

# Free will in oedipus rex and the odyssey essay sample

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Greek authors, when one considers the time period in which they lived, are relatively simple to distinguish from one another, particularly in how they treat Greek myth in relation to the message they aim to convey to their audience. Homer and Sophocles use myth to reflect their different perspectives on human nature, which coincides with their audience's previously held perceptions of the myths they are dealing with. Homer's *Odyssey* suggests that humans need not search for meaning in their lives, as it is administered and controlled by the gods; Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* offers a completely different standpoint, in which humans, for all their worldly knowledge, can still be held blind to the truth of their existence and origins. *Odyssey* primarily deals with a world of immanent meaning; that is to say, divine presence is everywhere, and everything is subject to the will of the divine, or in the case of the Greeks, several godly figures. Nearly all of the instances in which Homer allows Odysseus to escape whatever situation he is in, is due to a combination of his own cunning and divine intervention. He makes a point of asserting the god's continual presence in Odysseus' responses to his adventures.

Poseidon is seen to be pulling the majority of the strings that work against Odysseus, being the one to bestow the curse on him to wander for ten years (*Odyssey* 9. 584-96). However, there is a collection of gods and powerful god-like figures that make it possible for him to overcome Poseidon's challenges; perhaps the most potent example of this is the instance upon which Calypso, who has fallen deeply in love with Odysseus and has persuaded him to stay with her, must set him free. Athena was able to persuade Zeus to send Hermes to Calypso, who is then told that she must let

Odysseus go on his way (5. 108-28). Homer makes it abundantly clear how invested the Olympians are in the life of Odysseus, and how seemingly uninvested he is in his journey home, further underscoring his ideas about the role humans play in their own lives. Oedipus Rex details a contrasting idea to Homer, in that Sophocles is markedly sparse in any references to gods having a say in the struggles that Oedipus encounters.

Though the chorus makes repeated appeals to Apollo, Zeus, and Athena, it is left unclear, perhaps deliberately so, whether or not they come to Oedipus' aid. Though it's easy for the reader to regard Oedipus as being a slave to fate, having succumbed to the self-fulfilling prophecy, Sophocles is adamant in his quest for Oedipus' freedom. Though the prophecy is made and fulfilled, Oedipus is not initially entirely bound by it; he makes a series of free choices that are not at all predetermined. He was not bound by the Oracle to avoid returning to Corinth, nor was he explicitly told to venture to Thebes, which led to the slaughter of his father and the marriage to his mother. Sophocles assures us that his downfall is not due to anything the gods are doing; it is, instead, his complete misinterpretation of Tiresias' prophecy, and his own blindness to his true lineage. It is also worthwhile to note that both Homer and Sophocles have their own individual interpretation of the Oedipus myth, which is addressed in their respective works.

Homer's Oedipus, who is spoken of by Epicaste to Odysseus during his time in the underworld, remains the King of Thebes with his eyesight intact; it is also said that the gods informed him of his paternity (Odyssey 11. 307-14). Sophocles' Oedipus is made to discover the truth on his own, through

investigating, with Creon, Laius' death, with no assistance from the gods (Oedipus Rex, 532-688). In both instances, Oedipus is blind to the reality of his origins, but the manner in which he is enlightened is entirely dependent on the author we are examining. Upon careful consideration, we can observe that both authors are able to manipulate myth in such a way that it tells their audience something about how they really participate in their lives.

This is done by making it possible for the audience to be able to relate to the main mythological figure, and then constructing a world in which the character is either able to make decisions and choices for himself or not. The implications of reading both texts, in conjunction, are vast; the reader is forced to question how much power is in their own existence in the modern world, and to examine both ancient and current arguments for either side. This brings to light the centuries-old conundrum of the truth about our free will: are we bound by a higher power, or are we alone in the universe?