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# **Literature Extended Essay**

**Sample**

*To what extent does  
"Oedipus Rex" by Sophocles  
and  
"Macbeth" by William  
Shakespeare emphasize the  
tension between fate and  
free will?*



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# **Topic: To what extent does “Oedipus Rex” by Sophocles and “Macbeth” by William Shakespeare emphasize the tension between fate and free will?**

## **I. Introduction**

"Oedipus Rex" by Sophocles and William Shakespeare's "Macbeth" are two classic tragedies that explore the complex relationship between fate and free will.

In "Oedipus Rex" we meet the tragic story of Oedipus, a king destined to fulfil a prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. Unaware of his true identity, Oedipus tries to prevent that cruel fate but inadvertently fulfils the prophecy, leading to his ultimate downfall. It reveals how Oedipus' choices and actions are connected to an inevitable fate. Sophocles skillfully weaves a narrative that highlights the tension between human freedom and predetermined ways of life<sup>1</sup>.

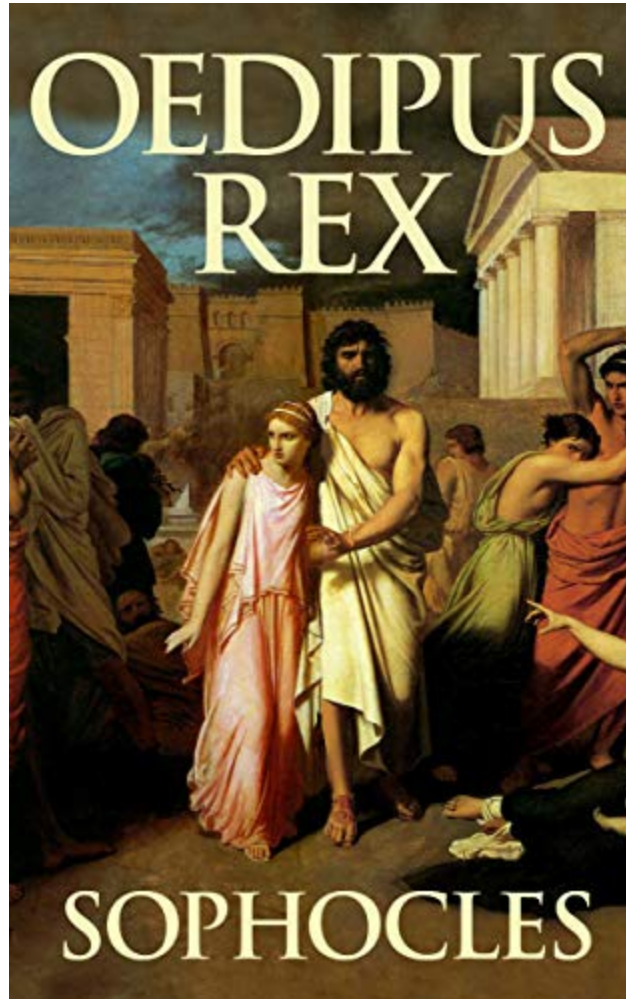
On the other hand, William Shakespeare's "Macbeth" depicts the tragic story of Macbeth, a Scottish general whose fate turns dark after he meets three witches. These supernatural beings help him to rise to power. The play introduces a catalytic sequence of events including Macbeth's irresistible will and his wife's influence. The witches' predictions bring an element of fate to the story, ambiguating and exacerbating the conflict between fate and individual identity. According to the thesis statement of the essay, both works explore the tension between fate and free will, examining the intertwining of free will and fate.

It is seen that in analyzing "Oedipus Rex" and "Macbeth," a central theme emerges: fate and the complexity of free will. Sophocles and Shakespeare presented heroes struggling with the consequences of their choices in the face of preordained fate. The title emphasizes that these works are profound explorations of the balance between human freedom and the universal forces that shape our lives and that the characters' decisions are central to their fate, but fate creates inevitable tension. Through the heartbreaking tragedy unfolding in Oedipus and Macbeth, audiences are made to consider the timeless question of whether individuals have the power to change their fate, or whether their choices are merely tools to deliver the fulfilment of an already written text.

