

Fate and free will in oedipus rex essay

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In Oedipus Rex, the main character spends the entirety of the play escaping a prophecy that he heard as a child; that he would kill his father and marry his mother. However, circumstances and mistaken assumptions lead him right back to his parents, and the prophecy is fulfilled before he even realizes it. By the beginning of the play, he has already killed his father and married his mother – the play is about the circumstances of his discovery of that fact. The Greeks placed a great emphasis on fate and the power of destiny in people's lives; if you were fated to do something, that is what you did, with no way around it. In a modern interpretation, however, Oedipus has a surprising amount of free will – the prophecy turns out to be self-fulfilling, as knowledge of the prophecy brings about actions that end up causing the events of the prophecy. In this essay, we will examine how fate and free will intertwine in this story, and how Oedipus' actions, as well as the actions of his parents and others, bring about the fulfillment of the prophecy.

The concept of fate begins in the play with the revelation of the prophecy that was given to Laius and Jocasta by an oracle, wherein their firstborn son would rise up to kill the father and marry the mother. Obviously disapproving of this outcome, the characters take steps to remedy it, sending it away and attempting to murder the child once he is born. However, through a set of incredible circumstances (being sent away, being saved from exposure by random, benevolent strangers), Oedipus survives and grows up believing that his guardians, the king and queen of Corinth, are his biological parents. Even then, Oedipus hears that same prophecy which claims he will kill his father and marry his mother. He leaves, thinking that his adopted parents are his biological parents, escaping his own fate. However, it seems as

though circumstance is the friend of fate, because he happens to come across Laius in his journey, neither party recognizing the other. Through a brawl, Oedipus slays Laius and marries Jocasta, not knowing the truth of his actions.

When Oedipus tells Jocasta of the prophecy, he opines that he would “rather vanish from the sight of men, before [he sees] a fate like that roll over [him].” (Sophocles, lines 830-832) This is part of the free will that Oedipus affects, as he wishes to avoid the prophecy and do everything he can to fight it. Unbeknownst to him, however, it is the very actions that are taken to fight the prophecy that bring him to this place. While he did not know that Laius was his father, he still made the choice to fight and murder him on that road that day, regardless of the identity of his victim. If he had not made that decision, he would have passed on his way, not killing his father, or taking his mother from him as a reward for besting Laius. Therefore, while there was not a tremendous amount of foresight on the part of either party, the actions that led to Laius’ death were, indeed premeditated. The only difference is that Oedipus did not have all the facts.

The big question would seem to be, according to Lucas, “When do we have enough evidence to act?” (“Character v. Fate,” 2008) Oedipus, when compared to other literary figures such as Hamlet, at least acts quickly and takes responsibility for his actions as soon as he realizes them. He is quick to act, even when those actions might be terrible in hindsight. It is this active personality that either makes him an efficient engine of fate or a proactive seeker of his own destiny. That it happens to fall in with the prophecy is just a fortunate coincidence.

Is it possible to act with confidence at all, since there could be some new fact that we do not know about as we weigh our decisions? Oedipus Rex attempts to explore this in detail, especially when he does everything right to avoid the prophecy and still happens upon the craziest luck (running into his father randomly, a passing stranger saving him from exposure as a child). One must decide whether or not these events are fate or mere circumstances. Much of it is not free will; Oedipus did not choose to have the random passerby be his father, and he certainly did not choose to marry his mother specifically; it was just how things were done back then, as you took what belonged to the man you killed. The circumstances were simply not known to Oedipus, yet he acted anyway.

It is implied that Sophocles means to showcase the inescapability of fate with Oedipus Rex, but at the same time, he implies through the text that free will is a major component of our actions. After the suicide of Jocasta, the messenger refers to the whole affair as “ the vilest things/brought on by choice and not by accident.” (Sophocles, 1470) If we take this at face value and as indicative of the author’s message, Oedipus’ actions were still actions; he made the choice to perform them, and no external force thrust them upon him. From the moment he decided to attack a complete stranger on the road, he set in motion a chain of events that would bring him barreling back to the prophecy and doing everything that was foretold.

Works Cited

Lucas, Gerald. " Character v. Fate in Oedipus Rex | The Humanities Index." The Humanities

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