

The Structure of Greek Tragedy Found in *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles

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Abstract

Aristotle (384-332 BC) proposed the dramatic arc to identify the common structure of Greek plays and two main types of Greek plays, namely comedy and tragedy. Observing the structure of plays is of vital importance as, in the words of Abraham (1997), the elements of plot render from one scene to another in order to achieve "a particular emotional and artistic effect". With the inevitable importance to study stages of plot, this paper focuses on the analysis of the structure of the play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. The structure of the play *Oedipus Rex* by *Sophocles* was analyzed, highlighting the elements of drama, scenes, stages and their functions along with the emphasis on the importance of strophes and antistrophes. With regard to the findings and discussion in this paper, it was found that the play *Oedipus Rex* included repetitive stages of plot which varied in terms of their plots and functions.

1. Introduction

According to Abraham (1997), plot refers to "...the structure of its actions, as these are ordered and rendered towards achieving a particular emotional and artistic effect". Elements of plot proposed by Pickering and Hoepfer (1986) were used to analyze the structure of plot. This paper aims to point out the common structure of Greek plays and two main types of Greek plays. The main emphasis is on an analysis of the structure of the Greek play *Oedipus Rex* by *Sophocles*. In this paper, firstly, the structure of typical Greek play is illustrated with regard to two main types of Greek play – comedy and tragedy. Next, the structure of the play *Oedipus Rex* by *Sophocles* such as exposition, complication, crisis, falling action and resolution is analyzed, highlighting the elements of drama, scenes, stages and functions with regard to the importance of strophes and antistrophes. What is distinctive in the play is mentioned in findings and discussion session, followed by conclusion and references.

2. Aim and Objectives

This paper aims to illustrate the structure of Greek play with regard to the one found in *Oedipus Rex* by *Sophocles*. The objectives of this paper are:

- (i) to analyze the elements of plot in the selected play,
- (ii) to highlight function of each stage of plot, and
- (iii) to illustrate that stages of plot can overlap as the plot progresses.

This paper attempts to answer the following questions:

- (i) What are the stages of plot found in the selected play?
- (ii) How do Prologue, Parados, Episodes and Exodos serve to develop the plot?
- (iii) To what extent does the structure of plot follow the structure of Greek tragedy?

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3. Literature Review

3.1. The structure of Greek play

Greek plays are different from modern plays in that they are more like opera as songs are sung in most part of the play. Besides, music and dance influence Greek plays. According to Bruce MacLennan (1999), there are two or three singer-actors and chorus of twelve to fifteen, generally arranged in the form of rectangle. He also adds that there is a musician playing the double reed-pipe and possibly supernumeraries ("spear-carriers").

3.1.1. The structure of Greek comedy

There are two main types of Greek play – comedy and tragedy. Their structures are also slightly different from one another. The typical structure of Greek comedy includes prologue which is usually in the form of monologue or dialogue between the main character and the other, parode or entrance ode which takes up a position either for or against the hero, agôn or contest in which two speakers argue the issue and the first speaker loses, parabasis or coming forward in which the chorus members move their masks and step out of character to address the audience after the other characters have left the stage, episode which primarily elaborate on the outcome of agôn and exode or exit song which is sung with the mood of celebration and with a riotous revel, joyous marriage or both. The typical chorus in Greek plays can be divided into four parts – ode which is sung by one half of the chorus to address to a god, epirrhema or afterword which is a satiric or advisory chant on current issues by the leader of that half chorus, antode or answering ode which is sung by the other half of the chorus and antepirrhema or answering afterword which is sung by the leader of the second half-chorus which leads back to the comedy.

3.1.2. The structure of Greek tragedy

The typical structure of Greek tragedy is composed of prologue, parode, episode, stasimon and exode. Prologue includes a monologue or a dialogue between two characters of the play. Next, the chorus which presents the topic follows the prologue. After that, there is parode or entrance ode which is the entry chant of the chorus. Generally, they remain on stage throughout the remainder of the play. Although they wear masks, their dancing is expressive via the use of hands, arms and body. Typically the parode and other choral odes involve strophê or turn -a stanza in which the chorus moves in one direction (toward the altar), antistrophê or counter-turn.

