

The significance of fate in different genres of literature

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



There are many overarching themes that can be applied to the different genres of literature. People can relate to these themes, and they can be applied to short fiction, poetry and drama. The theme of fate is something that can be applied to all of these forms of literature. Fate is defined as the development of events beyond a character's control, as determined by an unseen force. The short story "The Lottery" written by Shirley Jackson, the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" written by T. S. Eliot, and the play "Oedipus the King" written by Sophocles, are all works of literature that explore the theme of fate. "The Lottery" deals with the societal acceptance of fate, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" deals with internal acceptance of fate, and Oedipus the King deals with the fact that people cannot escape their fate. Fate is something that people have no control over, both in real life and in works of literature. Short stories are able to develop characters and conflict in just a few pages.

In the short story "The Lottery", society's acceptance of fate is the conflict being explored. This story describes a tradition within a society in which a lottery is conducted once a year. Everyone in the town gathers in the town square and a name is drawn to see who the big winner is. At the beginning, and throughout much of the exposition of this story, it seems that this lottery is a happy occasion. However, there are some small hints throughout that also suggest that this occasion may not be quite what it seems. With the young boys stuffing their pockets full of stones, the conductors of the lottery acting nervous around one another, and Old Man Warner talking about "nothing but trouble" in discontinuing the tradition of the lottery. However the reader does not truly figure out what is happening until the very end of the

story. Toward the end of “ The Lottery”, the winning family’s name is drawn and each member of that family then must draw a slip of paper. The mother, Tessie Hutchinson, begins to get visibly and audibly upset, and the reader figures out that this story is bound to have a less than optimal ending. She begs the directors of the lottery to allow other members of their family to be included into the drawing as well, and when they deny her, she gets even more upset: “‘ It wasn’t fair,’ Tessie said” (314). This is a display of Tessie trying to escape her fate, even though everyone around her has already accepted that there is nothing that can be done, including Tessie’s own husband. After each member of the family makes their drawing, and it is discovered that Tessie is the “ winner”, the entire demeanor of the town changes, and Tessie becomes even more panicked than before. Everyone else in town ceremoniously picks up their rocks and stands around Tessie. She is begging for her life and they cannot do anything, because they must go along with tradition. They realize that this is Tessie’s fate, and that she was meant to live and die in this way. No matter how much she begs and pleads, everyone else, including her husband and children, realizes that she has no choice: “‘ It isn’t fair, it isn’t right,’ Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her” (316). Although Tessie has a hard time accepting her fate, everyone around her has already accepted it for her. Because it has been ingrained in each member of this society from the time they were born, and they do not know any other way. Even when one individual does not want to accept their fate, sometimes that does not matter, as societal acceptance from those around them is all it takes to have that fate carried out. While some characters in different genres of literature have trouble

accepting their fates, there are others who are coping with their internal acceptance of fate.

In “ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, the man mentioned in the title is dealing with the way that his life has turned out. He is reminiscing on his life and the decisions that he has made during his time on Earth. He reflects on all the times in his life that he has missed out on opportunities because he was a man that was unable to commit to anything. When the speaker says “ in the room the women come and go, talking of Michelangelo”, he is insinuating that he is a shallow man who dates the same type of women all the time (926). When the speaker repeats this same thing later on in the poem, it reinforces this idea. This quote suggests that the speaker dates women who are all the same, and who will never truly interest him. He realizes, after all of his years of reckless dating, that he has grown old and less attractive than he once was: “ Time to turn back and descend the stair, with a bald spot in the middle of my hair” (926). He knows he is getting old and that he has missed out on a lot of opportunities due to how shallow he was in his youth. He realizes that the cruel tricks of time have cheated him out of what he really wants, and quite possibly what he once had: “ and I have known the arms already...Is it perfume from a dress that makes me so digress?” (927). The speaker quite possibly had the perfect person for him once before in his life, but he let them go because of his tendency to act shallow and full of himself. The speaker in “ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is reflecting on his life choices, and realizes that time dictated his future, and that opportunities are limited. He realized that people have only

