

# **SELF-ACTUALIZED INDIVIDUALS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF OEDIPUS AND LEAR**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

Moral vision of a play must not be understood apart from character, since character is vision. Abraham Maslow, the “father” of American humanism, expounded the theory of self-actualization. Taking into consideration the preferences given to different needs of human beings, Maslow created the hierarchy of needs. The top most level is self-actualization. According to Abraham Maslow, self-actualization is reaching one’s full potential. The self-actualized people have factual insights about themselves, others and the environment around them. They exercise their inborn strengths beyond their fundamental requirements and try to probe and achieve full human capacity. The tragic heroes, Oedipus and Lear, too undergo the process of self-actualization but only through suffering. For both, the suffering acts as a motivational factor in the process of being a better human being. Nietzsche, too, in his *Birth of Tragedy*, puts forward the idea that even pain acts as a stimulus for the gain of pleasure through tragedy. Both Oedipus and Lear derive stimulus from intense suffering for their self-realization and self-actualization. Maslow’s theory can be well-compared with the terms of “round” and “flat” characters proposed by E. M. Forster in his *Aspects of Novel*. As most of the tragic heroes, Oedipus and King Lear are the “round” characters if Forster’s term is to be applied. Oedipus and Lear both “round” up for their ultimate ‘serene deportment’.

**Key Words:** Self-actualization, *Peripeteia*, *Anagnorisis*, Catastrophe, Flat and Round characters.

Moral vision of a play must not be understood apart from character, since character is vision; knowing what happens to the character and within the character. In the tragedies, the character undertakes a voyage of self-discovery which results not only in creation but transfiguration. The hero is confronted with a situation with which he is unable to cope. His whole personality seems to disintegrate towards destruction. In the end, subdued and transfigured, he

is complete for death. There is always a parallel process of increasing awareness of self along with the development of moral vision of the play which manifests itself in a *cathartic* change in the audience.

Abraham Maslow, the “father” of American humanism, expounded the theory of self-actualization. Maslow created the hierarchy of needs which he starts with the physiological needs; second layer consists of safety and security and then arise the needs of love and belonging. The fourth layer displays the need for status, distinction, honour, appreciation, respect and supremacy. Then the top most level is self-actualization. According to Maslow, self-actualization is reaching one’s full potential. The self-actualized people have factual insights about themselves, others and the environment around them. They exercise their inborn strengths beyond their fundamental requirements and try to achieve full human capacity. Maslow also states that compared to common people, self-actualizers have more peak experiences. According to him, a peak experience makes one forget his own self; thinking himself to be insignificant or prominent and makes him perceive himself to be united with life or nature or God. But Maslow does not consider the self-actualizers as ideal human beings finding out various flaws and imperfections in their personalities.

The tragic heroes, Oedipus and Lear, too undergo the process of self-actualization but only through suffering. Though Maslow uses this term for describing the psychology of normal, healthy and successful people, it can be applied to the regenerated psychological state of Oedipus and Lear. For both, the suffering acts as a motivational factor in the process of being a better human being. In their cases, the more the suffering, the deeper is the sense of self-actualization. They also develop down-to-earth attitude and know their own limitations along with a better understanding of the universe.

According to Aristotle, a tragic hero is a distinguished person whose prosperous circumstances prophesy his doom due to a *hamartia* or a defect of character. As per Aristotle’s prescription and Maslow’s observation, Oedipus

and Lear have a *hamartia* due to which the rising graph of their lives and careers starts falling down. Both Oedipus and Lear are the men who possess a strong sense of self-love and self-esteem in the beginning. Oedipus is a man of extraordinary intelligence who saves the city of Thebes from the fearful Sphinx. He is a highly acclaimed king taking a great care of his subjects. The priest of Zeus in the beginning of the play is seen to be full of praise for Oedipus and considers him to be the city's only savior. He is a considerate husband and an affectionate father. In essence, Oedipus is a man worthy of high esteem both as a king and a human being and this is a fact that Oedipus knows and boasts upon. Similarly at the outset of the play, Lear is seen as a "highly renowned and prosperous" King of Britain; a glorious sovereign. He is a loving patriarch who wishes to divide his kingdom among his three daughters and lead a peaceful life after retirement.

However, both Oedipus and Lear are not perfect men and suffer from their own *hamartia* i.e. *hubris* or ego. This is made evident in the opening lines of the Prologue when Oedipus states:

"Here I am myself .....

You all know me,

The world knows my fame

I am Oedipus". (7-9)

Oedipus is seen to be proud, over-confident, stubborn, impulsive and disrespectful in various incidents of the play.

Lear's behaviour, too, in the opening scene, presupposes his absolute power. "Lear's resignation of his throne and division of his kingdom are the acts which are a violation of the king's responsibility to God, and they could result only in the chaos on every level of creation which is the subject of the play". (Craig 206).

Oedipus' self-esteem is shockingly hurt when Teiresias declares Oedipus as a culprit whose crimes pollute the city of Thebes. Thereupon immediately, Oedipus loses all his self-control and respect for Teiresias for his being an old prophet and seer.

