instance, by Lessing and Racine. Matthew Arnold describes him as one

Who saw life steadily and saw it whole,

The mellow glory of the Attic stage,

Singer of sweet Colonus and its child.

Shelley had a volume of Sophocles in his pocket when he was drowned. Among Landor's *Imaginary Conversations* is one between Sophocles and Pericles.

II

Disaster without Justification

The Aeschylean universe is governed by moral laws, a violation of which is sure to bring disaster. In the world of Sophocles wrong-doing does indeed lead to its punishment, but disaster may come without justification and, at the most, with contributory negligence. Oedipus would not have done what he did, had he been a little more cautious and a little less self-confident; nor would Heracles have suffered if he had never given Deianeira cause to use the supposed love-philtre. But this does not explain why, in a given case, a comparatively small fault should have such consequences. Still less does it explain why a woman like Deianeira should be at one moment a loving, anxious but hopeful wife, and at the next a hanging corpse. Does Sophocles have any comfort to offer to his readers or any advice to give?

Need of Pity and Wisdom

Of this pattern, which mankind describes as the will of the gods, a great part is piety and purity. Accordingly, no poet speaks more than Sophocles of the need for reverence. But part of it lies beyond morality and is incalculable. Accordingly, no poet speaks so much as Sophocles of the need for wisdom. A man should know what he is; he should know his place in the world; he should be able to take the wide view, with a due sense of proportion—unlike Creon in *Antigone*, who could see only that Polynices

was a dead traitor, and could not see the more important fact that he was a dead man.

The Dignity of Being a Man

But no piety and no wisdom can protect a man against the blows of fate. And as for consolation, the suffering of Oedipus is beyond any possibility of relief. And yet Sophocles does have something to offer to his readers. He certainly offers no hope of a better world. But the grave beauty and dignity of his plays surely reflect the beauty and dignity that he found in human life. Man may be an insubstantial shade; but for all that, Sophocles leaves us with a great sense of the dignity of being a man. To be great and noble of soul is everything. Ajax faces death proudly. Antigone knows that she has done her duty and will be welcomed by her kin among the dead. As for Oedipus, his essential greatness is beyond any shadow of doubt.

The "Complex" Sophocles Hero

The Sophocles hero is complex, not single-minded; he must, therefore, be seen from more than one point of view. We cannot understand Creon's tragedy or the tragedy of Oedipus unless we know how they behave to a diversity of people, and how different people behave to them. Oedipus's consideration for his people, his courtesy to Creon and Teiresias which quickly passes to suspicion and rage, Creon's attitude to Haemon—these are not decorations or improvements, it is essential to the tragedy that we should know our heroes in this light. Similarly the Watchman's reluctance to face Creon is important as a side-light on the King's character, not only sub-comic relief. Eteocles's colourless Spy is transformed, necessarily, into this attractive character of flesh and blood. This is not "progress", it is plain logic. This art of "undercutting" is used in *Oedipus Rex* as it has rarely been used since, when the supreme eminence of Oedipus is shown by the collapse of Jocasta's bold scepticism.

The Need for the Third Actor

Here most probably we have the origin of the third actor, but there was an accessory cause and a development. No catastrophe can be self-contained; others besides the sinner are involved. To Aeschylus this necessary aspect of tragedy presented itself as a linear movement, hence the trilogy; either the tragic event is the result of inherited character, or it leaves a legacy of tragedy for the next generation. To Sophocles this idea presents itself in a complex way, as one immediate situation which involves others at once. The vanity of Ajax ruins Ajax, but it also endangers his sailors, Tecmessa, and others; Creon's stubbornness threatens the

Watchman and destroys Antigone before it involves Creon himself through Haemon and Eurydice. Thus again more actors are wanted. Finally, Sophocles began to lay more weight on the tragic inter-working of circumstance with character, so that the situation becomes more complex. The more complex situation brings the use of the three actors to its highest degree of fluidity.

In the two great discovery scenes of Oedipus Rex, the situation is not presented practically complete before our eyes; not only does it grow but it grows in opposite directions for the two chief actors. The conversation between Oedipus and the Corinthian messenger is itself painfully dramatic, but the addition of Jocasta more than doubles the power of the scene. The progress of Jocasta from hope, through confidence, to frozen horror, and the progress of Oedipus from terror to a sublime resolution and assurance, the two connected by the commonplace cheerfulness of the Corinthian—this makes a really excellent combination of cross-rhythms.

The Myth of Oedipus

Oedipus, Son of Laius and Jocasta

Oedipus is one of the most important and famous figures in mythology. He was the son of Laius, King of Thebes. When Amphion and Zethus gained possession of Thebes, Laws had taken refuge with Pelops, but had repaid his kindness by kidnapping his son Chrysippus, thereby bringing a curse on his own family. Laius recovered his kingdom after the death of Amphion and Zethus, and married Jocasta, but was warned by Apollo that his own son by Jocasta would kill him.

In order to escape death at the hands of his son, Laius had the child, Oedipus, exposed on Mt. Cithaeron with a spike driven through the child's feet. There the child was discovered by a shepherd who took it to Polybus, King of Corinth, and Merope his Queen, who brought up the child as their own son. Later, being taunted with being no true son of Polybus, Oedipus enquired of the Delphic Oracle about his parentage, but was only told that he would kill his own father and get married to his own mother.

Killed His Father and Married His Mother in Ignorance

Thinking that this prophecy referred to Polybus and Merope, Oedipus determined never to see Corinth again. At a place where three roads met, he encountered Laius whom he did not know, and was ordered to make way. A quarrel followed, in which Oedipus killed Laius, thus fulfilling the first part of the prophecy

but without realising the identity of the man he had killed. He then went on to Thebes, which was at that time suffering great misfortunes at the hands of a monster called the Sphinx who asked people riddles and killed those who could not give the correct answers. As the monster's riddles could not be answered by anyone, all those entering the city were being killed by it. Creon, brother of Jocasta and regent of Thebes, offered the kingdom and Jocasta's hand to whoever should rid the country of the monster. Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx and thus became the King of Thebes and married Jocasta (his own mother) without knowing who she really was.

Oedipus Blinded Herself

Oedipus and Jocasta had two sons, Eteocles and Polynices, and two daughters, Ismene and Antigone. At last in a time of famine and pestilence, the Oracle announced that these disasters could be averted only if the slayer of Laius were expelled from the city. Oedipus thereupon started a search for the man who had killed Laius. The result was to establish that he himself was Laius's son and also his murderer. On this discovery, Jocasta, finding that she had been married to her own son, hanged herself while Oedipus blinded himself. Oedipus was removed from the throne and banished.

His Two Sons and How they Died

Attended by his daughter Antigone, he wandered to Colonus in Attica, where he was protected by Theseus and where he met his end. According to another version, Oedipus remained shut up in Thebes. His sons having given him cause for displeasure, he put a curse on them that they should die by each other's hand. When they succeeded to the throne, on the deposition of Oedipus, they agreed to divide the inheritance, ruling in alternate years. But Eteocles, who ruled first, refused to make way for Polynices when his year of kingship ended. Polynices had spent his year of absence from Thebes at the court of Adrastus, King of Argos, and had married his daughter. Adrastus now assembled an army to support the claims of his son-in-law. The army was headed by seven champions, the famous "Seven against Thebes." To each of the seven champions was allotted one of the gates of Thebes to attack, while Eteocles likewise entrusted a Theban warrior to defend each gate. The invading army suffered a heavy defeat. Eteocles engaged in a combat with his brother Polynices, and the two killed each other. Creon, now King of Thebes, ordered that the bodies of the enemies and particularly that of Polynices should be refused burial. (This was a grave punishment, for unless buried, the dead could not enter Hades, the kingdom of death).

The Tragedy of Antigone, a Daughter of Oedipus

What followed is variously told. One version is that given by Euripides in his play,*the Suppliants*. Another version is that Antigone, rebelling against Creon's decree, managed secretly to perform the rites of burial over her brother. For this she was placed alive by Creon's order in a sepulchre, even though she was betrothed to his son Haemon, and there she killed herself while Haemon stabbed himself beside her dead body. This is the version in the *Antigone* of Sophocles. (According to yet another version, Antigone, detected in the act of cremating her brother's dead body at night, was handed over by Creon to Haemon to be killed. But Haemon hid her in a shepherd's hut and pretended that he had killed her. Later, their son, having come to Thebes for a festival, was recognised by a birthmark common to all his family. To escape from Creon's vengeance, Haemon and Antigone killed themselves or perhaps were saved by divine intervention).

Oedipus Rex—An Introduction

Oedipus Rex, produced by Sophocles in the maturity of his powers, is his masterpiece. Aristotle also regarded this play as Sophocles's best and he frequently referred to it as the perfect type of tragic composition. Its greatness lies in the combination of a faultlessly-constructed plot with the profoundest insight into human motive and circumstance.

It is the story of the impact of a totally undeserved misfortune upon a man of no exceptional faults or virtues. It reveals, with a merciless sincerity, the pitfalls lying about the path of a man into which those very unexceptional faults or virtues may at a touch overbalance him, at the bidding of some incalculable chance, and out of which he must raise himself by the greatness of his soul which alone makes him a match for the eternal powers. The story has its religious and anthropological implications. But the average reader is more interested in the more universal human issues of the drama. Oedipus is too complacent in his prosperity, too confident of his sufficiency, too ready to take offence or to impute blame when upset by the approach of trouble. Oedipus is unshirking in the performance of a self-appointed unpleasant task, and he is unflinching in quest of the truth at whatever cost of terrible self-revelation. Oedipus is driven to the summit of passion by the agony of body and soul, and returns at last to humility and selfless resignation. This vast and living portrait of a man, surrounded by a group of subsidiary figure no less vital, has no equal in the Greek, or in any other theatre. The chorus, fellow-citizens desperately concerned in the awful happenings, are

closely tied to the action and their moods move swiftly with the march of events. Bewildered and apprehensive, they have little respite for calm reflection or reasoned judgment, and even their final words seem only to deepen the hopeless gloom. The moral they would draw for us is implied rather than stated in their moods of apprehension lest divine law should after all be found wanting, and a lurking spirit of defiance be justified by the event. This worst calamity at least is averted.

Oedipus Rex has been thought to be a "marvel of construction", and its plot has thus been analyzed:

Act I

The arrival of an oracle about the plague in Thebes commanding the banishment of the unknown murderer of the late King Laius.

Act II

Oedipus, in the course of his investigation of the murder, quarrels with Teiresias, the true servant of the gods.

Act III

Hot-tempered and suspicious, Oedipus quarrels also with Creon, the true servant of the State.

Act IV

A messenger comes from Corinth. Jocasta realizes the truth and goes to hang herself. Oedipus, misunderstanding the situation, persists in his inquiry, and the Chorus rashly exults in the hope of discovering that some great, perhaps divine, parentage is his.

Act V

Owing to the revelations of the messenger, a shepherd is brought from Cithaeron. Oedipus in his turn realizes the truth—that he is the son of Laius and Jocasta—and rushes out to blind himself.

A Play About Human Greatness As Well As About the Insecurity of the Human Condition

Oedipus Rex is undoubtedly a play about the blindness of man and the desperate insecurity of the human condition. In a sense every man must grope in the dark as Oedipus gropes, not knowing who he is or what he has to suffer. We all live in a world

of appearances which hide from us dreadful realities which we know not of. But surely *Oedipus Rex* is also a play about human greatness. Oedipus is great, not because of a great worldly position but because of his inner strength. He has the strength to pursue the truth at whatever personal cost, and he has the strength to accept and endure it when found. "This horror is mine," he cries, "and none but I is strong enough to bear it." Oedipus is great because he accepts the responsibility for all his acts, including those which are objectively horrible, though subjectively innocent.

Oedipus, a Symbol of the Human Intelligence

Oedipus is a kind of symbol of the human intelligence which cannot rest until it has solved all the riddles, even the last riddle to which the answer is that human happiness is built on an illusion. Sophocles does seem, in the last line of the play, to generalize the case; he does appear to suggest that in some sense Oedipus is every man and that every man is potentially Oedipus. In this matter Sophocles' view did not change. Whether this vision of man's condition (namely that all man living are but appearance or unsubstantial shadow) is true or false, it ought to be comprehensible to a generation which relishes the plays of Samuel Beckett. This view may not be a "message" but it certainly tends to an "enlargement of our sensibility."

Freud's Interpretation

Freud interpreted the play in a specific psychological sense: "Oedipus's fate," says Freud, "moves us only because it might have been our own, because the oracle laid upon us before birth the very curse which rested upon him. It may be that we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses towards our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence towards our fathers; our dreams convince us that we were."

Oedipus Rex—(or, "Oedipus The King"): A Summary of the Play

An Appeal to Oedipus for Help in the Midst of the Misfortunes that have Befallen the People of Thebes

Oedipus, King of Thebes, comes out of his palace to meet a group of Theban citizens led by a priest of Zeus. Oedipus asks these people what has brought them to him and why the air is so full of hymns and prayers and lamentations. Addressing the Priest in particular, Oedipus asks him to explain what misfortunes have brought

these people to him. The Priest replies that these are not the only people praying to the gods and giving expression to their wretched condition.

A large number of other citizens have gathered in the market-place and near Athene's temple where they are kneeling in prayer, hoping to get some relief in their troubles. The Priest goes on to tell Oedipus that the city has been overtaken by a great disaster; the land has become barren; the herds of sheep are hungry upon the pastures which used to be green; the women of the city are giving birth to dead children; people are dying, in large numbers, of the plague. The Priest then appeals to Oedipus to come to the help of his subjects. Oedipus is certainly no god, says the Priest, but he is wiser than all other men; he can read the riddles of life and the mysterious ways of heaven because it was he who had saved the city from the cruel and bloodthirsty Sphinx. It is the duty of Oedipus to save his people so that the impression which people have of him as a noble, mighty, and wise man should not be nullified because of his inaction. The city looks upon him as its saviour; let it not be thought that, under his Kingship, the city first rose from ruin and then to ruin fell again.

Creon Sent to Delphi to Seek the Guidance of Phoebus (or Apollo)

Oedipus replies that he is aware of the cruel sufferings his people are undergoing. He himself may not be sick but he is suffering a greater torture on account of the sufferings of his people than they themselves are suffering. Each citizen is suffering as a single individual; but he, Oedipus, bears the weight of the collective suffering of all of them. He has been shedding many tears on their account. He has even been looking for a remedy. He has sent Creon, his wife's brother, to Delphi to find out from Apollo's oracle there the reason for the sufferings of the Theban people and the method by which they can be delivered of those sufferings. Creon left for Delphi many days ago but has not yet returned. On his return, says Oedipus, the method proposed by the oracle will promptly be adopted to relieve the sufferings of the people.

The Circumstances of the Murder of King Laius

Just at this time Creon arrives. He had sought the guidance of the oracle of Delphi and has now brought the information for which Oedipus has anxiously been waiting in order to know how the sufferings of his people can be relieved. Creon tells Oedipus that, according to the Delphic oracle, all the sufferings of the people are due to the presence in their midst of the man who had murdered Laius who was the ruler of the city before Oedipus was enthroned as the King. The murder of Laius

must be avenged before people can expect any relief in their sufferings. As Oedipus is not aware of the circumstances which prevailed in the city before he became its King, he asks Creon who murdered King Laius and how. Creon gives a brief description of the circumstances in which King Laius was killed. King Laius had left the city in the company of a few attendants on a religious journey and had never come back home again. A single survivor from the King Laius's party had returned to the city and said that the King and his companions had fallen in with brigands who had killed not only the King but his companions also. Oedipus asks how brigands would dare to attack the King unless they were bribed by enemies within the city. Creon replies that no inquiry had been held into the murder because the city was pre-occupied with a grave problem that had been troubling all the people. This problem had been created by the Sphinx whose riddle nobody was able to solve with the result that the people were groaning under the weight of the affliction caused to them by the Sphinx. It was only Oedipus who had solved the riddle and thus rescued the city from the clutches of the Sphinx. Laius having been killed, reportedly by brigands, the people had made Oedipus their King and offered their widowed Queen to him as his wife.

Oedipus to Avenge the Murder of Laius

On hearing all these facts, Oedipus replies that he will start an investigation into the murder of Laius and that he will find out the truth. Oedipus declares that he will avenge the murder of Laius on behalf of the people of Thebes and on behalf of Phoebus. In avenging this murder, Oedipus will not only remove the stigma from the city but also protect himself because the murderer of Laius could very well try to murder Oedipus also.

The Song Sung by the Chorus

The declaration of the King satisfies the Priest who then withdraws in the company of the citizens who had come with him to submit their petition to the King. Creon also leaves. Only Oedipus remains behind and the Chorus representing the citizens of Thebes enter singing. The song sung by the Chorus is a kind of invocation. The Chorus appeals to Athene, Artemis, and Apollo to protect the people of Thebes, as they used to protect them in the past. The woes which the people are suffering cannot be counted. There is no defence against the destruction which is going on in the city. The fertile soil has become unproductive. Women suffer pain and are giving birth to dead children. People are dying in large numbers. The dead bodies of those who perish remain lying on the ground unburied, infecting the air with deadly pollution. Young wives and aged mothers go to the altars and cry aloud in prayer. The

terrible cry of the fierce god of war rings in the ears of the people, and this is an indication that war might soon begin and cause further destruction. The song ends with a prayer to Apollo, Artemis, and Bacchus to come to the rescue of the city of Thebes and save the people.

Oedipus's Curse Upon the Murderer

When the Chorus have completed their song, Oedipus says that the sufferings of the city can be ended if the members of the Chorus co-operate with him. Oedipus reminds the members of the Chorus that years ago he had come to the city as a complete foreigner and that it was only afterwards that he became a Theban among Thebans. When he came first, he did not know anything about the murder of Laius, and even now he has no clue to that murder. However, he now wishes to proclaim the whole city that he is bent upon avenging the murder. Let the murderer come forward and confess his crime. The murderer need have no fear; no punishment will be awarded to him except banishment from the city. If any citizen brings information about the identity of the murderer, he will be rewarded and will, besides, earn the King's gratitude. If any citizen is harbouring the murderer in his house, let him take this warning and speedily drive out the murderer from his home because it is the presence of the murderer which is responsible for the plague raging in the city. Oedipus then goes on to utter a curse upon the man who murdered Laius; the murderer will find nothing but wretchedness and misery as long as he lives; if the murderer is intentionally given shelter by Oedipus himself, let the same curse descend upon Oedipus. It would have been Oedipus's duty, the King goes on to say, to avenge the murder of Laius even if the command had not come from Phoebus. Now it is doubly his duty, and he will leave nothing undone to find the man who killed Laius. On those who disobey, Oedipus invokes another curse. May their fields become utterly barren and their wives be rendered incapable of bearing any children, and may the present plague, and a pestilence worse than the present one, destroy them! Oedipus completes his speech with a prayer for the welfare of the Chorus: "May justice and all the gods always help you!"

Teiresias Sent for at Creon's Advice

The Chorus-Leader now speaks. He says that he did not kill Laius and that he is ignorant of the identity of the killer. Since Phoebus has imported the task of revenge, upon the city, Phoebus should also name the murderer. Oedipus says that there is no force by which human beings can compel the gods or do or say anything against their own will. Phoebus has not chosen to name the murderer of Laius. The

Chorus-Leader thereupon suggests that the prophet Teiresias should be consulted in the matter because Teiresias has the power to read the mind of Apollo. Oedipus replies that he has not ignored even this possibility. Acting upon Creon's advice he has already sent two messengers to Teiresias. Strangely enough, Teiresias has not yet come in response to the summons.

Oedipus and Teiresias

Just then the blind Teiresias arrives, led by a boy. The Chorus-Leader draws Oedipus's attention to the prophet's arrival, saying that Teiresias is divinely inspired and that he is the only man whose heart contains the truth. Oedipus turns to Teiresias and, speaking most respectfully, says that only he can save the city from the plague. The plague will never cease unless the murderer of Laius is discovered and punished with either death or banishment. Oedipus appeals to Teiresias to exercise his powers of divination and give him the name and identity of the murderer. Teiresias replies that he should not have come in response to Oedipus's call. Knowledge becomes a great weight upon the mind if that knowledge can be of no avail. Teiresias says that he would like to go back home and that such a course will be best not only for himself but also for Oedipus. Oedipus points out that, if Teiresias does not reveal the truth of which he is aware, he will prove disloyal to the city where he was born. Oedipus makes another humble appeal to Teiresias to tell him the truth. Teiresias, however, declines to unburden his mind of the knowledge that he possesses. Oedipus now loses his temper. He asks if Teiresias would like to see the city ruined and all the inhabitants killed, and if he can prove so hard-hearted and rigid. Oedipus's tone of humility is now gone. He calls Teiresias a villain for treating people with such cold disdain. Teiresias persists in his refusal regardless of Oedipus's anger and rage. Thereupon Oedipus, losing all self-control, asserts that the murder of Laius must have been planned by Teiresias himself and that Teiresias, being blind, must have used someone else for the actual murder. Teiresias thereupon says that Oedipus himself is the man whose crimes pollute the city and that, for this reason, he should submit to the punishment which he has announced for the culprit. Oedipus is shocked by the accusation and can never believe it. But Teiresias repeats the accusation, adding that Oedipus is leading a horrible life of shame with those nearest and dearest to him. Oedipus threatens Teiresias with dire consequences for trying to defame him, but Teiresias says that he has spoken nothing but the truth. Oedipus expresses the suspicion that Teiresias is in league with Creon and that they have both hatched a conspiracy against him. Oedipus laments that Creon, in whom he had reposed his trust, has become hostile to him and has entered into a shameful

agreement with Teiresias whom he calls a crafty schemer and a mountebank, and who, in Oedipus's opinion, is not only blind by sight but also by brains. Oedipus taunts Teiresias on the latter's failure to have solved the riddle of the Sphinx, adding that it was he, Oedipus, who had solved the riddle thus getting rid of the Sphinx and saving the people of Thebes.

Oedipus warns Teiresias that he will teach him a lesson for his treason. At this point the Chorus-Leader intervenes and tries to pacify Oedipus, saying that it is more important to carry out the task that Phoebus has laid upon him. Teiresias claims the right to give a reply to what Oedipus has said. Teiresias then angrily denies the charge that he is in league with Creon. Teiresias next rebukes Oedipus for having taunted him with blindness. Oedipus may be having eyes in the physical sense, says Teiresias, but Oedipus is unable to see the facts. Teiresias accuses Oedipus of being ignorant of the identity of his parents. Teiresias warns Oedipus that he will be driven out of Thebes, that he will be deprived of his eyesight, that he will utter cries of agony on learning the real significance of his marriage, and that he will find himself one with his own children. Teiresias' words naturally enrage Oedipus and, in a state of fury, he shouts to the prophet to get out of his sight at once. Teiresias says that he seems to be a fool to Oedipus but that he was regarded as wise by Oedipus's parents. Oedipus asks who his parents were. Teiresias replies that this very day will unfold the secret of his birth and his destruction. Oedipus says that Teiresias is talking riddles, but Teiresias replies that Oedipus, who is proud of his talent for solving riddles, should have no difficulty in understanding him. Oedipus says that he has nothing but contempt for Teiresias; and he boasts of the talent by means of which he had won glory. Oedipus then once again shouts to Teiresias to leave. Teiresias says that he will go only when he has had his say and that he is not in the least scared of Oedipus.

Teiresias then goes on to complete what he had to say. According to Teiresias, the man for whom Oedipus is searching, namely the murderer of Laius, is living in the city itself; the murderer shall be found to be a Theban by birth even though he is at present regarded as a foreigner; the murderer will be forced to depart from the city, with his eyesight turned to blindness and his wealth to beggary, and he will take his children with him; the murderer will find himself to be the brother of his own children and the son of the very woman whom he now calls his wife. Teiresias then bids Oedipus to go and think over all this. Only if his statements prove to be false, will Oedipus be justified in thinking Teiresias to be lacking in the power of divination.

A Choral Song

When both Teiresias and Oedipus have withdrawn, the Chorus sings its next song. The Chorus calls upon the murderer of Laius to flee from the city without delay because Phoebus has denounced him and because the Furies, whose function it is to punish crime, must already be active in their chase of the murderer. Apollo's threat will hang upon the criminal's head and descend upon him. Let every Theban join the search for the criminal. But the Chorus would like to know the meaning of the words spoken by Teiresias. The Chorus is puzzled by what Teiresias has said. There is no strife between the Kings of Thebes and Corinth. An unknown hand killed Laius who was then the King of Thebes. Zeus and Apollo know the true facts. As for human beings, they will only believe what can be proved. How can Oedipus be regarded as the murderer of Laius as has been alleged by Teiresias, Oedipus proved his wisdom by defeating the Sphinx and saving the city. How can he be accused of the murder of Laius?

Oedipus and Creon

Creon now enters. He has just heard of the accusation made against him by Oedipus in his conversation with Teiresias. He tells the Chorus that he has never said or done anything to harm Oedipus and that Oedipus's accusation was most unjust. The Chorus-Leader replies that the accusation was probably the result of anger and not of a well-considered judgment. At this point Oedipus re-enters. Seeing Creon, Oedipus becomes indignant and asks how Creon dared to come here when it has clearly been proved that he has tried to take Oedipus's life and steal his crown. Oedipus says that he has come to know of Creon's conspiracy against him, and that Creon must be having the support of some others in the city. Creon tries to defend himself, denying all these accusations, but Oedipus is so convinced of Creon's villainy that he is not willing to listen to him. Creon asserts that, when has no knowledge of a matter, he does not speak about it. Oedipus says that he sent for Teiresias at Creon's advice and that the prophet has now accused him, Oedipus, of the murder of Laius, thereby proving that Creon was hand in glove with the prophet who had been instigated by Creon to bring a fantastic charge against Oedipus. Oedipus calls Creon a traitor. Creon now gets an opportunity to speak in defence of himself. He says that he never felt a desire to become the King of Thebes. Kingship only creates fears in the mind of a man and gives him sleepless nights. Being very close to Oedipus, Creon has been wielding great influence in the city. He would not like to lose his present position in order to become the King and lead a life of high responsibility and ceaseless anxiety. Nothing is farther from his thoughts than the wish to become the King. If he had been a traitor, he would not have truthfully reported the information he got from the Delphic oracle. It is, therefore, highly unjust on the part of Oedipus

to discard a loyal supporter like Creon. Creon's statement in defence of himself is reinforced by the Chorus-Leader who points out to Oedipus that hasty judgment is not desirable. But Oedipus is in no mood to pay any heed either to Creon or to the Chorus-Leader. He says that he must be prompt in meeting an attack from the enemy and that no hasty judgment is involved here. Creon asks if Oedipus wants to banish him from Thebes. Oedipus replies that banishment would not be enough and that he would sentence Creon to death. Creon asks if Oedipus must be stubborn and if he really does not believe him. Oedipus again calls him a traitor. The Chorus-Leader again tries to intervene in the dispute. Just then Jocasta, the Queen, appears on the scene.

The Intervention of Jocasta and of the Chorus on Creon's Behalf

Jocasta is very upset by the dispute between her husband and her brother, and the hot words they have exchanged. She asks both of them to feel ashamed of indulging in private quarrels when the city is afflicted by the plague. Creon replies that Oedipus has decided either to banish him from Thebes or to sentence him to death. Oedipus tells Jocasta that her brother had secretly potted against his life. Creon pleads his innocence. Jocasta appeals to Oedipus to believe Creon's words and to respect the oath of allegiance Creon had taken. The Chorus now joins Jocasta in defending Creon. The Chorus calls upon Oedipus to show due respect to Creon who is bound by an oath to remain loyal to the King. Oedipus replies that, if he spares the life of Creon, it will mean either banishment or death for Oedipus himself. The Chorus swears that it has no such wish regarding Oedipus. The Chorus appeals to Oedipus not to add another misfortune to Thebes which is already afflicted with plague. In response to the appeal of the Chorus, Oedipus softens. He pardons Creon but declares that Creon will have his lasting hatred. His pardon of Creon might endanger his own life, says Oedipus, but he would not like to reject the appeal of the Chorus. Creon says that Oedipus's pardon has been granted in an unwilling and ungenerous manner. Creon adds that, when Oedipus's anger has cooled, he will realise the injustice of the action he had wanted to take against him. But Oedipus remains unconvinced and he orders Creon to get out of his sight.

Oedipus and the Chorus

Creon withdraws, and the Chorus asks Jocasta to take the King inside the palace with her. Jocasta says that she would like to know what had happened. The Chorus replies that the quarrel arose from a suspicion and that random words, undeserved, were spoken. Jocasta asks if both the men had spoken in anger. The Chorus says

"yes" to this question and then suggests that the matter should be allowed to rest here. Oedipus complains that the advice of the Chorus had blunted his wrath and prevented him from taking action against Creon. The Chorus-Leader repeats that he had absolutely no wish to upset or defeat the King's plan and that he had no intention at all to do any harm to the King. The King had saved Thebes at a crucial time, and now his guidance is again needed because of another crisis.

Jocasta's Disbelief In Oracles, and the Dawning of a Suspicion in Oedipus's Mind

Jocasta asks her husband to tell her, in the name of Heaven, the reason why he became enraged. Oedipus tells her that her brother Creon had plotted against his life and that he had used a crafty prophet, namely Teiresias too to accuse him of being the murderer of Laius. Jocasta advises husband not to feel afraid of any prophecies because what the prophets say has no bearing upon human life at all. She says that she knows from personal experience that the so-called power of prophecy is something imaginary. She goes on to relate her personal experience. An oracle once came to Laius and prophesied that he would have a son by her, namely Jocasta, and that the son would kill his father, namely Laius. But later events had proved the falsehood of that prophecy because Laius had been killed by strangers, by brigands, at a place where three roads met. As for the child that was born of Laius's union with her, it was hardly three days old when Laius fastened both its feet together and ordered it to be exposed over a precipice in order that it might die. Thus the prophecy uttered by Apollo's oracle had failed, because Laius's son did not kill his father.

Jocasta's Account of Laius's Death and Oedipus's Desire to see the Survivor (the Theban Shepherd)

On hearing this account, Oedipus is shaken by terror. He remembers that he had killed not one but several persons at a place where three roads met. It occurs to him that one of the men killed by him might have been Laius. Oedipus asks Jocasta what Laius had looked like. Jocasta replies that Laius was a tall man with some grey patches in his hair and that in his appearance he had greatly resembled Oedipus. Oedipus is now scared to think that he himself might be the man who had murdered Laius, in which case the curse that he had uttered against the murderer would descend upon himself. There seems to be some truth after all in what the blind prophet had said a while ago. Oedipus asks Jocasta whether Laius was alone at the time of his death or was attended by his bodyguard. Jocasta says that the King was

accompanied by four attendants including a herald. She also says that only one of the five had survived, that the survivor had come back to Thebes with the information of Laius's murder, and that he had immediately afterwards left the palace with her permission to become a shepherd in the country. Oedipus finds that the facts as stated by Jocasta tally with his own recollection of the incident. He had encountered a royal party, had got involved in a fight with them, and had killed them all except one, though he did not know the identity of any of them. Oedipus, seeking further confirmation of the facts, expresses a strong desire to see the man who had survived. Jocasta says that she would send him a message and summon him.