Chorus is followed by epode or after-song in which one or two actors interact with the chorus. The epode is in a different, but related, meter to the strophe and antistrophe, and is chanted by the chorus standing still. The epode is often omitted, so there may be a series of strophe-antistrophe pairs without intervening epodes. Each episode is ended by a stasimon which is a choral ode in which the chorus may comment on or react to the preceding episode. Greek tragedy plays end with exode or exit ode which is the exit song of the chorus after the last episode.

3.2. A brief biography of the dramatist Sophocles

Sophocles (497-406 BC) is one of the famous dramatists whose works are well-known for the dramatic competitions of the city Athens and its religious festivals of Lenaea and Dionysia. His masterpieces include Ajax, Antigone, Women of Trachis, Oedipus Rex, Electra,

Philoctetes and Oedipus at Colonus. Both of his eminent tragedies – Oedipus and Antigone – are known as the Theban plays both of which are the different part of tetralogy. He is renowned for his influence of the development of drama and the chorus in his presentation of plot. Most of his plays follow the structure of Greek tragedy and Oedipus, as a whole, can also be regarded as a play whose structure, in general, conforms to that of Greek.

4. Research Methodology

In carrying out the research, research methods are of vital importance as the reliability of the results depends on the kind of method chosen.

4.1. Selection of the Model

In this paper, the structure of Greek play proposed by Aristotle (384-332 BC) and the elements of plot by Pickering and Hoepfer (1986) are used to identify the stages of plot in the play *Oedipus Rex* by *Sophocles*.

4.2. Research Procedures

4.2.1. Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data were collected from the prologue, parodos and exodus of the play *Oedipus Rex* by *Sophocles*. Firstly, stages of plot were identified with regard to the elements of plot proposed by Pickering and Hoepfer (1986). Secondly, the function of each stage of plot was portrayed. Thirdly, the significant features of the structure of Greek play were illustrated. Then, the features different from the conformed structure of Greek play were identified.

5. An Analysis of the structure of the play *Oedipus Rex* by *Sophocles*

In the play *Oedipus Rex*, the play is composed of prologue, parodos, episodes and exodos. Prologue is in the form of dialogue between Oedipus and the priest. The priest is informing Oedipus of the disasters people of Thebes are facing and provoking to Oedipus to figure out how to overcome these maladies.

Prologue is followed by parodos or entrance ode which is composed of strophe 1, antistrophe 1, strophe 2, antistrophe 1, strophe 3 and antistrophe 3. Strophe forms the first part of the ode in ancient Greek tragedy followed by the antistrophe and epode which were a kind of stanza framed only for the music. Antistrophe or "a turning back" is the portion of an ode sung by the chorus in its returning movement from west to east, in response to the strophe, which was sung from east to west. It has the nature of a reply and balances the effects of the strophe. John Milton wrote "strophe, antistrophe and epode were a kind of stanza framed for the music then used with the chorus that sang" in the preface to *Samson Agonistes* in 1671.

In the play *Oedipus Rex*, in strophe 1, the chorus is provoking to gods not to create disasters and in antistrophe 1, they are provoking to Athene, her sister Artemis and Apollo to solve their problems and to wipe away their calamity. Strophe 2 informs the audience of the troubles they are facing and antistrophe 2 reports the adverse effect of the troubles. Strophe 3 presents the sufferings of Thebes and antistrophe 3 finds solution from gods. The prologue can be regarded as exposition as it introduces what is happening in the play.

Episodes follow the parodos. There are four scenes in this play. After Scene I, there is ode 1 which is composed of strophe 1, antistrophe 1, strophe 2 and antistrophe 2. In strophe 1, the chorus informs the audience of the gods' anger towards the murderer. Antistrophe 1 states

that the murderer cannot escape from his sin. In strophe 2, the chorus continues to imply that Oedipus is the murderer with regard to the prophecy by Teiresias. Antistrophe 2 is used to raise the doubt on King Oedipus in readers' mind. This can be regarded as the rising action stage as it stimulates or arouses the audience's interest in what happens next in the play.

Next, in Scene II, after the dialogue among Oedipus, Creon and the leader of the chorus, strophe 1 which is conveyed in the form of dialogue between the leader of the chorus who persuades Oedipus to believe in Creon's words and Oedipus, and strophe 2 which is the dialogue between Oedipus, Creon stating that what he has said is true and the leader. After strophe 1 and strophe 2, antistrophe 1 and antistrophe 2 follow. Antistrophe 1 informs the audience of Iocaste's snap decision to get married to a man whom she has never known. In antistrophe 2, Iocaste tries to make Oedipus get relief from his superstition concerned with prophecies.

