Oedipus The King: Fate And Free Will In A Play

When first reading Oedipus the King, one of the three Theban Plays, written by Sophocles around 440 B.C., it was, to put it simply, a repulsive story about a man who kills his father and marries his mother all because of a prophecy made before he was even born. The last thing I wanted to do was to read into it, in more depth. However, when doing so my horror towards the fulfillment of the play faded more and more and my fascination towards Sophocles' literature intensified. As E.F. Walting stated in the introduction to his translation of the play, 'the attention of the audience was not primarily to be held by the factor of suspense or the desire to 'see what happens [next]'', '[but to form] a profound contemplation of external truths'.

Despite Oedipus being seemingly all-knowing, even going so far as to say, ' I have known the story before you told it', he remains ignorant to the truth of his past. And we as an audience and reader are made aware of this and the fact that no matter how much we think we may already know, there will always be something more that we have yet to discover. It was with this realization that I began to question the real message behind Sophocles' play. Throughout Greek tragedy, in which these plays were written, many believed that our lives were being run by some higher power and that our fate, much like Oedipus' is something that has been chosen for us long before we are born. It is what's so enticing about Greek tragedy and causes one to reflect on both the internal and external factors that govern our lives. Sophocles causes us to question this idea constantly throughout his plays. As the reader is already given the main facts of the story, it is easier for us to accept what had occurred in the path and focus our attention on the truth's that the characters may or may not discover in the future. It leads man to question how much of what we think we know is fact, is just a theory waiting to be disproven. Whilst this may seem a terrifying prospect it is one that has intrigued me and many others for the centuries that this play has bee around.

And so we ask ourselves, was Oedipus' fate inevitable? How much of our lives do we owe to genetics, upbringing, accidents, privileges to the choices we do and don't make. Are we living our lives as a result of our own free will or as a result of something beyond our control? What is so fascinating about this play isn't the fulfillment of the prophecy but rather how it was fulfilled and how that affects Oedipus in the present. Sophocles didn't right the Theban plays to debate fate versus free will but rather both fate AND free will and how they interact with each other. Whilst Oedipus couldn't escape his fate, Sophocles chooses to concentrate on the choice he freely chose to make to discover the source of the plague and how that leads to his undoing.