Name:

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Course Title/Section:

Due Date:

How the Oedipus Myth Resonates with Contemporary Social Issues

 A significant proportion of individuals view Greek myths as epic tales of goddesses and gods traveling to different locations in the earth, achieving tasks that were once deemed impossible. These individuals believe that Greek mythologies involve narratives whereby individuals dealing with their gods either come out triumphant, aggrieved or turned into plants or animals. Indeed, individuals who do not take a deeper look at the tales will automatically assume that the tales are the products of storytellers’ “soaring of the imagination.” However, Greek myths are tales with a reason and a purpose, and they reveal philosophies, morals, and warnings. Most of these stories do not have the happily-ever-after endings that individuals in contemporary society are accustomed to because they were not written for entertainment; instead, they were written with a higher purpose. Although Greek myths are a crucial component of ancient Greece’s legacy, they continue to shape contemporary society – and most of the world – to this very day. The myth of Oedipus is an ideal myth that resonates with contemporary social issues, specifically climate change and global warming.

Sadly, Mother Nature is no longer the protective and generous deity that facilitates the thriving of human life. Mother Nature has been utterly de-sanctified, exploited, and ruined by imperious humans, whose artificial culture is growing more and more with each passing day. Ethicists warn that technological and economic developments without ethical considerations result in ruinous outcomes, environmentalists continually inform the public about the risks and outcomes of climate change, and international conferences all agree that emissions that facilitate climate change need to be reduced. Despite all these warnings, there is no significant change; instead, emissions are increasing drastically, plastic is the product of choice in most factories, and individuals give little importance to the conservation of Mother Nature.

When it comes to two of the most perilous issues in contemporary society: global warming and climate change, the myth of Oedipus stands out more than any other, and it can be deemed as an eerie prophecy of the current climate crisis. Oedipus’s grisly fate was established before his birth due to his father’s mistakes. However, Oedipus added his own errors, which were irreversible, affecting his children and grandchildren (Gordon 94). The damage that humans have caused to Nature started before the birth of the present generations, but the present generations are accentuating the damage because they cannot stop advocating for industrial, technological, and scientific developments. These practices bring about environmental changes that can impact future generations in more adverse ways. Before Oedipus was born, Laius, his father, attended a party held by King Pelops and abused King Pelop’s son, who later committed suicide (Dynes 135). Wanting to satisfy his selfish desires, uncaring about the feelings of the King’s son, and motivated by arrogant self-love, Laius disregarded King Pelop’s hospitality and went ahead to break the natural law of prosperity and preservation. What Laius did is in no way different than the abuses humans inflict on Mother Nature. Humans abuse the environment to satisfy their need for a more comfortable and better life, ignoring the hospitality that Nature offers, and forgetting that they are guests on earth and that they should leave it as they found it or make it better for their children.

After his son’s demise, King Pelops cursed Laius to be destroyed twice by Oedipus: symbolically and physically, as the husband to the Queen and as King of Thebes, for Oedipus would marry his own mother and murder him (Sophocles 1). This occurrence shows that human actions ultimately become the oracles that drive their future because every action has a consequence, or as Sophocles puts it, “Time is an all-seeing eye that searches out hidden guilt” (Sophocles 45). Humans cannot foresee the consequences of their actions. A prime example of this can be seen in the technological field. The first decades of the nineteenth century saw the invention of the electric car (Guarnieri 2), but the producer chose to power the car using oil instead of electricity. No human at that time anticipated the return of the electric car, which is fast becoming a popular choice among vehicle manufacturers and buyers today, and the dire consequences of the producer’s initial choice: the reliance on oil and the pollution and destruction caused by big oil companies.