The structure of Scene II is different from the typical structure of the scenes found in Greek plays. The reason is that strophe 2 immediately follows strophe 1 in place of antistrophe 1. It is seemed that Strophe 2 is the continuation of Strophe 1 but they are divided separately as Strophe 1 is in the form of dialogue between Oedipus and the leader where as Strophe 2 is in the form of dialogue between Oedipus, the leader and Creon. As characters included in the dialogue are slightly different, it is likely that the dramatist puts these strophes and antistrophes separately.

Scene II is followed by Ode II which is composed of strophe 1, antistrophe 1, strophe 2 and antistrophe 2. Strophe 1 implies that the truth cannot be avoided whereas antistrophe 1 informs the audience of the recklessness of Oedipus. Strophe 2 describes the arrogance of the murderer or Oedipus while antistrophe 2 portrays the lost hopes of people from Thebes.

Scene III includes only dialogue among Oedipus, Iocaste and messenger. In Ode III, there are strophe in which the chorus implies that young Oedipus is not dead but is found in the mountains and antistrophe which informs the audience that Oedipus is a royal man. In Scene IV, the dialogue of Oedipus, messenger and shepherd is portrayed. In Ode IV, strophe 1 which informs the audience of the downfall of Oedipus, antistrophe 1 which presents Oedipus's reckless mind to kill anyone who disturbs him without any reluctance, strophe 2 which reveals Oedipus's pitfall and antistrophe 2 which informs the audience of Oedipus's remorse are included. At this stage, the most interesting part of the play called climax can be seen in that Oedipus comes to realize that he is the murderer of his father King Liaos and the spouse of his own mother Iocaste.

In the last part of the play – exodos, dialogue, strophe 1, antistrophe 1, strophe 2 and antistrophe 2, followed by dialogue again are mentioned. In strophe 1, the dramatist informs the audience of Oedipus' remorse and pain. Antistrophe 1 depicts Oedipus' blindness and strophe 2 foreshadows the audience of Oedipus's exile in advance. Antistrophe 2 depicts Oedipus's remorseful state of mind through the flashback in the form of monologue.

The following table shows the structure of the play *Oedipus Rex* by *Sophocles*.

Elements of drama	Scenes	Stages	Functions
Prologue		Exposition	- to inform the audience that Oedipus, the priest and the citizens of Thebes are at the mass meeting because of the disasters originated from the murderer of the former king

Elements of drama	Scenes	Stages	Functions
Parodos	- Strophe 1	Exposition	- to let audience know that people at that time provokes to gods whatever happens to them
	- Antistrophe 1	Exposition	- to introduce three gods – Athene, Artemis and Apollo Athene is the goddess of wisdom, warfare, divine intelligence, architecture and crafts Artemis is the goddess of hunt, forests, hills and the moon. Apollo is the god of music, archery, healing, light and truth. He is believed to be a god who mediates between the man and the gods. Both Artemis and Apollo are the children of Zeus and Leto.
	- Strophe 2	Exposition	- to inform the trouble people of Thebes are facing
	- Antistrophe 2	Exposition	- to report the adverse effect of the troubles
	- Strophe 3	Exposition	- to present the sufferings of Thebes
	- Antistrophe 3	Exposition	- to let audience know that people at that time find solution from gods
	Scene I	Rising action	Teiresias prophesies that Oedipus is the murderer of his own father, the former king and the spouse of his own mother.
	Ode I		
	- Strophe 1	Rising action	- to inform the audience of the gods' anger towards the murderer
	- Antistrophe 1	Rising action	- to foreshadow that the murderer cannot escape from his sin
	- Strophe 2	Rising action	- to imply that Oedipus is the murderer with regard to the prophecy by Teiresias
	- Antistrophe 2	Rising action	- to raise the doubt on King Oedipus in readers' mind
	Scene II	Rising action	
	- Strophe 1	Rising action	- to inform the readers that Creon's words are true
	- Strophe 2	Rising action	- to confirm what Creon says is true Helios who is the sun-god is introduced.

