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*Oedipus the King* and the Human Condition of Dealing with Plight

The sense of sight and vision are recurring themes in the play *Oedipus the King*, which was written by Sophocles around the middle of the fifth century BCE. Sight and vision symbolically and adequately reinforced the message of truth and knowledge as important virtues that hone the human moral code. Throughout its pages, the play emphasizes the importance of the virtue of truth and the imposition of retribution for any misdeed committed against the flow of the natural and moral law. *Oedipus the King* exemplifies that there is a consistency in enduring and coping in the state of the human condition as one approaches the truth and garners knowledge. This consistency transcends time and is instilled in the human psyche. This is why even after two-thousand and five-hundred years, *Oedipus the King* still persists as a popular masterpiece of the classical period. Select powerful scenes depicting the theme of vision and sight within the play demonstrates how an ancient civilization perceives the virtues of truth and knowledge through the themes of sight and vision, why these themes mirror the coping mechanism of the human condition, and why these fundamental ideologies about truth and knowledge endure the test of time to become the bases of the societal ethos that affects our world today.

One of the strongest elements that display the Greek perception of truth and knowledge is the depiction of blindness, both physically and metaphorically. Teiresias, a respected prophetic man in Thebes, despite the fact that he is physically blind, manages to see the truth in the predicament of Oedipus. He says “the killer” of Laius that Oedipus “[is] seeking is [himself]”

(Sophocles 35). Oedipus, on the other hand, with all of his five senses intact and complete, lives in ignorance of the truth about his fate. Although Oedipus is renowned throughout Thebes to be the man that outsmarted the Sphinx, he still struggles in figuring out the truth about his real identity and eventual fate. Sophocles delineates that true knowledge of any substance goes beyond quick wit; a man can have the innate ability to answer riddles and puzzles, and yet still live in ignorance.

When Oedipus finds out that the oracle's prophecy is coming true about his unfortunate circumstances in life which includes the consummation of marriage with his mother Jocasta, the murder of his father Laius and the conception of his children through an incestuous union, he decides to pierce and blind his eyes "with Golden brooches" fastened upon Jocasta's robe (Sophocles 60). Oedipus then "[thrust] from full arm's length" the pins on to his eyes (Sophocles 61). Oedipus performs this desperate act of self-mutilation to cope with the whirlwind of realizations overcoming him. This is not just a way of inflicting retribution upon himself, but is also an effort to escape the sordid realities of his affairs. Sophocles uses this particular scene to portray the human tendency to escape in the face of unfortunate circumstances.

The blinding of Oedipus effectively portrays human nature in plight. Oedipus grapples the situation by punishing himself, seeking absolution from all the misdeeds he commit and, at the same time, mutilates his eyesight to escape the turmoil that falls on him. People by nature have the propensity to choose an escape route rather than face the music, even today. A fine modern example of a quick escape that some people opt for is the use of illegal substances. This option provides a momentary escape that causes harm, not just on the user, but to the advantage of the community as well. Sophocles buttresses his moral message at the end of the play: when

Oedipus blinds himself, he becomes the embodiment of what he is all along---a man that was blind from the truth.

The story of *Oedipus the King* compellingly illustrates the perception of the Ancient Greeks about truth and knowledge. This perception frames the moral philosophy that is now the bedrock of modern society. Using the themes of sight, vision and prophecy, Sophocles weaves a story that possesses conflicts that directly oppose the virtues he was trying to address. During the encounter with Teiresias, the prophet tells Oedipus that he is “living in sinful union with the one [he] [loves]” and that he is “living in ignorance of [his] own undoing” (Sophocles 35). Oedipus retorts by heckling Teiresias, calling him a “shameless and brainless, sightless, senseless sot” (Sophocles 35). Oedipus continues by saying that men like Teiresias who are “living in perpetual night” cannot possibly harm him, a man who “sees the light” (Sophocles 36). Pride, conceit and ignorance are forceful elements in the story that become the basis of Oedipus’s adverse fate. Pride clouds his mind and his ability for sound judgment. He goes to extreme measures of ensuring that his pride will remain intact after the scene with Teiresias. He succumbs to slandering Creon of conniving with Teiresias to usurp his throne and boasts his power to a pleading Creon that “kingdoms are won by men and moneybags” (Sophocles 40). Pride, conceit and ignorance are still within the foundations of modern society. Most people choose to live in ignorance to protect their pride and with that, conceit comes into play. In modern politics, pride and ignorance are still rampant. Many issues facing the United States of America today require wise actions. Issues of war, for example, are still based on the decisions of the upper echelon of government. When the cause for war becomes questionable, the people in charge will keep their ignorant courses of action to mainly protect their pride. Corruption in the government and private industries are another example. Companies go down because of an executive’s prideful and

ignorant business tactics. Irresponsibility and incrimination of others are a good way to preserve one's pride in situations like these. Only truth and knowledge can counter such weakness and that is why politicians and Wall-Street giants pander to people's sentiments to convince them of their wisdom and honesty.

*Oedipus the King* was a play written two millennia and half ago but it nevertheless retains its influence to echo what we are as human beings. People build society and society is the picture of the people of build it. Modern justice and communal ethics are based on the virtues of truth and knowledge. *Oedipus the King* illustrates that there is a consistency through history about how people cope and face facts. The settings and technologies might have changed, but the inner workings of human psychology still functions the same: we still seek an escape from our troubles, we value our pride above and beyond, blaming others, we seek retribution one way or another, etc. Although these are inevitable, people still search for the truth and pursue knowledge because it is the only way to find self-purpose and progress as a civilization. Sophocles and the Ancient Greeks perceives the same and that is why *Oedipus the King* is still very much alive today.

Works Cited

Watling, E.F. and Sophocles. *The Theban Plays*. London: Penguin Group, 1974. Print.



