

**How Events Happened During his Life Turned him from a Hero into a Tragic Hero**

Corey A. Conn

Cathedral Catholic School

World Literature

Mrs. Graning

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## **The Heroic Tragedy of Oedipus**

What started out to be an investigation of King Laius' death to save the Kingdom of Thebes from a deadly plague transformed King Oedipus from a hero to a man of shame and doom. While on a mission to find out the man who killed King Laius, Oedipus realizes the prophecy he had run from years ago of him killing his father and sharing a bed with his mother had come true. The prophecy was told to his birth father and mother before his birth resulting in the first tragic decision that was made by Oedipus' parents to attempt to end the prophecy. Oedipus' life was to end shortly after his birth but fate had other plans for him. Shepherds spared his life and gave him to King Polybus of Corinth to be his son. However, Oedipus did not realize he was not of the blood of Polybus and his wife, Merope, a fact that continues to move toward the prophecy coming to pass. Once Oedipus learned the truth of his birth and the prophecy had come true, he considered his life over. His perfect life was over and he was no longer considered a hero or savior of Thebes.

The heroic tragedy began when the people of Thebes begged Oedipus to stop the plague that threatens to destroy the city. Oedipus shouted "Let them hear. For I suffer for them more than for myself" (Rudall page 12, par.4). Oedipus sent Creon, his brother-in-law, to the Oracle to learn what needed to be done to destroy the plague. Upon Creon's return he announces that Oracles instructed Oedipus to find the person who is responsible for killing King Laius, the king of Thebes before Oedipus. The punishment for the murderer would result in the end of the plague. So Oedipus sets out to solve the murder of Laius to save Thebes. The Priest calls to the people "May he walk among us and heal us and drive this plague from our city" (Rudall page 14 par.2). Creon suggests that Oedipus call for Teiresias, a prophet, to come to the palace and tell what he knows about Laius' death. Teiresias came but was reluctant to speak until he was forced

to talk. He accuses Oedipus of killing King Laius and makes subtle hints of a incestuous marriage. Oedipus rejects what Teiresias says and accuses him of lying. Teiresias rebukes Oedipus' claim and states that "Yes, if there is strength in truth and truth does not die" (Rudall page 21, par. 12). Oedipus angrily says to Teiresias "If it weren't for your age you would feel the pain that your treachery deserves" (Rudall page 23, par. 1) and orders him to leave the palace. Oedipus became angry with Creon for suggesting he speak with Teiresias.

As Oedipus and Creon were arguing Jocasta, the queen, walked in to stop the quarrel over the prophecy that Teiresias had told. After Jocasta learns about the content of the argument, she tells him to ignore the prophecies. She explained that a prophet told her that her husband, King Laius, would die by the hands of their son. Jocasta continued by saying that the prophecy could not come true because of the death of Laius and her baby. As a young boy, Oedipus learned from the Oracle that he was fated to kill his father and then marry his mother. The prophecy drove Oedipus from his parents King Polybus and Queen Merope of Corinth to Thebes to stop the prophecy from coming true. The tragedy is that everyone was trying to stop the prophecy not knowing of events that have taken place for it to come true.

As Oedipus continues to search for Laius' killer, a messenger comes to tell Oedipus of the death of Polybus, Oedipus' adopted father, a fact that he did not know which started the tragedy for him. Oedipus was relieved when he learned that Polybus had passed away from old age and not by his hand. However, Oedipus still worries about fulfilling the prophecy with his mother. Oedipus' relief was short lived when the messenger informs Oedipus that Polybus and Merope are not his real parents, that a Shepherd offered Oedipus to them. Oedipus summons the Shepherd to the palace to learn more about this and where the Shepherd found him as a baby. The Shepherd informed Oedipus that Laius had given the baby to a worker to kill. The worker

could not do this horrible act, so he gave the baby to the Shepherds. Jocasta confirmed that she and Laius did this to not have their son kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus also remembered that Jocasta had told him how Laius had been killed at the crossroad. Oedipus became distressed remembering the remarks about Laius' death from Jocasta because right before he came to Thebes he killed someone who resembled Laius at the crossroad. Suddenly Jocasta begs Oedipus to stop looking for Laius' killer for she realized the truth. The Shepherd refuses to speak of other truths, but Oedipus threatens him so he tells him that his biological parents are Laius and Jocasta. The prophecy was true about Oedipus' condemnation. Once Oedipus realizes that he killed his father and married his mother, he was agonized by his own fate. Oedipus speaks "He said that I would bed my own mother, that I would breed children from that womb, and that the world would turn away in horror" (Rudnall page 37, par. 1). Oedipus runs back to the castle with wild grief and when he returns he finds that Jocasta, his wife and mother, had killed herself. Oedipus takes the pins used in her gown and raked out his eyes, so he will not have to look at the misery that he has caused. The Chorus asks Oedipus why he chose to take his eyes and live in darkness? Oedipus replies "If I had eyes...how could I look upon my father down below? How look upon my mother? I have sinned against both" (Rudnall page 57, par. 3).

How tragic of an outcome for Oedipus at the height of his kingship, starting out as a hero and ending up a tragic hero. As Tearle stated "It means that Sophocles were aware of something which governs all our lives. Call it 'Karma' if you will, or fate, but it works even if we remove the supernatural framework into which the action of Oedipus the king is placed" (Tearle par. 15). Laius, Jocasta and Oedipus were running from a prophecy that would bring them shame and disgrace. If the worker had killed Oedipus as ordered by Laius instead of giving him to the

Shepherds, the prophecy would have ended. If the Shepherd had not given Oedipus to Polybus and Merope, the prophecy would have ended. If Oedipus had not been told of the prophecy at a young age, he would not have run away from Corinth to Thebes trying to save Polybus and not marry Merope. If Oedipus had known that he was adopted and not the blood child of Polybus and Merope, he would not have run away and killed Laius on his way to Thebes. All of these events led to the prophecy coming true. Ferrigno wrote “Dramatic irony is a vital part of tragedy as the tragic plot revolves around circumstances in which characters unknowingly cause their own downfall and the downfall of others (Ferrigno par. 9)”. Oedipus was the hero of Thebes but became blind and disgraced, losing everything as a result of the prophecy. He still followed his declaration to be killed or exiled from Thebes as ordered by the Oracle, which makes him a tragic hero.

**Work cited**

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