**Fate, Freedom, and the Tragic Experience: An Introductory Lecture on Sophocles's *Oedipus the King***

[*This is the text of a lecture on Sophocles's*Oedipus the King*written and delivered, in part, by Ian Johnston at Malaspina University-College (now Vancouver Island University) on October 11, 2000, in the Liberal Studies 111 class. The text is an extensive revision of an earlier lecture on the same play. All references to and quotations from the play are taken from the translation by Ian Johnston (available free on line at*[***Oedipus the King***](http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/sophocles/oedipustheking.htm)*)*. *This document is in the public domain, released October 9, 2000. It may be used in whole or in part by anyone for any purpose, without permission and without charge, provided the source is acknowledged]*

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**Introduction**

This week we are discussing one of the world's most famous plays, Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, and my purpose here is to offer a general introduction to this famous and often puzzling work, which, from the time of the Classical Greeks, has set the standard for a form of literature we call *dramatic tragedy*. I shall be addressing that claim in some detail later on, but before getting to that or to the text of the play itself, I would like to clarify a couple of terms which are going to be crucial parts of the interpretative remarks I have to offer. In this preliminary part of the lecture, I shall attempt to link what goes on in this play to other works we have studied (or will be studying).

The lecture thus falls into three parts: first, an initial discussion of some terms I wish to use (particularly the terms *fate* and *hero*), then an application of those terms to what we see going on in *Oedipus the King*, and finally, building on these two concerns, I would like to address the terms *tragedy*and *tragic vision of experience.*

**Fate, Fatalism, A Fatalistic World View**

In Sophocles's play, as in other works we have read, we encounter an obviously important notion, 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*?

Now, almost everyone will offer a definition of this quality, but it's surprising how those definitions can often differ. So let me attempt to clarify what, for the purposes of this lecture and beyond, I understand by these important terms.

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 my contribution to that), 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.

The terms fate and fatalistic do assert, however, that something or someone is in control, and hence the universe does not operate by *chance*.  We may have little to no accurate idea of why fate works the way it does (although differing fatalistic vision will provide different senses of just how much we can know and deal with fate), but at least there is something out there controlling what goes on.  To assert that *chance* rules all things (as Jocasta does in the play) is to claim that there is little we can do to control things and nothing we can learn about it, since the concept of chance suggests that what occurs is quite arbitrary, unrelated to any higher system of order or meaning.

All these points are clear enough, but it is important to insist upon them, because (as I shall mention later) such fatalism is, in many ways, profoundly different from what we believe nowadays, and thus books which hold up a fatalistic view of life (and that includes almost all books up until the eighteenth century) can provide difficulties for us, especially since a fatalistic view of life in some ways challenges some of our most cherished beliefs and can make us profoundly uncomfortable (a factor which is, of course, something which can make such books uniquely valuable to us).

If we hold a fatalistic world view or believe in fate, it is not uncommon to give that fate a name or series of names, that is, to provide some way of talking about or picturing such fatal forces. Hence arises (according to many scholars of myth) the entire concept of divinity or a divine family—superhuman personalities (who may or may not have human forms and attributes) who control the rules and the events of our lives according to their own principles, which may or may not be intelligible to us (more about that later).

For instance, it's clear that the visions of life in *Gilgamesh* and the Old Testament, for all their differences, are fatalistic in the sense I have described. Ultimate control over human life is exercised by non-human forces or personalities. The human beings who believe these fatalistic visions have names for such controlling figures. In the Old Testament there is only one such fatal figure; in *Gilgamesh*, as in the Greek epics, there are numerous controlling figures. But the principle is the same: our lives are not in our own hands.

Giving fate a name or series of names is a necessary imaginative act, for it permits the human subject to such fate to understand his situation. Such a symbolic construct makes the most important features of human life emotionally intelligible, allowing us to explain and generally to accept the game we are all in, even if we are conscious that we did not choose it and can imagine a better one. It also permits us in the process to establish a relationship with the controlling forces of our existence. Such a relationship often forms the basis for personal or communal religious practices, especially if I believe that such fatal presences do listen and can sometimes be persuaded by prayer, sacrifice, penitence, and so on.

Let me give you a personal example. A few years my son was killed very unexpectedly. At once, I, like everyone else, searched for an explanation. Why did this disaster have to happen? What in this best of all possible worlds could justify such an unwelcome event? And after reading all the police reports and talking to countless people, I could come up with only one explanation: The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Now, I'm not a particularly religious person. But that explanation (as unsatisfactory as many may find it) was enormously consoling. My son died because that's what fate, destiny, the Lord, or whatever one chooses to call it, had so determined. The event was not simply fortuitous, inexplicable. I could put a name and a personality on the disaster. I might not have been able to come up with a clear human reason, but I could at least make that event emotionally intelligible to me within the framework of a supportable belief system.

It's important at this stage to stress what such a fatalistic world view does not mean (or not necessarily mean). To call a world view fatalist or to believe in fate is not necessarily to characterize that fate as having any particular form. So, for example, a fatalistic world view might be extremely pessimistic, seeking in the non-human forces an irrational and often malignant force or personality which has little love for human beings and who takes a great delight in human suffering and death (or who, at least, permits it without much scruple). Alternatively, a fatalistic world view might well hold that the controlling forces or personalities of the cosmos are, on the whole, benevolent and friendly and that, if I attend carefully to what they demand, I may lead a generally satisfying life, perhaps even going on to some eternal happiness in the life hereafter. Such conflicting visions are both equally fatalistic, for they both share the sense that there is no human control over the rules and no method humans can devise for changing such rules. But they differ profoundly on how they view such fatal rules, the first being much more pessimistic than the second.

Another important point to note in discussing fatalism or a fatalistic view of life is that it does not therefore mean that human beings have no freedom. This point is crucial. The fates (or the gods, if I characterize my fatalistic vision in that manner) may indeed control all the rules and determine the good and bad things that happen to me, including my own death. But I am free to adopt towards that fate whatever attitude I choose. In other words, how I confront my fate is my free choice, the way in which I exercise my human freedom.

This point, indeed, should be clear enough after a reading of Exodus or *Gilgamesh*. For the key element in both books is an education in the appropriate stance towards the fatal conditions of life, something over which the people in the stories have complete freedom. God may control the world and the future of the Israelites, but they have freedom whether or not they believe in him. And that story shows us the great difficulty the Israelites, in their freedom in the desert, experience in maintaining the faith. God promises to reward them or their descendants if they believe, He gives them all sorts of demonstrations of His power, He punishes those who break faith and the rules which demonstrate that faith, but He does not determine their belief: they are free not to believe. Similarly in *Gilgamesh*, the hero goes through an extensive education before he freely chooses to accept his fate, return to Uruk, and live his life in the full and free acceptance of how the world operates.  Gilgamesh has the freedom not to return, after all.

