

World Literature Paper II
Tiresias as the Perfect Messenger of Fate
in *Oedipus* By Sophocles

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Fate plays one of the most vital aspects in the play *Oedipus* by Sophocles. As such, one of the most interesting analyses to be made is one on Tiresias –Fate’s messenger– and how his character helps create an image of Fate herself. The main facets of Tiresias’s personality to be examined are his logical, controlled manner, the contempt he demonstrates, the authority he commands, and the provocatively cruel nature that both he and Fate share. The analysis will look at Tiresias’s words, his tone, the syntax within the play, and the stage directions offered, all of which help demonstrate that Tiresias is Fate’s perfect messenger.

The first notable aspect of Tiresias is his controlled, logical, and seemingly unshakeable, demeanor. While in the presence of a king –and an angry king at that– Tiresias maintains an air of controlled intellect and power. Though at the start of their encounter Tiresias appears woeful and sad, “Wisdom is a dreadful thing ... I would never have come here” (pg 19) and Oedipus

remarks “Why this despairing mood?” (pg 19), by the end it is quite evident that Tiresias was never truly ruled by these emotions, but rather employed them to establish an emotional connection with Oedipus and to provoke his interest and subsequent downfall from the prophecy he orders Tiresias to impart. As their exchange progresses there are numerous times when Tiresias shows his unemotional state; “I will say no more. Do what you like –rage at me in the wildest anger you can muster” (pg 21). This particular statement shows not only his lack of emotion, but also Tiresias’s apparent separation from reality. Any subject is mercy to the king’s will, yet Tiresias does not fear him –conversely he encourages the king to pit himself against him. At this moment, Tiresias’s control over his emotions shows power and strength –a clear contrast to Oedipus who remains prey to his emotions, and an obvious symbol of the power and invulnerability of fate. Short and concise syntax adds to the clarity and precision of Tiresias’s expression and logic by eliminating unnecessary emotional description. This is clearly seen when Tiresias plaintively states “I say you are the murderer” (pg 23). No preemptory explanation, wheedling hints, or dramatic expression is used –just a simple, blunt fact. This is the essence of both Tiresias and fate; They will both try and connect with you in the beginning, but after a certain point, –one will still be left with the cold, hard truth.

A second aspect of Tiresias that reflects fate extremely well is that of contempt. When Oedipus begs Tiresias to “not turn your back on us” (pg 19), Tiresias very unkindly retorts “You are all ignorant. I shall never reveal my dreadful secrets, or rather, yours” (pg 20). Here one can see the contempt Tiresias holds for Oedipus who does not know his fate, and also his reluctance to relinquish that which distinguishes him from all others: knowledge. Similarly, Fate is often vain in its knowledge of others, and sometimes spurns those who are ignorant. In the above quote, a certain anger at Oedipus for making him carry these burdens –as Fate carries those of others– can be felt, showing that knowledge is a double-edged sword. Tiresias also insults Oedipus numerous times: “You are a pitiful figure” (pg 23). There is no display of reticence or caution here –the truth is the truth is the truth–, and that is power. Furthermore, when Tiresias says “Do what you like –rage at me in the wildest anger you can muster.” (pg 21), it is clear that Tiresias sees Oedipus as inconsequential, and belittles the effect his anger will have over him. When Tiresias later states “I will not cause pain to myself or to you” (pg 20), he considers himself before Oedipus –again placing his needs over those of the king’s. Lastly, there is a notable development in who truly commands authority in this scene. At the start, it is Oedipus who speaks first, as all kings should. However by the end it is Tiresias who says “I will go then. Boy, lead me away” (pg 25) without the king’s leave. By speaking last and leaving first, a clear shift in power occurs, mimicking the situation when humans come to terms with the true supremacy of Fate.