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<sup>1</sup> University of Pennsylvania. (n.d.). Sophocles' Tragedies. Classical Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. <https://www2.classics.upenn.edu/myth/php/tragedy/index.php?page=sophocles>

## II. Analysis of "Oedipus Rex"



The story of "Oedipus Rex" revolves around a prophecy that plays an important role in shaping the fate of the main character Oedipus. Revealed at the beginning of the play, Oedipus prophesies that he will kill his father and marry his mother, sending shockwaves through the audience and setting the stage for a tragic tale of fate and self-discovery. As stated in the book, "Long, long ago; her thought was of that child. By him begot, the son by whom the sire. Was murdered and the mother left to breed. With her own seed, a monstrous progeny. Then she bewailed the marriage bed whereon. Poor wretch, she had conceived a double brood, Husband by husband, children by her child."

The prophecy becomes a ghost looming, casting a dark shadow over Oedipus' life even before his birth. Oedipus, who did not know his real parents, was adopted by King Polybius of Corinth

and Queen Merope<sup>2</sup>. Even as they grow up in a royal household, the omen continues to have its effects, creating tension and uncertainty. As quoted in the book: *"Whose tale more sad than thine, whose lot more dire? O Oedipus, discrowned head, Thy cradle was thy marriage bed."*

The audience is acutely aware of the impending tragedy that awaits Oedipus, and the prospect of the omen unfolding carries complexity. Faced with a terrible prophecy, Oedipus embarks on a journey to defy the fate ordained by the speaker. Determined to escape the predicted tragedy, he takes drastic measures to distance himself from Polybius and Merope, his presumed parents. Oedipus believes that by leaving Corinth and avoiding any contact with his adoptive parents, he can avert the anticipated disaster.

But Oedipus' unintentional attempt to defy fate brings the fulfilment of the prophecy closer. Despite his best efforts, the inevitable force of fate remains inescapable. The irony comes when Oedipus, driven by a sincere desire to control his fate, inadvertently does things that coincide with the very prophecies he wishes to avoid. This tragic irony becomes a strong element in Sophocles's narrative and rests on the helplessness of individuals in a preordained fate. Epilogue of "Oedipus Rex", prophecy is a driving force, guiding Oedipus' life and adding dramatic tension to the play in which Oedipus' attempts to defy fate prove futile with humans opposing cosmic forces which govern life<sup>3</sup>.

Conversely, the role of Gods came into play. The theme of divine influence permeates "Oedipus Rex", as the gods play an important role in shaping the actions and destiny of the main character, Oedipus, flowing through the story where the will of the gods is considered absolute and the effect extends to death the life. As stated in the book: *"No living man can hope To force the gods to speak against their will."*

Oedipus, despite his efforts to escape the prophecy, ultimately succumbed to the gods. Functioning as a means to divine knowledge, the prophecy of the Word sets the stage for the tragic journey of Oedipus. The gods, in their omniscience, direct the events that lead to the fulfilment of the Oedipus prophecy. The audience recognizes a relentless force at play, pushing Oedipus towards actions in line with a predetermined course established by divine will<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Opera Philadelphia. (2022). Oedipus Rex Program Note. Opera Philadelphia Blog. <https://www.operaphila.org/backstage/opera-blog/2022/oedipus-rex-program-note/#:~:text=Oedipus%20Rex%20is%20about%20the,caroon%20toward%20their%20foregone%20conclusions.>

<sup>3</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. (n.d.). Oedipus Rex. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Oedipus-Rex-play-by-Sophocles>

<sup>4</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. (n.d.). Oedipus. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Oedipus-Greek-mythology>

The interference of the gods in various aspects of Oedipus' life is evident. From the circumstances of his birth to prophetic revelations, divine forces shape his life course. The story suggests that the efforts in death are entwined with the divine order, emphasizing the inevitable influence of the gods on Oedipus' actions. As the story unfolds, Oedipus gradually realizes the value of trying to escape the gods' predestined plan. As Oedipus unravels the truth about his origins and the prophecies that hang over him, the influence of the gods becomes more apparent. Despite his earlier resistance and attempts to assert control over his destiny, Oedipus faces the undeniable truth that the will of the gods is irresistible.

