

Oedipus vs. Achilles: A True Hero and a Wannabe Hero

NOVEMBER 27, 2016

By Carissa Climer, NU Student

Abstract

This paper contrasts Oedipus, from Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, with Achilles, from Homer's *Iliad*, and claims that Oedipus is more of a hero than Achilles based on his actions throughout the story. The term *hero* is defined as someone who admits that they are wrong and makes unselfish decisions, even when it is tough. Throughout *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus makes unselfish decisions. When he realizes he has made a mistake, he confesses his sin and takes the responsibility. However, Achilles spends most of the story thinking only of himself. He takes responsibility for his actions only after his mother comes and talks to him. Because of his actions, Oedipus is more of a hero than Achilles, even though Achilles is usually one of the first literary characters whom people think of when they hear the word *hero*.

Oedipus vs. Achilles: A True Hero and a Wannabe Hero

Throughout literary history, the most common part of any story is the battle between the hero and the villain, yet the definition of a hero seems always to be changing. Some people envision a knight in shining armor, while others may think of someone who always risks their life for others. Further, there have been plenty of books written about the definition of a hero, including Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that sparked the most widely used heroic definition. A hero is willing to admit that they make mistakes. They are unselfish and self-sacrificing.

By this definition, Oedipus, the eponymous main character of Sophocles's play *Oedipus the King*, is a true hero. The play follows the story of Oedipus, king of Thebes, as he uncovers who killed King Laius years before. It is a discovery story—Oedipus is discovering who he really is. He realizes that he is the one who killed King Laius, and that this killing has inadvertently fulfilled the prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother.

Even though Oedipus left what he thought was his hometown to avoid fulfilling the prophecy, the Fates had different ideas. The act of leaving home is a self-sacrificing act. Oedipus is willing to give up his own happiness to save his parents. Even though he loves them and wants to stay with them and one day be king of Corinth, he makes the heroic decision to leave home. He has no idea that by leaving, he is, in fact, fulfilling the prophecy. What Oedipus also does not know is that his real parents are King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes, who had given the newborn Oedipus to a shepherd to kill. Instead, the shepherd gave the infant to King Polybus and Queen Merope of Corinth, who had been unable to have children of their own. They raised Oedipus as their own son. Consequently, when he hears the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother, Oedipus does not think of himself. He only thinks of his parents and wants to save them from a horrible fate. As a result, he leaves Corinth and makes his way to Thebes, where he encounters King Laius and unknowingly fulfills the first part of the prophecy.

The play takes place years after Oedipus has killed King Laius. He is now married to Queen Jocasta, and they have four children together—two sons and two daughters. When the play opens, the reader finds out that the city of Thebes is being punished with a plague because the person who killed the king has not been brought to justice. Oedipus swears to join the search for the killer and punish him. Creon, brother of Queen Jocasta, actually says that “[i]t's blood – / kin murder – that brings this storm on our city” (Sophocles lines 113-114). These two lines tell the reader, from the beginning, that it is because of Oedipus that the city is being hit by a plague. Oedipus does not understand the reference yet, but he gets there by the end of the play.

When Oedipus does realize that he is the one who killed Laius all those years back, he does not try to continue hiding it. He shouts, “All! All! It all happened! / It was all true” (1336-1337). He admits that he did something wrong, and takes the responsibility for it. Oedipus could have easily kept trying to blame other people for killing King Laius, even after he figured out that it was him. Instead, he admits that it was him. He knows that he did it; he knows that he needs to be punished; and he is willing to bear the punishment.

Consequently, Oedipus chooses his own punishment by blinding himself. Oedipus takes an unselfish course of punishment, as opposed to Queen Jocasta, who takes her own life after she realizes that she married her own son. He could have easily followed in Jocasta's footsteps and killed himself as well, but that would have been too easy. Instead, Oedipus forces himself to stay alive and deal with the aftermath of his actions. He does, however, recognize that he needs to be punished in some way, so he blinds himself. As he blinds himself, inside the palace, he says, “Eyes, now you will not, no, never / see the evil I suffered, the evil I caused” (Sophocles 1441-1442). Sticking around to deal with the effects of his past decisions is an unselfish act. By staying in the world of the living, he will be punishing himself every day.