I stress this point about the importance of free will in a fatalistic universe, because it's the key to understanding most of the ancient stores we read. The quality of being human, in such stories, comes, not from the extent to which the hero controls his own destiny or fate (which is ultimately in the hands of other forces), but from the attitude(s) he adopts in the face of a fatal destiny.

[To appreciate the point one has only to think about a modern sports hero, whose greatness derives not from changing the rules or inventing a new game or whatever, but from operating within the given structure of the game, over which he has no control. What he does control is his own effort and attitude to what is going on.  A sports figure who whines all the time about the unfairness of the rules is of little interest.]

For many of you I have been re-stating the obvious. However, for some here this concept of fatalism may seem rather odd or at least strange. For we North Americans (particularly those on the West Coast who are not Natives) are, in many respects the least fatalistic of people, and we spend most of our lives either denying the entire concept of a fatalistic vision of experience or trying hard to forget it. And we do that because we are heirs to a tradition, now about two hundred years old, which has attempted to deny the existence of fate in the old-fashioned sense I have been outlining above and to insist, by contrast, that human beings must be encouraged to take control over their own lives, to make their own rules, and where necessary to fight and conquer the given conditions of life, which are not fatal divine presences but human problems, capable of human solutions.  We have all enlisted in the fight against Humbaba, the divine monster in *Gilgamesh* and our most cherished cultural belief is that we can and will eventually win.

We, in other words, have been trying to take control of the game of life, to reshape it to our own purposes, and to deny the existence of some greater powers over which we have no control. We have done this by launching a massive project to assault as much of nature as we can, so as to bring it under human control, so that we are no longer victims of casual changes in climate, bacterial infections, harvest failures, natural disasters. And we have been, in many quarters, so spectacularly successful that we are encouraged to think that we have only a short route to go before we become, as the saying has it, masters of our own fate.

This point is clear enough if you think for a moment about how everyone in here carries a clear fate, and no one has to have a religious sensibility to accept it. That is, each of us carries a biological destiny in our genes, something which, it seems clear, is going to control a great deal of what happens to us, no matter what we do. But most of us here are aware that we are assaulting that genetic destiny with a vengeance, so as to gain control of it, to subsume the mystery of our biological fate under human rational control. And many of us are extremely confident that once that victory is complete, we will have gained a significant victory over fate, putting human life, and perhaps even that strongest reminder of our fate, our death, into our own hands.

This two-hundred year old project has been accompanied by a general hostility to fatalistic ways of looking at the world (religious and otherwise), because any notion of fatalism, the sense that the controlling forces of the world are much more mysterious and powerful than we can imagine is an uncomfortable reminder that we may be deluding ourselves about our own powers, that what we are up against may be a great deal more complex and unknowable than we can imagine. Severe natural disasters or new outbreaks of massive lethal epidemics and similar occurrences are often unpleasant reminders that, even if we don't like to think about fate, we may not have put our fates as much under our control as we might wish. This very play, Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, some have argued, is making precisely that point (I'll come back to this idea later).

**The Hero**

If we grasp something about the basic notion of a fatalistic universe (which is, as I say, fundamental to almost all traditional stories), then we can see why the principal character in many traditional stories has a unique importance. It's not simply a matter that the hero is very successful (although he often is) or that he he carries out deeds which no one else can carry out (although he frequently does just that). The hero is more likely to be someone who confronts fate in a very personal manner and whose reaction to that encounter serves to illuminate for us our own particular condition.

Most of us, after all, live in a community where we don't have to think about the implications of a fatalistic vision of the universe very much because our social group has educated us in a particular way of understanding the world and has provided, in addition to that education, all sorts of stories, rituals, institutions, and so on to reinforce our common approach to experience. We are all, to a great degree, creatures of habit in this respect. And so we don't constantly explore the basis for our belief or (if we stay more or less within our community) have to cope with any challenge to it.

The story of a hero who challenges or encounters fate and has to respond (particularly outside the community, physically or psychologically) can force us to confront some basic truths about life and about how what we like to believe rests on some fundamental assumptions. That can happen (and often does happen) even if the vision of fate which the hero has to deal with is quite strange to us. For the basic questions about life which a fatalistic vision of life raises transcend the particular details of that vision.

Let me explain. Many of us no longer believe in the Lord of the Old Testament, and we would be unlikely to sign on with Moses in his journey through the wilderness. But when we read that story, we have to confront a challenge: Who does control our lives? What sort of relationship do we have to that divine force? Does an acknowledgement of a fatal divine presence impose any moral obligations on me relative to my fellow believers? And so on. Moses gives us a vision of a particular answer to such questions. We don't have to share it in order for these questions to register as important and challenging. We may well prefer not to have to think about them most of the time. But if we are reading the Old Testament imaginatively, we can scarcely avoid them. And what comes out of that collision does not depend upon whether or not I share the faith of Moses in the Lord and the Lord's promise to His people's historical destiny (although the reader's evaluation of his response will certainly be different if he is a believer or a non-believer).

Similarly, I don't have to believe in the panoply of gods in *Gilgamesh* to sense that this is a fatalistic universe, that the hero's conduct forces him to confront his awareness of and attitude to the fates which control his destiny, and that his various responses (which go from ignoring fate, to challenging it, to accepting it) raise some serious issues for me.

[Incidentally, to digress for a moment, in this business, there's an important difference between someone we call a hero and someone we call a celebrity. The latter is someone who is very successful within the context of the social group, who has become well known because of his skill in existing within a particular set of rules, without having to question those rules. A hero, by contrast, is someone who confronts issues beyond the social rules, who encounters (often by a long physical journey) the fundamental conditions of life itself and who thus comes to some understanding, as Moses and Gilgamesh do, of the relationship between the way the world runs and the social group which bases itself on a shared community understanding. Celebrities, if you like, show us that our society can produce worldly success; heroes help us understand the reasons why our society works the way it does. Heroes, especially traditional heroes, are usually (often invariably) also celebrities, like Moses, Gilgamesh, and Oedipus. But heroes don't have to be celebrities (like Socrates).

Because heroes explore the roots of their society's beliefs (rather than just exploiting them), their stories will often be particularly illuminating about the particular cultural values of their communities. To understand why Moses is such a great hero (when, for example, he is in many ways unlike heroes from other cultures) is to understand a great deal about why the Israelites behave the way they do. To understand why Gilgamesh is such a great hero is to understand some things that lie at the heart of the vision of fate which *Gilgamesh* illuminates for us. To compare Moses and Gilgamesh as heroic characters is to come to an understanding of some of the fundamental differences between two famous and imaginatively moving fatalistic visions very different from our own understanding of the world.

