

WE ARE NOTHING BUT PENCIL IN THE HANDS OF FATE: A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF ARISTOTELIAN PARAGON OF TRAGEDY IN SOPHOCLES' *OEDIPUS REX*

Chinyere S. JACOB

Introduction

This paper dialectically examines the inexorability of external forces and man's alter defencelessness before fate and destiny. This is typical of Greek tragedy, hence, Sophocles, using his *Oedipus Rex* typifies this enigmatic predicament of man. In this tragedy, one beholds a man's (Oedipus) conscious attempt to escape his awful destiny, prophesied at his birth. This enigmatic scenario is further compounded by the ironic fact that the more he and every other person in the play connected with this awful prophesy try to walk against this predestined manifestation, the more they inadvertently hasten its fulfilment. The philosophical question that begs for an answer in this fateful scenario (which is believed to be the beginning of philosophy and the summit of religion) is, who is to be blamed, the gods or man? Consequently, this paper attempts to offer an analytic excursus on the features of Greek tragedy in the play through the Aristotelian notion of tragedy as espoused in his *Poetics*. Hence, this paper argues that the Aristotelian paragon remains the inviolable parameter for evaluating a true tragic piece till date.

Towards A Delineation of the Concept 'Tragedy'

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is a typical Greek tragedy. Tragedy is one of the forms of Drama whose origin can be traced to the ancient Greek society. It has been defined in the classical sense as, a play that focuses on serious issues as against comedy that focuses on trivial or mundane issues. Tragedy according to Aristotle is a serious dramatic representation or

imitation of some magnitude arousing pity and fear, and the where with all to accomplish a catharsis of such emotions. According to Bamisaye T. and Afolayan S. “inclusive I Aristotle's postulation on tragedy is that tragedy involves an incident of a destructive, or painful sort, such as violent death and physical agony”¹. Looking beyond this literal meaning of tragedy, Lara Owoeye, asserts that tragedy in literature means more than its literary meaning as a saddening, terrible event. Quoting the Encyclopaedia Britannica, she defines tragedy as “a branch of drama that treats in a serious and dignified style the sorrowful or terrible events encountered or caused by a heroic individual”². A broader delineation of literary concept of literature was articulated by Olu Obafemi thus:

This concept often refers to plays which treat serious issues of existence. At times, some ordinary issues are amplified to assume serious dimensions. In the conventional forms, tragic plays devolves on individual protagonists whose fortunes fall on reverses and typify the essence of conformism in human existence. The issues that compel tragedy include: love, ambition, power, etc. which propel the protagonist to death or grave misfortunes, generating in the audience, usually lesser or less remarkable beings, into feeling of sorrow, empathy and fear. The protagonist is ennobled through intense suffering in an inevitable circumstance. This breaks about self-knowledge via purgation of the soul or what is called catharsis³.

Obafemi's conceptualization of tragedy above correlates Aristotle's plausible description of tragedy as “an action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself, and of some amplitude; in language enriched by a variety of artistic varieties appropriate to several parts of the play; presented in the form of action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation of such emotion”⁴. It is germane to state that the conceptualisation of tragic form was preceded by the practical manifestation of the form, as expressed in the works of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles. These classics explored the genre of drama loosely without any ground rules as to what tragedy ought to be or should be like.

It is historically significant to indicate that Sophocles had written *Oedipus Rex* long before the emergence of the Aristotelian notion of tragedy. Against this backdrop, W. B. Worthen states that, “in about 335 BCE, Aristotle's Poetics set formal elements of Drama and influence of Aristotle's description has been massive...”⁵ The implication of this is

that, the existence of plays like *Oedipus Rex* is instrumental to the formation of the Aristotelian notion and as such could be considered a precursor of Aristotle's concept of poetics. This claim is leveraged on the fact that a critical study of *Oedipus Rex* reveals that it captures the tragic essence that Aristotelian notion sort to define. This is not unconnected to the fact that Sophocles' play, *Oedipus Rex*, is adjudged as the best of all time. Little wonder then Ruth Scodel calls it, "Tragedy of tragedies"⁶. Moreover, Olaniyan, Modupe is of avid conviction that Sophocles was an influence and precursor to Aristotle; hence, she asserts "Aristotle in his poetics outlines the major principles of tragedy, citing *Oedipus Rex* as a paragon of the form. In other words, "Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* served as Aristotle's model in his poetics..."⁷. Albeit, Aristotle himself did not write any tragedy; yet, his treatise on tragedy in his *Poetics* has made the sub-genre popular among scholars and critics worldwide.⁸

The intention of this paper is therefore to critically examine and analyse *Oedipus Rex* as a tragic play through the lens of the Aristotelian notion of tragedy. Also, this paper attempts to critically exhume and analyse the characteristics of Greek tragedy as enunciated by Aristotle's *Poetics* and epitomized by *Oedipus Rex*. Pursuant to this, it is germane at this juncture to present an explication of Aristotelian notion of tragedy, to leverage our understanding of *Oedipus Rex*.

