

T The Undergraduate Center**Ethics Reading
Assignment:*****OEDIPUS REX AS
THE IDEAL TRAGIC
HERO OF ARISTOTLE*****by Marjorie Barstow,
1910**

If we give ourselves up to a full sympathy with the hero, there is no question that the Oedipus Rex fulfills the function of a tragedy, and arouses fear and pity in the highest degree. But the modern reader, coming to the classic drama not entirely for the purpose of enjoyment, will not always surrender himself to the emotional effect. He is apt to worry about Greek *fatalism* and the justice of the downfall of Oedipus, and, finding no satisfactory solution for these intellectual difficulties, loses half the pleasure that the drama was intended to produce. Perhaps we trouble ourselves too much concerning the Greek notions of fate in human life. We are inclined to regard them with a lively antiquarian interest, as if they were something remote and peculiar; yet in reality the essential difference between these notions and the more familiar ideas of a later time is so slight that it need not concern the naive and sympathetic reader. After all, the fundamental aim of the poet is not to teach us about these matters. but to construct a tragedy which shall completely fulfill its proper function. Nevertheless, for the student of literature who feels bound to solve the twofold problem, *How is the tragedy of Oedipus to be reconciled with a rational conception of life?* and *How does Oedipus himself comply with the Aristotelian requirements for a tragic hero?* there is a simple answer in the ethical teaching of the

great philosopher in whose eyes the Oedipus Rex appears to have been well-nigh a perfect tragedy. In other words, let us compare the ideal of the Ethics with the ideal of the Poetics.

Aristotle finds the end of human endeavor to be happiness, that is, an unhampered activity of the soul in accordance with true reason, throughout a complete lifetime. This happiness, as Aristotle discovered by careful observation during the length of his thoughtful life, does not result principally from the gifts of fortune, but rather from a steady and comprehensive intellectual vision which views life steadily and distinguishes in every action the result to be attained. By the light of this vision the wise man preserves a just balance among his natural impulses, and firmly and consistently directs his will and emotions toward the supreme end which reason approves. He has, therefore, an inward happiness which cannot be shaken save by great and numerous outward calamities, and, moreover, he attains an adequate external prosperity, since, other things being equal, the most sensible people are the most successful, and misfortune is due, in large measure, to lack of knowledge or lack of prudence. Even if he is crushed beneath an overwhelming catastrophe from without, the ideas character of the Ethics is not an object of fear and pity, for the truly good and sensible man bears all the chances of life with decorum, and always does what is noblest in the circumstances, as a good general uses the forces at his command to the best advantage in war.

Such is the ideal character, the man who is best fitted to attain happiness in the world of men. On the other hand, the tragic hero is a man who fails to attain happiness, and fails in such a way that his career excites, not blame, but fear and pity in the highest degree. In the Poetics, he is described as not eminently good and just, not completely under the guidance of true reason, but as falling through some great error, flaw of character, rather than through vice of depravity. Moreover, in order that his downfall may be as striking as

possible, he must be, as was Oedipus, of an illustrious family, highly renowned, and prosperous. /2/

When we analyze the character of Oedipus, we discover that, in spite of much natural greatness of soul, he is, in one vital respect, the exact antithesis of Aristotle's ideal man. He has no clear vision which enables him to examine every side of a matter with unclouded eyes, and to see all things in due perspective; nor has he a calm wisdom which is always master of his passions. Oedipus can see but one side of a matter--too often he sees that wrongly--and it is his fashion immediately to act upon such half-knowledge, at the dictates, not his reason at all, but of the first feeling which happens to come uppermost. His is no deliberate vice, no choice of a wrong purpose. His purposes are good. His emotions, his thoughts, even his errors, have an ardent generosity which stirs our deepest sympathy. But his nature is plainly imperfect, as Aristotle says the nature of a tragic hero should be, and from the beginning he was not likely to attain perfect happiness.

When the drama opens, the thoughtless energy of Oedipus has already harnessed him to the "yoke of Fate unbending." Once at a feast in Corinth, a man heated with wine had taunted him with not being the true son of Polybus. These idle words of a man in his cups so affected the excitable nature of Oedipus that he, characteristically, could think of nothing else. Day and night the saying rankled in his heart. At last, too energetic to remain in the ignorance which might have been his safety, he eagerly hastened to the sacred oracle at Delphi to learn purposes. The oracles of Sophocles, like the ghosts and witches of Shakespeare, are but necessary means for attaining an end. The representation of their effect upon the action of the characters is not the end of the drama, and must not be so regarded. They embody the final teaching of the poet as little as the words of particular dramatic characters, in particular circumstances, express the poet's own unbiased thought and feeling.

The central conception of the Oedipus Rex is plainly no more fatalistic than the philosophy of Aristotle. If any reader finds the doctrine hard, he may remember that Sophocles himself completed it somewhat as the Christian Church completed Aristotle, and, in the representation of the death of Oedipus at Colonus, crowned the law with grace. Nevertheless, for the understanding not only of Sophocles, but of the great "master of those who know" the laws of life and art, it seems important to recognize the relation between these two ideal conceptions--the magnanimous man of the Ethics, ideal for life, the tragic hero of the Poetics, ideal for death. According to Aristotle, the man who attains perfect happiness in the world is the wise man who sees in all their aspects the facts or the forces with which he is dealing, and can balance and direct his own impulses in accordance with reason. In the Oedipus Rex Sophocles had already shown the reverse. The man who sees but one side of a matter, and straightway, driven on by his uncontrolled emotions, acts in accordance with that imperfect vision, meets a fate most pitiful and terrible, in accordance with the great laws which the gods have made.

This philosophy of Aristotle and Sophocles is clearly expressed in the drama itself. "May destiny still find me," sings the Chorus, "winning the praise of reverent purity in all words and deeds sanctioned by those laws of range sublime, called into life throughout the high, clear heaven, whose father is Olympus alone; their parent was no race of mortal men, no, nor shall oblivion ever lay them to sleep: the god is might in them and grows not old."

Is Barstow saying that Oedipus was unhappy because he was a bad person, or is she saying that he was unhappy



*Reading
Tutorial
Question*

because he was a good person who had some bad habits, or made some bad decisions? Why does Barstow say that what happens to Oedipus is "most pitiful?" What would it mean if an ordinary college student "pittied" the great Oedipus?

Your name?

This essay (written when Ms. Barstow was a sophomore at Cornell University in 1909-1910), first appeared in the October 5, 1912, issue of the Classical Association of the Atlantic States.