The most significant feature of a traditional hero in comparison with the others in his community is his willingness to act, to make decisions (usually in response to a crisis of some kind), and to step forward and take risks in the face of fate at a time when such decisions are necessary.  In Greek tragedies, nowhere more clearly than in *Oedipus the King*, this quality is what separates the hero from the chorus.  The latter typically acknowledge their timidity or bewilderment or anxiety in the face of the crisis and look to the hero for leadership, often placing their hopes in the hero's record of previous successes.  They are followers and require someone to step out an assume the risks of making decisions about what the community should do.

**Oedipus the King: Some Initial Observations**

I would now like to establish some preliminary observations (at first, some very obvious ones) about Oedipus in order to establish, following some of the remarks I have made above, why we can consider him a great hero and what his famous story reveals about the vision of human life which this play illuminates for us.

Oedipus is, we recognize right from the start, a great celebrity, a national leader of a city-state at a moment of crisis. Thebes has been mysteriously attacked by the plague, something which both Oedipus and the citizen see as a manifestation of the fatal forces of the universe in which they live. The citizens are dying, and they want, if possible, to stop the disaster. The future of their city depends upon that.  They naturally turn to Oedipus, their firm and popular ruler.

The opening of the play makes at least two things clear to us. First, the citizens have enormous respect, even love, for Oedipus. They acknowledge not only his political power (which they have given him), but also his pre-eminence among all human beings for wisdom, especially in dealing with things they don't understand: "We judge you/ the first of men in what happens in this life/and in our interactions with the gods" (37-39). Second, we see in Oedipus a person of enormous self-assurance and self-confidence, a man who is willing to take on full responsibility for dealing with the crisis, a task which he clearly accepts as his own unique challenge. Oedipus has, we observe right from the opening lines, an enormously powerful sense of his own excellence, of his own worth (the most obvious indication of this point, something worth attending to throughout the entire play, is the frequency of the pronouns *I* and *me* in all of Oedipus's utterances).

The opening also makes clear to us that both the chorus's confidence in Oedipus and his strong sense of his own worth derive from past experience. Oedipus has saved the city before, at a time when many others had tried. And he did it with his mind, his intellect: he solved the riddle of the Sphinx. So the opening speeches clearly establish a harmonious relationship between ruler and ruled, based on past experience. Oedipus's confidence is not, in other words, merely an illusion. He has an exemplary record, the people have come to him because of that quality, and he fully intends to live up to that standard. Yes, he has a high regard for himself, but we are given to understand that that is quite deserved and shared by those over whom he rules.

And his first steps to deal with the crisis, that is, to send to the oracle for some instructions, are entirely appropriate. Given that fate has brought on the plague, what can fate reveal about its origins? Oedipus has, in fact, anticipated the request of the priest: he has already acted on his own initiative to address the crisis. And when the oracle's report is made public, Oedipus immediately and forcefully proclaims his famous curse against the murderer of Laius, the previous king. All this seems very appropriate. And, in fact, it does serve to reassure the people. Their fears are calmed, because Oedipus, their king who saved them before, is taking care of the problem.

At the same time, however, this scene gives us our first sense of what becomes inescapable later on. Oedipus, in accepting the responsibility, has no room for sharing the problem with anyone else. As a measure of his own greatness, he will resolve Thebes's distress, and he will do it openly for all to see. That's why he can dismiss Creon's suggestion that he listen to the report about the oracle privately first and why he can confidently declare "Then I will start afresh, and once again/ shed light on darkness" (159). He is taking on the task as a personal challenge, to be dealt with in his terms, not by delegating it to someone else or, indeed, by discussing the matter with others or, as we shall see, by listening to what others have to say and acting on their suggestions.

**Oedipus's Self-Assertion**

The quality I have just referred to (Oedipus's determination to deal with the issues himself), hinted at here in the opening scene, becomes increasingly evident as the play progresses. Indeed, it becomes his most obvious characteristic—his will to see this matter through on his own terms, no matter what the cost. And the more we learn about the ironic net of facts which he is uncovering about the murder, the more we see his determination grow. Even as he becomes increasingly aware about his own possible implication in the death of Laius, his commitment to finding an answer by himself remains strong.

This quality is the most puzzling and most important feature of Oedipus's character, and we need to appreciate it in order to understand both certain incidents in the play and the effect the play has on us. For Oedipus is fundamentally different from the heroes we have encountered so far. He is not like Moses, a man with hardly any sense of his own magnificence, a man who sees himself first and foremost as a servant of God charged with bringing religious and political discipline to his community. Nor is he like Gilgamesh, a man capable of learning to listen to others and finally to accept what they tell him about the nature of existence. Oedipus is a fiercely self-assertive man throughout his story. He is, to put the matter simply, a man who answers only to himself, to his image of his own greatness. The fact that he is acting in the interests of Thebes and trying to do the right thing (at least at first) doesn't alter this point at all. Oedipus is trying to live up to a standard, but it is not a standard given to him by God or one taught to him by others: the standard he answers to is the measure he sets of his own greatness.  So prominent is this feature of his character, that we cannot separate out clearly Oedipus's desire to help the city from his desire to manifest his own greatness.  In his eyes (and those of the chorus), of course, the two are identical.

For that reason, Oedipus has very little political sense, and the play has no political dimension to it at all. Creon seems to be the one with a political sensibility (where caution and a sense of political outcomes matter). Oedipus does everything publicly, as if hiding something would compromise his own greatness. He is Oedipus. He and everyone else recognize his greatness. To practice duplicity or political prudence would be to compromise his own sense of himself.

**Oedipus and Teiresias**

The most obvious indication of Oedipus's total commitment to himself is the famous quarrel with Teiresias. To some readers Oedipus's conduct here seems very odd, but this quarrel makes perfect sense if we see Oedipus as someone with no sense of ambiguity in life, as a person wedded to the view that his conception of what matters is, in fact, the truth.

By that standard, Oedipus has good reason to be angry with Teiresias and to suspect him. For Teiresias knows the murderer of Laius and will not tell. Oedipus has absolutely no sense that he might be involved at all. And since he has no conception of that as a possibility, it cannot be true. Thus, when Teiresias announces to Oedipus that "the accursed polluter of this land is you" (421), Oedipus's interpretation is clear enough: Teiresias must be lying, and he must have a reason, a secret agenda. A different man might well stop at this point, calm down, and ask Teiresias what he meant. That is to say, a different man might have stopped hanging onto his own certainties, confident that they were the truth, and have listened carefully to what someone else had to say (as Gilgamesh learns to do). But Oedipus is not that sort of person.  In fact, rather than listen to Teiresias, Oedipus reminds everyone of his previous triumph over the Sphinx (stressing that Teiresias failed to help Thebes then)—he derives a sense of what is right from who he is based on his past achievements, rather than from any more flexible appreciation for more complex possibilities.

