



THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLOT IN THE FAMOUS GREEK TRAGEDY “OEDIPUS REX” OR “OEDIPUS THE KING” BY SOPHOCLES

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ABSTRACT

The present research work deals with the development of the plot in the famous Greek tragedy “Oedipus the King” written by Sophocles. “Oedipus the king” is also known by the Latin title “Oedipus Rex” which is an Athenian tragedy by Sophocles and was first performed in 429 B.C. Oedipus Rex Chronicles the story of Oedipus, a man who becomes the king of Thebes who was destined from birth to murder his father Laius and marry his mother Jocasta. The play is an example of a classic tragedy, noticeably containing an emphasis on how Oedipus’s own faults contribute to the tragic hero’s downfall, as opposed to having fate be the sole cause. “Oedipus Rex”, produced by Sophocles in the maturity of his powers, is his masterpiece. Aristotle also regarded this play as Sophocles 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 profoundness insight into human motive and circumstance. In this essay we discussed the plot construction of this famous Greek tragedy.

INTRODUCTION

Sophocles portrays his play, Oedipus the king, as more of an investigation into past events rather than a normal strait forward plot structure in order to reflect the theme, one of which deals with excessive pride, and another which asserts that no one can escape fate. It is the story of the impact of a totally undeserved misfortune upon a man of no exceptional faults or virtues. 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 unshrinking 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, 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” (the

phrase used by F. L. Lucas) and its plot has thus been analysed.

Discussion:

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 place 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.

As required by Aristotle, Oedipus Rex has a beginning, middle and an end. A beginning is a situation which has definite consequences, though not very obvious causes; 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. The 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 Teirebias, 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 realizes the truth and leaves in a state of great perturbation; while Oedipus, will 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 himself, 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 in the orderly development of the plot? There are no digression of any kind and nothing irrelevant. Every situation contributes to the furtherance of the plot, even the scene of Oedipus quarrel with Creon.

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 the prophet is now expected to disclose to Oedipus the identity of the murderer. Teiresias, however, tries to evade giving straight answers to Oedipus completely loses his temper and insults the prophet. The prophet is not the one to remain quit. He hits back and he hits hard. He calls Oedipus the murderer and makes a number of veiled prophecies regarding Oedipus ultimate fate. The utterances of Teiresias fill us with terror. The scene of his quarrel is highly exciting to the reader or the spectator. Then follow three scenes which lead to the final revelation -- the scenes with Jocasta, the Corinthian messenger, and the Theban Shepherd. 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 Corinthian messenger at a time when Oedipus is investigating the murder is 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 like fear, pity, awe, admiration, resentment and irritation. but the dominant feelings are three- fear, of what might

happen and what really happens; and 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.

Aristotle spoke of "peripetia and anagnorisis". A peripetia 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. The anagnorisis means the realization of the truth, the opening of the eyes, the sudden lightening 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 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 highly touching and on the same time highly uplifting and productive of the cathartic effect of which Aristotle has spoken. Another important feature of the construction of the plot of "Oedipus Rex" is the use of tragic irony is to be found almost in every major situation in this play.

Lastly the role of chorus is remarkable in this play. 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, chorus not only represented the feelings of the audience but also reinforced them, sometimes providing a kind of guidance to them. The all chorus songs of the play are very good and remarkable. Today chorus is regarded 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 in this play and chorus plays an active role in the action of the play also.

CONCLUSION

Thus it can be concluded that the plot of the play is very brilliantly constructed and the events and incidents are occurred accordingly to say that the greatness of the play lies in the faultlessly constructed plot.

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