

Fortitude: Sophoclean Vision of Human Spirit in Tragic Circumstances in *Oedipus Rex*

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Abstract

Tragedy deals primarily with evil and suffering; it shows human beings chained in the grip of these. Inevitabilities and necessities are something that demand courage if one has to encounter them in life. In every great tragedy, we sense the validity of a meaningful struggle and the real possibility of it. It is the struggle itself that is the source of dramatic significance and it is out of this struggle with necessity and inevitability that 'heroism' is emerged. Tragedy, indeed, would produce a wholly painful and frustrating effect on us if it were to depict only the vulnerability of man, and not man's essential greatness also. Every great tragedy shows the triumph of the human spirit even when a human being has sunk under the tide of misfortune. This paper attempts to highlight the Sophoclean perception of human spirit, especially emerged and exhibited at the moment of human crisis and in tragic situations.

Keywords: Tragedy, inevitability, human struggle, indomitable human spirit

Tragedy in its unrefined form is inherent in everyone's life and there is no question of escaping from it. It leads to an enrichment of our experience of life. Tragedy deals primarily with evil and with suffering, and shows human beings in the grip of these. It shows us the external contradictions between human weakness and courage, human stupidity and greatness, human frailty and strength. It instills us pleasure by exhibiting human endurance and human perseverance in the face of calamities and disasters. Tragedy, indeed, would produce a wholly painful and frustrating effect on us if it were to depict only the vulnerability of man and not man's essential greatness also. Every great tragedy shows the triumph of the human spirit even when a human being has sunk under the tide of misfortune.

The tragic writers of all ages have been concerned with the fate of man, and we think of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, Racine, Ibsen and O'Neill as tragedians

because their plays, although greatly different in form, give expression to the tragic nature of the human condition. Further, when we think of tragic heroes, we usually think first of their great nobility of spirit. Oedipus, Faustus, Macbeth or Lear may be right or wrong, they suffer and are destroyed; however, the emotional depth and the intellectual capacity of each of them stamps them with a mark of greatness. We admire the hero because he resists the forces of fate. Moreover, in every great tragedy, we sense the validity of a meaningful struggle and the real possibility of it. It is the struggle itself that is the source of dramatic significance and it is out of this struggle with necessity that 'heroism' is emerged. "We shall all die at a moment unknown and in the circumstances, no one can foresee; this is the ultimate dispensation" (Winnington-Ingram, 1980: 150). The Greeks at some early stage in their thinking about the world came to conceive the powers of unknown, which they called *Moerai*. If these were the spirits who presided over our birth as well as determining death, it is not hard to see why so. An individual came to birth with an appointment of life, and nothing is more striking in the lot of human beings than the differences in their life spans and the unpredictability of their deaths. There must be some powers, which determine these things, not only birth and death, but also the events of life, particularly perhaps those which are determined, dramatic and disastrous and lead towards death. What Greeks have in common is the suggestion of something inevitable, something that "has to be" and that is "bound to happen".

In the various plays of Sophocles, there are even more remarkable gradations with regard to the severity of the rule of fate. His tragedy *Oedipus Rex* seems to have been written with the expressive purpose of inculcating this doctrine, and of making people realize, by means of a most elaborate and striking example, what the meaning of fate is. The play is centered around a protagonist, who is destined to commit the most appalling crimes. All the precautions taken by his parents at his birth, and those which he has taken himself later on only serve to bring about the fulfillment of the oracles. The very same fate drags him at last to the discovery of those crimes of which he has been ignorant for so long, and in consequence, he is plunged irretrievable from the heights of a glorious and seemingly spotless life to the depths of infamy and horrible despair (Drapper, 1980:106). Precisely, fate has a part in the tragedy of Sophocles, but it is the fate brought to its consummation through the character of the individual. The Oracle had declared Oedipus's fate, but the fate, which he sought so hard to avoid, was brought about largely through his own unyielding disposition, through his determination to have his own way.

Greek tragedy as developed by Sophocles has as its distinguishing feature the determination of character. This has been long recognized, and is apparent even to the most casual readers of his plays. Sophocles' method is to select some outstanding personage in an Old Greek story and then through the action of drama to portray his conduct under various trying circumstances. The skill with which these trails are introduced and woven into a consistent plot constitutes the chief excellence of his tragedy. In general, the trying situations in which his principal characters find themselves as his plots develop and due in each case to some defect in character themselves. This is in accord with Aristotle's declaration that the

tragic hero should neither be a very good or a very bad man, but one of distinction who meets with disaster through some failing of his own.