Aristotelian Notion of Tragedy

Tragedy for Aristotle (as established earlier) is, imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds of being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; though pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. By language embellishment, Aristotle means language into which rhythm, 'harmony' and song enter. Also, tragic imitation implies a person's action. Therefore, Tragedy is the imitation of an action; and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought. Aristotle states that "every tragedy must have six parts-Plot, Character, Diction Thought, Spectacle and song, which determines it's quality"⁹. The first and the most important one in the Greek drama is the plot because it involves action and according to the definition by Aristotle, tragedy is the imitation of action not of men or character. According to him, action is the first, character is the second. So he says: "Tragedy is an imitation not of men, but of an action and of life, and life is consisting action"¹⁰. Consequently, it fundamentally means that the plot is the first principle, and as it were, the soul of tragedy.

Next in the order of prominence is Character which holds the second place, followed by thought that is, the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in a given circumstances. Fourth among the enumerated elements is the diction; by this Aristotle meant the expression of the meaning in words; and its essence in the same both in verse and prose of the remaining elements, song holds the chief place among the embellishment. Spectacle is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. The production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage mechanist than on that of the poet.

Furthermore, Aristotle postulates that tragedy must have a beginning, middle and end. The chief function of tragedy according to him is to arouse “pity and fear” he describes pity as a type of pain as an evident evil of destructive or painful kind in case of somebody who does not deserve it, the evil being one which might be expected to happen to ourselves or some of our friends. We cannot limit the emotions of pity and fear to the narrow boundaries of self. For instance, we pity Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex* not because of the fear that the same might happen to us, but because he is basically noble. Having outlined the basic assumption of Aristotle on the concept of tragedy, what follows a critical x-ray on how *Oedipus Rex* captures these fundamental characteristics of an ideal tragedy as enshrined in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Manifestation of Aristotelian Notions of Tragedy in *Oedipus Rex*

This segment explores *Oedipus Rex* via the Aristotelian notion or concept of tragedy, with the intention of defining the text as a classical tragedy. As established above, Aristotle has raised a number of ground rules as crucial elements necessary in defining a tragic play. These rules otherwise known as fundamental characteristics of an ideal tragedy are hereby explicated in detail as they are applied in establishing the plausibility of *Oedipus Rex*.

The Plot

The plot is the first principle and the most important feature of tragedy. Aristotle defines the plot as “the arrangement of incidents”. That is, not the story itself but the way the incidents are presented to the audience, the structure of the play. In other words, the plot consists not of the story line but the series of incidence or events. According to Aristotle, tragedies where the outcome depends on a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain of actions are superior to those that depend primarily on the character and personality of the protagonist. Aristotle asserts, that the plot must be structurally self-contained with the incidents bound together by internal necessity of action leading inevitably to the next with no outside intervention.

As a paradigm of Greek classical tragedy, in *Oedipus Rex*, the incidents are part of a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain. The plague in Thebes prompts Oedipus Rex to send Creon to consult the oracle of Delphi; hence, in the Prologue we read ...“I have sent Creon... to Delphi, Apollo's place of revelation, to learn there...”¹¹. The oracle replies that the murderer of Laius must be banished from Thebes promptly; Oedipus pronounces a solemn curse on the murderer and to send for Teresias. “The gods commands us to expel from the land of Thebes an old defilement that it seems we shelter ...by exile or by death...”¹². Teresias states that Oedipus is the murderer, “I say that you are the murderer whom you seek”¹³, but since the king knows himself to be innocent or thinks he knows, he accuses Creon of plotting with Teresias against him.”... , you and your friend Creon, it seems to me, will suffer most. If you were not an old man, you would have paid already for your plot”.¹⁴ The quarrel between Oedipus and Creon brings Jocasta from the house; seeking to calm down her husband and prove that oracles cannot be trusted, she tells again of how Laius died. When she mentions that he was killed at “a place where three roads meet”, Oedipus suddenly begins to suspect that he may indeed have killed without knowing who he was. The truth about Oedipus leads directly to the suicide of Jocasta and Oedipus' self-blinding and request to be exiled. He leaves Creon in control of Thebes and exile himself “But let me go, Creon! Let me purge my father's Thebes pollution on my living here, and go out to the wild hills.... The tomb my mother and father appointed for me, and let me die there...”¹⁵ The departure of Oedipus from Thebes will lift the plague, thus resolving the problem that started off the chain of events and concluding the plot.

