

'Out of tragedy comes self knowledge.' Do you find this to be true in *King Lear* and *Oedipus the King*?

A tragedy is not only an imitation of life in general but an imitation of an action, as Aristotle defined it. Aristotle formulates his ideas in his *Poetics*, where Oedipus is the ultimate example of tragic art. The terms of self-recognition and self-knowledge in Oedipus as well as in King Lear are very significant and are discussed by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. For Aristotle the Reversal, the Recognition and the Suffering are key terms of a complex tragedy. The human instinct to seek knowledge and to know the individual character is essential to understand their actions (Aristotle, 1-49).

The plays show that King Lear and King Oedipus have to find out that self-recognition and self-knowledge are very important keys to understand their individual behaviour and as a consequence their lives. They learn by painful suffering that wealth and kingship means nothing and that both are only common men in the end. So all three key terms of Aristotle's complex tragedy could be found in the plays: reversal, recognition and suffering.

King Lear is constituted by his kingship, his wealth and power. These attributes have always been there and form his character. When he introduces the love-contest the losing and suffering begins. First of all and most obvious, he loses all his wealth and his power. Although the hundred knights and his title give him an illusionary security this is only on the surface and not for very long. Without his kingdom and his power he is only a poor imitation of the former king. It is the Fool, who demonstrates King Lear, with his honest and teasing answers, that he in fact has also lost his identity and not only his property. In act one the Fool says to Lear "All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with" (1.4.142), and "now thou art an 0 without a figure; I am better than thou art now. I am a fool, thou art nothing" (1.4.184).

The Fool as well as Kent also tries to show Lear that it is not only all about property and losing a big part of his identity. It is also about losing his most valuable treasure – his only true loving daughter. The Fool and Kent support King Lear in a helpful manner through the play to find his identity. Contrary to them are the characters of Lear's two elder daughters. They show him his weakness clearly and very rigorously when they do not allow him his knights. This is the last evidence for Lear that his two elder daughters have only wanted his property and do not care about him as a father. He still does not admit that the sense of self-worth and self-

identity has nothing to do with needs, nothing to do with wealth and power and that love has nothing to do with quantity but with quality. In his pain he flees the truth as a last solution. The storm scene shows Lear's madness and his painfully self-recognition best. In this scene King Lear must painfully accept that he is nothing as a common man, powerless against the force of nature and the gods.

It is not only Lear, who has to find himself in this play. There is also the bastard son of the Earl of Gloucester, Edmund, who finally recognises himself. Edmund is a character without any scruple. His only thoughts are selfish and he does not understand that his machinations are ultimately self destructive and false. He even plots against his brother and his father to find his destiny. Not even when his father is blinded, because of Edmund's denouncement does he show any pity. Edmund thinks that he has the right given by nature, to use everything to get what he wants. In the ending Edmund suddenly realizes his wrong behaviour when he declares, "I pant for life. Some good I mean to do" (5.3.241). But it is too late - for Cordelia and also for him.

In the ending, King Lear knows that only the love of his daughter Cordelia is worth living for. Nonetheless Cordelia and Lear die – Lear, wiser than he ever was and so a real tragic hero and Cordelia, as a sacred victim of this tragedy. Lear finally finds out that true love has nothing to do with property but with knowing oneself and recognizing each other. A true understanding of love must mean a true understanding of oneself.

King Oedipus's character is similar to King Lear's. Oedipus is a man, who is fully aware of his strength, intelligence and power. As the solver of the riddle and the national leader of Thebes in a moment of crisis, he is a noble hero and a great celebrity. Thebes high esteem for Oedipus is shown through the Chorus until the bitter end of the play. In the beginning of the play King Oedipus is a person of vast self-assurance. This character attribute is demonstrated in his willingness to take the full responsibility for dealing with the crisis, the plague. King Oedipus feels certain that he will also manage this crisis as he has done before with the riddle of the sphinx. He feels so self-assure that he even thinks he is able to trick the oracle and the gods by simply fleeing Corinth. But this is a big miscalculation as the play shows.

