

The Construction of a Play: Structuralism in Oedipus the King

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In *Oedipus, the King*, a play by Sophocles, we are presented with the mythical king who defeated the Sphinx and now rules over Thebes. However, he got the position by killing his biological father, Laius, at a crossroads years before the play takes place. A major purpose or meaning is to present the great irony surrounding Oedipus and his rule. However, there is a systematic construction, or structure, through which the play gets its meaning across. To understand the meaning, we must first understand the structure. Whether it be through the layout of specific scenes or the order of the scenes through the entire play, the structure is what gives the play the ability to make its meaning possible; structure is the catalyst for meaning.

Before we get to the structure and the significance or point of a scene, first we must find what the structure is. Structuralists say that “form is inevitably bound up with meaning; structure, however, is what makes meaning possible.” (Bertens 47). They are correct. Without a structure to give form to meaning, meaning is unable to be presented. Only through structure are stories crafted, and it is the vehicle to integrate the purpose or message. The structure of stories is this: narration. Structurally, “narrative belongs with the sentence without ever being reducible to the sum of its sentences: a narrative is a large sentence, just as any declarative sentence is, in a certain way, the outline of a little narrative”

(Barthes 241). Narrative is involved in the sentences of a work, the basic blocks of its structure. But it is the culmination of these sentences, these building blocks, that make up the whole and ultimately give meaning to the work.

Basically, a narrative “appears as a succession of tightly interlocking mediate and immediate elements; dystaxy initiates a ‘horizontal’ reading, while integration superimposes on it a ‘vertical’ reading. There is a sort of structural ‘limping,’ a constant interplay of potentials, whose ‘falls’ impart ‘tone’ or energy to the narrative. Each unit is perceived as a surface texture, while an in-depth dimension is maintained, and in this way narrative ‘moves along’” (Barthes 270). There is an overarching connection to a work such as a film or text, in this case a play, which enables meaning.

The narrative is the broad connection of sentences or units, and it is these units that make up the structure. Multiple levels of meaning are assigned, not just the immediate or surface. A superior level is made up of these lower levels or units of the text that act as the skeleton. The construction of these units forms the structure. Again, it is this structure that gives the intention of a medium to expose itself. This theory in Structuralism can be applied to *Oedipus the King*.

One of the points of Sophocles’s play is to demonstrate the many ironies that are involved in Oedipus’s life. An example of this



Dimitri Tavadze, Tskhinvali Khetagurov Theater; Sophocles – Oedipus the King 1968, CC BY-SA 3.0 Wikimedia Commons

comes early on in the play starting at line 301, during a conversation between Oedipus and the Chorus of Theban Elders. It starts with Oedipus saying,

But now
I possess the ruling power which Laius held
in earlier days. I have his bed and wife—
she would have borne his children, if his
hopes
to have a son had not been disappointed.
(301-305)

These lines not only tell us that Oedipus is acknowledging his replacement for Laius as Jocasta's husband, but also that Laius and Jocasta have no children besides Oedipus himself, though he does not know that. He continues with "Children from a common mother might have linked / Laius and myself. But as it turned out, / Fate swooped down onto his head" (306-309). Here Oedipus is stating that Laius was a victim of fate. Lastly, Oedipus says,

So now,
I'll fight on his behalf, as if this matter
concerned my own father, and I will strive
to do everything I can to find him,
the man who spilled his blood, and thus
avenge [Laius]. (309-313)

Oedipus claims to do everything he can to find Laius's murderer, and vows that he has taken up the cause as if it was his own father. The structure of these lines is important in portraying the irony in Oedipus's quest. They match the exact specifications of Oedipus's fate as he was told by Apollo's oracle. Oedipus has replaced his father as the ruler of Thebes (after killing Laius), and he becomes king by marrying the queen, Jocasta. It is clear that Oedipus doesn't know that Laius and Jocasta are his parents, and it is clear that he doesn't realize that he is, in fact, Laius's murderer, but readers do.

