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‘Character is Destiny’- Justify the dictum in the context of Sophocles’s Oedipus Rex

Or

Would you consider Oedipus Rex as a tragedy of fate or a tragedy of character? Give reasons

Or

Oedipus Rex as a tragedy of fate/ Role of fate in the play

“It lies not in our power to love, or hate, for will in us is over-rul’d by fate” ... Christopher Marlowe

Fate is a major theme in Sophocles’s plays for his characters are all pre-destined. His masterpiece Oedipus Rex is a fine example in which the protagonist is the victim figure of fate. Though he attempts to shake the net of cruel destiny, he ultimately entangles more and more in its meshes and finally encompasses his own destruction.

The story relates the tragedy of Oedipus in the hands of destiny. Lias, king of Thebes, being alarmed by an oracle, had his newly born son exposed in the wastes of Cithaeron. The servant who had this order to obey gave the child to a Corinthian shepherd, who took it back to Corinth to his king Polybus. Oedipus grew there and one day became aware of the Delphic oracle that he should kill his father and marry his mother. Frightened he fled from there and slew the aged Lias in an early quarrel. He came to Thebes and saved the country from the riddle of sphinx. Jocasta married the saviour of the country and thus the tragedy gloomed the king.

From the outline of the story, it is obvious then that Oedipus’s tragedy has been pre-destined. Unlike the Shakespearean tragic heroes who are the victim figure of *hamartia* or error of judgment, Oedipus is a victim of Nemesis. Judged by the Aristotlean scale, of a tragic hero, he is an able ruler, protector of his citizen, an honest and great administrator and an outstanding intellect. Even he has complete faith upon the oracles at Delphi. For such a character to face an ill-fated destiny is indeed painful to the audience.

Oedipus is, however, not free from flaws. He is hot-tempered, rash, hasty in forming judgments, easily provoked and even somewhat arbitrary. Though he shows reverence to Tiresias at the beginning of the play, soon he gets furious at the old prophet and accuses him of treason along with Creon. As the play moves forward we come to know that due to pride and his own free will,



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Oedipus has made mistake so many times in the past. When he meets Liaus at Phocis, ‘a place where three roads meets’, he does not pay any heed to the former king and ultimately kills him. Pride and self-confidence induce him to feel almost superior to the gods. Under the influence of Jocasta, he grows skeptical of the oracles. Thus Oedipus lacks true wisdom and this want of wisdom is sufficed for determining a man’s destiny.

It is then quite arguable that if Oedipus had not been hot-tempered, he might not have got entangled in a fight on the road and might thus have not been guilty of murdering his father. Similarly, if he had been a little more cautious, he might have hesitated to marry an unknown old enough for his match. Both his killing his father and his marrying his mother may thus be attributed to his own defects of character.

To conclude, it is very difficult to judge whether the tragedy of Oedipus is product of fate of character. It cannot be denied that the most tragic events of his life- his murder of his father and his marriage with his mother – had inevitably to happen. These are obviously the irony of fate. But the real tragedy – the anagnorsis or discovery of truth – the discovery of his patricide and the incest – are no doubt the traits of his own character. As soon as he realizes it he blinds himself. Sophocles succeeds in presenting the medley.