Another quality or nature of a plot is, the plot may be either simple or complex. Although, complex is better because it has both reversal of intention (peripeteia) and recognition (anagnorisis) connected with catastrophe. X-raying this feature In *Oedipus Rex*, it shows that the peripeteia of the play is the messenger's reversal of intention; seeking to help Oedipus by telling him that Polybus and Merope were not his real parents he indeed creates the opposite effect. Providing the crucial piece of information that will reveal that Oedipus has indeed killed his father and married his mother. As directly connected to the anagnorisis, for the messenger and Herdsman piece together the whole story of Oedipus enabling him to recognize his identity to gain essential knowledge he has lacked. The peripeteia and anagnorisis directly cause Oedipus catastrophe, or change of fortune from good to bad, and led to the emotional scenes of suffering with Creon and his children. In a sense, each of Oedipus action can be considered a reversal of intention, and each gives him a little more knowledge of the dreadful truth that will lead to his downfall.

From the above excursus, we see sequence of events or incidences that transpire in this classical Greek tragedy in retrospect, this best fits Aristotle's description of what a plot consists of- the plot must be structurally self-contained with the incidents bound together by internal necessity of action leading inevitably to the next with no outside intervention. The above except aptly portrays *Oedipus Rex* as densely packed with series of indecencies of cause-and-effects. Hence, it aligns with Aristotle's benchmark for a tragic plot.

The Character

Character occupies the second place of importance. In Tragedy, character supports the plot, i.e. personal motivations will be intricately connected parts of the cause- and- effect chain of actions producing pity and fear in the audience. According to Aristotle, the protagonist should be renowned and prosperous, so his change of fortune can be from good to bad. This change should come about as the result, not of vice, but of some great error or frailty in a character. Such a plot is most likely to generate pity and fear in the audience, for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune of a man like ourselves. The term Aristotle use here is HAMARTIA, often translated “tragic flaw”. The role of the tragic flaw in tragedy comes not from the moral status of the tragic hero, but from the inevitability of its consequences. Hence, the peripeteia is really one or more self-destructive actions in blindness, leading to results diametrically opposed to those that were intended (often termed tragic irony). It is expected that characters in a tragic play should be good. Aristotle relates this quality to moral purpose and says it is relative to class. He said a tragic hero should be better than we are, as a man who is superior to the average man in some way. In Oedipus' case, he is superior not only because of his social standing, but also because he is smart, he is the one who could solve the sphinx's riddle. Moreover, as a virtuous man, Oedipus worked vehemently to avert the awful prophesy, but, as the sagacious mind, would have it, 'we are noting but pencil in the hands of fate...'. In consequence, Uzomah argues that “Oedipus in human reckoning for justice and fairness sake deserves to be pitied, because morally he is not to be blamed”¹⁶. Hence, in terms of character, *Oedipus Rex* measured up to the standard set by Aristotle for a typical Greek tragedy.

Songs

Songs here implies the musical elements employed in the piece of literary work. The musical element here is the chorus. Aristotle argues that the chorus should be fully integrated into the play like an actor; choral odes should not be mere interludes but should contribute to the unity of the plot. In concordance to Aristotle's expectations, the chorus

in *Oedipus Rex* demonstrates a level of insight akin to the view of the audience as third party to an on-going drama. According to Aristotle, the chorus should be like one of the characters. Chorus discharges some broad functions in all classical tragedies. The structure of Greek tragedy is determined by the chorus.

The functions of chorus are very well performed in *Oedipus Rex*. In the very first ode, the chorus depicts the horror of the plague and expresses an apprehension about the message from the oracle of Delphi. Other odes comment on the action that has taken place after the last ode and build an atmosphere appropriate to that stage of the play. It plays the role of a peace maker between the king and Creon and succeeds in getting the king's pardon for the later. After the exit of Teiresias it comments on the terrible predictions which Teiresias has made but shows determination to support the king. Its most significant response is when Oedipus and Jocasta have expressed irreverent thoughts against oracles. At many other times also they reflect the dominant mood and help to deepen it. When Oedipus imagines that he is the son of the goodness of luck, the chorus, immediately sing that their master Oedipus, might be the son of goodness of luck, the chorus immediately sing that their master, Oedipus might be the son of Apollo. In the fifth or last choric ode, in *Oedipus Rex*, the chorus reflects the dejection of Oedipus and says that all the generations of moral man add up to nothing. This ode must not be regarded as reflecting the final mood and impression of the play, for the impression is as much of greatness of the human spirit as of the insignificance of man and the transitoriness of his happiness. This ode must therefore be looked upon only as reflecting a final judgement of it. Oedipus remains forceful even in his downfall; in a sense he is still heroic. The chorus takes part in the dialogues also.