Oedipus's Account of His Life to Jocasta

On being asked by Jocasta what is troubling him, Oedipus tells her the circumstance; of his past life. His father, he says, was Polybus, King of Corinth and his mother, Merope, the Queen of Corinth. One day a drunken man had said at a banquet that Oedipus was not the son of King Polybus. This remark had hurt Oedipus and he had reported it to his parents who dismissed it as a lie. But somehow this slanderous remark gained currency and mentally disturbed him. Without telling his parents, Oedipus went secretly to Delphi and asked the oracle who his parents were. The oracle, instead of answering this question, prophesied that Oedipus would murder his father and marry his mother who would bear children by him. This horrible prophecy had shocked Oedipus and, in order to prevent its fulfilment, he decided never to go back to his parents in Corinth. In the course of his aimless journeying, he arrived at the spot where three roads met and where, without any provocation by him, he got involved in a fight with a few travellers. In his rage he had killed nearly all the travellers. If one of the men killed on that occasion was Laius, who can be more unfortunate than Oedipus himself, in view of the fact that he had invoked a terrible curse on Laius's murderer? As a consequence of the punishment pronounced by himself, Oedipus must now be ready to suffer exile from Thebes. At the same time, it is not possible for Oedipus to go back to his parents in Corinth, because there would still be the possibility of killing his father Polybus and marrying his mother Merope, as foretold by Apollo's oracle. It would be better for him to die than to incur the stigma of such a pollution.

An Interrogation of the Survivor Essential to Prove Either Oedipus's Innocence or his Guilt in the Matter of Laius's Murder

After hearing Oedipus's story of his life, Jocasta asks him what he expects to find out from the man who had survived the brawl that had occurred between Oedipus and Laius's party. Oedipus replies that there is still a possibility that he will be proved to be innocent of Laius's murder. The survivor had reported that Laius had been killed by brigands, that is, a group of men, and not a single man. Oedipus was all alone when he had encountered the travellers with whom he had fallen out. If the survivor still maintains that more than one person had attacked the King's party, then Oedipus would be proved to be not guilty of Laius's murder; but if the survivor says that a lone person had fought with the King's party, then the burden of the guilt would fall upon Oedipus himself. Jocasta assures him that the survivor had spoken not of a lone individual but of several men having attacked Laius's party. Not only she, but others had also heard the version of the encounter given by the survivor. Even if the survivor now modifies his version of the incident, it cannot be proved that Laius was murdered according to the prophecy. The oracle had said that Laius would be killed by his own son borne by Jocasta, but Laius was killed by someone else. Therefore, so far as divination or prophecy goes, she is not prepared to put her faith in it. Oedipus says that she is wise in her views but that he would still like to meet that Theban shepherd. Jocasta says that she will send for the fellow at once. Oedipus and Jocasta make their exit, leaving the Chorus behind.

The Chorus's Affirmation of Piety and Condemnation of Impiety

Another choral song now follows. The Chorus speaks of the divine laws created by Olympus, laws in the framing of which mortal men had no share. These laws are eternal because the god who created them never grows old. A tyrant, says the Chorus, grows unwise and loses self-restraint because of pride, pride of wealth and pride of power. Pride must ultimately lead to the destruction of the proud man. A proud man will find no escape from the doom that awaits him. May ruin descend upon the man who is proud in word or deed, who has no fear of justice, and who feels no reverence for holy shrines! No man who lays violent hands on sacred things can be safe from the anger of the gods. The Chorus ends its song by affirming its complete faith in the shrine of Apollo and in the temple of Zeus, and deploring the fact that people are losing their faith in the oracles and are moving towards a denial of Apollo's power.

Oedipus in the Grip of Fear; Jocasta's Worship of Apollo

Jocasta now reappears, attended by a girl carrying a wreath and some incense. Jocasta tells the members of the Chorus that she has come to the altar of Apollo in

order to lay a wreath on it and to burn incense in token of her worship. Her husband, Oedipus, is feeling terrified by many things and she has failed to calm him. Jocasta then turns to the altar of Apollo and makes her offerings. She appeals to Apollo to grant peace to all the people. This peace is necessary in view of the fact that the King himself is in the grip of fear.

The Arrival of a Corinthian Shepherd

At this stage a stranger appears on the scene. He is a shepherd from Corinth and he asks whether he can meet King Oedipus. The Chorus-Leader introduces the newcomer to Jocasta who is still there after her worship. The Corinthian informs her that he has brought good news for her husband who is going to be invited by the people of Corinth to become their King. Jocasta asks what has happened to King Polybus. The Corinthian replies that Polybus has died. Jocasta immediately sends for her husband, at the same time making sarcastic remarks about the oracles. According to the prophecy, Polybus should have been killed by his son Oedipus, but Polybus has now been reported as being dead, while Oedipus has not at all moved out of Thebes.

The Oracle Declared Wrong by Jocasta

When, a moment later, Oedipus enters, Jocasta asks him to listen to the news brought by the Corinthian and to form his own conclusion whether there is any truth in prophecies. After hearing the news from the Corinthian's own lips, Oedipus comes to the same conclusion as Jocasta. The oracle has been proved wrong because Polybus has died a natural death. However, there is still the other half of the prophecy, namely, that Oedipus will marry his mother.

Jocasta's Philosophy

Jocasta tries to allay her husband's fear on this score also. According to her way of thinking, man is ruled by chance and there is no room for any prophecies. A man should live at random and live as best as he can. She urges him not to fear the possibility of his marrying his mother. Many men, she says, have married their mothers before, but only in their dreams. The best way to lead peaceful life is to pay no heed to such a possibility.

Oedipus's Fears Baseless, According to the Corinthian

Oedipus says that he would have agreed with Jocasta if his mother had not been alive. But Jocasta's wisdom cannot help him as long as his mother lives. Jocasta tells

him that he should draw comfort from his father's death because he had previously been feeling afraid of the possibility of his murdering his father. Oedipus replies that that much comfort he does have but the fear of marrying his mother still persists. The Corinthian at this point intervenes, asking Oedipus the nature of his fears. Oedipus tells the Corinthian of the prophecy which had been uttered years ago by Apollo's oracle. The oracle had said that Oedipus would marry his own mother and defile his hands with the blood of his own father. To avoid this fate Oedipus had fled from Corinth many years before. The Corinthian says that if Oedipus's fears are only due to this prophecy, he should dismiss his fears because Oedipus is not the son of Polybus.

The Origins and Birth of Oedipus, Still a Mystery

The Corinthian explains that he himself had presented Oedipus, when the latter was only an infant, to Polybus and Merope who, being themselves childless, had adopted the infant. The Corinthian says that he had found the infant in the woods upon Mt. Cithaeron, where he used to work as a hired shepherd. He had found the infant with fetters clamped upon its feet and, for that reason, the child had been named "Oedipus". The Corinthian further says that actually the child had been given to him by another shepherd who had been serving in the employ of King Laius. Oedipus expresses a great anxiety to talk to the other shepherd, namely, the Theban shepherd who had been working for King Laius and who can, so Oedipus thinks, supply further information regarding Oedipus's origin and birth. The Chorus-Leader expresses the view that the Theban shepherd might be the very man who has already been sent for by Jocasta at Oedipus's request.

Jocasta's Grief on Learning the Truth

Oedipus asks Jocasta if the man sent for could be the same to whom the Corinthian had referred and who had handed over the child Oedipus to this Corinthian years ago. Jocasta has already understood the situation. It is clear to her that Oedipus is her own son, who, as a child, had beer, handed over to the Theban shepherd, to be exposed on Mt. Cithaeron and allowed to die in view of the oracle's prophecy that Laius's son by Jocasta would ultimately kill Laius. Jocasta now knows the grave crime that she has unknowingly committed by having married her own son. But she would like to spare Oedipus the agony of this knowledge. She, therefore, entreats him not to pursue his investigation into his parentage. But Oedipus misunderstands her intention. He thinks that she apprehends the possibility of his being found to be low-born. He, therefore, insists on seeing the Theban shepherd to know the truth. Jocasta leaves in a state of great wretchedness and misery. When

the Chorus-Leader points out to Oedipus that Jocasta has gone away in a state of fear and grief, Oedipus still expresses the view that she is miserable at the thought that he is a man of humble origin. Oedipus calls himself the child of Fortune, with the Years as his kinsmen, and he says that he would not be ashamed if he finds that he is low-born.

The Hope Expressed by the Chorus

The Chorus now sings its next song. The Chorus says that Mt. Cithaeron would be honoured and worshipped for being the birth-place of Oedipus, the great King of Thebes. The Chorus expresses the view that Oedipus, far from being low-born, is the offspring of the union of some god with a mountain-nymph. That is why Oedipus was found at such a deserted place as Mt. Cithaeron. Oedipus could be the son of the union of god, Pan with a nymph or he might be the son of Apollo, or of Hermes, or of Dionysus.

The Theban Shepherd's Reluctant Disclosures

Now the Theban shepherd who had been summoned, appears on the scene. The Chorus-Leader recognises him as having been one of the most trusted shepherds in the service of King Laius. The Corinthian also recognises him as the man who had given the child to him. On the Theban shepherd's failure to recognise the Corinthian, the latter states certain facts relating to the past association of the two shepherds. The Corinthian then reminds the Theban shepherd of the baby that the latter had handed over to him. The Theban shepherd denies any knowledge of any such incident. Oedipus suspects the Theban shepherd of trying to hide something. He, therefore, threatens the Theban shepherd with serious consequences if he does not come out with the truth. The Theban shepherd still persists in his denial but, on being threatened with death, confesses that he had given the child to the Corinthian. On being further questioned by Oedipus, the Theban shepherd explains that the child had been given to him by Queen Jocasta who had wanted the child to be destroyed because of the prophecy that the child would kill its father. On being asked why he had then handed over the child to the Corinthian, the Theban shepherd replies that he had taken pity upon the child and, not wanting to destroy it, had handed it over to the Corinthian who could take it to his own country and allow it to live. Oedipus has at last discovered the secret of his parentage. He is the son of King Laius whom he had killed at the spot where three roads met, and he is the son of Queen Jocasta

whom he had married and with whom he had lived as her husband for many years. The agony of Oedipus on learning the truth can only be imagined.

The Chorus's Lament

The Chorus now sings a song commenting upon the vicissitudes of human life. No man, says the Chorus, can win any real happiness. All human happiness is a shadow that quickly fades away. The fate of Oedipus is a clear illustration of this fact. Oedipus won great prosperity and wealth. By conquering the Sphinx, he had become the sovereign ruler of Thebes. But who in this world can now be more wretched and more afflicted with cruel misery than this very Oedipus? The life of Oedipus has been reduced to dust and ashes. What a monstrous crime he had committed by becoming the husband of the woman who had given him birth! Time sees everything. And time has punished the unnatural marriage of Oedipus with his mother. The Chorus laments the fact of ever having known such a man as Oedipus.

The Death of Jocasta, and the Self-blinding of Oedipus

A messenger from the palace now arrives with horrible news which he communicates to the members of the Chorus. The royal palace, says the messenger, has become the breeding-place of many evils. He then informs the Chorus that Queen Jocasta is dead. Having come to know the real identity of Oedipus, the Queen had felt crazy with grief. She ran across the courtyard of the palace tearing her hair with both her hands. She had gone into her chamber and shut the door. She had then called upon Laius and shouted that he had met his death at the hands of his own son and that she had afterwards got married to the same son. She had cried aloud upon the bed where she had given birth to a son with whom she had afterwards slept in the same bed as his wife. A little later Oedipus, also feeling miserable and grief-stricken, was seen wandering through the palace. He was calling for a sword and asking for the woman whom he had called his wife. Thus raving, he had forced his way into the Queen's chamber where he found her dead body hanging by a rope. On seeing this sight, Oedipus had groaned in misery and disengaged her body from the rope. He then snatched away the golden brooches from her dress and with their point struck his own eyes, crying aloud that he should never be able to see with those eyes what he had suffered and what he had done. He struck his eye-balls with the pins several times to that blood flowed from them profusely. The happiness which Oedipus and Jocasta had enjoyed for many years has ended in this dark tragedy. Their happiness has given way to shame, death, ruin, and lamentation.

Oedipus's Agony

The Chorus-Leader asks the messenger if there is any intermission in Oedipus's agony. The messenger replies that Oedipus shouted that the gates of the palace be opened and that the whole city be allowed to see the man who had killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus had also declared that he would no longer remain in Thebes because he had announced that the murderer of Laius would not be permitted to live in the city. Just then Oedipus himself is seen advancing slowly towards the Chorus.

Oedipus's Description of His Misery to the Chorus

The Chorus is shocked to see the horrible sight of Oedipus who is now blind and is groping to find his way. The Chorus-Leader shudders at the sight of Oedipus. Oedipus is bemoaning his fate and expressing his misery at having been crushed by Heaven. He is afflicted both by the pain of the blinding and the memory of the crimes he unknowingly committed. The Chorus-Leader says that the sight of Oedipus is too terrible to be seen and expresses his sympathy for the unfortunate man. Oedipus appreciates the words of sympathy spoken by the Chorus-Leader, saying that, though blind, he can recognise his sympathiser by his voice. The Chorus-Leader asks what had led Oedipus to blind himself. Oedipus replies that it was Apollo's decree that he should suffer but that the hand that blinded his eyes was his own. He had blinded himself because there was for him now no sight worth seeing. The Chorus-Leader agrees. Oedipus says that he would like to be driven out from Thebes because he is "accursed" and, what is more, because he is more hateful to Heaven than any body else. Oedipus curses, the man who had removed the fetters from his feet and saved him from death when he was a child. If he had been allowed to die as a child, he would not have witnessed the great disaster; he would not then have slain his father and become the husband of the woman who had given him birth. Now he is God's enemy, because of the crimes he has committed. The woman who gave him birth also later on gave birth to children by him. If there is an evil surpassing all evils, that evil has come to Oedipus.

Reason for Blinding Himself

The Chorus-Leader says that Oedipus has not done the right thing by blinding himself because it would be better to be dead than to be blind. Oedipus thereupon gives his reasons for having robbed himself of his eyesight. He says that by killing himself he would have gone to Hades (or the realms of death) where he would have

found himself face to face with the ghost of his father and the ghost of his mother. This horrible confrontation he wanted to avoid. Besides, death would not have been an adequate punishment for the crimes he has committed. If he had not rendered himself blind, he would have faced his children, and the sight of them would have been no pleasure to him, because these children were begotten of an unnatural union. Nor would there have been any pleasure for him to see this city, its walls, and its sacred statues. He is now forbidden to see the sights of the city by his own decree according to which the murderer of Laius was not to be allowed to stay on in Thebes. If it had been possible for him to block his ears and to render himself completely deaf to the sounds of the city, he would have done that also. It would have been more appropriate for him to have deprived himself of hearing as well as sight.

Oedipus's Lament

Oedipus then asks why Mt. Cithaeron had accepted him at all instead of letting him die as a child. Why had the King of Corinth brought him up? Why did he ever go to the spot where three roads met and where, with his own hands, he had shed his father's blood, which was his own blood? And then what a crime he had committed in Thebes! He had married his own mother and begotten children by her, thus mingling the blood of fathers, mothers, wives, sons and brothers. This was the most horrible of all crimes. In view of all this Oedipus would like to be banished immediately, or be killed or be thrown into the sea where he may sink from view. He appeals to the Chorus-Leader not to shrink from touching him. There is no man alive, says Oedipus, who can endure this load of evil but Oedipus himself. The Chorus-Leader now informs Oedipus that he should address his prayer to Creon who is coming towards them and who will now be the King of Thebes.

Oedipus's Request to Creon

Creon now appears on the scene. Oedipus finds it hard even to speak to him, because he badly misjudged Creon and falsely accused him of treason. However, Creon proves very considerate. He tells Oedipus that he is not gloating over Oedipus's misfortunes. At the same time he would not like anyone to set his eyes upon such a sinful and polluted person as Oedipus. He would like Oedipus to be taken inside the palace so that only his kinsmen should see and hear the evils resulting from Oedipus's sins. Oedipus says that he has only one request to make: he would like to be banished from Thebes so that he can be alone and nobody is able to speak to him. Creon replies that he would like to obtain divine approval for such an action. Oedipus says that the oracle had given full instructions in advance for the

destruction of the man who had killed Laius. Creon says that those were the original instructions but that he would like to ascertain the opinion of the gods in the present situation. Oedipus then calls upon Creon to perform the appropriate burial ceremonies for the dead Jocasta. As for himself, he would not like to live in Thebes any more. He would like to go to Mt. Cithaeron and die at the place where he had been sent as an infant to die. Oedipus goes on to say that Creon need not bother about Oedipus's sons who, being men, will be able to look after themselves. But he would certainly want Creon to look after Oedipus's unhappy daughters.

Oedipus and His Daughters

Oedipus then asks if he can be permitted to hold his two daughters in his arms for a while. Just then he hears the sobbing of his daughters whom Creon had already sent for. Oedipus expresses his gratitude to Creon for having allowed him to meet his children. He then turns to his daughters, feeling for them the love of a brother as well as the love of a father. He cannot see them (because he is now blind), but he can weep for them because of the bitter life that they will have to lead. He knows that, with the dark shadow of their father's sins upon them, they will never be able to lead a normal life, to take part in the celebration of festivals, to join the gatherings of citizens, and so on. No man will take to marry them. Oedipus says that he has brought shame and disgrace to his family first by killing his own father, next by marrying the woman who had given him birth, and then by having begotten children from that very woman who was the source of life for him. He laments the fact that his daughters will remain unwedded and unfruitful. He then entrusts his daughters to the care of Creon, appealing to him to have pity on them in their state of wretchedness and desolation.

Oedipus Not Allowed to Have His Way in all Things

Creon advises Oedipus to shed no more tears but to go inside. Oedipus says that he wishes to be banished from Thebes. Creon replies that this cannot be done without divine approval. Oedipus asks if Creon will promise to carry out the will of the gods at the earliest. Creon replies that he cannot say anything till he has actually obtained the will of the gods. Oedipus then says that he would like to keep the children with him, but Creon rebukes him for trying to have his way in all things. Creon would like Oedipus to learn from his past experiences and not to forget that his rule is over.

The Moral

The play ends with the Chorus pointing out the moral of the story. Oedipus, the greatest of men, was envied by all of his fellow-men for his great prosperity. But afterwards he was overtaken by a full tide of misfortunes. Let all human beings remember that none can be called happy until that day when he carries his happiness down to the grave in peace. (The Chorus means that human happiness is transient and that it can never last till the last day of a man's life).

Critical Comments on The Development of The Plot in Oedipus Rex

I

The Prologue: the Statement of the Subject; and the Characters of Oedipus and Creon

A Greek tragedy generally begins with what was known as the "prologos" (or the prologue) which was that part of the play, before the entrance of the Chorus, in which was stated the subject of the drama and the situation from which it started. Accordingly this play has its prologue in the situation in which Oedipus speaks to the Priest who is leading a large number of the citizens of Thebes, and in which Creon arrives with the reply of the Delphic oracle.

The priest describes the woeful conditions prevailing in the city; and Oedipus, who is not unaware of the sufferings of his people, expresses his sympathy. The King reveals that he had already sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to Delphi in order to find out the cause of the sufferings of the people, and the remedy. Creon brings the startling news that the sufferings of the people are due to the presence in their midst of the murderer of King Laius and that the murderer must be punished before the people can get any relief. Thereupon Oedipus promises to track down the culprit and to avenge the murder of King Laius. The Priest feels satisfied, and withdraws from Oedipus's presence in the company of the citizens whom he had brought. Thus the subject of the play has explicitly been stated in the prologue. The subject is the investigation into the murder of Laius and the necessary action to punish the murderer. Apart from stating the subject of the play, the prologue also gives us some idea of the high intelligence of Oedipus and the high esteem in

which he is held by his people. Oedipus is certainly no god, as the Priest says, but he is wiser than all other men and he can read the riddles of life and the mysterious ways of heaven because it was he who had saved the city from the blood-thirsty Sphinx. Oedipus is a very sympathetic man too. He tells the Priest that, while the citizens are suffering as individuals, he himself bears the weight of the collective suffering of all of them. Oedipus is a dutiful King as, even before the Priest came with his petition, Oedipus had sent Creon to Delphi to seek Apollo's guidance. Furthermore, Oedipus's love of truth is indicated to us in the prologue. Oedipus shows his anxiety to find out the truth regarding the murder of Laius. The prologue also throws some light on the character of Creon and his role in the play. Creon acts as Oedipus's messenger to the Delphic oracle. He is also the person from whom Oedipus learns such circumstances pertaining to the murder of Laius as are known to the authorities in the city. On the whole, we form a very good impression of Creon as a man, though we form a much better impression of Oedipus. Oedipus appears as a man of much greater intellectual and moral stature than Creon.

The Entry-Song of the Chorus

Then enters the Chorus, singing a song. This entry-song of the Chorus was technically known as the "parodos". The first song sung by the Chorus is a kind of invocation to the gods to protect the people of Thebes. As the Chorus generally represented the people of its city, what it sings should be taken as conveying the feelings and thoughts of those people. The sufferings of the city as described by the Chorus reinforce the pathetic impression already produced by a similar description given by the Priest. The invocation to the gods is indicative of the religious feelings of the Chorus and of the people whom it represents.

Oedipus's Curse Upon the Murderer: Dramatic Irony

Apart from the song which the Chorus sings on entering the Chorus-Leader also holds a conversation with Oedipus. Oedipus has taken the message from Delphi in a very serious light. He now tells the Chorus that he is bent upon avenging the murder of Laius. Oedipus also utters a curse upon the man who committed the murder. Here we have a striking example of what is known as tragic irony because Oedipus is in fact cursing himself though unknowingly. In fact even the reader at this stage does not know that the curse uttered by Oedipus will later on be found to be applicable to Oedipus himself. Oedipus's dialogue with the Chorus confirms our impression of him as an earnest, conscientious ruler. He will show no mercy to the murderer who is responsible for the misfortunes that have descended upon the city. He will leave

nothing undone. He is determined to find the man who killed Laius. Besides reiterating his resolve to trace the murderer, Oedipus also utters a prayer for the welfare of the Chorus. When the Chorus-Leader suggests that Oedipus should consult the prophet Teiresias, Oedipus says that he has already sent for the prophet. Oedipus in this matter acted upon the advice tendered by Creon. Thus Oedipus, although himself a man of exceptional intelligence, is not immune to advice.

The Scene with Tiresias

Oedipus's talk with Teiresias, the blind prophet, is one of the major episodes in the play. Teiresias is reluctant to reveal the facts to Oedipus, in spite of Oedipus's humble entreaty. Tiresias's reluctance angers Oedipus and he accuses the prophet of having himself been responsible for the murder. At this Teiresias becomes angry too and says that it is Oedipus himself whose crimes have polluted the city. Oedipus now expresses the suspicion that Teiresias is in league with Creon and that they have both hatched a conspiracy against him. Teiresias warns Oedipus that he will be driven out of Thebes, that he will be deprived of his eyesight, and that he will find himself one with his own children. It is wrong to say that this scene does not carry forward the plot. In fact, many of the things that are to happen afterwards are mentioned in this very scene. This scene is another striking example of tragic irony. Teiresias knows the whole truth, while Oedipus is ignorant of all the crucial facts. Not knowing the true significance of what Teiresias says, Oedipus loses his temper and his self-control. Oedipus here appears as a hot-tempered man who loses his mental balance, thus exposing himself to the charge of pride and arrogance. Inevitably we consider him to be an unreasonable man who, instead of exercising self-restraint when dealing with a man of an established spiritual reputation, goes to the length of calling him a crafty schemer and a mountebank, and taunting him on his blindness. Thus Oedipus proves himself guilty of what is known as "hubris". He not only unjustly accuses Teiresias of treason, but charges Creon also with the same crime. His suspicion of both these men is totally baseless and therefore, uncalled for. The scene with Teiresias is one of the most dramatic in this play. The clash between the highly respected King and the highly esteemed prophet arouses a multitude of feelings in us and we wonder what will happen to Oedipus in view of the horrible warnings uttered by Teiresias. From the point of view of plot-construction, this scene lays the basis for much of what will happen afterwards. It is to be noted also that Teiresias, the wise prophet, shows himself to be no less hot-tempered than the King.

Another Song by the Chorus

Both Teiresias and Oedipus now withdraw, and the Chorus sings a song that is a kind of commentary on the episode which has just ended. The Chorus calls upon the murderer of Laius to quit the city without delay. The Chorus also expresses its feeling of perplexity at what Teiresias has just said. Teiresias has accused Oedipus himself of being the murderer of Laius. But how can such an accusation have any basis? After all Oedipus was the man who showed his wisdom by defeating the Sphinx and saving the city.

The Scene with Creon

This scene constitutes another important episode. Creon is understandably upset on hearing of the accusation made against him by Oedipus. Oedipus is in no mood to listen to Creon's defence of himself. Oedipus accuses Creon of treason and decides to sentence him to death. The Chorus appeals to Oedipus not to form a hasty judgment and, when Jocasta appears on the scene, she also appeals to him not to judge Creon too harshly. Oedipus softens and withdraws the sentence of death against Creon though his hatred for Creon does not diminish one bit. The importance of this scene lies in confirming our impression of the unreasonableness and harshness of Oedipus when excited or agitated. That a man of such a high intelligence should be prone to hasty action and to the impulse of the moment is really deplorable. But this precisely is the moral defect in the character of Oedipus.

This is the "hubris" of which he is guilty. At the same time we must note the fact that, under the pressure of the Chorus and of Jocasta, Oedipus agrees to withdraw the sentence of punishment against Creon. He does not show himself utterly stubborn or inflexible. The moderate and impartial attitude adopted by both the Chorus and Jocasta in this matter is also worthy of note.

The Scene with Jocasta

This scene is important in pushing forward the plot which now moves rapidly. Jocasta's view, that a man should not feel afraid of prophecies, is irreligious according to the ideas prevailing in those days. In support of her view she relates what the oracle had said about the manner of Laius's death and how that particular prophecy had already proved untrue. Here is another striking example of tragic irony. Both Jocasta and Oedipus are ignorant of the real facts while the audience who knows the myth or who has witnessed the play before is aware of those facts. Jocasta's account of the oracle creates a terrifying suspicion in Oedipus's mind. This suspicion can be removed or confirmed only by the Theban shepherd who is accordingly sent for. The circumstances of the death of Laius, as described by

Jocasta, strengthen the suspicion that has arisen in the mind of Oedipus. Jocasta's religious scepticism may be regarded as evidence of her pride; this is her "hubris".

Another Choral Ode: Both Oedipus and Jocasta Guilty of Pride

The song which the Chorus now sings has two themes: pride as a serious defect in a human being, and the need of having complete faith in Apollo and his prophecies. Both these themes are relevant to the main story of the play. We have here an oblique accusation of pride against Oedipus, and we have also an indirect comment on Jocasta's unbelief in prophecies. Thus both Oedipus and Jocasta appear as guilty persons, if judged by the standards laid down by the Chorus.

A Temporary Change in Jocasta

Soon afterwards a change is perceived in Jocasta. She, who was sceptical of prophecies, now comes with offerings for the worship of Apollo. The fear which grips Oedipus has unnerved Jocasta and compelled her to turn to Apollo for consolation. But the change in Jocasta will prove short-lived.

The Disclosure by the Corinthian Shepherd

Then comes the Corinthian shepherd with what is, from his point of view, a great news. The arrival of the Corinthian shepherd is a purely accidental occurrence. The news brought by him, namely that Polybus has died not at the hands of his son but of old age and illness, revives Jocasta's scepticism regarding prophecies. The news is also a source of much comfort to Oedipus who has no further ground to feel afraid of the possibility of killing his own father; but the other half of the prophecy, namely that he would marry his own mother, still remains to perturb him. Jocasta tries to allay the remaining part of her husband's fear also. Her philosophy is that man is ruled by chance and that there is no room for any prophecies. Men do marry their mothers sometimes, but only in dreams, says Jocasta. Oedipus, however, continues to feel apprehensive on this score. The Corinthian's disclosure that Oedipus is not the son of Polybus and Merope marks a further step in the development of the plot and carries the process of discovery a little further. The dramatic irony of this scene is also noteworthy. The Corinthian thinks that by his disclosure he is relieving Oedipus of a great fear (namely the fear of marrying Merope whom he thinks to be his mother), but in actual fact this disclosure takes Oedipus further towards his doom.

Jocasta's Discovery of the Truth

The account given by the Corinthian of the circumstances in which Oedipus as a child had been handed over to him comes as a great shock to Jocasta who can now see clearly her predicament. Jocasta now knows that Oedipus is her own son, and it is natural for her to try to spare Oedipus the agony which he will experience on learning the truth. She entreats him not to pursue his investigation into his parentage, but he misunderstands her intention in making the entreaty. The misunderstanding on his part is another example of dramatic irony because we know that, far from being low-born, he has a royal background.

An Example of Tragic Irony

The next song of the Chorus is remarkable for its tragic irony because, while the Chorus sings rapturously regarding Oedipus being the offspring of the union of some god with a mountain-nymph, actually Oedipus is moving rapidly and surely towards his doom.

The Terrible Disclosure by the Theban Shepherd

Then come the disclosures which the Theban shepherd makes, though most unwillingly. This scene marks the climax of the main plot of the play. This is the scene of discovery, and of the reversal in the fortunes of Oedipus. What Jocasta had come to know from the statements of the Corinthian shepherd, Oedipus now comes to know from the answers given by the Theban shepherd to the questions put to him by the Corinthian and by Oedipus himself. Oedipus finds, to his indescribable grief and humiliation, that both the prophecies made by the Delphic oracle have already proved to be true, in spite of his life-long efforts to prevent their fulfilment. This is from Oedipus's point of view, the most horrible moment of his life.

The Comment of the Chorus on Oedipus's Sad Fate

The song sung by the Chorus at this point is an appropriate commentary on the fate which Oedipus has met and it is also an apt summing-up of human life in general. This song of the Chorus lends an even greater pathos to the situation that we have just witnessed. We have here a general relation made by the Chorus on the basis of the particular fate of Oedipus.

The Self-Murder and the Self-Blinding

The real tragedy, however, comes with the next scene in which we are given an extremely painful account of Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus's self-blinding. There would hardly be a member of the audience witnessing this play in a theatre who can control his tears while listening to this sad account. The dramatist has done well in

not presenting these two scenes of horror (self-murder and self-blinding) on the stage and in conveying this information to us through the speech of a messenger. These scenes would have been intolerable on the stage and would have made the play unduly melodramatic. The tragic effect of the messenger's speech is in itself very deep.

Reasons for the Self-Blinding, and the Desire for Banishment

Then follows the conversation between Oedipus and the Chorus-Leader. Oedipus appreciates the sympathy shown to him by the Chorus-Leader in his misery. Oedipus's explanation as to why he has blinded himself is quite convincing, especially in view of the feeling of perplexity experienced by some critics as to the reasons for Oedipus's self-blinding. After giving his reasons, Oedipus laments the course which his life has taken. In view of his own proclamation, made by him when he was totally ignorant of the facts, Oedipus would now like to be banished from Thebes.

