

The Role of Free Will in Oedipus the King

Fate is by definition the occurrence of inevitable events that are predestined to happen in a man's life. In literature, fate has a strong connection with the concept of free will because both can guide a character to a certain destiny. In Oedipus the King, written by the Sophocles, Oedipus's ominous fate of parricide and incest is prophesized by the Oracle at Delphi. However, it is not fate that led to Oedipus's destruction, but his overwhelming curiosity, impetuous actions, and irrational judgments.

Oedipus's voracious curiosity forces him to discover the horrible truth of his crimes and ancestry. His curiosity often sets him unsatisfied, and provokes him to investigate many gratuitous details. In Corinth, a drunkard bawled out that Oedipus was "not [his] father's son" (44)¹. Overwhelmed with frustration, Oedipus questions his parents about his identity. Although he got the desired response, he still feels that "the thing had hatched a scruple in [his] mind" (44). His superfluous curiosity encourages him to "steal away from home to Delphi, to the oracle" (44), where he then learns of the horrible prophecy. This curiosity leads him to depart his safe homeland into a foreign land where he eventually meets his grievous end. Oedipus's copious curiosity is also presented when he stubbornly pursues his self-identity search. Jocasta warns Oedipus to terminate his investigation for "[his] own life's sake" (59). However, spurring from his curiosity, Oedipus still chooses not to consider her warnings thoughtfully. Not only do Oedipus's curiosities contribute to his downfall, Oedipus's hasty actions are also essential.

Oedipus's impulsiveness acts as a guide that pushes him to meet his own disastrous

¹ "All citations taken from Paul Roche's translation of The Oedipus Plays Of Sophocles, Penguin Group: 1987, New York"

destiny. When Oedipus left Corinth, he was “[forced] off the road” (44) by men who seemed to be urging on. Without serious considerations of the men’s possible identities and intentions, Oedipus “in fury landed [one man] a blow” (44). Eventually Oedipus kills all the men, including his real father, Laius. This preventable issue is set as a foundation to Oedipus’s future tragedy. As a leader, his actions also play a pivotal role in his future outcome. When Creon comes back with information from Apollo, he asks Oedipus if he wants to discuss the matter privately. Without a second thought, Oedipus demands him to “speak out to all” (8). Oedipus frenetically eliminates the necessity of this pivotal piece of information to be interpreted thoughtfully first. His feral personality is shown again through his conversation with Jocasta. When she tries to prevent Oedipus from knowing the repugnant truth, Oedipus blindly accuses her of “bridling at [his] paltry origin” (60) with all “a woman’s pride” (60). These officious words will become a part of ignorance and guilt he eventually has to bear. Although Oedipus’s fierce actions play a major role in his future, his vague judgment also plays a crucial part.

Oedipus’s way of analyzing problems creates flaws that direct him to meet his destiny. As the King of Thebes, Oedipus does not fulfill the requirement of being a successful leader. He leads Thebes to “follow fifteen years” (3) of “a sham prosperity cloaking corruption” (3). It was not until Thebe is “struck by plague” (3) that Oedipus finally picked up the responsibility and asks for advice from the God. When Creon returns with advice from Apollo, Oedipus does not calmly interpret the God’s message. Instead, he openly requests for the killer of Laius. When this method fails, unsurprisingly, Oedipus reacts with rage. He curses the killer, whether “slipping off alone or with a band of men” (15) to be “[called]

down a life to fit a life dragged out in degradation” (15). As Oedipus hastily searches for the murderer, he also makes the discovery of his own crimes more inevitable. This way of solving the issue leads Oedipus fervently to seek for a solution. Oedipus was encouraged by Creon to find Tiresias, the blind man with great insight. Oedipus pleads Tiresias to “stir himself to help where help he can” (18) and describes him honorably as the “intuitive, didactic master of the finite and the infinite” (17). However, when Tiresias claims the “murderer of the man whose murder [Oedipus] pursues is [him]” (22), Oedipus responds by calling Tiresias a “purblind man, in ears and mind and vision” (22). It can be seen that Oedipus’s trust for Tiresias is not genuine. The infuriated Oedipus loses his judgments, and does not consider the reliability of Tiresias’s words or to examine the case privately. Instead, he carries on his mistake by accusing Creon of plotting with Tiresias to “overthrow and snatch” (22). Creon tries to explain to Oedipus that he “could not covet kingship for itself when [he] can be a king by other means” (33), and he asks Oedipus to “take [him], kill [him]” (34) if he is found unfaithful. However, Oedipus neglects Creon’s fifteen years of loyalty and still claims to “want [him] dead” (34). By not giving Tiresias’s prophecy a second thought and blindly accusing Creon, Oedipus extends his own dreadful deeds. His hatred towards Creon leads him to hear from Jocasta that Laius was murdered “at a spot where the road from Delphi meets the road from Daulia” (41). This incident strikes Oedipus as he recalls that he had killed some men at the same spot. From this point on, the truth began to unravel as Oedipus is urged to find the surviving herdsman of Laius. These anticipating events resulting from Oedipus’s own problematic judgments cause him to meet his acrimonious destiny.

Oedipus the King presents the inevitable fate of the main character, Oedipus, of incest and parricide. However, it is not the predetermined force of fate that drives Oedipus inescapably to his destiny. Free will and Oedipus's own choice are the main sources that destroyed his life. Oedipus, with his immense curiosities, rash actions, and inconsiderate judgments, led him to meet his own doom.

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