Fate, Family, and Oedipus Rex: Crash Course Literature 202

Crash Course: Literature
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=====Introduction=====

Hi! I'm John Green. Welcome to Crash Course Literature. Today we're going to talk about *Oedipus*. Leo Tolstoy once famously wrote that "All happy families are alike, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." And I certainly hope that there's no family as unhappy as Oedipus'.

Ancient Greek playwrights really specialized in the dysfunctional family. I mean, they had plays about wives killing husbands, parents killing children, children killing parents, siblings killing each other, and they also wrote tragedies. But it's hard to imagine a more tragic, dysfunctional family than the Theban clan that Sophocles writes about in *Oedipus the King*. I mean, except for the Kardashians.

John from the Past: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Who are the Kardashians? That sounds exotic! Is it something from Star Wars?

Oh yeah, Me from the Past! You don't know about the Kardashians. Right now, to you, the only Kardashian you know is OJ Simpson's defense attorney.

Anyway, don't worry about it. Just imagine a green light on the other side of the bay that represents the glory you'll never reach. That's the Kardashians!

(Intro)

=====Plot Summary=====

Okay, so Oedipus is King of Thebes, having solved the riddle of the Sphinx and saved the city from destruction. But now a plague is devastating Thebes, and various oracles and bird entrails suggest it's because the murderer of the old king, Laius, still lives there unpunished. Oedipus decides to investigate the murder, only to discover that -- mind blown -- HE is the one who killed Laius and married his queen, Jocasta. THEN he finds out that Laius was actually his father, and Jocasta is his mother, so he's had four children with his mom, fulfilling an earlier prophecy, because bird entrails are never wrong. It's the old "Accidentally Kill Your Father, Accidentally Marry Your Mother" plot. It goes way back. Freud can tell you a lot about it in Crash Course Psychology.

Anyway, Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus gauges out his own eyes with her jewellery, then goes into exile. In subsequent plays, his two sons murder each other and one of his daughters commits suicide. So... You know, it could have gone better.

=====Ancient Greek Theater=====

So for a little context, theater was a really big deal to the Greeks. I mean, if you were a male citizen -- not a woman, not a slave -- attending it was your civic duty. It was sort of like voting, except that it began with ritual animal sacrifice, so it was really nothing like voting. But this civic duty aspect is interesting, because a lot of the plays ask really troubling questions about power and control and the wisdom of rulers. Like, playwrights masked their commentary by setting plays in earlier, mythic eras or in foreign lands, just like Shakespeare did. But they were quite provocative then, and what's most important is that the best of them are still interesting now.

Three playwrights would each present four plays: a cycle of three related tragedies, and then a satyr play, which would be funny and would often involve enormous phalluses and/or poop jokes. Citizens would watch play after play while judges would determine a winner. So it was kind of like Sundance or Cannes, but again, with the ritual animal sacrifice, and there was no multi-million dollar theatrical distribution guild. You know, but there was glory.

Unfortunately, we only have a small portion of these plays today -- many were lost over the millennia, including some that were destroyed at the burning of the Library of Alexandria. In Sophocles' day, the cast was made of three male actors, some of whom took on multiple roles, and also a chorus. Playwrights were typically the director, the composer, the set designer, and often also the lead actor, although apparently, Sophocles did not appear in his plays because he was, I guess, a terrible actor.

But the choruses were drawn from the Athenian citizenry, and generally served as like, stand ins for the audience, asserting conventional wisdom and asking the questions that a typical audience member might. The actors wore masks that were made of linen and hairs, as well as enormous robes and platform sandals so you could still see them, even if you were in the cheap seats.

So Sophocles lived throughout nearly all of the fifth century B.C.E, and he wrote a hundred and twenty-three plays. We have seven. Who knows what kind of crazy stuff people got up to in the other ones.

=====Aristotle's Poetics=====
The first person to offer literary criticism of Greek drama was my old nemesis, Aristotle, whom you'll remember was wrong about everything. This was a guy who believed that people were naturally born to slavery. Except, he was actually kind of right about a lot of theater stuff. It pains me to say this, because I do genuinely despise him, but Aristotle had a lot of interesting ideas about story. For instance, he noticed that in a lot of stories, the main character has a recognition and a reversal. He's also responsible for a lot of classical ideas about tragedy and comedy, and *Oedipus* fits his definition of tragedy very well -- probably because it was his favorite play.

