
The Relationship Between Men And Gods In Oedipus Rex

By Sophocles

There have been debates about the role of gods in human societies ever since the establishment of the first religions. Ancient Greek playwrights often explored the ideas of divinity, predestination, and fate in their works, which were performed in theatres. Sophocles' works, including *Oedipus Rex*, reflect on religious, mythological, and divine beliefs and questions society had. In the tragedy play *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus, the king of Thebes, unconsciously fulfills a prophecy, declared by Apollo, by murdering his father and sleeping with his mother. When Oedipus discovers that he is the person in the prophecy, he carves his eyes out due to mental desperation and an effort to escape the oracle. *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles suggests human's inability to comprehend divine powers, especially how divinity functions as a whole and how gods come to their decisions.

With the existence of oracles and prophecies, although gods' decisions seem orderly, people cannot comprehend the overall administration of the divine. If predestined fate suggests an orderly universe, why are Oedipus and Laius singled out to endure such suffering? The criteria of selection and pairing of fate with individuals are unclear and chaotic. The question about why Oedipus is selected to experience the fate he receives remains unanswered. Perhaps this is to suggest that human knowledge and intelligence is insufficient enough to fathom the perplexing workings of the divinity. Oedipus questions "what [Zeus] is doing with his life," and later describes his fate to be "strange" (Sophocles 964-965, 1893). Oedipus' frustration stems from his inability to understand the gods and why he was chosen to go through so much suffering. If Oedipus, as bright and intelligent as he is, cannot solve the mysterious workings of the divinity, the play may be hinting that the human idea of ration and justice may be different than the version of the gods. The readers are put in the same spot, unable to understand why a lovable, flawless character like Oedipus must suffer. Here, the readers experience similar emotions as Oedipus – frustrated, saddened-- and they are prompted to question whether they actually understand divinity. At this point, it is clear that Oedipus' attempt to rationalize supernatural beings and their plans is meaningless, which also suggests that there exist many other potential misunderstandings between men and gods.

People often misunderstand the intent behind the actions of gods like Apollo, who fulfills its duties and helps Oedipus. Upon initial examination of the play, it may seem like Apollo is imposing suffering on Oedipus for enjoyment. However, the play as a whole reveals that Apollo is not responsible for Oedipus' suffering. As the god of truth, prophecy, and healing, Apollo fulfills his duties by actually helping Oedipus realize his troublesome identity. Apollo possesses the truth, and its job is to make Oedipus aware of his true identity. The timely arrival of the Shepherds may even hint that Apollo deliberately works to facilitate Oedipus' investigation of his father's murder. After Oedipus discovers his background, he believes that "some unknown god, some savage venomous demon must have done this, raging, swollen with hatred. Hatred for me" (1070-1073). Oedipus blaming Apollo is analogous to a stage 4 cancer patient blaming the doctor. Apollo simply gives out the truth, but Oedipus believes that Apollo is a "venomous demon" who is "swollen with hatred... for me." Even if the oracle is solely designed by Apollo, it is Oedipus' reaction to the truth that causes his suffering. Without actively interpreting his fate and deciding that Apollo holds personal hatred for him, Oedipus would not have blinded and

exiled himself. Also, Apollo had no way of predicting Oedipus' reactions to the truth as the oracle never predicts Oedipus blinding himself. It is Oedipus who misunderstands Apollo's intent and decides to further injure himself to demonstrate his individual power when actually a feud never existed between Oedipus and Apollo. The god is certainly not to blame for shedding light on facts and helping Oedipus discover those facts, but people like Oedipus are prone to wrongly blame divinity for their suffering because he is a human.

Oedipus Rex furthers the idea that men misunderstand divinity by illustrating how Oedipus overestimates the power of Apollo. Apollo shows Oedipus a tragic prophecy that is extremely vague. To use a comparison, the prophecy is similar to the first draft outline of a paper. There exist a plethora of possibilities within this prophecy to achieve a single resolution. Oedipus, however, claims that one "cannot hide from that light" (1553). The light symbolizes Apollo, the god of light, and Oedipus suggests that Apollo has full control over his actions because he cannot escape or "hide" from Apollo. Oedipus' perspective is contrary to the truth because, in fact, Oedipus is never controlled by Apollo. Like Oedipus, Odysseus also has a predetermined fate, but in the process of completing the prophecy, Odysseus acts and reacts freely. Thus, so can Oedipus. Although Oedipus' life has a few predestined events, god has otherwise no control over him. Therefore, his actions to blind himself because he wants to "never again flood these eyes with [Apollo's] white radiance" is unnecessary because his reasoning is flawed (1490-1491). Oedipus blinds himself partly in an attempt to escape the oracle and his original fate. Of course, the oracle contributed to his destiny, but Apollo does not determine every detail of Oedipus' life, which includes blinding himself. Here, Oedipus tries to escape something that does not exist in the first place. From what he perceived as escaping the oracle, Oedipus feels as if he achieves something when in fact, he changes nothing but his own perception of himself. Again, perception is categorized as a reaction, which can be thought of freely. Ultimately, Oedipus loses two eyes because he miscomprehends how much power divinity actually has.

Oedipus Rex exemplifies the exploration of the relationship between men and gods. Oedipus' frustration with his fate, mistake about Apollo's intent, and misunderstanding of Apollo's power all seem to suggest that people not only misinterpret divinity but are also incapable of understanding it. This play may be Sophocles' attempt to warn people about the danger of blindly pursuing what they perceive to be the truth, especially when also dealing with greater powers. More importantly, in the age of a political revolution, Sophocles may be cautioning people against the change in religion and mythology. If one does not possess either the power or the knowledge to change or understand divine powers, it may be best to remain conservative in areas concerning religion.