

Free will vs determinism



and Number of the Teacher's Evaluation Paper FREE WILL VERSUS
DETERMINISM IN OEDIPUS THE KING BY SOPHOCLES Introduction

The ancient Greek tragedy Oedipus the King by Sophocles first performed in c. 429 B. C. (Knox 133), depicts the theme of free will against determinism or fate. In this mythological story of the power of prophecy and destiny against man's struggles to exert his own will on his life, the main characters are Oedipus and his father Laius.

Thesis Statement: The purpose of this evaluation paper is to assess whether determinism or free will played the predominant role in the lives of the main characters in the play, who forcefully used their free will in attempting to change their destiny.

Discussion

Based on his past transgression, King Laius of Thebes, the father of Oedipus, and his descendants were doomed to tragedy as predicted by Apollo's Oracle. Thus, the tragic hero Oedipus' fate was sealed even before his birth (Dilman 21). Laius was destined to perish at the hands of his own son, Oedipus. The king attempts to eliminate the infant son by ordering his wife Queen Jocasta to get him killed. However, his will to divert his destiny is interceded by fate through a kindly shepherd who rescues the abandoned baby. Ultimately, Oedipus is raised by the childless king of Corinth, Polybus and his queen Merope (Sophocles 36). The greater the attempts to intervene with fate, they serve only to strengthen the victory of the prophecy.

Later Oedipus as a grown man comes to know from Apollo's Delphic Oracle, that he would be the murderer of his father and would mate with his own mother. In an attempt to prevent this prediction from coming true on Polybus and Merope whom he believes to be his true parents, Oedipus leaves

Corinth. It is clear that Oedipus pits his strength against the fate predicted for him by Apollo (Dilman 22). However, by leaving his foster home in Corinth to protect his parents from himself, unaware that Polybus and Merope were not his true parents, he makes the prophecy come true. Thus, while travelling to Thebes, he meets his true father Laius, while both are unaware of each others' identities. The haughty father and the arrogant and impetuous son (Dilman 23) quarrel over whose chariot has the right of way, and Oedipus kills his father. Thus, fate works through the participants' characters, and one part of the Oracle's prophecy comes true. He frees the kingdom of Thebes from a sphinx's curse (Sophocles 10), is rewarded with the kingdom and married to the dowager Queen Jocasta, his biological mother, while each is unaware of the other's identity, consequently fulfilling the entire prophecy.

After several years during which two daughters are born to him, and through significant revelations which he stubbornly seeks against his mother's pleadings, when Oedipus realizes the truth he blinds himself and begs to be exiled (Sophocles 59). His mother had already taken her own life on knowing the truth. The character of Oedipus, with an arrogance and self-deception that he would be able to divert his pre-ordained destiny, led inevitably to disastrous consequences (Dilman 22). He believed that he could outwit Apollo's prophecy with the same intelligence with which he outwitted the sphinx. However, his outwitting the sphinx shows Apollo's upper hand in leading Oedipus to the fate that he tried greatly to prevent.

Conclusion

This evaluation paper has highlighted determinism versus free-will, and assessed whether fate or free will played a more significant part in the main

characters meeting with their disastrous destinies. Similar to Laius' attempt to change his destiny, Apollo's Oracle as a prophecy of doom was not accepted by his son Oedipus, who struggled to prevent it from coming true. Dilman (p. 24) reiterates that there is a powerful interplay of chance, knowledge of the prophecy, ignorance of Oedipus' about his origins, and his pride. However, his ignorance about his origins cannot be condemned since he was unable to get the information he sought from his foster parents, and hence believed them to be his real parents. The prophecy was fulfilled by Oedipus' efforts to avoid his destiny through actions that reflected his character portrayed as stubborn and arrogant. Thus, it can be stated that Oedipus himself is responsible for his tragedy, and the part played by his free will was more significant than that played by determinism.

Works Cited

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