Aristotle defines tragedy as, quote, "An imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude." Tragedy is also meant to evoke both pity and fear. I mean, when Oedipus returns at the play's end wearing a new mask that shows his gouged out eyes, you feel bad for him; you also feel afraid.

But here's the tricky part. Aristotle wrote that tragedy should afflict a mostly good character who makes a big mistake. I mean, it can't be about a bad character, because then you don't feel any pity. And it can't be about a perfect character who does everything right and still suffers a tragic end, because, one, that wouldn't be very satisfying, and two, it would imply that the universe doesn't reward goodness and punish evil, which is kind of a terrifying thought.

So instead, it has to be about a good guy afflicted with a hamartia, or a har-marsha, depending on how pretentious you are. This word is sometimes mistranslated, including by the protagonist of my novel, *The Fault in Our Stars* -- available in book stores everywhere -- as a tragic flaw. But actually, it's a term from archery that means you aim for the bulls eye, but you miss. Now, I would argue that in the twenty-five hundred years since *Oedipus*, there have been some very good tragedies that evoke fear and pity without the argument that the universe is interested in the lives of individuals, but you know, this is the classical definition.

=====Open Letter=====

So could Oedipus really... Uh oh, my desk disappeared. That means it's time for the open letter. Hey there, Chewbacca.

An open letter to the tragic hero, a type of character, of course, exemplified by Chewbacca. He was a Wookiee. He was strong. He was loyal. He was a great man, or at least, a great Wookiee. But it was his loyalty, a desirable trait, that also, ultimately, made him kind of a complicated hero.

I mean, Chewbacca made a blood oath to Han Solo, so if you mess with Han Solo, Chewbacca's gonna rip your arms off. And for those of you who know the Star Wars universe outside the movies, you already know that eventually, that does prove tragic. Chewbacca, you're a hero, but it's your heroism that also was ultimately your undoing.

Best wishes, John Green.

=====Thought Bubble=====

So, is Oedipus a good character, and does he make a great mistake? Well, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

So, at the beginning of the play, Oedipus definitely seems like an A++ king, I mean, the priest calls him "the first of men in all the chances of this life." When the priest comes to tell him about the suffering in the city, Oedipus says he knows about it already: "I have known the story before you told it."

Oedipus is already worried about what's happening to his people -- in fact, he's dispatched his brother-in-law, Creon, to visit an oracle and find out the source of the pestilence. And let's not forget that Oedipus has already saved the city once by answering the riddle of the Sphinx; the Sphinx had the body of a woman, the wings of an eagle, and a really bad temper. She had the habit of killing everyone who answered her riddle incorrectly. So, I mean, you know, it takes a measure of courage to try to answer the riddle. He's a good guy; he's a great king, right? Meh.

I mean, when Creon gives answers that Oedipus doesn't like, Oedipus accuses him of plotting against him. He also has some harsh words for the blind seer, Tiresias, when Tiresias correctly names Oedipus as the source of the contagion. When the shepherd is brought to Oedipus and resists revealing the truth of Oedipus' birth, because he knows it will upset the king, Oedipus threatens the man with torture.

Then there's the ambiguity of missing the mark. I mean, what was Oedipus' error in this play? Was it killing Laius at the crossroads? I mean, that's maybe a little bit aggressive, but Sophocles makes it pretty clear that Laius had some chariot-era road rage, and Oedipus was acting in self-defense. Was it sleeping with Jocasta? Well, that's pretty icky, but again, not really a choice. She was presented to him along with the kingdom when he defeated the Sphinx, and as we've said, he treats other characters pretty shabbily, but those are small mistakes, rather than great ones. Maybe his mistake is believing he can outrun or escape his own fate, but if you were told you were gonna murder your father and marry your mother, wouldn't you try to escape it?

=====Fate and Ironies in Oedipus=====

Now, maybe you're thinking, "Well if I heard a prophecy that I was going to be a father-killer and a mother-- I would, you know, avoid fights with older men and sex with older women." And fair enough, but remember, Laius and Jocasta had attempted to kill Oedipus -- they received a prophecy about this, too, so Oedipus was brought up by the king and queen of Corinth, who he assumed were his parents. How is it a mistake to stay very far away from your parents and in the process, save the city of Thebes? And if you can't outrun your fate, how is your fate a result of your flaws?

