

## **SOPHOCLES' TRAGIC VISION OF HUMAN EXISTENCE**

- Origins of drama: religious festivals and Homeric epics
- Tragedy, Thespis, Athens 534 B.C.: Golden Age of Pericles
- Aeschylus (Oresteia), Sophocles (496-406 B.C.), Euripides ; Aristophanes (comedy)
- Democracy: Acropolis, Parthenon, Athena : Dionysus
- Amphitheatre: orchestra (dancing-place), actors, **Chorus** : masks, ceremonial costumes, music, dance, poetry ("total" theatre)

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

1. HOMER'S COSMOS: **Order/Beauty: aesthetic/primacy of Art** (*Odyssey*, 8:579-580)
  - **impersonal**: not made for **human** fulfillment (1317-19 and 1678-84)
  - **three dimensions** inextricably intertwined: cosmic, political, private (family and individual)
  - **ambiguity** : the **Order** is never easy for humans to comprehend (**aletheia** / truth ; reality/appearance...) (561-5)
  - **given**: just 'there', 'the way things are;' no attempt to justify it **rationally: 'lots'**
  - **ultimate principle**- the **Moirai**<sup>1</sup> (the 'fates', 'lots', 'shares') that no one, not even **Zeus**, can transcend
  - **the gods**: immortal, powerful; **not** perfect, benevolent
    - Zeus is identified with '**justice**' by Sophocles' time; **but** 'justice' is merely the given (established) **order** of things (957-60 and 1340-50)
    - Zeus and **Apollo** (main god in the play) like all the gods are seen as the source of many of the **miseries** of human existence (169-77)
  - **human excellence** (**arête /virtue**) resides in **heroism**, enhanced precisely when achieved within this particular view of a harsh, ambiguous, threatening universe
  - **morality** is primarily a function of **observing the 'given order'** : **aesthetic** (Odysseus is ultimately a **hero** of this vision of things; '**homecoming**' (**nostos**) elevated to an ultimate principle and not merely a private goal)
2. THE POLIS : for the **Athenian** more than just a '**city-state**': the **necessary condition** for living a **truly human life**
  - **Oedipus** is presented as the upholder/guardian of authentic humanity par excellence
3. APOLLO: '**know thyself**' and '**balance is best**': the human **ideal** ; active search for true **identity/place** within the Cosmos **and** performing one's **role** in the best possible way (**virtue/excellence**)

---

<sup>1</sup> Three sisters who operated according to an **inflexible law** that not even the **gods** could transgress.

## THE ANTIGONE, OEDIPUS TYRANNUS, OEDIPUS AT COLONUS<sup>2</sup>

1. *The story* (Oedipus, Jocasta, Creon, *Teiresias*, Two Messengers, *Chorus*...)
2. *Many interpretations* : Sophocles' originality (not just retelling the ancient legend)
3. *Homer's rival offspring* : tragic poets *versus* rationalist philosophers: two *primal aspects* of our humanity ?
4. *Rationalistic interpretations* of *Oedipus T* stress specific *character 'flaws'* (*anger, pride*), *errors in reasoning*, claiming to find a comprehensive *rationalist moral meaning* for the play.
5. *Others* insist on the very crucial, real, *irreducible ambiguity* that is being presented, which precludes any *satisfying* rationalistic comprehension.

What lies *beneath and beyond*, the *aletheia* that lurks in the *ambiguous* realm, is *impenetrable* to human reasoning (561-5). Only *Teiresias* (not human: *apolis*) can '*see*' it conclusively.

*The three dimensions*: cosmic, political, private: *balancing* them is formidable

- *Oedipus* claims to be the *champion of the polis*.
- *Teiresias* claims to be the *champion of the cosmic order*.