The outline in the story of Oedipus's self discovery begins when he starts to solve the second riddle, the riddle of Laius death. During this solving Oedipus' character changes from an honour man to a fearful, condemned man by his tragic

fate in the end. The changing of the character is accompanied by the changing of the riddle: the question “Who is the murderer of Laius?” changes to “Who am I?”. Aristotle in his *Poetics* discusses this reversal when he speaks of “a change of the action into the opposite” (Aristotle, 18).

As the tragedy moves on, finding the truth for Oedipus becomes an obsession. The dispute between Teiresias and Oedipus demonstrates that Oedipus does not even take the possibility of involvement in something bad into consideration. Teiresias, after he has been provoked, wants Oedipus to find the truth, to acknowledge himself. “I tell you, you and your loved ones live together in infamy, you cannot see how far you’ve gone in guilt” (418). Although, Teiresias’s speeches are very clear Oedipus negates the truth before himself. The ironic net of facts becomes clearer and clearer.

After the entry of the messenger and the shepherd, Jocasta suddenly recognises the truth. She now knows what she is to Oedipus and what guilt lies upon her family. Nevertheless she tries to avoid the truth and tries to save Oedipus when she begs him “Stop – in the name of god, if you love your own life, call off this search!” (1163). But now, Oedipus wants to know everything so she could only scream, “You’re doomed – may you never fathom who you are!” (1173). When in the following lines Oedipus claims that he is a son of Chance he is only just entering the circle of increasing knowledge about himself. He soon realizes that outer forces may have impact on his life, but he still relies on his own genius and infallibility.

As Oedipus discovers his own identity he has to learn about himself what it is to be a man. He learns that his behaviour and his mistakes are partially responsible for this horrific truth. So he takes the full responsibility for his punishment. In blinding himself he does not die physically but in a sense he is dead. Moving out into the wastelands there is nothing to look forward to except death. The self-recognition of what he has done and consequently what he is to his children has destroyed him.

The play ends in a sense as it begins, with the greatness of a hero. But it is a different kind of greatness. Now it is based on self-recognition and self-knowledge instead of ignorance and pride. Finally Oedipus has gained knowledge of himself and his reality and he realizes that higher forces, such as the gods and destiny have influence. Werner Jaeger declares in his *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* “to know oneself for Sophocles is to know man’s powerlessness” (Jaeger, 284). And this is to be true for Oedipus as well as for King Lear.

King Lear's and King Oedipus's awareness of their strength and power is nothing in the end. At the start of the play both kings are majestic figures. Nevertheless not only their character flaws of pride and the exaggerated opinion of themselves lead to this ultimate downfall in the end. Oedipus and Lear cause their own fall partly because they do not know who they are. They first have to find out, through incredible sufferings, that they are nothing more but common men.

Both characters symbolize the tragic hero in a perfect sense. The human suffering in these plays is so significant that the reader can almost feel it. Though Oedipus' fate is determined, the reader still feels sympathy for the tragic hero, believing that somehow he doesn't deserve what ultimately comes to him. The same applies for King Lear, who gives everything away to his daughters, who will only betray and defraud him.

Although in both plays the theme of self-knowledge is very important, it is only one of many ways of entry to the texts. The theme of Blindness, the impact of the Gods as well as Fate are other interesting ways to look at the plays. But we learn from the first perspective that self-recognition and learning about oneself has also something positive. No matter how painful the realization, how destructive the outcome there are aspects of growth and gain in it. An important outcome of these plays is that the only person who can tell you who you really are is you by yourself. And this knowledge mitigates the sufferings at least a little bit.

Literature Essay
Winter Semester 2004
Mark: A

Bibliography

- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. Malcolm Heath. London: Penguin Books, 1996.
- Colie, L. Rosalie a.
Flahiff, F.T., eds. *Some Facets of King Lear: Essays in Prismatic Criticism*. London: Heinemann, 1974.
- Jaeger, Werner. *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*. Trans. Gilbert Highet. Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott Ltd., 1954.
- O'Brien, Michael, ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Oedipus Rex: A Collection of Critical Essays*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968.
- Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Ed. R.A. Foakes. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Arden (Thomas Learning), 2003.
- Sophocles. *Oedipus the King*. In *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. Trans. Robert Fagles. Penguin Classics. New York: Penguin Books, 1984.