Oedipus Essay: Instructor’s Comments

Original Essay Assignment: 4-8 typed pages on Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex due Th 10/18/12

Background to the topic

Around 513 B.C., the famous Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “A man’s character is his fate,” an idea echoed a century later by another famous Greek philosopher, Democritus. They probably meant “Hey, you think that the only cause of everything that happens to you all your life is fate? That it’s all absolutely determined even before you were born, and you don’t play any part? Well, pal, you’re wrong. You are mostly the cause! Yeah, your character traits like anger, pride, rashness, skepticism, etc. when you let them get out of hand and become excessive, then your noodle stops working and the result can be pretty painful.”

Later, in the Athenian Golden Age of Reason, Sophocles writes the tragedy “Oedipus Rex,” illustrating all the above.

The topic: Oedipus’ character is his fate

The Comments

Hi, all, I’m working on your essays, but it’s slow going and I may not be finished before next week. But, from the ones I’ve read so far, I have some thoughts that may be of help. First, the topic and background info focus on character, not on fate. Second, “fate” seems to mean the important results of his living the way he does, not-as I explained in the lectures- the circumstances over which we have no control. Neither we nor Oedipus can control our birth, gender, rules of the gods, nor death. Many ancient stories/legends seem to suggest that people believed that their lives were completely out of their control and in the hands of something they called fate; but that’s not Heraclitus or Democritus’s position nor the position of the Background to the topic explanation, above. Therefore, it should not be your position in interpreting the topic. The topic should be taken to mean something like “Each person mostly creates his own consequences (‘fate’).” With that in mind, your Thesis should respond directly to the topic, using the same key terms.

[Thesis example] O.’s character traits [list three or four, e.g., anger, rashness, pride)] were even more important than the gods’ decrees in leading to his own “fate” of blindness and exile.

Your Discussion section should be the hows, i.e., how did each trait lead to his suffering?

The character traits are in the Background-to-the-topic directions, above, written that way to help you remember your readings and the lecture material.

[1st t/s]: O.’s anger, increasing to rage, led to his suffering

[2nd t/s]: O.’s pride, having become excessive, also led to his miserable end

And, so on, adding trans, of course. You can then discuss any of your ideas under the appropriate t/s.

All this info on logically organizing the essay is in your Essay sheet, so keep reviewing it.