

## Oedipus Rex as Tragedy of Fate

In the Greek tragedy, **Oedipus the King** written by Sophocles, the antagonist is fate. The **role of fate** is deeply intertwined in the plot. This interpretation is directly linked to the ancient Greek belief in the powers of the gods to dictate and direct a person's life, absolutely. The Greeks believed in "**Fatalism**", that means a person's fate is pre-determined and unchangeable. Man is a puppet in the hands of Fate, incapable of changing his destiny.

The first instance-involving fate occurs when Oedipus sends Creon, Jocasta's brother, to the temple of Apollo, the god of prophecy and healing, to find the **fate** of Thebes and how to **rid** Thebes of the plague the people are suffering from. It is important to note that Apollo made the prophecy to King Laius, Jocasta's former husband, and Jocasta, Oedipus's wife, that they would bear a son who **would** kill King Laius, and Apollo made the prophecy to Oedipus that he **would** kill his biological father and sleep with his biological mother.

**Fate** is next brought into the play when Creon is sent in search of the blind prophet of Apollo, Tiresias. Against his will, Tiresias reveals Oedipus' fate. Oedipus is so anxious to find the murderer of King Laius that he will not give up until the murderer is found. Oedipus relentlessly pursues the truth, unwilling to give up until the truth is found. ✓

After Oedipus repeatedly provokes Tiresias, he reveals what Oedipus is and who Oedipus really is. Tiresias says to Oedipus,

*"You cannot imagine...I tell you,  
you and your loved ones live together in infamy,  
you cannot see how far you've gone in guilt."*

Tiresias is alluding to the fact that Oedipus unknowingly is married to his mother and has produced offspring through her. Oedipus is too

blind to comprehend what Tiresias is saying. Tiresias goes on to say, "**I pity you, flinging at me the very insults / each man here will fling at you so soon**". Tiresias is warning Oedipus that everything he thinks he has is not really his. People will turn against Oedipus and he will lose everything. Oedipus blasphemes against the gods when he tells Tiresias that he does not have the gift of prophecy. This is blasphemy because Tiresias is the messenger between gods and humans, and when Oedipus calls him a liar, he is denying the words of the gods. Upon further provocations, Tiresias tells Oedipus that Oedipus does not know where he is living or who his parents are. Tiresias insinuates that Oedipus is both father and sibling to his children when he says, "**And a crowd of other horrors you'd never dream / will level you with yourself and all your children**". Next Tiresias predicts, "**This day will bring your birth and your destruction**".

In his final speech towards Oedipus, Tiresias tells Oedipus that he is the murderer. Tiresias further tells Oedipus that though he is a stranger to Thebes, he will soon discover that he is a native Theban. Oedipus will also discover that he is both father and brother to his children, and both son and husband to his wife.

After first arguing with Tiresias and then Creon, Oedipus talks to Jocasta, bringing about our third example of fate as an antagonist. Upon learning what the argument was about Jocasta relays that an oracle had come to King Laius and told him that he would "**die a victim at the hands of his own son**". The king had pierced the infant's ankles and sent him to die. Besides King Laius was killed by highwayman.

Jocasta should have known that she could not outwit the gods, or fate. Fate next comes into play when Oedipus, who has begun to think he is King Laius' killer, recounts the dinner where the drunken man accused Oedipus of being a bastard. Oedipus goes to the oracle at Delphi to find his destiny. Oedipus flees Corinth to protect Merope and Polybus and to escape his destiny, which gives us our fifth instance of fate.



The change in the curse was brought about by Jocasta, who feared the oracle's prophecy. Jocasta sent the infant, Oedipus, to his death. In doing this Jocasta was attempting to cheat **fate**. Jocasta thought that if she killed the baby, she could change her husband's destiny. The added prophecy that Oedipus would lie with his mother and produce cursed offspring is a result of Jocasta's attempt to cheat **fate**. **Oedipus** is really an innocent victim of fate.

Again, **fate** is seen when the messenger brings news that Polybus has died a natural death. Both **Oedipus** and Jocasta rejoice briefly in this news for it further proves that oracles are wrong. Yet, Oedipus still has fear of prophecy for he will not return to Corinth as long as Merope is alive, for fear that he will lay with her. The messenger tells Oedipus that Merope is not Oedipus' true mother, as he himself gave **Oedipus** to her and to Pelops as a gift. It is a strange twist of fate this messenger both took Oedipus to Corinth, but also is one of the final puzzle pieces in **Oedipus'** true identity.

When the shepherd arrives, he is forced by **Oedipus** to verify that **Oedipus** is the child of Jocasta and King Laius. Oedipus' is now forced to realize that he has not escaped his **fate**. The entire prophecy has been fulfilled. After finding Jocasta's body, "**And there we saw the woman hanging by the neck**". Oedipus does the following:

*"He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins holding her ropes—and lifting them high, looking straight up into the points, he digs them down the sockets of his eyes, crying."*

To conclude we can say that despite the evidence to prove Oedipus as a free agent in most of his actions, we cannot forget that most of the tragic events in his life—the murder of his father and his marriage with his mother inevitably happen. Here the role of fate cannot be denied. No doubt, the last act of destruction was caused by Oedipus free will, but his tragic fate came about because of the role of Gods in human affairs.

Fate not only plays a vital in a play but also it teaches people the ethic or beliefs in their religion, particularly how they should believe in the power of gods and bow to them without demur.