While considering the notion of “inevitable”, naturally the question of “free will” versus “determination” comes up. It is a philosophical issue, but the conflict implies is also a fact of life. There have been time and places in human history at which the feeling of inexorable fate has been so strong as to stop vitality. If what is bound to happen will be, then all human striving is futile. The Greeks of the classical period were not like that at all. They were vigorous, self-assertive, emulous, ambitious and they pursued their aims with some confidence that they could attain them. It is an undisputed fact that there are limitations upon human freedom. However, Greeks valued freedom, as individuals and as communities, above most things. Reflecting that freedom and individuality, the character of Oedipus has been drawn largely as a spectacle. Moreover, the inspiration behind Sophocles’ play is the conception of a heroic world in which man, if not more virtuous, was more magnificent than man as we know him. The spirit to fight against what is bound to happen is what the play embodied. Both Laius and Oedipus came to know about their fate, but their efforts prove futile to avert the divine oracle. It was almost impossible to escape from such a situation and it seemed as if both were ignorant and stupid enough for thinking like that. However, significance that lies here is not that thought, but in the spirit behind that thought. Inevitability and necessity are something that demand courage if one has to encounter them in life. Oedipus got enough courage to think like that, and indeed he was a man of his word, quite stubborn and irresistible. In his stubbornness lies his courage and in stupidity lies his greatness. In one instance after blinding himself, the chorus encountered Oedipus and wished that it would be better for him to die than blind and living. However, Oedipus was bold enough in defending his resolve, proclaiming “what I have done here was best done – don’t tell me otherwise, do not give me further counsel” (Greene, 1942:148).

Man’s tragic condition is that he is doomed by fate to defeat because of the dividedness of his nature. The fate of each of us is that we are doomed to failure and defeat and born to die. The Absurdist playwright, Arthur Adamov (1908-1970), described this fate quite pessimistically when he said in an interview shortly before he committed suicide: “The destinies of all human beings are of equal futility. The refusal to live and the joyful acceptance of life both leads, by the same path, to inevitable failure, total destruction” (Sewall Richard, 1959:8). However, the affirmation of tragedy is that in the midst of inevitable failure, it celebrates a kind of man’s spirit over his fate. In the ambiguity of tragic tension, death in some form usually triumphs, but “heroism” is born out of that mortal struggle, and its spirit lives on long after the corpse has been interred. Therefore, while we think of human spirit, it seems to echo around Hemingway’s words: “...., but man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (Hemingway, 1952:103).

In the play, Oedipus came to know from the Oracle that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother. We know Oedipus that in trying to escape his fate, something that tragedy continually confirms which we can never succeed in accomplishing, ensured its

realization. However, in refusing to passively accept it, he not only triggered a chain of events, which lead to “heroism”, even more significantly, he made his fate his alone. If Oedipus has a flaw, it should not be thought of as a sin or as a prideful assertion of egotism; but rather as a human response to the limitations of our tragic condition.

Analyzing the play as a whole and judging it according to circumstances, the term “heroic quality” can be attributed to a single character, i.e., Oedipus. For Dorothea Krook, the stature of the protagonist is certainly important. In her discussion on the qualifications of the ideal tragic hero, i.e., the kind of hero necessary to enable the work in which he appears to achieve the maximum tragic effect, she places first a modified form of the traditional requirement of high rank. Actual social status might not be common place humanity, but some fundamental, persistent aspect of man’s nature. He must, therefore, not be ordinary, but extraordinary; and among the extraordinary qualities he must possess are those of charisma, courage, nobility of spirit, and the capacity to learn through suffering and thereby achieve self-knowledge (Drapper, 1980:19-20).

Oedipus’ greatness and ruin both lie in the moral choice he made and the circumstances that followed. What is important to be realized is that the “human spirit” lies not only in man’s ability to fight against external forces, but rather in the readiness to fight internal tensions and conflicts. The external forces defeated Oedipus at the moment he discovered his crimes. However, his spirit survived and he could come out of that heartening final shock. Any simple individual could have easily succumbed to such circumstances. In Oedipus’ case things took altogether a different shape. Perhaps, Sophocles got that spirit and therefore, he didn’t wish his character to be portrayed like ordinary beings. Perhaps, Oedipus’ death, like Jocasta’s could have been the desired resolution for certain readers or spectators; but in that case there could have been no heroism, no greatness, because “death” means the easiest way to escape from suffering. Oedipus let himself live and suffer and his spirit became stronger and stronger with every passing moment. He was heroic because he decided to live by suffering; we sympathize with Jocasta, but we admire Oedipus. Aristotle was right to admire Sophocles, but he did so for the wrong reason. His respect for Oedipus was plainly enormous; he used it in the *Poetics* as a standard of achievement and yet the points for which he commended it concerns general analysis of form, not the essence of its distinctive excellence (Jones, 1962). However, even if we reject Aristotle and ask what is Sophocles’ distinctive excellence, we are left with impenetrable formula, that is the “portraiture of human character”.