The Pathos of the Last Scene, and the Reassertion of Oedipus's Greatness

The final scene is intensely pathetic, almost heart-rending. Oedipus's natural love for his daughters finds a very touching expression. He laments the fact that his daughters will remain unwedded and unfruitful. His appeal to Creon that he be immediately exiled from Thebes is also very moving. Creon appears, once again, a man moderate and balanced in his views and in his judgment. Creon would like to do nothing without consulting the Delphic oracle. He does not gloat over Oedipus's misfortunes. On the contrary, he shows a lot of consideration to Oedipus in providing an opportunity to him to have a meeting with his daughters. However, Creon does not show himself to be a weak man. We see him asserting his authority as a King in refusing to grant Oedipus's request to be allowed to keep his daughters with him. It has been said that this last scene comes as an anti-climax, because Oedipus is shown no longer to be an active force but as a purely passive person, almost a zero. As against this there is view that the last scene shows the recovery of Oedipus, the reintegration of the hero, and the reconstitution of the dominating, dynamic, and intelligent figure of the opening scenes.

II

The Opening Scene (or, the Prologue)

The opening scene shows us a deputation of suppliants appealing to Oedipus for help against the plague. We see Oedipus, a grand figure towering god-like above the afflicted city. But in the background of this picture is our knowledge that he to whom they appeal is the cause of their plight, so that we at the same time see him

as a doomed man. All the dramatic elements in the situation are presented there in a kind of tableau. The words spoken emphasize and point the moral of what we see with the eyes.

The Element of Suspense

Then we hear that Oedipus has already sent Creon to the oracle at Delphi to find out the cause of the plague, and is impatiently waiting for his return. The question at once arises in our minds as to what Apollo will say. Is Oedipus to learn the truth by this method? Will Creon bring the terrible news ? So, when we hear that he is approaching, we wait excitedly for what he will say. The moment passes, and we see our knowledge being moved further away from Oedipus. We hear the story of Laius's murder being wrongly told, to Oedipus. (By "we" is meant the original audience who, though they knew the story of Oedipus, had no idea how Sophocles was going to unfold it).

The Dramatic Value of Oedipus's Scenes with Teiresias and Creon

After Oedipus's proclamation to the people of his resolve to search out the murderer of Laius, the coming of Teiresias is announced. Teiresias we know to be the true prophet, as soon as he speaks. The truth is on the brink of being told, we feel. We experience here the height of excitement. We see our own knowledge being put before the persons of the play and being rejected. We come as close to the revelation as it is possible to get, and yet it is still to be made. The scene is a triumph of dramatic understanding. The most important persons in a play are not the *dramatis personae* but the audience. The dramatis personae are but instruments for satisfying the needs of the audience. We today are apt to find Oedipus's two scenes with Teiresias and Creon to be long-drawn and over-elaborated. But what is happening here is something that had a value for Sophocles' audience which it has not for us. For them it intensified the impression of coming doom. We, knowing to start with, as they say, that Oedipus is doomed, may feel no emotional value in these scenes except that of suspense, the holding back of the inevitable moment through Oedipus being delayed in his discovery by suspecting the wrong person, following up a false clue. But for the Athenian spectators there was more in it than that; through the scenes they were not just waiting for his doom to come; they were seeing it coming, seeing him going to meet it, helping it along; for he is behaving, or apparently behaving, as the man of *hubris*proverbially behaves, and *hubris* is in Greek story the sure precursor of ruin. This is the general effect. At the point when Jocasta comes between her husband and her brother, Oedipus is on the verge of the violent act

which brings the *hubristic* man to disaster, and the play marks the apparent crisis by raising the dialogue into music and singing.

Oedipus's Essential Innocence

Of course Oedipus is not guilty of *hubris*. Oedipus is essentially innocent. The dramatist deliberately, obscures the thought of his innocence. He confuses the hearers' minds by setting them running on the familiar *hubris* theme, so that the calamity acquires a seeming appropriateness, sufficient to diminish the immediate moral shock (the shock that an innocent man has been made to suffer). In the final effect, however, the contrast between this and the facts as otherwise shown increases enormously the pathos and irony of Oedipus's fate.

The Revelation

The central scenes of the play contain the heart of the drama, the drama of the revelation. This drama extends over five hundred lines or so. The excitement increases, rather than diminishes, by being spread out. We have here a three-fold revelation rising to a climax. The incidents are manipulated with supreme dramatic skill. By the end of the first of these scenes Oedipus knows almost for certain that he is the killer of Laius. The dramatist's next step therefore is to reveal that Laius was Oedipus's father. If we leave out Teiresias, as Sophocles does henceforth, nobody in the world of the play knows that. One fact known by one man (the Theban Shepherd) must be added to another fact known by another (the Corinthian messenger) before the revelation can come. Sophocles has made sure of the coming of the first of these men through the one ray of hope in Oedipus's mind in regard to the identity of the man he killed. As, for the audience, the effect of Oedipus's learning that he had himself killed Laius is attained fully enough in this scene, the dramatist brings in the Corinthian first, in order that the coming of the Theban Shepherd may be the culmination of a new revelation, not a confirmation of the one whose effect we have already seen. By the time he arrives, Oedipus's interest has been shifted to coincide with ours. It is the interest of the audience that determines the way the action is developed, and the motives and acts of the *dramatis personae* must be directed accordingly. So Sophocles interrupts the orderly progress of events by forcing in here the coming of the messenger from Corinth, the only accidental occurrence in the play. It is really a pure coincidence that he should arrive at this juncture. His coming looks on the face of it like an answer to Jocasta's prayer to Apollo to grant peace to her husband—an ironical answer as of course we must know it must be, but all the more dramatic for that.

Oedipus Rex—Critical Approaches

I

Various Interpretations

Various views have been advanced about the meaning of *Oedipus Rex*. According to one view, the play justifies the gods by showing that we get what we deserve. Oedipus is a bad man as is seen in his treatment of Creon, and so the gods punish him. Or, he is not altogether bad; he is even rather noble in some ways; but he has one of these defects which all tragic heroes have. According to a second view,*Oedipus Rex* is a tragedy of destiny.

The play shows that man has no free will but is a puppet in the hands of the gods who pull the strings. According to yet another view, Sophocles was a "pure artist," and was therefore not interested in offering a thesis about the gods. He took the story of Oedipus as he found it and used it to write an exciting play, with the gods simply a part of the machinery of the plot

Oedipus's Goodness

All the above interpretations of the play, says F.R. Dodds, are unsound. The first two of these interpretations are linked with Aristotle's view that the tragic hero is a man highly esteemed and prosperous who falls into misfortune because of some serious *hamartia* or defect. Oedipus is proud and over-confident; he harbours unjustified suspicions against Teiresias and Creon; in one place he goes so far as to express some uncertainty about the truth of oracles. But the flaw in this argument is that, even before the action of the play, Oedipus has been declared to be a would-be incestuous parricide, which means that the punishment has been decided upon before the crime has been committed. Apart from that, Sophocles has depicted Oedipus as a *good* man. In the eyes of the Priest in the opening scene Oedipus is the greatest and noblest of men, the saviour of Thebes who with divine aid rescued the city
from the Sphinx. The Chorus has the same view of him: he has proved his wisdom; he is the darling of the people; and never will the people believe ill of him.

Offence Committed in Ignorance

By *hamartia*, Aristotle did not mean a moral defect as is generally supposed; he means an offence committed in ignorance of some material fact and therefore free from wickedness or vice. An example of such an offence is Thyestes eating the flesh of his own children in the belief that it was butcher's meat, and subsequently

begetting a child on his own daughter, not knowing who she was. The story of Thyestes has much in common with that of Oedipus. Both these men violated the most sacred of Nature's laws and as incurred the most horrible of all pollutions. But they both did so without wickedness, because they knew not what they did. Had they acted knowingly, they would have been inhuman monsters. In that case we could not have felt for them that pity which tragedy ought to produce. As it is, we feel both pity and terror—pity for the fragile state of man, and terror because of a world whose laws we do not understand. The *hamartia* of Oedipus did not lie in losing his temper with Teiresias; it lay quite simply in killing his father and marrying his mother. It is a wrong notion to say that the dramatist has a moral duty to represent the world as a place where the good are always rewarded and the bad are always punished. This notion is completely foreign to Aristotle as well as to the practice of the Greek dramatists. Aristotle did not say that the tragic hero must have a serious moral defect of character.

"Moral Innocence" of Oedipus

A suggestion is sometimes made that Oedipus should have taken every possible precaution to avoid his fate. But the oracle's prediction was unconditional; it did not say that if Oedipus did such and such a thing he would kill his father and marry his mother. The oracle simply said that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother. What an oracle said, was bound to happen. Oedipus does what he can to evade his fate: he resolves never to see his (supposed) parents again. But it is quite certain from the first that his best efforts would be unavailing. What should be emphasized is Oedipus's essential moral innocence.

Oedipus, No Puppet but a Free Agent

If Oedipus is the innocent victim of a doom which he cannot avoid, is he a mere puppet? Is the whole play a "tragedy of destiny" which denies human freedom? Such a view would be wrong, too. Sophocles did not intend that we should treat Oedipus as a puppet and not a free agent. Neither in Homer nor in Sophocles does divine foreknowledge of certain events imply that all human actions are predetermined. The Messenger in the present play emphatically distinguishes Oedipus's self-blinding as voluntary and self-chosen from the involuntary parricide and incest. Certain of Oedipus's actions were fate-bound; but everything that he does on the stage from first to last he does as a free agent.

Even the Major Sins not Fate-Bound

Even in calling the parricide and the incest fate-bound we perhaps go too far. The average citizen of Sophocles' day would not perhaps have thought so. As has been said, the gods know the future but they do not order it. This view may not satisfy the analytical philosopher, but it seems to have satisfied the ordinary man at all periods. Let us recall Jesus's words to St. Peter, "Before the cock-crow, thou shall deny me thrice." We are not to think that Peter's subsequent action was fate-bound in the sense that he could not have chosen otherwise. Peter fulfilled the prediction, but he did so by an act of free choice.

The Real Cause of Oedipus's Ruin

According to one view, the gods *force* on Oedipus the knowledge of what he has done. This view is unconvincing. The gods do nothing of the kind. On the contrary, what fascinates us is the spectacle of a man freely choosing, from the highest motives, a series of actions which lead to his own ruin. Oedipus could have left the plague to take its course; but pity for the sufferings of his people compelled him to consult the oracle. When Apollo's word came, he might still have left the murder of Laius uninvestigated; but piety and justice compelled him to act. He need not have forced the truth from the reluctant Theban Shepherd; but he could not rest content with a lie and therefore wanted to tear away the last veil from the illusion in which he had lived so long. Teiresias, Jocasta, the Shepherd, each in turn tries to stop Oedipus, but in vain: he must read the last riddle, the riddle of his own life. The immediate cause of Oedipus's ruin is not "fate" or "the gods": no oracle said that he must discover the truth. Still less does the cause of his ruin lie in his own weakness. What causes his ruin is his own strength and courage, his loyalty toThebes, and his loyalty to the truth. In all this we are to see him as a free agent. And his self-mutilation and self-banishment are equally free acts of choice.

II

The original assumption is too unreasonable, and this fairy-tale quality affects and infects the plot. Aristotle's apology is that the irrationality is outside of and precedes the main action. That may serve as an apology for Oedipus's ignorance of well-known facts about the Thebes in which he had been King for years and about the former husband of the woman he had married. But the fundamental folk-lore or fairy-tale irrationality is irremediable. In fact the underlying thought is not to be taken seriously. It is merely an answer to a primitive riddle: what is the worst thing that could happen to a man? Why, to kill his father, and marry his mother!

Unanswered Questions

As to the probability of the story of the play, one could ask some awkward questions. For example: Why did the servant of Laius give the false report of "a band of brigands"? Why did he say nothing when he saw Oedipus in Thebes but ask to go to the country? Why was he treated so well, when he had run away and left his master and fellow-servants on the road? One may answer these questions thus: The servant suspected the truth all the time, beginning with the encounter on the road, for he knew that the son of Laius did not die, and recognized him in this young man who looked like Laius. The servant was loyal to his protege, and perhaps disliked Laius, of whom no good has ever been told, here or elsewhere; the story of brigands protected both him and Oedipus. These answers are plausible, but are we intended to work them out, or is there even time to consider them in the rapid progress of the action?

Some More Such Questions

There are other points of verisimilitude. For instance, why had Oedipus never gone even superficially into the question of Laius's murder? Or again, how could Jocasta know nothing at all about the stranger she married? Sophocles himself raised a couple of questions which he did not answer. Why, if Teiresias was wise and inspired, positively omniscient, did he not answer the Sphinx? Why, after the death of Laius and the arrival of Oedipus, did Teiresias say nothing about the connection between the two events? Creon's answer to this is wise and temperate: "I do not know. And where I have no idea I prefer to keep quiet." But it does not take us far. It may be, rather, that Oedipus is the man who must find, and condemn, and punish himself. Likewise it was not for Teiresias to solve the riddle of the Sphinx. The Sphinx is there for Oedipus to answer. To say he was "fated" is to overstate it with prejudice toward the grand designs of heaven; but it is a part of the pattern or story-tyche, which in Greek does not mean "fate" or "chance" or "fortune" so strictly as it means "contact" or "coincidence," or the way things are put together.

Voltaire's View

Voltaire expressed the following opinion in this connection: "it is already contrary to probability that Oedipus, who has regarded for such a long time, should not know how his predecessor died. But that he should not even know whether it was in the country or in the city that this murder was committed, and that he should not give the slightest reason or the slightest excuse for his ignorance—I confess that I know of no word to express such an absurdity. It is, one might say, a fault of the subject

and not of the author; as if it were not up to the author to correct his subject when it is defective!"

Voltaire goes on to say: "But what is still more astonishing is that Oedipus, when he learns that the Theban herdsman is still alive, does not dream of simply having him sought out; he amuses himself by pronouncing curses and consulting oracles, without commanding that the only man who could enlighten him be brought before him. The Chorus itself, which is so intent on seeing an end to the misfortunes of Thebes, and which gives Oedipus constant advice, does not advise him to question this witness to the death of the late King; it asks him only to send for Teiresias."

III

Possible Symbolic Meaning

It may be supposed that Oedipus represents human suffering while the gods symbolize the "universe of circumstance as it is." The play then becomes a dramatic expression of the universe of circumstance as it is and of the suffering of man.

Lack of Universality in the Play

But to argue thus is merely one more way of smuggling significance into the play, and of showing that the play is universal. The action of this play is in reality exceptional. Oedipus in his peculiar destiny is a freak. He is a man selected out of millions to undergo this stunning fate; that is why the story is so fascinating. He stands, because of the extreme rarity of his destiny, outside the common lot of mankind. And so the special disaster that befalls him is a thing quite apart from the universe of circumstance as it is. The gods who really do stand for circumstance are very much milder beings. That is why it is so misleading to reduce this play to the normal.

The Lesson of the Play

Oedipus Rex shows the humbling of a great and prosperous man by the gods. This treatment is not deserved by Oedipus. It is not a punishment for insolence, nor in the last resort is it due to any fault of judgment or character in the man. The gods display their power because they must. But since they display it, we may draw a lesson. This lesson is stated at the end of the play in the comment by the Chorus:

"And, being mortal, think of that last day of death, which all must see, and speak of no man's happiness till, without sorrow, he has passed the goal of life."

IV

Freud's Interpretation of the Myth and the Play

Oedipus did all he could to avoid the fate prophesied by the oracle, and he blinded himself in self-punishment on discovering that in ignorance he had committed both these crimes. The play traces the gradual discovery of Oedipus's deed, and brings it to light by prolonged inquiry which has a certain resemblance to the process of psycho-analysis. In the dialogue the deluded mother-wife, Jocasta, resists the continuation of the inquiry. She points out that many men have in their dreams mated with their mothers, but that dreams deserve no attention. To us today dreams are of great importance. The reader reacts to the play as though by self-analysis he had detected the Oedipus complex in himself, as though he had recognized the will of the gods and the oracle as glorified disguises of his own unconscious. The reader feels as if he remembered in himself the wish to do away with his father and in his place to marry his mother, and must abhor the thought. The dramatist's words seem to him to mean: "In vain do you deny that you are answerable; in vain do you proclaim that you have resisted these evil designs. You are guilty, because you could not eradicate them; they still survive unconsciously in you." And there is psychological truth in this; even though man has repressed his evil desires into his unconscious and would then gladly say to himself that he is no longer answerable for them, he is yet compelled to feel his responsibility in the form of a sense of guilt for which he can perceive no foundation.

The Flaw in the Freudian Interpretation

Superficially, the play seems to confirm Freud's theory. But if Freud's interpretation is right we should expect the myth to tell us that Oedipus met Jocasta without knowing that she was his mother, fell in love with her, and then killed his father, again unknowingly. But there is no sign whatsoever in the myth that Oedipus is attracted by or falls in love with Jocasta. The only reason we are given for Oedipus's marriage to Jocasta is that she as it were, goes with the throne. Are we to believe that a myth with an incestuous relationship between mother and son would entirely omit the element of attraction between the two?

The Son's Rebellion Against the Father's Authority

A more convincing interpretation would be to say that the myth (and therefore the play) should be regarded as a symbol not of the incestuous love between mother

and son but of the rebellion of the son against the authority of the father in the patriarchal family. From this point of view, the marriage of Oedipus and Jocasta is only a secondary element; the marriage is only an evidence of the victory of the son who takes the father's place with all its privileges.

The Theme in the Other Two Plays of the Trilogy

This view is supported by *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*, the other plays of Sophocles' trilogy. We find that the theme of the conflict between father and son runs through all the three tragedies. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus kills his father Laius who had intended to take the infant's life. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus gives vent to his intense hate against his sons. In *Antigone*, we find the same hate again, between Creon and his son Haemon. The problem of incest exists neither in the relationship between Oedipus's sons to their mother nor in the relationship between Haemon and his mother, Eurydice. Thus it is quite valid to hold that the real issue in *Oedipus Rex* too is the conflict between father and son and not the problem of incest.

V

Oedipus, a Personification of Human Suffering

To know oneself is for Sophocles is to know man's powerlessness. But it is also to know the victorious majesty of suffering humanity. The agony of every Sophocles character is an essential element in his nature. The strange fusion of character and fate is most movingly and mysteriously expressed in the greatest of his heroes, Oedipus. Sophocles returned once again to his character in *Oedipus at Colonus*, when Oedipus, a blind man, begs his way through the world, led by his daughter Antigone, another of Sophocles's most beloved figures. From the first, the tragic king who was to bear the weight of the whole world's suffering was almost a symbolic figure. He was suffering humanity personified.

VI

Champion of Traditional Religion

Sophocles in this play supports the traditional religion against contemporary attacks. Apollo and his ministers are shown as justified, while the scepticism of Jocasta and Oedipus is condemned. Criticism of oracles was becoming common at the time. In such an atmosphere Sophocles wrote this play to defend what was for him, as for Socrates one of the basic facts of religion.

VII

The Feeling of Curiosity Behind the Tragedy

The pressure of curiosity is sweetly bitter; curiosity is also uncontrollable. Curiosity leads Oedipus to the greatest of disasters. It was while inquiring into his own identity in the belief that he was not a Corinthian but a foreigner, that he met Laius. When he had killed Laius, won the throne, and married his mother as well, he once more made inquiry into his identity. His wife tried to stop him but he grew all the more insistent in questioning the old man who knew the facts. Finally, when the affair was already leading him to a suspicion of the truth and the old man had cried out, "Alas! I am on the very point of saying the fearful thing!" Oedipus nonetheless answered, "And I of hearing it. But all the same it must be heard." The consequence was a most painful tragedy.

VIII

A Victim of His Victory Over Unconscious Fantasies

The treasure which the Sphinx guards is not gold, but an intellectual one, namely knowledge. The hidden and closely guarded secret is the unknown of the sexual riddle. While the fabulous dragon must be killed in other mythical stories in order that the treasure of gold may become the possession of man, the Sphinx significantly kills herself when her secret is broken in time of maturation. Oedipus, the swollen-footed hero, does not kill the monster by physical force but defeats her through insight and knowledge. The primary anxiety, connected with the sexual riddle, shapes the pattern of all subsequent anxiety arising from the unknown, especially if one is confronted with the riddle of existence and non-existence. The dragon-killer is a hero if he is the victor in the struggle with his own monster—with the feeling of anxiety and guilt that lies hidden in his unconscious fantasies. All dragon-killer heroes become finally the victims of their victory over unconscious fantasies. Oedipus, just because he has defeated the monster of the unknown, personifies the greatest blunder, the final defeat of the conscious self-evident thinking and the victory of the Sphinx, that is, of the psychic forces which are hidden in the unconscious and the unknown of the own self. He is the victim of his infatuation.

IX

Oedipus's Real Fruit

Oedipus's *hamartia* is not bad temper, suspiciousness, or hastiness in action, for his punishment does not fit these crimes. Nor is it ignorance of who his parents are,

for ignorance of this type is not culpable. Still less is it murder and incest, for these things are fated for him by the gods. Oedipus's fault is his failure in existential commitment, a failure to recognize his own involvement in the human condition, a failure to realize that not all difficulties are riddles to be solved by the application of pure intellect but that some are mysteries not to be solved at all but to be coped with only by the engagement of the whole self. Oedipus's punishment, then, is not really punishment at all, but the only means by which the gods may enlighten blindness of this destiny. Sophocles was not concerned to tell a crime and punishment story; this is shown by his leaving the "crimes" out of the action.

X

The Evil Resulting From Incest

Among many peoples, breaches of marriage laws and other sexual offences have been thought to be productive of disastrous consequences. Adultery has often been regarded as being destructive of the fruits of the earth. Ancient Greeks and Roman perhaps had similar notions of the wasting effect of incest. According to Sophocles, the land of Thebes suffered from blight, from pestilence, and from the sterility both of women and of cattle under the reign of Oedipus, who had unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. The Delphic oracle declared that the only way to restore the prosperity of the country was to banish the sinner from it, as if his mere presence withered plants, animals, and women. No doubt these public calamities were attributed in great part to the guilt of parricide which rested on Oedipus, but much of the evil must have been thought to be due to his incest with his mother.

XI

The Value of Guiltless Suffering

There are numerous religious myths that depend on guiltless suffering. The misery of a blameless man has been thought somehow to lighten the burden for the rest of mankind. The power of the *Book of Job*, and also of *Prometheus Bound*, *Antigone*, *Hamlet*, etc. seems to require a similar consciousness of innocence on the part of the sufferer. Christ was thought to be entirely undeserving of the humiliation, pain, and public execution—that is obvious. He also found these experiences difficult and painful in the extreme, in spite of his divinity. And the fact that Christ suffered thus though he deserved nothing but good is believed to reprieve the rest of mankind from guilt. Others are more innocent because of his having suffered innocently.

XII

The Gods Not Justified

Another question to consider is whether Sophocles in this play tries to justify the ways of God to man. The answer to this question is "no" if "to justify" means to explain in terms of human justice. If human justice is the standard, then nothing can excuse the gods. But that does not mean that Sophocles intended the play to be an attack on the gods. In fact it is pointless to look for any message or meaning in this play. According to a critic, A.J.A. Waldock, "there is no meaning in Oedipus Rex; there is merely the terror of coincidence." G.M. Kirkwood, takes a similar view: "Sophocles", he says, "has no theological pronouncements to make and no points of criticism to score." Both these opinions come close to saying that the gods are merely agents in a traditional story which Sophocles, a "pure artist", uses for dramatic purposes without raising the religious issue or drawing any moral. The text of the play seems at first sight to support this view. After the catastrophe no one on the stage says a word either in justification of the gods or in criticism of them. Oedipus says: "These things were Apollo"—and that is all. Nor is there any reason why we should always be looking for a message from a work of art. The true function of an artist, as Dr. Johnson said, is to enlarge our sensibility.

Sophocles' Religious Opinions

And yet it is possible to infer from the plays of Sophocles the opinions or religious views of the author. We can, for instance, safely say that (i) Sophocles did not believe that the gods were in any human sense "just" and (ii) he did always believe that the gods existed and that man should revere them.

Disbelief in Divine Justice, and the Need to Revere the Gods

The first of these opinions is supported by the implicit evidence of *Oedipus Rex*, while the second opinion is supported by at least one passage in this play. The celebrated choral ode about the decline of prophecy and the threat to religion was of course suggested by the scene with Creon which precedes it; but it contains generalizations which have little apparent relevance either to Oedipus or to Creon. The question which the Chorus seem to be asking is this: "If Athens loses faith in religion, what significance is there in tragic drama, which exists as a part of the service of the gods?" In short, while Sophocles did not claim that the gods were in any human sense just he yet held that they were entitled to human worship. Nor should we think these two opinions to be incompatible. Disbelief in divine justice as

measured by human standards can perfectly well be associated with deep religious feeling. Sophocles would have agree that men find some things unjust, other things just, but that in the eyes of God all things are beautiful and good and just. There is an objective world-order which man must respect, but which he cannot hope fully to understand.

XIII

"Hamartia" or Tragic Error

Aristotle used the word "hamartia" to mean simply a mistake, but critics have always tended to interpret "hamartia" as a moral weakness or sin. Aristotle's ideal form of tragedy is simply one in which the destruction of the hero or heroine is caused by some false step taken in ignorance. This false step may be either a crime like Clytemnestra's or a mere miscalculation like Dejanira's. It is only a craving for poetic justice that interprets Aristotle's view to mean that the tragic disaster is due to a moral defect or a sin. Yet even Aristotle felt that the misfortunes of the absolutely righteous characters were too shocking for the tragic stage.

Representing the Ways of Life, Not Justifying Them

Sophocles is concerned not to justify life's ways but to show them. He finds no difficulty in representing even the downfall of a man doomed before his birth, in the very moment he was begotten. Oedipus has a pride, a hot temper, an imperiousness, that serve to make us dread his fall; but it is significant that his fall is not caused by these faults. The ruin of Dejanira comes only from her excessive trustfulness; Antigone's from her unflinching sense of duty. Still less in Euripides is there any justifying of the ways of God; often they are openly denounced, and the tragic error is sometimes not moral, sometimes absent altogether.

Tragedy At Its Best

At its best, tragedy is a story of human blindness leading human effort to defeat itself—a tragedy of error. The *hamartia* is the tragic error; the *peripeteia*, its fatal working to a result the opposite of that intended; the *anagnorisis*, the recognition of the truth. The error may or may not be moral. And its dramatic importance is not based on any conception of life's justice, but on the purely artistic and logical consideration that it is neater, formally, that calamities should begin at home the universe may proceed by law: but it seems heedless of justice. For its laws are those of cause and effect, not of right and wrong. Similarly in the theatre there may or may not be justice, but there must be law if we are to feel that inevitability which a play needs in order to convince. And the peculiar virtue of the tragedy of error is

that it is convincing in its logic, neat in its form, poignant in its irony. It remains not the only kind of tragedy; but, as Aristotle says, the best.

The Three Climaxes in The Play

Three Parts of the Play

Oedipus Rex may be divided into three parts, each having its point of climax and each representing a distinct area within the play. These three parts are the condemnation of Creon by Oedipus, the discovery, with the consequent self-blinding of Oedipus; and the conclusion of the play.

Condemnation of Creon

The first part puts before us a picture of Oedipus as the ideal king, devoted to the welfare of his subjects. Towards Creon he is courteous. But after the Teiresias scene, Creon is most unjustly condemned to death, or exile. Thus Oedipus the King becomes Oedipus the Tyrant, and, although he is persuaded to revoke the punishment, he is not convinced that his judgment of Creon was wrong.

Why the Condemnation

It is to be noted that the condemnation of Creon does not carry forward the plot at all, except to the small extent that it brings Jocasta upon the scene. Of course, the process of discovery gets started, but for this purpose it was not necessary for Oedipus to be brought to the verge of a judicial murder. A question arises why Oedipus is depicted as going to this length in tyrannical "hubris". It cannot contribute to his doom, that is already sealed. Not does it explain his doom, because it is never suggested that Oedipus fulfilled the prophecies through hubris. So there must be some other answer to the question.

Oedipus's Excessive Faith in His Own Judgment

In the Teiresias scene an emphatic contrast is drawn between the physical blindness of the prophet and the intellectual blindness of the King. Oedipus's suspicion of a collaboration between the prophet and Creon is the result of his intellectual blindness, even though Oedipus's reasoning has a certain plausibility. Oedipus feels so sure of himself that he will not listen to Creon's appeal to his reason. He instantly rejects the suggestion that he should go to Delphi and inquire whether the god had or had not given the response which Creon has reported. He also

disbelieves Creon's oath of allegiance. In his complete certainty he brushes aside all such considerations, feeling too confident in his own judgment, the good King behaves like an unjust tyrant. As the Chorus says, "swift is not always sure."

Past and Present Mental Blindness of Oedipus

There is one obvious link between Oedipus's present action and the past, and that is the mental blindness from which an intelligent man suffers, or a man's false confidence when circumstances are treacherous. Oedipus was sure that Polybus and Merope were his parents. It never occurred to him that he might be wrong. He is also sure that Creon is conspiring against him. The earlier certainty led him into misfortunes of which he had been explicitly forewarned. The second certainty leads him to an outburst of tyrannical hubris.

Sophocles's Failure to Utilize the Opportunity for a Dramatic Ending

The last climax in the play, again, is not what the story dictates; it is not an inevitable ending to a play about the tragic fate of Oedipus. However, this climax harmonises with the first part and the climax of the first part. Nothing could be more logical and dramatic than that the play should end with the exiling of Oedipus. Teiresias prophesied that Oedipus would become blind, an exile, and a beggar cursed by all. Oedipus himself uttered a curse on the murderer of Laius. Now the curse has recoiled upon his own head. It is established that he is responsible for the misfortunes of the people of Thebes. The stranger who once saved Thebes by his intelligence must now save it by leaving the city for ever. But Sophocles has not given such a dramatic ending to the play. We must, therefore, look for a reason for the dramatist's failure to provide that would have been a logical and dramatic ending. Sophocles had here all the ingredients of a powerful scene and for a forceful character-contrast. Creon, who had barely escaped death or exile at the hands of Oedipus, has now become the King, and Oedipus is reduced to the position of a petitioner. Hitherto Creon had a passive role in the play, now Sophocles had the opportunity to draw a Creon who would be vindictively triumphant or exceptionally large-hearted. But Sophocles does not utilise the opportunity. Creon is, indeed, shown as having no ill-will against Oedipus, but the fact is dismissed in two verses. He is not depicted as strikingly kind or strikingly unkind towards Oedipus.

Creon's Insistence on Consulting Apollo before Banishing Oedipus

What Sophocles does is to develop a situation perfectly antistrophic to the one at the end of the first part of the play. As many as four times does Oedipus demand

to be banished; twice he demands it of the Chorus and twice of Creon. Once again Oedipus shows himself quite sure of his position. But Creon refuses the demand both times and he refuses not out of kindness but because he does not know the will of Apollo. Oedipus, earlier, did not consult Apollo to verify his own inferences about Creon even though Creon's life was at stake. Now Creon refuses to act in a crisis until he has consulted Apollo even though, on Oedipus's showing, the case for his exile is clear.

The Ending Not Really Undramatic and Negative

This link between the first and the last parts of the play is strengthened by a verbal repetition. In the course of Oedipus's questioning of Creon in the first part, the latter once says that he prefers not to express an opinion which he lacks the necessary knowledge. Now, in the last part, Creon again says, in reply to a question by Oedipus, that, when he lacks knowledge, he prefers not to speak at random. In other words, the contrast between certainty (on the part of Oedipus) and caution (on the part of Creon) is very much in Sophocles's thoughts. And we already know that in the first part certainty led to *hubris*. Thus the ending of the play, though superficially un-dramatic and negative, is not really so. This does not, however, prevent readers from wishing that the ending should have been more striking and spectacular.