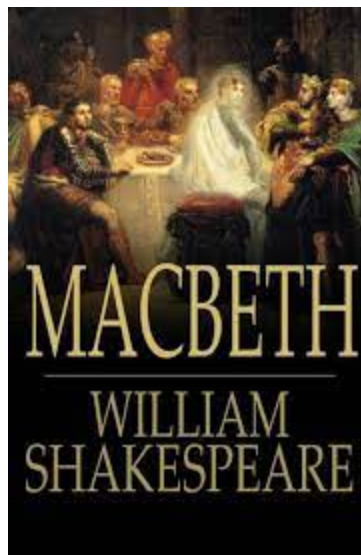
The moment of self-realization by Oedipus is a tragic ending, as he realizes the full impact of the gods on his life. The concept of the gods, as expressed through prophecy, emerges as an inescapable force that shapes not only Oedipus' actions but also his very identity. This realization is a poignant and transformative moment in the play, marking Oedipus' acceptance of his predestined fate and the mighty power of divine intervention. Hence, the role of the gods in "Oedipus Rex" is a central theme that emphasizes the influence of divine forces in the unfolding tragedy. The presence of the gods is most obvious from the guidance of Oedipus' actions to the eventual realization of his preordained fate, revealing a complex interplay between the dominion of death and the immutable will of the divine.

Tragic irony is one of the main themes of the story. As stated in the book: *and Oedipus—we couldn't see the man—he was gone—nowhere! And the king, alone shielding his eyes, both hands spread out against his face as if—some terrible wonder flashed before his eyes and he, he could not bear to look.*

"Oedipus Rex" deftly uses tragic irony, creating a wonderful tension between what the audience knows and what the characters, especially Oedipus, have forgotten. From the beginning, the audience is made aware of the prophecy foretelling the tragic fate of Oedipus. This knowledge casts a shadow over the unfolding events, adding some complexity and emotional intensity to the story. As the audience witnesses Oedipus' unwavering determination to change the course of his life, tragedy is a powerful tool to engage the viewer. The difference between what the audience knows and what the characters say about the story of the line creates a sense of impending doom and invites a deeper emotional investment in the inevitable tragedy that awaits Oedipus. It gains importance and thus grows. Oedipus, unaware of the prophecies and the audience's knowledge, proceeds with an unwavering confidence in his ability to control his destiny. The tragic irony lies in the stark contrast between Oedipus' ignorance and the events leading up to the fulfilment of the prophecy. Oedipus's determination to uncover the truth behind

his origins and defy the gods is a poignant allegory of his tragic flaw as he seeks and comes close to freeing himself from the web of fate that has entangled him<sup>5</sup>. The audience, well aware of the impending tragedy, watches in dismay as Oedipus, motivated by a sincere desire to escape his fate, unknowingly takes a step exactly in line with the prophecy. The inevitable clash between Oedipus' actions and his ordained fate creates a deep sense of inevitable melancholy. The tragic comedy ends when Oedipus, in a moment of terrifying self-realization, realizes the true extent of his actions and how fate inevitably holds them in. In conclusion, the tragedy of "Oedipus Rex" is a powerful narrative, skillfully immersing the audience in the extended tragedy by revealing the hero's tragic flaw.