Like Fate, Tiresias exhibits power, knowledge, control, and invulnerability even in the face of an angry king. This first becomes evident in his speaking style and manner. He is curt and blunt –“I say you are the murderer you are searching for.” (pg 22)– which creates an element of authority,

power, and control when contrasted to the longer responses of Oedipus and the emotions that rule them. Tiresias's tone remains relatively consistent throughout the exchange while Oedipus's goes from worry to anger to contempt and to anger once more. These fluctuating currents of emotion that pour out of Oedipus contrast the steady, unwavering presence of Tiresias and help emphasize Tiresias's obvious control of the situation and prophecy. Secondly, Tiresias's physical descriptions and environment perpetuate the idea of the power and presence of Fate in the scene. Firstly, Tiresias is blind and has to be led inside by a child. Within this image lie two significant symbols. First is the concept that Tiresias's blindness to the physical world helps emphasize his connection to the spiritual world; his ability to live without his sight hints at the power of spiritual knowledge, control, and power over that of the physical; as if spiritual concepts –such as Fate– rule the physical ones. The child may also be a symbol of innocence in terms of lack of prejudice, openness to new ideas, and perceiving everything around you without the delusions we tend to create as we get older. The child then becomes a symbol of clarity and belief in Fate, which is strengthened by the fact that Tiresias is led, or guided, by the child (these concepts). The guard that accompanies Tiresias's arrival echoes the necessity for security when dealing with the unknown, accentuating the tendency of humans to guard against the supernatural, avoid looking at the unpleasing, guard against fate, and obscure the truth. Tiresias displays his acceptance of Fate and its undeniable power when he momentarily states "I have no fear of you. You cannot destroy me" (Pg 27). This quote emanates power and allows one to picture Fate's booming voice emanating from Tiresias's mouth. From the clear sense of power, authority, and control, it is incontrovertible that Tiresias is the messenger of Fate.

Lastly, Tiresias also exhibits the insufferable nature of Fate; tempting listeners to search for truth and then at the end of their journey bluntly telling them that their search was for naught, for their fates are just as miserable and unforgiving as when they first started upon their quest of self-discovery. Tiresias displays this cruel attribute from the very start; He tantalizes Oedipus's curiosity when he says "Dismiss me, send me home. That will be the easiest way for both of us to bear our burden" (Pg 19). This statement plays on Oedipus's hamartia, his hubris and his curiosity; it leads him to pull, and pull –until Tiresias finally and triumphantly tells him the truth. At this point, Oedipus cannot complain, for he was the one who pleaded with Tiresias for the truth instead of taking his chance to walk away. This echoes many interactions between Fate and her subjects, where humans desperately and incessantly demand the truth, and when Fate bluntly relinquishes it, bemoan their own folly. When Tiresias allows his rage to spill forth and releases his knowledge, his words are full of accusation and anger. His fury though seems not to be directed only at poor Oedipus, but to encompass the fury of Fate towards all who constantly plead and keen to know their future, yet when they are shown its tarnished nature, curse and fowl her name. Within Tiresias's sudden flow of emotion on page 25, one becomes aware of the deep frustration Fate has with the human race, and perhaps, her own fate. Exhausted after his sudden emotional outburst, Tiresias regains control and loses all pretense of emotion, becoming as

sentimental as a stone. Stating “Boy, take me away” (pg 27), it is clear that Tiresias wants nothing more to do with Oedipus, and shirking Oedipus’s actual authority as king, decides to be the one who ends their fateful exchange.

As the argument between Tiresias and Oedipus unfolds, it becomes clear to readers that within Tiresias’s mannerisms and words he not only displays his personal nature, but embodies the characteristics typical of Fate: her authoritative, uncaring manner; her contempt for the pitiful efforts of humans to change their destiny; and her cruel efforts to draw human nature’s curiosity into searching for an optimistic future, only to shatter it with a frank statement on the futility of trying to alter the bleak truth.

Works Cited

Sophocles. Oedipus the King. Simon and Schuster Paperbacks (paperback edition), New York, NY. April 2009.