When Oedipus consults them about ending the plague in the city, they expressed disappointment that the oracle had not guided them about the identity of Laius' murderer. They also tell him what they know about the murder of their previous king and its circumstances. When Creon, learning that the king has accused him of treason, comes on the stage he talks to the chorus, who tells him that the king's accusation was probably made in heat of anger. Creon asks if the king look absolutely serious while making the charge and they rightly say that it is not for them to look into the eyes of his master when he speaks. When Oedipus almost passed a sentence upon Creon, Jocasta arrives on the scene and first talks to the chorus, and they request her to settle the differences between the two men. They are worried when they see Jocasta going into palace in a very dejected mood, and they give expression to their apprehension. Oedipus asks them about the shepherd who gave the fact

to Corinthian, they answer that his queen will be able to answer the question better. They sympathise with Oedipus when they see him after he has blinded himself.

It is instructive to observe that from all indication it is clear, that the chorus never takes a direct hand in the action. It does not consist only of spectators but influences the action in various ways. The contribution of the chorus in *Oedipus Rex* is considerable. They link the play with common humanity. In some sense they are often in the position of spectators. They fill in the gaps in the action when no other character is there. They add to element of melody. The tragedy of Oedipus and its relevance to common life is very well stressed by chorus in the exit ode or exude. The last but not the least importance of chorus as exemplifies *Oedipus Rex* (and as it is typical of classical Greek tragedy) is that it relates acts of violence which are never shown on the stage.

The Spectacle, Thought and Diction

These tripartite concepts or characteristics in Aristotle's *Poetics* intermingles in tragic works, to such extent that one cannot exist without the other. For Aristotle, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the stage mechanist than on that of the poet. Aristotle argues that the superior poets rely on the inner structure of the play rather than spectacle to arouse pity and fear; those who rely heavily on spectacle create a sense not of the terrible but only on monstrous¹⁷. Despite the fact that, much of the important action of the play takes place before the beginning. Spectacle is implied by Oedipus' stately role as king of Thebes and saviour of its people, little wonder he exclaimed, "I Oedipus whom all men call the great"¹⁸. It should be noted that Sophocles graphically paints the closely intertwined relationship between the elements of spectacle, diction and thought.

In Aristotle's configuration, thought is the third in the order of importance. He says little about thought, and most of what he says is associated with how speeches should reveal character. However, one may assume that this category would also include what we call the themes of a play. The play under analysis is replete of instances where thoughts reveal the character. Diction in Aristotelian understanding is the expression of the meaning of words which are proper and appropriate to the plot, characters, and end of the tragedy. Aristotle discusses the stylistic elements of tragedy; he is particularly interested in the metaphors.

Aristotle found at least part of this relationship (of spectacle, thought and diction) noteworthy of mention, he sees it in his *Poetics*, "as having the special effect of revealing the character's personal thoughts"¹⁹. With

regard to this he asks, “were is the business of the speaker, if the thought were revealed quite apart from what he says?”²⁰. The inner monologue are unique to the perceptions of their host, it can be assumed that access to character's thoughts granted by the author to the audience, are revealing of the character themselves.²¹ Therefore, in the interest of complete understanding of a work of drama, one cannot exist without the other. However, the methods detailed by Aristotle are not the only way by which Sophocles uses to reveal the nature of his characters.

In keeping with Aristotle's paradigm, Sophocles makes good use of his poetic license by employing appropriate diction to convey the fundamental message of the play in perspective. Sophocles reveals his characters by their own speech, in monologues or asides that develop their thought processes, and through well placed aphorisms by secondary characters. For instance, it is through Creon's diction that we learn the most about Oedipus and likewise through Jocasta that we learn the most about Creon.

Sophocle's mastery of the relationship between diction and thought is the stuffs that defines a character, whether he is good or bad, cunning or stupid. etc.²² He also draws a clear line between diction and thought, in so much as that the former reveals the later²³. Therefore, there are leverages amongst all three, where for, as one cannot be significantly or meaningfully defined without the other. However, what Sophocles may have not taken note of are the aphorisms Sophocles assigned to secondary characters in the play to accurately describe one another.