The biggest irony is that Oedipus calls Laius a victim of fate, which is actually true. Oedipus does not realize how true his words

ring, and that he is as much a victim as he is an agent. All of this information is given as Oedipus is starting his investigation at the beginning of the play. This is important for the structure because it sets up the major irony, the overall meaning that is meant to be portrayed. Its placement is necessary to make this a tragedy composed entirely out of irony.

In fact, irony drives the actions of virtually every character in the play. In another important scene, Jocasta tells Oedipus to ignore oracles after he relays the oracle's claim that he is the murderer. In her attempt to comfort him and disprove the oracles' power, she tells him about the prophecy that Laius would die by his son's hands, but he died by robbers instead at a place where three crossroads meet. After this, Oedipus is clearly shaken. Oedipus explains his fate to Jocasta that he was to kill his father and marry his mother, the same prophecy as Jocasta recited to him. He continues,

When I heard that, I ran away from Corinth.
From then on I thought of it just as a place
beneath the stars. I went to other lands,
so I would never see that prophecy fulfilled,
the abomination of my evil fate. (955-959)

The scene's placement is important for the structure of the play. It repeats the irony, bringing it back to the forefront of the focus. Oedipus tries to defy his fate by leaving his family in Corinth. However, it is this attempt to defy his fate that ultimately brings it to fruition. And this scene demonstrates that Oedipus is starting to realize that. Having Jocasta repeat the prophecy in an attempt to comfort Oedipus after he is told that he is the murderer is crucial in reinforcing the irony of the play. This repetition of the prophecy leads to Oedipus's uncertainty, which in turn begins to unveil the irony to the central character. Oedipus needs to realize that he is the murderer, that his fate is realized. This is the turning point of the play, the beginning of the revelation. This is a component of tragedy, and it is a stepping stone in the unraveling of this great irony.

Finally comes the revelation and the conclusion. The revelation comes at the end of the play because it is what the play was about, the unraveling of irony. This tragic irony about defying fate is the point of Sophocles's play. When Oedipus truly understands that his attempt to stop destiny is what actually caused it, he says,

Ah, so it all came true. It's so clear now.
O light, let me look at you one final time,
a man who stands revealed as cursed by
birth,
cursed by my own family, and cursed
by murder where I should not kill. (1418-
1422)

Oedipus realizes that he is a cursed man, a victim of fate. In his mention of light, he is not only talking about his sight. He is also referring to the revelation, to the truth. The truth is he is a corrupted man, and he wishes for nothing more than to block it out. Not just the fact that he killed his father and married his mother. No, he wishes to have awareness itself eradicated. The placement of this statement is important because it leads to the major consequence of this tragic truth.

Oedipus blinds himself after Jocasta commits suicide. When he is questioned on why he chose self-blinding rather than simply killing himself, he tells the Chorus that he won't be able to look into his family's eyes in Hades. He even says he would make himself deaf if he had the knowledge to do so. Oedipus continues,

I'd make a dungeon of this wretched body,
so I would never see or hear again.
For there is joy in isolated thought,
completely sealed off from a world of pain
(1638-1641)

Again, he is trying to eliminate awareness of the truth. Solace lies in solitude.

The suffering of Oedipus is necessary for the conclusion of this play because it is the

meaning. His suffering is the culmination of his irony. His revelation and suffering are what the scenes, the narration were building towards. From the investigation to the gradual unraveling to the revelation and conclusion, this narration was aimed at the destruction of Oedipus. Each scene was meticulously placed, the position or structure of each scene was necessary in achieving the meaning. The intention and impact of this play wouldn't work otherwise. Simply, structure is "that which enables meaning to emerge" (Bertens 47).

In Sophocles's play *Oedipus the King*, we are shown the fall of the mythical king of Thebes. The irony of fate, and the irony brought about by defying it, are the causes of his devastation. The irony surrounding Oedipus and his topple from the grace and admiration of his kingdom is the focal point of this play; it is the reason this play exists. However, the enlightenment of this irony is brought about through the structure of the play. This is achieved through the sentences and placements of scenes by narration. From Oedipus's investigation to the exile of the conclusion, each scene, each unit that builds them up, are placed with purpose. They have to be. Meaning emerges through the use of structure.

Works Cited

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