



# The Achievers Journal

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## **Oedipus complex and *Oedipus Rex*: A Freudian Reading of Sophocles' *Theban Trilogy***

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### **Abstract**

*Sophocles' Theban Trilogy comprises of Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone. The genogram of Oedipus is largely traced from the ancient text Theogony and Sophocles has chosen to elaborate on the family line beginning with Laius, the father of Oedipus and it concludes with the story of Antigone. Oedipus was, for Freud, a rich literary geological lode in which he could focus, by projection, the tormenting and turbulent early childhood fantasies of his own troubled unconscious, and from which he extrapolated a general principle of his psychology which eventually became elevated and enshrined as a dogma of psychoanalysis: the Oedipus Complex. Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic theory Oedipus complex is one of the most influential as well as divisive theories of the twentieth century. The paper examines the scope of Oedipus complex in Oedipus Rex.*

**Keywords:** oedipus complex; mirror stage; neurosis; castration anxiety; penis envy

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* centres on different kinds of the notions and logi of the theocentric, fatecentric and anthropocentric messianic logocentrism. The book is one among the Theban Trilogy, where the other two works include *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. It contains a self-reflexive debate and discussion on the power of logi and their manipulative force. The story is inextricably interlinked with the Greek religion, philosophy and culture and features most of the Greek gods like Apollo, Athena, Ares, Aphrodite, Dionysus etc. Sophocles describes the fate as the will of gods in the play. In this sense, the play is riddled with fate, destiny, coincidence, and



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counter coincidence. The fate of the tragic hero, Oedipus depends on predetermined events and he is just a puppet in the hands of gods.

The characters in the play represent all the human beings of ancient Greece, who are imprisoned in the blind alley of different illusions. One such illusion is the Sphinx, a supernatural winged female monster with the body of a lion and the head of a woman. Oedipus answered the riddle of Sphinx correctly, saved Thebes and on this Creon rewarded him with the hands of recently widowed Queen Jocasta and the kingdom of Thebes. In *Antigone*, Oedipus, old and blinded, wanders along the roads to find Sphinx and asks her “Why did not I recognise my mother?” “You gave the wrong answer” said Sphinx. “But that was what made everything possible,” said Oedipus. “No”, she said. “You answered my riddle Man. You didn’t say anything about Woman” (*Antigone* 86 – 91).

Another supernatural device used is the Oracle at Delphi. It is considered to be the mouth-piece of Apollo to foretell the fortune ancient Greek people. The prophesy about Oedipus eventually comes true, making man believe that gods predestine the fate of man. The play also gives special privilege to Tiresias, the prophet. He appears in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone* and in both the plays he represents the same force – the truth rejected by a wilful and proud king, almost the personification of Fate itself.

Oedipus himself is presented in the movie as a god-like character. He is both an anthropocentric and theocentric logos for suppliants of Thebes. They consider him god who can remove their miseries and sufferings. The play opens with the crowd of suppliants before the palace of Oedipus, who are beseeching him to remove the distress and wretchedness of the pestilence from the city, as if he were a god. The first words of the Priest fully express the god-like absolute authority of the King enjoys over them. To quote Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, “My Lord and King: we are gathered here, as you see, Young and Old, from the tenderest chicks to the age bent seniors” (32).



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Oedipus as a king and sacrificial scapegoat is bound up with the personal fate of ruler offers himself up as a city redeemer from pestilence and drought by blinding himself and banishing himself from Thebes. In this way, Sophocles decentres Oedipus's messianic position and dethrones his god-like authority in the end of the play. As Creon says to Oedipus in the end of the play:

“Command no more. Obey. Your rule has ended” (Oedipus the King 156).

A genogram of Oedipus's family, as taken from *Theogony*, takes us back seven generations, to the cosmogony, the coming – into being of the universe. It begins with the first dynasty, the primal parents, Heaven and Earth, whose union gave birth to their monstrous children, the Titans. The children were so wicked that their own father hated them from the beginning and as soon as each of them was born, he hid them all away in a cavern of Earth. The last of the children, Kronos and his wife Rhea becomes the second dynasty and the motif of Cannibalism enters the litany of dysfunction. Because Kronos learns from Ouranos and Gaia that he is destined to be defeated by his own child Zeus, he observed and swallowed each of his children, as each of them reached their mother's knees from her holy womb. But as Rhea was about to give birth to Zeus, she wraps a large stone in a baby cloth to deliver it to the son of Heaven, only to fulfil the prophecy later.

