

# MOTIVATIONS IN “OEDIPUS REX” AND “HEDDA GABLER”

HELEN STEELE

Control and self-determination are at the heart of both “Oedipus Rex” and “Hedda Gabler” and this deep need in both the characters of Oedipus and Hedda, in the face of immovable forces against them, lead to tragedy. Oedipus is outwardly the more sympathetic character, for he shows a certain altruism in his motivation and he ultimately does the right thing when faced with the truth. Yet Hedda is a tragic figure too, for she cannot reconcile the twin needs to both maintain societal respectability and propriety and to gain control of her life in a society that does not allow that level of control to women. In the end, she has to lose the former to fully gain the latter.

Before the crisis erupts in “Oedipus Rex”, we get hints of Oedipus’ motivations. Confronted with the elders of the city and their tales of woe, Oedipus declares his desire to save the city. Outwardly, this would appear to show altruistic motivations, but it cannot be counted as pure altruism. Oedipus, in his arrogance, sees himself as the *paterfamilias*, the spirit of the city and declares that “Sick as you are, not one is as sick as I [...] my spirit groans for the city, for myself, for you.” I believe it significant that he includes himself prominently in this line. He aligns the city’s health with his own and even if only subconsciously, he believes that by saving the city, he will save himself. He has already saved Thebes once, and by saving it once again he can renew the glory and relive his past. His social position is very important to Oedipus and this corresponds with the apparent initial motivations of Hedda in “Hedda Gabler”. Like Oedipus, Hedda is a child of a prestigious family and from the first moment she appears, she seems to need to reinforce this impression. This manifests as a need to control all the minutiae of life around her, such as the veranda doors, as well as manipulate the people to her desires. Hedda’s initial encounter with Aunt Julia shows such a desire: Hedda belittles Aunt Julia and shows her own primacy over her.

However, at this point, we cannot grasp the deeper needs that are driving Hedda. These only emerge when faced with her nemesis, Thea Elvsted.

The intent of both characters in the early sections of both plays does show the differences in attitude of the two. Oedipus does not seem to harbor malign intent to the city, and while the needs of the city correspond with his own, he appear to act from genuine concern. He sends Creon to the Delphic Oracles, preempting the requests of the people, and he appears eager to act upon their advice. In the beginning of Scene I, Oedipus appears to be determined to bring the killers of Laïos to justice. He needs to be seen to be doing something, and in the absence of further information on the cause for the plague, he chooses action. Hedda, on the other hand, appears at this point to be motivated partially by a need to hurt others: a spite that Oedipus does not show. Hedda’s life is so empty, her own pain so acute, that she tries to fill the void with the pain of others. She is curt with her husband, disinterested in his interests and seems distracted. While Oedipus’ conflict comes with Teiresias, it would appear that Hedda already has some measure of conflict in her life.

With the arrival of Teiresias in Scene I, however, Oedipus’ motivations become muddled. The entry of Teiresias begins the conflict for Oedipus. At first, the seer is reluctant to divulge his information and Oedipus bullies the old man until he reveals the truth. Why is Oedipus so insistent even after Teiresias hints that his news will not be good? At this point, Oedipus has become consumed by the need to be seen as the savior and is not prepared for the consequences. But with Teiresias’ lines “Killed him with your own hands [...] I’d say the crime was yours and yours alone” the first shadow of doubt enters Oedipus life and his motivations. He has an immediate conflict: his wish to save the city battles with his need for self-preservation. He knows that he has killed men in the past, he must know

that the possibility exists that he could have killed Laïos, yet he denies the possibility almost unconsciously. To divert attention, both his own and his people's, from the possibility that he is the stain on the land, he becomes angry. Much of the rest of this scene and the subsequent two scenes are fueled by Oedipus' deep need to reassure himself that he is a savior and thus cannot be the problem. He decries prophecy and reminds us of the incident with the Sphinx "When that hellcat the Sphinx was performing here, what help [was the seer] to these people?". By referring to himself as "the simple man" he aligns himself with the ordinary people of the city and a certain purity. He who is so simple cannot be tainted by such evil. In his anger, his need for denial, he loses all sight of the needs of the city, despite the concerns of the elders, and concerns himself only with his own needs.