so much time to be alive, but he realized this far too late. He also realized that the nature of his personality caused him to miss out on opportunities that came with a shelf life. Now, he must come to terms with the fact that he was meant to end up like this. Although he felt that he had a choice, and felt like he could have perhaps done something to prevent his life from going this way, there really was nothing that he could have done. Some unseen force played a role in the speaker's life ending up the way that it did. It was his fate to become a lonely, shell of a man, sitting around wishing that he had done things differently in his life: " I grow old...Do I dare eat a peach?...I shall wear white flannel trousers and walk upon the beach. I Have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to me" (929). The speaker realizes that he has grown old, and that he has run out of opportunities. His fate has determined that he was never the type of man to take a wife. He was to be the type of man who dated around throughout his life, and ended up wishing he had done things differently when it was all too late in his old age. He is finally able to accept this at the end of the poem, when he realizes that people thinking that they can choose their future is all just a facade, and that the ugly truth of it all is that fate determines everything. All people can do is just sit back and wait for their fate to catch up with them. However fruitless their efforts may be, there will always be those who try to escape their fate.

In the play Oedipus the King written by Sophocles, there is a classic case of a character attempting to escape his fate, and failing, despite his best efforts. Every person during Sophocles' day knew the story of Oedipus, so there was

plenty of dramatic irony to be experienced for audiences during his time. Even today, this story is fairly well known, and not much of the irony is lost in the translations of both languages and time. The story of Oedipus is a tragic one, in which he is cursed by fate from the very beginning of his life. When he was born, a prophet told Oedipus' parents that he would sleep with his mother and murder his father. Oedipus' parents were the first to try and escape Oedipus' fate by casting him out of their home in order to save themselves. During the play, as the plot progresses, the audience realizes that Oedipus has already fulfilled the prophecy. He is the one who has caused the trouble in Thebes, therefore they know he is the one who must be banished. The audience is aware of the fact that Oedipus has no control over his fate, and that he will ultimately have to face the consequences of the fate that was chosen for him. When Oedipus calls on the prophet Tiresias to help him find the person who has cursed Thebes, he is met with information that he does not want to hear. Tiresias tells him that the person who has cursed the land is Oedipus himself, and Oedipus becomes angry with Tiresias, not wanting to believe him. He begins hurling insults at Tiresias about his blindness, to which Tiresias responds: " those jeers you hurl at me before long all these men will hurl at you" (1601). Tiresias knows everything about Oedipus' fate, and that is why he was reluctant to tell him the truth about it. However, Oedipus' prodding caused him to tell him the truth anyway, and Oedipus still has some idea in his mind that he has done no wrong. When he and his wife and mother, Jocasta, finally figure out that Tiresias was right all along, both of them break completely. Jocasta hangs herself at the atrocity of it all, and Oedipus stabs his eyes out with pins.

There was no way for Oedipus to escape his fate. Despite the valiant effort from his parents to avoid the prophecy told at Oedipus' birth, they should have known better. It was Oedipus' fate to murder his father and to sleep with his mother. Although both Oedipus and his parents tried to hide from who Oedipus truly was, there was no escaping it. No matter how hard one tries, they cannot escape their fate.

In the short story "The Lottery", the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and the play Oedipus the King, different aspects of dealing with fate were explored. "The Lottery" dealt with the societal acceptance of fate. Even if one person does not accept their fate, if the society that they live in already has, this fate will most definitely be carried out. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" dealt with the internal acceptance of fate, realizing that there are limited opportunities in life, and sometimes we just are not cut out for the things we assume that we would be. Finally, Oedipus the King dealt with the fact that no matter how valiant one's efforts are, they cannot escape their fate. Fate is something that is predetermined by an unseen force, and there is nothing that can be done about it.

Works Cited

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