Oedipus Rex And 3 Tenets Of Tragedy Essay, Research Paper

There are many examples of Aristotle’s views on tragedy in the play Oedipus Rex. Without these characteristics the play would not be as dramatic and well known today as it was 1500 years ago. These principles of tragedy are not only useful to the plot of the play, but also to our everyday lives. Audiences surely asked themselves, “If even the mighty Oedipus can be subjected to such a fate, what can happen to a ordinary person like myself?” The relevance to our being now makes us look at the play in a different way. We now have a desire to investigate the characteristics of a tragedy and how they relate to the drama. Aristotle’s three tenets of a tragedy that relate to Oedipus Rex are that it concerns a character’s downfall at a significant time in his life which causes the audience to experience catharsis. Aristotle said that “A tragedy is a story of an individual who suffers a disaster either through his own fault, decreed by fate, or the inevitable outcome of action or choices made by him” (Rock). From this definition, the play Oedipus Rex especially applies to a character given a fate that will be carried out beyond his control. Oedipus tried to escape Cornith when he learned of the prophecies that were supposed to take place in his life. Instead, he fell right into the trap of the prediction by killing his father and later marrying his mother. By doing this he proved that his life was pre-determined by fate and there was nothing he could do to could change it. This indicates that the plot of this play follows Aristotle’s definition of a tragedy. Along with this principle are many other subtopics that Aristotle said makes a dramatic tragedy. He said that pride seems to be at the root of every tragedy and the tragic character would have “supreme pride (HUBRIS) which separated him from the other mortals and challenged the gods” (Rock). Oedipus illustrated this haughtiness throughout the entire play. He refused to listen to Teiresias because he let his pride stop him from hearing the truth. The chorus discussed Oedipus’s pride: “Haughtiness and the high hand of disdain/ Tempt and outrage God’s holy law;/ And any mortal who dares hold/ No immortal power in awe/ Will be caught up in a net of pain:/ The price for which his levity is sold./” (871). This quote tells us that anyone who believes that they are as high as the immortal gods will be punished by a fate that will be inevitable. Aristotle also said that the tragic hero has the greatness to accept the responsibilities for his downfall. Oedipus does this by taking his own eyesight. He says, “The God was Apollo./ He brought my sick, sick fate upon me./ But the blinding hand was my own!/ How could I bear to see/ When all my sight was horrible everywhere?” (884). In this quote Oepidus says that Apollo brought

the fate to him, but he does not blame the god. Instead, Oedipus accepted his mistakes and was willing to take punishments for it. Through the textual evidence we know Oedipus Rex supports Aristotle’s definition of a tragedy and the many subtopics that go with it. Aristotle also said that a tragedy will “depict the troubled part of the hero’s life which will precede and lead up to his death” (Rock). At the beginning of this play, Oedipus is the King of Thebes. Due to events that follow one another, Oedipus’s fall from the throne occurs after the terrible truth that he is the criminal he has been seeking is revealed. Aristotle said that this revelation would eventually lead to the tragic hero’s death. Oedipus’s sense of justice keeps him from making excuses for his wrong-doings and he blinds himself. He says, “Do not counsel me any more./ This punishment that I have laid upon myself is just./ If I had eyes,/ I do not know how I could bear the sight/ Of my father, when I came to the house of Death,/ Or my mother: for I have sinned against them both/ So vilely that I could not make my peace/ By strangling my own life” (885). In this quote he admits that killing himself could not even constitute for the pain he has caused everyone in his life. Aristotle points out that this contrast of happiness to unhappinessupports another characteristic of a tragedy. At the end of this play, audiences are left with feelings of pity and fear. Aristotle feels this pity is the chief source of tragic emotions. These emotions are felt because there is no escape from the punishment that the character will endure. Although we are moved by compassion, the audience also feels fear when they realize the “size and the power of the forces that acted against the hero” (Rock). This revelation that the human life is very fragile and is in fact influenced of fate will eventually give the audience a sense of calmness and cleansing. This cleansing is what Aristotle called Catharsis. Catharsis is what the audience experiences at the end of play. It comes from “the knowledge of how great the human being can be when it is called upon” (Rock). Aristotle gave the foundation of principles to tragedies for future writers to follow. Without these, plays would not be as dramatic and unforgettable as they are. Oedipus Rex is one of the plays that is equally as valuable today as it was when it was first written. Sophocles incorporated Aristotle’s principles in a way that makes every reader look at his life and value it more. Through the definition, the result of fate, and the audience’s reaction to this tragedy, Sophocles created the masterpiece, Oedipus Rex, that will be looked upon for many years to come as an example of the perfect tragedy.

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