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Oedipus Rex as a Tragedy of Aristotle: Tragedy of Fate or Character

Oedipus Rex as a Prominent Tragedy

“Oedipus Rex”; the tragedy; has been mentioned as one of the best tragedies ever written by Sophocles. Despite of its controversial genre, it gained fame in many countries. The play was translated in many modern languages and performed in the whole world. A reason due to which, “Oedipus Rex” got fame is that it was mentioned in “Poetics”. Aristotle, Greek philosopher and the author of “Poetics”, mentioned Oedipus Rex as an ideal tragedy. Numerous critics do not consider “Oedipus Rex” as perfect tragedy; they are of the view that if “Oedipus Rex” is judged in Aristotle’s requirements of tragedy even then it cannot be regarded as a Greek tragedy. On the other hand, some critics say that Aristotle rightly adjudged “Oedipus Rex” and it is a perfect Greek tragedy as per necessities of “Poetics”. Hence, this matter needs consideration and explanation is required to decide the genre of “Oedipus Rex”.

Tragedy and its Purpose

Two types of genres have been mentioned in “Poetics”, in which one is comedy, whereas second is tragedy. Undoubtedly, “Oedipus Rex” is not a comedy then definitely it is tragedy but the matter of discussion is that if it is tragedy then why not it fulfills the constraints of a perfect tragedy. Aristotle defined “Tragedy” in his book “Poetics in the following words:

“[tragedy is] the imitation of an action that is serious and also as having magnitude, complete in itself.” - Poetics by Aristotle

It is not the main purpose of a tragedy. He concludes the definition in the following's words:

“tragedy effects the catharsis of pity and fear.” - Poetics by Aristotle

Hence, the main aim of tragedy is the catharsis of pity and fear. Aristotle did not define the word catharsis yet in simple words, it means that when hero's sufferings shock the audience then audience put its feet in hero's shoes and shares his feelings with the character. This action causes the arousal of feelings and emotions of pity and fear. Thus, we call it catharsis. To summarize the definition of tragedy, as mentioned in poetics, we can say that following are the fundamentals of a tragedy: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song.

“Oedipus Rex” as Tragedy in Aristotle's Eyes

Aristotle referred “Oedipus Rex” as ideal tragedy in his book “Poetics” because it perfectly is the imitation of an action. It is serious and also effects the catharsis of pity and fear. Moreover, it has magnitude and indeed it is complete in itself; it has a proper beginning, middle and end. Aristotle focused on the plot of “Oedipus Rex” which is the prominent element of a tragedy. To understand the importance of plot, focus on the following statement of Aristotle: “Without action there cannot be a tragedy there may be without character” (Poetics by Aristotle).

Sophocles embroidered the plot of “Oedipus Rex” very skillfully, due to which it became favorite of Aristotle. “Oedipus Rex” starts when people of Thebes are suffering due to an unknown disease. King of Thebes tries to find solution of the problem; that part of the play unveils different things. Thus, middle of plot is the combination of beginning and its leads the plot towards end. The plot has also a proper end as it has no further event but a tragic finish. Thus, Sophocles masterly knitted every event of plot in this tragedy.

Character of "Oedipus Rex" is also favorite of Aristotle; he belongs to the class of kings; his nature is noble; he is good but not perfect; his hamartia is the reason behind his sufferings; he falls from prosperity to adversity. These requirements of a tragic hero cause the catharsis of pity and fear. As regards the other requirements of tragedy, Sophocles tried his best to knit them perfectly. Hence, there is no denial the fact that "Oedipus Rex" does not go beyond the requirements of tragedy as defined by Aristotle in "Poetics". Due to these reasons, he considered "Oedipus Rex" as best Greek tragedy.

Modern Critics on "Oedipus Rex as Tragedy"

Modern critics do not agree with Aristotle. They agree that "Oedipus Rex" has a perfect plot but Aristotle ignored that concept of catharsis. Main problem with "Oedipus Rex" is its hero, who seems mere a victim of circumstances. They say that Oedipus Rex does not suffer due to hamartia. It was the will of gods that Oedipus Rex would kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus Rex tried his best to escape from his fate but his efforts were useless. When audience watches the downfall of Oedipus Rex it does not shock the audience. It only gets sympathy of the audience which is against the notion of tragedy.

Thus, "Oedipus Rex" does not affect the catharsis of pity and fear. Downfall of Oedipus Rex seems predestined. His hubris is not responsible for his downfall. Gods are responsible for the fall of Oedipus Rex. Aristotle himself has said that the character should suffer because of "hamartia", "err", or "frailty". In case of "Oedipus Rex", only gods are responsible for his adverse circumstances, therefore, there is no concept of catharsis in "Oedipus Rex".

On the contrary, some critics, who are fan of Aristotle says that Oedipus Rex suffers due to hubris. His rash judgment, his anger and quick decisions are responsible for his downfall. He definitely has flaw in his character. Thus, gods are less but character is more

responsible for his ruination. He could have saved himself if he did not kill his father. He should have not married a woman who was of his mother's age. Be that as it may, the concept of gods is ignored. If it is the case, then we may call "Oedipus Rex" as a perfect tragedy.

Conclusion

To conclude, Oedipus Rex is a perfect Greek tragedy. In modern days, dramatists and novelists have altered the definition of tragedy but in those days, people and writers considered Aristotle's definition of tragedy as best definition. Whether Sophocles followed Aristotle or vice versa but it is true that tragedy was defined in that era. As mentioned earlier, Aristotle did not concentrate on character but plot of tragedy. If character is ignored even then "Oedipus Rex" is considered as a wonderful tragedy (a tragedy is possible without character – said Aristotle). Hence, the play "Oedipus Rex" belongs to the genre of "Greek Tragedy".



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