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## Analyzing The Central Questions In Oedipus Rex By Sophocles

Oedipus Rex is a complex work of fiction, interweaving several questions throughout its narrative: if gods are manipulators with ulterior motivations, fate versus agency, the blame to be given in such a complex situation, and the irony of Oedipus' actions.

The only direct contact the city of Thebes receives from the gods is at the very start of the play in the form of the oracle of Delphi's prophecy, which was given to Creon: Creon: Apollo commands us - he was quite clear - / "Drive the corruption from the land, / don't harbor it any longer, past all cure, / don't nurse it in your soil - root it out!" (108-111) The only other part the Gods really have to play in the narrative is the characters' feelings towards them. The chorus continuously prays in hopes of ending the plague that has befallen them, seeing the gods as benevolent deities: Chorus: O lord of the stormcloud, / you who twirl the lightning, Zeus, Father, / thunder Death to nothing Apollo, lord of the light, I beg you - / whip your longbows golden cord / showering arrows on our enemies-shafts of power / champions strong us before rushing on! / Artemis, Huntress, / torches flaring over the eastern ridges - / ride death down in pain! / God of the headdress gleaming gold, I cry to you - / your name and ours are one, Dionysus - / come with your face aflame with wine / your raving women's cries / your army on the march! Come with lightning / come with torches blazing, eyes ablaze with glory! / Burn that god of death that all gods hate!

However, we later find that it was due to a prophecy given by Apollo that Laius and Jocasta attempted to kill their son, Oedipus, and it was that same prophecy that led Oedipus down the path toward Thebes. This seems rather contradictory of the benevolent deity the Chorus has made Apollo and his fellows out to be. When taking both of these interpretations into account it is easy to see the truth of the matter regarding the Gods. They are neither benevolent or malevolent, they are ambivalent. They neither help nor harm anyone throughout the entire show. The only argument that can be given against this point is the tragedy that was caused by prophecies given by Apollo and his oracle, but this too points towards ambivalence when you reconsider two seemingly insignificant details. Firstly, it wasn't the prophecies themselves that caused the great tragedy of this story, but the actions taken by the characters. Second, Oedipus directly sought out his version of the prophecy, if he had not done so he would have never left Corinth. Therefore I feel it is safe to assume that the Gods had no ulterior motives in their actions, or rather inactions, they simply gave a prophecy and left it to the characters to decide what to do from there.

Which brings us to our next question, the idea of fate versus agency. One may think due to the driving force of the play's plot being a prophecy, that Oedipus Rex is a story about fate. However, as stated before the God Apollo simply gave the prophecy. He did not influence the characters' actions or motivate them to act selfishly. They befell tragedy due to their own selfish nature, through their own agency.

Let's speak hypothetically for a moment, if Laius and Jocasta had not attempted to kill Oedipus as a baby, would the prophecy have come true anyway. While there is no way to definitively decide I believe the answer is no. If Oedipus had lived in Thebes his entire life, I feel it is safe to

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assume a few things. Firstly, he would never have discovered his prophecy, unless he was told by his parents which seems unlikely. The only reason Oedipus seeks out the oracle is because he is confused about the circumstance of his birth: Oedipus: Some man at a banquet who had drunk too much / shouted out - he was far gone, mind you - / that I was not my father's son. Fighting words! (858 - 860) Oedipus: And so. / unbeknown to mother and father I set out for Delphi, (868 - 869) But even if you believe that Oedipus would seek out the prophecy for a similar reason, or would have been told, his actions after visiting Delphi further proves my point: Oedipus: and the god Apollo spurned me, sent me away / denied the facts i came for, / but first he flashed before my eyes a future / great with pain, terror, disaster - I can hear him cry, / "You are fated to couple with your mother, you will bring / a breed of children into the light that no man can bear to see - / you will kill your father, the one who gave you life." / I heard all that and ran. I abandoned Corinth, / from that day on i gauged its landfall only / by the stars, running, always running / toward some place where i would never see / the shame of all those oracles come true.

Even if Oedipus had somehow become aware of his 'fate' he would have simply left Thebes. Therefore 'fate' had nothing to do with the events of this play. If Laius and Jocasta had simply ignored the oracle and raised Oedipus as their own, no matter whether he discovered the prophecy or not they would have been safe. They were all doomed by that initial selfish reaction. That being said, it seems clear that the lion's share of the blame resides with Laius and Jocasta. As stated above it is my belief that if they had simply taken the time to think through their actions, they could have very easily realized that there is no way a child raised by a loving mother and father, an environment Oedipus found with Polybus and Merope, would ever harm their parents, Oedipus fled Corinth to avoid harming those who raised him. However, does some of the blame still lie with Oedipus? Yes. He is the one who doubted Polybus and Merope. He is the one who actually sought out the oracle. He is the one who made the decision to kill a group of travelers. Although most of these things were done with only the best of intentions, Oedipus still made the decisions that led him down the path of the prophecy. At its very core, Oedipus Rex is a story of irony and tragedy. Let us take a stepback for a moment and think of this story through new eyes.