Creon's Rebuff to Oedipus at the End

The very last action deserves consideration also; it is by no means inevitable. The two children have been brought out. What Oedipus says to them and about them is a most tragic addition to the picture of ruin and desolation that Sophocles is drawing. Now, when Oedipus is taken into the palace, the children too must be removed from the stage. There is no need to make a dramatic point of it, but Sophocles does make it. They are removed from Oedipus's embrace and, when he expresses a desire to keep them with him, Creon says: "Command no more. Obey. Your rule is ended." Such is the goal to which Sophocles has taken this long train of events.

The Illusory Nature of Certainty and Command

Certainty and command, both are illusory. Laius was given a warning and he tried to ensure his safety by ordering the destruction of the child. He thought that he had controlled his destiny. Oedipus thought likewise when being warned of what was to happen, he avoided Corinth where his parents were and went in the other direction. But circumstances proved adverse. Sophocles points out that human

resolution and intelligence can easily go wrong and be defeated by circumstances. The picture is poetically not untrue to life. Chance does sometimes defeat the best of plans. Human control is an illusion. Further, Oedipus's certainty led him into *hubris*.

The Element of Universality

If we assume that the subject of this play is merely the tragic story of Oedipus, then both the first and the third climaxes appear to be unexpected. But the personal drama of Oedipus is in this play surrounded by something more universal, and it is this that has determined the play's structure.

The Sharp Opposition Between Chance and Prophecy

The middle part of the play shows, in a terrible manner, that the incredible is true, that the impossible has happened. With difficulty, the Chorus and Jocasta have prevailed upon Oedipus to withdraw his decree against Creon. The episode is barely mentioned again and seems to have no influence on what follows. Jocasta proves to Oedipus that one oracle at least has failed, but in doing this she produces in Oedipus the frightening suspicion that he may himself be the man who killed Laius. Jocasta repeats that the oracle has failed because Laius was not killed by his own son. Then comes the ode in which the Chorus emphasises the need for purity, for the observance of the unwritten divine laws, for the avoidance of that *hubris* which breeds the tyrant and is always overthrown. The ode also contains the prayer that the oracles may be fulfilled, since the validity of religion depends on it. This leads at once to Jocasta's sacrifice and the cruel answer that it receives. (The cruel answer is the arrival of the Corinthian messenger and the revelation, clear to Jocasta but not yet to Oedipus, that Oedipus is Jocasta's own son). Before, however, Jocasta realises the horrible truth regarding Oedipus's identity, she asserts that oracles are not reliable and that human affairs are ruled by Chance. Hardly has she said so, when her feeling of security is shattered, and all she can do is to go in anguish to meet her death. Oedipus once more draws a wrong conclusion. He thinks that Jocasta's grief is due to nothing more than injured pride (at thinking that Oedipus is low-born). He declares himself to be the son of Chance. The Chorus taking up the theme, wonders which of the gods begot Oedipus from some mountain-nymph. Then enters the Theban shepherd to prove that Oedipus is no son of Chance but of Laius and Jocasta. We are thus faced with the sharp opposition between Chance and prophecy, and the close connection between prophecy and religion (religion meaning purity, the observance of the unwritten laws, and the avoidance of hubris). Sophocles seems to be saying: "Seek purity and avoid hubris; prophecies come true; religion is

not a fraud." However, he does not clearly say that obedience to the unwritten laws would have saved these people.

The Hubris, Not of Jocasta But of Oedipus

The first part of the play, as we have seen, leads to a climax almost irrelevant to the actual story; Oedipus, in his intellectual self-reliance, reached a conclusion which was entirely wrong and, feeling sure of the rightness of his conclusion, nearly committed a crime of exceptional enormity. Here was the hubris that breeds the tyrant. As for the ode, it would not be right to say that the Chorus is referring to the hubris of Jocasta in denying the truth of the oracle. Jocasta is merely relating what she actually knows; the child was destroyed, and the oracle did fail. In any case she has protected herself by saying that the oracles may not have come from the god, but only from his human interpreters; and if this be regarded as hidden hubris, then the Chorus too is guilty of it for it said exactly the same thing earlier. On the other hand, Sophocles has created and displayed at length a striking example of hubris in Oedipus. It was Oedipus who swept aside all restraints like a tyrant, and went to the verge of crime because he felt too sure of himself.

Jocasta's Erroneous Philosophy

Jocasta serves a different purpose. She also feels sure of herself, both before the ode and still more after it when she learns that Polybus is dead and that a second oracle has failed. From this certainty, she draws the conclusion that life is governed by chance and that it is best to live at random. With a doctrine like this, we should not be surprised at the kind of response which she gets to her prayers. In the other plays of Sophocles the dramatic function of prophecy is to assert that life is not chaotic. If Jocasta's view about "chance" is right, then Creon's downfall in *Antigone* is a mere fluke and *Electra* is no more than a superior thriller. In that case there is no such thing as Order, no Dike; only Chance.

No Justice in Tragedy according to Human Standards, But not a Random Universe Either

In this context, Dike or Order should not be paraphrased as justice or natural justice, meaning happiness for the good people and suffering only for the bad ones. Neither Sophocles nor any earlier Greek poet believed in this kind of justice. The justice of the gods is not dispensed according to human standards or human specifications. The Greek poets took the view that the gods could be cruel and indiscriminate, but they knew also that the gods were not for the reason to be disregarded. Antigone was dismayed that the gods left her to perish. They certainly

left her to perish, but equally certainly they visited their anger on Creon. In the case of this play we could say that, while Oedipus is punished without any deliberate fault on his part, the universe is not to be regarded as being random. Jocasta feels sure that the oracles had failed. As a consequence, she did not recognise the place of forethought, caution, scruple. Similarly, Oedipus was sure that Creon was a traitor. As a consequence, he observed no restraints. Surely the ode need not puzzle us any more. The ode begins with the unwritten laws and ends with a prayer for the fulfilment of the oracles.

Sophocles' Philosophy in this Play

Sophocles is not just indulging in a statement of orthodox piety. It is evident that an observance of the unwritten laws would not have prevented this catastrophe. Sophocles' point is quite different. Life is vast, complex, uncertain; we deceive ourselves if we think that we can control life; human judgment may go wrong; ever-reliance on one's judgment leads to hubris, and that always ends in disaster. Many things in life are impossible to explain, but life is not random. The gods do exist and their laws do operate. If we think that there are no laws, and if we neglect the restraints on that assumption, we are only deluding ourselves.

Oedipus Rex - Character or Destiny?

Different Interpretations of the Play Possible

Oedipus Rex is a play that may be interpreted in various ways. Perhaps Sophocles here wishes to tell us that man is only the plaything of Fate. Or, perhaps, Sophocles means to say that the gods have contrived an awful fate for Oedipus in order to display their power to man and to teach him a 'wholesome lesson. At the beginning of the play Oedipus is the great King who at one time saved Thebes at a crucial hour and who is the only hope of the people now. At the end of the play, Oedipus is the polluted outcast, himself the cause of the city's distress, through crimes predicted by Apollo before he was born. It is possible also that Sophocles has simply written an exciting drama without going into its philosophical implications.

Characters and Adverse Circumstances
Responsible for the Catastrophe

The action of Oedipus Rex shows a certain duality. In the foreground are autonomous human actors, drawn fully and vividly. Oedipus himself, Teiresias, Creon, Jocasta, and the two shepherds are all perfectly lifelike characters, and so are the remoter characters who do not appear on the stage—the hot-tempered Laius at the cross-roads and the unknown Corinthian who insulted Oedipus by saying that the latter was not the son of Polybus. The circumstances, too, are natural, even inevitable, once we accept the characters. Oedipus, as we see him on various occasions, appears to be intelligent, determined, self-reliant but hot-tempered and too sure of himself. As apparently hostile chain of circumstances combines, now with the strong side of his character and now with its weak side, to bring about the catastrophe. A man of a poor spirit would have tolerated the insult and remained safe in Corinth. But Oedipus was resolute. Not content with Polybus's assurance he went to Delphi and consulted the oracle; and when the oracle, instead of answering his question repeated the warning given originally to Laius. Oedipus, being a man of determination, never went back to Corinth. By a coincidence he met Laius at the cross-roads and, as father and son were of a similar temper, a fight took place. Being a man of a high intelligence, Oedipus was able, afterwards, to solve the riddle of the Sphinx. But though Intelligent he was blind enough to marry a woman old enough to be his mother, all the time feeling sure that his mother was in Corinth. Whatever happens is the natural result of the weaknesses and the virtues of his character, in combination with other people's. Sophocles does not try to make us feel that a relentless destiny or a hostile god is guiding the events. Whatever happens is a tragic chapter from Oedipus's life except for the original oracle and its repetition.

A Hidden Power in the Background

At the same time we are made to feel that the action of the play is moving on a parallel and higher plane. The presence of some power or some design in the background is already suggested by the continuous dramatic irony. In the matter of the plague this hidden power is definitely stated. The presence of this power is most imaginatively revealed in the scene containing Jocasta's offer of a sacrifice. She, who refused to believe in the oracles, surprises us by coming out of the palace with sacrificial offerings. She lays them on Apollo's altar, burns the incense, and prays for deliverance from fear. There is a moment of reverent silence, which is broken by the arrival of the cheerful messenger from Corinth. The messenger brings the news that Polybus is dead. All fear comes to an end. Jocasta's prayer has been heard. But soon afterwards Jocasta hangs herself. This is how Jocasta's prayer has been answered! But how does the god answer the pitiable prayer of Jocasta? Not by any direct intervention. It was not Apollo who instigated the Corinthian to come. It was

the Corinthian's own eagerness to be the first with the "good" news. He wanted to win the new king's favour because, besides the news of Oedipus's succession to the throne of Corinth, the Corinthian is completely autonomous, and yet in his coming the hand of the god is visible. Thus the action moves on two planes at once. In spite of that the whole texture of the play is so vividly naturalistic that we must hesitate to interpret it as showing a bleak determinism. These people are not puppets in the hands of higher powers; they act in their own right.

No Display of Power by the gods

Nor does this texture support the view that the gods want to display their power to man and teach him a lesson. If Sophocles meant the gods to display their powers by pre-determining the life of Oedipus in order to teach men a lesson, it was quite easy for Sophocles to say so; he could have made the Chorus sing a song on the power and mysterious ways of the gods, but he does not do so. On the contrary, the ode that immediately follows the catastrophe expresses the view that the fate of Oedipus is typical of human life and fortunes and not that it is a special display of divine power. Secondly, although Oedipus is by far the greatest sufferer in the play, he is not the only one. There are others who suffer, though not in the same degree, and we must take them into consideration also. Sophocles wants us to treat Oedipus not as a special case except in the degree to which he suffers. Oedipus is typical, as the Chorus says. What happens to Oedipus is part of the whole web of human life. One reason why Sophocles introduces the children towards the end of the play is that Oedipus may say to them what he does actually say: "What a life must yours be! Who will admit you to the gatherings of the citizens and to the festivals? Who will marry you?" In short, Sophocles wants to tell us that the innocent suffers with the guilty; such is life, such are the gods.

The Disappointment and the Distress in Store for the Two Shepherds

The two shepherds deserve consideration also. Sophocles has presented them sharply, with their motives, hopes and fears. The Corinthian frankly expects a reward because the news he has brought is great news; but he has something much more surprising in reserve, and the moment for revealing it soon comes. Oedipus learns that he is not the son of Polybus but the circumstances in which Oedipus as an infant fell into the hands of the Corinthian have to be explained by the Theban

shepherd who handed over the child to the Corinthian. Jocasta's last despairing cry does not disturb Oedipus because Oedipus interprets it as Jocasta's disappointment at finding her husband to be a man of low birth. The Chorus is happy and excited, and, when the Theban shepherd is brought in, the Corinthian becomes even more obliging and helpful as he works up to his climax; "Here is the man, my friend, who was that baby!" And this is his last speech. No reward for him, no glory in Corinth, only bewilderment and utter dismay, for in a moment he hears the true facts from the Theban shepherd's lips. Such is the outcome, for these two shepherds, of their benevolent interest in an abandoned baby. Can we regard all this as the work of Apollo? Here, as in the much bigger case of Oedipus, is that combination of well-meant action with a situation which makes it lead to disaster. An act of mercy, tinged with a perfectly honest shrewdness, leads the Corinthian to the verge, of great prosperity, but as he gets ready to receive it, eagerly and with confidence it turns into horror. The other shepherd too is one who refused to kill a baby. Part of his reward came years later when he saw the man who killed Laius occupying the throne of Thebes and married to the Queen—an event which sent him, for his own safety, into half-exile. The rest of his reward comes now, when a sudden command brings him back to last to the city, to learn what he learns there.

The "Catharsis" in the Perfection of Form

These minor tragedies, of the children and the shepherds, are in harmony with the major one. Such is Apollo and such is human life. An awful sin is committed in all innocence, children are born to a life of shame, and virtuous intentions go wrong. Where does the "catharsis" lie? It lies in the ultimate illumination which turns a painful story into a profound and moving experience. It has been suggested that the catharsis of a play like this lies in the perfection of its form. The perfection of form represents, by implication, the forces of righteousness and beneficence of which Aeschylus speaks directly in his choric odes.

The Universe Not Chaotic and Irrational

It is necessary to add a word about Jocasta's sacrifice, and Apollo's swift and terrible answer. Jocasta has been denying the truth of oracles. Sophocles certainly does not consider Jocasta's unbelief to be a kind of wickedness deserving severe punishment. Sophocles means much more than this. Jocasta has said that there is no need to fear oracles and that one should live at the random. This is a doctrine which would deny the very basis of all serious Greek thought. The Greeks believed that the universe was not chaotic and irrational, but was based on an obedience to law. The tragic poets too thought in this way. In Aeschylus we find moral laws which have

the same kind of validity as physical and mathematical laws. The doer must suffer. To the mind of Sophocles the law shows itself as a balance, rhythm, or pattern in human affairs. Call no man happy until he is dead, Sophocles tells us. But this does not mean that life is chaotic. If it so appears to us it is because we are unable to see the whole pattern. But sometimes when life for a moment becomes dramatic, we can see enough pattern to give us faith that there is a meaning in the whole. In *Antigone* when Creon is overwhelmed, it is by the natural recoil of his own acts, working themselves out through the minds and passions of Antigone and Haemon and we can see in this a natural justice. In *Electra* the vengeance that at last falls on the murderers is linked to their crime by the natural chains of cause and effect. In *Oedipus Rex* we get a much more complex picture. Here we have a man who is destroyed like a man inadvertently interfering with the natural flow of electricity. Many casual and unrelated actions contribute to the ruin—actions of the shepherds, the charioteer who tried to push Oedipus off the road, the man at the banquet in Corinth. Things happen contrary to all expectation. Life seems cruel and chaotic. Cruel, yes; but chaotic, no—for if it were chaotic no god could predict, and Jocasta's view of life would be right. Piety and purity are not the whole of the mysterious pattern of life, as the fate of Oedipus shows, but they are an important part of it, and the doctrine of chaos would deny even this. The pattern may hit the life of the individual cruelly, but at least we know that it exists; we feel assured that piety and purity are a large part of it.

Every detail in this play is devised in order to support Sophocles' faith in this underlying law and the need of obeying it. That is why we can say that the perfection of form implies a world-order. Whether or not it is beneficent, Sophocles does not say.

The Question of a Moral Lesson in the Play "Oedipus Rex"

Oedipus Rex is a play of inexhaustible interest. Literary critics and students of Greek religion in our times continue to turn to it. Anthropologists and Psychologists find it useful as a reflection of an ancient myth and man's unconscious mind. In short, the play continues to be a subject of intensive discussion.

Certain things about it are clearer than others. For instance, it can easily be analysed as a piece of stagecraft; the methods used to arouse the interest and excite the emotions of the audience are evident to the analytical reader. But the meaning or significance of the play has aroused a lot of controversy. Briefly speaking, there are two major considerations regarding this play: (i) Sophocles'

dramatic craftsmanship, and (ii) Sophoclean thought—the former presenting no problem and the latter giving rise to considerable differences of opinion. Most critics have found a profound meaning in the play and they have offered a variety of interpretations ranging from the didacticism of Plutarch to the more complex explanations of the 20th century (such as Freudian, post-Freudian, Marxist, and existentialist).

Matching Wits with the gods

The plot of this play is a search for knowledge, and its climax is a recognition of truth. The hero here is a man whose self-esteem is rooted in his pride of intellect. The gods here manifest themselves not by means of any miracle but by a prediction which is proved true after a long delay. Various formulas have been imposed on this play. For instance, the play has been interpreted to mean that a wicked man is punished, or that an imprudent man pays the price, or that a family curse returns, or that an innocent man is victimised by fate. However, a more appropriate formula would be to say that in this play a man matches wits with the gods. We might even lend universality to this formula by saying that here man (and not a man) matches wits with the gods.

The gods always Win

The play appears to dramatize the conventional Greek wisdom that, when mortal man vies with the immortal gods, the gods always win. The theme is as old as Homer, who tells this story to illustrate it in the sixth book of the *Iliad*. In this particular play the specific point of contention is knowledge. This is Sophocles' way of translating the old theme into a form suited to the age of enlightenment and it creates a fine contrast or opposition between knowledge as power and self-knowledge. In short, the awareness that man is less than the gods is undoubtedly an element in the play.

Victory in Defeat

"*Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles combines two apparently irreconcilable themes, the greatness of the gods and the greatness of man, and the combination of these themes is inevitably tragic, for the greatness of the gods is most clearly and powerfully demonstrated by man's defeat. The god is great in his laws and he does not grow old. But man does grow old, and not only does he grow old, he also dies. Unlike the gods, he exists in time. The beauty and power of his physical frame is subject to sickness, death, and corruption, the beauty and power of his intellectual, artistic, and social achievement to decline, overthrow, and oblivion. His greatness

and beauty arouse in us a pride in their magnificence which is inseparable from and increased by our sorrow over their imminent death. Oedipus is symbolic of all human achievement, his hard-won magnificence, unlike the everlasting magnificence of the divine, cannot last and, while it lives, shines all the more brilliant against the sombre background of its impermanency. Sophocles' tragedy presents us with a terrible affirmation of man's subordinate position in the universe, and at the same time with a heroic vision of man's victory in defeat. Man is not equated to the gods but man at his greatest, as in Oedipus, is capable of something which the gods cannot experience; the proud tragic view of Sophocles sees in the fragility and inevitable defeat of human greatness the possibility of a purely human heroism to which the gods can never attain, for the condition of their existence is everlasting victory."

The Lesson of Modesty or Self-Restraint

It might be held that the play teaches us the precept: "know thyself". If we agree, we shall have to support the view that the play is didactic and that Sophocles is a teacher; for what the Delphic maxim just quoted amounts to is a warning to cultivate *sophrosyne*, a word best translated as modesty or self-restraint. It may be asserted that the play teaches the reader to cultivate the virtue of modesty, or self-restraint, or self-control, or caution. According to a strong supporter of this view, the touchstone by which Oedipus is to be judged is Creon. Creon's "pious moderation" and "modest loyalty" are the ideals against which the arrogance of Oedipus is measured and found to be wrong. If the play teaches the lesson of self-control and self-restraint, then we have to admit that Creon's personality illustrates this virtue. Creon explicitly claims this virtue in one of his speeches. He is at all time respectful, cautious, and reverent. Even at the end, he insists that he will not exile Oedipus until he is absolutely sure that this is what the gods desire. It is he who points the obvious moral in the last scene, that now perhaps Oedipus will put his faith in the gods. His last, minor dispute with Oedipus is over a question of caution. Oedipus wants to be exiled immediately but Creon will not promise this until the will of the gods is made quite clear. Twice in the course of the play Creon makes a statement that may be taken as his motto. The statement is to the effect that Creon will not do or say anything unless he possesses definite knowledge to justify his doing or saying it.

The Contrast with Creon

This trait in Creon contrasts him sharply with Oedipus who suffers from the pride of knowledge. Creon shows a desire to avoid the responsibilities of kingship because they are dangerous and painful. Creon would be content instead with public

approval and with honours that bring gain. Creon is a just man; he is even a kind man who brings the children in the last scene to meet Oedipus. He is also an innocent man unjustly accused who reacts mildly and seems not to bear any grudge at the end. But he is humdrum and poor spirited and self-satisfied. He is thoroughly decent in his way, but Oedipus with his boldness and intelligence and ease of command is a much greater personality.

The Contrast between Oedipus and the Other Main Characters

The contrast between Oedipus and the other two principal characters is also noteworthy. Teiresias represents and defends the wisdom of the gods in his opposition to human folly. But Teiresias, as a person, stands no comparison with Oedipus. His first words in the play show that Teiresias finds his knowledge unbearable, and he is quite prepared to go back home until Oedipus provokes him to anger. As for Jocasta, she has raised irresponsibility to the status of a principle. Besides, neither Jocasta nor Teiresias is willing to face the truth, while Oedipus is not only willing but determined. Neither Teiresias nor Creon desires the responsibility that comes with office and power, but Oedipus does. Teiresias and Creon are both wiser men than Oedipus and at the end of the play Creon is still giving to Oedipus a lesson in *sophrosyne* or self-restraint. But the brilliance and the courage of Oedipus make him a greater man than both Teiresias and Creon.

The True Greatness of Man

Oedipus may be taken to represent all mankind. He represents also the city which is man's greatest creation. His resurgence in the last scene of the play is a prophetic vision of a defeated Athens which will rise to a greatness beyond anything she had attained in victory. In the last scene, we witness a vision of a man superior to the tragic reversal of his action and the terrible success of his search for truth, reasserting his greatness not this time in defiance of the powers which shape human life but in harmony with those powers. In the last scene we see beyond the defeat of man's ambition the true greatness of which only the defeated are capable.

No Moral Lesson

There is no moral lesson here. No moralist would present human folly in such bright colours and depict wisdom and temperance as dull. The kind of play Sophocles was writing in *Oedipus Rex* was intrinsically unsuited to be a lesson. The play does not persuade that Creon is a nobler man; it only shows him to be a wiser man. It does offer some comfort to the pious reader, but only a little, though it creates a

difficulty for a philosopher like Plato who believed in the unity of human virtues. Nor could this play have pleased humanists of the fifth century, who attached great importance to the human intellect. Here we have a play showing man at his noblest and greatest when he is most foolish and in the very actions which exhibit his folly. We may accept that gratefully as a great artistic triumph, but we should not expect a moral lesson from it.

The Interplay of Characters in Oedipus Rex

Oedipus's Nature Revealed

The theme of Oedipus Rex is centred in the person of Oedipus, and the function of the subordinate persons is to reveal his nature. Three of these persons call for detailed consideration—Creon, Jocasta, and Teiresias. The relationship of each of them to Oedipus shows a high skill of dramatic art on the part of the author.

The Dialogue between Teiresias and Oedipus

The first major interplay of character is in Oedipus's scene with Teiresias. The prophet begins well-intentioned, the King respectful and calm. Indeed the extreme reverence of Oedipus toward Teiresias is very unlike his impetuous manner in the prologue and his anger later in this scene. It is quite clear that Sophocles is aiming at a striking contrast between the mood at the beginning of the scene and that at its end. Oedipus, obstructed by Tiresias's refusal to talk, soon flies into a terrible rage and presently accuses him of complicity in the crime. This in turn strings Teiresias into declaring that Oedipus is himself the murderer that he seeks. By now Oedipus is in a fierce rage, and Teiresias can shout aloud the whole truth without any chance of Oedipus's discovering it. The two men are moving in different channels of thought, though each is impelled in the direction he takes by the influence of the other. Oedipus hears Teiresias and reacts, and yet he does not really hear. Or, perhaps he does hear. Perhaps there is behind his indignation and rage that fill this scene, and the next, with Creon, a lurking fear that what Teiresias has said is right. However, the fear, if such there is, is deep within and subconscious. Towards the

end of this scene, there is a subtle and most revealing display of Oedipus's egotism. A reference by Teiresias to the parents of Oedipus catches the King's conscious ear, though the earlier declarations of his guilt found him indifferent. Oedipus is for the moment all attention, and it seems that now he will learn his parentage. But the prophet (Teiresias) answers enigmatically, and Oedipus reproaches him for talking in riddles. Teiresias asks him if solving riddles is not Oedipus's special skill. This reminder of Oedipus's triumph over the Sphinx so occupies the King's attention that he forgets all about his original question and the moment of possible disclosure passes without Oedipus becoming any wiser about his parentage. In this scene we are also made aware of a double contrast. There is a contrast between the outward magnificence and inward blindness of Oedipus i.e., the opening dialogue of Oedipus with the priest followed by his talk with Teiresias. Then there is the contrast between the outward blindness of Teiresias and his inward sight. Oedipus taunts Teiresias with the latter's blindness, saying that he has eyes for profit or monetary gain but is blind as regards prophecy. Teiresias gives a reply which is a wonderful consummation of this play on sight and blindness. Oedipus has eyes to see, says Teiresias, but does not see his own damnation.

The First Scene between Oedipus and Creon

Oedipus has two scenes with Creon, both of which are important for the light they throw on Oedipus's character. The first follows the Teiresias-scene and is like it in form. Creon does not, of course, have the fire and authority of the old prophet and therefore the dramatic pitch of the scene is much lower. Creon is the "moderate" man. His role is to stress the extravagance of speech and the self-reliance displayed by Oedipus in contrast to Creon's unfailing modesty and calm. Oedipus is angry from the start, Creon pleads only for a fair hearing. Creon shows extreme caution in contrast to Oedipus with his wild suspicions and guesses. It is typical of Creon to say that it is not his habit to assert what he does not know. In a long speech Creon argues that any man of modesty would prefer to enjoy a ruler's power without the cares of rule, as he does. Creon wants honours that bring gain. Oedipus is arrogant in his unjust charges; he accuses Creon of being the murderer of Laius; he accuses Creon of plotting against his own (Oedipus's) person. Creon is in fact mild of manner, loyal, and patient. Oedipus's accusations therefore only serve to show Oedipus's stubborn reliance on his own convictions.

The Second Scene between Oedipus and Creon

The second scene between these two men comes at the end of the play. Here we have the same contrast, though the emphasis is different. Creon is still the man of

complete moderation, while Oedipus is an extremist. But now it is himself that Oedipus attacks, while toward Creon his attitude is one of humanity and gratitude. The change emphasizes, of course, the completeness of Oedipus's reversal of fortune. It also shows that Oedipus is as capable of generosity as of abuse—which we already know.

Mechanical Virtues of Creon

Creon thus serves as a foil to Oedipus. But Creon is not a character who excites our sympathy in spite of his unfailing justness and moderation. Creon's virtues are a little mechanical. There is no sign of an inward fire of conviction. This aspect of his nature is especially clear at the end of the play. But even in his earlier self-defence his impersonal logicality fails to stir us, especially in contrast with Oedipus's emotional intensity. To take only one example of this contrast, when Oedipus, convinced of Creon's treachery, shouts "My city, alas for my city," Creon very correctly, coolly, and logically answers that it is his city too, not Oedipus's alone. Creon's words are both just and logical while Oedipus is all wrong. Yet the unjust cry of Oedipus excites more sympathy by its fervour than the cold truth of Creon.

The Continued Domination of the Play by Oedipus

The above contrast serves, as in the last scene, to ensure the continued domination of the play by the tragic hero (i.e., Oedipus). Creon at no time gives a sign of emotion for the fall of Oedipus. If he were a smaller man than he is, he would be elated. If he were greater, he would show some sympathy. But when Oedipus begs to be exiled from Thebes, Creon answers that he would already have given a command to that effect if he had not thought it necessary to consult the gods first. Creon will do nothing without the certainty that it is the right thing; but he is quite prepared to drive out his blind and helpless kinsman without the least personal feeling. Just at the end Oedipus pleads, hopelessly, that his daughters may stay with him. Creon's reply is that Oedipus should try to command no longer. The reproach is slight, and no doubt justified; but its total want of feeling is vaguely offensive. Creon is not malicious; he is well intentioned. Of his own accord he brings Oedipus's daughters to him. But he is colourless, without depths of good or evil. His saneness is symbolized by his repetition, at the end, of what he said earlier, namely that he speaks of only things of which he has knowledge. Were Creon a mere living and attractive figure, the sympathy and admiration of the audience would not wholly go to Oedipus. The distinction between the high spirit of the central figure and his unheroic foil—between Oedipus and Creon—is firmly drawn.

The Skepticism of Oedipus and of Jocasta

The relation between Oedipus and Jocasta is mainly one of sympathy. The skepticism of Oedipus, which appears in his scene with Teiresias, is shared by Jocasta. Indeed, she serves as a temptress to induce Oedipus to disregard the ominous oracles and trust in his own judgment entirely. But we need not for that reason interpret Jocasta as a symbol of the free-thinking, liberal, intellectual Athenian woman of Sophocles' time. Her skepticism springs from her own immediate situation, from her desire to protect Oedipus and keep peace. Love, not self-confidence, governs her attitude. Three times she speaks out against the validity of oracles. This skepticism is, of course, a folly, because \ht oracles are ultimately vindicated. But the question is: Does Sophocles present this skepticism as a thing to be condemned, or is his use of oracles here a dramaturgical convenience? We cannot be certain about Sophocles's own attitude toward the religious significance of oracles. But this much perhaps we could say: The skepticism of Oedipus is a symbol, not necessarily of impiety but of confidence in the self-sufficiency of human power. In Sophocles's view human power is an inadequate defence against suffering.

The Relentless Chain of Events

In any case, the skepticism of Oedipus and Jocasta creates effective dramatic suspense. Several times Jocasta is used as a parallel and prelude to the fortunes of Oedipus. First she sees that the oracles are true after all, and later he sees it too. First she finds her life ruined by the inevitable process of events, and later he comes to the same terrible knowledge. Oedipus and Jocasta react differently to the Corinthian messenger's revelation of Oedipus's origin: the knowledge and despair of Jocasta are contrasted with the blind excitement of Oedipus. The most striking case of a contrast and a parallel between Jocasta and Oedipus is in the following episode. When the messenger from Corinth has brought news of the death of Polybus, Jocasta, in the excitement of her relief, cries: "Why should a man be afraid? His life is governed by chance and the future is all unknown. It is best to live at random, in whatever way we can." But presently Jocasta realizes that no chance but a relentless chain of events is in command of her life and that of Oedipus; and she goes into the palace to hang herself in despair. But now Oedipus takes up the theme. Baffled as to who his parents are (after the Corinthian messenger has told him that he is not the son of Polybus and Merope) and wildly excited by the search for truth, Oedipus cries that he is "the child of Fortune." In the next short episode he arrives at the dreadful knowledge which Jocasta has learnt a little earlier.

The Two Shepherds

The Corinthian messenger and the Shepherd are clearly differentiated. The Corinthian, who comes as a bearer of what he believes to be good news, has been shown, in the episode before they meet, to be a cheery, familiar, garrulous person. The Shepherd, knowing that he possesses a dreadful secret about his King, is trying desperately to hide it and is therefore surly and slow to speak, just the reverse of the Corinthian. The opposite pull of these two characters brings a remarkable tension to this crucial scene. The cheery Corinthian is unaware of the horrors he is bringing to light, and so he tries to stir the reluctant Shepherd's memory. The Corinthian's colloquial address, his cheery delivery of the fatal message, and his ignorance of the Shepherd's desperate efforts to conceal his knowledge—these add enormously to the grimness of the moment. Here is a very brief instance of the tragic use of comedy, in the Greek style.

