

Fate: Life's Greatest Mentor

In Homer's *The Odyssey*, fate plays a critical role in the form of prophecies and gods meddling with humans. The various prophecies throughout *The Odyssey* are all predetermined to happen; however, although even the gods cannot change the end result of fate after it is decided, it is vague and people have some degree of power over the small details of their lives. Much of a person's destiny is fixed, but there is room for choices and mistakes to be made; those few decisions that a person can make can show their personality; Homer is trying to teach us that fate is a mentor to us. It is used to teach lessons and to test a someone's character. Fate is a general, fixed structure for people's lives, that teaches lessons and character.

An important function of fate is to instill discipline. For instance, after Odysseus's return to Ithaca, Poseidon becomes furious at the Phaeacians' attempt to help Odysseus and turns their returning ship to stone. King Alcinous of Phaeacia takes this as an omen, because he remembered his father's prophecy, saying to his people, "If we gave safe conveyance to all passengers, we should Poseidon's wrath, he said, whereby one day a fair ship, manned by the Phaiakians would come to grief by the god's hands ... so my old father forecast" (235). Alcinous took this as a warning to them and a lesson to all that they should never help strangers that appear if they want to keep the peace with the gods. Although the message that the islanders received was taken literally and the meaning was a little bit altered - Poseidon only wanted to stop Odysseus and anybody else who offended him - the main message of not offending the gods got across to the Phaeacians, and the forecast may have prevented a mountain built around their city. Similarly, Halitherses warned the suitors with a prophecy, "Let us think how to stop [the deaths of the suitors]; let the suitors drop their suit; they had better, without delay" (24). His advice could have prevented the deaths of the suitors, but they arrogantly refused to listen to him. They knew that they had done wrong in the face of the gods and fate, so they had no reason to try to redeem themselves when Odysseus came home and attacked them. The prophecy, like all the other prophecies in the book, was a lesson to all of the people to prevent future mistakes.

Because someone's future is fixed, it tests the character of people, especially those who know their future. Odysseus's future is already fated and known by the gods or through prophecies such as Tiresias's. Therefore, it seems like there would be little meaning to the story:

Tiresias's prophecy tells Odysseus that he will reach home for sure; Odysseus knew he return to live contently. However, Homer does put meaning behind this, because Odysseus does not stop and relax in the Underworld when he hears his fortunate future: he still intends to do his best to return home quickly and safely. Odysseus's perseverance is tested with the knowledge of his own destiny, because he still tries his best to do his best, even knowing the end result. Somebody else of a less heroic character might give up after hearing the prophecy that "a seaborne death soft as this hand of mist will come upon you when you are wearied out with rich and old age, our country folk in blessed peace around you" (189). Another example of this is when Odysseus tells his men not to kill the cattle of Helios: "Let this whole company swear me a great oath: Any herd of cattle or flock of sheep here found shall go unharmed; no one shall slaughter out of wantonness ram or heifer ... They fell at once to swearing as I ordered" (219). His men knew that killing the cattle would be a fatal decision, but they decided to make an excuse to take the impossible risk and take their lives by aggravating the gods- exactly what Odysseus had told them not to do. They decided to give up to the worse of two fated options because of lack of discipline and perseverance- they failed the test of perseverance that the prophecies put forth to them. The foreshadowing that prophecies provide is an excellent test of patience and endurance.

Because fate can be used as a lesson, to warn people of mistakes in times to come, it cannot change. In Halitherses's forecast, he said that Odysseus was going to come home, and that "I see this all fulfilled" (24); similarly, Tiresias ends his prophecy with "And all this shall be just as I foretell" (188). Both of these statements show that they are certain the Odysseus will come home, no matter what - Odysseus's fate cannot be changed. Indeed, Odysseus returns home, fulfilling the prophecies. This makes sense because the prophecies were to be used as future lessons, therefore an uncertain destiny would be useless. Since Odysseus could not change his fate, then there is no way to avoid the lessons he learned: he returned home to slaughter the wrongdoing suitors after his nineteen years of punishment at sea; there was no way for him to return home early so that Penelope and Telemachus's loyalty would not be tested; Poseidon was avenged for Polyphemus and Odysseus learned to be humble to the gods; and the suitors became firm to take over Ithaca. A person's destiny has to be fixed, so that all lessons will end up learnt by the humans, and no shortcuts in life are taken.

Anybody can change some aspects of their future, but not their fate. Fate is fixed, but it does not include all the details of someone's future. For example, in Tiresias's prophecy to Odysseus, he did not lay out Odysseus's future for him exactly how it would unfold; instead, he made Odysseus's future very vague, and he left some choices for Odysseus to take. Odysseus orders his men, "Avoid those kine, hold fast to your intent, and hard seafaring brings you all to Ithaca. But if you raid the beeves, I see destruction for ship and crew" (188). This goes to show that Odysseus actually had a chance to return home without being captured on Calypso's island for seven years, if not for his men. Therefore, even the best prophets cannot know everything that is to happen, because fate leaves some opportunities open for people to decide what to do. Similarly, Halitherses prophesied, "Odysseus will not be absent from his family long: he is already near, carrying in him a bloody doom for for all these men ... My forecast was that after nineteen years, many blows weathered, all his shipmates lost, himself unrecognized by anyone, he would come home" (24). He only forecasts about the end result and a little description of what had happened- he did not go into the details about what was to happen. Nobody was sure exactly how Odysseus was to return, because his future was not entirely decided. He still had to make his own decisions about the way he was to return to Ithaca. These little holes in the rigid structure of fate, these opportunities, allow fate to test people's character, because those little decisions show important characteristics of a person, especially perseverance.

Fate is not totally decided, nor is it totally left open to for a person's decisions; instead, it is a mixture of both. Homer's *The Odyssey* included fate as a major entity, of predicted futures, to teach us that fate is meant to be this way. All of the prophecies in the book were proven true in the end, no matter what, which shows that much of our destinies are set- but they were left open to interpretation and change as to exactly what happened. Fate acts like a teacher in people's lives: it teaches and tests our character in difficult times. Fate is designed to be both ambiguous and definite to teach and test people, and it is a major guide to peoples' lives.