

The Birth of Kings

Two plays, "Hamlet", written by William Shakespeare and "Oedipus Rex", written by Sophocles share a common bond of illusion and innocence. The protagonists in both plays appear at the beginning only to have changed so that reality has broken through the illusion with less than desirable results for either. In these two plays, two kings must leave their innocence behind as the truth leads them first, to enlightenment and then to their downfall. This is a battle between the light and the darkness, the light being the truth and the darkness being the lie. Throughout the two plays we can see that both are isolated in a world of their own, completely unaware of the truths surrounding them. In Hamlet's case, growing up under the loving care of his parents, he believes that his father died of natural causes. Or, in Oedipus' case, the main character thinks that he has escaped Apollo's prophecy that decreed that he would grow up and murder his father, the king, and marry his mother, the queen. This eventually leads to the point at which both have their "eyes" opened to the reality surrounding their "illusionary" worlds. Hamlet is approached by the ghost of his dead father who reveals that his own brother, Hamlet's uncle, murdered him. Oedipus Rex discovers the truth when the blind prophet, Teiresias accuses him of being the one who murdered King Laios therefore fulfilling his destiny in which he had sought to avoid. In the end, the actions taken by both lead to their downfalls in different ways, death for Hamlet and loss of vision for Oedipus Rex.

In the beginning, we see Hamlet living in an illusion blocking him from seeing what is really there. Hamlet is under the belief that his father died of natural causes and nothing more. As he comes to realize the truth, he leaves behind the safe harbor of innocence and naiveté and enters the uneasy world of adulthood and experience. Standing within his castle, he makes a speech to himself and to God commenting on the quickness in which his mother married his uncle. It is at this point where the beginning of the end of his innocence starts. He believes that by marrying his uncle, his mother betrayed his father. By doing that, the illusion that his parents had the perfect union is shattered forever. In the play, Hamlet says, "Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him. As if increase of appetite had grown. By what it fed on, and yet within a month." In this quotation, he wonders if his mother really loved his father enough to have waited longer than a month before marrying again.

The discovery of the fact of his father's murder by the hand of his uncle leads to an awakening from the fog, which created the illusionary world Hamlet lives under. Doubts begin to cloud Hamlet's mind. He asks the question, "to be or not to be for that is the question." In asking this question, Hamlet poses the question whether people can live in innocence or if they can live with knowledge.

Finding the truth at last, Hamlet chooses to handle it in a way that leads to his own death. Choosing to avenge his father's death, he takes "an eye for an eye" and kills his uncle. The question now exists whether or not he truly needed to get revenge for his father or for himself? This question is best left unanswered for now because it would require an intricate exploration of the inner depths of Hamlet's psyche.

Oedipus Rex, too, lives under the illusion that he escaped his destiny of killing his father, the king and marrying his mother, the queen. It was that illusion which caused him to be blind to the truth. He can see the light, meaning he has vision, but at the same time he is blind and is still living in the darkness of a lie.

The lie leads to a day when a blind prophet reveals the truth to him that he had in actuality not escaped his destiny. Oedipus Rex moves from being in power to being an outcast. In the beginning, he proclaims to his subjects to bring him the murderer of King Laios only to find that he is, himself, the murderer. This twist of fate leads to his downfall. In response, Oedipus Rex gouges his eyes out as a symbol of opening his eyes to the truth, or in this case, the light. This

quotation, "This punishment. That I have laid upon myself is just," serves to tell us that Oedipus Rex believes he needs to be punished for his unjust deed. In the end, a loss of innocence destroys both Hamlet and Oedipus Rex. Both Kings have lost their power and virtues. One has lost his life and the other has lost his vision. Their innocence protected them; their knowledge destroyed them.