Oedipus’s Misconceptions

Often, misconceptions of reality solicit irrational behaviour and hinder the ability to examine the components required to assess problems. Oedipus's hubris misguides him to inadvertently fulfill a prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother despite his precautions. In Sophocles's tragic play, Oedipus Rex, Oedipus is an honorable and heroic man, but he chooses to lead a life of both pride and arrogance; his false perception of himself and his paranoid behavior that others are maliciously plotting against him cause him to react rashly to the truth of his background.

With regard to self-perception, Oedipus thinks of himself as a man of action and general concern for his subjects. The people of Thebes are in the grip of a devastating plague that ravishes the city; “I thought it wrong, my children, to hear the truth from others, messengers. “Here I am myself—you all know me, the world knows my fame: I am Oedipus.” (7-9) Oedipus was praised by the Thebiens as the defeater of the Sphinx; therefore, his subjects appeal to him as an individual that is especially favored by the gods and ask him to lift the plague. As Oedipus steps out of the palace, he is surrounded by a crowd of citizens:

“My children, I pity you. I see—how could I fail to see what longings bring you here? Well I know you are sick to death, all of you, but sick as you are, not one is sick as I. Your pain strikes each of you alone, each in the confines of himself, no other. But my spirit grieves for the city, for myself and all of you.” (1-5)

Oedipus expresses his sympathy and offers his compassion and concern for the citizens of Thebes. In an effort to end the plague, Oedipus sends Creon to consult the oracle about the cause of the plague in Thebes. Creon returns and instructs them to find the murderer of Laius in order to put an end to the devastating plague. Oedipus consults the blind prophet Tiresias to help end the plague by guiding him to the murderers of King Laius; however, Tiresisas is reluctant to reveal to Oedipus and attempts to leave: “How terrible—to see the truth 360 when the truth is only pain to him who sees! I knew it well, but I put it from my mind,” (359-360) Tiresias was reluctant to tell the truth of the details surrounding the murderer of Laius because it may do more harm than good. Assuming that discovering the identity of the murder will resolve his issues, Oedipus holds the smug misconception that Tiresias opposition to tell the truth suggests that he may have had involvement in the murder. Although Oedipus demonstrates common leadership skills, it is his misconception of reality that leads to his downfall.

Oedipus, in his arrogance, is unwilling to accept the miserable reality of his true identity. Oedipus insists that Tiresias reveals the murderer of the former King. An argument ensues and Oedipus accuses Tiresias of complicity in Laius’s' murder. Tiresias tells the king the truth, that he himself is the murderer: “Revealed at last, brother and father both to the children he embraces, to his mother son and husband both—he sowed the loins his father sowed, he spilled his father’s blood!” (520-523) Oedipus is blind in his understanding; nonetheless, he is determined to uncover the absolute truth. Oedipus reckless disregard for the truth makes him uniquely incapable to accept the uncomfortable truth. After hearing rumors that he was not the biological son of King Polybus, Oedipus consults an oracle which foretold would marry his own mother and kill his own father: “You are fated to couple with your mother, you will bring a breed

of children into the light no man can bear to see you will kill you father, the one who have you life!” (873-875) Desperate to avoid this foretold fate, Oedipus leaves him home in Corinth. Trying to escape his predestined fortune, Oedipus stumbles directly into his terrible destiny despite his precautions. After the story behind Oedpius’s true identity is finally revealed; he curses himself and his tragic destiny and stumbles off: “I am the man no alien, no citizen welcomes to his house, law forbids it—not a word to me in public, driven out of every hearth and home. And all these curses I—no one but I brought down these piling curses on myself!” (901-907) Oedipus' metaphorical blindness to his knowledge of the truth made him oblivious for most of his life; thus, when the inevitable truth is revealed, he struggles to come to terms with it. Oedipus’s conflict between his journey towards self-discovery and his opposing desire to cover up the truth leads to his downfall.

Oedipus's quest for identity and truth ends somewhat abtruly and tragically. In his farewell address to the people of Thebes, Oedipus offers some brief advice: “Oblivion - what a blessing...for the mind to dwell a world away from pain.” (1522- 1523) Oedipus is blind to the prophecy in the early stages of his life. Oedipus's act of blinding himself suggests that oblivion of the truth achieves inner calm and peace of mind. After his quest for the truth comes to an end, Oedipus ultimately recognized that the abhorrent prophecy he tried so desperately to avoid was finally fulfilled: “The blackest things a man can do, I have done them all.” (1541- 1542) Oedipus acknowledges that his hubris left him blind to the truth. Oedipus is reduced from a proud and heroic king into a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. The Chorus, representing the citizens of Thebes, acknowledge that a great man can be denied by fate: “People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus. He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance, he rose to power, a man beyond all power. Who could behold his greatness without envy? Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him.” (1679- 1683) Initially, the citizens of Thebes admire Oedipius for his admirable leadership; however, rather than submit to the cruelty of his community, Oedipus begs to be banished from Thebes. Consequently, Oedipus role in his community undergoes a transformation from a high ranking member of society to an individual driven by his own guilt.

Although Oedipus exhibits important leadership qualities, his several misconceptions suggest that his unwillingness to accept the truth is a result of both his egotism and arrogance. When faced with threatening information, Oedipus is unable to accept basic aspects of reality. Misconceptions of reality lead people to dismiss evidence; however, denialism of the uncomfortable truth creates irrational behaviour.