### III. Analysis of "Macbeth"



In William Shakespeare's "Macbeth," witches play an important role in the prophecies that led to the play's tragic events<sup>6</sup>. These supernatural beings, commonly known as the Strange Sisters, appear on a deserted heath at the beginning of the story. As stated in the book: *"First Witch: When shall we three meet again  
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?  
Second Witch: When the hurlyburly's done,  
When the battle's lost and won."*

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<sup>5</sup> St. Louis Public Schools. (n.d.). Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. St. Louis Public Schools. <https://www.slps.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?FileName=Sophocles-Oedipus.pdf&dataid=25126&moduleinstanceid=22453>

<sup>6</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company. (n.d.). Macbeth Language Analysis. Shakespeare Learning Zone. <https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeare-learning-zone/macbeth/language/analysis>

Macbeth's rise to power and eventual downfall are foretold, inspiring the tragic hero's desire to do unwanted things. The witch's predictions act as a catalyst for the unfolding drama, making it supernaturally exciting and foreboding. Their cryptic statements about Macbeth's future, such as "All the hail, Macbeth, who henceforth shall be king," convince the audience and Macbeth himself. The introduction of these mysterious figures and their prophecies provides a platform for the interior and the external conflict that will shape Macbeth's fate<sup>7</sup>.

At first, Macbeth reacts with doubt and disbelief after hearing the witches' predictions. But as events unfold and he is elected Cawdor's Thane, part of the witches' prediction comes true, causing Macbeth to reconsider the importance of their words. The witches' predictions become a test and a high ambition for Macbeth and arouse previously dormant desires for power. Macbeth's transformation from scepticism to belief in fate is central to the play. As he becomes more involved in the web of trickery and craft, Macbeth begins to see the witches as agents of fate rather than mere devices of deception.

The influence of the witches on Macbeth reflects a broader theme of the supernatural so is the difference between reality and mystery in the game. The witch's prophecies are self-fulfilling as Macbeth works hard for the kingdom driven by his greed and belief that fate is on his side. This change in Macbeth's view of fate contributes to the tragedy of the play, revealing the unstoppable destructive power of ambition and the manipulation of fate. As per the book: *"I have almost forgot the taste of fears.*

*The time has been my senses would have cooled  
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair  
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir  
As life were in't: I have supped full with horrors;  
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,  
Cannot once start me."*

Simply put, the witches' prophecies in "Macbeth" are a narrative that propels the hero towards his tragic fate. The introduction of these supernatural elements creates a state of uncertainty and leads to a series of events that require fate, free will and the complex interplay between will and consequence. As discussed earlier, ambition and free will are the central themes of the story. "Macbeth" engages in deep issues of ambition and self-aspiration. Initially presented as a brave and honourable general, Macbeth's encounters with the witches and their prophecies stir

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<sup>7</sup> English Summary. (N.D.). Macbeth by William Shakespeare. English Summary. <https://englishsummary.com/course/macbeth-william-shakespeare/>



up a consuming hidden desire<sup>8</sup>. Macbeth's choices are crucial in shaping his destiny, and his irrepressible will becomes a driving force beyond his sense of morality. Driven by a lust for power and influenced by the witches' predictions, Macbeth makes heartbreaking decisions, including murdering King Duncan to ascend the throne. Each choice sends him into wild chaos and shows the consequences of giving himself up to the goal of the irresistible.

The play vividly demonstrates the tension between Macbeth's free will and the external forces that determine his destiny. Although the witches' predictions provide a glimpse into a possible future, Macbeth's decisions ultimately determine the course of his tragic fate. Shakespeare skillfully explores the psychological impact of will on the individual by emphasizing the narrow distinction between personal choice and the inevitable pull of fate<sup>9</sup>.

A person who plays a crucial role in the development of the character is his wife. Lady Macbeth<sup>10</sup> plays an important role in igniting the flame of Macbeth's will and influencing his actions. As stated in the play: *"I dare do all that may become a man; Who dares do more, is none"*

His desire for power and position drives him to kill power for Macbeth. Lady Macbeth criticizes her husband's manhood and questions his resolve, telling him that the only way to fulfil the witch's predictions is through cruelty-free actions. Lady Macbeth's persuasive speech and encouragement cause Macbeth to overcome his moral reservations and commit heinous acts. Her famous solo speech, urging the spirits to "sleep" and filled with cruelty, revealing the extent to which Lady Macbeth is willing to defy societal norms outside of power, becomes a destructive force a powerful symbol of the thing with an irresistible will for itself and then he says.