The Catharsis

Catharsis is another Aristotelian term that has generated considerable debate. The word means “purgation, cleansing”. Aristotle seems to be employing a medical metaphor tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear in order to purge away their excess to reduce these passions to a healthy balanced proportion. The end of a tragedy is a **catharsis** of the tragic emotions of pity and fear.(Abiodun Ojo)²⁴

At the beginning of *Oedipus Rex*, the gods sent a plague against Thebes because of the presence of Laius murderer in the city and because of the incest of Oedipus and Jocasta. The entry-song of chorus following the prologue heightens the feelings of pity and fear. The chorus say: “with fear my heart is raven, fear of what shall be told. Fear is upon us”. Moreover, Catharsis is experienced at the point in which Oedipus realises his role in the plight of the people of Thebes. At the time of his realisation, Oedipus feels great remorse and shame for what he has done. “When all sight was horror everywhere” this catharsis comes to

its climax in the penitential act of Oedipus blinding himself. This allows him a chance to gain the same type of sight that Tiresias, whom he treated with scorn and disdain, possessed. Sophocles is wise enough to know that catharsis, or the act of purification has to happen on both political and personal levels. In consequence, Oedipus who seeks to make right what he unknowingly made wrong, asks for political forgiveness. However, catharsis lies not on how he wishes himself but his children. It is here we begin to see purity and sense of reclamation evident, catharsis becoming formed before our own eyes.

From the foregoing, it can be plausibly asserted that it has been sufficiently established that, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* typifies the features of Greek tragedy as enunciated by Aristotle in his *Poetic*, in the sense that it epitomized the six parts of drama. Having observed that, what follows is examination of Oedipus as a tragic hero in line with Aristotle's notion that one of the outstanding characteristics of tragedy is heroism.

Oedipus as a Tragic Hero

According to Aristotle, a tragic hero is a noble man, an influential figure in a society, whose fall creates elements of shock and surprise. He is better than ordinary men and his action must reveal moral purpose.²⁵ Oedipus's story focuses attention on a very particular heroic character, one who insists upon acting according to his own vision of experience, who persists freely in the course of action he has initiated, brushing aside or shouting down the objections or alternative suggestions of other people. He imposes on his life his own views of what he thinks is right, refusing to attend to what others are saying (he insists on agreement, rather than listening to others and weighing what they tell him). Oedipus, in his freedom, sets in motion a chain of events for which he accepts full responsibility and, even as disaster looms, he continues as before, not flinching or assigning blame or tasks to anyone else.

It's worth noting that, even when he learns the horrific truth of his life, Oedipus himself takes full responsibility of his action. First, he plucks out his own eyes and then he insists on banishment. At no time in the play does he compromise. What needs to be done is what he decides needs to be done. And even in the face of the disastrous truth, Oedipus does not bend or break or start asking advice. He will act decisively until the very end.

Oedipus remains at the end of the play, for all the total reversal of his fortune, still the self-assertive man exercising full free control over his own life. If he is going to suffer, then he will determine what form that

suffering will take. Oedipus, of course, is more than just a particular character. He is also a character type. In fact, his story helps to define a certain heroic response to experience which we call *tragic*, and this play is commonly hailed as our greatest dramatic tragedy.

One major component in Oedipus's personality which defines him as a character is his attitude towards fate. Rather than aligning himself with it, or learning through experience to accept the mystery of fate, Oedipus chooses to defy fate. He will make his own decisions in his own way, and he will live with the consequences these bring. He will answer to his own sense of himself, rather than shape his life in accordance with someone else's set of rules or an awareness of something bigger and more important than himself. That's true of Oedipus at the start of the play, and he's doing the same thing at the end. At no point is he willing to compromise. He is, if you like, a man totally committed to his own freedom to be what he thinks he must be, to live up to his own conception of heroic greatness. If there is an obstacle in the way (like Teiresias, for example), then that obstacle must be forcibly removed—it interferes with his sense of what's going on. Oedipus makes no effort to conceal what he is feeling or to hesitate about acting on those feelings. Why should he? After all, he is Oedipus, whose greatness manifests itself in being entirely true to itself, without duplicity.

Obviously, he has an enormous ego—the central purpose of his life is to assert that sense of himself. With this powerful ego comes a certain narrowness of vision, which has no room for alternative opinions or dissenting views, and often a very powerfully assertive voice (dominated, as it is observed, by the pronouns *I* and *me*). But (and this is crucial) he is also prepared to accept any and all the consequences of his actions. That, too, is a measure of his greatness. The Chorus at the end of the play may blame fate or the gods or the impossible demands of life. Oedipus does not, he remains the master of what happens to him. The responsibility is his, and what happens to him is entirely up to him.