For Hedda, her conflict comes into sharp relief with the arrival of Mrs Elvsted. Hedda has a deep and abiding desire for equality with men. She desires their comradeship and is torn when she learns that Mrs Elvsted and Eilert Lövborg were "comrades". In the patriarchal society in which she finds herself, Hedda cannot both maintain her social status and find this equality, and yet she is unable to accept any compromises. In a way, while Oedipus fights for self-preservation, the arrival of Mrs Elvsted sends Hedda on a path of self-destruction. She does not desire love or other womanly things: she scorns love calling it a "sickening word". Instead, she seeks companionship suitable to her temperament. This she finds, to a certain extent, in Judge Brack, who alone is capable of seeing Hedda for who she is and treating her as an equal. She appears to despise all the other people around her and rather than show love and respect to them, she evinces her need for control by manipulating them. Her husband cedes to all her wishes, as does Aunt Julia and she betrays Mrs Elvsted's confidences in order to manipulate Lövborg, almost to show that she can, to prove to herself that she is capable of control of others. I think this a manifestation of the lack of control Hedda feels in her own life. She constantly seeks self-determination and yet can never find it.

Hedda's need for control over her own destiny mirrors Oedipus' own. While Hedda fights against the weight of a patriarchal society where she is expected to conform to the perceptions and expectations of others, Oedipus defies the Gods. Yet both are in a way defying their destinies and for both it is both tragic and ultimately destructive. One of the manifestations of Hedda's need for control is shown in her loathing of other women and their acceptance of their place in society. She deliberately hurts Aunt Julia over the bonnet and declares her desire to burn both Mrs Elvsted's hair and her "child", the manuscript. The hair is a symbol of Mrs Elvsted's femininity, her nurturing fertile womanhood that could help Lövborg produce the manuscript. To Hedda, they are symbols of everything she cannot be: a muse and supporter, aiding a man to his destiny.

Throughout "Oedipus Rex" there is another conflicting motivation working through Oedipus, which ultimately beats the self-preservation instinct. Oedipus needs to know the truth. He bullies it out of Teiresias and out of the shepherd. While at first that it would appear that this motive fits in with the desire to save the city and himself, I believe it is a deep reaction of the subconscious to the long-standing denial that Oedipus has lived with. He has known certain truths but been unable to accept them for along time. Finally, he must face the truth about his parentage and his destiny and while the conflict rages through the later scenes, ultimately truth wins and Oedipus cannot deny it any longer.

While the truth could be said to have destroyed Oedipus, I would argue that instead it redeems him. In the Exodus, we see that, knowing that he is the plague on the city, Oedipus sets aside his selfish motivations and finds the altruism he could not find earlier. He accepts his own complicity in the plague upon the city and declares his desire to "purge [...] Thebes of the pollution of my living here". For someone so proud and arrogant before, he is prepared to be humbled for the good of the city by being led "to the gates so that all the children of Kadmos might look upon [him]". He could have tried to fight his destiny,

to hide the truth, but instead he accepts the truth for the good of Thebes.

There is less chance of redemption for poor Hedda, however. The truth to her ends in her destruction. While the struggles of Oedipus and Hedda both result in death – for Oedipus the plague on his city, for Hedda, the messy suicide of Lövborg – it is only Oedipus who has a true change of heart and motivation. Hedda sees only that all her actions are futile, and resolves the conflict in the only way that she can. She realizes cannot retain the place in society she so needs while retaining her precious control: Brack has seen to that. As Brack threatens her with disgrace, Hedda's head "sinks": she knows there is no escape but one. After a final outpouring of passion on her

piano, her link to the past, she takes her grandfather's pistols and shoots herself in one final act of control.

Oedipus and Hedda are both tragic figures, battling conflicting motivations. They both desire control over their lives, to not give in to their destinies, but both find that control difficult to achieve. For Oedipus there are the additional conflicting needs for both self-preservation and for the truth of his background. Ultimately, he discovers a side to himself he did not really know and finds it in himself to do the right thing. For Hedda, the need for control conflicts with her need to retain her position in society and those motivations cannot be reconciled. Yet in her death, she finds a certain liberation, a final, tragic show of self-determination she could not show in life.