Many first-time readers of the play are quick to criticize Oedipus here, to say that, in effect, he is too hot tempered or proud or whatever. But it's important to remember that Oedipus has every reason to be fully confident that he is not implicated in the murder of Laius, as well as to be confident in his own abilities to get to the truth (after all, he's done it before). True, he might be more cautious and polite here, but if he had those qualities he almost certainly wouldn't be king of Thebes in the first place or, if he were, he would be too prudent to launch the sort of investigation he does.

This last point (to which I shall return) is crucial to grasp. At the heart of Oedipus's greatness is an enormous (and, as we learn, naïve) self-confidence. And we can be quick to criticize that as a failing. But without this self-confidence, this absolute trust in his own power to act decisively, publicly, and quickly, Oedipus would be like the Chorus, impotent in the face of the crisis, looking around for someone to take charge. The very things that we might find lacking in his character are the very things that enable him to step up to the front, make decisions, and act to meet the crisis (and eventually, let us remember, to deal with it, since he does find the murderer of Laius and cleanse the city of plague).

**The Chorus and Other Characters**

The contrast between Oedipus and the Chorus, very prominent in a stage production, is perhaps less evident to a reader.  But it's important to note just how incapable they are of acting decisively.  They want something done, but they are all too aware of their own limitations, their fear in the face of the unknown, typically addressing their fates with acknowledgements of their own terror or fearful questions:

My fearful heart twists on the rack and shakes with fear.  
                  O Delian healer, for whom we cry aloud  
                           in holy awe, what obligation  
              will you demand from me, a thing unknown  
               or now renewed with the revolving years?  
                Immortal voice, O child of golden Hope,                        
                                     speak to me!  (185-191)

The Choral utterances are reminders of what we might call a normal response to experience—hesitation, fears, hopes, questions.  They want to believe in the benevolence of their gods, but they know all too well that that may not be there.  Confronting their fates with such feelings, naturally they lack the assertive self-confidence to do anything significant at the time of crisis, and they look to Oedipus to take actions because they not only have no idea what to do but lack the self-confidence to do anything.

Oedipus's treatment of Teiresias and Creon concerns the Chorus, and they make some attempt to calm things down, recognizing that Oedipus's quick judgment may be leading him to misjudge what Creon and Teiresias are saying.  But they will not abandon or criticize Oedipus because they understand that if some decisive action needs to be taken, he's the only one who can do it.

They certainly cannot expect Creon to tackle the problem head on.  After all, he makes it clear to everyone (including the readers) that he's primarily a cautious political operator, happy to play that game as second fiddle, with no desire to manifest his own excellence to the full.  One gets the distinct sense that if Creon were in charge of the investigation into the plague, he would (like so many college administrators) appoints a series of committees to meet behind closed doors to talk the problem away if possible.

And Jocasta clearly wants the whole matter just to go away.  She has precisely the wrong advice for Oedipus (not that he would listen to anyone's advice anyway) when she advises him to cease his investigation into his fate because there's no such thing, inviting him to live his life for the moment:

Why should a man whose life seems ruled by chance  
      live in fear—a man who never looks ahead,  
      who has no certain vision of his future.  
      It’s best to live haphazardly, as best one can. (1161-1164)

What she's doing here, of course, is inviting Oedipus to be someone else, someone who has no concern for living up to his reputation for knowledge and courage.  And, of course, Oedipus doesn't listen to her, just as he doesn't listen to anyone else.

One needs to measure Oedipus's stature against the other characters in the play, taking into account his capacity for decisive action in comparison to their inaction or unwillingness to think through the need for action.  Whatever one might like to say by way of criticizing Oedipus, that point remains.

**The Irony of Oedipus's Story: The Interplay of Fate and Free Will**

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 fated 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 happen 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).

We, of course, know otherwise. 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. We understand why he sees the world and himself the way he does (and we can applaud him 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).

[As an aside, one might observe that the very name *Oedipus*, which means either swollen foot or knowledge of one's feet or both, is a constant reminder of this ironic tension. Here the greatest of men, famous for his insight into the mysteries of life, is blind to the significance of his own name, an obvious clue to his past.]

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 we witness 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*.  He has done nothing by any standard of conventional morality to merit such a fate.  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 possible imagine. And the course of events which leads him to discover the truth about himself has been freely initiated and maintained throughout by himself.

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 (as in Exodus), nor does fate offer a secure and valued life in the community (as in *Gilgamesh*), 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.

**Oedipus as a Tragic Hero**

It is time now to turn to a term which I have deliberately kept out of the discussion until this point, the word *tragedy* and its corollaries *tragic hero* and *tragic vision*. But now, having considered very cursorily some of the major points about *Oedipus the King*, I would like to introduce it in order to amplify the discussion of the play and to place that in a wider context.

Oedipus's story, I have argued, focuses our 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 on the full responsibility for his own punishment. First, he stabs 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.

In this respect, Oedipus stands in marked contrast to Gilgamesh, who, in response to the death of Enkidu is placed in a similar situation and for similar reasons—he thought he knew all there was to know about life. But Gilgamesh learns from that experience and changes. His behaviour towards others undergoes a significant transformation, and he comes back to Uruk at the end of the story a changed personality. 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. While Sophocles's Oedipus is by no means our first tragic hero, he is certainly the most famous (outside of Shakespeare) and hence has exerted a decisive influence on literature in the West. Thus, I would like to spend a few moments looking at the general characteristics of his character, indicating how these help us to understand what we mean by a tragic hero (as opposed to other kinds of heroes), and then suggesting some observations about the vision of life which such a tragic hero exemplifies.

One major component in Oedipus's personality which helps to define him as a character we label as tragic is his attitude towards fate. Rather than aligning himself with it (as Moses does) or learning through experience to accept the mystery of fate (as Gilgamesh does) Oedipus chooses to defy fate. He will make his own decisions in his own way, and he will live with the consequences those 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 I have 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 (like the reader) 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.

