

Lecture
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Title Page: Aristotle Defines Tragedy

Slide 2

The great philosopher Aristotle in Chapter VI of his work *Poetics* offered his definition of tragedy as it applies to drama. Now that you have read the play, consider whether Sophocles' work *Oedipus the King* meets the rigorous standards set out by Aristotle.

SLIDE 3

First, writes the philosopher, "*Tragedy is an imitation of an action of high importance.*" By its very nature as a play, *Oedipus* is an imitation of life. The measure of its importance can be seen in the noble stature of the protagonist.

SLIDE 4

King *Oedipus* is an esteemed leader of a great city. He is of royal lineage, born to King *Laius* and Queen *Jocasta* of *Thebes*, and raised by in the royal court of King *Polybus* and Queen *Merope* of *Corinth*.

SLIDE 6 (sphinx)

While still a young man, he rescues *Thebes* from the tyranny of the sphinx by answering her riddle, thus winning the gratitude and devotion of the citizens of that city. As the new king of *Thebes*, he is loved and respected. He, in turn, cares deeply for his subjects.

SLIDE 7

He is not aloof, as readers see in the Prologue of the play, but walks among his subjects, comforting and encouraging them as the plague grips their lives. *Oedipus* is also a man of action. When he learns that the plague will not be lifted until the murderer of the former king is brought to justice, he dedicates himself to finding the culprit.

SLIDE 8

He is an important man, and his life and destiny are of great import to those around him.

SLIDE 9

Aristotle goes on to qualify that tragedy must be "*complete and of some amplitude.*"

Readers and viewers of this play are struck by the circular completeness of the tragedy. In the most extreme of ironies, *Oedipus* seeks to avoid his repugnant fate, and in his flight circles back to the very place where that fate will unfold completely and tragically.

SLIDE 10

The amplitude of the play is seen by the far-reaching effects of Oedipus's fate. It is not only the king who suffers the consequences of his actions. The entire city of Thebes must endure the scourge of plague as a result of his unwitting deeds. The people closest to Oedipus are grievously affected.

SLIDE 12

Jocasta, who we see early in the play as a highly functional woman—a wife, mother, sister-in-law, and peacemaker—is driven to hang herself when the truth about her marriage comes to light.

SLIDE 14

Others gravely affected by the deeds of Oedipus are the ill-begotten children of his incestuous union. Antigone and Ismene are both left motherless and disgraced. Who will want to marry the offspring of this monstrous joining of mother and son? And what life is there in the context of ancient Greek life for a husbandless, motherless woman? Even poor Creon's life has been disturbed. He doesn't want to be a king. He was quite happy with his life of responsibility-free privilege.

SLIDE 15

Yes, there is definitely amplitude in this play. In fact, the ripple effects are generational, as evidenced in the two subsequent plays of the trilogy, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*.

Aristotle's next criteria for tragedy is that the story be told "*in language enhanced by distinct and varying beauties; acted not narrated.*"

This requirement is certainly seen in *Oedipus the King*. The play, in its original form, was written in a rhyming scheme, yet even in modern English translations we can feel the rhythm of the lines and hear the poetic majesty of the language.

In the Parados, for example, the Chorus laments the horrors of the dreadful plague: "*See how our lives, like birds, take wing/Like sparks that fly when a fire soars/To the shore of the god of evening/ The plague burns on, it is pitiless/Though pallid children laden with death/Lie unwept in stony graves.*" The play is laced through with such poetic phrasing.

SLIDE 16

And of course, the work is "acted, not narrated." The actors are clad in masks, and in the original open-air productions the drama was enhanced by music and dance.

SLIDE 17

Aristotle's final requirement for tragedy was that the work "*by means of pity and fear effects purgation of these emotions.*"

SLIDES 18 – 21

This release of emotion is known as *karthasis*. What person with a beating heart can read this play and not ache for the proud king brought low?

Most of us acknowledge that yes, Oedipus was overly proud, a trait which blinded him to truth—Many people say, in fact, that pride—or hubris—was Oedipus’s “tragic flaw,” the character trait that would lead to his undoing. Yet Isn’t it part of a king’s majesty to be proud? And as for anger, isn’t anger a component of a strong, dominant personality? Even ordinary people are overcome at times by this fiery emotion. Oedipus is a human being, not a god. And no human being is without flaws. Beyond that, many readers feel that the king’s good traits far outweigh his flaws.

And so, when his cruel fate catches up with him, we feel pity for this man who was only striving to do the right thing, to take the right action.

But we—like the ancient Greeks who filled the outdoor amphitheater to watch the play—also feel, in addition to pity, a quiet sense of terror. Maybe the source of this terror is the realization that we, like Oedipus, are not truly the masters of our fate. We try our best to control what we can in our lives. But inevitably there are events and outcomes over which we have no control. If a great king like Oedipus can be the victim of the gods, certainly we can be too.

That, sadly, is the human condition. And if we look at it with eyes wide open, we see that there is ample reason for terror—and pity. The question is: Are our tears really for Oedipus? Are we really trembling in dread and fear for the doomed king—or for ourselves?