Elements of drama	Scenes	Stages	Functions
	- Antistrophe 1	Rising action	- to stimulate the audience's suspicion that Oedipus may be the murderer
	- Antistrophe 2	Rising action Exposition	- to convey Oedipus's doubt on Creon's words - to imply that Oedipus happened to kill his own father through flashback
	Ode II		
	- Strophe 1	Rising action	- to imply that the truth cannot be avoided
	- Antistrophe 1	Rising action	- to inform the audience of the recklessness of Oedipus
	- Strophe 2	Rising action	- to describe the arrogance of the murderer or Oedipus
	- Antistrophe 2	Rising action	- to portray the lost hopes of people from Thebes
	Scene III	Rising action	- to arouse the audience's interest in Oedipus's origin Lycean lord who is the lord of light is introduced.
	Ode III		
	- Strophe	Exposition	- to imply that young Oedipus is not dead but is found in the mountains
	- Antistrophe	Exposition	- to inform the audience that Oedipus is a royal man
	Scene IV	Climax	- to prove that Oedipus is the murder of his father and the spouse of his mother
	Ode IV		
	- Strophe 1	Falling action	- to inform the audience of the downfall of Oedipus
	- Antistrophe 1	Falling action	- to present Oedipus's reckless mind to kill anyone who disturbs him
	- Strophe 2	Falling action	- to reveal Oedipus's pitfall
	- Antistrophe 2	Falling action	- to inform the audience of Oedipus's remorse
Exodos	- Strophe 1	Falling action	- to inform the audience of Oedipus' remorse and pain
	- Antistrophe 1	Falling action	- to depict Oedipus' self-blinding
	- Strophe 2	Resolution	- foreshadow the audience of Oedipus's exile in advance
	- Antistrophe 2	Resolution	- to depict Oedipus's remorseful state of mind through the flashback in the form of monologue

6. Findings and discussion

In analyzing the structure of the play *Oedipus Rex*, it is found that more than half of the play is replete with strophes and antistrophes. These appear in the form of chorus or the dialogue between the leader of the chorus and the character(s). The main functions of chorus and the dialogue in strophes and antistrophes are to convey the background information and to foreshadow what will happen next. Furthermore, these strophes and antistrophes help the audience especially foreign audience to have better understanding. Moreover, while reading this play, because of the indication of strophes and antistrophes, readers can easily visualize the way the actors perform on the stage although all they can see the book in reality.

In analyzing the play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, it can be found that the way the dramatist writes Scene II breaks the rules of typical Greek play. The reason is that Strophe 1 and Strophe 2 go together and only after them, Antistrophe 1 and Antistrophe 2 follow. Strophe 1 and Strophe 2 are, to some extent, connected but the dramatist separate them into two strophes instead of only one strophe as the participants in the dialogue are slightly different. Likewise, in Antistrophe 1 and Antistrophe 2, the dramatists use them successively instead of alternatively as the subject matters are linked and one more character joins the conversation in Antistrophe 2. This can be said as one of the significant features of the play.

In addition, the dramatist makes use of the names of gods in Greek time in order to highlight the strong and superstitious belief towards the ancient gods. He introduces different gods who have different kinds of power. It is found that some of the gods are in some way akin to one another. For instance, Athene who is the goddess of wisdom, warfare, divine intelligence, architecture and crafts is the daughter of Zeus and Metis. Artemis who is the goddess of hunt, forests, hills and the moon and Apollo who is the god of music, archery, healing, light, truth, poetry, plague, oracles, sun and knowledge are the daughter and son of Zeus and Leto. Therefore, it seems clear that Athene is the half-sister of Artemis and Apollo.

Sophocles also introduces Helios to his audience. Helios is the Titan son of Hyperion and Theia. His siblings are Selene who is the goddess of the moon and Eos who is the goddess of the dawn. In Greek mythology, Helios is believed to be the handsome god crowned with the shining aureole of the Sun. He is also regarded as the god of light, the guardian of oaths and the god of gift of sight. In the play, the leader of the chorus is provoking to Helios in order to swear what Creon says is true. Sophocles also introduces Lycean lord as the lord of light in Scene III. Iocaste provokes to Apollo and Lycean lord that Oedipus believes whatever oracles told by the others but does not pay attention to her words of consolation. She provokes to these gods as she believes that they will give enlightenment to Oedipus. It can be found that the dramatist uses the names of different gods in order to inform his audience that people at that time provoke to respective gods depending on their problems and the power of gods.

