

## On the Irrationalism in King Oedipus

Shuang Zhou<sup>1, a</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of literature, Yangtze University, Hubei province Jingzhou city, 434000, China.

<sup>a</sup>26250586@qq.com

### Abstract

**King Oedipus was a model of heroic tragedy and fate tragedy in ancient Greece. In the resistance between man and fate, the author eulogized man's free will and spirit of resistance, and embodies the sublime beauty of human nature. At the same time, re-examining this work from the perspective of existentialist philosophy, it reflected the thinking of human's survival situation. It also reflected that the world was absurd and life was limited. In the face of the absurdity of fate, human's rationality was limited. King Oedipus had become the earliest enlightenment of Western irrationalism.**

### Keywords

**Existentialism, Absurdity, Irrationalism.**

### 1. Introduction

King Oedipus was the representative work of Sophocles, one of the three great tragic writers in ancient Greece. It was praised by Aristotle as a "perfect tragedy" and was regarded as a model of Greek tragedy. From ancient times to the present, there were many scholars who discussed the tragedy of Oedipus's killing his father and marrying his mother. But in conclusion, the main scholars studied it from the perspective of fate, fault, scapegoat mechanism, Oedipus complex and so on. Critics of different times would find different meanings from it, because Oedipus's tragic fate was not only the tragic fate of Oedipus. The fate of the ancient Greeks was a reflection on human nature and the general living conditions of human beings from the perspective of philosophy of existence. King Oedipus, through Oedipus's resistance to fate, demonstrated human's free will and transcendental spirit. At the same time, it also expressed the recognition of human's finiteness, reflects on the limitation of human's rationality and shows irrationalism.

### 2. Unrecognizable Self

The story of King Oedipus began with the riddle of the Sphinx, this riddle of the "human" that was fully reflected by the Greeks in their efforts to explore themselves. In the Temple of Delphi, a famous rumor was engraved: "Know yourself". Socrates also said, "Knowing yourself can understand life" and "Wisdom means knowing yourself and ignorance". At the same time, he also repeatedly stressed that the most fundamental task of philosophy, and the most important mission of life was to know oneself. King Oedipus also tried to answer the riddle of what human beings are. When Oedipus solved the riddle, he pushed himself into a terrible abyss. This riddle showed that everyone was first a little baby without the power of a chicken, then grew into a powerful adult, and finally from young to old, and finally to death. On the surface, Oedipus found the right answer, but in fact, he did not really solve the problem of "knowing oneself". Apart from the obvious phenomenon that everyone was bound to die from birth, this riddle did not answer the questions that everyone was eager to understand, such as what was human and how to grasped his own destiny. Everyone in the life journey from birth to death, the road ahead was completely unknown, there was no stage that they could control. As Oedipus in the story, when he was a baby in the shackles, he could only let his parents hurt his heel and abandon him

in the wilderness. When he grew up, he seemed to be able to choose himself life, escape from the nominal parents, defeat the Sphinx and become a slaying king, insist on tracing the murderer who killed the old king, and strive to hold the destiny in his own hands. But he step by step to push himself to the established path of fate. He once thought that he was a hero against fate, a king of justice and virtue, but in the end, when he stabbed his eyes and exiled himself, he found himself a sinner who killed his father and married his mother.

Man was humble and small in the universe, just as Montaigne had repeatedly recited his finiteness and ignorance in his Essays. In *The Record of Thoughts*, Pascal believed that people were very small in nature and limited in all aspects. But few people realized that everyone, like Oedipus, always believed that they could constantly transcend reality, got rid of all kinds of constraints and pursued higher freedom, and became their ideal self. From the beginning, Oedipus firmly believed that with his own strength, he could control his own destiny and master the world, thus becoming a hero in the eyes of others. This could be seen from Oedipus's attitude in tracking down the real murderer who killed the old king. In the process of pursuing the killer, Oedipus also had a vague premonition of the truth. He could stop pursuing the truth and obstruct its appearance. But he did not do so. In addition to his persistent search for the truth, he always believed in his heart that he was not the sinner. But when the final truth was revealed, Oedipus found that the killer he persisted in was tracing himself. This ironic ending was that fate was ridiculing ignorance and blindly optimistic humans.

The limitation of human beings determines that human beings could never transcend destiny. The pursuit of transcendence was doomed to be a tragedy that ended in failure. In ancient Greek mythology, fate occupied a dominant position and it was a theme that never failed. Like the fourth role on the stage, it played an important role. From the tragedy of Oedipus, we could see the strength and ruthlessness of fate. Even if Oedipus had super will, noble virtue and super wisdom, he could not get rid of the relentless teasing of fate.

### 3. Tragedy Caused by Reason

Heidegger once said that human beings were a group of hopeless accidental creatures. When people came to this world, they were thrown into this inevitable world. When people came to this world, they were always in extreme accidents. The encounters of Oedipus since birth had reflected the existence of contingency in life. Oedipus was born and was taken by a servant to the hillside outside Thebes to prepare to discard. At this time, the servant accidentally encountered the shepherd of Kototos. It happened that the king of Kototos had no children, so the shepherd took this. The child of the ankle was given to the king. When Oedipus heard that he would kill the god-in-law of the gods in the temple, he left his hometown to escape his fate and passed through a three-way intersection, and happened to meet his father. Face the three-way intersection, Oedipus chose the go to Thebes. The follower of the old king who escaped from the three-way intersection happened to be the servant who was ordered to discard Oedipus. The messenger of Kototos also happened to be the one who took Oedipus and gave it to King Kototos. The meeting between the two made Oedipus's life experience clear. The life of Oedipus, as Heidegger said, was always in extreme accidents. Coincidentally, the followers of the old king who had escaped from the three-way intersection were the servants who were ordered to drop Oedipus, and the messenger of Kototos happened to be holding Oedipus and giving it to King Kototos. When they met, the truth about Oedipus's life was revealed. The life of Oedipus, as Heidegger said, was always in extreme accidents.