According to Audu Musa (2004), “What makes Oedipus so compelling is not that he suffers horribly and endures at the end almost a living-dead. The force of the play comes from the connection between Oedipus' sufferings and his own freely chosen actions”²⁶ That is, from the awareness of how he himself is bringing upon his own head the dreadful outcome. His freely chosen decisions are bringing things closer and closer to an inevitable conclusion. Looking forward in the play, it can be seen that Oedipus is free to go in different directions; in that sense he is not compelled to do what he does. Looking back over the action from the conclusion of the play, there is a link of inevitable consequences arising from the hero's free decisions.

According to Musa, “Strictly speaking in a literary sense, true accidents are never tragic, because they are accidents; they occur by chance. What makes Sophoclean tragedy so moving is the step-by-step link between the hero's own decisions throughout the play and the disaster which awaits”²⁷. As Aristotle points out, Sophoclean tragedy works, in part, through this sense of inevitability. Oedipus is doomed, mainly because he is the sort of person he is. Someone else, someone with a very different character, would not have suffered Oedipus's life. They would have compromised their sense of freedom in the name of prudence, custom, politics, or survival.

Oedipus learns that he has been horribly wrong about life, but that does not induce him to change, or beg for forgiveness, or transpose the blame onto someone else or seek to put his life on a different footing. Oedipus's story has a different effect. Because of what he has done, we have been given a privileged glimpse into the ineluctable mysteriousness and malignancy of fate. Here the social order is not confirmed as an eternal decree of fate: it is, by contrast, exposed as something of an illusion. Consequently, Musa concludes that, “The story of Oedipus, that is, offers us no consolation that what we believe about the order of the world or the benevolence of the ruling powers or the eternal rightness of our ways of dealing with them bears any relationship to what they are really like”.²⁸

Hamartia

The play offers a perfect illustration of the nature of hamartia as mistake or error rather than flaw. Oedipus directly causes his own downfall not because he is evil, or proud, or weak, but because he does not know who he is. If he really wanted to avoid the oracle, leaving Corinth was a mistake, killing an unknown older aristocrat was a mistake, and marrying an older queen was a mistake seeking to uncover the past, cursing the murderer of Laius, sending for the herdsmen—each of the actions that he pursued so vigorously and for such good reasons led to his doom. Oedipus is not morally guilty, but he is radically ignorant, and Sophocles does not present him as a unique case but rather as paradigm to human condition, as a man like ourselves. In the words of the chorus: “what man, what man on earth wins more of happiness than a seeming and after that turning away? Oedipus, you are my pattern of this, Oedipus, you and your fate!”²⁹ It is pertinent to observe that, this tragic flaw can be blamed on non-other, other than on fatalism.

Fatalism

In Sophocles' play, an important notion is obviously seen, the role played by fate or the fates. The emphasis placed on these words (and sometimes the personalities representing them) gives to the stories and

the vision of life they hold up something we might call a fatalistic quality. What exactly does this mean? What does a text mean when it invokes the concept of fate?

To invoke the concept of fate or to have a fatalistic vision of experience is, simply put, to claim that the most important forces which create, shape, guide, reward, and afflict human life are out of human control. There is something else out there (where exactly varies from one vision to the next) which, in effect, sets and controls the rules of our lives, determining most or all things of particular importance to us: our good and bad fortune, our happiness and sorrow, and, above all, our death. To have a fatalistic sense of life is to hold that in this game of life, the rules, the flow of play, the success or failure of my team, and so on are out of the control of any human being or collection of human beings. The outcome and all the various stages of the game are determined from non-human sources.

Aristotle considered this play a perfect tragedy. This tragedy borders on fatalism which demonstrates the uncertainties of human destiny, man's inability to control his own fate. Earlier on in the introduction it was stated that, *Oedipus Rex* graphically portrays man's utter defenselessness before supra human forces that decides, shapes and determines his destiny. Fate is an idea that surfaces again and again in the play. Oedipus who kills his father and marries his mother in an attempt to avoid the very prophesy he ultimately fulfils. Oedipus cannot escape his fate, but he finally finds peace after enduring the worst the fate had to offer. Therefore, this play expressing in the strongest term possible, the fact of determinism and fatalism in human affairs, thereby, mocking those who erroneously think human beings are free agents.