We need to remember that he is always in a sense the chief architect of what is happening to him. What underscores the irony I referred to earlier is that the Oedipus is dealing with a situation in which he is increasingly having to cope with circumstances initiated by his own decisions. This last point is an essential one. What makes Oedipus so compelling is not that he suffers horribly and endures at the end an almost living death (a great many other non-tragic heroes suffer wretchedly). The force of the play comes from the connection between Oedipus's sufferings and his own freely chosen actions, that is, from our awareness of how he himself is bringing upon his own head the dreadful outcome. His freely chosen decisions are (we know) bringing things closer and closer to an inevitable conclusion. Looking forward in the play we can see 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, we can see a link of inevitable consequences arising from the hero's free decisions.

This is an important point because in common language we often use the term *tragic* or *tragedy* as a loose synonym for *terrible*, *pathetic*, or *horrible* (e.g., a tragic accident). But 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. 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.

Such a powerfully egoistic character is entirely different from someone like, say, Moses, who sees his life in terms of service to the Lord and the community of Israelites (there's little sense that Moses has anything we might call an ego) or like Gilgamesh, who is prepared to wander adrift throughout the world looking for answers and learning from others so that he accepts limitations on own sense of personal freedom. Moses and Gilgamesh both suffer a great deal, but they learn from that suffering and encourage others to do so. Oedipus learns that he has been horribly wrong about life, but that does not induce him to change, or beg forgiveness, or transpose the blame onto someone else or seek to put his life on a different footing.

And the effects of the stories are quite different. Moses's story serves to confirm the validity of the existing social order, to endorse the vision of social order which the Lord has passed down to His people through Moses. Yes, Moses dies, but he has lived a full life and is in sight of the promised land, which his people will reach very soon. And Gilgamesh's story (like the *Odyssey*) confirms the social order of the community (particularly as that is enshrined by relationships with women) as the very centre of the good life.

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. 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. In that sense it is a much more disturbing narrative (more about that later).

**Further Observations on the Tragic Hero**

If we take a step back from the story of Oedipus for a moment, we might want to ask ourselves this question: What is the point of telling such a story, or, more interestingly perhaps, why would we ever celebrate such a vision of life? This question is all the more compelling for us because the tragic hero and the vision of life his story holds up for us are something unique to the West, an inheritance passed onto us by the Greeks, something profoundly at odds with most of our religious sensibilities.

Put another way, we might wonder what there is to admire in a character like Oedipus, who confronts the world with a heroic self-assertion so strong that he will never compromise with social custom, prudence, or political strategy—not even when his own survival is at stake. Why should we admire a character who is willing to endure so much rather than to swerve from his self-directed course, even when that leads him to disaster?

The answer to such questions is very complex and much contested, and I can offer only a general indication. But I think it has something to do with our cultural obsession with personal freedom and integrity. For Oedipus (and tragic characters based on a similar vision of life) see life primarily in terms of these two qualities: freedom and integrity. So strong is their sense of the importance of these qualities that they simply ignore all the things which most of us do to remain in a stable well-functioning community, that is, to adjust our sense of our integrity and what we demand out of life to the demands of living in a community, limiting our desires and shaping our identity under certain pressures to conform.

Sophocles's play forces us to confront the disturbing reality about such an attitude: this ultimate expression of my own freedom to express myself, to demand from the world that it answer to me rather than the other way around, leads by a step-by-step process to inevitable destruction. For the fates that rule the cosmos are powerful and mysterious, and we have no right to assume that they are friendly. The human being who sets himself up to live life only on his own terms, as the totally free expressions of his own will, is going to come to a self-destructive end. However grand and imaginatively appealing the tragic stance might be, it is essentially an act of defiance against the gods (or whoever rules the cosmos) and will push the tragic hero to an series of actions (which he initiates in the full sense of his own freedom) culminating in destruction. We cannot live life entirely on our own terms for very long. We may think we can, but Oedipus is a reminder of the consequences. Fate is so much more powerful, complex, and hostile than we can possible imagine it, no matter what our consoling social narratives tell us.

By way of underscoring the nature of the tragic hero, consider for a moment some different varieties of heroic conduct. In many narratives, the hero, like Oedipus, faces a critical situation. But he deals with them in a very different manner—by trickery, disguise, cooperative action, for example (Odysseus is the great example from Greek narratives of such flexible conduct). In Moses's case, his actions are determined, not by self-initiated assertions of a powerful ego declaring its own preeminence, but by following instructions of the Lord on behalf the people (and he has to learn to trust the Lord and even go against his own sense of his abilities in order to serve). Gilgamesh becomes a mature leader only because he is capable of learning to move beyond the assertions of his ego, to acquire humility and an acceptance of his community's values.

In all such cases, the emphasis is very strongly on getting back to the community or hanging onto the community at all costs—the hero will do whatever is necessary within the framework of a shared belief system. And his greatness is measured by his success at confirming the importance of that belief system. To do so, the heroes must frequently compromise or hide their identity or undergo humbling experiences or admit they have been wrong, and so on. Once they display these characteristics, such heroes return home to a sense of continuity and happiness (hence, the frequent ending to such stories: "They lived happily ever after"). Such heroes we generally refer to as comic heroes, a term which does not mean necessarily that they are funny but rather that the ending of their stories is a celebration of community values, most often dramatically exemplified in the final dance (the *komos*).

The tragic hero, by contrast, rarely if ever displays such intellectual and emotional flexibility. He doesn't (in his mind) need to, since the purpose of his life is to live it openly on his own terms. And he ends his story with self-destruction, usually a self-chosen death (or suicide) because the only alternative to destruction (or self-destruction) is compromise, something he will not (or cannot) do. True, Oedipus does not die at the end of the story. But in a sense he is dead, moving out into the waste lands, beyond the community where he has created that sense of his own greatness. There is certainly no sense at the end of the play that Oedipus has anything to look forward to except death.  In most of the plays we call tragedies the death is physical.

[Parenthetically, we might note here that it's not entirely clear at the end of the play whether Oedipus returns to the palace or stumbles out into the wilderness beyond the city.  We know from the full Oedipus story that he eventually wandered out into the wilderness (as he wishes to do), but there are suggestions in the play that Creon is going to wait before allowing him to do that.  However, there is no doubt that having Oedipus wander off away from the palace is the more dramatically compelling ending].

**The Appeal of Tragedy**

Let me try to explore the differences I have briefly referred to above in another way, using the terminology of an interpreter of the comic and tragic experience, Murray Krieger. Krieger observes that most of us live in communities and that these communities are governed by shared rules of conduct, ethical norms. These ethical norms constitute limits beyond which we do not go, for fear of either fracturing the community or endangering ourselves. Thus, we are all in a sense ethical human beings. We usually keep our disputes and desires and assertions of the self within certain limits, resolving differences of opinion in accordance with procedures and institutions we have set up to deal with them. Such rules may be given to us in our traditions, by our religion, or by a shared rational agreement, or by all three. And we set up civic institutions to ratify this shared social code (courts, churches, schools, legislatures). All around us we place reminders so that we recognize them and act on them. And should we be forced, by circumstance, to recognize that we have become somehow displaced from the community (as Odysseus or Gilgamesh is geographically during his adventures), we strive as hard as possible to get back, to recover the communal joy and security of living within the limits.