So the play depends a lot on ironies. The guy who seem the smartest is actually the most ignorant; the man who saved Thebes is actually the one destroying it; enlightenment leads to literal blindness... But that, combined with the aforementioned ambiguity, is a lot of what's made the play so enjoyable to so many generations of people. We, in the audience, are aware of all these ironies in a way that no one on stage is -- at least until the very end.

Remember how Oedipus says, "I have known the story before you told it"? Well, just about everyone in the audience also knows the story before it's told.

I mean, you probably knew the outlines of this story before you actually read the play, right? The gap between what we know in the audience and what the characters know on stage makes us uncomfortable and scared for them, and it ratchets up the tension.

Oedipus is a detective story where it turns out, the detective is the murderer, and the detective doesn't know it, but the reader does, so with each new scene, with each new clue, the net draws more and more tightly around Oedipus. Every time a messenger comes with supposedly good news: "Hey, the King of Corinth is dead", "Hey, the King of Corinth wasn't your father", Oedipus is lead closer to the truth of his own guilt.

And at several points, Jocasta tries to persuade Oedipus not to inquire further, but Oedipus can't help himself. He wants to know the whole story. For me, at least, that's what's admirable about him, and also what's pitiable.

The play asks whether knowing is a good thing. I mean, Tiresias says: "Alas, how terrible is wisdom when it brings no profit to the man that's wise." And Oedipus, at least, personally, probably would have been happier living in ignorance, although, then, the plague would have continued to devastate Thebes.

So I think the play ultimately suggests that even though ignorance can be bliss, Oedipus' search for truth is right and just and brave and uncompromising, and that's what makes him great. It's also what ruins his life, as the critic E.R. Dodds says, "What causes his ruin is his strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes and his loyalty to the truth."

And so, finally, thankfully, I do find myself disagreeing with Aristotle, because I don't think that Oedipus was a great man ruined by a great error. I think the story is more complicated than that. So, could Oedipus ever really have escaped his fate? Probably not, I mean, there are occasional examples in Greek myth of gods softening of fate or finding a loophole, but those are rare.

So when you read *Oedipus*, you realize there are actually two stories: one is about what's already happened, and one is about what's happening now. It's the second one that interests Sophocles, like, killing the father and marrying the mother -- that stuff happens in the past, offstage. Sophocles concentrates on the choices that Oedipus freely makes to find the source of the plague, even when it means implicating himself to gouge out his eyes so that he won't have to look at his parents in the underworld.

So Oedipus can't escape his fate, but he does have a measure of free will, he does make some choices. What's interesting to Sophocles isn't so much the fulfillment of the prophecy as HOW it is

fulfilled, and how that affects the present.

As the critic A.W. Gomme put it, "The gods know what the final score of the football game will be, but we still have to play it." Ultimately, the victory, Gomme says, "will depend on the skill, the determination, the fitness of the players, and a little on luck."

Instead of using the play to stage some sort of fate versus free will debate, Sophocles is interested in asking questions of both fate AND free will. I mean, when we see Oedipus, we should ask ourselves, "How much control do we have over our lives? How much do we owe to genetics, to privilege, to upbringing, to accident, to the choices that we do or don't make?" And those are relevant questions today.

=====The Oedipus Complex=====

Now, of course, not everyone thought that was the most interesting part of the play. Like, Sigmund Freud decided that the reason the play was so successful is because everyone suffers from a so-called "Oedipus Complex." Freud described this in the *Interpretation of Dreams* as "the fate to direct our first sexual impulse and our first hatred and our first murderous thought against our father." But, for the record, Oedipus does not have an Oedipus Complex. His tragedy is about a man who deliberately tried to avoid killing his father and impregnating his mother, not about a man who secretly wants to.

=====Conclusion=====

But ultimately, what makes *Oedipus* such a great play is that it stands up to many readings, and can inform our lives in many ways. I mean, is he a great man? Does he make a great mistake? Does he suffer his fate because of personal flaws or because of the nature of the universe? Those are big, interesting questions, and it's nice to know that people have been asking them for millennia. Thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

=====Credits=====

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