

From Odyssey to Oedipus the King—Reflections on the Balance and Disequi Librium between Divine Order and Human Will

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Abstract: *The Odyssey and The King of Oedipus are two enduring masterpieces that examine such timeless themes as fate, free will and the role of the gods in human affairs. Although they are both imbued with fatalism, they are represented differently in these two works. The Odyssey presents God as a guiding force, depicting the oracle's predetermination of the protagonist's fate and Odysseus's own review, efforts and contract with God during the hero's journey, reflecting the balance between the divine order and human beings. The King of Oedipus reflects God's control and manipulation of human nature through the oracle, and human's efforts are rendered as useless and futile struggles. God's order and human are presented as a complete imbalance. However, behind the dramatic effects of tragedy, the purpose is not to deny the human will, but to question God through dramatic effects, to improve the attention to human nature and the role of God in human affairs. Therefore, the difference between the two works is not the denial of the value of human nature, but the reflection on the relationship between man and God. This shows that in the context of ancient Greece, people gradually see themselves in the established laws of God and emphasize the will of human beings.*

Keywords: *Oedipus, Odyssey, Tragedy of fate, Divine order, Human will*

1. Introduction

The ancient Greeks attached great importance to the relationship between man and the gods, and this relationship is most often reflected in literature through oracles or predestination. This paper will compare and contrast the divine order and the expression of humanity in the Odyssey and Oedipus the King. It is argued that the divine order in the Odyssey is manifested mainly through the predestination of the main character by the oracle. In addition, the divine order in the Odyssey is manifested more through the covenant, which forms a virtuous balance between humanity and divinity. On the other hand, Oedipus embodies the control and manipulation of human nature by the divine through the oracle. The former is the balance of the power order, and the latter is the check and balance of the power order. This paper will analyze and discuss the above arguments in light of the relevant literature[1].

2. The Odyssey of the Divine Order and the Return of the Human Will

The desire to return home is the outcome of Odysseus' efforts, and it is the desire to return home that supports him and inspires him to overcome his difficulties and resistance. The multiple dichotomies between Odysseus and Poseidon (a god), the suitors and nature (the storm) are the basis of the structure of the epic. It is a structural relationship that also constitutes a relationship of meaning. As Jamison⁶ (1991) says, In structuralist linguistics, meaning can only exist through dichotomous oppositions. We can represent the dichotomous opposition of the Odyssey as follows shown in Figure 1.

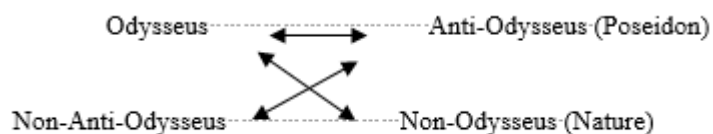


Figure 1: The dichotomous opposition of the Odyssey

Poseidon appears throughout the epic as the antithesis and absolute negator of Odysseus, and nature

and the gods (what Aristotle calls 'the storm' and 'the escape,' escape meaning freedom from divine entanglement (Brunner², 2002)) inadvertently become the obstruction to Odysseus' return home. They appear in the epic as non-Odysseus. A closer look at the details of the epic reveals that Odysseus always refers to his homeland as 'sunny Ithaca.' The sea is not only the dominant colour of the epic but is also the leading site of the struggle between man and nature. The epic makes several references to the timing of the voyage of Odysseus and others, which not only gives the reader a sense of certainty about time but also shows the vastness of the sea and the problematic situation of the navigators. On the other hand, Poseidon is the parasite of the ocean and, at the same time, the dominant player in the marine realm. Again and again, they push the wanderers to their doom through their power or the power of the ocean. Odysseus is finally freed from the gods and returns, after all the hardships, to Ithaca, which he misses day and night, to face the many suitors who squander his family's wealth, to endure their insults and provocations, and later, with the help of Telemachus and others, to overcome the suitors finally. On the side of Odysseus is Athena, the "grey-eyed goddess," not Odysseus, but the faithful helper and guide of Odysseus[2-3].

The relationship between Odysseus and Poseidon, nature, the gods, and Athena is, on the one hand, a structural relationship, the skeleton of the story as a whole, and the derivation and occurrence of many stories are closely related to this structure. On the other hand, this relationship is also a relationship of meaning. That is, man lives in the interstices of multiple forces, and man cannot ignore the existence of various forces. However, he does not succumb to them either. This structural relationship not only completes the epic and fleshes out the story but also allows the reader to feel the passion of Greek age.