The Mind and Character of King Oedipus

I

Almost an Ideal King

We form an excellent impression of Oedipus as a King in the very prologue. The Priest, who leads the citizens in a deputation to King Oedipus, recalls the great service that Oedipus did to the city of Thebes by having saved the city from the cruel and bloodthirsty Sphinx. The people, says the Priest, think Oedipus to be a noble, mighty, and wise man. The city looks upon him as its saviour. Oedipus gave evidence of his high intelligence by solving the riddle of the Sphinx.

Thus Oedipus appears to us in the prologue as a man who is almost worshipped and adored by his subjects. People have complete faith in him, and they believe that he is capable of ridding them of the afflictions which have descended upon them. Oedipus is not only powerful and wise, but also deeply sympathetic. Even before the people come to him with a petition, he is aware of their sufferings. He has already sent Creon to Delphi to find out from Apollo's oracle the reason for the sufferings of his people and the method by which they can be delivered of those sufferings. Furthermore, acting on Creon's advice, he has already sent for Tiresias, the blind prophet, to seek his guidance. Oedipus tells the Priest that he is suffering a greater torture on account of the distress of his people than they themselves are suffering. He has been shedding many tears on their account. Each citizen is suffering as a single individual but he, Oedipus, bears the weight of the collective suffering of all of them. All this shows the softer side of Oedipus who appears to us almost as the ideal King.

A Man of Determination with a High Sense of His Duty

Soon we become aware of another of Oedipus's good qualities. As soon as Creon reports the information he has brought from Delphi, Oedipus proclaims his resolve to trace the murderer of Laius and to punish him suitably. Oedipus declares his intention to start an investigation into the murder in order to find out the truth. Oedipus also seeks the cooperation of the Chorus in his purpose. He tells the Chorus that years ago he had come to the city as a complete foreigner, knowing nothing about the murder of his predecessor. He would like the murderer to come forward and confess his crime, promising that he will award no punishment to the criminal except banishment from the city. Oedipus also utters a curse upon the man who murdered Laius: the murderer will find nothing but wretchedness and misery, as long as he lives. It would have been his duty, says Oedipus, to avenge the murder of Laius even if the command had not come from Apollo. Now it is doubly his duty, and he will leave nothing undone to find the murderer. Upon those who disobey his order in connection with the efforts to trace the criminal, Oedipus invokes another curse. All this shows that Oedipus is a man of strong determination. He is not a wavering kind of man. Nor does he believe in half-measures. He will go the whole hog in trying to find out the facts and discover the criminal. Oedipus does not take things lightly. He is a serious-minded man with a high sense of the office he holds. He identifies himself fully with his people, and regards their sufferings as his own. Although he is a man of a compassionate nature, there is no sign of weakness in him. The curses that he invokes upon the murderer of Laius and upon those who evade their duty in the context of his proclamation show him to be a man of a stern and almost ruthless nature, a man who will not shrink from taking drastic steps to punish an evil-doer and in the pursuit of truth.

Hot-tempered, Hasty, Rash

The scene with Teiresias, however, shows Oedipus in a somewhat unfavourable light. He begins his interview with the prophet respectfully enough, but Teiresias's reluctance to reveal the facts greatly irritates and upsets Oedipus. Of course, Oedipus does not know the real reason why Teiresias is unwilling to talk and to disclose, the name and identity of the murderer of Laius. But even so, Oedipus shows himself lacking in self-control and self-restraint. From a King reputed to be highly intelligent and wise, we should have expected a greater capacity to control his feelings and passions. But Oedipus flies into a rage when Teiresias accuses Oedipus himself of the crimes which have polluted the city. Oedipus threatens Teiresias, with dire consequences for trying to defame him. And then Oedipus commits another

blunder in his state of fury. He alleges that Teiresias is in league with Creon and that they have both hatched a conspiracy against him. This rash, hasty verdict by Oedipus against both Teiresias and Creon does him no credit at all. We see here a glaring defect of character in Oedipus. It is true that this defect has little to do with the tragic fate that overtakes him, but a defect it does remain. It is a defect which greatly detracts from his nobility. Oedipus's taunting Teiresias with blindness also shows bad taste. When Teiresias is provided into making some highly offensive predictions about Oedipus's future, Oedipus feels further enraged and shouts to the prophet to get out of his sight at once. But the prophet has some more unpleasant things to say before he departs.

On the Verge of Committing a Judicial Murder

This ugly side of Oedipus is emphasised in the scene with Creon. Oedipus is convinced that Creon is a traitor and he begins to treat Creon accordingly. He hardly allows Creon to speak in self-defence but, even after Creon had explained in most lucid and straightforward manner his position, Oedipus remains unmoved. Oedipus declares that he would sentence Creon to death on a charge of treason. For a wise and experienced King, to pass such a hasty judgment on a tried kinsman and supporter is unpardonable. Indeed, Oedipus comes close to committing a judicial murder for which there are hardly any extenuating circumstances.

Oedipus's Fear, Suspicion, Misunderstanding

Oedipus's fear on learning from Jocasta the circumstances of Laius's death is great. He had not felt frightened in the least by the threats and warnings of Teiresias, but now a suspicion takes hold of his mind that he might himself have been the murderer of Laius. This suspicion can be removed or confirmed only by the Theban shepherd who must therefore be interrogated. His state of mind at this time causes grave anxiety to his wife who, contrary to her own convictions, offers worship to Apollo, seeking peace for her husband and all others. When the Corinthian messenger discloses to Oedipus the fact that Polybus was not Oedipus's father, he does experience some relief to think that there is no danger of his murdering his father who has died a natural death. However, there is still the other half of the prophecy, namely, that Oedipus will marry his mother, and this part of the prophecy prolongs his anxiety. The Corinthian allays his fear on this score also by revealing that Oedipus was not the son of Polybus and Merope. But now Oedipus is very keen

to know his real parentage and even the advice of Jocasta, who has clearly perceived the truth, not to pursue his inquiry into his parentage does not deter him. When Jocasta leaves, feeling most wretched and miserable, Oedipus commits another error of judgment. He wrongly thinks that Jocasta has left in a bad mood because she suspects him of being low-born.

The Discovery, the Agony, the Self-blinding

Oedipus is now determined, even more than before, to learn the truth about his parentage. He calls himself the child of Fortune with the Years as his kinsmen. He says that he would not be ashamed if he finds that he is low-born. The interrogation of the Theban shepherd, when he arrives, leads to Oedipus's discovery of the true facts. He is the son of King Laius whom he had killed, and he is the son of Queen Jocasta whom he had married and who has given birth to several children by him. Oedipus's discovery of the truth, which he had pursued relentlessly, naturally causes him an agony which is indescribable. With his mind almost crazed with grief, he wanders through the palace calling for a sword and asking for the woman whom he had called his wife. He forces his way into Jocasta's chamber and seeing her dead body hanging by a rope, groans in misery. His next step is most horrifying. With Jocasta's pins and brooches he blinds himself in order to punish himself for his misdeeds and also to escape the necessity of having to witness any sight in the city which he has polluted with his sins. He does not kill himself because, as he tells the Chorus, he could not bear to face the souls of his parents in the kingdom of death. It was Apollo's decree that he should suffer but the hand that has blinded his eyes was his own, he tells the Chorus. Oedipus would now like to be driven out of the city of Thebes. He curses the man who had removed the fetters from his feet and saved him from death when he was a child. He calls himself God's enemy because of the crimes he is guilty of.

A Loving Father

We are also given a brief glimpse of Oedipus as a father. A devoted husband, he also shows himself to be a very loving and fond parent. Creon, knowing Oedipus's great love for his daughters, has already sent for them so that Oedipus should be able to meet them. Oedipus expresses his gratitude to Creon for having shown him this consideration. When he turns to his daughters, he feels for them the love of a brother as well as the love of a father. He cannot see them, he says, being now blind, but he can weep for them because of the bitter life that they will have to lead. His heart bleeds for them when he thinks that nobody will shelter them and no man will

marry them. He then entrusts his daughters to the care of Creon, appealing to him to have pity on them in their state of wretchedness and desolation.

His Heroic Attitude in the Last Scene

In the final scene of the play, Oedipus seems to recapture some of his earlier greatness. This greatness we see in the manner in which he punishes himself and in the manner in which he faces the greatest crisis which a human being can ever be faced with. No doubt, Oedipus's lamentations show him as undergoing a great physical and mental agony; but he undoubtedly shows himself to be a real hero, by the way in which he endures his misfortunes. His fortitude is admirable, and his repeated appeals to Creon to banish him from the city show how anxious he is that the punishment he had proclaimed for the murderer of Laius should be carried out against him to the letter. Instead of pleading for leniency or mercy as an ordinary human being would have done on such an occasion, Oedipus insists upon the implementation of the penalty which had been proclaimed by him. Oedipus truly wins our genuine sympathy. If his self-blinding horrifies us, his condition at the close of the play moves us deeply. His fate, as also the fate of Jocasta, truly results in that catharsis of the feelings of fear and pity which, according to Aristotle, is one of the essential functions of tragedy.

II

A Good and Pious King

In spite of his defeats, Oedipus is a good ruler. He is a good King, a father, of his people, an honest and great administrator, and an outstanding intellect. His final care is not for himself but for the people and the State. He even shares the throne, not only with his wife who had been his predecessor's wife; Creon, too, is his co-regent, a fact that shows that Oedipus avoids autocratic appearances. He is also a pious man who believes in oracles, respects the bonds of family and hates impurity. His piety is the very basis of the whole plot, the very tragedy of the man Oedipus.

Desire for Absolute Authority

Oedipus has a very clear feeling for the outstanding importance and high dignity of his royal position and of Kings in general. He is a man who likes to give orders and to hear himself doing so. He describes his position in words which show that in his heart he wants full and absolute authority. The same tendency is seen in the attitude of those whom he governs. The suppliant people approach him almost as a god, and he is honoured as a saviour. Such honours, as every Greek knew, are dangerous, for they may lead to *hubris*.

On the Way to Tyranny

The scene with Creon clearly shows Oedipus on the verge of tyranny. The King shows a blind suspicion towards friends, an inclination to hasty inference, and a rash vindictiveness. When he meets opposition, or thinks he does, he easily loses all self-control. His treatment of the old Shepherd in a later scene is outrageous. His position and greatness seem to be leading him to become a tyrant. He identifies himself with the State and upholds the principle of monarchic rule even if the ruler is bad. Creon, who in the play represents moderation and common sense, has to remind him that the Polis (or the City) does not belong to him alone. Even the blinded Oedipus gets the reproach: "Do not crave to be master in everything."

The Failure of His Piety

Oedipus mistrusts the venerable seer, Teiresias, and suspects him of being bribed. This attitude of distrust towards a prophet is in sharp contrast to Oedipus's genuine piety. No doubt Oedipus first addresses Teiresias reverently; but his attitude changes suddenly and completely when he smells danger to his Kingship and to the State. His piety fails as soon as his political leadership seems to be threatened. Oedipus the ruler belongs, in spite of his piety, to the world of politics and human standards rather than to the divine order of the world.

Self-confident intellectual Pride of Oedipus

An outstanding feature of Oedipus's character is a self-confident pride in his own wisdom and success in solving the riddle of the Sphinx seems to have given a boost to an inherent feeling of pride. No seer found the solution, this is Oedipus's boast. Pride and self-confidence induce him to feel almost superior to the gods. He tells the people who pray for deliverance from the plague that they may be delivered if they follow his advice. He scornfully rejects both Creon's advice and Teiresias's prophecy. The play shows us the difference between true wisdom and self-confident intellectual pride. Lack of true wisdom is an essential feature of the man who is on the verge of becoming an impious tyrant.

Oedipus's Tragedy Due to Horrible Deeds

However, all this does not make Oedipus morally guilty. He is not an example of hubris, but a truly great man. He suffers because he has committed deeds, though unknowingly, against the laws of the gods. He who has killed his father and married his mother can never be called "innocent". Conceptions such as guilt and innocence

simply have no meaning here. Horrible deeds have been committed according to divine prediction, and thus human greatness is set against divine power.

The Son of Chance

Oedipus's self-reliant and independent mind is fully revealed in the speech in which he calls himself the son of *Tyche*. In his quest for the truth he has come to the final stage when the secret of his birth is to be disclosed. He is great enough to face anything, though he can think of nothing worse than a possible low birth. Tyche is his true mother. Once he had brought Tyche, "Chance", to Thebes "with good omen", the same "Saviour Chance" which he expected to come through Creon's message from Delphi. But it is also Tyche that in Jocasta's words has undone the divine prophecies, and, in Oedipus's own words, Tyche killed Laius before he begot a son who might kill him. To the audience, who knew better, these utterances were full of tragic irony, and Tyche must have appeared as a fatal and disastrous power. In speaking of her, Oedipus unsuspectingly touches on the truth, the gods' cruel game with his life. He calls her the giver of good, because he believes that Chance has been friendly to him up to now. It is clear that Oedipus, in claiming to be a son of Chance, has gone beyond the bounds of tradition and religion. At that moment, he is only just entering the circle of increasing knowledge about himself. He realizes that his wife is ruled by outer forces, but he does not yet realize their tremendous and cruel power. The foundations of his life have crumbled, but his great and powerful mind knows no despair. He still relies on his own genius, and it is indeed the core of his tragedy that, by using his high intellect honestly and uncompromisingly, he brings doom upon himself.

III

Oedipus's Most Striking Quality: Intelligence

Although Oedipus is by no means a one-dimensional character, his various qualities are not of equal importance. As a King he shows himself to be benevolent, hot-tempered, and extremely vigorous. Each of these qualities contributes to the development of the action. However, his most striking quality, and the one which becomes a major issue, is his intelligence. His intelligence becomes, indeed, a subject of discussion to a degree that his hot temper, for example, does not, in spite of several allusions to it. One can see this to best advantage in the Teiresias scene. The proud and angry speech in which Oedipus attacks Teiresias and praises himself might easily have turned on a contrast between selfishness and patriotism, or corruption and incorruptibility, or feebleness and youthful vigour. Each of these themes is alluded to, but all are subordinated to the emphatic, repeated claim, "you are inept

and I am clever." Tiresias's blindness is intended, among other things, to serve a symbolic purpose. Oedipus taunts Teiresias cruelly on account of his blindness, saying that he is blind not only physically but also as regards his power of prophecy. The ground is thus prepared for Tiresias's reply, that Oedipus is figuratively blind already and will one day become literally blind. By the time Teiresias has uttered his final prophecy and has left the uncomprehending King to try to understand ifs meaning. Oedipus's proud claim to have defeated the Sphinx and his scorn for the blindness of Teiresias have been rebuked in a doubly unexpected way. Teiresias has used his blindness as the starting-point of his counter-charge, and he has baffled the quick-witted King with his prophecy. Appropriately, his parting shot is a challenge to Oedipus's intelligence: "Go in and think over that."

Oedipus's power of understanding, and not his clear conscience, seems to be the basis for his self-esteem, and it is this faculty of his which becomes the target of Teiresias's scorn. It is in the reproaches of Teiresias that the issue of what the King does and does not understand is first made explicit, but even before this scene it had been implied by ironic statement.

Oedipus's Self-Blinding

I

Why the Blinding?

Why does Oedipus blind himself? So that the eyes should no longer look upon the people, the things, that they should not. Sophocles says so. He repeats it: how could Oedipus share sensibilities with his fellow citizens, with whom he can now share nothing? If he could have shut off the sources of hearing, he would have, thus making himself the outcast who was to be banned from the community, because the murderer was to be that outcast, and Oedipus is the murderer. Sophocles adds that it would be sweet for Oedipus to cut himself loose from all evils, from all his life he knows now as evil; and then Sophocles seems to contradict himself when Oedipus cries for his daughters and calls them into his arms. But, by then, the mood of frenzy has ebbed along with the strength of fury, and Oedipus is himself again, reasoning, and justifying.

The Three Stages of the Life of Oedipus:
Oedipus as Everyman

Oedipus's self-blinding can be seen from various angles. It seems to be a punishment of what is evil, for Oedipus does not deign to call himself unlucky, ill-starred, but just evil or vile. But the blinding serves one more purpose. The riddle of the Sphinx spoke of man feeble as a baby, man strong as a grown-up man (walking on two feet), and man feeble in old age. And we have had Oedipus as a baby. Oedipus as a grown-up man, a strong traveller walking on his two feet. We need Oedipus old and unfeebled, and he is still a man in his prime and very strong. Only such a disastrous self-punishment can break him so that, within moments, he has turned into an old man who needs strength now, and needs someone to lead him. So Oedipus has lived the three stages. The riddle of the Sphinx was the mystery of man. But it was the specially private mystery of Oedipus. In this sense, and perhaps in this sense only, Oedipus is Everyman.

Oedipus, a Unique Individual

Oedipus is bent by the shape of the story but he generates a momentum which makes his necessary act his own. He is the tragedy tyrant driven by his plot, but he is more, a unique individual, and somehow a great man, who drives himself.

Blinding, a Kind of Castration

Freud said that this blinding stands for the only logical self-punishment, castration. The eyes are as precious to man as are the genitals. One may expand this interpretation by stating that Oedipus retaliates upon the eyes, not only the epistemological mistake in genitalia (both being organs of knowledge), but he avenges also on the outside eye the blindness of the inner eye. What was the sense of those carnal eyes when they saw and did not perceive? This is what Oedipus says in blinding himself: "You were too long blind for those I was looking for." The same implication is present in the words of Christ stating that adultery can be committed not only by the genitals but also by the eyes; consequently to pluck out the eyes is tantamount to castration.

II

Self-blinding, a Culminating Act of Freedom

Oedipus's own motives in blinding himself are far from clear. He says that he did it to spare himself the sight of the ugliness he had caused, that he could not bring himself to face the people on whom he had brought such suffering. In *Oedipus at Colonus* he tells his son that he did it in a moment of frenzy and not from a sense of guilt. When the Chorus, in the present play, asks him directly why he did it, he says that Apollo had a hand in it. Again, he says that he did it so that he might not meet

eye-to-eye his father or his mother "beyond the grave". No one reason suffices, nor all of them put together. The act seems compounded of opposite elements: egotism and altruism, self-loathing and self-glorification. As an act of destruction, it shows man at his worst. To the extent that it was predetermined, it shows the gods at their worst. But as an act of freedom it turns out to be curiously creative in unexpected ways, and shows man at his best. What Oedipus insists upon in his reply to the Chorus is that the act was his own: "Apollo, friends, Apollo has laid this agony upon me; not by his hand; I did it." Whatever he may have thought he was doing, the act stands in the play as his culminating act of freedom, the assertion of his ability to act independently of any god, oracle, or prophecy.

III

The Reason for Self-Mutilation

Why does Oedipus blind himself if he is morally innocent? He tells us the reason: he has done it in order to cut himself off from all contact with humanity. If he could choke the channels of his other senses he would do so. Suicide would not serve his purpose because in the next world he would have to meet his dead parents. Oedipus mutilates himself because he can face neither the living nor the dead. If Oedipus had been tried in an Athenian court, he would have been acquitted of murdering his father. But no human court could acquit him of pollution, because pollution was inherent in the act itself, irrespective of its unintentional character. Least of all could Oedipus acquit himself of this burden.

Self-mutilation Not Surprising in this Case

Oedipus is no ordinary murderer. He has committed the two crimes which, more than any others, fill us with horror. And in the strongly patriarchal society of ancient Greece the horror would be more intense than it is in our own. We have only to read Plato's prescription of the merciless treatment to be given to a parricide. And if that is how Greek Justice treated parricides, it is not surprising that Oedipus treats himself as he does. The great King, the first of men, the man whose intuitive genius saved Thebes, would surely act like this when he is suddenly revealed to himself as a thing so unclean that "neither the earth can receive it, nor the holy rain nor the sunshine endure its presence."

The Character of Oedipus in the Final Scene of the Play

Oedipus's Recovery in the Final Scene

The play does not end with the proof of divine omniscience and human ignorance. It ends, as it begins, with Oedipus. We cannot be content with the assessment of the Chorus when they say that all the generations of mortal man add up to nothing. The Chorus makes this remark just after Oedipus learns the truth about his own identity). If the play were to end with this assessment, it would mean that the heroic action of Oedipus in pursuing the truth is a hollow mockery. It would mean that a man should not seek the truth for fear of what he might find.

As it is, the final scene of the play offers a different estimate, though not in words but in dramatic action. In the final scene Oedipus, on whom the hopeless estimate of the Chorus is based, overcomes the disaster that has overtaken him and reasserts himself. He is so far from being equal to zero that towards the close of the play Creon has to tell him not to try to assert his will in everything. The last scene of the play is, indeed, vital, though it is often wrongly criticised as unbearable or as an anti-climax. The last scene shows us the recovery of Oedipus, his reintegration, and the reconstitution of the dominating, dynamic and intelligent figure of the opening scenes.

Oedipus, a Zero at the Beginning of the Last Scene

When Oedipus comes out of the palace after having blinded himself, the sight of him is so terrible that the Chorus can hardly bear to look at him. The Chorus approves his wish that he should have died on the mountain-side before reaching manhood. Further, the Chorus tells him that it would be better for him to be dead now than to live as a blind man. This despair is expressed in Oedipus's own words also; they are the words of a broken man. What he says, and the manner in which he says it, shows that Oedipus is no longer an active force but purely passive. This impression is supported by his address to the darkness in which he will now for ever live and by his reference to the pain which pierces his eyes and mind alike. Oedipus gratefully recognises the loyalty of the Chorus in looking after him; a blind man. This is an expression of his complete dependence on others. He seems indeed a zero, equal to nothing.

His Own Responsibility for the Blinding

The Chorus at this point reminds him that his blindness is the result of his own independent action after he came to know the truth about himself. His blindness was not required by the prophecy of Apollo. Nor was it demanded in the oracle's instructions. His blindness was an autonomous action on this part. The Chorus asks him if he was prompted by some god in the act of blinding himself. Oedipus replies

that while Apollo brought his sufferings to fulfilment, the hand that blinded him was his own. His action was self-chosen. It was a swift decisive action for which he assumes full responsibility and which he now defends. At this stage, the original Oedipus re-asserts himself. He rejects the suggestion of the Chorus that the responsibility was not his. He rejects the reproaches of the Chorus. We now see the same man as we met in the earlier scenes of the play. All the traits of his strong character reappear. His attitude to the new and terrible situation in which he now finds himself is full of the same courage which he displayed before. When the Chorus scolds him for having made a bad decision in blinding himself, he replies with the old impatience and a touch of the old anger. He tells them not to preach a lesson to him or to give him any advice to the effect that he has not done the best thing. He goes on to describe in detail the reasoning by which he arrived at the decision to blind himself. His decision was, no doubt, a result of some reflection. Oedipus shows himself fully convinced of the Tightness of his action and the thinking which led him to it.

Insistence on Punishment

Oedipus insists, in the face of Creon's opposition, that he be put to death or exiled from Thebes. He rejects the compromise offered by the Chorus with the same courage with which he had earlier dismissed the attempts of Teiresias, Jocasta, and the Shepherd to stop the investigation. As before, he cannot tolerate any half-measures or delay. His own curse call for his exile or death and he sees no point in prolonging the matter, Creon finally does what Oedipus wanted to be done sooner: Creon exiles Oedipus from Thebes. Oedipus, in demanding the punishment, insists on full clarity and on all the facts. He spares himself on detail of the consequences of his pollution for himself and for his daughters. While Creon's reaction is to cover and conceal, Oedipus brings everything out into the open. Oedipus analyses in painful detail his own situation and that of his children.

Destined to Live

The old confidence in his own intelligence and action is very much there. However, the exaggerated and leaping hopefulness is gone. And yet there is still a kind of hope in him. After his initial wish for death, he becomes sure that he is destined to live. He feels that he is in some sense too strong to be destroyed. He feels himself as eminent in disaster as he once was in prosperity. His sufferings, he says, are such as no one except himself can bear.

Concerned about the Welfare of the City

Nor does his devotion to the interests of the city become extinct in him. He is anxious that the terms of his own curse and the demand of the oracle be immediately and exactly fulfilled. This anxiety arises partly from his sense of the city's need of release from the plague. The release can come only through the punishment of the murderer of Laius. It is in terms of the interest of the city that he states his desire for exile. He speaks this time not as the tyrant but with a consciousness of his newly revealed position as the hereditary monarch. He does not want the city of his fore-fathers to be doomed.

His Adaptability to Circumstances

Oedipus shows also a great capacity to adapt himself to the change in his circumstances. The process of his rapid adjustment to his blindness is well depicted. In the opening lines of this scene, he shows a helpless desperation. Soon he comes to realise that he has still some power of perception and recognition; he can hear. He tells the Chorus-Leader that he can clearly distinguish his voice, blind though he may be. After recognising the possibilities as well as the limitations of his new state, he begins to adapt himself to the larger aspects of the situation. Oedipus is now an outcast and, as Teiresias told him he would be, a beggar. When he was the autocratic ruler his wish was an order; but as a beggar he lives by insistent appeal, by emphatic and often importunate pleading. When Creon appears, Oedipus shows how he has adapted himself to the change. The words of entreaty come as easily from his lips as the words of authority used to come before, though his words now are charged with the same fierce energy. Oedipus begs to be expelled from the city. Subsequently he seeks the privilege of saying fare-well to his children. When his request is granted, Oedipus invokes blessings on Creon as a beggar might. Later he makes another appeal to Creon's pity, requesting him not to let his daughters wander about husband-less, thus indicating his own status as a beggar. Indeed, Oedipus makes a strikingly successful adjustment to his new role. As a beggar he cannot be resisted, because his insistent entreaty is marked by an emphasis and a force which remind us of the days of his prosperity. When he first hears the voice of Creon whom he had wrongly condemned to death, he is full of shame and at a loss for words. Yet in a few moments he is arguing stubbornly with him.

An Active Force in the Last Scene

Thus in the last scene of the play Oedipus, after a brief interval during which he is reduced to a zero, shows himself to be an active force. His intelligence assures him that he must go immediately into exile, and to this point of view he clings

obstinately. He presses his point so persistently and forcefully that Creon has to yield to it. At the last moment, when Creon orders him into the palace, Oedipus imposes a condition. The condition is the same demand which he has obstinately repeated throughout the scene, namely that Creon should immediately exile him from Thebes. Creon's attempt to shift the responsibility by seeking the advice of the oracle is rejected by Oedipus, and Oedipus is right. According to the original advice of the oracle, and also according to the curse uttered by Oedipus, the murderer of Laius must be exiled. While allowing himself to be led into the palace, Oedipus makes an attempt to take his children with him, but at this point Creon finally asserts himself and separates the children from their father, rebuking Oedipus for trying to have his own way. Oedipus cannot have his way in everything, but in most things he has got his way, including the most important issue of all, namely his expulsion; in this matter the blind beggar has imposed his will on Creon.

A Remarkable and Rapid Recovery

In the last scene of the play, then, Oedipus makes a remarkable and swift recovery from the position of a non-entity to which he had been reduced by his discovery of the truth about himself. This recovery proceeds from no change in his wretched situation; it is not the result of any promise or assurance by any human or divine being. This recovery, like every one of his actions and attitudes, is autonomous. It is the expression of a great personality which defies human expectation as it once defied divine prophecy. The last scene shows a remarkable re-assertion of Oedipus's forceful personality.

His Greatness in His Ruin as in His Prosperity

Thus the play ends with a fresh insistence on the heroic nature of Oedipus. The play ends as it began, with the greatness of the hero; but it is a different kind of greatness. This greatness is based on knowledge and not on ignorance as previously. Oedipus now directs the full force of his intelligence and action to the fulfilment of the oracle's command that the murderer of Laius be killed or exiled. Creon taunts Oedipus with his former lack of belief in the oracles but Oedipus does not care to answer the taunt. Oedipus repeatedly makes the demand that the command of the oracle be immediately and literally fulfilled. The heroic qualities of Oedipus were previously exercised against prophecy and the destiny of which it was the expression. Now those heroic qualities are being exercised to support prophecy. The heroic qualities of Oedipus are being given full play even now but now with the powers that shape destiny and govern the world, not against those powers. The confidence which was once based solely on himself now acquires a firmer basis; it now proceeds

from a knowledge of the nature of reality and the forces which govern it. In the last scene he supports the command of the oracle against the will of Creon. It is Creon now who shows a politic attitude towards the oracle, and Oedipus who insists on its literal fulfilment. Oedipus is now blind like Teiresias, and like Teiresias he has a more penetrating vision than the ruler he opposes. In this scene Oedipus has in fact become the spokesman of Apollo. His action ceases to be self-defeating, because it is based on true knowledge. The greatness of Oedipus in his ruin is no less, and in some senses more, than the greatness of Oedipus when he was a powerful King.

The Character and Role of Tiresias

A Man of an Established Reputation as a Prophet

Teiresias, the blind prophet, appears early in the play. Acting upon the advice of Creon, Oedipus had sent for the prophet in order to seek his guidance in the context of the misfortunes which are taking a heavy toll of the lives of the people of Thebes. Teiresias, we learn, has come somewhat unwillingly in response to the summons of the King. As Oedipus's very first speech to Teiresias shows, Teiresias is a man of an established reputation and is greatly honoured in Thebes. Oedipus begins by saying that nothing is beyond Tiresias's powers of divination. Both sacred and profane, both heavenly and earthly knowledge, are in Tiresias's grasp. Teiresias can help and protect the city of Thebes, says Oedipus, appealing to him to save the city and its people.

Teiresias Provoked to Anger by Oedipus's Rudeness

Teiresias is reluctant to supply any information or guidance to Oedipus for the relief of the sufferings of the people. He does have the necessary knowledge, but it would not be wise on his part to disclose what he knows. In fact the knowledge which he has in connection with the disaster that has overtaken the city is a heavy weight on his mind. Having strong reasons of his own to keep silent, Teiresias refuses to tell Oedipus anything. When Oedipus loses his temper, Teiresias is not in the least scared. On the contrary, he speaks to Oedipus in a defiant tone, asking him to rage as much as he pleases. Irritated by Oedipus's false accusation, Teiresias bluntly says that Oedipus himself is the cursed polluter of Thebes. Teiresias does not show any fear of Oedipus, saying that truth is his defence. Pressed still further by Oedipus,

Teiresias says that Oedipus himself is the murderer for whom he is searching, adding that Oedipus is living in sinful union with one whom he loves. When asked by Oedipus how he can make such slanderous statements, Teiresias once again says that he is protected by truth. When Oedipus taunts him with his blindness, Teiresias feels further excited. Oedipus's claim that he has an intelligence superior to that of Teiresias, and his boast that it was he who saved the city from the Sphinx, offend the prophet even more. In fact, Teiresias now feels so provoked that he becomes as reckless in making predictions about Oedipus as he was reserved at the beginning. Oedipus may be having eyes which can see but he is blind to his own damnation, says Teiresias. Oedipus has sinned but he does not know it; he has sinned against one who is already in the grave and he has sinned against one who is yet alive on earth. The curse of his father and the curse of his mother will drive Oedipus out of this city. These clear-seeing eyes of Oedipus will then be darkened. When Oedipus learns his real identity, he will feel more miserable than can be imagined. All this Teiresias pitilessly flings into Oedipus's face.