Now, acting in accordance with these ethical rules always requires, Krieger observes, certain compromises. We cannot be or do all that we might want, simply because the full range of human possibilities includes things which transgress the limits, the ethical norms upon which the community depends. Thus, an important part of being an ethical member of the community is to control ourselves and, if necessary, to educate ourselves, so that we act within the limits set by the community.

Now, it is clear that in this sense Odysseus and the mature Gilgamesh and Moses are ethical human beings. They do not challenge the basic rules set up for the community; in fact, their survival depends upon recognizing and using those rules. Moses and Odysseus get upset when certain life forms, like the Cyclopes, or certain people, like the rebelling Israelites, do not observe the limits of civilized living. Odysseus is constantly battling bad luck and the various challenges that nature is placing in his way, but he never loses faith in, let alone challenges, the most important shared rules of the community. The same is true of Moses. Both Odysseus and Moses may be displaced from society, outside the community or in the business of creating a community, but they want to get back in, because they believe in and endorse what communal living stands for. At the end of the *Odyssey*, for example, Odysseus and his rivals are prepared to compromise (under the orders of Athena), to end their conflict, in order to achieve tranquility on which the community depends. Gilgamesh is willing to move beyond the loss of Enkidu and his earlier identity and to celebrate the walls of Uruk.

But Oedipus is quite different. He is acting in the interests of the community, but his primary motivation does not come from any sense of ethical propriety or accepted norms of behaviour. He answers only to himself, and he is not willing to compromise his quest for the truth in the name of any social principle which others, like Creon or Jocasta, may offer, because to do so would be to violate his sense of himself. In that sense, he is like Job throughout most of Job's story: the only answer he will accept is one from god. Like Job, Oedipus is extraordinarily stubborn, resisting any pleas for moderation or limits on his own desires for life on his terms.  The main difference between Job and Oedipus, of course, is that when fate reveals itself, Job bows down before it; Oedipus continues to defy it to the end.

This feature of the tragic hero as exemplified in Oedipus makes the tragic character a great paradox. For unlike most of us, the tragic hero emerges as anything but a social person. He apparently may begin that way, seemingly motivated by a genuine desire to help the community, as Oedipus and Job both do, but what emerges in the course of the action is that he is actually, deep down where it really counts, far more concerned with his own sense of himself, his own demands for justice on his own terms, than in compromising his desires with any awareness of ethical norms. He is, in fact, far less concerned about his own survival in the community than he is about being right, seeing things through to the very end.

What is there about such a character that commands our admiration? Why have we in the West placed such a high value on this sort of behaviour? For from one perspective tragic heroes, like Oedipus, are anything but attractive. They are usually very stubborn, egocentric, humourless, relentlessly convinced of their own rectitude, quick tempered, and unswerving in their pursuit of truth as they see it, with no room for those who would persuade them otherwise. These are not people whom one would, at first sight, like to invite to dinner or have as next-door neighbours or in-laws (Odysseus, Gilgamesh, or Moses, one senses, would be much better candidates for a social occasion).

And it's true that many people find the stance of the tragic hero unacceptable. Obviously, anyone who believes that certain ethical norms are laws of nature will find the tragic hero's stance simply idiotic—an vain egotistical posturing for self-glorification in defiance of the established truth of things. So it's not surprising that people who believe in the rational progress of human society will have no sympathy for tragedy. Walt Whitman, for example, the great democrat, expressed the views that America had no place for Shakespearean tragedy, and the first Commissar for Education in the Soviet Union, Lunacharsky, said much the same about the new communist state.

To admire the tragic character requires, not that we like him particularly, but rather that we see in his response to experience something magnificently heroic, an unwillingness to accept any shared understanding of experience, a refusal to compromise with any one else's answer as to what life is all about, a determination to push life beyond all simple ethical explanations and to discover for himself the full meaning of experience (that may not be his original intention, as I say, but as the story unfolds that becomes increasingly manifest). If that desire leads to self-destruction, as it usually does, then that is the price the hero is willing to pay. It's not that the tragic hero necessarily sets out with that goal in mind. But somewhere in the course of his adventures he is faced with a choice: compromise or continue on your own terms. The comic hero, I have suggested, is the one who compromises for survival and a safe return. The tragic hero is the one to chooses not to compromise for the sake of continuing on his own terms, even if that means he will soon come to a nasty ending.

The really puzzling question is this: Why do some people make that choice not to compromise. How do we arrive at a sympathetic understanding of such a radically individualistic stance? There is no way to do so, short of witnessing it in some way. For the tragic stance is profoundly irrational. It stems from something deep inside some people, and has to do with the way they feel about themselves and about life. Most of us, I take it, are not tragic by nature. We are ethical citizens, compromising all the time with our desires to push life's envelope in order to achieve a secure cooperative life in the community. But imaginatively we can see in the tragic hero the courage and resolution of someone who is not prepared to compromise and who is prepared to endure terribly through life and to accept an early death as the price one must pay to live life entirely on one's own terms. To the extent that the tragic figure represents some ultimate possibility of human striving and achievement, we honour it, even if we cannot find adequate rational reasons for conferring communal worth upon it. A culture which values personal freedom and integrity will see in the tragic hero the ultimate symbol of those values.

What I am referring to is summed up in the famous dictum of Horace Walpole: Comedy is for the person who thinks, tragedy for the person who feels. A thinking person, wedded to some rational communal understanding of life, will often find no sense to the tragic stance, since it seems to violate all that community life demands from the individual in the name of joy, security, and justice. Only if I feel within me an emotionally imaginative contact with the tragic hero can it "mean" anything to me.

Krieger puts it this way. As human beings, he says, we have two basic urges—first, to survive in the community and to live on in our family and its descendants, and second, to have our individual life mean something, to have our integrity, our sense of ourselves as unique individuals uncontaminated with any compromise, count for something which endures. Comedy, Krieger argues, is the literary form celebrating the first impulse; tragedy the literary form celebrating the second. In comedy we are prepared to compromise our human individuality in order to secure a life in the enduring community. In tragedy the hero is prepared to sacrifice everything in order to guarantee his integrity.