The term 'experienced wise man' seems synonymous with Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, and in many places in the epic, he is described as 'wise and perceptive' and 'godlike'. He did many things, such as blinding the Cyclops and crossing the Siren Islands, under the guidance of wisdom. Not only that but Odysseus was also known for his resilience and strength. Ten years of wandering and countless disasters did not sap his fighting spirit. He was able to endure humiliation in the face of divine injustice and in the face of suitors who were arrogant and occasionally provocative to him. Linked to this excellent quality is the attitude towards life, that is, the value of life and the cost of living. Death and funerals are written about in many places in the epic, but Odysseus and his party never treat their dead companions hastily, whatever their circumstances. Before they prepared to return home from Circe, they first burnt the bodies of their companions, built graves, erected tombstones, and placed beautifully shaped pulp on top of them. The Greeks' attitude towards life and their 'joyful, lively nature' 'made them idealists by nature,' and indeed these Greek natures led the way '...the Greeks on the path of elegance, integrity and virtue (Aristotle¹, 2006). All this is also the ideal moral state that the epic presents to us.

But on the other hand, the poet's depiction of the gains and losses of the world of values, especially the destruction of the individual and the damage to the group's interests by their failure, emphasizes the need to uphold ideal morality. What are the causes of this undesirable outcome? Tanner¹³ (1915) argues that it is folly, their lust, greed, arrogance and ignorance, the alienated human selves that lead them to their doom, that tempts them to evil. Thus, overcoming human weaknesses and flaws is the subject of the epic's attention. "The story of the Island of the Winds is a moral fable. The God of the winds offers them warm and selfless help, but the crew, caught up in their rhapsody, foolishly opens the windbags while Odysseus is asleep. By abandoning the principles of 'trustworthiness' and 'mutual respect,' many are led to the point of no return. Out of the same selfishness and stupidity, they ignored the prophet's warning and again stole and killed the bull of the sun god, resulting in the death of everyone except Odysseus, for these are the notes of fate.

The idea of fate was the most common concept of the ancient Greeks in their understanding of the world. At that time, fate was spatial, i.e., moralizing the order of the universe, and temporal (Taine¹², 1995), referring to the past and the future. Everything about the man is governed by fate; the time Odysseus wanders, the place he wanders, and the misfortunes he suffers are all determined by fate. Chapter 11 of the *Odyssey* is an interpretation of fate: Odysseus meets many characters in hell, newly married girls, single boys, older men who have gone through trials and tribulations, warriors who have fallen on the battlefield, and heroes of the Trojan War, which seems to be a summary of the fate of the dead; and the blind prophet Thérèse of Cybele's prophecy, on the other hand, is an advance on the future fate of Odysseus (Homer⁴, 2015). Fate seems to be an omnipresent and mysterious force regulating the flow of the world and defining each individual's actions.

Fate, as a limiting and prescriptive force, does have a tremendous hold on man, but man is never utterly subservient to fate; he will seek to break through the limits and break the rules. So, again, the

epic celebrates the spirit of man's struggle against fate and celebrates the heroes who resist it. Odysseus never backs down from his misfortune, and his unyielding, strong character is a powerful testament to man's sense of worth and dignity.

The idea of fate in Homer's epic is expressed as a transcendent being. Fate is then manipulated in the hands of the gods, who can distribute it and dictate it at will. "According to Homer, mortals who practice their destiny cannot do so without the guidance of the gods, whose help guarantees success and victory (Sculley, J., & Byrne⁹, 1987)." Zeus, who sits on Mount Olympus, dictates good, evil, and misfortune and holds the power of life, death, reward and punishment on earth, while he can foresee everything and see everything. The poets also consciously transmit God's voice and narrate God's story with a divine vision occupying the position of God. On the other hand, man can only live under God's shadow and consciously and unconsciously incorporate his actions into the divine system, and he is severely punished when he breaks the divine law or the divine interest. Stabbing the giant in the eye cost Odysseus ten years of wandering; slaughtering the bull of the sun god cost all of Odysseus' companions their lives. All of this happened without a second thought[4-7].

Homer's gods are often neither tyrants nor even human creators, but another class of people with human flaws, burial bumps, wisdom, and beauty. By personifying the gods, the poet defies the laws of nature and spirit most humanly, and the gods objectify human nature. Zeus and Calypso are no different: they have their own emotions, their own life choices, their likes and dislikes, and the gods are merely symbols that regulate and limit human activity. At this point, we can place the relationship between Odysseus and the foolish ego, fate and the gods, into a rectangular square such that

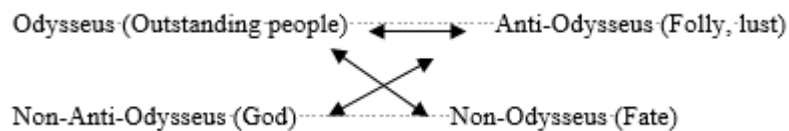


Figure 2: The relationship between Odysseus and the foolish ego, fate and the gods

Homer describes the forms of activity, energies, limitations of, and interrelationships between the divine, fate (force), and natural and human forces, suggesting that God or divine power is the 'first power' or source force. The Odyssey is also the source of Western existentialist ethics (Sculley, J., & Byrne⁹, 1987). In Homer's time, since the divine king who unified and harmonized social relations no longer existed, the forces of conflict and unity, namely Eris quarrels and "philia," existed simultaneously (Joly⁷, 1963), so the epic celebrated both antagonism and competition, as well as unity, fraternity and morality, order and law. This new type of social relationship, based on equality and competition, marks the dawn of reason in Greece[8-11], as shown in Figure 2.