After the oracle warns Laius that the curse will take effect, he and his wife commit another callous act: they pin Oedipus’s ankles together (who is a newborn at that time) and instruct a shepherd to take Oedipus and abandon him in the mountains. Having pity on young Oedipus, the shepherd became the instrument through which fate would become effective. He gave Oedipus to a shepherd from Corinth, who took Oedipus to the royal couple, which raised him as their own child (Harshbarger 121). By trying to escape his fate, Laius ended up in a state of guilt and only facilitated his own destruction. Laius’ sequence of doing worse when attempting to do better can be applied to humans who attempt to correct errors made in the past. For instance, for hygiene purposes, the lack of which caused many infections and diseases, humans created disposable goods, which quickly accumulated as dirt that humans cannot do away with. Additionally, realizing the polluting effects that resulted from the process of producing energy from coal, humans went ahead to establish nuclear power plants, whose wastes are more dangerous as they remain radioactive for hundreds of thousands of years (Audet 72).

While at a banquet, Oedipus comes across a drunken man who, in his drunken state, informs him that Polybus (the King) and Merope (the Queen) are not his biological parents. This information causes him to feel “very hurt, angry and insulted” (Sophocles 29). Although the King and Queen tried to assure him that they love him regardless of whether or not he is their biological child, Oedipus secretly traveled to Delphi to ask the oracle about his true identity. The oracle did not give him a direct answer; instead, he told him that it was his fate to marry his mother and murder his biological father (Sophocles 951-954). The oracle’s silence about Oedipus’s identity is significant. The oracle gave Oedipus hints about future events and left him to use self-guidance and self-control to make his decision. Just like Oedipus, humans have been warned about the consequences of their actions. Humans have been warned about how climate change and global warming can negatively affect the earth and pose a danger to humankind. Scientific studies have shown that climate change and global warming disrupts habitats, including Alpine meadows and coral reefs; drives animal and plant species to extinction; melts glaciers; causes early snowmelts, and causes asthma, allergies, and infectious diseases to become more common (MacMillan 1). Despite being given these warnings, humans do not use self-guidance or self- control while making decisions; instead, they are driven by the myth of money as a measure of all things and choose to advance themselves economically while destroying the pristine state of the environment.

Thinking he can avoid the prophecy, Oedipus chose never to go back to Corinth and headed to Thebes, stating that “I would never see that prophecy fulfilled/ the abomination of my evil fate” (Sophocles 957-959). While on his journey, Oedipus comes across a man and kills him, but he does not know who the man is or the consequences that will follow his actions. The man he killed on his journey is Laius, his birth father, and this action sets the prophecy in motion. Shortly after arriving at Thebes, Oedipus soon marries Jocasta, who is widowed by Laius’ murder, but he is unaware that she is his mother. By marrying Jocasta, he fulfills the second part of the prophecy. Jocasta later finds out that Oedipus is her son, who she thought was dead, and that he is the one behind her husband’s demise (Olszewski 2). Soon after, a plague hit Thebes, and the oracle told Oedipus that he is the reason behind the fiery plague. Jocasta kills herself, and Oedipus blinds himself using pins from Jacosta’s gown, unable to deal with the agony that he has caused. Mother Nature is paying the price of centuries of human emancipation. But, humans are part of Nature, and, as such, they cannot escape the consequences of their actions and decisions. Like Oedipus, humans know the fate that will befall them if they choose to place their own needs ahead of environmental needs and the needs of future generations. Additionally, like Oedipus, Humans are the culprits that facilitate climate change and global warming, which not only affect entire populations but the environment itself (Bristow 237).

Humans belong to two competing and closely interlinked systems: Nature and the artificial culture that has been cultivated for centuries. Human artifices only exist because of the resources and data that Nature provides, while Nature carries the weight of an ever-increasing technological civilization that benefits a rapidly expanding population. If the human population were entirely wiped out, Nature would prosper. Humans have an innate tendency to do things in excess and for their own benefit, which is belligerent, impulsive, arrogant, greedy, and blind to the repercussions of their actions. Humankind has been warned of the consequences that will befall them if they do not change how they act. Like Laius and Oedipus, will humans self-inflict punishment for their thoughtless deeds and actions, or will an irate Nature teach all humanity a lesson of humility? In citation to Sophocles once more, “only time’s all-seeing eye will tell.”

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