Dramatic Irony

According to Aristotle, good tragedies are filled with irony. The audience knows the outcome of the story already, but the hero does not, making his actions seem ignorant or inappropriate in the face of what is to come. Whenever a character attempts to change fate, this is ironic to an audience who knows that the tragic outcome of the story cannot be avoided.³⁰ Dramatic irony plays an important role in *Oedipus Rex*. Its story revolves around two different attempts to change the course of fate: Jocasta and Laius's killing of Oedipus at birth and Oedipus's flight from Corinth later on. In both cases, an oracle's prophesy comes true regardless of the character's action. Jocasta kills her son only to find him restored to life and married to her. Oedipus leaves Corinth only to find that in so doing, he has found his real parents and carried out oracle's words. Both Oedipus and Jocasta prematurely exult over the failure of oracles, only to find that the oracles were right after all. Each time a

character tries to avert the future predicted by the oracles, the audience knows their attempt is futile, creating the sense of irony that permeates the play. Even the manner at which Oedipus and Jocasta express their disbelief in oracles is ironic. In an attempt to comfort Oedipus, Jocasta tells him that the oracles are powerless; yet at the beginning of the very next scene we see her praying to the same gods whose powers she has just mocked³². Oedipus rejoices over Polybius's death as a sign of that oracles are fallible, yet he will not return to Corinth for fear that oracle's statements concerning Merope could still come true (52).³¹ Regardless what they say, both Jocasta and Oedipus continue to suspect that the oracles could be right, that the gods can predict the future? And of course the audience knows they can. Perhaps the best example of dramatic irony in the play is the frequent use of references to eyes, sight, light and perception throughout. When Oedipus refuses to believe him, Teiresias cries, "have you eyes, /and do not see your own damnation? Eyes, / and cannot see what company you keep?".³² Mentioned twice in the same breath, the word eyes stands out in this sentence. Teiresias knows that Oedipus will blind himself; later in this same speech he says as much: "those now clear-seeing eyes shall then darken"³³. The irony is that sight here means different things. Oedipus is blessed with the gift of perception; he was the only man who could see the answer to sphinx' riddle. Yet cannot see what is right before his eyes. He is blind to the truth, for all he seeks it. Teiresias's presence in the play, then, is doubly important. As a blind man, he foreshadows Oedipus future, and the more Oedipus mock's his blindness, the more ironic he sounds to the audience.

What makes Oedipus's actions in this quarrel with Teiresias and throughout the play so dramatically compelling and increasingly tense is that we, the readers, know the outcome of the story. That is, we are familiar with Oedipus's fate. And yet there's no sense during the story that Oedipus is compelled to act the way he does: he freely chooses to initiate the chain of events which eventually reveals his fate to him. In that sense, the interplay between Oedipus's sense of his own freedom and our sense of his eventual outcome constitutes the main dramatic power in the play (for there's no suspense about the outcome of a story which is so well known to the audience before they arrive at the theatre or pick up the text to read it).

Oedipus has spent all his life dealing with his fate. He has, we learn, been told that he is destined to kill his father and marry his mother. And he has refused to accept that fate. He has spent much of his life moving around, so as to avoid his fate. In other words, he has freely chosen, for reasons which we can surely understand and applaud, to construct a life in which what he has been told will not happen.

And, so far as he can tell, he has been spectacularly successful. In doing what he has done, Oedipus has gained (he thinks) the knowledge that a man does not have to meekly accept an unwelcome fate, and one, moreover, which is morally abhorrent to him and to the play's audience. He can take efforts to change the direction assigned to his life. This fact, once again, gives him powerful reasons for feeling very confident in his own abilities to deal with the mysterious powers which control the world. In his own mind, he is a human being who has thwarted his fate (although he is still very worried that it might eventually happen).

So, throughout the play there is a powerful sense of irony at work, an irony which manifests itself in the growing discrepancy between what Oedipus thinks is the case and what we know to be the case. Micheal Etherton, asserts that the play “demonstrates the potential of irony in drama to convey a deeper meaning, and of the separate but related theatrical device of dramatic irony to engage an audience in the unfolding action of the play”³⁴. We understand why he sees the world and himself the way he does (and he can be applauded for that). At the same time, we know he is wrong. He is deceived about his relationship to the world. In that sense, he is blind (a really important metaphor here).

The ironic tension builds as the play goes on, of course. The clues about the real murderer accumulate, yet Oedipus persists in believing he cannot be the one, even though he remembers killing a man at a road junction. And so, in his ignorance he redoubles his efforts, resisting all urges from Jocasta, his wife, to abandon the investigation. For Oedipus finding the truth becomes something of an obsession- he has to see this matter through, because that's the sort of man he is. Finding the truth is far more important than what that truth might reveal.