## Significance of Oracle

The Delphic oracle plays an important role in Oedipus Rex, controlling the action of the play almost at every step. If the Delphic **oracle** were to be eliminated, the play would fall to pieces. The Delphic oracle is, indeed, the very basis and foundation of the whole play. Without it, the play simply disintegrates. The Delphic oracle has, therefore, a key position in the development of the plot. The play is based upon a myth, a myth which has its origin in the Delphic oracle. The importance of the Delphic oracle cannot, therefore, be underestimated. It is noteworthy also that the Delphic oracle enjoyed a high prestige and authority in those days, even though there were sceptics who scoffed at it. The belief in the Delphic oracle was thought to be an essential part of religion. He who did not believe in the oracle was regarded as impious and irreverent. It is a message from the Delphic oracle that sets the plot of the play afoot. Creon brings the news that the sufferings of the Theban people will be relieved only if the murderer of the late King, Laius, is traced and expelled from the city or put to death. Apollo or Phoebus has sent word that there is an unclean person polluting the soil of Thebes and that that person must be driven away or killed before people can obtain any relief. Oedipus, who is a great well-wisher of his people, immediately announces his resolve to do the oracle's bidding, namely to find out the criminal and punish him. By this announcement Oedipus shows his faith in, and allegiance to, the Delphic oracle. He undertakes to investigate the murder of Laius, saying "**All praise to Phoebus**"! The opening words of the entry-song of the Chorus thus refer to the message of the Delphic oracle. When the Chorus suggests that the identity of the criminal should be sought from Phoebus who has disclosed the reason for the misfortunes of the



people of Thebes, Oedipus reverently replies that it is not in the power of any human being to compel a god to speak against his will.

Thereupon the chorus suggests that Teiresias be entreated to help in the matter because he is very close to Phoebus and possesses powers of divination. To this Oedipus replies that he has already sent for Teiresias, having been advised by Creon to do so.

It is clear from all this that everybody concerned has **full faith** in the words of the Delphic oracle, who, on being approached, revealed the cause of the troubles afflicting the people of Thebes and also suggested the remedy. There is not a single dissident voice so far as the authority of the Delphic oracle concerned. The King believes the oracle: Creon believes the oracle; and the Chorus, which represents the citizens, believes the oracle also. Delphic oracle is the motivating force behind the undertaking of Oedipus to find out and punish the criminal. Thus the Delphic oracle serves as the starting-point or the driving force for the drama to commence. In the scene between Oedipus and Teiresias, there is hardly any reference to the Delphic oracle, apart from Oedipus's seeking the prophet's help on the basis of the word of the oracle, namely that the only way of deliverance from the plague is to kill or banish the murderer of Laius. This scene ends with a furious quarrel between the two men and the Chorus then sings a song in which it refers to the words of Delphic oracle. The chorus which has complete faith in the oracle, warns the guilty man against the wrath of the gods.

A little later we meet the person who does not attach any importance to oracles or to those human beings who are credited or to those human beings who are credited with the powers of divination. This person is no other than Jocasta, the Queen. Jocasta believes



neither on the oracles of gods nor in prophets. As evidence in support of her view, she refers to an oracle given to Laïus, not indeed from Phoebus, but from Phoebus's priests, that he should die by the hand of his own child to be delivered by Jocasta. This oracle proved to be false, says Jocasta, because Laïus was killed by robbers on the highway, while the child, when it was hardly three days old, had been fettered and exposed on the mountain-side to perish. When Oedipus hears that Laïus was killed at a place where three roads met, he remembers having killed some persons at such a place. The oracle had said that he would kill his father and marry his mother. In order to avoid committing such monstrous deeds, he had fled from Corinth determined never to see his father Polybus and his mother Merope again. His journey away from Corinth had brought him to Thebes, but not before he had killed some persons on the road-side and not before he had conquered the Sphinx. After listening to his story Jocasta once again makes a sarcastic comment on the oracles. "**A fig for divination**", she says. The chorus now sings another song, this time deploring the loss of people's faith in oracles. It is highly regrettable, says the Chorus, that the oracles are not being duly respected and honoured by the people, that Apollo's glory is fading.

The fulfillment of the prophecies of the Oracle happened when the Corinthian messenger arrives with his news, Jocasta finds another opportunity to scoff at the oracles: "**Where are you now, divine prognostications!**" Oedipus kept avoiding Polybus all these years as to not kill him. And now Polybus has died a natural death, and not by any act of Oedipus's. A moment later Oedipus joins Jocasta in scoffing at the Delphic oracle. "So wife, what of the Pythian fire, the oracles?" says Oedipus. Oedipus was to kill his father but now Polybus has died

when Oedipus was nowhere near Polybus. The prophecy of the oracle, says Oedipus, has proved wrong and lies dead like Polybus. We find Oedipus who was in the beginning a whole-hearted believer in the oracles, now become sceptic. Oedipus is still afraid and the other half of the prophecy and, when the Corinthian messenger tries to relieve his anxiety on this score, Jocasta receives the shock of her life on learning that Oedipus is no other than her own son, she had thought, had perished as an infant. Oedipus, however, is still in the dark about the facts. The Chorus now sings a song which has an ironical ring because the Chorus imagines Oedipus to be the offspring of the union of a god and a mountain nymph. The Chorus reiterates its faith in Apollo and in the **Delphic oracle: "Phoebus, our Lord, be this according to thy will"** Then comes the discovery for Oedipus, which shows that the entire prophecy of the Delphic oracle has been fulfilled in every particular.

**To conclude**, the Oracle's prophecy that Oedipus will murder his father and marry his mother comes true despite the various actions of Laius and Oedipus attempting to escape their fate. The Oracle and her prophecy in Oedipus rex represents the ancient Greek view of **Fixity of Fate**.