

How is the tension between sight and blindness communicated through the use of characterization in Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, and what does this reveal about excessive pride?

Higher Level Essay - International Baccalaureate English A: Language and Literature

Text: *The Theban Plays: King Oedipus* by Sophocles

Word Count: 1500

Exam Session: May 2025

Blinded by the Tunnel of Pride: The Illusion of Clear Sight in *King Oedipus*

Do human eyes see, or do they only look? Robertson Davies wrote, “The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend,” suggesting that physical sight does not guarantee true understanding. The Greek tragedy *The Theban Plays* by Sophocles manifests this notion in a trilogy about mankind’s struggle to face uncomfortable truths. Among these three plays, *King Oedipus* exemplifies this theme through its use of characterization. The protagonist, Oedipus Rex, ignores many warnings from the blind prophet, Teiresias, while having already unwittingly fulfilled the prophecy of killing his father, Laius, and marrying his mother, Jocasta. Only after realizing the truth does Oedipus pierce his eyeballs, symbolizing his prior ignorance and intellectual blindness. Sophocles explores this tension between sight and blindness through the characterization of three characters — Oedipus’ hubris, Teiresias’ wisdom, and Jocasta’s arrogant denial of reality — ultimately revealing that individuals with excessive pride are blind to the truth, showing the importance of living in humility and being open-minded in the face of adversity to avoid further suffering.

To begin, through the characterization of Oedipus, Sophocles demonstrates the emotional and physical repercussions of hubris, which blinds individuals to the truth. One constant at the beginning of the play is Oedipus’ stubborn and ruthless nature, portrayed in his conflict with Teiresias. When Teiresias warns him about the prophecy, Oedipus responds, “Shameless and brainless, sightless, senseless sot! [...] / Living in perpetual night, you cannot harm / Me, nor any man else that sees the light” (Sophocles 36). The alliteration of “sightless, senseless sot” emphasizes Oedipus’ cruelty by undermining Teiresias’ foresight. Here, Sophocles evokes Oedipus’ rash anger, blinding him to the truth of Teiresias’ warnings and his patricide, showing how pride worsens his anguish. Specifically, juxtaposition is employed when Oedipus continues

to mock Teiresias as “living in perpetual night,” which contrasts with “any man else that sees the light.” Oedipus’ prideful comparison depicts Teiresias’ physical blindness as a disadvantage, yet his actions lead to his own “perpetual” pain as he gouges out his eyes. Through the hypocrisy in Oedipus’ actions, Sophocles highlights the physical downfall that ensues from one’s excessive pride and intellectual blindness, whereas humility, by being open-minded to the harsh truth, prevents self-affliction and agony. Nevertheless, Oedipus carries on without humility in his encounter with Creon, when he exclaims:

Well, sir? What brings you here?

Have you the face to stand before my door,

Proved plotter against my life, thief of my crown? [...]

I doubt your eloquence will teach me much. (Sophocles 40)

Oedipus greets Creon with a mockingly hostile tone, asking, “Well, sir? What brings you here?”

Oedipus’ loathing of Creon’s presence mirrors the “door” to his palace, symbolizing his pride that closes him off from seeing Creon’s innocence, and the truth that Creon is both his uncle and brother-in-law. The ironic accusation of Creon being the “thief of [his] crown” reinforces his intellectual blindness: Oedipus himself has unknowingly stolen the crown by killing his father and marrying his mother, thereby fulfilling the prophecy. This blindness is attributed to his closed mindset, as he first ignores Teiresias’ foresight, and then refuses to consider that Creon has anything valuable to “teach” him. As a result, Oedipus’ stubbornness proves far more damaging than physical blindness. His lack of humility transforms into guilt, which leads to his self-inflicted wounds that intensify his suffering on top of the tragic prophecy he fulfills. Hence, Sophocles shows that to avoid irreversible pain in times of adversity, individuals must be humble while remaining open-minded to other perspectives.

Furthermore, Sophocles communicates the need for humility to be clear-sighted akin to Teiresias, which is essential for overcoming the mental and physical adversities in life. This is shown through Teiresias' humility and wisdom, which offers a contrasting perspective to Oedipus' pride. To illustrate, Teiresias enters Oedipus' palace and says, "Let me go home. It will be easier thus / For you to bear your burden, and me mine" (Sophocles 34). Teiresias' reference to "home" symbolizes his modest retreat from unnecessary conflict. This humility lends way to wisdom in recognizing that the "easier" solution is to distance himself from the emotional confrontation to protect himself from Oedipus' wrath. Altogether, Teiresias' direct address to Oedipus' "burden" confirms how they each "bear" the truth differently: Teiresias faces it with humility and clear-sightedness, while Oedipus' pride becomes a burden of guilt that causes self-inflicted harm. Sophocles' portrayal of Teiresias acts as a foil for Oedipus, highlighting how one's humility fosters wisdom amidst hardships to prevent emotional turmoil. This notion is echoed when Teiresias says:

King though you are, one right —

To answer — makes us equal; and I claim it.

