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Prophecy and Knowledge: A Tragic Combination

Throughout Sophocles’ play Oedipus Tyrannus, the reader is shown the power of prophecies and knowledge in a very negative light. These prophecies are so powerful that it makes a once strong and confident king­­, Oedipus, doubt himself, and become a very brittle character as his knowledge about his origins and ancestral line come to light. This power brings into question about how prophecy and knowledge truly affect a human being and if knowledge is sometimes too much for even a king to understand and overcome. In the Sophocles’ play Oedipus is worshipped similarly to how a god would be worshipped with suppliants (14-56) which may have been a factor in his tragic fall from fame. The three crossroads (716) plays a significant metaphorical role in the play which depicts how the paths in Oedipus’ life have led him to this inevitable prophecy. Vision is also a key theme and motivator for some of the actions taken throughout Oedipus’ search for truth. Overall, the tremendous weight that prophecy and knowledge have is undeniable and can change humanity’s action, for better or for worse.

Prophecy is an incredibly interesting notion from a philosophical point of view. If a person is given a prophecy that something will happen to them they can just avoid it, right? At the same time prophecies are written in stone, and nothing can change them. In the case of Oedipus, this dilemma causes him to quickly turn to doubt and anger, and eventually a crusade for information to gain knowledge about his past. When Tiresias the blind prophet confronts Oedipus (316), Tiresias begs Oedipus not to have him speak the prophecy because he knows that it will be Oedipus’ utter destruction (321-333). Tiresias even opens his talk with Oedipus, saying “Oh, oh. It is a hateful thing to know, when nothing can be gained from knowledge.” (316-317) showing that no matter what he does, this knowledge is the truth and it is destined to happen. Oedipus quickly accuses Tiresias of being a liar, and doubts his prophetic abilities (390), to which Tiresias unleashes the entire prophecy in full (408-428). We know that Oedipus has already fulfilled this prophecy (by killing Laius and sleeping with his mother) as an audience to the play. A key point is the knowledge of this. Oedipus had lived his life as Tyrannus for some time and was in a way already blind to the real world. Near the end of the play when knowledge is gained that Oedipus had blinded himself (1270), his true inner self as a character who is blind to his surroundings is shown in the physical form of blindness. This dispute between Oedipus and Tiresias also shows that physical sight does not necessarily translate to higher knowledge, as Tiresias seems to have much more knowledge about the human world than Oedipus, who is a quick and intelligent character. We know this because of the repeated mention of Oedipus being able to solve the Sphinx’s riddle and saving the city (35).

Vision and the link it shares with prophecy and knowledge is brought up again and again throughout the play, just as when the chorus learns about what has happened to Oedipus,

Cry, cry misfortune! I cannot bear to look.

Many things I wish to ask

I wish to learn, I wish to see,

But you are blinding me with horror (1303-1306).

Even the chorus, who are made up of Theban Elders who are some of the wisest in the city cannot fathom the knowledge they are acquiring about Oedipus and this knowledge is blinding them. By “blinding” the elders with this knowledge, the elders are gaining true sight and a clear view of what has happened, similar to how Tiresias is physically blind and has the power of prophecy. This blindness to his own past, present, and future is surprising for Oedipus due to his reputation for being cunning after solving the riddle of the Sphinx (35).[[1]](#footnote-1) This metaphorical blindness will eventually manifest as physical blindness in Oedipus as foretold by Tiresias, “The double-edged curse of your mother and father, treading the terror, will hound you out of this land, and then your keen eyes will only see darkness.” (417-419). So not only is Oedipus blind to the truth of his own origin and past, he will eventually be blind to his future by not having the gift of sight. This can also be seen as Oedipus gaining true knowledge similar to an oracle such as Tiresias, who does not need sight to see what will happen in the future, past or present.

“I was consoled, but a rumor creeps in stealth, and soon enough it started to grate on my mind.” (785-786). Even though Oedipus denies Tiresias’ prophecy, it plants a seed of doubt into Oedipus’ mind, and this seed proves to corrupt his mind enough to drive him mad and discover knowledge about himself that he was not prepared for. This doubt quickly turns to fear when Oedipus discovers that who he thinks is his father, Polybus, dies (1011). This fear and doubt is what lead to Oedipus to eventually discovering that he has already fulfilled part of Tiresias’ prophecy.[[2]](#footnote-2) Oedipus blinding himself is a self-fulfilling prophecy since the knowledge of the prophecy is what leads him down the path to knowledge that he is not prepared for, leading to him acting irrationally.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The three crossroads is a vivid piece of symbolism in the play. The crossroads is where Laius was slain (715-716) and is a part where three roads that each represent a time: past, present, and future, meet. The crossroads is key moment in Oedipus’ lifetime that sets him on his doomed fate as told by the prophecy. The crossroads shows a time where Oedipus made a decision that will set forth the prophecy that can no longer be avoided, but at the same time the power of prophecy in a character’s lifetime.

The power of prophecy and knowledge is undeniable, as seen in Sophocles’ play Oedipus Tyrannus. Prophecy and knowledge has the power to change a person’s normal way of thinking, change the way they act, and even act completely irrational and violent as in Oedipus’ case. Oedipus lived a happy life as a Tyrant until the prophecy of his life was told to him and he gained the knowledge that led to his downfall. At the end of the play, the chorus says “Therefore, always look to the last day, and never say a man is happy until he’s crossed life’s boundary free from grief.” (1528-1530) which is incredibly relevant to Oedipus’ tragic downfall.

Works Cited

Sophocles. *Theban Plays: Oedipus Tyrannus*. Translated by Peter Meineck and Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2003. Print.

1. The Sphinx’s riddle: “What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening?” The answer to which is man. The Sphinx was so upset that she hurled herself off a mountain, thus saving the city. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Oedipus has already killed his true father and is already sleeping with his mother, but Tiresias also mentioned in his prophecy that Oedipus will be blind. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A self-fulfilling prophecy is false in the beginning but the knowledge of the prophecy causes a change in behavior of individuals (in this case Oedipus), which leads to the prophecy being true. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)