Patriarchal order is brought into danger by Lear's so called love test for his daughters. The legitimating of love is given a dignified form, with a clear reference to the issue of dowry. Though given a chance to speak twice, Cordelia has "nothing" to speak. Lear warns her "nothing will come out of nothing". But Cordelia firmly declares her opinion that after her marriage, half of her love and care would be devoted to her husband. Lear's self-esteem as a monarch and a patriarch is greatly hurt by Cordelia's curt but practical reply. Lear's disinheriting Cordelia and banishing Kent in the opening scene makes Lear appear as a haughty, arrogant and short-sighted man seeking flattery, lacking in judgment of a character, and taking arbitrary decisions. He is seen to be "not eminently good and just." Later finding Goneril to be stubborn, he utters an awful curse upon her which is another manifestation of his hurt self-esteem.

Oedipus feels that attack is the best defence and to defend himself, he charges Creon and Teiresias of plotting against his life and crown. Again to defend himself, he doubts the authenticity of the oracles just after he receives the news of Polybus' natural death. Likewise, Lear's curse upon Goneril and his rushing in the storm exposing himself to the torments of nature is a step towards self-defence and self-destruction.

During the quarrel with Goneril, he realizes that he had been magnifying a "most small fault" in Cordelia. This realization is a vital step in Lear's psychological development because he becomes conscious of the blunder he has committed at the time of the division of the kingdom after his confrontation with Regan. Both of his daughters combine together to oppose his will.

He threatens his daughters with dire consequences and goes out in the stormy night. In the storm scenes, Lear becomes aware of other's sufferings, besides his own suffering. With this realization begins the purging of Lear and also the purging of the spectators which is a sign of intense tragedy. As Bradley points out, these scenes constitute the dramatic centre of the whole tragedy. To defend himself, he calls himself a man "more sinned against than sinning." Lear's madness is a mark of his unconscious attempt towards self-destruction.

Oedipus, too, is pre-eminently great and glorious, but not pre-eminently just and virtuous. His *hubris* does not cause the calamity, but it hastens its exposure. Fagles Robert (132) aptly comments, "...Sophocles engineered this discovery not by divine agency (as Homer did) and not by chance, but through the persistent and courageous action of Oedipus himself. The hero of the play is thus his own destroyer; he is the detective who tracks down and identifies the criminal-who turns out to be himself." After the horrible discovery of his birth, Oedipus indulges in self-destruction by blinding himself; thus accepting all his guilt and sin.

In Lear's case, his simplicity is the result of the undergoing process in the pursuit of knowledge. C.J. Sission (88) comments that the play has "... a theme which might justify the title *The Redemption of King Lear* in place of *The Tragedy of King Lear*...pointing to a fuller knowledge and with a deeper understanding of the world of men, and of their universe, through the desperate evils let loose by his own act."

Oedipus is spiritually and morally blind in the dark and god's every move is designed to open his eyes and move him into the light. The ultimate self-blinding of Oedipus is the mark of his enlightenment. Bernard Knox rightly points out, "The Chorus sees in Oedipus an example in mankind. In this self-recognition of Oedipus, man recognizes himself." (Brooks, 21-22).

Finally, the self subdues and both Oedipus and Lear are enlightened with a better understanding of man's place in the universe. Their redemption is achieved through their self-discovery; they learn the virtue of patience.

The hero of the sub-plot is the Earl of Gloucester who is Lear's counterpart and who has earned a better vision through terrible physical and mental suffering in the course of the play. As a totally undeserving punishment for helping Lear, Gloucester is brutally blinded by Cornwall. He, too, indulges in self-destruction by trying to attempt suicide. Through self-discovery, Gloucester's self subdues. He learns to *see* better with his inward mental insight:

I stumbled when I saw (iv, i, 20-21)

Maslow's motivational theory can be distantly related to Nietzsche's views in his *Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche puts forward the idea that even pain acts as a stimulus for the gain of pleasure through tragedy. Both Oedipus and Lear derive stimulus from intense suffering for their self-realization and self-actualization.

Maslow's theory of self-actualization can be well-compared with the terms of "round" and "flat" characters proposed by Forster. "E.M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, introduced popular new terms for an old distinction in discriminating between round and flat characters. A flat character is built around "a single idea or quality" and is presented in outline...A round character is complex in temperament and motivation and is represented with subtle particularity; thus he is as difficult to describe with any adequacy as a person in real life, and, like most people, he is capable of surprising us." (Abrams 21). As most of the tragic heroes, Oedipus and King Lear are the "round" characters if Forster's term is to be applied.

Aristotle says, "A man cannot become a hero until he can see the root of his own downfall." This is a 'fortunate fall' which helps both Oedipus and Lear to achieve a depth and profundity to discern the problems of human existence.

Though the *hamartia* of Oedipus and Lear is great, the suffering and misfortune that befall them is far greater. This perhaps is the characteristic of a round character that should fall to rise to heights above the normal level of man in a way to compensate for their sufferings. There is always a take home message for the audience through the portrayal. It is like coming to a full circle. Here both Oedipus and Lear “round” up for their ultimate ‘serene deportment’.

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