*What of Apollo's 'know thyself' and 'balance is best' (the pursuit of excellence) ?*

6. *An interpretation for your consideration*
  - *Oedipus* is presented as the quintessential *seeker of the truth*. Nothing stops him-no threat of a *high personal price* to be paid ( *Teiresias*:360,377,429-31; *Jocasta*:1163-78; *Shepherd*1273,1286-7,1305-10).
  - *Creon* (145-8), *Teiresias* (377-9), *Jocasta* (1163-5), *Shepherd*(1285), *Chorus* (1482), are presented in *contrast* as more concerned with *private pain* than with the truth. [Sophocles seems to *structure* his play on the model of Homer's *Illiad*: a series of *contests*, in this case between the *heroic 'somebody'* seeker of truth and his *mediocre 'nobody'* opponents.]
  - *However*, and in terms of '*know thyself*', *Oedipus* is quite *blind* to his true position in the fabric of things. His great intelligence and previous successes (the Sphinx, model ruler...) blinds him to his *full identity* as a human with all of its *limitations*. He is *arrogant* ("*proud*") in his *overconfidence in human reasoning* (a main theme of the tragic poets: *rationalistic reductionism*). (451-3)
    - ❖ *This is his basic weakness - other faults ('flaws') are symptoms.*
  - In *similar* fashion, with regard to '*balance is best*' (do things in the most excellent way), he carries out his *role as ruler of the polis* in seemingly excellent fashion. He *identifies* himself heroically with the people (Polis), pursues the remedy for the threat to human life with a *determined rationality*, *anticipating* the best measures (Delphi, *Teiresias*), consulting, interrogating, gathering all possible evidence. He shows true political *humility* in *yielding* to the *Chorus* even though he believes this will put his *life at risk* (734-5 and 741-4). He thinks he is fulfilling his '*role*' in the best possible way.
  - *However* (once again), '*Balance*' involves giving due consideration to all *three* dimensions with *priority to the cosmic*. *Oedipus* gives his full attention to balancing the *political as prior to the private*. Here he is faultless. His *failure* lies in *not giving* the *cosmic* dimension its full due.
    - ❖ Now, "the plot thickens" with respect to interpreting the play. The underlying human issue takes us into the controversial field of *responsibility*: *Oedipus' guilt*.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sophocles wrote 126 plays; only a very few remain. The 3 plays are not a **trilogy**. Written at ages (ca) 55, 70, and 85. Creon is very different in each play.

- Perhaps the search for *answers* will take us back to the basic fabric of *Homer's* universe still operative for Sophocles. The *Cosmos* is ordered *impersonally* and human motivation or intention are *irrelevant* in establishing *guilt or innocence*. The universe is an impersonal system that regulates itself automatically. Any *breach* of its structure (laws) elicits *automatic* retribution (nemesis). *Oedipus is guilty* in this sense.
- On the other hand, the *radical ambiguity* at the heart of things is *inescapable, woven into the very fabric of human life* (aletheia; the appearance-reality gap). Thus *the practical impossibility, given human limitation, to penetrate to any conclusive 'balance'*. Perhaps what the poet is telling us is that this is an *irreducible aspect of our existential human condition: know thyself. How might this apply to Oedipus?*
- He is the '*villain*' and yet Sophocles *contextualizes* this within the framework of *tragic ambiguity*. He has been a hero of the search for truth and the savior of the 'polis' but has not been able to 'see' all *three* dimensions. *Blindness not wickedness is his moral condition* ("unhappy your lot(suffering) and unhappy your awareness of it":1481-2). He was blind to the truth yet *apparently* happy. Now that he is aware of the truth he is miserable. He *appeared* to have 'sight' but in *reality* he was 'blind'.
  - *His 'guilt' does not rob him of his heroic stature*. The chorus clarifies this pivotal point in Sophocles' treatment of guilt (1311-1350 and 1678-84). To all *appearances* he was the best of men. In *reality* he now is revealed as the most miserable. He is heroic in accepting (objective) *responsibility* (1469-70).
  - *Furthermore*, this is merely horrible for him at the *private* level. His *political* achievements are real and enduring. His relentless pursuit of the truth has *saved the Polis once again!*

