

# *A Literature Review Study of the Creative Structure of Oedipus the King*

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**Abstract:** *Oedipus the King* is one of the three great tragedies of ancient Greece, and Aristotle gave it a high evaluation in his work *Poetics*. The core of this article is to study the creation structure and plots of *Oedipus the King* from Aristotle's theory of tragedy. This article is divided into three parts: introduction, literature review and conclusion. Through these three parts, the author will summarize the current research status, research views and shortage of *Oedipus the King*. Through the research, the author finds that *Oedipus the King* has three main characteristics in the plot: the closed dramatic structure, the application of "retrospective method" and the perfect use of "sudden turn" and "discovery". In addition, the current scholars' research mainly focuses on the external drama conflicts of *Oedipus the King*, but the internal reasons for the series of "action" of Oedipus are not studied enough. Therefore, the author believes that only when scholars have a deep understanding of the definition of "action" in the *Poetics* can they obtain the creative research results of *Oedipus the King*.

**Keywords:** *Oedipus the King*, *Poetics*, Aristotle, plot

## 1. Introduction

As one of the three great tragedies of ancient Greece, *Oedipus the King* is of great research value. It tells the story that Oedipus, king of Thebe, kills his father and marries his mother without knowing it, which causes the god to send plague to Thebe city. In order to eliminate the plague, Oedipus tracks down the murderer and finally finds himself the one who committed the crime of killing his father and marrying his mother. Its wonderful plot layout and ingenious plot setting have been regarded as a model by later dramatic literature. Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle highly praised *Oedipus the King*, calling it "the perfect tragedy", and put forward a large number of tragic theories based on *Oedipus the King* as an example in his literary theory work *Poetics* [1]. It can be said that *Oedipus the King* is one of the sources of Aristotle's drama theory, and it is also a tragic example produced by the ancient Greeks after a long period of creation and practice. The author believes that many scholars will study the creation structure of *Oedipus the King* from the perspective of *Poetics*, and use Aristotle's tragic theory to study the drama text. Therefore, the author decides to take some famous tragic theories in *Poetics* as a breakthrough to study the creative structure of *Oedipus the King*, so as to deepen the understanding of the plot setting of ancient Greek tragedy. In addition, by summarizing the previous studies and discoveries of *Oedipus the King*, the author explores the ingenious artistic techniques and creation characteristics of the ancient Greek playwright Sophocles, and learns to use

the creative techniques of “sudden turn” and “discovery” to make the drama plots go through twists and turns.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Domestic

There are three main directions for domestic scholars to study *Oedipus the King*: the first is to explore the ethics and philosophy contained in the drama; the second is to compare *Oedipus the King* with other dramatic texts; the third is to analyze the development of the drama plot and the creation structure.

The first and second are mostly based on the text of *Oedipus the King*, interpreting the content of the play at different levels. For example, Xingyi Yang studied the expression of Oedipus’s free will in the play in her paper *The Conflict between Free Will and Tragic Fate—The Thematic Implication and Dramatic Structure of the Play Oedipus the King*, and elevated it to the discussion of human reason [2]. Haonan Zeng sorted out the plots of *Thunderstorm* and *Oedipus the King* respectively in his article *The Drama Appreciation of Thunderstorm and Oedipus the King* [3]. He pointed out that the themes of the two are similar: the characters constantly resist the established fate, and finally cannot break away from the tragedy [3].

The third type generally puts *Oedipus the King* and Aristotle’s *Poetics* together and interprets the play through the tragic view of *Poetics*. In *A Brief Analysis of Aristotle’s View of Tragedy—A Case Study of the King Oedipus*, Yujie Li and Yulu Jia deconstruct *Oedipus the King* from two perspectives of “sudden turn” and “purification”, pointing out the inevitability of Oedipus’s fate change and the purification effect of tragedy [4]. Pan Peng’s *Analysis of King Oedipus under the Structuralism of Poetics* also starts with the “sudden turn” and “discovery” proposed by Aristotle, and explains in detail how Oedipus gradually discovered the truth in the process of tracing and fell into the net that fate had weaves for him [5]. In *On the Superiority of the Tragic Plot of Oedipus the King*, Qiru Feng further mentions the role of pity and fear in the drama. He believes that tragedy relies on pity and fear to relieve the audience’s emotions [6]. From above it can be seen that domestic scholars have a deeper understanding of Aristotle’s view of the plot. However, the author also notes that their views are similar and there is a lack of innovative research on Aristotle’s tragic view. In the past 20 years (about 2000-2020), the literature on Aristotle and *Oedipus the King* can seldom put forward some new views. The reason is that the understanding and research of Aristotle’s *Poetics* are not deep enough, and there is a lack of diversified explanations and opinions.

Regarding the construction of the storyline of *Oedipus the King*, scholar Jiayi Wang mentioned the “closed-type” structure. In *The Tragic Effect and Presentation of Narrative Structure of Oedipus the King*, she sorted out the content of *Oedipus the King* [7]. She said that Sophocles wrote the play starting from the plague in Thebe city, and then writing about the king Oedipus constantly recalling the past experience and checking his own life in order to track down the murderer, but finally found that the murderer is himself. He committed the crime of killing his father and marrying his mother. The development of the whole plot realized the logic closed loop, the plague of Thebe city, the birth of Oedipus, the mysterious oracle... These seemingly unrelated things are firmly linked by fate, forming a trackable causal law. The whole narrative also presents a closed-loop structure [7].