3. The Oedipus of the Divine Order and the Return of the Human Will

The word "tragedy of fate" is used throughout Oedipus the King in terms of theme. But this tragedy is an expression of the divinely ordained order (oracle) correcting the subjective will of humanity. The main character's free will does its best to fight against fate, but it still ends in destruction. This confrontation between personal power and fate, the melody of Oedipus the King, is the central theme of ancient Greek tragedy. The tragedy of Oedipus and Iannella in Sophocles' Oedipus the King is due to fate's inescapable web.

Looking at the story of Oedipus as a whole, its tragic ending is the most poignant and thought-provoking in terms of what it is that makes Oedipus unable to escape his fate. This article argues that it is not the missteps in the process of detachment, the immaturity and irrationality of thought, the recklessness of action, or the fact that fate is a "rift valley" where human beings cannot fight against the oracle. The source of this is Apollo's metaphorical judgment of Oedipus for "killing his father and marrying his mother (Sophocles¹⁰, 1972)." This oracle, ostensibly a warning, is a pronouncement of fate, behind which lies the superiority of the gods' status. Throughout Greek mythology, almost every hero has a predetermined destiny, which is decided and foretold by an oracle, which can determine the life of a mortal early on (Chowdhury³, 2020). Even famous heroes such as Hercules and Theseus could not escape this oracle, even though they tried to change their destiny through their efforts. So what was the fate behind this oracle? It is a barrier of absolute authority that determines the victory or defeat of the gods on the one hand and the life and death of mortals on the other. The struggle of the mortal man is a continuous search for self-awareness. Although he knows the tragic end of this destiny, he still tries to break free as much as possible—the triumph of the human being.

What did ordinary mortals do to try to escape the oracle of fate? Oedipus' father, the Theban king Laius, tried to escape his fate by passing a wire through his son's heel and abandoning him in the wilderness. When Oedipus learned of his oracle's fate, he left his 'parents' and travelled to neighbouring Thebes, using his wisdom on the road to solve the riddle of the Sphinx and save the Thebans from disaster, thus becoming King of Thebes. During his reign, he was a dedicated, hard-working and loving ruler, and when a plague broke out in Thebes, he did his best as a competent ruler to find the killers of the former king. Even so, the fate of "killing his father and marrying his mother" did not fall on him in any way, and whoever strives to keep the oracle from being fulfilled pushes it further away (Sophocles¹⁰, 1972).

In contrast, Apollo did not interfere with this fate himself but merely warned of it in a religious metaphor. On reflection, Apollo's divine metaphor is at best a prophecy, and this tragedy is carried forward, step by step, by the actions of all, whether it be the Theban king abandoning him to the wilderness, Oedipus using his wisdom to vanquish the Sphinx and save the people of Thebes from their scourge, or him pursuing the truth of the events step by step to save the city-state from the plague. Everyone is a pusher, an object of assistance in pushing Oedipus into the abyss, including himself, and fate looks down coldly on the struggles of all (Reisner⁸, 2003). In this struggle between mortal power and oracle and fate, it is not just Oedipus' struggle for destiny, nor a contest between his power and the oracle's destiny; behind it lies a struggle to recognize the finitude of man and the infinity of the world. Oedipus starts confidently, with the courage to take on the Sphinx alone, the wisdom to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, and the kingliness to accept the Theban people as their king. However, digging deeper, he is the man who solves the riddle of the Sphinx, but fails to understand what man is, lost in joy and pride, and this finitude brings his tragedy to its final, irrevocable link (Sophocles¹⁰, 1972). He is ignorant of what man is and what the world is, and so the end is destined to be tragic, the infinity of the world, this destiny to punish this man who presumes to break free from his fate, to tell him the end just when he thinks that everything is back to good.

It is only here that he understands the finite nature of man, acknowledges this finitude, knows that he cannot escape his destiny even if he has a self-striving spirit, finally acknowledges the infinite nature of the world and understands the predetermined nature of this "fatalistic" ending—the "predestined" tragic end. At a deeper level, from the point of view of the values he pursues, the reason why Oedipus struggles against fate is that he identifies with his values and the logic of his actions, but this ending destroys everything he affirms in the most violent and direct way, and in the moment of destruction he touches the limits of the values he affirms, and it is in this moment that he realises the infinity of the world and the idea of salvation by faith is born. Behind the tragedy of Oedipus' fate are the ancient Greeks' renewed questioning and reflection on "man" after their self-exile, on how to "know me" and "man's relationship to the world (Leonard⁵, 2013)." The reflection here is the germ of Greek self-awareness, the rise of self-reflection. Or, as mortals, a profound reflection on the world and the individual, the group and the person[12-14].