From these contingency factors, the fate of Oedipus seemed to be changeable at any time. If the servant did not meet the shepherd, if he appeared at the three-way intersection at another time, if he chose another road at the three-way intersection, etc., any unintentional choice may change Oedipus fate. However, countless accidents had brought the inevitable fate

of Oedipus, and contingency only indicated the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the future of man. As Iokas said in the play, "Occasionally control us, the future can not see clearly"[1].

Oedipus King expressed the author's perception of the world through the inevitability of the accident. Accident was the essence of the world. There was no inevitable law in the world. Everything was accidental and random, so the world was absurd. In the face of accident and absurdity, human reason was limited, even powerless.

The understanding of the finiteness of human reason expressed in Oedipus King could be said to be the earliest source of irrationalism in the 20th century. In the 20th century, the irrationalism trended of thought in the West, especially the philosophy represented by existentialism, generally believed that the world and human beings themselves had no laws to speak of, no innate essence, and everything was accidental. So everything was beyond the control of reason. When people felt that the world and human existence were groundless, they would feel lonely, empty and painful.

In Sophocles's works, Oedipus could be regarded as the representative work of human reason. He had many advantages, such as wisdom, courage, reason and responsibility. All these seemingly superior characters did not extricate him from the fate of tragedy, but led him step by step to despair. From an objective point of view, the tragedy of Oedipus was caused by the established fate, but from a subjective point of view, the disaster was also caused by Oedipus's self-righteous rationality.

Socrates lived in a time of rational publicity. Socrates of the same age defined human beings as "an existence that can give rational answers to rational questions", [2] this was a time when rational philosophy flourished. However, with the tragic ending of Oedipus, Sophocles reflected more reflection on human reason, even mockery. When Oedipus learned of the oracle and knew that he would kill his father and marry his mother, he felt he will be murderer. So he escaped to change his fate. As a result, in the process of escape, Oedipus killed his father at the three-way intersection. Later, with his wisdom, he solved the mystery of Sphinx and was elected king for eliminating disasters for the people of Thebes. As a result, he unwittingly married his own mother and gave birth to children. Oedipus, with his wisdom, courage and rationality, tried to escape from this terrible fate. He also believed that he could do it, but every time he tried, he pushed himself one step further towards fate. In this age of advocating rationality, Oedipus could be regarded as the representative of rationality. He acted according to secular moral standards, but eventually went to the abyss of sin in his self-righteous judgment. Oedipus never doubted his wisdom, nor did he realize his one-sidedness in reason. In his opinion, as long as he resisted this fate with his free will and relies on his rationality and wisdom, he could get rid of the tragic fate. In the play, this kind of one-sided rationality made him unable to see his own mistakes, made him become rough and suspicious, conceited and arbitrary, and unwilling to listen to other people's opinions. On the one hand, he believed that he would find out the truth. On the other hand, he firmly believed that he would not be a sinner. "I am not confused about my own affairs". His optimism and self-confidence made him emotional and subjective. When Teresias refused to name the murderer who killed the king, he said that "Teresias you are a terrible thing, your temper is like a stone!" Finally, when he forced Teresias to imply that he was the murderer, he rebuked, slandered and mocked the prophet, "I think you are the mastermind of this crime", and then suspected that Corian had bought eresias to take the throne and murder him. When things did not develop in accordance with his expectations, he was unreasonably suspicious of Corleone. He thought Corleone framed himself because he was jealous of himself. Then the Queen stopped him from seeking the truth. He thought that she was enjoying her noble family. Reason made him crazy and blind, and finally lost his reason. He was like a threatened lion, madly attacking people and things around him. When Laius uttered the oracle of "killing his father and marrying his mother", when he learned the location and

appearance of the old king's murder, he subconsciously identified himself as the murderer, and his heart was extremely shocked and frightened. His fierce reaction had exposed his subconscious mind - he was sure he had killed his father and married his mother. But out of subconscious self-protection, he was reluctant to admit it. Including his attacks on Teresias and Corleone, they all reflected his subconscious self-protection and his extreme confidence in his rationality.

Rationality occupied an important position in Western culture. The worship of rationality began in ancient Greece, developed further through the Renaissance, and even developed into rationalism in later generations. Rationalism regarded rationality as omnipotent God, and believed that people could know themselves and control the world through rationality. The French enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century believed that what was in line with human nature was rationality, and advocated rationality as a measure of the existence of all things, thus establishing a rational kingdom of eternal justice. Rational reason, which mankind had prided itself on, was the most reliable indicator of all things. In the history of western ideological development, the worship of reason had been accompanied by suspicion from the very beginning. Oedipus King was regard as the earliest germination of Western irrational thought. The script showed the transcendental spirit of human beings inherently resisting the infinite with the limited power and "knowing nothing can be done". At the same time, through this great tragedy, it reflected the deficiency of human rationality. It held that human beings could neither exhaust themselves nor the external world by relying on rationality alone. In the era of rational publicity, it reflected a more rational thinking of rationality, which was precisely the transcendent experience of this work.

## References

- [1] Socrates et al. Ancient Greek Opera Slection[M], Niantang Luo, Renmin UP, 1998.P210.
- [2] Cassire,Ernst. An Essay on Human [M], GanYang. Shanghai: Translation Publishing House, 2003.P19.