

Oedipus is Both a Saving and Destructive Force for Thebes. Discuss.

Throughout Sophocles' play '*Oedipus Rex*', Oedipus acts as both a saving and destructive force for the city of Thebes. He saves the city from the Sphinx and searches for the killer of Laius, the previous king, to cleanse the land and end plague. He is destructive in that he was unwittingly the killer of Laius and therefore the cause of plague and suffering in Thebes. Oedipus leaves immediately without fuss when he is proven, thus saving Thebes again. However, these acts were simply the fate the gods had handed him. He was merely a puppet controlled by the gods, therefore the saving and destructive forces were not those of Oedipus but rather the gods.

The theme of '*Oedipus Rex*' is fate. It is meant to tell the audience that the gods have complete control and that one cannot change what is meant to be. Sophocles tells the story of a man, Oedipus, who could not rewrite his destiny, though all efforts were put in place to change it. When Oedipus was first born to King Laius of Thebes and his wife Jocasta, the god Apollo told of his terrible fate. Oedipus speaks of it:

*'I must marry my mother...and kill my father'*¹

His parents could not let this awful fate prevail so they gave the child to their servant, a shepherd, to leave on a mountainside to die. Had this have been done by the shepherd, the subsequent events would have been prevented but one cannot mess with fate. The shepherd, not having the heart to leave a baby to die, gave him to another shepherd who then passed him on to his Lord, the King of Corinth, Polybus, who decided to keep the child and raise him as though he was his own. Thus, Oedipus was allowed to live and to fulfil his horrible fate and in doing so become a very destructive force for Thebes.

As a man Oedipus fled the safety of Corinth after hearing of his awful destiny from the gods and running away for fear of killing his father, whom he believed was Polybus. It was fate that on this journey he would run into Laius also travelling and feeling threatened would then kill him, thus fulfilling the first half of the prophecy. It was this journey, put in place by the gods, which led him to the city of Thebes.

Once at Thebes it was his fate to save the city from the Sphinx, so he could marry his mother, Jocasta, and fulfil the second half of his horrible destiny. Oedipus risked his life to beat the Sphinx even though he was not from Thebes, did not know anyone who lived in Thebes, or had any intention of starting a life in Thebes. This was a task that many people had set upon and had all found impossible, resulting in death; but somehow Oedipus managed to beat the unsurpassable Sphinx and become the saviour of Thebes. The priest says:

*'It was you...a newcomer to Cadmus' town,
That broke our bondage to the vile enchantress...
You gave us back our life...
Oedipus great and glorious...'*²

Here he is speaking of Thebes ('*Cadmus' town*') and how grateful the Thebans are to Oedipus for saving them from the Sphinx ('*the vile enchantress*'). Being their hero and saviour of the town, it was appropriate for him to marry the recently widowed Queen Jocasta, his mother, though he did not know at the time who she was. In doing so he became King of Thebes and satisfied the second half of his awful fate.

As the ruler he was required to stay in the city. It was this that caused destruction. There was huge famine and plague caused by, as the gods said, the man who had killed the previous king, Laius. Creon speaks of this:

*'There is an unclean thing,
Born and nursed on our soil, polluting our soil,
Which must be driven away, not kept to destroy us'*³

This polluter is, of course, was Oedipus, who had been placed in the city by the gods. This means that, through Oedipus, it was the gods who caused all the suffering and destruction in Thebes.

It was also the gods that went on to save Thebes, as Oedipus was found to be the killer of Laius and so was banished from the city as the gods had said the killer must be. Therefore, through Oedipus again, the Gods had saved the city once more, as the killer had left so peace could now be restored to the city.

Oedipus was condemned by the gods from birth. He is proof that one cannot escape their destiny. He wasn't a saving or destructive force for Thebes, simply an instrument of the gods. He was used to throw the city into disarray by killing their king and then used to save the city by defeating the Sphinx. Then again used as a destructive force for the city by marrying Jocasta and staying in Thebes as leader, causing great suffering in the town, as he was their "poison".

Also through the gods, Oedipus became the saving force of Thebes by leaving, ridding the town of their cause of destruction. Oedipus was merely the gods' puppet, as Sophocles tried to emphasize to the audience, we all are.

Word count: 832 words

¹ Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, Penguin Books, Blackburn, 1972, p.47.

² *ibid.*, p.26.

³ *ibid.*, p.28.