4. Compare and contrast the differences and causes of the divinely ordained order (predestination) of Oedipus and Odysseus

The ancient Greeks' perception of fate was initially relatively primitive, as they believed that human behaviour was manipulated by so-called fate and could not perceive the existence of "fate" tangibly. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus wanders the seas and goes through many hardships before returning to his homeland, while the ancient Greeks attributed the hardships in his voyage to the means of the gods. The *Odyssey* expresses the character of Odysseus through the multiple dichotomies between him and nature, the gods, and fate, as well as the structural relationship between man and other opposing factors (Szondi¹¹, 2002). It reflects the new relationships in Greek society and the rational concepts of order, law, and equality. Because the ancient Greeks regarded fate as a mysterious and powerful supernatural force, they passively accepted the so-called fate, thankful for fate's favour when things went well and fearful of the predestined punishment when things went badly.

In contrast, in Sophocles' famous tragedy *Oedipus the King*, we consider this fatalistic tragedy from the perspectives of both the oracle of fate and the power of mortals. On the one hand, one can sense the self-rebellion of mortals in the face of the oracle and the hidden depth of the finitude of man and the infinity of the world. Sophocles does recognize the dominance of the gods in all human activities. However, even so, it cannot be denied that the heart of this devout playwright was full of contradictions and confusion when he thought deeply about the many questions of fate and the gods at certain moments in his later works. We can detect subtle wavering in his thinking - although the dominance of

God remains unshakable in the relationship between man and God. Man's actions are still directly or indirectly at the mercy of God, but there is finally room for man's free will to flourish. The author's original intention was perhaps to declare the correctness of the oracle and to uphold the high status of the gods in the earthly world by describing the process of Oedipus' rebellion against fate, his banishment and suffering, and his eventual submission to it, without deliberately trying to make Oedipus a tragic hero who struggles against fate in the eyes of present-day people but ultimately loses (Toledo¹⁴, 2020). Sophocles believed that any act of disobedience to the gods was foolish and would surely be punished or even brought to ruin and that Sophocles should subjectively portray a sinner who disobeyed the gods and thus was tricked by fate eventually redeemed himself through spiritual and physical suffering (Lefkowitz⁵, 2015). The reason why Oedipus could become a tragic hero in the eyes of later readers is that he was an ordinary man who dared to fight for his life against heaven. The contrast in power was so great that even though he failed miserably in the end, the image of Oedipus remained as an immortal monument, a banner symbolizing the free will of humanity, standing forever. In reality, however, the tragedy of Oedipus did not lie in his efforts to break through the web of fate or in the disparity of power between man and the gods. Instead, it lies in his failure to recognize the limitations of man, despite his extraordinary wisdom. A person needs to have the spirit of resistance, and what makes a person human is that he dares to fight against infinite difficulties with his limited power. After the rise of human subject consciousness and the spirit of reason, human beings dare to act in heaven and earth and fight for the clouds, but objectively, it is undeniable that human beings cannot solve all problems by their power; needless to say, that there is a vast and profound universe above the high heavens. These exist all the time to remind humanity, relying only on the limited subjective will, still can not penetrate all the mysteries of the infinite world.

However, it cannot be denied that both Odysseus and Oedipus are full of fatalistic episodes because of the background of the divine order. The return of Odysseus is discovering good humanity from an irresistible fate, linking his past, essence and future. The Odyssey is Odysseus' self-examination, perception, and covenant with God. On the other hand, the tragedy of Oedipus' sinfulness is a return to the divine order and the law of necessity from the perspective of predestination (the gods).

5. Conclusion

In terms of results, the divinely ordained order is a symbol of supremacy and necessity in both ancient Greek works. The effect of this order on human nature is where the two works differ, but whether the effect is one of balance or checks and balances, there is no doubt that predestination is ultimately a return to the law of necessity. The difference between the two works is thus not a denial of the value of humanity, but a reflection on the relationship between man and God. In contrast to the heroic and the wise Odysseus through his covenant with the gods is a delicate balance of man's maintenance of the divinely ordained order, and thus more people might have pitied Oedipus. Because of the divine order, humanity seems to be dispensable in the checks and balances of the whole work, but this tragedy is all the more an expression of the ancient Greek playwright's questioning of the gods and his criticism of divine domination and barbarism. It is undoubtedly this divine balance and counterbalance that reflects the fact that man in the context of the ancient Greek era began to confront the inferiority of the gods and the glory of humanity, and that this was the affirmation of the value of human existence in the divine order.

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