

Fate vs Free Will in Oedipus Rex

Fate is a crucial facet that plays a dominate role in a man's life. Defined as a "fixed force in which the order of predestined events are defined" (Merriam-Webster, 2003), this paves reason for man to believe that their lives are controlled by a higher power or being. As much as each life is victimized by their predetermined fate, man is still free to choose their course of actions, and is ultimately responsible for his doings. In Sophocles' Oedipus the King, the hero's fate of murder and incest was predetermined by the Gods that controlled him, yet Oedipus' downfall is attributed to the decisions and actions in which he performed. The play Oedipus the King primarily illustrates an underlying relationship of man's free will existing within the cosmic order of fate which guides the tragic hero towards his ruin.

In the beginning of this tragedy, Oedipus learns of the prophecies that will take place in his life, and flees from Corinth in attempt to escape his fate. Instead, he falls into the trap of meeting his father, in his journey towards Thebes. It was his actions and free will that allowed for the prophecy to come true, as he recalls the murder of the mysterious travelers on his journey to Thebes, "... I killed him. I killed them all" (Sophocles, 819). He prizes his pride, honour, and excellence of his life above all else, yet as a hero, must choose between impending doom or an alternative "which if accepted would betray the hero's own conception of himself." In the end, he "refuses to yield; he remains true to himself to his physis, that "nature" which he inherited from his parents and which is his identity" (Knox, 8). The murder of his father is due to his inherited arrogance and inability to control his violent anger, leading to the simple refusal of stepping aside for a chariot to pass on a road, "... forced me off the road at his lord's command; But as the charioteer lurched over toward me / I struck him in my rage." (Ibid, 819).

Out of compassion for his suffering people, Oedipus sends Creon to Delphi to seek an end to the plague. When he learned of Apollo's prophecy, he acts in his hastiness and passionately curses the murderer, "Upon the murderer I invoke this curse ... may he wear out his life in misery or doom!" (Ibid, 266-271), unknowingly cursing himself. He does not realize the consequences his hunt for the murderer will have, and the loyalty to the truth is based on his ignorance. Later, he also blindly accuses Creon of being an enemy, "You're quick to speak, but I am slow to grasp you, for I have found you dangerous, and my foe. In both these situations, he freely pursues actions without evidence which leads him to his destruction.

The true sin that Oedipus is guilty of was his insolence shown towards the gods; believing that he was capable of raising himself to the level of the gods, bypassing his fate and ultimately outsmarting them. He show his lack of respect towards Tiresias, calling the old oracle a liar upon hearing that he was responsible for Laius' death. Yet, his inability to recognize the fate the constructed his past caused his every action to bring the prophecy closer to a reality.

From the bible, we are able to shed new light on the verse, "Men will parish for lack of knowledge". As Jocasta learned that the prophecy came true, she "begs [him], do not hunt this out... if you have any care for you own life. What I am suffering is enough" (Ibid, 1158-1161). In response, Oedipus replies, "I will not be persuaded to let change of finding out the whole thing clearly" (1166-1167). He has an uncompromising attitude towards the quest for the truth, even under his wife's pleading. The lack of knowledge and ignorance of the truth leads him to solve the final riddle of the play, the riddle of his own life.

Upon the discovery of the past truths, Oedipus realizes that his fate had run its course and is cursed by his former actions, "O god all come true, all

burst to light! / O light not let me look my last on you! / I stand revealed at last cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage, cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands" (Sophocles, 631). He accepts responsibility for the burden of his acts, which leads to his fall as king, and subsequently as a heroic figure. By free will, he punishes himself of the sins he had committed by asking to be banished and blinds himself with his Jocasta's gold pins.

Thus, Sophocles' Oedipus the King proves that a collection of man's actions of free will in combination with the force of fate guides a tragic hero towards his ruin. Although fate may be more powerful than man's free will, the existence of heroes and their stories are held together the bond of these elements. Fate can be seen as the one true evil, in which everything that happens is meant to be and cannot be changed, but the presence of a character's struggles through free will is meant to balance the forces of good and evil and restore moral order.