

Blind to the Answer

Blindness is an important theme in *Oedipus the King*. The city of Thebes is under a terrible plague that a priest explains to the reader.

PRIEST: ...cattle sicken and die,
and the women die in labor, children stillborn,
and the plague, the fiery god of fever hurls down
on the city, his lightning slashing through us---
raging plague in all its vengeance, devastating
the house of Cadmus! And black Death luxuriates
in the raw, wailing miseries of Thebes. (31-37)

Thebes is in a horrible condition, and the people under Oedipus are suffering greatly. Oedipus is obviously unhappy about the situation, willing to do whatever it takes to restore his city back to a proper state. He tells a priest, “You can trust me. I am ready to help, / I’ll do anything. I would be blind to misery / not to pity people kneeling at my feet” (13-15). However, Oedipus likely does not experience the same sorrows that his subjects do. While he does feel pity and sadness for his people, he is privileged because he is a king and does not feel the same effects of the plague.

Oedipus turns a blind eye to all of the warnings that Tiresias the prophet gives him.

When Tiresias warns that it would be better if he was just sent home, Oedipus tells him that he is

withholding the word of god and that he is unfriendly towards the state that he was born in.

Oedipus continues to pester Tiresias about the solution that will end the plague.

OEDIPUS: What? You know and you won't tell?

You're bent on betraying us, destroying Thebes?

TIRESIAS: I'd rather not cause pain for you or me.

So why this... useless interrogation?

You'll get nothing from me. (376-380)

Tiresias is ridiculed and insulted until he says that Oedipus himself is the curse, the "corruption of the land" (401). This accusation obviously infuriates Oedipus and he claims that what Tiresias says is obscene. Oedipus rules out the possibility that he himself could be the murderer, ignoring everything that Tiresias tells him. Irritated, Oedipus ends Tiresias's interrogation. Before he exits, Tiresias says to Oedipus, "Go in and reflect on that, solve that. / And if you find I've lied / from this day onward call the prophet blind" (524-526). While Tiresias is physically blind, he is not blind to what is going on and what needs to be done for the plague on Thebes to end. He knows the truth about Oedipus's past and his future, but Oedipus is in denial of the fact that he might be what is causing his city so much hardship.

Oedipus's wife, Jocasta (also King Laius's ex-wife), reinforces his thoughts that what the prophet told him was not true. She tells him that it was prophesied earlier that Laius would be murdered by his son, so the son was cast out of Thebes when he was still a baby. She explained

that Laius was killed by thieves at a crossroads before Oedipus even arrived in Thebes. At that point, Oedipus realizes that what Tiresias said might be true. He worries that he *was* the one who murdered Laius after all because he killed a group of travellers at that same crossroads that Laius was killed at. He also remembers that the oracle of Delphi once told him that he would murder his father and sleep with his own mother.

“You are fated to couple with your mother, you will bring
a breed of children into the light no man can bear to see---
you will kill your father, the one who gave you life!” (872-875)

Oedipus becomes rightfully anxious and seeks validation that the prophecy is not true. When he confronts a shepherd who survived the attack at the crossroads, it is proven that he is not the murderer.

The king still worries that he still may have slept with his mother. Jocasta worries too, and tries desperately to stop Oedipus from getting any more information. However, Oedipus gets more out of the shepherd after threatening him with torture. It is revealed that he was the son of Laius but was raised by that shepherd. Even after the shepherd tried to keep Oedipus from fulfilling the prophecy, it still came true.

Oedipus's eyes are finally open and he sees who he truly is and what he has done. Jocasta realizes what she has done as well. She rips out her hair, weeps, and hanged herself. Oedipus saw her body hanging from the noose, and he realized once more the pain and suffering he caused. It all becomes too much for him and he pulls the pins from Jocasta's robes and stabs his eyes out, yelling.

“You,

you'll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused!

... Blind from this hour on! Blind in the darkness---blind!" (1405-1409)

Oedipus wishes to become blind again, to not witness himself what he has done. He could not look his children in the eyes, knowing that they were his siblings as well. Before, he was blind to the idea of such a thing ever relating to him at all. Now, he knows the atrocities he's committed and is physically blind. The chorus tells Oedipus that it's "Better to die than be alive and blind" (1498), possibly referencing being blind to the situation instead of literally being blind. This sticks with Oedipus, and after telling Creon to look after his daughters, he begs him to exile him far from the city. Although he cannot see, Oedipus leaves Thebes not being blind.