

Teiresias and the Paradox of Blindness

Paradox:

A seeming contradiction; whatever sounds impossible yet is in fact possible. "It's the little things in life that are colossal," said G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936), the British essayist and master of paradox. A paradox is a play on ideas, side-by-side contraries that seem to clash and reconcile simultaneously. In "Canis Major" Robert Frost calls the Big Dog constellation "that heavenly beast." See *oxymoron* in the dictionary. Paradoxical ideas provide the theme for serious poetry, for poets often set out to show that things are not what they seem--that death is life, that love is hate. Richard Lovelace in "To Althea, From Prison," writes, "Stone walls do not a prison make"--and in confinement that poet finds freedom. The underlying statement in much poetry is made, and can only be made, by paradox, as Cleanth Brooks observes:

"More direct methods may be tempting, but all of them enfeeble and distort what is to be said...Many of the important things which the poet has to say have to be said by means of paradox:--most of the language of lovers...most of the language of religion: "He who would save his life, must lose it"; The last shall be first."¹

Conventionally, throughout the ages, the motif of physical blindness in literature has paradoxically suggested extraordinary insight into truth. Consider these two notable quotations illustrating this concept:

"Hear now this, foolish people, and without understanding; which have eyes, and see not; which have ears, and hear not."

The Book of Jeremiah 5:21

"None no blind as those that will not see."

Matthew Henry, *Commentaries*

Teiresias, the blind prophet, is known to have extraordinary powers of divination. Oedipus, who physically can see quite well at the beginning of the play, is accused of being blind to the truth.

¹Arnold Lazarus and H. Wendell Smith, *A Glossary of Literature and Composition* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1983) 212.

Explain the paradox of blindness in each of the following examples from *Oedipus the King*:

1. Oedipus (to Teiresias): You child of endless night. You can not hurt me or any other man who sees the sun.
2. Teiresias (to Oedipus): Listen to me. You mock my blindness, do you? But I say that you, with both your eyes, are blind.
3. Teiresias (to Oedipus): You do not even know the blind wrongs/That you have done [your parents], on earth and in the world below.
4. Teiresias (to Oedipus): But the double lash of your parents' curse will whip you/Out of this land some day, with only night upon your precious eyes.
5. Once Oedipus discovers his true identity, he blinds himself.