It is not you, but Loxias, whom I serve;

Nor am I bound to Creon's patronage. (Sophocles 37)

Although Teiresias acknowledges Oedipus' authority as king, when it comes to divine order, both humans are "equal." Creon is treated in the same way; he is not "bound to Creon's patronage," which shows Teiresias' wisdom in not being swayed by Creon's support, nor being ruffled by Oedipus' hostile accusations. Here, Sophocles' use of situational irony presents that while Teiresias is physically blind, he is unaffected by the outside emotional pressures and does not yield to pride, which paradoxically allows him to see beyond physical sight: being

clear-sighted to the truth. Next, Teiresias' humility is evident as he acclaims Apollo as "Loxias," an allusion to the god of prophecy, suggesting that it is thanks to Apollo's will that he can foresee future events. Sophocles also employs "Loxias" as a link to the Greek word "λοξός [or loxos], meaning ambiguous," to illustrate the complexity of divine truths that require humility to accept and open-mindedness to truly understand (Apolla). This is represented by Teiresias' submission to the divine. He understands that true control over the elusive nature of fate rests with the gods, not with himself, which allows him to see the truth with an open mind free from pride. Therefore, Sophocles emphasizes that clear-sightedness stems from humility and wisdom; both are needed to avoid emotional and physical conflict with oneself and others.

Lastly, Sophocles' characterization of Jocasta demonstrates how arrogance and willful denial of reality will blind individuals to the truth, and make them prone to fatal consequences. Jocasta is portrayed as arrogant, as seen when she exclaims, "Where are you now, divine prognostications! [...] / Your father, Polybus, / Is dead — dead!" (Sophocles 51). Through dramatic irony, Jocasta dismisses the tragic implications of the prophecy; she is blind to the fact that it has been fulfilled long ago. Jocasta's mocking tone in replacing the word prophecy with "divine prognostications," shows her arrogant belief that she can manipulate divine will. However, Jocasta's blindness to the truth due to the absence of humility, leaves her unprepared to face the adversities of her incestuous relationship, resulting in her tragic downfall. In particular, the repetition of "dead" reinforces Jocasta's denial of the prophecy, that since Polybus is dead, Oedipus' fate of murdering his father is false. This arrogance makes her intellectually blind and oblivious to the fact that Oedipus killed Laius, his biological father. Rather than arrogant denial, Sophocles thus communicates the importance of open-mindedness by considering all possibilities to the truth, to help prevent fatal consequences. For instance, when Jocasta

eventually realizes the truth, she is described as “white with terror” and says to Oedipus, “O lost and damned! / This is my last and only word to you / For ever!” (Sophocles 55). The imagery of being “white with terror” exaggerates Jocasta’s transition from arrogance to horror upon discovering that Oedipus is her son. This is evident with her exclamation to Oedipus of “lost and damned” showing her despair, causing her “for ever” end of suicide. Accordingly, Sophocles demonstrates that individuals who are arrogant and in denial of the truth will be emotionally shocked by endless suffering when they are proven wrong. This attests to the importance of humility in addition to being open-minded to one’s misfortunes that are fundamentally part of human life; otherwise, being blind to reality due to arrogance leads to one’s self-demise.

Ultimately, Sophocles’ tragedy uses characterization to demonstrate the need for individuals to be humble and open-minded in the face of adversity. Through Oedipus’ characterization, Sophocles establishes the importance of humility in valuing different perspectives, as excessive pride will merely intensify one’s suffering. Contrary to this, Teiresias shows that humility is key to clear-sightedness, and to wisely avoid conflict with others. Finally, Jocasta reinforces the human limitations of seeing the harsh truth, which conveys that recognizing misfortunes as an inherent part of life, helps individuals stay away from greater disasters. Sophocles’ play reveals that those prideful, see only what they want to see. This notion is explored in his tragic play through the characters’ hubris, wisdom, and arrogant denial of reality, encouraging the audience to reflect on how their emotions may misguide their judgment of themselves and others. *The Theban Plays: King Oedipus* by Sophocles reveals that to reduce suffering, humans must recognize the limits of what they know and be open to others’ opinions to help overcome the many challenges in life.

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