Tiresias's Dreadful Threats

When Oedipus, almost mad with rage, commands the prophet to get out of his sight, Teiresias leaves, but not before he has delivered another onslaught upon the King. Teiresias now says that the murderer of Laius is here in Thebes; that the murderer, regarded as a foreigner, is actually a Theban by birth, that the murderer came to the city with eyes that could see but will leave the city with blind eyes, that the murderer is rich now but will be a beggar afterwards, and that the murderer will prove to be both a brother and a father to the children whom he loves, and both the son and the husband of the woman who gave him birth. Only when Oedipus can prove these predictions to be wrong, will he be justified in calling Teiresias blind.

Tiresias's Complete Lack of Humility

While we certainly admire Teiresias for his foresight and his prophetic gift, we cannot reconcile ourselves to his arrogance, haughtiness, and feeling of self-importance. There is no doubt that Oedipus offends him with his tone of authority and command, but we should have expected a certain amount of moderation in a man who is spiritually so great as to know the minds of the gods and to be able to read the future. Unfortunately, we find that humility is not one of the virtues of Teiresias. He is as hot-tempered as Oedipus, and equally reckless. No doubt, his refusal to unburden his knowledge is prompted by the best of motives: he would not like to foretell unpleasant facts to Oedipus till the time is ripe for him to discover those facts in the natural course of events. But even so he has no right to lose his

self-control to such an extent as to hit back Oedipus for Oedipus's offensive remarks, especially when in trying to retaliate he discloses, though in a veiled manner, the very facts which he had sought to suppress. Teiresias is sensitive to insult, but he is almost merciless in lashing the King with his cutting remarks, and heartless to the point of vindictiveness.

Contributes to Dramatic Irony

Furthermore, Teiresias contributes to the tragic irony which is present throughout this play. In this particular scene, tragic irony is provided by the predictions which Teiresias makes. Teiresias knows the full import of his predictions, while Oedipus is completely ignorant of their significance. As for the audience, some members will be aware of the true meaning of these predictions while others will be ignorant of it depending upon whether they are reading the play for the first or the second time.

The Character and Role of Creon

A True Servant of the State. A Simple and Straightforward Man; the Bringer of a Message from the Oracle

If Teiresias, with his prophetic powers, may be described as the true servant of the gods then Creon, the brother of Queen Jocasta, may be regarded as the true servant of the State. We meet Creon quite early in the play, in fact in the prologue itself. He returns from Delphi whither he had been sent by Oedipus to seek the oracle's guidance. He has brought what he considers to be good news, the news that may lead to good results if all goes well. This news is most crucial for the people of Thebes and also from the point of view of this play.

The news is, indeed, the starting point of the investigation which occupies the major part of the play. The news is that the murderer of King Laius lives on the soil of Thebes and must be killed or banished if the people are to expect any relief in the vast suffering which they are undergoing. As Oedipus knows nothing about the history of King Laius, he questions Creon with regard to Laius's death, and Creon gives a simple, straightforward account of the circumstances of Laius's death as known to him, though his knowledge is not first-hand, having been obtained from the survivor of the small group of persons attending upon Laius. At this stage we do not have enough data to form a proper estimate of the character of Creon. Judging by appearances only, he is a well-meaning sort of person, free from any trickery or deceit.

Creon's Able Reasoning: His Defence of Himself

We next meet Creon after Oedipus has had a quarrel with Teiresias in the course of which Oedipus has expressed his suspicion that Creon has, in collaboration with Teiresias, hatched a conspiracy against him. Having come to know what Oedipus has said about him, Creon arrives and has a brief talk with the member of the Chorus. He says that Oedipus has brought a slanderous charge against him which he finds hard to endure. Creon seems to have been stunned by the charge. He says that he would rather die than be guilty of doing any harm to Oedipus either by word or by act. The Chorus tries to soothe him by saying that Oedipus spoke the offensive words in a fit of anger. On being asked by Creon whether Oedipus had alleged that Teiresias had been instigated by Creon, the Chorus confirms what Creon has heard. At this point Oedipus appears and directly accuses Creon of treason. Creon would like to explain his position, but Oedipus hardly lets him speak. However, Creon does get an opportunity to speak in his self-defence, and the speech he makes shows his powers of reasoning and persuasive talk, though his eloquence falls flat on Oedipus. Creon argues that he would be the last man to desire Oedipus's throne and that the question of his plotting against Oedipus's life does not, therefore, arise. He is leading a quiet and carefree life, he says, and he is at the same time wielding a lot of influence in the city by virtue of his close relationship with Oedipus. As a moderate man, he desires nothing more. Kingship would not please him more than his present status does. He is not so foolish as to seek more honours than are good for him. As for his sincerity and truthfulness, Oedipus can himself go to Delphi and verify if the message brought by Creon was genuine or not. If he is found guilty of any secret agreement with Teiresias, he would be ready to forfeit his life. But he would not tolerate a charge of treason against him on mere suspicion. Oedipus has committed a blunder by bringing a baseless charge against a loyal man, Creon says. By discarding an honest friend like Creon, Oedipus would be losing a precious treasure. Time alone will teach Oedipus the truth of this observation. While the Chorus supports Creon in what he has said, Oedipus rejects Creon's plea and says that he will punish Creon's treason with death. The speech that Creon makes in his self-defence shows his transparent honesty and loyalty even though Oedipus is at this time blinded by his prejudice.

A Man who Speaks on the Basis of Sure Knowledge

Two other remarks which Creon makes in the course of this interview with Oedipus are important: he does not presume to say more than he actually knows; and what he knows he will freely confess. The first observation shows that Creon does not indulge in idle conjectures or speculation, while the second remark shows that

he will not hide what he knows. Both these traits of his character raise him in our estimation.

Jocasta's Faith in Him, and the Faith of the Chorus

Creon enjoys the full confidence of his sister, Jocasta. As soon as she learns about the quarrel between Oedipus and Creon she scolds both men. When Creon complains that Oedipus has unjustly sentenced him to death or, a charge of treason, and swears that he has always been loyal to Oedipus, Jocasta pleads to her husband on Creon's behalf asking the King to believe Creon's oath. The Chorus supports Jocasta's petition, pointing out that Creon has never in the past played false to Oedipus. At the entreaties of Jocasta and the Chorus, Oedipus certainly withdraws the sentence of death against Creon, but does not cease to suspect him of treason. All our sympathy in this scene is with Creon, and we deplore Oedipus's hasty judgment in condemning an innocent and tried man on the basis of a mere suspicion.

His Consideration for and Kindness to the Blind Oedipus; His Piety and Faith in the Oracles

In the final scene, again, Creon gives a good account of himself and reinforces the favourable impression which we have already formed of him. He tells Oedipus, who is now blind, that he has not come to exult at Oedipus's downfall or to reproach Oedipus for his past misdeeds, though at the same time he would not like the unclean Oedipus to remain outside the palace in the full light of the day. A sinner like Oedipus must not expose himself to public view, says Creon. Out of consideration for the paternal feelings of Oedipus, Creon has already sent for Oedipus's daughters so that he may be able to draw some comfort from their company. Creon's kindliness and consideration towards the man, who had unjustly accused him of treason and had almost taken his life, further raise him in our regard. Creon is now the King and wields all the authority of a King. But Kingship does not turn his head. His religious piety has not diminished one whit. He believed in prophecies before and he believes in them now; his reverence for the oracle suffers no decline. And he repeats what he had previously said, "I do not speak beyond my knowledge." Creon's character may be summed up in these words: self-restraint, self-control, moderation, avoidance of excess of all kinds, and speaking from sure knowledge only.

The Character of Jocasta

I

A Moderate and Reasonable Woman

Jocasta has a brief but essential and crucial role to play in the drama. She appears on the stage just after Oedipus has had a quarrel with Creon and has declared his resolve to punish Creon with death. The very first speech of Jocasta shows her to be a moderate kind of person with a balanced mind.

She scolds both her husband and her brother for quarrelling over private matters when the city is passing through a critical phase of its existence. She calls upon her husband to go into the palace and advises Creon to go home. On learning the cause of the quarrel, she appeals to Oedipus to believe Creon's assertions of innocence and not to distrust Creon's oath. She pleads on Creon's behalf not just because he is her brother but because she knows him to be a dependable man and a man of integrity. She insists on knowing from Oedipus why he has conceived such a terrible hatred against Creon.

Her Scepticism

Jocasta is frankly sceptical of prophecies and, therefore, is, according to the religious ideas of the time, guilty of irreverence towards the gods. She believes neither in the oracles nor in the interpreters of oracles. When Oedipus tells her that her brother has been using the prophet Teiresias as his tool, she unhesitatingly advises her husband not to attach any importance to prophets or soothsayers. She expresses the view that no human being possesses the power of divination (i.e., the power of knowing the unknown and probing into the mysteries of life). In a speech, which is a striking example of dramatic irony "in the play, she tries to prove her point with reference to the very prophecy the exact and complete fulfilment of which forms the theme of this whole play. She tells Oedipus of the prophecy which said that Laius was to die at the hands of his own son; she tells him of how Laius had taken measures to see that his child by her would perish on the mountain-side; she tells him that Laius had not died at the hands of his son. Jocasta's story is intended to prove that oracles are not necessarily reliable. Her ultimate discovery of the true facts becomes all the more tragic in the light of this speech in which she denies the oracles.

Contribution to the Investigation of the Truth

Jocasta is the means by which Oedipus is enabled to make some progress in his investigation into the murder of Laius. The surviving member of Laius's party alone can confirm or remove the suspicion which is now troubling Oedipus's mind, the suspicion, namely, that he might himself be the murderer of Laius. Jocasta

undertakes to summon that man, though she repeats that there is no such thing as divination. When the Corinthian messenger comes with his great news, Jocasta feels further confirmed in her view that divine prognostications are meaningless. She mocks the oracles when Oedipus comes to meet the Corinthian.

Her View of the Role of Chance and
Her Belief in Living at Random

Jocasta gives further expression to her philosophy of life when she urges Oedipus not to entertain fears of any kind. What has a man to do with fear? she asks. She is of the view that chance rules human lives and that the future is all unknown. Let human beings live as best as they can, from day to day. She favours living at random. As for Oedipus's fear that he might marry his mother, men do such things only in their dreams. Such things must be forgotten, if life is to be endured. There is much in this philosophy that appeals to us. The only snag about his philosophy is that only a few moments later it is proved to be utterly false and Jocasta discovers to her horror that the oracles are after all true.

Her Sad End

After the discovery of the truth, Jocasta tries to prevent Oedipus from learning the truth, though he pays no attention to her. A little later we learn that she has hanged herself in her fit of sorrow and grief. She was seen calling upon her dead husband, Laius, remembering the son to whom she had given birth long before, the son who had killed his father, the son who became her husband and begot children by her. The end which Jocasta meets was the only right end for a woman in her position. It is an appropriate end for her, and this end contributes to the effect of catharsis which this play produces in full measure.

II

Her Scepticism and Impiety

Oedipus does not stand alone. Jocasta's love and anxiety are always at his side. It is her tragedy that she actively leads Oedipus towards their common disaster, and that she realizes the truth gradually though always in advance of him. Jocasta is sceptical of oracles and is, therefore, impious from the traditional point of view. She certainly distinguishes between the god and the god's priest when she tells the story of the oracle given to Laius; she speaks of the oracle as having come "not from Phoebus himself, but from his ministers." But even so she is aware of the impiety implied in her words. When she mentions the story again, it is the god himself whom she blames, and feels no restraint in doing so. Although her advice to disregard all

prophecies springs from her love for Oedipus, this is no explanation of her manifest impiety. The oracle is still the same, and it might have been easier to convince Oedipus of its untruth if she had again held the priests responsible and not the god. She is so full of love for her husband that she neglects and even despises the gods. And this is ample proof that, in her emotions as well as her brain, she has no religion. Her life is an unparalleled tragedy indeed; but she is at the same time truly impious. Her public prayer to Apollo is no more than an act of conventional duty, as her own words confirm. When the news of the death of Polybus comes, she does not thank the gods. With even more scorn than before she denounces the prophecies of the gods. She tries to allay Oedipus's fear by explaining away the oracle with a rationalistic allusion to certain dreams and denies any belief in divine signs. Her impiety reaches its climax when she says that human beings have nothing to fear because their life is determined by the changes of Tyche; no foresight is possible, and to live at random is the best way to live. She proclaims the law of lawlessness and complete disregard of the gods and their warnings.

In a Moral Sense Neither Guilty Nor Innocent

Jocasta's belief ends where Oedipus's ends too, in replacing the gods by Tyche, in putting sceptical fatalism in the place of piety. But Jocasta always proceeds to the extreme possibilities when Oedipus is still reluctant and restrained; however, he always tries to comply with her thoughts. Whatever explanation may be accepted for Jocasta's attitude to the gods, it will not explain what is behind and beyond it. She cannot be truly pious, and her scepticism is necessary because she is bound to perish on account of her incest. She shares Oedipus's life and tragedy as the one person who loves him most and who is most loved by him. She, too, is in a moral sense neither guilty nor innocent. What she shows and stands for is that they both belong to a world of man-made standards. Piety is not sufficient, if it is not the unconditional acceptance of one's fate at the hands of the gods.

The Use of Tragic Irony in Oedipus Rex

The Meaning of Tragic Irony

Tragic irony is the name given to a device used originally in ancient Greek tragedy, and later almost in all tragedies, whereby a character's words and actions are seen to be wholly contradictory to the actual situation as known to some of the other characters or to the audience. Irony consists essentially in the contrast of the two aspects of the same remark or situation. A remark made by a character in a

play may have one meaning for him and another meaning for some of the other characters and the audience, or one meaning for the speaker and the other characters and another meaning for the audience. Similarly, a situation in a play may have a double significance in the sense that a disaster or calamity may be foreseen by the audience while the characters concerned may be ignorant of it. The use of irony, whether it be in words or in a situation, heightens the tragic effect. Irony was used with striking effect by Sophocles in his plays.

Tragic Irony in Oedipus's Initial Proclamation

Oedipus Rex is replete with tragic irony. In fact, tragic irony is to be found in this play in most of the speeches and in most of the situations. There are many occasions on which the audience is aware of the facts while the speaker—Oedipus, or Jocasta, or the Corinthian messenger, or the Chorus, is ignorant of those facts. The awareness of the audience (and some character or characters) on the one hand, and the ignorance of the speaker and some other character or characters on the other hand, present a contrast which lends an increased emphasis to a tragic fact or to the ultimate tragic outcome. The very proclamation to Oedipus, for instance, that he will make a determined effort to trace the murderer of Laius and the curse that Oedipus utters upon the killer and upon those sheltering the criminal, possess a tragic irony in view of the audience's knowledge that Oedipus himself will ultimately prove to be Laius's murderer. In this connection it may be pointed out that the Greek audiences of those times knew beforehand the myth pertaining to Oedipus. In other words, the audiences of those times had a prior knowledge of the facts of which Oedipus himself, speaking on the stage, was ignorant. Even the modern audience is well-acquainted with the myth of Oedipus before going to witness a performance of the play in the theatre, and the modern reader knows the story of the play in advance, so that the irony underlying Oedipus's proclamation is not lost upon either the audience or the reader. But, even when an audience or a reader does not have prior knowledge of the story of the play, this speech of Oedipus, like several others which follow, will be seen to possess tragic irony in the light of the later developments in the play. In other words, at a second reading or at a second visit to the theatre, the reader or the audience is bound to perceive the tragic irony of Oedipus's expression of his anger against the offender and his resolve to bring him to book. Oedipus proclaims that no home or house in Thebes is to provide shelter to the guilty man and that the gods will curse those who disobey his command in this

respect. Thus, without knowing the real meaning of his words, Oedipus announces the sentence of banishment against the murderer and heightens the tragic effect of the discovery which comes towards the end of the play. Oedipus does not know that he himself is to become the victim of the punishment which he is proclaiming, but we, the audience, know it. In this contrast between Oedipus's ignorance and our knowledge of the true fact lies the tragic irony.

The Tragic Irony in the Scene of Quarrel between Oedipus and Teiresias

The scene between Oedipus and Teiresias is fraught with tragic irony throughout. Teiresias is the prophet who knows everything, while Oedipus is the guilty man who does not know himself as such. Teiresias would not like to disclose the secret that he knows, but Oedipus quickly loses his temper with the prophet, thus irritating him and provoking him to say things which the prophet never wanted to say. Teiresias tells Oedipus that the guilty man he is seeking is he himself, and that he is living in a sinful union with the one he loves. The significance of these words is totally lost upon Oedipus. The accusations of Teiresias enrage him, and he insults the prophet by calling him a shameless, brainless, sightless, and senseless sot. A keener irony lies in the fact that, Teiresias, who is physically blind, knows the real truth, while Oedipus, who physically possesses normal eyesight, is at this stage in the story totally blind to that truth. Oedipus mocks at the blindness of Teiresias, in this way showing his own inner blindness. The irony here is not limited to the contrast between the blind but knowledgeable Teiresias, and Oedipus who, having his eyesight, is yet blind. There is irony also in the contrast between what Oedipus truly is and what he at this moment thinks himself to be. Actually he is ignorant of the facts, but to Teiresias he boasts of his exceptional intelligence, citing his past victory over the Sphinx as evidence of it. The predictions, that Teiresias goes on to make regarding the fate in store for Oedipus, also possess irony in the sense that, while we know their tragic import, Oedipus treats them as the ravings of a madman whom he dismisses from his presence with insulting words. These predictions are terrible but they become even more awful when we realise that they will prove to be true and valid. Every word of these predictions will be fulfilled. Teiresias warns Oedipus that the killer of Laius will ultimately find himself blind, destitute, an exile, a beggar, a brother and a father at the same time to the children he loves, a son and a husband to the woman who bore him, a father-killer and father-supplanter. Oedipus, of course, does not have the least notion that these threats have any reference to himself, though the prophet has at the same time clearly called him the killer he is searching for. Even the Chorus, ignorant of the facts, refuses to

believe what Teiresias has said about Oedipus. After a few moments of perplexity, the Chorus dismisses the warnings and predictions of Teiresias. Thus, in this scene, both Oedipus and the Chorus are unaware of the truth while Teiresias is fully aware of it, and so is the audience.

Tragic Irony in Oedipus's
Tyrannical Attitude Towards Creon

Tragic irony is also to be found in the scene with Creon. Creon begs Oedipus not to think him a traitor and not to pass the sentence of death or banishment against him. But Oedipus, blinded by his authority and his anger, shows himself relentless. This situation is ironical when viewed in the light of the final scene in which it is Oedipus who becomes the suppliant and Creon who is the King. In the final scene the roles are reversed. There Oedipus begs Creon to look after his daughters, and entreats him to pass the order of banishment against him. Creon, of course, does not show himself to be arbitrary or unrelenting in that scene: Creon is a moderate type of man. Thus, although Oedipus makes a display of his temper and his authority as the monarch in the earlier scene, we can perceive the irony in that situation in the light of the final scene. The pathos of the final scene is in this way intensified.

Tragic Irony in Jocasta's Account of the Oracle

Then there is the scene with Jocasta. Here both Oedipus and Jocasta appear as persons ignorant of the true facts. Therefore, we the audience, who are aware of those facts, experience a deep sorrow at the fate which is going to overtake both these characters. Jocasta is sceptical of oracles. No man possesses the secret of divination, she says. And as a proof of the falsity of oracles, she gives an account of what she and her husband did to the child to whom she had given birth and, who, according to the oracle, was to kill his father. There is palpable irony in Jocasta's unbelief in oracles and her citing as evidence the very case which is to prove the truth of the oracle received by her and the late Laius. This irony deepens Jocasta's tragedy.

Tragic Irony in Oedipus's Account of the Oracle

There is irony also in the account of his life which Oedipus gives to Jocasta. Oedipus thinks himself to be the son of Polybus and Merope: he fled from Corinth after the oracle had told him of the crimes he would commit; he has all along been under the impression that he has avoided committing the crimes foretold by the oracle. But all the time Oedipus has been unknowingly performing certain actions leading to the fulfilment of the prophecies of the oracle. The greatest irony of the

play lies in the fact that the actions of Oedipus lead to the fulfilment of those very prophecies which he had been striving to belie, just as King Laius had earlier taken desperate but futile measures to prevent the fulfilment of the prophecy which had been communicated to him by the oracle.

Tragic Irony in the Scene with the Corinthian Messenger

When the Corinthian messenger arrives with the news of Polybus's death, Jocasta gets another opportunity to mock at the oracles. "Where are you now, divine prognostications?" she asks, without realizing that her mockery will turn against herself. There is irony also in the simple remark of the messenger that Jocasta is the "true consort" of a man like Oedipus. Neither the messenger nor Jocasta knows the awful meaning of these words which the audience understands. Jocasta tells Oedipus that the news brought by the Corinthian messenger proves the hollowness of oracles because Polybus, whom Oedipus believed to be his father, has died a natural death. Jocasta makes an exultant, though brief, speech on the desirability of living at random and on mother-marrying as merely a figment of the imagination. Jocasta makes this speech only a few moments before the real truth dawns upon her. The Corinthian, who wanted to free Oedipus of his fear of marrying his mother, ends by revealing, unknowingly, the fact that Jocasta's husband, Oedipus, is really her son, although this revelation is at this stage confined to Jocasta. The tragic irony in this situation and in what is said by the Corinthian and Jocasta in this scene is evident.

Tragic Irony in a Song by the Chorus

The song of the Chorus after Jocasta has left, in a fit of grief and sorrow, is full of tragic irony. The Chorus visualises Oedipus as the offspring of a union between some god and a mountain-nymph. The Chorus thereby pays a tribute to what it thinks to be the divine parentage of Oedipus. There is a big contrast between this supposition of the Chorus and the actual reality. The arrival of the Theban shepherd is the prelude to the final discovery, the point in which the climax of the tragedy is reached.

No Room for Tragic Irony in the Concluding Part of the Play

After the discovery there is hardly any room for tragic irony and, accordingly, the concluding part of the play contains little or no tragic irony. This concluding part consists of a long account of the self-murder and the self-blinding, a dialogue between Oedipus and the Chorus, and a scene between Oedipus and Creon including

the brief lament by Oedipus on the wretched condition of his daughters who have been brought to him. The concluding portion of the play is deeply moving and poignant, but there could hardly be any tragic irony in it, because all the facts are now known to all those concerned.

II

Tragic Irony in the Play

Oedipus Rex bristles with tragic irony. It opposes Oedipus—possessed of rumour, opinion, or error—against those who know (Teiresias, the Theban shepherd, both of them trying to withhold information because they know it to be bad while Oedipus insistently goes plunging forward, armed as he with his native wit). Where characters themselves are not omniscient, the audience is. The audience know the gist of the story and can be surprised only in the means by which the necessary ends are achieved. They know, for instance, that Oedipus is, in all sincerity, telling falsehood when he says: "I shall speak, as a stranger to the whole question and stranger to the action." The falsehood is, however, qualified in the term stranger: the stranger who met and killed Ling Laius, the stranger who met and married Queen Jocasta, the stranger who was no true stranger at all. At the outset, he says: "For I know well that all of you are sick, but though you are sick, there's none of you who is so sick as I." Here he is, indeed, speaking the truth, but more truth than he knows, because he is using sickness only in a metaphorical sense while actually it is true of him in a literal sense. He only refers to his mental distress as a King worried by the plague, but the audience knows much more than that and can only wonder when the shock of the revelation will come to Oedipus.

Irony in the Inversion of the Action

In addition to this irony of detail, there is a larger irony in the inversion of the whole action. The homeless wanderer by delivering the city of Thebes from the Sphinx and marrying Jocasta became a King in fact and then was shown to be a King by right, but this revelation turned him once more into a homeless wanderer. But the wanderer, who had once gone bright-eyed with his strong traveller's staff, now uses the staff to feel the way before him, because he is now old, and blind.

The Role of the "Helpers"

The reversed pattern is seen again in the fact that the malignant oracles have their darkness moment just before they come clear. Jocasta's words mocking the prophecy of the gods are echoed and amplified in Oedipus's typical tyrant-speech of unbelief. The role of the helpers is another example. Sophocles provides at least one

helper, or rescuer, for every act. The appeal in the prologue is to Oedipus, himself a rescuer in the past. Oedipus appeals to Creon who comes from and represents Apollo and Delphi. It is as a rescuer that Teiresias called Jocasta intervenes to help. So does the Corinthian messenger, and the last helper, the Theban shepherd, is the true and original rescuer. Those who do not know the reality are eager to help; those who know are reluctant. But all the helpers alike push Oedipus over the edge into disaster.

The action in Oedipus the King rises in one great crescendo making it a drama of great tension and tragic feeling. Elucidate.

The Observance of the Unities

The first point to note about the plot of *Oedipus Rex* is that, like most Greek plays of ancient times, it observes all the three unities—unity of place, unity of time, and unity of action. The entire action of the play takes place at the royal palace in the city of Thebes. The entire action of the play occupies no more than the twenty-four hours which was the maximum duration permissible according to rules. Our entire attention is focused on a single theme—the investigation made by Oedipus into the murder, of Laius and the discovery of the truth. There are no side-plots, or under-plots.

The observance of unities is not by itself a great merit in a play. Shakespeare violated all the unities and yet attained great heights in the writing of drama. It cannot, however, be denied that the unities do make a play close-knit and produce a great concentration of effect, even though they restrict the freedom of the dramatist in several ways.

A Beginning, A Middle, and An End;
Increasing Excitement

As required by Aristotle, *Oedipus Rex* has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is a situation which has definite consequences, though not very obvious causes; a middle is a situation with both causes and consequences; and an end in the result of the middle but creates no further situation in its turn. *Oedipus Rex* begins

with a complaint by the people to the King, and the arrival of Creon with a command from the oracle that the unknown murderer of the last King, Laius, should be banished from the city. This beginning is the prologue in which the problem is stated and the way is prepared for the development of the real theme of the play. A feeling of suspense is also created in this opening scene. Then follow into important episodes: Oedipus's quarrel with Teiresias, and his quarrel with Creon. Both these scenes are highly dramatic, especially the former in which the prophet proves more than a match for Oedipus. The next episode, more important from the point of view of plot-development, is the arrival of a messenger from Corinth. Jocasta realises the truth and leaves in a state of great perturbation; while Oedipus, still ignorant, persists in his inquiry. The Theban shepherd arrives in response to the royal summons. Now Oedipus learns the truth which is unbearably agonizing. Soon an attendant comes and announces the self-murder of Jocasta and the self-blinding of Oedipus. All these incidents belong to what has been called the middle of the play. It will be noticed that the emotional excitement of the audience rises with each of these scenes and a tension is generated in their minds till the great shock comes with the discovery first by Jocasta, and then by Oedipus himself. The tragedy lies in the discovery of the guilt and not in the guilt itself, and so the feeling of pity and fear reach their height with the discovery by Oedipus. The end of the play consists of the scenes in which Oedipus laments this fate and the fate of his daughters and in which he is banished from Thebes at his own insistence. What strikes us most here is the orderly development of the plot. There are no digressions of any kind and nothing irrelevant. Every situation contributes to the furtherance of the plot, even the scene of Oedipus's quarrel with Creon.

Surprise and Suspense

Surprise and suspense are two vital elements in a successful play. Both surprise and suspense are found in abundance in this play and they both produce highly dramatic effects. For instance, when Teiresias arrives, we are in a state of suspense because the prophet is now expected to disclose to Oedipus the identity of the murderer. Teiresias, however, tries to evade giving straight answers to Oedipus's questions with the result that Oedipus completely loses his temper and insults the prophet. The prophet is not the one to remain quiet. He hits back and he hits hard. He calls Oedipus the murderer and makes a number of veiled prophecies regarding Oedipus's ultimate fate. The utterances of Teiresias fill us with terror. The scene of this quarrel is highly exciting to the reader or the spectator. The pride and insolence of Oedipus have a disturbing effect on us, and we wonder what he will do. Then follows the quarrel with Creon in the course of which Creon, the moderate and

mild-mannered man, defends himself as best as he can while Oedipus shows how stubborn he can be till the Chorus and Jocasta prevail upon him to withdraw the sentence of banishment against Creon.

Scenes Leading to the Final Revelation

Then follow three scenes which lead to the final revelation—the scenes with Jocasta, the Corinthian messenger, and the Theban shepherd. This drama of revelation extends over five hundred lines or so. The excitement increases, rather than diminishes, by being spread out. Jocasta tries to make light of Oedipus's fear which has been aroused by the prophet's allegation. She says that no man possesses the secret of divination and that Teiresias's allegations should be dismissed. But Jocasta's own experience of the oracle, which she describes as evidence of the falsity of oracles, produces yet another doubt in the mind of Oedipus, and he tells Jocasta the story of his own life. Oedipus's fears fill Jocasta with dread and she offers worship to Apollo. But as soon as the Corinthian arrives and tells his news, Jocasta's scepticism returns with an ever greater force. However, a little later, the scene with the Corinthian messenger brings the greatest possible shock for Jocasta, though Oedipus at this stage remains unenlightened. The shock for Oedipus comes after his questioning of the Theban shepherd in the scene that follows. The discovery by Oedipus is the culminating point of the play and of the excitement it produces.

Logical and Convincing Sequence of Events

It is evident that everything proceeds in a logical and convincing manner. Nothing is forced; everything happens naturally, the only exception being the arrival of the Corinthian messenger at a time when Oedipus is investigating the murder of Laius. The arrival of the Corinthian messenger is certainly a coincidence, but it is the only coincidence in the play. The scenes we have surveyed produce various feelings in us—pity, fear, awe, admiration, resentment, irritation. But the dominant feelings are three—fear of what might happen and what really happens; pity at the sad fate of Jocasta and of Oedipus; and admiration for the integrity of Oedipus who pursues the investigation in spite of advice to the contrary by Jocasta and the Theban shepherd.

The Peripeteia and the Anagnorisis

Aristotle spoke of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. A *peripeteia* occurs when a course of action intended to produce a certain result actually produces the reverse of it. Thus the Corinthian messenger tries to cheer Oedipus and dispel his fear of

marrying his mother, but, by revealing who Oedipus really is, he produces exactly the opposite result. Similarly, Oedipus runs headlong into the jaws of the very destiny from which he flees. The *anagnorisis* means the realisation of the truth, the opening of the eyes, the sudden lightning flash in the darkness. This moment comes for Jocasta at the end of the talk with the Corinthian messenger and for Oedipus at the end of the cross-examination of the Theban shepherd.

The Moving Last Scene

The final scene of the play is highly moving. The account of the self-murder and the self-blinding is extremely horrifying; the lamentations of Oedipus show him for a while to be a helpless and pathetic figure, but soon his original imperiousness and pride reassert themselves and he insists on having his own way though he cannot. The last scene is very touching and at the same time highly uplifting and productive of the cathartic effect of which Aristotle has spoken.

Use of Tragic Irony

Another important feature of the construction of the plot of Oedipus Rex is the use of tragic irony. Tragic irony is to be found almost in every major situation in this play. Thus, when Teiresias accuses Oedipus of being the murderer, Oedipus thinks that the prophet, prompted and instigated by Creon, is out to defame and slander him, but Teiresias knows the exact truth (and so does the audience). Thereafter Oedipus speaks insultingly to Creon, not realising that very soon Creon will be the King while he himself will be reduced to the position of a suppliant. Jocasta's sarcastic comments on the oracles are also full of tragic irony, especially because the oracles are going to be proved to be true in a short while. The use of tragic irony is a device by means of which a dramatist heightens the tragic effect. Sophocles is famous for his use of tragic irony, and this play clearly shows the skill with which he has employed it.