Hence, what is witnessed here is a strongly pessimistic vision of fate: here we have the best of men, the most knowledgeable, the most successful, and, in many ways, the best intentioned, who sets out to save his own city. And in a very fundamental way Oedipus is entirely *innocent*. But even such a man, for all his excellence and past success, cannot know enough about what fate is really like to recognize what it has in store for him. The truth of what he is and what he has done is even worse than he can possibly imagine. And the course of events which leads him to discover the truth about himself has been freely initiated and maintained throughout by himself. According to Ada Ebe:

The vision of life here is very mysterious and very cruel. Even the best and most innocent of men, it seems to say, one who has striven to live the best life possible and who endures to find

out the truth of who he really is and what his life really amounts to will be horrified to learn the truth. Fate has not established a reasonable covenant here with some clear rules and a happier future, nor does fate offer a secure and valued life in the community, nor is there any sense that Oedipus's fate is linked to some sin he has committed. Here fate punishes arbitrarily and mercilessly those who choose to confront the mystery.³⁵

From the foregoing, it is crystalline clear that Oedipus Rex is indeed the Tragedy of tragedies. Being adorned with ironic events, it remains a fascinating epic trauma that brilliantly portrays the intrigues, paradoxes, and the enigma of man in the human society. It chronicles the ironies portraying how all men are utterly condemned to fate and determinism. Aristotle is right to have found in it an epitome of genuine tragedy.

Conclusion

This paper critically explored the elements of tragedy from the perspectives of plot, character, thought, diction, songs, spectacles and fatalism. The analysis of the text in relation to Aristotle's notion indicates that the play *Oedipus Rex* is indeed as Aristotle put it a perfect example of tragedy. A tragedy that typified man's struggle against fate and destiny. It is uniquely rich by portraying the ironies, the dilemma and enigmatic predicament that has always confronted man arising from the influence of transcendental forces or deities. Therefore, having analysed *Oedipus Rex*, using the Aristotle notion of classical Greek tragedy, it is clear that man's actions determined his destiny. However, in this drama, it has been established that in some cases man's action cannot change his destiny as the same is influenced from without. In consequence, this literary work can be plausibly and succinctly concluded in the following ironic expression: "we are nothing but pencil in the hands of fate and destiny."

Endnotes

¹ T. Bamisaye and S. Afolayan, *Basic English Structure and Literary Studies*. Lagos: King Julius Educational Publishers, 2006, p. 90

² L. Owoeye *A Short Introduction to Literature*. Ibadan: Yori books, 2010, p. 7

³ O. Obafemi. "The Fundamentals of Drama, Theatre and Performance" in O. Obafemi, G.A. Agadi, et al (eds) *Critical Perspectives on English Language & Literature*. The Department of English,

University of Ilorin: Ilorin. 2007, p. 254.

⁴ L. Oyegoke, *Undergraduate Text on English Language and Literature*. Ibadan: Yori books, 2008, p.151.

⁵ W. B.Worthen, *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama*. London: Wadsworth-Cengage Learning; 2004, p. 6

⁶ R. Scodel, *An Introduction to Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p.147.

⁷ M. Olaniyan, 'English Drama a Lecture Note in Ekiti State University'. Unpublished, 2011, p. 4.

⁸ L. Owoeye, p. 11

⁹ <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>

¹⁰ <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>

¹¹ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*. Trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald in *Types of Drama: Plays and Context*, Sylvan Barnet, William Burton, Lesley Ferris, Gerald Rabkin (eds) Longman Line 71-74.

¹² Ibid, Lines 100-104.

¹³ Ibid, Scene 1, Line 143.

¹⁴ Ibid, Scene 1, Lines 184-186.

¹⁵ Ibid, Scene 4, Lines 221-225.

¹⁶ Uzomah, *Windows of Literature*. Ekiti: A&B Publishers, p. 79.

¹⁷ http://www.julius/spectacle_Nonye.mtv

¹⁸ Sophocles, line 8.

¹⁹ <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>

²⁰ <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>

²¹ <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>

²² <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>

²³ <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>

²⁴ http://www.Abiodun/OedipusRex_Ojo.mtv

²⁵ <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>

²⁶ http://www.Audu/fearandpity_Musa.mtv

²⁷ ibid

²⁸ ibid

²⁹ Sophocles, line 5

³⁰ <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>

³¹ Sophocles, lines, 45-50.

³² Ibid, line 37.

³³ Ibid, line 37.

³⁴ Michael Etherton. *The Development of African Drama*. Tamaza: Kaduna, 2012, p. 122.

Ada Ebe, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King as an Epitome of Greek Tragedy*, Nigeria: Madianbooks, 2005, p. 40.