Compared to Oedipus, Achilles from the *Iliad* is not a hero at all, even though most people consider him to be one. Homer's epic, the *Iliad*, is focused on the events of the fictional Trojan War. Achilles is one of the main characters. He is an incredibly strong demigod, the son of Zeus himself. He has always been considered as a hero, but in reality, he is a very petulant character who does not act heroically at all, unlike Oedipus. He never admits that he does anything wrong or makes mistakes, and every one of his decisions is selfish.

The story opens with an argument between Achilles and Agamemnon. Achilles is mad at Agamemnon for stealing the girl he received as a prize after a previous battle. Consequently, he acts like a child on a playground who has had his toy taken away. Achilles even goes so far as to refuse to fight at all if Agamemnon tries to take the girl, even though Achilles is by far the best fighter that the Greeks have. Instead, he sits by the shore and cries for his mother, the goddess Thetis. He begs Thetis to ask Zeus to help him out. For someone who is supposed to be a hero, crying out to his mother and asking for her help to get back at the bullies is not a heroic decision. It is just selfish.

Further, that is not the only time that Achilles's anger causes him to make some awful and selfish decisions. Later on in the story, Achilles fights Hector, prince of Troy. Though Achilles fights Hector to avenge his friend's death, which could be seen as a heroic move, his decisions after he wins completely negate any accolades he may have won. After Athena helps Achilles trick Hector and kill him, Achilles ties the body to his chariot and drags it around the town several times. In a culture where certain rituals need to be carried out in order for the spirit to safely make it to the underworld, this is a big disgrace. To make things worse, Hector's family is watching all of this happen. As they stand and watch what Achilles is doing down below, “Hector's mother / T[ears] off her shining veil and scream[s], / And his old father groan[s] pitifully, / And all through town the people [a]re convulsed / With lamentation” (Homer 450-454).

Still, Achilles won't listen to anyone who tries to persuade him to return the body to Hector's family. He is so bent on getting his revenge that he acts selfishly. Achilles does eventually return Hector's body and apologize to his family, but only after he is told to do so by his mother. If Thetis had not stepped in and said something to Achilles, who knows how long he would have continued to drag Hector's body around Troy. As it was, he disrespected the body for twelve days. That is twelve days too long for someone who is supposed to be a hero.

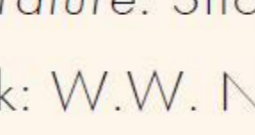
While most people consider Achilles to be a typical hero, he does not fit the heroic mold. Throughout the *Iliad*, he acts like a spoiled little child who is not getting his way and does not know how to cope with that. He makes incredibly selfish decisions and does not stop to think about how they might affect other people. Additionally, he never once tries to apologize for his actions on his own accord.

Now, contrast Achilles with Oedipus, who is man enough to admit when he has messed up and ask for forgiveness. Oedipus tries to think of others before himself and is even willing to maim himself in punishment for something that he did. He does not always make the best decisions, but that is part of human nature. Everyone makes mistakes. The hard part is owning up to those mistakes and accepting punishment. Achilles may be considered a typical hero by most readers, but Oedipus makes more heroic decisions, and that makes him a true hero.

Works Cited

Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo. *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*. Shorter 3rd ed. Vol. 1. Ed. Martin Puchner et al. New York: W.W. Norton, 2013. 129-177. Print.

Sophocles. *Oedipus the King*. Trans. Robert Bagg. *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*. Shorter 3 d ed. Vol. 1. Ed. Martin Puchner et al. New York: W.W. Norton, 2013. 485-525. Print.



Previous

Effects of Romantic Kissing on Love and Marital Satisfaction