The Role of the Chorus

How can we ignore the role of the Chorus? The songs of the Chorus may be regarded as representing the reactions of the audience to the play as it unfolds itself. The function of the Chorus was to comment upon the major incidents as they occurred. In this way, the Chorus not only represented the feelings of the audience but also reinforced them, sometimes providing a kind of guidance to them. The entry-song of the Chorus is, for instance, an invocation to the gods to protect the people of Thebes. This song is indicative of the religious feelings of the Chorus and of the people whom it represents. The second song of the Chorus shows its perplexity at

the allegations of Teiresias against Oedipus. This feeling of perplexity would naturally be shared by the reader or the spectator seeing the play for the first time. The third song of the Chorus expresses its reverence for the divine laws and condemns, indirectly, Oedipus's pride. The fourth song speculates upon Oedipus's parentage, visualising a love-affair between some god and a mountain-nymph. The tragic irony of this song is obvious. The last song of the Chorus expresses the idea that human happiness is short-lived, citing the case of Oedipus as a clear illustration. This song deepens our sense of tragedy. Today it is possible for us to regard the Chorus as an unnecessary element in the play or as an encumbrance. But the Chorus was an essential part of every drama in those days, and we just cannot shut our eyes to it. The Chorus does serve a dramatic purpose, as we have seen above. Here and there, the Chorus plays an active role in the action of the play also. For instance, the Chorus dissuades Oedipus from carrying out the sentence of banishment against Creon. The Chorus also soothes the feelings of Oedipus when he appears before them, blind and helpless, though the Chorus does not make light of the sinful deeds of which Oedipus has been shown to be guilty.

Consider the protagonist of Oedipus Rex in the light of Aristotle's account of the tragic hero. Do you think that this protagonist is a man guilty of pride and so punished for his sin?

Aristotle's Conception of a Tragic Hero

According to Aristotle, a tragic hero is a distinguished person occupying a high position or having a high status in life and in very prosperous circumstances falling into misfortune on account of a "hamartia" or some defect of character. Morally speaking, a tragic hero, in Aristotle's view, should be a good or fine man, though not perfect. There is nothing, says Aristotle, to arouse the feelings of pity or fear in seeing a bad character pass from prosperity to misfortune. At the same time, the ruin of a man who represents near-perfection in the moral sense is repugnant and horrible. Thus the tragic hero, for Aristotle, is a man not especially outstanding in goodness nor yet guilty of depravity and wickedness. The tragic hero is neither a moral paragon nor a scoundrel. Aristotle also demands that the tragic hero should be true to type, and consistent or true to himself. So far as the disaster or catastrophe in a tragedy is concerned, Aristotle would attribute it to an error rather than a deliberate crime.

Oedipus, as Judged by Aristotle's Criteria

The main requirements of Aristotle in regard to the tragic hero are thus: (1) high social standing, (2) moral excellence or goodness, and (3) some fault of character, or some error committed by the hero in ignorance of the circumstances. Oedipus answers to all these requirements, though so far as the last-mentioned requirement is concerned, the matter has to be considered carefully. Oedipus is a man of royal birth; he is brought up by a King and a Queen and he himself afterwards becomes a King and marries a Queen. He is thus a man of social eminence. He is also a man possessing excellent qualities of character, though he is by no means perfect. We cannot say in categorical terms that his misfortune is due to any defect in his character, though his defects do produce the impression that such a man must pay for his defects. At the same time, it would not be correct to say that he is a puppet in the hands of fate. Within certain limits he is a free agent, though it must also be recognised that, no matter what other precautions he had taken besides those which he does actually take, the prophecy of the oracle would yet have been fulfilled.

Oedipus's Excellent Qualities as a King and as a Man

Oedipus is a good King, a great well-wisher of his people, a man of integrity, an honest and great administrator, and an outstanding intellect. He is also a pious man who believes in oracles, respects the bonds of family, and hates impurity. His belief in the prophecies of the gods is the very basis of the whole body; it is because he receives a message from the Delphic oracle that he undertakes an investigation into the murder of the late King Laius. Oedipus is highly respected by his people. The suppliant people approach him almost as a god and he is honoured as a saviour. The Priest recalls the valuable service that he rendered to the city of Thebes by conquering the Sphinx, and looks forward to his rescuing the people from the afflictions that have now descended upon the city. Oedipus responds to the appeal of the Priest wholeheartedly; in fact he has already despatched Creon to consult the Delphic oracle, and soon he summons the prophet, Teiresias, to seek his guidance. When Creon reveals the cause of the city's suffering and the remedy communicated to him by the oracle, Oedipus declares his resolve to track down the criminal and he utters a terrible curse upon him. In the light of all this, we can say that Oedipus is almost an ideal King. He also shows himself as a devoted husband and as a loving father. He shows due consideration for the opinions and feelings of Jocasta and he lavishes all his affection on his daughters. His relations with the Chorus are also very cordial and he shows all due courtesy to them, sometimes even acting upon the advice

tendered by them. In short, both as a man and as a King Oedipus is worthy of high respect.

The Faults of Oedipus

However, Oedipus has his faults. He is hot-tempered, hasty in his judgment, excessively proud of his intelligence, and arbitrary in his decisions. He quickly loses his temper with Teiresias when he finds the prophet reluctant to reveal the things that he knows. He jumps to the conclusion that Teiresias has been bribed by Creon and that the two of them have hatched a conspiracy against him. No doubt, he first addresses Teiresias reverently, but his attitude changes suddenly and completely when he smells a danger to the Kingship. This attitude of distrust towards the prophet is in sharp contrast to Oedipus's genuine piety. Oedipus the ruler belongs, in spite of his piety, to the world of politics and human standards rather than to the divine order of the world. His piety fails also later on when, under the influence of Jocasta, he becomes somewhat sceptical regarding the oracles.

On the Way to Tyranny

The scene with Creon clearly shows Oedipus's arbitrariness and his dictatorial tendency. His attitude towards a tried and trusted kinsman is one of thoughtless and blind suspicion showing a hasty influence and a rash vindictiveness. It would seem that his position and authority are leading him to become a tyrant. In spite of all his love for the people, he wants full and absolute power, while in the case of Creon he comes close to committing a judicial murder.

His "Hubris" or Pride

An outstanding feature of Oedipus's character is an inherent feeling of pride in his own wisdom. This feeling of pride seems to have been considerably nourished and inflated by his success in solving the riddle of the Sphinx. It is his boast that no seer, not even Teiresias, found the solution to that riddle. Oedipus's feeling of pride is the subject of indirect comment in one of the choral odes. Because of this *hubris*, or arrogance, Oedipus certainly alienates some of our sympathy. Self-confidence is a good quality, but when it takes the form of pride, haughtiness, arrogance or insolence, it becomes disgusting and obnoxious. His attitude of intolerance towards both Teiresias and Creon and his highly offensive and insulting words for both of them create in us the impression that he is paving the way for his own downfall. Of course, Oedipus has already committed the crimes which make him a sinner in the eyes of the gods, in his own eyes, and in the eyes of other people; he killed his father and married his mother long before his defects come to our notice. But the tragedy

lies not so much in the committing of those crimes as in his discovery that he is guilty of them. If the crimes had remained unknown there would hardly have been any tragedy. Tragedy comes with the fact of discovery both for Jocasta and himself.

His Pride not the Direct Cause of His Sins

It would be a flaw in logic to say that Oedipus suffers because of his sin of pride. That he is guilty of this sin cannot be denied. But his pride is not the direct cause of his crimes or his tragedy. Having come to know from the oracle what was in store for him, he tried his utmost to avoid the fulfilment of the prophecies. It was completely in a state of ignorance that he killed his father and married his mother. His tragedy is a tragedy of error, not of any wilful action. And yet it is possible to argue that, if he had been a little more careful, things would have taken a different shape. He might have avoided the quarrel on the road if he had not been so proud or hot-tempered; and he might have refused to marry a woman old enough to be his mother if he had not been blinded by the pride of his intelligence in solving the riddle of the Sphinx. But, then, the prophecies of the oracle would have been fulfilled in some other way, because nothing could have prevented their fulfilment. Pride, therefore, has little to do with Oedipus's killing his father and marrying his mother.

His Pride, the Motivating Force Behind the Discovery

But does pride have anything to do with the discovery of his crimes because, after all, the tragedy lies mainly in this discovery? We can be almost certain that, if Oedipus had not relentlessly pursued his investigations, he might have been spared the shock of discovery. Something in him drives him forward on the road to discovery. After Teiresias has first refused to tell him anything and then uttered some frightening prophecies, Oedipus is discouraged by Jocasta to continue his investigations. But he pays no heed to her philosophy of living at random. She makes another effort to stop his investigations when she has herself realised the truth, but again she fails. The Theban shepherd too tries to dampen Oedipus's determination to know the truth, but in vain. It is this insistence on the truth that leads to the discovery in which lies the tragedy. We may, if we like, interpret this insistence on the truth as a form of pride, the pride of intellect, or the pride of knowing everything. The link of cause and effect is unmistakable between Oedipus's pride of intellect and Oedipus's *discovery* of his sins. But there is no strong link between his pride and the actual *committing* of his sins because the sins would have been committed in any case, if the oracle was to be fulfilled. The oracle did say that Oedipus, would be guilty of those sins, but no oracle said that Oedipus must discover the truth. What causes the tragedy is Oedipus's own loyalty to the truth. To this

love of the truth we may, as already suggested above, give the name of the pride of intellect what follows the discovery, the self-blinding and self-punishment, is another matter; what follows is deeply tragic also, but that is an offshoot of the discovery which is the major tragedy.

The Indomitable Spirit of the Tragic Hero

Oedipus is thus an authentic tragic hero in the Aristotelian sense because, among other things, his tragedy is as much due to his own initiatives in discovering the truth as to external circumstances. To the modern mind, a high social position is not necessary for the tragic hero. The modem reader does not recognise the validity of oracles, too. But, apart from these considerations, Oedipus is an authentic tragic hero even from the modern reader's point of view. In Oedipus we see the helplessness of man in the face of the circumstances and we see at the same time man's essential greatness. The manner in which Oedipus blinds himself after realizing his guilt, and the manner in which he endures his punishment raise him high in our esteem. He is introduced to us as a man of heroic proportions in the prologue, and he departs at the close of the play as a man of a heroic stature. The spirit of Oedipus remains unconquered even in his defeat, and that is the essential fact about a tragic hero.

Discuss the relationship between man and the gods in Oedipus Rex. (P.U 2004)

Crucial Events Pre-determined

Oedipus Rex is, to a large extent, a tragedy of fate. The crucial events in the play have been pre-determined by fate or the gods. Human beings seem rather helpless in the face of the circumstances which mould their destiny.

King Laius was told that his own son by Jocasta would kill him. Laius did everything possible to moment such a disaster. As soon as Jocasta gave birth to a son, Laius had him chained and handed him over to a trustworthy servant with strict and precise instructions to the effect that the child be exposed on. Mt. Cithaeron and allowed to perish. No child could have survived under the circumstances. But the servant, out of compassion, handed over the child to a Corinthian shepherd who passed him on to the Corinthian King. The child grew up as the son of Polybus and Merope, the King and Queen of Corinth, and subsequently killed his true father, Laius. Of course, the son killed his father unknowingly and in complete ignorance of the real identity of his victim. But Apollo's oracle was fulfilled in the case of Laius

even though he and his wife Jocasta took the extreme step of ordering the death of their own child, in order to escape the fate which had been foretold by the oracle.

Oedipus's Efforts to Avert His Fate Thwarted

Oedipus, the son whom Laius had begotten, had likewise to submit to the destiny which Apollo's oracle pronounced for him. Oedipus learnt from the oracle that he would kill his own father and marry his own mother. Like his parents, Oedipus tried his utmost to avert a terrible fate. He fled from Corinth, determined never again to set eyes on his supposed father and mother as long as they lived. His wanderings took him to Thebes the people of which were facing a great misfortune. King Laius had been killed by an unknown traveller (who was none other than Oedipus himself) at a spot where three roads met; the city was in the grip of a frightful monster, the Sphinx, who was causing a lot of destruction because nobody was able to solve the riddle which she had propounded. Oedipus was able to solve the riddle and thus put an end to the monster. As a reward for the service he had rendered to the city, Oedipus was joyfully received by the people as their King and was given Laius's widow as his wife. Thus, in complete ignorance of the identity of both his parents, he killed his father and married his mother. He performed these disastrous acts not only unknowingly and unintentionally, but as a direct result of his efforts to escape the cruel fate which the oracle at Delphi had communicated to him.

Characters Not Responsible for their Fate

It is evident, then, that the occurrences which bring about the tragedy in the life of Laius, Oedipus, and Jocasta are the work of that mysterious supernatural power which may be called fate or destiny or be given the name of Apollo. This supernatural power had pre-determined certain catastrophic events in the life of these human beings. These human beings are even informed in advance that they will become the victims of certain shocking events; these human beings take whatever measures they can think of, to avert those events; and yet things turn out exactly as they had been foretold by the oracles. How can we attribute any responsibility for the tragic happenings to characters? Oedipus, the greatest sufferer in the play, has done nothing at all to deserve the fate which overtakes him. Nor do Laius and Jocasta deserve the fate they meet.

The Goodness and Intelligence of Oedipus

Let us, however, take a closer look at the character of Oedipus, the tragic hero of the play. Aristotle expressed the view that the tragic hero is a man, esteemed

and prosperous, who falls into misfortune because of some *hamartia* or defect. Now, there can be no doubt at all about the essential goodness of Oedipus. He is an able ruler, a father of his people, an honest and great administrator, and an outstanding intellect. His chief care is not for himself but for the people of the State. The people look upon him as their saviour. He is adored and worshipped by them. He is also a religious man in the orthodox sense; he believes in oracles; he respects the bonds of family; and he hates impurity. Indeed, in the prologue of the play we get the feeling that Oedipus is an ideal King. That such a man should meet the sad fate which he does meet is, indeed, unbearably painful to us.

Oedipus's Defects of Character

Oedipus is not, however, a perfect man or even a perfect King. He does suffer from a hamartia or a defect of character which makes him liable to incur the wrath of the gods. He is hot-tempered, rash, hasty in forming judgments, easily provoked, and even somewhat arbitrary. Even though in the beginning his attitude towards Teiresias is one of reverence, he quickly loses his temper and speaks to the prophet in a highly insulting manner accusing both him and Creon of treason. His sentencing Creon to death even though subsequently he withdraws the punishment shows his rashness and arbitrariness. Indeed, in the two scenes with Teiresias and Creon, Oedipus shows a blind suspicion towards friends, an inclination to hasty inference, and a strange vindictiveness. When he meets opposition, or thinks he does, he easily loses all self-control. His position and authority seem to be leading him to become a tyrant. (That is the reason why this play is also called *Oedipus Tyrannus*). Creon has to remind him that the city does not belong to him alone. Even when blinded he draws the reproach; "Do not crave to be master in everything always." All this shows that Oedipus is not a man of a flawless character, not a man completely free from faults, not an embodiment of all the virtues. His pride in his own wisdom is one of his glaring faults. His success in solving the riddle of the Sphinx seems to have further developed his inherent feeling of pride. No seer or prophet found the solution: this is Oedipus's boast, pride and self-confidence that induce him to feel almost superior to the gods. There is in him a failure of piety even. Under the influence of Jocasta, he grows sceptical of the oracles. Thus there is in him a lack of true wisdom and this lack is an essential feature of the man who is on the verge of becoming an impious tyrant.

The Oracle's Predictions Inescapable

But the question that arises is: what is the connection between these defects of character in Oedipus and the sad fate that he meets. It may be said that if he had not been hot-tempered, he might not have got entangled in a fight on the road and might thus have not been guilty of murdering his father. Similarly, if he had been a little more cautious, he might have hesitated to marry a woman old enough to be his mother. After all there was no compulsion either in the fight that he picked up during his journey or in the act of his marriage with Jocasta. Both his killing his father and his marrying his mother may thus be attributed to his own defects of character. At the same time it has to be recognised that the pronouncements of the oracles were inescapable. What was foretold by the oracle must inevitably happen. Even if Oedipus had taken the precautions above hinted at, the prophecy was to be fulfilled. The oracle's prediction was unconditional; it did not say that if Oedipus did such and such a thing he would kill his father and marry his mother. The oracle simply said that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother. What the oracle said was bound to happen.

Oedipus Not a Puppet, But a Free Agent in His Actions on the Stage

If Oedipus is the innocent victim of a doom which he cannot avoid, he would appear to be a mere puppet. The whole play in that case becomes a tragedy of destiny which denies human freedom. But such a view would also be unsound. Sophocles does not want to regard Oedipus as a puppet; there is reason to believe that Oedipus has been portrayed largely as a free agent. Neither in Homer nor in Sophocles does divine fore-knowledge of certain events imply that all human actions are pre-determined. The attendant in the present play emphatically describes Oedipus's self-blinding as voluntary and self-chosen and distinguishes it from his involuntary murder of his father and marriage with his mother. Some of Oedipus's actions were fate-bound, but everything that he does on the stage, from first to last, he does as a free agent—his condemnation of Teiresias and Creon, his conversation with Jocasta leading him to reveal the facts of his life to her and to his learning from her the circumstances of the death of Laius, his pursuing his investigation despite the efforts of Jocasta and the Theban shepherd to stop him, and so on. What fascinates us in this play is the spectacle of a man freely choosing, from the highest motives, a series of actions which lead to his own ruin. Oedipus could have left the plague to take its course but his pity over the sufferings of his people compelled him to consult the oracle. When Apollo's word came, he could still have left the murder of Laius un-investigated, but his piety and his love of justice compelled him to start an inquiry. He need not have forced the truth from a reluctant Theban shepherd,

but he could not rest content with a lie and, therefore, wanted to prove the matter fully. Teiresias, Jocasta, the Theban shepherd, each in turn tried to stop Oedipus, but in vain; he was determined to solve the problem of his own parentage. The immediate cause of his ruin is not fate or the gods; no oracle said that he must discover the truth. Still less does the cause of his ruin lie in his own weakness. What causes his ruin is his own strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes, and his love of truth. In all this we are to see him as a free agent. And his self-blinding and self-banishment are equally free acts of choice.

The Responsibility of fate and the Responsibility of Character

What is our conclusion, then? In spite of the evidence to prove Oedipus a free agent in most of his actions as depicted in the play, we cannot forget that the most tragic events of his life—his murder of his father and his marriage with his mother—had inevitably to happen. Here the responsibility of fate cannot be denied. But the discovery by Oedipus of his crimes or sins is the result of the compulsions of his own nature. The real tragedy lies in this discovery, which is due to the traits of his own character. If he had not discovered the truth, he would have continued to live in a state of blissful ignorance and there would have been no tragedy—no shock, no self-blinding, and no suffering (assuming, of course, that Jocasta too did not discover the truth). But the parricide and the incest—these were pre-ordained and for these fate is responsible.

"Tragedy is a representation which by means of pity and fear effects the catharsis or purgation of such emotions." Examine Oedipus Rex in the light of this view of Aristotle.

What is Catharsis

According to Aristotle, a tragedy should arouse in the spectators the feeling of pity and terror—pity chiefly for the hero's tragic fate and terror at the sight of the dreadful

suffering that befalls the characters, particularly the hero. By arousing these feelings of pity and terror, a tragedy aims at the catharsis or purgation of these and similar other emotions. According to the homoeopathic system of medicine, like cures like; that is, a sick person is given dose of a medicine which, if given to a healthy man, would make him sick. Similarly, a tragedy, by arousing pity and terror, cures us of these very feelings which always exist in our hearts. A tragedy, therefore, affords emotional relief and the spectators rise at the end with a feeling of pleasure.

This, according to Aristotle, is the aesthetic function of tragedy. The catharsis of pity and fear and similar other emotions does not mean that men are purged of their emotions; it means that the emotions are reduced to a healthy and balanced proportion. It is also to be noted that pity and fear are not the only emotions believed by Aristotle to find a healthy relief in tragedy. Aristotle refers to these and similar other emotions. An audience also experiences such feelings as contempt, repugnance, delight, indignation, and admiration while witnessing a tragedy. However, these emotions are less important or less intense. Pity and fear are the dominant emotions and they are intensely produced.

A Multitude of Feelings Aroused by Tragedy

This is, however, a limited interpretation of the function of a tragedy. Tragedy provides, by means of pity, fear, and other emotions, not only relief but also exercise and nourishment for the emotional side of human nature. Nor is that all. Tragedy also satisfies in certain ways our love of beauty and of truth, of truth to life and truth about life. Experience, and more experience, is a natural human craving. Tragedy leads to an enrichment of our experience of human life. It may teach us to live more wisely, but that is not its function. Its function is to widen the boundaries of our experience of life. Tragedy deals primarily with evil and with suffering, and it shows human beings in the grip of these. Tragedy shows us the eternal contradiction between human weakness and human courage, human stupidity and human greatness, human frailty and human strength. Tragedy affords us pleasure by exhibiting human endurance and perseverance in the face of calamities and disasters. Broadly speaking, tragedy also supports the view that there is a moral order in the universe, thus arousing in us a feeling of eternal justice. In short, tragedy arouses a multitude of feelings in us. At the same time the beauty of the writer's style and imagination arouses also an artistic emotion. The total effect of tragedy, hard to analyse, is to remould our whole view of life towards something larger, braver, less self-centred.

Feelings of Pity and Fear Aroused in the Prologue

There is no doubt that pity and fear are the dominating feelings produced by the play, *Oedipus Rex*, though a number of subsidiary feelings are also produced. And there is no doubt that, apart from providing a catharsis of these feelings, the play greatly deepens our experience of human life and; enhances our understanding of human nature and human psychology. The very prologue produces in us the feeling of pity and fear, pity for the

suffering population of Thebes and fear of future misfortunes which might befall the people. The Priest, describing the state of affairs, refers to a tide of death from which there is no escape, death in the fields, death in the pastures, death in the wombs of women, death caused by the plague which grips the city. Oedipus gives expression to his feeling of sympathy when he tells the Priest that his heart is burdened by the collective suffering of all the people. The entry-song of the Chorus which follows the prologue, heightens the feelings of pity and fear. The Chorus says: "With fear my heart is riven, fear of what shall be told. Fear is upon us." The Chorus makes yet another reference to the sorrows afflicting the people of Thebes: "The city reeks with the death in her streets." The effect of the whole of this first Choral ode is to deepen the feelings of terror and pity which have already been aroused in our hearts.

Feelings Aroused by the Clash Between Oedipus and Teiresias

Oedipus's proclamation of his resolve to track down the murderer of Laius brings some relief to us. But the curse, that Oedipus utters upon the unknown criminal and upon those who may be sheltering him, also terrifies us by its fierceness. The scene in which Oedipus clashes with Teiresias further contributes to the feelings of pity and terror. The prophecy of Teiresias is frightening especially because it seems to pertain to Oedipus in whose fortunes we have become deeply interested. Teiresias speaks to Oedipus in menacing tones, describing Oedipus in a veiled manner as "husband to the woman who bore him, father-killer and father-supplanter," and accusing him openly of being a murderer. The reaction of the Chorus to the terrible utterance of Teiresias intensifies the horror. The Chorus refers to the unknown criminal as the shedder of blood and the doer of evil deeds, and expresses its feelings of perplexity and awe all the terrible things the prophet has spoken.

The Climax of Pity and Terror in the Scene of Discovery

In the scene with Creon, the feeling of terror is considerably less, arising mainly from Oedipus's sentence of death against the innocent Creon, which, however, is soon withdrawn. The tension in the play now diminishes to some extent but it begins to reappear with Oedipus's suspicion on hearing from Jocasta that Laius was killed at a spot where three roads met. Oedipus's account of his early life before his arrival at Thebes arouses the feeling of terror by its reference to the horrible prophecy which he received from the oracle at Delphi, but even to both terror and pity subside in this scene mainly because Jocasta tries to assure Oedipus that prophecies deserve no attention. The song of the Chorus severely rebuking the proud man and the tyrant revives some of the terror in our minds, but it again subsides at the arrival of the Corinthian after hearing whom Jocasta mocks at the oracles. The drama now continues at a comparatively low key till first Jocasta and then Oedipus, find themselves confronted with the true facts of the situation. With the episode of the discovery of true facts, both the feelings of pity and terror reach their climax, with Oedipus lamenting his sinful acts in having killed his father and married his mother.

Pity and Fear in the Last Scene

But the feelings of pity and fear do not end here. The song of the Chorus immediately following the discovery arouses our deepest sympathy at Oedipus's sad fate. The Chorus extends the scope of its observations to include all mankind: "All the generations of mortal man add up to nothing." Then comes the messenger from the palace and he gives us a heartrending account of the manner in which Jocasta hanged herself and Oedipus blinded himself. This is one of the most terrible passages in the play, the messenger concluding his account with the remark that the royal household is today overwhelmed by "calamity, death, ruin, tears, and shame." The conversation of the Chorus with Oedipus who is now blind is also extremely moving. Oedipus speaks of his physical and mental agony, and the Chorus tries to console him. Oedipus describes himself as the "shedder of father's blood, husband of mother, Godless and child of shame, begetter of brother-sons." The feeling of profound grief being expressed by Oedipus is experienced by the audience with an equal intensity. The scene of Oedipus's meeting with his daughters is also very touching. His daughters, laments Oedipus, will have to wander homeless and husbandless. He appeals to Creon in moving words to look after them.

Relief, Exhilaration, Upliftment

As we leave the theatre or as we complete our reading of the play at home, our hearts are heavy with sorrow and grief. We are hardly in a position to speak a word on account of the intensity of the feelings, mainly of pity and fear, which we have been experiencing from the very opening scene of the play onwards. Other feelings aroused in our hearts were irritation with Oedipus at his ill-treatment of Teiresias, resentment against Teiresias for his obstinacy and insolence, admiration for Creon for his moderation and loyalty, liking for Jocasta for her devotion to Oedipus, admiration for Oedipus for his relentless pursuit of truth, and so on. But the feelings of relief, exhilaration, and pleasure have also been aroused in us. These feelings are the result partly of the felicity of the language employed and the music of poetry, but mainly the result of the spectacle of human greatness which we have witnessed side by side with the spectacle of human misery. The sins of Oedipus were committed unknowingly; in fact Oedipus did his utmost to avert the disaster. Oedipus is, therefore, essentially an innocent man, despite his sin of pride and tyranny. Jocasta too is innocent, in spite of her sin of scepticism. There is no villainy to be condemned in the play. The essential goodness of Oedipus, Jocasta, and Creon is highly pleasing to us. (Teiresias lives on a different plane altogether.) But even more pleasing, though at the same time saddening, is the spectacle of human endurance seen in Jocasta and Oedipus inflicting upon themselves a punishment that is awful and terrible. In the closing scene, the blind Oedipus rises truly to heroic heights, displaying an indomitable spirit. Blind and helpless though he now is, and extremely ashamed of his parricide and incestuous experience as he is, he yet shows an invulnerable mind, and it is this which has a sustaining, cheering, uplifting, and exhilarating effect upon us.

Write a critical note on the themes of the Choric odes in Oedipus Rex.

The Purpose of the Choric Odes

The Chorus used to be an important ingredient in a Greek tragedy. Its utterances were closely related to the development of the plot. The Chorus was not just a spectator but a commentator. It took stock of the changing situations and developments, and expressed its reactions to them mostly in the form of songs which took the shape of odes. The Chorus represented the citizens and as such, could not be treated as an extraneous element in the play. The songs of the Chorus took the form sometimes of an invocation, sometimes a prayer, sometimes a wish, sometimes a lament, sometimes an expression of joy or grief. Thus the Choric odes covered a wide range of subjects and emotions.

The Theme of the First Song

In this play the first Choric ode is sung just when Oedipus has declared his resolve to trace the murderer of Laius, and when the Priest, feeling satisfied, disperses his followers who had come to submit a petition to the King. The Chorus, having learnt the message that has come from the Delphic oracle, here expresses its state of fear. Invoking three deities, Athena, Artemis, and Phoebus, the Chorus seeks the three-fold power to save the city of Thebes from the fire and pain of the plague which is raging there. The Chorus then goes on to describe the conditions prevailing in the city. People are suffering sorrows which defy description. Sickness has taken the form of an epidemic and no remedy is available. The soil has become unproductive and women are giving birth to dead babies. Large numbers of dead people lie in the streets. Dead babies lie on the ground, un-pitied and unburied, infecting the air with pollution. Young wives and aged mothers approach the altars and cry aloud in prayer. Although there is no war being fought, yet the

terrible cry of the fierce god of war rings in the ears of the people. The Chorus appeals to the all-powerful Zeus to hurl his thunderbolt upon the god of war in order to subdue him". The Chorus also appeals to Apollo, Artemis, and Bacchus to fight against the power of the savage god of war, and to drive him away from Thebes.

Critical Comments

This opening song of the Chorus has two themes, the message from Delphi and the plague raging in the city. Although both these themes have already been dealt with in the prologue, the Choral song does not produce any feeling of repetition. Both these themes which were presented vividly through the dialogue in the prologue, now become something much more immediate when presented through a song. A noteworthy point is that the two themes appear in the song in the reverse order, first the message and then the plague. The reverse order will make the transition from the prologue to the first episode more smooth. It is also to be noted that, while the prologue ended on a note of hope, the first Choric ode ends on a note of apprehension and prayer.

The Theme of the Second Song

The Chorus sing its second song just after the departure of Teiresias who has had a quarrel with Oedipus. Teiresias has spoken to Oedipus most bitterly, accusing him of the murder of Laius and making many other offensive and insulting allegations. The Chorus asks the identity of the man who did the horrible deeds mentioned by the prophet. Let that man flee from the city of Thebes with the maximum possible speed because the son of Zeus, armed with his fires and his lightnings, is coming to destroy that man. A command has come from the god to avenge the murder of Laius. Where is the murderer? asks the Chorus. The prophet has spoken terrible things denouncing Oedipus. Out of its

respect for Teiresias, the Chorus cannot disbelieve him but out of their high respect for Oedipus the Chorus cannot believe him to be guilty of any evil. The Chorus is, therefore faced with a dilemma and cannot come to a conclusion. Why such allegations against Oedipus? All secrets of earth are known to Zeus and Apollo. But no mortal, not even Teiresias, can claim to know everything. The Chorus will, therefore, not believe the allegations against Oedipus till these are proved. Oedipus had conquered the Sphinx and won fame. The Chorus cannot consent to think him other than good.

Critical Comments

This ode is highly dramatic and thoroughly relevant to the situation. There are two parts of this ode. In the first the Chorus speaks of the guilty man as a homeless outcast shrinking from men's eyes. The Chorus utters a warning to this "shedder of blood", this doer of horrible deeds, to flee from Thebes if he wishes to escape the wrath of Zeus. This part of the ode obviously contributes to the atmosphere of awe and terror in the play by visualising the fate which the murderer of Laius will meet. In the second part of the ode the feeling of uncertainty experienced by the Chorus is expressed. The Chorus cannot disbelieve the words of Teiresias whom they know to be a true prophet; at the same time they cannot believe Teiresias who has accused their idol, Oedipus, of the murder of Laius. Thus this second part reveals the conflict of loyalties of the Chorus. Towards the end of the ode it is the Chorus's loyalty to Oedipus which wins. The Chorus recalls Oedipus's heroic action in conquering the Sphinx and refuses to entertain any doubts about the goodness and nobility of Oedipus who has been denounced by Teiresias. The conflict in the mind of the Chorus is a reflection or echo of the conflict that must at this point be taking place in the minds of the audience which is seeing or reading the play for the first time without

previously knowing the story. To this extent the second ode correctly represents the reaction of the spectators.