The true tragedy found in Oedipus rex is not through the father he killed, the mother he wed, or the children he had. It is not found in what he did but rather, but rather in who he was. The story of Oedipus has become so very rote that we look past the most basic of basics in analyzing a text, the characters. Oedipus is a good man and a good king, he stands in sharp contrast to many mythical rulers written in this time period. So his tragedy is not that he was human and suffered for his mistakes, it is that he did not make mistakes and suffered anyway. It is that we can never escape the sins made by the ones who came before us. The oracle gave laius a prophecy that any son born of him would kill his father, so when his wife Jocasta gave birth to a son he had the baby's ankles nailed together and ordered the infant be left to die. Laius made a mistake, he intended to kill his kin who had committed no crime other than being born. The shepherd who was given the baby gives him away instead of leaving him on the mountain. This baby is adopted by King Polybus and Queen Merope where he grows up a devoted son. Laius is left heirless and this is where the curse on his house truly begins. Because the dark cloud over Thebes does not begin when Oedipus becomes king, it begins during his father rule. Oedipus, still living in Corinth hears the rumors about his birth and decides to consult the oracle and is told the same prophecy that was given to Laius. Not realizing that he was adopted, he believes the prophecy is referring to Polybus and Merope. Rather than bring any sort of harm to the parents who he loves, decides to travel far away from Corinth. During his travels Oedipus

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comes to a crossroads where, unbeknownst to either of them, he meets Laius. The two argue over who should step off the road to let the other pass. It is important to note that it is Laius who attacks first, which results in Oedipus defending himself first from Laius himself and then from Laius' men. Oedipus kills Laius, not knowing he's a king or his father, and fulfills the first half of the prophecy. Once again it is Laius' actions that have caused this to happen, if he had not attacked Oedipus on that road, perhaps he wouldn't have died. If he hadn't thrown his son away, Oedipus never would have knowingly killed him, since he was so aghast at the possibility of harming his adopted parents that he ran from his home and his life rather than risk it. Through his actions on the road Oedipus has broken no law, has not acted in hate or anger. Yes Oedipus kills his father, but no sin is committed. Infanticide is a sin, patricide is a sin, defending yourself is not.

So Oedipus continues his travels, eventually ending up at the gates of Thebes where a great Sphinx sits, eating those that cannot answer its riddle. Was the Sphinx there before Laius left? There is no way of knowing. But if it was, Laius had left his city to die by another curse caused by his actions. So Oedipus solves the riddle, and the Sphinx leaves. Oedipus is a man who is strong enough to kill a king, and clever enough to defeat a sphinx. He has not harmed any who did not first try to harm him, and was so against committing harm against innocents that he would leave his life behind. Oedipus so far has shown no fatal flaw, no poor judgment. Creon, who was acting as an interim ruler, had said any man who could defeat the Sphinx would be named king and given his sister Jocasta's hand in marriage. Oedipus had not known about this before solving the riddle, and had no reason to do so other than out of the kindness of his heart. So now Oedipus, now king, is given Jocasta's hand, and the prophecy is complete. He has wed his mother and father's children with her.

However, this only happens because of how honorable and kind Oedipus is to begin with. Jocasta is at least in her forties, she is not a young woman by any means. Yet there is no tell of the young Oedipus being unfaithful or cruel towards her. If Oedipus had rejected the widowed queen so much pain would have been spared, but he is not a cruel man so he dedicates himself to her instead.

Many years after this marriage, a plague comes to Thebes. Why is not clear, because if it were due to the gods taking offense at this incestuous union, surely it would have come before they were able to bear four children. No matter the cause a plague arrives, and the oracle says the only way to lift it is to bring Laius' killer to justice. (And we see yet again how Laius is at the center of all of this.) Of course, just and honorable King Oedipus vows to bring the murderer to light and have them exiled. Exiled and not executed, a merciful punishment from a merciful king. This is where things begin to fall apart. A messenger comes from Corinth bringing the news of Polybus' natural death and Oedipus is relieved. Not through any malice, but because now this means that he will not die by Oedipus' hand as had been foretold. Yet he still refuses to return home to take up his rightful crown, as Merope is still there and he does not want to harm her. When the messenger reveals that Oedipus has nothing to fear since he was adopted Jocasta realizes what had happened. She realizes that her husband is her son who has killed his father, yet she still tries to shield him from the truth. Jocasta must believe he is deserving of the throne, he must have shown her great kindness if she is still so desperate to protect him, even at the expense of the wellbeing of Thebes. However, Oedipus does not listen, after all they are so close to uncovering the truth why should he stop now. This is when he discovers the truth of his life: he is the son of Laius and Jocasta, Laius is the man he killed at the crossroads, he has killed his father and married his mother, his prophecy has come true. Jocasta has killed herself

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and Oedipus has blinded himself with her pins, unable to bear the sight of all the suffering he has caused. He is exiled with only his daughter Antigone to guide him. Oedipus was an honorable ruler of Thebes, a kind husband to Jocasta, and a good father to his children.

So Oedipus Rex is a tragedy, because it's not fair. Kind, clever, merciful people can do their best, but in the end it won't be able to save them from the actions of those who came before them.

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