So the third generation of Olympian dynasty is headed by Zeus and Hera. Compared to his father and Grandfather, Zeus is a little more civilised, his major faults include being unbridled promiscuity and narcissistic rage. The fourth generation is the only one that has any sense of temporary calm and some positive parenting. There is celebrated wedding between Cadmus, son of Agenor, founder of the city of Thebes and the goddess Harmonia, daughter of Ares, god of war and son of Zeus and Hera. They enjoy a long and happy marriage, despite being eventually dispossessed and exiled from Thebes by a conspiracy. So the bad blood resurfaces in their children, the fifth generation, who begins again the disintegrative dysfunctional process.



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Cadmus and Harmonia have one son, Polydorus and four daughters – Ino, Semele, Autonoe, and Argave. Polydorus is the grandfather and Labdacus is the father of King Laius. Autonoe is the mother of Monoceus, who is the father of Jocasta, wife of Laius and mother of Oedipus. Zeus is enamoured by Semele and begins an affair with her, despite the fact that she is his great granddaughter. Out of their relation, Dionysus or Bacchus is born and Ino, Autonoe and Argave instantly become his followers or Maenads. They engage in a frenzy of rites on Mount Cithaeron, the same mountain upon which Laius was to abandon baby Oedipus two generation later. Jealous of their relationship, Hera prompts Semele to make a demand to Zeus to show her his glorious form. Unable to rescind his promise, the god unveils and Semele is promptly incinerated.

Now the Oracle at Delphi decreed that if Laius had a son, by the hand of that son he would die. Laius, although married to Jocasta, fell in love with Chrysippos, the son of neighbouring king. Chrysippos, however, rejected Laius's love. Laius kidnapped Chrysippos, raped him and in despair Chrysippos committed suicide. It was as retribution to this that Appolo made his decree. For the same reason, Hera sent the Sphinx to Thebes to wreck catastrophe on the city and populace. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, no mention about Laius' sin is mentioned.

Oedipus was, for Freud, a rich literary geological lode in which he could focus, by projection, the tormenting and turbulent early childhood fantasies of his own troubled unconscious, and from which he extrapolated a general principle of his psychology which eventually became elevated and enshrined as a dogma of psychoanalysis: the Oedipus Complex. Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic theory Oedipus complex is one of the most influential as well as divisive theories of the twentieth century. Freud coined the term Oedipus complex to refer to a stage in the development of young boys around the age of five, when they wish to have their entire mother's love and thus, jealousy causes them to resent and even unconsciously wish for the death of their fathers. The Oedipus complex represents the core of neurosis for Freud. Little boys overcome this tendency with an



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unconscious fear of castration – Castration Anxiety – and in little girls it is aided by jealousy men and what is termed as Penis Envy.

In order to resolve the conflict, the boy identifies with his father. In this act, super ego is formed. The super ego becomes a sort of inner moral authority, an internalisation of the father figure that strives to suppress the urge of the Id and make the ego act upon these idealistic standards. In a letter that Freud wrote to Wilhelm Fliess, Freud describes how he came to recognise the existence and importance of Oedipus complex.

“Being entirely honest with oneself is a good exercise. Only one idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood. Even if it does not always occur so early as in children who have been made hysterics. If that is the case, the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex* in spite of all the rational objections to the inexorable fate that the story presupposes, becomes intelligible, and one can understand why later fate dreams were such failures. The Greek myth in *Oedipus Rex* seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognises because he has felt traces of it in himself. Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy, and this dream fulfilment played out in reality causes everyone to recoil in horror, with the full measure of repression which separates his infantile from his present state” (The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887 – 1904).

Jocasta plays a more important role in the rise and fall of the title character in *Oedipus Rex*. Freud believes that when a baby looked at an image of him/herself in a mirror, they would at a certain point in their development realise that the reflection was him/herself that they are seeing. And this is the moment in a child’s life that the ego is formed. Gradually he/she will realise that they not only see themselves, but also the image of their mothers in the mirror, so will start looking at their mothers, breaking the egoistical stare. It is this ability to break the primary concern of viewing



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ourselves that allows us to move into the society. Children are able to break the self-concerned stare and focus it on our 'Mother' or society as it were. This constitutes the mirror stage of Freud's theory.

Lacan carries this in identifying the patriarchal society with which we live in as being founded on men's words. Therefore, women have no voice in this world and cannot be satisfied in their lifetimes. Lacan takes Freud's theory on this stage in human psycho evolution and related it to his theories in language. He explains that the image we see in the mirror is the 'I', which is ever fluctuating versus the 'me', which is continuous. It is the separation of their two things that Lacan focuses on in his theory of mirror stage. He has termed them 'signifier' and 'signified'. The image we see is the signified and we are signifier.