That is one reason perhaps why comedy, for all its celebration and fun at the end, its sense of a community happily restored to a meaningful ethical way of life which will provide purpose to life, often contains within in a sense of defeat. There is something unwelcome to some people about that famous conclusion, "And lived happily ever after." For comedy inevitably involves a turning away from ultimate questions about the full importance of an individual life and settling for a significance provided by the community's shared values, even when we think (as we may do) that those values are not true or do not answer to everything we might like to achieve for ourselves.

That sense of a let down may also be the clue to one of our most intriguing characters in literature: the clown with the broken heart (Pagliacci, Rigoletto, Feste, Red Skelton, Tony Hancock, and others), the figure who has turned away from any final confrontation with the mystery of life and has devoted his energies to celebrating the joys that are possible in the community, in the full awareness of their illusory nature. We celebrate the fun, because the alternative is too dangerous to contemplate or endure.

Tragedy, by contrast, for all the pain and suffering the hero goes through, often brings with it a sense of triumph, at least to the extent that we have witnessed a possibility of the human spirit which is not prepared to define life by the limits imposed by the community and its shared rule-bound expectations. The tragic hero is a reminder that there are those who are prepared to tear apart the comforting illusions of cosmic order and justice by which we live in our communities, who have the courage to demand from life the truth of things, even if that truth is uncomfortable, as it surely is in Sophocles, or devastatingly pessimistic as it is in Euripides.

That sense of triumph is frequently accompanied by a sense of unease. After all, in tragedy we are celebrating the possibility of a human spirit's moving into uncharted territory in which our well loved social values stand revealed for what they may well be: illusions which we like to believe are the truth but which may be quite wrong.

For example, it is common to observe that *Oedipus the King* may well be a prophetic insight into the nature of our human confidence in our ability to confront fate. Perhaps we, in our scientific confidence, in the optimistic spirit with which we think we can deal with fate, may turn out to be like Oedipus, going up against something much more mysterious and complex and malignant than we can imagine. I don't want to push this interpretation here, but such an approach to the play might well help to generate some unease about the self-assertive confidence with which we declare our own superiority over fate and seek to solve all questions with those tools which seem to have served us so well in the past, our intelligence and daring. Do we even fully understand our own swollen feet?

**Interpreting Tragedy**

The tragic vision is particularly difficult to interpret, partly because it can be so difficult to accept the vision of the cosmos which it reveals. If the story of the tragic hero is a moving artistic reminder of the extent to which the universe is neither comforting nor rationally just, no matter how much we might like to think so, then as viewers or as readers it is striking at some of those things we most like to believe about the world.

Hence, we often try to moralize the tragic experience away. We try to convert the story of Oedipus from that of a supremely gifted and heroic individual who takes on life on his own terms and discovers the full mysterious destructiveness of the cosmos into a comforting morality story which tells us that Oedipus suffers because he sinned. If only he hadn't been so arrogant or so irascible or so egotistical or belligerent when confronted by his father and his entourage, or whatever, he would have been all right.

This approach to Oedipus or to any Sophoclean tragedy is, of course, disastrous, because it entirely misses the point. Of course, if Oedipus had been someone else, he wouldn't have ended up the way he does. But then he would not be the great person he is either. When we interpret the play in that way, we are like Job's comforters, trying to fit a painful and complex human situation into a moral straight jacket where we can understand it easily and without discomfort.

Oedipus suffers because he is a great human being. Yes, he makes an error, but it is his greatness as a human being which leads him into this error. That word error is important. It comes from Aristotle's concept of *hamartia*, that characteristic of the tragic hero which leads to his destruction. This phrase is often translated as "tragic flaw." And that translation has unfortunately encouraged the moralizing tendency, because the word "flaw" suggests some corrigible moral error, some sin, which he shouldn't have done.

The word "error" is more useful, I think, because it is closer to the Sophoclean idea that the tragic hero initiates his own downfall, not because he is somehow a sinner, but rather because he is so excellent, so capable, so confident of his powers, and so brave that he will take on the consequences. His error is inextricably tied up with his human greatness. If he were a lesser human being, like Creon, he would not suffer the way he does. But then he would not have the tragic greatness Oedipus manifests either.

Putting it another way, we can say Oedipus is capable of doing what he does because he is uniquely brave, excellent, and intelligent. But the tragedy reminds us that even the best and the bravest, those famous throughout the world for their knowledge, are doomed if they set themselves up against the mystery of life itself, and if they try to force life to answer to them, they are going to self-destruct. His error, if that is the word we must use, is not sin but *ignorance*, and he is ignorant of what he is up against because he is a human being. Even the very best of us, the ones with most reason to be confident of our powers of understanding, have no idea what fate is really like, what it has in store.

(One might briefly mention at this point that Oedipus is frequently interpreted as an allegory for the Athens Sophocles lived in, a city which, like Oedipus, is heading for total destruction because of its amazing achievements. The play is thus not a warning that Athens ought to behave differently but rather a tragic vision of the inevitability of Athens's decline and self-destruction. Others, as I have mentioned, following the same allegorizing tendency, have seen in Oedipus the story of western civilization, especially the story of its confidence in its own powers to shape nature and make it answer to its own conceptions).

This desire to moralize the tragic experience is understandable perhaps, but it takes the human mystery out of this complex vision of experience. It's true there are many stories called tragedies, especially from the middle ages, which see punishment for sin as the main point of the play. Whether we should call these tragedies or not I'm not going to discuss. But I want to insist that they are fundamentally different from what Sophocles is presenting in his play.

That is one reason why so many people find the end of Job something unsatisfying. For Job's stance throughout most of his story is very close to that of a Sophoclean tragic hero (comparisons between Job and Oedipus are frequent). But Job does not push his demands on the cosmos to the limit. When he comes to his recognition of the truth of the universe, he bows in acquiescence to it. That experience does not shatter him. Quite the reverse, it leads to great material and emotional rewards, and thus to a sense of comic closure. When the chips are down, Job does what Gilgamesh does: he bows down before the fates which rule the world, aligning his desires with theirs.

For the same reason, the tragic vision evaporates if we believe that there is some life after death, if, that is, the life of the hero is not over and that his death is simply the door to a future life in heaven or elsewhere. What gives the tragic story so much power is the notion that whatever human life is about, that significance ends with death. To add something about "living happily or unhappily ever after" is to take away that sense of a final ending upon which our admiration for tragic heroism depends. If you think about it, there's a significant difference between someone like Oedipus and, say, a Christian martyr who suffers horribly in the name of a faith shared by a community of Christians and who goes onto an eternal reward. The conduct may be heroic and the suffering just as intense on a physical level, but it is not in the same Sophoclean sense tragic, since individual existence is not over.  And the promise of the reward in an afterlife clearly endorses rather than challenges the ethical norms by which the martyr lived and died.. Hence all traditional orthodox Christian views of life cannot be tragic but are inherently comic (a divine comedy).