In addition, in *The Impossible Layout, Structure Irony, and Other Art of King Oedipus*, Guoliang An mentions another theatrical technique—the retrospective method [8]. He argues that because of the use of a closed-loop structure, the play puts the most intense conflicts on the table first, so Oedipus extensive experience tracing his past decades of life needs to be performed in a retrospective manner [8]. An defined the method of retrospection in the literature. The “retrospective method” is to follow the most intense contradictions and reverse the current of time, to re-open the old case, and to

investigate the truth through memory or searching for the parties [8]. The drama *Oedipus the King* has a huge time span (about 30-40 years). Only by using the retrospective method can the extremely long time span be shortened to a limited theatrical performance time, bringing the exciting theatrical experience to the audience. This kind of drama structure is also in line with the tragic principle of “three unities” of Aristotle.

What’s more, *Oedipus the King* makes full use of “sudden turn” and “discovery”. Jiansheng Hu gave a clear explanation and demonstration of the concepts of “sudden turn” and “discovery” in *The Art of “Discovery” and “Sudden Turn” in the Drama of the Tentative Yuan—Taking Poetics as a Reference* [1]. In his essay, Hu pointed out that “sudden turn” is “the change of action in the opposite direction according to the principles we speak...From adversity to prosperity or from prosperity to adversity”, and “discovery” refers to “the disclosure or revelation of some particular or special character relationship in the play, as well as the inside story of some event that is not yet known [9]”. Yudan Fu also mentioned that “sudden turn” and “discovery” are actions to reach the end and everything with those two in the structure can be regarded as a complex plot [10]. In her essay *On the View of Plot in Aristotle’s Poetics*, she said Aristotle once pointed out that “sudden turn” and “discovery” must be produced in the plot structure, becoming the necessary or probable result of the antecedent [10]. This means, although the plot appears very suddenly, it must have antecedents and consequences and be logical, making different events are connected by causal logic, rather than simply in the order of time [10]. From this, the author can see that *Oedipus the King* uses these two methods to promote the development of the plot. The decline of Oedipus from the beginning as a king to the end as a blind beggar who has gone away from home is a sharp turn of events. It was his constant search, constant “discovery” that led to his end: that his was not the prince of Corinth, but the prince of Thebe, and that his wife was his own mother. It can be said that “discovery” and “sudden turn” run through the whole play.

## 2.2. Abroad

Compared with China, the study of *Poetics* in foreign countries started earlier and lasted longer. As early as the Renaissance in the 16th century, many European dramatists studied Aristotle’s *Poetics* and produced different interpretations of many of its views. As for Aristotle’s “imitation theory”, different scholars have given their own unique understanding. Sidney said in *A Defense of Poetry*: “Poetry, therefore, is an imitation art, as Aristotle calls it with the word Mime-sis, that is, it is a reproduction, an imitation, or an expression in images [11].” Sidney interpreted Aristotle’s “imitation theory” as the poet’s reproduction or imitation of reality, while Pierre de Ronsard, one of the French Seven Star poets, said: “Creation is nothing but the fine nature of imagination...The aim of the poet is to imitate, to create or to represent whatever is true, or maybe true [12].” He believed that imitation is not only the representation of reality, but also the creation of imagination on the basis of representation. Although they often differed in their views, their different views greatly enriched the poets’ creative practice, and the second interpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* also provided a theoretical basis for the study of ancient Greek tragedy.

As for the study of *Oedipus the King*, most foreign scholars focus on the interpretation and stage art of the drama. Different from domestic scholars, foreign scholars usually study *Oedipus the King* as a drama, while domestic scholars usually interpret it as a pure literature. The author attributes this to the late start and slow development of modern and contemporary Chinese drama literature, so there are some deficiencies in drama research. However, in the analysis of the text of *Oedipus the King*, foreign scholars also have a unique feature, they have a deeper understanding of the historical origin of ancient Greek tragedy. For example, Michael X. Zelenak, a professor at Cambridge University, mentioned in his article that the motive for the creation of ancient Greek tragedy was not art or literature, but society and political; Greek tragedy was a popular civic spectacle of its time, a central

part of Athenian's civic life and political discourse [13]. Therefore, when studying the ancient Greek tragedy, scholars should not only analyze it from the perspective of literature, but also be familiar with the social and political background of Athens at that time, and interpret *Oedipus the King* from the perspective of Athens' political life, so as to truly understand and thoroughly read *Oedipus the King*.

### 3. Conclusion

After consulting a large number of documents, the author can draw three conclusions from it: First, *Oedipus the King* is the first drama in the world to use the closed-loop dramatic structure and a single ending. Second, Sophocles uses the retrospective method to compress a large number of non-dramatic parts in the limited drama time, making the drama rhythm compact and the contradictions concentrated. Third, using "sudden turn" and "discovery" to push forward the development of the drama plot, so that the drama characters step by step towards the destruction of the ending. However, at present, scholars mainly analyze the external contradictions and conflicts in *Oedipus the King*, and do not have a deep understanding of Oedipus' inner "action", that is, the driving force that makes Oedipus do this series of things. Therefore, future scholars can conduct in-depth research from the perspective of Oedipus' "action", and explore the reasons for *Oedipus the King*'s various behaviors on the basis of understanding Aristotle's definition of "action". Similarly, domestic scholars can absorb more knowledge of Western drama, perfectly combine dramatic art and literary text analysis, and try to study ancient Greek drama at multiple levels and angles.

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