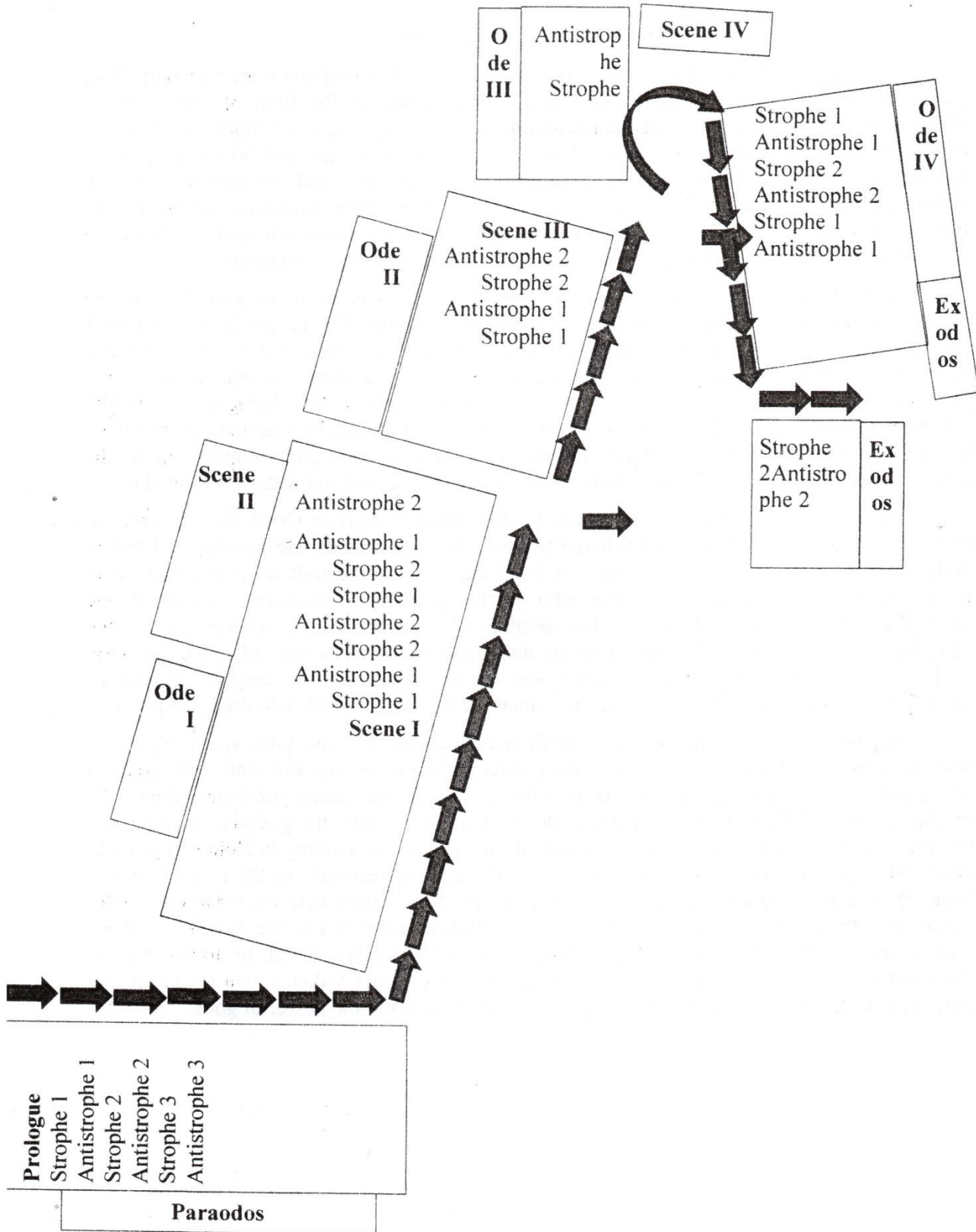


Figure 1: Stages of Plot in *Oedipus Rex*

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, in this paper, the common structure of Greek plays was identified with regard to the tragedy *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. Moreover, the structure of the Greek play *Oedipus Rex* by *Sophocles* is analyzed in terms of the typical structure of Greek plays. In analyzing the structure of the play, the importance of ode which is composed of strophes and antistrophes is pointed out along with the performance to be seen while listening to the ode. Next, prominent features found in the play such as the distinctive use of strophes and antistrophes and the use of different names of gods are highlighted in findings and discussion session with vivid elucidation. In short, the play *Oedipus Rex* by *Sophocles* can be regarded as a remarkable play which can introduce not only Greek mythology but also the tradition and beliefs of that time.

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