Parenthetically, it's interesting to observe that although most of Shakespeare's comedies take place in a recognizably Christian community, when he comes to write tragedies, he generally (but not exclusively) prefers to shift the time of the play to a pagan or pre-Christian epoch. Thus, the sense of a Christian afterlife does not enter into the vision of life held up by the play.

**The End of the Tragedy**

By way of emphasizing some of the points I have been considering, let me briefly mention another point: how dramatic comedies and tragedies end. Dramatic comedies typically end with some communal celebration, especially of those things most closely associated with the survival of the community: betrothals, weddings, christening, a family feast and dance, from which the evil forces have been excluded (either because they have been exiled, killed, punished, or have reformed). The end of the (non-satiric) comedy thus becomes an enthusiastic endorsement of the ethical norms (often newly reconstituted) which ensure community stability.

The tragic drama, in Sophocles especially, tends to end, not with the death of the hero, but with the community's reflections upon the significance of the life which has just come to an end. In this respect Oedipus is unusual, since he is not dead (although his blindness and his expulsion from the human community indicates that his life in Thebes as a leading citizen is, in effect, over). The tragic hero's death (real or living death) also invites a community celebration, but it tends to be something much more muted, the community's attempts to come to terms with what the hero's story reveals about how the cosmos really works.

The carrying out of the corpse, traditionally the final episode in a tragedy, is thus a reconstituting of the community, but not in a way that emphasizes the joyful fun of community standards. Rather, the citizens are united by a new awareness of the mystery of life, something they, in their daily lives, rarely think about and never discover for themselves. It is given only to the greatest of heroes to take on the intense spiritual journey, and the conclusion of the tragedy, especially in Sophocles, typically confers upon this extraordinary individual the awed respect of a community which has benefited from his willingness to live life to the extreme (even if the reasons for that respect are very hard to explain rationally). They may not know exactly what to make of the experience (for the full tragic sense resists easy moral summation), but they are intensely aware of having been given a glimpse into something truly moving, something beyond the veil of more comforting ethical norms.

So while we wait to see that final day,  
      we cannot call a mortal being happy  
      before he’s passed beyond life free from pain.  (1812-1814)

**Postscript: Some Observations on the Historical Development of Tragic Drama**

In seeking to elucidate the meaning of the term *tragic drama*we might usefully consider a few historical facts, starting with the point that tragic dramas started as those plays the Athenians put on in the Great Festival of Tragic Drama held at the annual religious festival in honour of the god Dionysus. Writers and actors were commissioned to take part in a competition, and prizes were awarded for the first, second, and third prize. Leading citizens were strongly encouraged to pay for the production.

The festival of tragic drama offered works which focused upon the life, suffering, and death of a great hero, usually one associated with the mythological past--Oedipus, Medea, Xerxes, Agamemnon, Ajax, Achilles, and so on. The audience was invited to witness the depiction and the celebration in art of the culminating event in a great hero or heroine's life, usually the struggle that ended with the main character's death and the community's reflection on that death.

Now, historians of literature, from Aristotle onwards, have for a long time been puzzled about why such a form of drama would emerge in the first place. This is all the more curious, since tragedy is not a form of drama found elsewhere. Unlike comedy, which we can see arising in many different cultures often in very similar ways, tragic drama seems to have been unique to Greece, and tragic drama is one of the most distinctively western traditions passed down to us.

So far as we can tell, tragic drama began in Athens sometime in the sixth century with an actor called Thespis. According to Aristotle's account (in the *Poetics*) originally a tragic drama consisted of a single actor and a large chorus. This feature suggests that tragic drama began as a choral celebration in memory of a dead hero in which someone, probably the leader of the chorus, at some point began to act out the exploits of the person being celebrated. That is, the leader of the chorus took on the role of the dead hero (thus making the celebration dramatic, since for drama to occur someone must pretend to be someone else, take on the role of a different character). Gradually, it seems, the number of actors increased. Aristotle tells us that Aeschylus was the first to introduce a second actor, Sophocles the first to introduce the third actor, and by the time of Euripides it is clear that the number of main actors has increased, and the importance of the massive chorus has decreased.

What should have led the Athenians to this unique form of drama is hard to figure out. Some historians have sought a clue in the word tragedy, which seems etymologically to have something to do with *tragos*, a goat. We know that the first actors clothed themselves in a goat's skin and that the goat was associated with Dionysus, the god at whose festival the tragedies were performed. But beyond that, speculation takes over. One critic has observed that tragedies are like goats, all hairy in front and bald behind. I offer that definition for whatever use you can make of it.

I don't propose here to survey the various theories that have been proposed as explaining the origin of this form of drama, except to observe that the celebration of the famous hero at the culminating point of his or her life may well have something to do with the Athenians' central concern with human excellence as it manifests itself in competition. For the tragic figure is, above all else, one who engages in the most dangerous and challenging of competitions, the struggle to assert one's human individuality to the fullest possible extent in the face of the most intractable opponent, the very nature of life itself--a subject first explored in Homer's *Iliad*, a source book for many Greek dramatic tragedies.

It is important to note that from the start the Athenians associated tragic drama with an important religious festival. For them, whatever took place in the experience of witnessing a tragedy was central to the religious life of the community. And the fiercely competitive nature of the contest and the esteem given to the winning playwright also indicate that tragic drama was for them a vital part of the community life.

The later history of tragedy is a complex business. As one can imagine, the tragic vision of experience (as exemplified in Sophocles) is not compatible with the much more optimistic fatalism of Christianity, with its emphasis on the good life as one of faith, hope, and charity within the Christian community and an eternity of joy or punishment afterwards. Many Christian writers used the term tragedy for relatively simple morality plays in which tragic figures were essentially great sinners whose death reinforces Christian doctrine, something very different in emphasis from Sophocles's vision.

In the Renaissance something like the old vision reappears in the great tragedies of Shakespeare (comparisons between *Oedipus* and *King Lear*, for example, are commonplace). But once we reach the eighteenth century and the powerful appeal of the new rational reforms of society and the aggressive agenda of the new science, traditional tragic drama becomes harder to write and to sell to a public which has little taste for such a challenge (for our culture is losing that sense of fate on which classic tragedy depends, except in some new literary forms, like the novel) and, with some important exceptions (notably Ibsen) tragic drama loses its vitality as a continuing literary form or artistic vision