Every great tragic play emphasizes the essential nobility of man, while at the same time representing man’s helplessness in the face of circumstances and unknown forces. Sophocles draws Oedipus’ character very nicely; he was very wise, but made the blind Teiresias even wiser. Yet by nature somewhat hasty, and not wholly unaffected by the temptations which accompany power, he was a fine man and a good king. He has faults enough to make him human and to save him from being tediously faultless. The power of the play lies in the fascination of watching a hero about whom we are better informed than he was about himself,

approaching step by step the appalling revelation, watching the delusive hopes and relaxations of suspense produced by partial knowledge. There is no melodrama; it is relevant to life as Sophocles saw it. Oedipus, wisest of men, was not wise enough to read the riddle of his own identity from certain clues open to him.

One very interesting thing to note is that if Oedipus was the innocent victim of a doom which he could not avoid, he would appear to be a mere puppet. The whole play in that case would become a “tragedy of destiny” which denied human freedom and human greatness. But such a view would also be unsound. Sophocles also might not wish to regard Oedipus as a puppet and that is the reason to believe that Oedipus has been portrayed largely as a free agent. Neither in Homer nor in Sophocles does divine fore-knowledge of certain events imply that all human actions are pre-determined. Critics emphatically describe Oedipus’ self-blinding as voluntary and self-chosen and distinguished it from his involuntary murder and incest. Some of Oedipus’ actions are fate bound but certain things he did on stage are self-chosen. What fascinates actually in the play is the spectacle of a man freely choosing, from the highest motives a series of actions which lead to his own ruin, and here lies the “heroism” or “victory of human spirit” in *Oedipus Rex*.

An important ingredient in tragedy is the emphasis on human greatness. “Human responsibility now fills both foreground and background”, declared Whitman. He departed radically from earliest interpretations announcing a new approach to the Sophoclean hero: “The real moral nature of his position must be judged by his own standards he reveals it in the play, and by the moral choices open to him in the action” (Blundell, 1980:3). The dictum “tragedy lies in the hero’s knowledge of the guilt rather than in the guilt itself” can be firmly established in this context, and here also lies Oedipus’ dramatic choice and its tragic consequences. We can mention it that if Oedipus had not relentlessly pursued his investigation about the murder and about his parentage, he might have been spared the shock of discovery. Something in him had driven forward on the roads to discovery. Oedipus was discouraged by Jocasta to continue his investigation. But he paid no heed to her philosophy of living at random. The Theban shepherd also tried hard to dampen Oedipus’ determination to know the truth, but in vain. It is this insistence on the truth as a form of pride, the pride of intellect, or the pride of knowing everything that has ruined Oedipus’ life. The link of cause and effect is unmistakable between Oedipus’ pride of intellect and his discovery of sins. But there is no strong link between his pride and his actually committing of the sins because the sins would have been committed in any case if the oracle was to be fulfilled. What causes Oedipus’ tragedy was his own loyalty to the truth. What followed the discovery, the self-blinding and self-punishment was another matter; what followed the discovery was deeply tragic also, however, it was that offshoot of the discovery which was the major cause of tragedy.

Towards the end of the play, after the disclosure, Jocasta committed suicide and Oedipus blinded himself. He cursed his fate, cursed his protectors who had saved his life, had not let him perish and avoided encountering those situations. Oedipus’ tragic circumstance

was really pathetic one. In such a situation any ordinary individual is supposed to either surrender to or compromise with the situation, or commit suicide out of despair, out of excitement. But Oedipus neither compromised nor succumbed. He would rather control his agonized spirit and could raise out of that situation and let himself suffer. "To exercise courage in this way demands a capacity for suffering in the same extreme, unqualified, absolute degree. Oedipus exposes himself totally and without reserve to the weary weight of all his unintelligible world, receives the full impact of his painful, terrible, humiliating unintelligibility, by the extremity of his conscious suffering, rendering it unintelligible, and by rendering it intelligible, effects the final reconciliation of tragedy. This is the supreme, overtopping distinction of tragic hero" (Drapper, 1980: 192).

In a nutshell, to conclude the analysis, it can be stated that the play *Oedipus Rex* is to a large extent, a tragedy of fate. The crucial events in the play have been pre-determined by fate or the Gods. Human beings seem rather helpless in the face of the circumstances which controlled their destiny. Oedipus has been defeated by the circumstances and by his own actions; however, what appeals most is that his spirit has not been crushed. He showed himself still capable of self-assertion, still retained his authoritative manner, imperiousness, and some of his pride, even though he lost all hopes. Even in defeat and in failure he showed his nobility. Sophocles' tragedy presents us with a terrible affirmation of man's subordinate position in the universe, and at the same time with a heroic vision of man's victory in defeat, a grand celebration of human spirit in the midst of tragic circumstances. As the soul survives after the body has perished, likewise the heroic spirit remains and remembers after the protagonist's catastrophe.

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