While analysing Jocasta's character, we must look at the abandonment of the child. The Oracle at Delphi had predicted well in advance that if a son is born to Laius and Jocasta, he will kill Laius and marry Jocasta. She would have abstained from sex to prevent childbirth. But that would intrude on Jocasta's happiness; from the pure physical satisfaction and because of her husband's dissatisfaction. It is Jocasta's silence when the child is taken away to be killed that allows that same child to grow up and fill the prophecy. It is her inability to articulate her concerns to Oedipus that eventually cause him to run-a-muck. She has that unfilled desire and therefore she ultimately takes her life. Doing so, she breaks her mirror and her son's mirror, she is his mother and there with him in the reflection. In conclusion, Lacan's theory holds true to the ways of the world.

The name Oedipus means 'Wounded foot' or as Jung translates it, 'Swell-foot', deriving from the iron pin which Laius had trust through the ankles of the baby he was abandoning. The act of parricide in Sophocles is that Oedipus murdered his father from unconscious primal rage and desire for revenge at his fathers' sadistic ankle nailing and primal parental abandonment. Rage and violence are closer to the psychotic core of the unconscious than sexual desire, which is



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developmentally more sophisticated. Oedipus has been brought up with loving adoptive parents. Of Polybus he says, 'he loved me so, he loved me so deeply, yet when he meets his birth father, the trauma rises and so does the murderous rage'. Oedipus commits murder, parricide and regicide. His defeat of the Sphinx, the archetypal Terrible Mother, gives him the right to the hand and body of his own mother, and he unconsciously commits incest. The ghastly genogram is complete.

Oedipus cannot look on his truth when finally revealed and impossible to deny. He has to resort to self-blinding with brooch pins of the despairing, self hanged Jocasta. The cathartic moment is reported by a messenger in a savage language.

“He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins  
Holding her robes – and lifting them high,  
Looking straight up into the points,  
He digs them down the sockets of his eyes, crying – Blind  
From this hour on! Blind in the darkness! Blind!” (Oedipus the King 32)

Oedipus' self-blinding represents a momentous, if temporary running away from a truth which has become utterly intolerable. In the drama, the self-inflicted mutilation corresponds in psychopathology to the act of self-harming – cutting or gashing oneself – which some very damaged individuals practise. It is supposed that physical pain releases some of the intolerable psychic pain. But Oedipus does more than just name the pain, and because of this, his utterances at the end of the play mark a turn in his inner journey. He is blinded and exiled from Thebes, moving on to a path of further suffering, an intense dark night of the soul, or to use the Jungian mythologem, a Night Sea Journey. What has been born in Oedipus is a small, flickering flame of self-knowledge, a new level of ego-consciousness that can truly own his own shadow and take responsibility for his pain, his darkness, his inherited fate and his life. He says



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The hand that struck my eyes was mine,  
Mine alone – no one else –  
I did it all myself  
What grief can crown this grief?  
It's mine alone, my destiny – I am Oedipus! (Oedipus the King 170)

This is the same ego announcement Oedipus makes at the beginning of the drama: “I am Oedipus!”- but then it was hubris filled; now that the hubris is purged in pain, inner illumination has arrived and a new stage begins in psychological journey. The culmination of that stage is the theme in *Colonus*. After many years of wandering, at the very end of his life, Oedipus’ last mortal hours are slipping away, the nature of the terrible journey has made a mendicant exile is finally revealed in images of transformation. Like Tiresias, he is now outwardly blind but inwardly lucid, his blindness and consciously accepted suffering having brought him fruit of pure gold; wisdom and compassion. He has passed beyond hubris and the narcissistic power complex into the dawn of primal light which is compassionate love, agape.

In *Colonus*, Oedipus offers to Theseus, a real gift of his power, following his death, to protect Athens from all future invasions and secure victory for all Athenians. The gift Oedipus brings is the spiritual power and distilled wisdom which he has been gaining through suffering and the loss of psychic power, and which, transformed by death, he offers as protector of the city. Oedipus is not a blind, aged man living in grief, but the fruit of his suffering is his individualisation, the power to withstand with equanimity all the vicissitudes of life. He is not an image of defeat and loneliness, but an image of triumphant inner power and fortitude.

In the myth, Oedipus does not die. He is translated alive by the gods in what appears to be a divine intervention. As always in a classical drama, the climax is described by a ubiquitous Messenger.





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He reports that Oedipus goes to a certain place, a 'steep descent', where he has his still living body anointed with the rites for a corpse. Oedipus' end is a conjoining with the numen, or as Jung would say, a conjunction of ego with Self, a bridging of conscious and unconscious, the creation of an experimental axis between the human and the divine.

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