The Theme of the Third Ode

The third song begins with an expression of the reverence which the Chorus feels for the laws framed by the gods. These laws have a divine origin, and mortal men had no part in framing them. Nor can these laws ever become invalid because the gods neither die nor grow old. The Chorus then speaks of pride which is a hateful characteristic of a tyrant. A tyrant is proud of his power and his wealth; a tyrant's wisdom collapses before his pride. This pride leads the tyrant to destruction from which nothing can save him. The Chorus next utters a prayer that a man, who is proud in word or deed and who has the fear of justice, should be overtaken by utter ruin. Those, who seek dishonourable advantages and lay violent hands on holy things, can never be secure from the wrath of the gods. Finally, the Chorus expresses its dismay at the decline in religious faith and religious piety. If the oracles of the gods are not fulfilled, people will lose their faith in the gods. People are tending to deny Apollo's power; Apollo's glory is no longer recognised to the same extent. Let the gods become vigilant!

Critical Comments

This ode is indicative of the importance which religion held in those days and the reverence which was, in general, paid to the oracles. The Chorus makes it clear that the divine laws, which had the sanction of the gods, must be obeyed by the people. The Chorus condemns pride and arrogance, and wants men guilty of such offences to perish. The Chorus also deplores people's dwindling religious faith and declining piety. In other words, the Chorus stands for religious sanctity and piety. The Chorus also shows its zeal for the observance of virtues like humility and self-restraint. In short, this ode has a moral and didactic quality. But that is not all. This ode has its relevance to both Oedipus and Jocasta. The song begins with a prayer for purity and reverence, and this is

clearly an answer to Oedipus's and Jocasta's doubt about the oracles. It ends with an even more emphatic expression of fear of what will happen if people begin to refuse to believe the oracles. The middle portion of the song describes the man who is born of hubris or pride, such pride as displayed by Oedipus and Jocasta. This description follows to a large extent the conventional picture of the tyrant. The Chorus fears that he, who behaves with pride and with an insolent self-confidence, will turn tyrannical and impious. If Zeus does not punish people's disbelief in oracles, all religion will become meaningless.

The Theme of the Fourth Ode

The Chorus sings its fourth song just after Jocasta, feeling shocked by the discovery of Oedipus's identity, has left and Oedipus has called himself the child of Fortune. This song shows that the Chorus has, up to this point, not discovered the true identity of Oedipus: The Chorus speculates upon Oedipus's parentage and visualises a love-affair between a god and a mountain-nymph. Instead of imagining any evil connected with the birth or parentage of Oedipus, the Chorus celebrates Mt. Cithaeron as the foster-nurse and birth-place of Oedipus and expresses the view that Oedipus was begotten as result of the union of a mountain-nymph with some god. This god could be Pan, or Apollo, or Hermes, or Dionysus.

Critical Comments

This song is intended by the Chorus as a tribute to Oedipus. The loyalty of the Chorus to Oedipus remains undimmed so far, because the Chorus does not suspect any evil in Oedipus. The Chorus, indeed, exalts and deifies Oedipus. We have here a striking example of tragic irony. Neither Oedipus nor the Chorus knows the real truth but the audience has by now enough knowledge of the facts to perceive the great disparity between what Oedipus really is and what the Chorus thinks him to be. This ode, celebrating the possible divine birth of Oedipus, comes, ironically again, moments before the discovery of the truth through the questioning of the Theban shepherd.

The Theme of the Final Ode

The last song of the Chorus expresses the idea that human happiness is short-lived, the fate of Oedipus being a clear illustration of this idea. Nobody ever won greater prosperity and power than Oedipus did. His triumph over the Sphinx not only snowed his great wisdom but enabled him to save the people of Thebes. Thebes honoured him by making him its King. All the people of Thebes were proud of the majesty of his name. But now who is more wretched and more afflicted with misery than Oedipus? His life now has been reduced to dust and ashes. He has proved to be the husband of the woman who had given him birth. How could such a monstrous thing be endured so long and remain unknown so long? Time has disclosed the truth and punished Oedipus for his unnatural marriage. The Chorus ends this song with a wish that it had never seen or known Oedipus. He who was the source of life for the Chorus has now proved to be a source of death to it.

"Sophocles shows his dramatic talent in presenting Oedipus in the act of learning about his guilt, rather than in the act of committing it. The tragedy lies in the hero's knowledge of the guilt rather than the guilt itself." Discuss.

The Plot-movement Towards the Discovery of the Guilt

The play *Oedipus Rex* opens many years after the committing by Oedipus of the two heinous crimes foretold by the Delphic oracle. The play opens when Oedipus, after having killed his father Laius, has lived as his mother's husband for many years during which period he has begotten several children by his mother-wife.

The earlier events, namely, the prophecy of the Delphic oracle, the measures taken by King Laius to avert the disaster, the flight of Oedipus from Corinth in order to avoid the fulfilment of the oracle, the fight on the road-side and the murder of Laius, Oedipus's conquering the Sphinx by solving her riddle and consequently becoming the King of Thebes and marrying the widowed Queen Jocasta who was no

other than his own mother—all these events took place many years before, and these are communicated to us only through narrative accounts of them given by Oedipus and Jocasta. The play as such deals with the discovery by Oedipus and Jocasta of the sins they have unwittingly committed, the account of the sins being given to us incidentally because an occasion has arisen on which Oedipus finds it necessary to narrate the story of his life to Jocasta. Even during the narration of these events, Oedipus is completely ignorant, and so is Jocasta, of the sins that have been committed. The tragedy lies in the revelation or the disclosure of the guilt, and not in the guilt itself. It is the revelation of the guilt that is dramatic. It is towards the revelation of the guilt that the development of the plot in the play has been moving. If Oedipus and Jocasta had remained ignorant of the sins committed by them till the natural end of their lives, there would have been no tragedy. Sophocles shows his dramatic skill in choosing as the theme of his play the circumstances leading to the discovery, the sins themselves being shown as having occurred in the past.

The Theme of the Play Stated in the Prologue

The play opens with the Theban citizens, led by their Priest, describing their misfortunes to their King, Oedipus, who, however, is already aware of their sufferings and who has already sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to the Delphic oracle to seek divine guidance. Almost immediately after Oedipus has informed the Priest of the steps which he has already taken, Creon arrives with a message from the oracle that the murderer of Laius must be found and banished from the city before the people can get any relief from their affliction. In this way the subject of the drama and the situation from which it starts are presented to us. The situation is the sufferings that have overtaken the city of Thebes, and the subject of the drama is the search for the criminal who murdered Laius. As a dutiful and conscientious King, Oedipus resolves to trace the murderer and to punish him with banishment, uttering at the same time a curse upon the criminal and those who may be providing shelter to him. In the announcement of the punishment for the murderer are the seeds of Oedipus's insistence on his own banishment from Thebes at the end of the play, just as in the resolve to trace the murderer are the seeds of his discovery of himself as the murderer of his father. Whether we know the myth and the story in advance or not, a lot of suspense is created in the prologue or the opening scene. If we do not know the story in advance, the situation arouses a deep curiosity about who the murderer is and why his identity has remained unknown for so many years; if we know the myth in advance, the suspense is caused by our desire to find out how Sophocles handles the myth.

The Dramatic Clash Between the King and the Prophet

The clash between Oedipus and Teiresias is highly dramatic. It is natural for Oedipus to summon the prophet in order to get from him a clue to the identity of the murderer. Teiresias is reputed to possess powers of divination, and Creon has advised Oedipus to send for the prophet, the advice being presently reinforced by the Chorus. Teiresias, of course, knows who the murderer is, but he would not like to disclose the shocking fact to Oedipus. He therefore evades Oedipus's question with the result that Oedipus misunderstands the whole situation, flies into a rage, and accuses Teiresias and Creon of having hatched a conspiracy against him. Teiresias loses his temper also, with the result that hot words ensue between the two men, and the prophet openly names Oedipus as the murderer, hurling certain other accusations at Oedipus, and foretelling in a veiled manner the tragic end that is in store for Oedipus. The verbal fight between Oedipus, the man with supreme secular authority, and Teiresias, the man with supreme spiritual powers, is very exciting from the point of view of the audience or the readers, arousing, as it does, several emotions. The scene throws much light on the characters of both the men and clearly brings out the defects in Oedipus's character, defects which seem to justify, to some extent, the punishment that ultimately befalls him, though the punishment is not a direct result of these defects. We find Oedipus to be hot-tempered, rash, hasty in drawing inferences, suspicious, arbitrary, and moving towards tyranny. The prophecy by Teiresias arouses feelings of uncertainty and perplexity in the Chorus, and we fully share these feelings. The Chorus is utterly unaware of the true facts and is not prepared to accept the accusations of Teiresias on their face value. In any case the clash between the King and the prophet takes the story one step further towards the ultimate discovery.

The Contrast Between Oedipus and Creon

The scene with Creon is not so dramatic from the emotional point of view, but it serves an important dramatic purpose. This scene emphasizes the contrast between the mild and moderate Creon, and the rash and autocratic Oedipus. Oedipus pays no heed to Creon's defence of himself and sentences Creon to death or at least to banishment. The hubris of which Oedipus is guilty is further emphasized in this scene, though we find also that Oedipus is not totally unresponsive to the advice given to him by the Chorus and by Jocasta in the matter of the alleged crime of Creon.

The Scene with Tiresias, another Step Forward in the Direction of the Discovery

The accusations of Teiresias have deeply disturbed the mind of Oedipus. Jocasta tries to soothe her husband's feelings by saying that no man possesses the secret of divination and that the words of Teiresias should, therefore, not weigh upon his mind. As evidence of the falseness of oracles, Jocasta refers to the prophecy made by the oracle with regard to the manner of Laius's death.

The tragic irony of Jocasta's advice to Oedipus here is noteworthy; the evidence which she cites to support her view of the falseness of oracles is precisely the evidence which, without her knowing it, supports the truth of oracles. Jocasta's account of the circumstances of the death of Laius serves only to strengthen the doubt that has arisen in Oedipus's mind as a result of the accusation by Teiresias. Oedipus would now like to interrogate the sole surviving member of Laius's party. At the same time he gives Jocasta an account of his own early life before his arrival in Thebes and his marriage with her. Jocasta, however, ridicules the prophecy which the oracle had communicated to Oedipus, namely, that he would kill his father and marry his mother. However, even Jocasta presently offers worship of Apollo because she is deeply troubled by Oedipus's wretchedness at the doubts that are tormenting him. By now, our curiosity and suspense have further been increased. Oedipus is feeling more and more troubled by doubts, and his apprehensions have begun to trouble Jocasta's mind also. The scene with Jocasta thus carries the story further towards the discovery.

The Stunning Disclosure

The next development in the plot is the arrival of the Corinthian messenger. On hearing the news this messenger has brought, Jocasta immediately reverts to her former, habitual scepticism, and she urges Oedipus to shed all fear of oracles and to live as best as he can. When the messenger learns the cause of Oedipus's fears about the future, he tries to comfort Oedipus by informing him that he is not the son of Polybus and Merope, which he believes himself to be. When the messenger reveals the circumstances in which he himself had handed over Oedipus as an infant to Polybus, the real identity of Oedipus as her own son flashes upon the mind of Jocasta and she turns white with terror. Her only anxiety now is that Oedipus should be spared the knowledge of his own identity. But Oedipus is determined, now more than ever, to know his parentage. The arrival of the Theban shepherd leads to the final discovery in the play. This is the supreme moment of the tragedy in the play. The Theban shepherd tries his utmost to keep back the information which would have a stunning effect on Oedipus, but Oedipus forces the Theban shepherd to come out with the truth. When the truth does come out, it is the most agonizing moment of Oedipus's life. The realisation, that the words of the oracle have proved true and

that he had really killed his father and married his mother, comes to Oedipus as an unbearable shock. This moment marks the climax of the play. This is the most painful moment for the audience also. Oedipus had tried his utmost to prevent the fulfilment of the oracle's prophecy, but he had failed. Circumstances and, to some extent, his own temperament had gone against him and he had committed the very sins which he had tried to avoid.

The Various Steps in the Process of Discovery

The tragedy lies in Oedipus's discovery of his guilt, and this tragedy he has himself brought about. Teiresias had tried to keep Oedipus in the dark, but Tiresias's attitude had only aroused Oedipus's ire. He was determined to find out Laius's murderer, mainly to bring relief to his suffering subjects. He could not shirk his duty as the King. The words of Teiresias had mentally disturbed him and, produced a doubt in his mind. The doubt was strengthened by Jocasta's account of the manner in which Laius had met his death. The Corinthian messenger's information marked the next step in the process of the discovery, and the process was completed by the information obtained from the Theban shepherd under the pressure exerted upon him. Thus it is as a result of Oedipus's efforts to punish the murderer of Laius and to find out his own parentage that Oedipus learns the truth; and the truth is appalling for him and for us.

Emphasis on Human Greatness

An important ingredient in a tragedy is the emphasis on human greatness. Great as Oedipus has been portrayed so far, his real greatness has yet to be pointed out. After the disclosure, Jocasta kills herself and Oedipus blinds himself. The blinded Oedipus, though in a state of despair, and suffering agonies on account of his sense of guilt and shame, yet shows an indomitable spirit. Oedipus has been defeated by circumstances and by his own actions, but his spirit has not been crushed. He shows himself still capable of self-assertion. He still retains his authoritative manner, his imperiousness, and some of his pride, even though he has lost all hope. He matched his wits against the gods, and failed. But even in defeat and in failure he shows his essential nobility. "Sophocles's tragedy presents us with a terrible affirmation of man's subordinate position in the universe, and at the same time with a heroic vision of man's victory in defeat."

"The final Chorus of Oedipus Rex is misleading as a clue to the play's theme; the play is concerned not merely with man's vulnerability but his greatness." Discuss.

The Subject of the Last Song of the Chorus

Let us first see what the last song of the Chorus contains. This song is a pessimistic comment on the fate of Oedipus and a pessimistic generalization about human happiness. All the generations of mortal man add up to nothing, says the Chorus. The happiness of any man is an illusion which is ultimately followed by disillusion.

The case of Oedipus shows that no mortal creature can be happy always. Oedipus gained the heights of prosperity; he conquered the Sphinx; he became the honoured King of Thebes and proved to be a pillar of defence for the city; all Thebes felt proud of the majesty of his name. But the same Oedipus ultimately suffered a heart-rending affliction. He discovered, to his utter dismay, that he had killed his own father and married the very woman who had given him birth. All the happiness of Oedipus ended in ruin and desolation. The reaction of the Chorus to Oedipus's discovery is one of disgust. "I wish I had never seen you, son of Laius," says the Chorus, "Till yesterday you were a source of light for me but now you have become a night of endless darkness."

Oedipus, Seen by the Chorus as a Hateful Person

This near-paraphrase of the last song of the Chorus depicts Oedipus as a degraded creature, as one to be avoided and shunned on account of his murder of his father and his incestuous relationship with his mother, crimes which have just been discovered. Oedipus is here represented as now beneath the attention of any respectable citizen because of his shameful deeds which have now come to light. Furthermore, Oedipus's fate shows that all human happiness is short-lived.

The Downfall and Defeat of Oedipus, Part of the Play's Theme: Human Vulnerability

Now, we shall be taking a very narrow view of the play if we think that the final song of the Chorus offers us a clue of its theme. Surely part of the theme of this play is the downfall of a man who had attained prosperity and renown by virtue of his high intelligence. No man is safe from the knocks and blows of circumstances. Laius tried his utmost to avert the disaster which had been predicted by the oracle; he took, what were, in his opinion, effective steps to prevent his death at the hands of his son. But circumstances thwarted the efforts of Laius. These circumstances took the shape of a feeling of compassion in the heart of the Theban shepherd and

his consequent handing over Laius's child to a Corinthian who passed on the child to the Corinthian King who in turn brought up the child as his own. Circumstances likewise thwarted the efforts of Oedipus to avert the disaster which, according to the oracle, he was to meet. Believing Polybus and Merope to be his parents he fled from Corinth in order to prevent the possibility of his killing his father and marrying his mother. But chance brought him face to face with Laius whom he killed in the fight that ensued between him and Laius's party; he went on to Thebes without any plan or design; he solved, the riddle of the Sphinx, thus destroying the monster and at the same time winning the throne of Thebes and the hand of its widowed Queen who was no other than his own mother. In this way the prophecy of Apollo's oracle was fulfilled by a totally unexpected combination of circumstances and in spite of all possible endeavours by Oedipus to belie the words of the prophecy. Man is certainly vulnerable; man suffers a terrible defeat at the hands of fate or destiny or gods or circumstances or whatever other name we might choose to give to the mysterious, supreme, unknown power that governs this universe. Oedipus tried to match his wits against the gods and he was defeated.

Man's Essential Nobility Emphasized in Every True Tragedy

This certainly is the subject of the final song of the Chorus. But, as has been said, to take this as a whole theme of the play would be wrong. The play also teaches us the greatness of man, and this greatness too is symbolised by the character and achievements of Oedipus. In fact, every great tragic play emphasizes the essential nobility of man, while at the same time representing man's helplessness in the face of circumstances and forces (known and unknown). *Hamlet, Lear, Tess, the tragic heroes* of Ernest Hemingway—they all illustrate the greatness of human beings in spite of their defeat at the hands of society or circumstances or fate or their own follies, or a combination of all these. Indeed, a tragedy would produce a wholly painful and frustrating effect on us if it were to depict only the vulnerability of man and not man's essential greatness also. Every great tragedy shows the triumph of the human spirit even when a human being has sunk under the tide of misfortune. *Oedipus Rex* is no exception to this generalization.

The Greatness of Oedipus is the Prologue

Oedipus has his defects and weaknesses but, in spite of them, he is portrayed from first to last as a man of heroic dimensions. In the prologue itself we receive the most favourable impression of the man. The Priest refers to him as a noble, mighty, and wise man. The city looks upon him as a saviour. Oedipus gave evidence of

his high intelligence by solving the riddle of the Sphinx. He is a man with a compassionate nature and, even before the citizens come to him in a deputation, he has sent Creon to seek the guidance of the oracle at Delphi. Each citizen is suffering as a single individual but he, Oedipus, bears the weight of the collective sufferings of all of them. In short, Oedipus appears to us here to be a near-perfect King.

His Defects Revealed in the Scenes with Teiresias and Creon

Then follow a couple of scenes, with Teiresias and Creon, in which Oedipus suffers a brief eclipse in pure estimation. We find him hot-tempered, hasty, rash, and arbitrary. We get the feeling that this man is so proud of his intelligence that he might well develop into a dictator one day. We see in him that *hubris* which can lead him to become a tyrant. His sentence of death against Creon and his offensive words to Teiresias before that are acts for which we see no extenuation.

Responsive to Advice; A Loving Husband; Determined to Know the Truth

Our impression of the greatness of Oedipus is, however, reinforced by what happens afterwards. He takes due notice of the advice given to him by the Chorus and by Jocasta with regard to his sentence of death against Creon. In other words, he is not unresponsive to advice. He shows himself also to be a loving and devoted husband. But greater than any other quality in him is his love of truth. He is determined not only to track down the murderer of Laius but also, after a doubt has entered his mind, to trace his own parentage. The efforts of Jocasta and the Theban shepherd to prevent him from pursuing his inquiry into the true facts prove to be of no avail, just as Teiresias's earlier efforts has proved futile. In this matter, he shows a high sense of duty as a King and a high reward for his own conscience as a man.

His Heroic Self-blinding

Even after Oedipus has suffered the greatest blow that any human being could have suffered, his spirit is not completely crushed. His self-blinding is a heroic act. When asked by the Chorus why he has taken this extreme step against himself, Oedipus replies that he had no desire any more to see any sight in this world. The reason why he did not put an end to his life was that he could not have faced his parents in the kingdom of death. His self-blinding is an autonomous act. He clearly says that, while Apollo brought his sufferings to fulfilment, the hand that blinded him was his own. His self-blinding was a self-chosen, decisive action for which he assumes full responsibility. His attitude to the new and terrible situation in which he

now finds himself is full of a great courage. When the Chorus scolds him for having blinded himself, he replies with the old impatience and a touch of the old anger, telling them not to preach a lesson to him. The same fearless attitude is adopted by Oedipus in demanding from Creon the punishment of death or banishment for himself. The curse, that he uttered when he was the King, calls for his death or exile and he sees no point in prolonging the matter. Creon finally does what Oedipus wanted to be done sooner; Creon exiles him from Thebes. In demanding the punishment, Oedipus shows a rare impartiality and strict regard for justice. He analyses in painful detail his own situation and that of his children.

Not Reduced to a Zero

In short, Oedipus is not at the end reduced to an absolutely helpless position or a zero. His original hopefulness is, of course, gone as it was bound to go after the shattering discovery of his parentage. But he does feel that he is in some sense too strong to be destroyed. He feels himself to be as eminent in disaster as he once was in prosperity. His sufferings, he says, are such as no one except he himself can bear. Even his devotion to the interests of the city does not become extinct in him. It is in terms of the interest of the city that he states his desire for exile.

Adaptability to Changed Circumstances

Oedipus shows also a great capacity to adapt himself to the change in his circumstances. In the opening lines of his first speech after his self-blinding he shows a helpless desperation. But soon he begins to adapt himself to the new situation. When he first hears the voice of Creon whom he had wrongly condemned to death, he is full of shame and at a loss for words. Yet in a few moments he is arguing stubbornly with him. He even tries to keep the children with him though at this point Creon asserts himself and has to rebuke Oedipus for trying to have his own way.

Heroic at the End

The play ends with a fresh emphasis on the heroic nature of Oedipus. The play ends as it began, with the greatness of the hero. However, at the end it is a different kind of greatness; this greatness is based on knowledge and not on ignorance as previously.

Q.10. Write a critical note on the Delphi oracle in *Oedipus Rex*.

Delphi, A Temple Dedicated to Apollo

Delphi was the name of a shrine or temple dedicated to Apollo. This temple was situated in a deep rocky cleft near Mt. Parnassus in Phocis. The highway to Delphi was very steep and difficult to climb. (It was on this road that Oedipus was supposed to have killed his father). Delphi was originally known as Pytho but, when Apollo took it over, he established his famous oracle there. The temple achieved a very wide reputation and became extremely rich as a result of the gifts presented to it. Inside the temple sat a priestess of Apollo on a tripod and uttered in a divine ecstasy incoherent words in reply to the questions asked by visitors, worshippers, and suppliants. These words were then interpreted by a priest in the form of verses. The Delphic oracle was primarily concerned with questions of religion, but questions pertaining to worldly matters were also answered. So far as the questions dealt with the future, the answers were often obscure and ambiguous.

The Key Position of the Delphic Oracle in the Plot of this Play

The Delphic oracle plays a most important role in *Oedipus Rex*, controlling the action of the play almost at every step. If the Delphic oracle were to be eliminated, the play would fall to pieces. The Delphic oracle is, indeed, the very basis and foundation of the whole play. Without it, the play simply disintegrates. The Delphic oracle has, therefore, a key position in the development of the plot. The play is based upon a myth, a myth which has its origin in the Delphic oracle. The importance of the Delphic oracle cannot, therefore, be underestimated. It is noteworthy also that the Delphic oracle enjoyed a high prestige and authority in those days, even though there were sceptics who scoffed at it. The belief in the Delphic oracle was thought to be an essential part of religion. He who did not believe in the oracle was regarded as impious and irreverent.

The Message of the Delphic Oracle

It is a message from the Delphic oracle that sets the plot of the play afoot. Creon brings the news that the sufferings of the Theban people will be relieved only if the murderer of the late King, Laius, is traced and expelled from the city or put to death. Apollo or Phoebus has sent word that there is an unclean person polluting the soil of Thebes and that that person must be driven away or killed before people can obtain any relief. Oedipus, who is a great well-wisher of his people, immediately announces his resolve to do the oracle's bidding, namely to find out the criminal and punish him. By this announcement Oedipus shows his faith in, and allegiance to, the Delphic oracle. He undertakes to investigate the murder of Laius, saying "All praise to Phoebus"! The opening words of the entry-song of the Chorus thus refer to the

message of the Delphic oracle: "From the Pythian house of gold, the gracious voice of heaven is heard." The entry-song of the Chorus is followed by a long speech from Oedipus proclaiming the punishment of banishment for the criminal. When the Chorus suggests that the identity of the criminal should be sought from Phoebus who has disclosed the reason for the misfortunes of the people of Thebes, Oedipus reverently replies that it is not in the power of any human being to compel a god to speak against his will. Thereupon the Chorus suggests that Teiresias be entreated to help in the matter because he is very close to Phoebus and possesses powers of divination. To this Oedipus replies that he has already sent for Teiresias, having been advised by Creon to do so.

The Sacred Authority of the Delphic Oracle; the Importance of the Oracle in Starting the Plot

It is clear from all this that everybody concerned has full faith in the words of the Delphic oracle who, on being approached, revealed the cause of the troubles afflicting the people of Thebes and also suggested the remedy. There is not a single dissident voice so far as the authority of the Delphic oracle is concerned. The King believes the oracle; Creon believes the oracle; and the Chorus, which represents the citizens, believes the oracle also. Oedipus's investigations into the murder of Laius and his discovery of the truth constitute the main substance of the play; the investigations and the discovery are, in fact, the very theme of the play; and the message of the Delphic oracle is the motivating force behind the undertaking of Oedipus to find out and punish the criminal. Thus the Delphic oracle serves as the starting-point or the driving force for the drama to commence.

The Chorus's Strong Faith in the Delphic Oracle

In the scene between Oedipus and Teiresias, there is hardly any reference to the Delphic oracle, apart from Oedipus's seeking the prophet's help on the basis of the word of the oracle, namely that the only way of deliverance from the plague is to kill or banish the murderer of Laius. This scene ends with a furious quarrel between the two men and the Chorus then sings a song in which it refers to the words of the Delphic oracle:

"From the Delphian rock the heavenly voice denounces
The shedder of blood, the doer of deeds unnamed.
Who is the man?"

The Chorus, which has complete faith in the oracle, warns the guilty man against the wrath of the gods. The Chorus also expresses its view in this song that all secrets

of earth are known to Zeus and Apollo, but that no mortal prophet can claim to know everything. The authority of the oracle is thus reasserted by the Chorus, and we are made once more conscious of the great prestige enjoyed by the oracle.

The Oracle Received by Laius

A little later we meet the person who does not attach any importance to oracles or to those human beings who are credited with powers of divination. This person is no other than Jocasta, the Queen. Jocasta believes neither in the oracles of gods nor in prophets. As evidence in support of her view, she refers to an oracle given to Laius, not indeed from Phoebus, but from Phoebus's priests, that he should die by the hand of his own child to be delivered by Jocasta. This oracle proved to be false, says Jocasta, because Laius was killed by robbers on the highway, while the child, when it was hardly three days old, had been fettered and exposed on the mountain-side to perish. Jocasta's speech here is a striking example of tragic irony because, while she believes that the oracle received by Laius has proved to be false, in actual fact the oracle has proved to be true, though Jocasta does not yet know the truth. Jocasta's belittling the oracle constitutes an, act of "hubris" on her part and, therefore, deserves punishment

The Oracle Received by Oedipus

When Oedipus hears that Laius was killed at a place where three roads met, he remembers having killed some persons at such a place though at this stage he does not have any suspicion that he is the son of Laius. He goes on to tell Jocasta the story of his own early life and what the Delphic oracle had told him in reply to his question regarding who his parents were. The Delphic oracle had given him an answer that spelt misery and horror for him. The oracle had said that he would kill his father and marry his mother. In order to avoid committing such monstrous deeds, he had fled from Corinth, determined never to see his father Polybus and his mother Merope again. His journey away from Corinth had brought him to Thebes, but not before he had killed some persons on the road-side and not before he had conquered the Sphinx. The Thebans had made him their King and had given their widowed Queen, Jocasta, to him in marriage. Oedipus's speech too is full of tragic irony, because he is not in the least aware that he has already, though unknowingly, committed those very deeds which had been predicted by the Delphic oracle and which he had endeavoured to avoid. After listening to his story Jocasta once again makes a sarcastic comment upon the oracles. "A fig for divination," she says.

The Chorus's Regret at the Loss of People's Faith in Oracles

The Chorus now sings another song, this time deploring the loss of people's faith in oracles. It is highly regrettable, says the Chorus, that the oracles are not being duly respected and honoured by the people, that Apollo's glory is fading, that Apollo's name is being denied, that there is no godliness in mankind. These words of the Chorus are highly significant in view of the fact that both the prophecies, the one received by Laius and the other received by Oedipus, have already been fulfilled though all the concerned characters including the Chorus are yet completely ignorant of the fulfilment.

The Fulfilment of the Prophecies of the Oracle

When the Corinthian messenger arrives with his news, Jocasta finds another opportunity to scoff at the oracles: "Where are you now, divine prognostications!" Oedipus kept avoiding Polybus all these years so as not to kill him. And now Polybus has died a natural death, and not by any act of Oedipus's. Jocasta, like Oedipus, does not know that Polybus was not Oedipus's father. A moment later Oedipus joins Jocasta in scoffing at the Delphic oracle. "So, wife, what of the Pythian fire, the oracles?" says Oedipus. Oedipus was to kill his father but now Polybus has died when Oedipus was nowhere near Polybus. The prophecy of the oracle, says Oedipus, has proved wrong and lies dead like Polybus. We find Oedipus, who was in the beginning a whole-hearted believer in the oracles, now becoming a sceptic. Thus to his pride is being, added the fault of impiety or irreverence. However, Oedipus is still afraid of the other half of the prophecy and, when the Corinthian messenger tries to relieve his anxiety on this score, Jocasta receives the shock of her life on learning that Oedipus is no other than her own son who, she had thought, had perished as an infant. Oedipus, however, is still in the dark about the facts. The Chorus now sings a song which has an ironical ring because the Chorus imagines Oedipus to be the offspring of the union of a god and a mountain-nymph. The Chorus reiterates its faith in Apollo and in the Delphic oracle: "Phoebus, our Lord, be this according to thy will!" Then comes the discovery for Oedipus, which shows that the entire prophecy of the Delphic oracle has been fulfilled in every particular.

References to the Delphic Oracle in the Concluding Portion

Some more references to the Delphic oracle are made in the concluding portion of the play. In answer to a question by the Chorus, Oedipus says that, although Apollo had laid all this agony upon him, his action in blinding himself was completely his own. In terms of the prophecy of the Delphic oracle, Oedipus calls himself the shedder of his father's blood, the husband of his mother, and the begetter of brother-sons.

In his dialogue with Creon at the end, Oedipus cites the authority of the Delphic oracle in demanding banishment as his due. The oracle had said that the parricide was to die or to be banished; and that command of the oracle must also be carried out. Creon therefore agrees to banish Oedipus.

Conclusion

Thus are the various pronouncements of the Delphic oracle fulfilled: Laius is killed by his own son, (ii) Oedipus is the killer of his own father, and he becomes the husband of his own mother, and (iii) the killer of Laius is banished from Thebes.