

"In the play, 'Oedipus the King' Sophocles argues that it is fate not the individual which controls human destiny."

The Ancient Greeks believed that the gods predetermined one's fate before their birth and that it was something could not be avoided or controlled by the individual. "Oedipus the King," written by the Greek playwright Sophocles supports these beliefs. The story of Oedipus was a well-known myth to the Greeks, he was fated to kill his father and share his mother's bed. The Ancient Greeks did not question this myth, they believed firmly in it as they did with all myths, and believed that Oedipus could not escape his fate.

The fate of Oedipus begins prior to the play, when his father Laius received a prophecy about his newborn child, whom his wife Jocasta had just given birth to. Apollo's oracle foretells that the infant is destined to kill his father, upon hearing this Laius gives the infant to a Shepherd, who is ordered to "expose the infant" on Mount Cithaeron. Rather than experiencing the guilt of their child's blood on their hands, the Ancient Greeks preferred to dispose of an infant in this manner. Laius' action of immediately believing the prophecy and trying to avoid it, illustrates the strict belief that the Ancient Greek society had in fate. There was no questioning the authenticity of the prophecy or the fact that it would not come true. Laius, by killing his child has tried to take destiny into his own hands and avert his fate but he does not succeed, because eventually his own son does kill him. The Ancient Greeks believed that if the father abandons the son, disaster will result, which is what happens to Laius.

Years later in Corinth, Oedipus the "handsome prince" of King Polybus and Queen Merope, discovers his fate. Unknown to Oedipus, he was given as a "gift" to the couple many years before, a common practice in Ancient Greek society, if a couple were infertile, a child was given to them as a gift. At a dinner party one night, a drunken man remarks to Oedipus that he is "not his father's son." After hearing this, Oedipus sets out towards the Delphic Oracle of Apollo to seek answers. The Ancient Greeks admired the beauty of Delphi and believed deeply in the words of the priests. People from all over Greece came to Delphi, with offerings to the gods in exchange for prophecies. Oedipus, like any other Greek believed that the truth lay with the gods Oracle in Delphi.

At Delphi, Apollo reveals Oedipus' fate: he is fated to couple with his mother, bring a breed of children into the light no man can bare to see and kill his father. Like any other Greek, Oedipus was not one to question the gods. The Greeks believed profoundly in the gods and of their existence. The words of the gods nor the legitimacy of their existence were never questioned, if you were to do this you would be guilty of hubris. Hoping to avoid the prophecy, Oedipus ran away towards Thebes, only to stop at "a crossroad where three roads meet". Here, Oedipus kills a man, a stranger who is actually his real father. With the death of Laius, Sophocles is showing that the choice Oedipus made did not affect his future. His freewill and choice to avoid his fate, actually bought him closer to it. Oedipus heads to Thebes believing he has escaped his destiny, unknown to the fact there is one more deed left for him to commit before his fate is fulfilled. This deed occurs when Oedipus saves Thebes from Sphinx and is rewarded the title of king and Laius' widow, Jocasta.

The play "Oedipus the King," begins twenty years later. Oedipus is yet to discover the truth of who he is and the fate he has been denying. This changes when a plague

hits Thebes, which slowly begins to kill everything in sight. Oedipus, concerned for his townspeople sends his brother-in-law Creon to Delphi "to learn of what he can do to save the city." In the Ancient Greek society, it was a common practice to seek out the help of the gods, when a city was in turmoil. The answer Oedipus receives is to bring the murderer of Laius to justice and the city will be saved. Oedipus is prepared to do what he has to, in order to save his city but unknown to him, seeking Laius' murderer will only bring him one step closer to his own fate being revealed.

As Oedipus begins to interrogate the blind prophet Tiresias, Sophocles shows us that actions and decisions based on freewill cannot defeat fate. Many years have passed and there is no doubt that Oedipus believes that he has outsmarted his fate. But while questioning Tiresias to find out the identity of his murderer, Oedipus is accused as Laius' murderer and of living in sin. At first, Oedipus doesn't believe it but after a discussion with Jocasta about prophecies, Oedipus is faced with the reality that he may be "the murderer he seeks." A Greek audience unlike a modern audience would not be questioning why Jocasta and Oedipus have never discussed the past before.

Oedipus now experiences a desire to seek the truth about Laius' death, but the more Oedipus probes, the closer he gets to revealing his fate. The truth is exposed when the Messenger comes to Oedipus, telling him of Polybus' death. The Messenger tells Oedipus that Polybus was not his real father, that Oedipus was nothing more than a "gift." Instead of seeking Laius' murderer, Oedipus begins an investigation into his heritage. Even though Sophocles used the technique of dramatic irony in the play, at this point the Greeks would be in suspense to see how the truth unfolds. Oedipus now summons the Shepherd, who reluctantly reveals the truth. Oedipus was the baby of Jocasta and Laius, who gave him up because of "frightening prophecies."

Once this has been revealed, Oedipus begins to see the light, he killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus realises he has been blind and punishes himself with a blinding. A modern audience would pity Oedipus and hold the belief that he doesn't deserve to be blind. Whereas, an Ancient Greek audience believed that Oedipus did deserve to be punished because he committed two horrific crimes: murder and incest. In the eyes of the Greeks, these were crimes that could not be easily atoned for or forgiven.

The story of Oedipus was a well-known myth to the Ancient Greeks and these myths give us an impression of the views of the Greek people. They demonstrate how the Greeks loved heroes, fame, and honor and how the Greek viewed particular aspects of life. One of the aspects, the Greeks loved was the theatre. Sophocles took the well-known myth of Oedipus and turned it into an ethical play about fate and freewill. Sophocles shows us several instances within the play, where freewill is set within the bounds of fate. It is Oedipus' freewill which has revealed his fate, which was only fulfilled because of Oedipus' free willed actions. Sophocles shows Oedipus trying to control his destiny, but in the end fate has prevailed, which supports the beliefs that Ancient Greeks, as well as Sophocles had in fate.

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