

Reflection of Art and Religion on People's Identity in Ancient Greece

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Art and religion construct people's identity; they give them a sense of self. Who are they? What is their position in this world, where do they stand as a species, and what is the purpose of their existence in this world, a small blue planet drifting in space? For us, scientific knowledge has become a source of identity that gives us a sense of self. How would the ancient people, the people of Greece, develop their ways of understanding the world?

How do religion, art, and philosophy help them to construct their sense of identity and the sense of the world they live in? These are the primary assumptions of this paper. The purpose of writing this paper is to identify topics such as art and religion and critically evaluate the influence and reflection of these social and metaphysical institutions on people's identity in ancient Greece.

Like many ancient civilizations, Greeks were also fascinated by rituals and religious practices, though their way of understanding this institution was very different from the later Abrahamic traditions like Judaism and Christianity. Nonetheless, they, too, had the idea of an afterlife and the sense of reward and punishment after death. In ancient Greek, the drama was closely linked with religious rituals; it was associated with Dionysus, the god of ecstasy and wild urges, the god of wine and orgies, and most of all, the god of disorder. Greek plays were performed at his annual fair, where renowned dramatists of the time contributed to a competition of performances acted in the glorification of Dionysus. Drama and religion were closely linked, and by understanding drama, we can see how it reflected the identities of the ancient people of Greek civilization.

As an example, we would be analyzing [Oedipus Rex](#) or The King Oedipus. In this play, we learn that the complex implications of identity and the sense of self come from ancient mythologies and were later composed by Sophocles in the drama that was performed at Dionysus' shrine. This play elaborates on the moral, ethical, and existential dilemmas of the Greeks. The identity crisis and the role of fate and free will in the lives of the people of Athens. Oedipus was prophesied to marry his mother and kill his father, as told by the oracle of Delphi, and was associated with Apollo, the god of order, music, and harmony, the polar opposite of Dionysus. With this fear of transgression his mother and father abandoned him in the wild where he was rescued by a shepherd and passed to the king of another city, they accepted and loved him as their son. When Oedipus was young, he was forced to know his origins, the question of 'who am I'? The play is structured to visualize that journey from ignorance to knowledge and the dire consequences that follow henceforth. In search of his origins, Oedipus left his home and went to the oracle of Delphi to ask about his origins. He was mocked and humiliated as they refused to face him as he was cursed to marry his mother and murder his father as it was destined.

Therefore, Oedipus vowed not to see his father and mother again and started traveling towards Thebes, where his real mother and father were living; on the way, he had a quarrel that resulted in the murder of an old man and his guards; one man succeeded in escaping the scene, and ironically the man he killed was his father. The play is expressed through dramatic irony, which means that the spectators are well aware of the fact that Oedipus killed his father and married his mother but the characters are not aware, they are as ignorant as the protagonist. The rest of the play attempts to evaluate the persistent struggle and stubbornness of Oedipus to know his origins; he is warned by the Tiresias about the dangers of wisdom in the following statement:

“Alas, how terrible is wisdom when it brings no profit to the man that’s wise! This I knew well but had forgotten it, else I would not have come here.” (Lattimore et al. 1959)

Tiresias was the blind prophet who warned Oedipus against the destructive consequences of wisdom or knowledge, hence, one can argue that this play is a metaphor about knowledge and a cautionary tale about the devastation it brings to an individual, as we can see in the case of the protagonist of the play. At the end of the play, Oedipus is humiliated and disgraced when he finally knew about his origins, his true identity, and screams:

“Darkness! Horror of darkness enfolding, resistless unspeakable visitant sped by an ill wind in haste! madness and stabbing pain and memory of evil deeds I have done!” (Lattimore et al. 1959)

Tragedy followed Oedipus; he became the victim of fate, a fate that used Oedipus himself against his own damnation. By the end of the play, Oedipus gouged his eyes out as he cannot see the reality of his position, as Tiresias says earlier in the play:

“You have your eyes but see not where you are in sin, nor where you live, nor whom you live with.” (Lattimore et al. 1959)

In this conclusion, one cannot commiserate with Oedipus, but I want to make a point here that can give us more insightful views about the general view of the ancients regarding the concept of a hero. According to ancient Greek the concept of a hero is a very interesting idea, for the ancient Greek it is not an easy task to become a hero, take the example of Heracles and Odysseus, these heroes suffered and went through many trials in order to gain the status of the hero. Similarly, the Ancient Greeks hailed Oedipus as a hero. He has a similar status as Heracles or Odysseus. Therefore, trials and tribulations make a hero, and nobody suffered more than Oedipus to attain the status of the hero. (Nagy et al. 1999) Hence, the play provides great insights into the development of the identity of the ancient people of Athens. How did they see themselves in the general scheme of the universe, the role of gods and fate, and free will?

Although religion, art, philosophy, and political ideologies are different fields of study in our times, in ancient Greece, every field of study was connected and had overlapping tendencies. In order to expand on how their philosophical or political ideologies contributed to or influenced and reflected their identities, we would critically evaluate Epicurus’ letter to Menoeceus. In the first paragraph of

this letter, Epicurus talks about wisdom and its pursuit through philosophy in the attainment of happiness because, for Epicurus, the ultimate goal of human existence is the pursuit of happiness that comes from pleasure. He states the following:

“So we must exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness, since, if that be present, we have everything, and, if that be absent, all our actions are directed towards attaining it.” (Sedley, 1979)

In the following passage, Epicurus goes on to give one of the most intellectual opinions on death; it is so genuine and so real that one is astonished by the sheer approach of Epicurus’ thought; the quote states the following:

“Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death does not come, and, when death comes, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living, it is not, and the dead exist no longer.” (Sedley, 1979)

Epicurus argues that we cannot ever know anything about death because ‘when we are, death is not, and when we are not, death is.’ It is about the impossibility of knowing about death and the foolishness of the debate that involves the metaphysical nature of the conversation. Furthermore, Epicurus goes on to explore his principle of pleasure and pain, happiness and despair. He argues that we must try to live in the present rather than think all the time about the future; the future is not certain. Similarly, he makes a very beautiful and scientific distinction between natural and necessary desires. Natural desires involve our instincts to eat, drink, have sex, defecate, etc. while on the other hand, we have desires to connect, love, and communicate with others, neither we can live without natural necessities nor can we survive without necessary desires. It is an interesting anatomy of desires and instincts, not very modern but very insightful. Epicurus was a cult figure. He had followers all over Greece, people followed him, and many modern thinkers and writers were inspired by his philosophy of pleasure and material realities. These concepts helped to build the identity of ancient Greece; they influenced their world view, and again, the typical yet good question of one’s existence in this world, the purpose of life, and the life hereafter.

Works Cited

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