

# Women in literature: oedipus the king and the odyssey essay

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



The portrayal of women in literature, especially in ancient Greek mythology, is an important topic of debate. A number of scholars have shown that the portrayal of women in ancient literature was based on the old perceptions that women are the “ lesser gender” (Puchner 47). For instance, in ‘ The Poetics’, Aristotle states “...women are the inferior person...” In almost all types of ancient literature, women are characterized as evil or weak. However, women have always had a major influence on the outcomes of narratives, especially in Greek mythology.

For instance, women are considered as one major factor that influences and determines the fate of heroes. Two major works of literature, ‘ Oedipus the king’ and ‘ The Odyssey’, provide some of the best examples of how the role of female characters is portrayed in different ways and how these women influence the fate of heroes. The purpose of this paper is to review the portrayal of women and feminine influence on heroism in the two works of literature.

In the play ‘ Oedipus the King’, Sophocles provides some evidence on how female characters influence the fate of heroes. Evidently, Jocasta is the major character that Sophocles uses to describe females and their influence on heroism. In this play, Jocasta is the wife of Oedipus the king. However, it is worth noting that Jocasta is also the mother to Oedipus. She is aware that Oedipus has killed his own father to take over as his mother’s husband and king. By agreeing to commit incest with her son, Jocasta is subjected to the wrath of the gods as predicted by the Oracle of Delphi.

Noteworthy, Oedipus is not aware of his actions; neither does he know that he is committing incest with his mother. To him, Jocasta is his wife and queen. Jocasta makes good use of Oedipus' naivety and commitment to her. She takes this opportunity to control his decisions and actions. It is clear that Jocasta is the main catalyst in the king's decisions. In addition, Oedipus is doomed by how his society, which is committed to keeping traditions and avoids the wrath of the gods, perceives.

Sophocles uses Jocasta to portray the influence of evil women in the society. To him, women influence and determine the fate of heroes as they attempt to be the real heroes but 'behind the curtains'. For instance, Jocasta is displayed as the evil woman who seeks power and influence. She even abandons her children. Jocasta's willingness and acceptance to commit incest with her son is an example of women who are only interested in their individual gains.

She has to choose between her husband and son for the purpose of individual gains. She chooses her son (power) and forsakes her husband (love). Therefore, she is an example of women who cannot stand by love when chances to gain power and personal gains emerge. In an ancient society that is deeply influenced by gods and traditions, the existence of women like Jocasta is a clear example of the evils some women bring to their own societies.

Her broad steps of questioning the gods and their priests further portray Jocasta's evil character. Sophocles is using Jocasta to show the character and

role of influential women in the society. For instance, Jocasta questions god's prophecies, which is considered evil in the Greek society. "... As a prophesy, I would not consider looking at the other side just because of it... our lives are ruled by chances...". This is an example of the daring nature of some women. In fact, few males can dare question the gods and their priests. Jocasta's thirst for power and material gains drives her ego- she even thinks she is powerful to gods.

Unlike other people in the ancient society, Jocasta's quest for welfare and love supersedes her respect to traditions, social norms and the belief in gods. For instance, what matters to her are her love and the persons to whom she gives her love. Clearly, Sophocles attempts to show that women are weak in any society, especially when it involves their ability to withstand difficulties and frustrations. For instance, Jocasta says that she can face the possibility of a whirlwind ruling the world. However, whenever her human connections and love are destroyed, her strength and ability to face difficulty are also destroyed. According to Sophocles, this is the cause of Jocasta's decision to commit suicide.

In his 'Odyssey', Homer uses a different approach and perspective to portray women and their role in their society. While Sophocles attempts to describe the innate weakness of women and inability to deal with destroyed love, Homer's women play very important roles. His women are powerful and wise but act from the background. Their influence is seen in their charming and controlling nature, provision of wisdom and care for heroes.

Unlike Sophocles who uses a single female character to display the general evil and weakness of women, Homer has used a number of characters to show the innate strength in women. For instance, Penelope, Helen, Arete and Nausicaa are portrayed as mortal women. Penelope is the wife of Odysseus. For a long time, Penelope waits for Odysseus to return home. A simple analysis of her character may portray Penelope as a weak or naive character. However, a deeper analysis of her reveals her innate wisdom and strength. For instance, for the long time that she waits for Odysseus' return, a number of suitors admire and approach her for love and marriage. However, she guards her love for Odysseus. Homer states "... Penelope has been deceiving the wits of the entire society, the hope for everyone and promises for all men... her meaning is totally different..."

Unlike Jocasta in "Oedipus the King", Penelope's wisdom is portrayed throughout the story. She is an example of women who are ready to die or suffer for the sake of their love. Unlike Jocasta, Penelope has many chances to elope with the good, powerful and loving men who come asking for her. Nevertheless, she declines their offer and spends many years waiting for the return of Odysseus. This is a different portrayal of women and their character in the society. Jocasta cannot live without the person she loves. However, Penelope is ready to stand her ground and ignore all the prevailing chances.

In addition, Jocasta is willing to take any chance and direct her love to any man who presents as a real lover, regardless of whether the action is a sin. On the other hand, Penelope takes caution when Odysseus comes because she was afraid and aware he might be an impostor. She has to use wits to

set up a trap that would provide evidence to prove that the man was the real Odessey. Probably, Jocasta would have offered herself even to an impostor.

As shown by Sophocles, women in the ancient societies are portrayed as weak and unstable characters. They pursue personal gains but cannot withstand destroyed love. However, women are also wise and influential beings (Puchner 79). As shown in Homer's ' Odessey' women are humble but wise, considerate and can endure pain and temptations for the sake of love.

Puchner, Martin. Norton Anthology of World Literature. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co, 2011. Print.