**BUT!** What about his *anger* and *pride* !!!!!!!???? Surely these are *the keys* to interpreting the play!

- Again, *contextualize* them. A careful reading of the encounters with Creon and especially Teiresias at the beginnings of the play has *Sophocles* seemingly taking great pains to *justify* Oedipus' *politically motivated anger*. Both Creon and Teiresias appear *strangely insensitive* to the vital needs of the '*Polis*' (authentic human life), which can be explained *reasonably in political terms* as smelling of a *conspiracy*. Consider especially Teiresias' refusal to provide the solution to the threatened total destruction of the 'Polis' (145-7; 337-526).
  - *Their behavior robs them of credibility in Oedipus' eyes. His anger bears nothing of the pompous tyrant asserting his power.*
- *As to pride*, Sophocles seems to present Oedipus as a model of *true humility*. He *empathizes* with his people, *risks* his own welfare for them, welcomes the prophet with great *honor and respect*, *yields* to the chorus...[We need to take care not to *impose our conceptions* of pride on the text.] His 'pride' lies *solely* in his *misplaced confidence* in the *power of his reason* (thinking he could escape his '*lot*' by fleeing from Corinth, and throughout the play...).
  - *Final verdict: he is a villain in spite of himself*. More to the point, he is *the icon of a tragic hero*.

**Conclusion:** what is human life all about in this '*tragic*' perspective?

- *A dramatic and challenging quest for excellence in the face of mediocrity: to be a ‘somebody’ and not a ‘nobody’*
- *This does not guarantee ‘happiness’; on the contrary, Oedipus ends up in misery*
- *His downfall is not a simple moralistic one but aesthetic: a failure to ‘see’ the balance, the aletheia; he has been ‘blind’, readily admits it, and assumes responsibility on that basis - not on grounds of wickedness*
- *Teiresias has better ‘sight’ but he disregards the serious threat to the Polis*
- *The human seeks excellence and rationality but the universe is perceived as anything but that : the play is replete with somber (macabre) reference to the malevolent , irrational forces that govern human life (168-77; 868-75...)*
- *We are to seek excellence but not to expect reward or success (extrinsic)*
- *‘Heroism’ (a ‘somebody’) is its own reward (intrinsic); the worst is to be a ‘nobody’*
- *In such a vision of things human potential for ‘heroism’ (excellence) assumes elevated status: the price of human dignity / grandeur is staggering*
- *This is the stuff of some enduring philosophies of life ( Nietzsche/modern atheistic existentialism...Prometheus, Sisyphus as icons of heroes who are not rewarded...)*
- *Is this just romantic idealism, is it the substance of whatever greatness and progress the human species have achieved throughout history, or... (what do you think) ...?*

#### **FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE ‘TRAGIC’**

- With respect to the ‘comic’ in human life : no *hope*/ no *despair* : *dignity*/ grandeur
- *Through Suffering Insight* : the centrality and *importance* of suffering (for the characters *and* the audience): maturity, humanization, *wisdom* (1311-19 and 1678-84)
- *Man : free and determined* : ambiguity as complexity/ richness (1467-71)
- *Tragic choice : no-win* situations/decisions: *inevitability* at play(cosmic booby-trap); Oedipus’ heroic *character* responds to *external events* in a way that leads him to his *doom*. Otherwise he would be a ‘nobody’: *a basic incongruity exists between the Human and the Cosmos*
- *The Peloponnesian War* as context : *two radical responses* : Homer’s rival offspring
  - The *philosophers*: a question of social reform and education: *virtue is knowledge* (Socrates) : *rational* justice is possible
  - The *tragic* interpretation: war, human misery , corruption , injustice... are *inevitable* because of the *very nature of things*, including elsewhere (Thucydides) *human nature* itself ( lust for power , greed , envy...)
- *POETIC INSIGHT versus RATIONALISTIC ANALYSIS* : *need we choose ?*

*[A final note* : some scholars have attempted to interpret *Oedipus T* and other tragedies within the context *solely* of the Persian and Peloponnesian wars. Interesting as that may be, this is open to the similar criticism that like the philosophers, this misses *the ‘tragic vision’* at the *poetic heart* of the plays. Great literature *reflects* the times but is *not reducible* to the concerns of the scholar / historian. ]

\*\*\*\*\*

*Note: numbers in parentheses refer to line numbers in your text (Sophocles, The Three Theban Plays, “Oedipus The King”, translated by Robert Fagles , Penguin Books)*