As the play progresses, Lady Macbeth's conscience unravels under the weight of guilt and the consequences of her and Macbeth's choices. The tension between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth establishes a complex connection between personal freedom and outside influences. "Macbeth" explores the complex relationship between will and free will through the protagonist's choices. Macbeth's decisions, influenced by the witches' predictions and played by Lady Macbeth, are a cautionary tale of the possible consequences of an unrestrained desire for her independence, of the possible tragic consequences that can result from the outcome of sovereignty interference.

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<sup>8</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. (n.d.). Macbeth by Shakespeare. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Macbeth-by-Shakespeare>

<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. (n.d.). Macbeth. Shakespedia. <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/shakespeares-plays/macbeth/>

<sup>10</sup> BBC. (n.d.). Oedipus Rex. BBC Bitesize. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z347v4j/revision/3>

Supernatural Elements in "Macbeth" also play a crucial role in the play. The supernatural elements of "Macbeth" are most evident through the three seemingly prophetic figures Macbeth encounters. These supernatural events heavily influence Macbeth's decisions, adding an element of suspense and mystery to the play. The manifestations are provided by the witches and are devices of Macbeth's understanding of fate.

The first floating head that appears warns Macbeth to beware of Macduff, planting seeds of doubt and fear in his mind. The second Freedom is a full-blooded boy who assures Macbeth that no man "born of woman" can harm him, instilling in him a false sense of invulnerability. The third supernatural experience, an anointed boy, convinces Macbeth that he will only be defeated if Birnam Wood arrives in Dunsinane, creating a false sense of security.

These supernatural elements increase Macbeth's belief in the inevitability of government and help to influence his low sense of false confidence. The effect of disclosure on Macbeth's decisions blurs the distinction between reality and the supernatural, revealing the game's insight into the consequences of relying on otherworldly forces shaping its destiny. As Macbeth struggles with the influence of the supernatural, his descent into madness becomes more apparent. The choices he makes driven by a combination of his greed, witchcraft predictions and apparitions create a state of psychological torture. Macbeth's free will is distorted due to his vulnerability to supernatural manipulation, and the consequences of his actions are tragically evident.

Wrecked with guilt and depression, Macbeth's mental state deteriorates as the consequences of his choices eat away at him. As stated in the book: *"Cure her of that! Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, raze out the written troubles of the brain, and with some sweet oblivious antidote cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon her heart."*

His descent into madness is a poignant commentary on the effects of irresistible will and reliance on supernatural resources for power. Macbeth's tragic flaw lies in his willpower to embrace the supernatural without considering its moral and psychological consequences. Ultimately, the supernatural in "Macbeth" contributes to the hero's downfall. The consequences of Macbeth's distortion of free will by supernatural influences culminate in a tragic conclusion that builds on the play's analysis of the thin boundary between human freedom and supernatural powers. Hence, the supernatural elements in "Macbeth," including prophetic implications, weave into the plot dramatically, influencing Macbeth's decisions and contributing

to his descent into madness. The consequences of his perverse free will are a warning that reveals the destructive power of the abuse of supernatural powers.

#### **IV. Comparison between "Oedipus Rex" and "Macbeth"**

The main characters Oedipus and Macbeth in "Oedipus Rex" and "Macbeth" respectively share the same struggle to face prophecies that greatly affect the course of their lives. Oedipus, as orators predict, is destined to kill his father and marry his mother. It sets the stage for the tragedies that lead to his eventual downfall. On the other hand, Macbeth receives prophecies from witches foretelling his rise to power and eventual destruction, furthering his prospects.

The similarity between Oedipus and Macbeth lies in the inevitability of their fate<sup>11</sup>, shaped by the prophecies they receive. Both characters are caught in the web of fate despite their attempts to ignore or interpret the prophecies differently leading to a tragic end. The shared theme of fate builds a universality of human struggle and has an emphasis on the seemingly insurmountable powers of prophecy. Another striking similarity between "Oedipus Rex" and "Macbeth" is the pervasive influence of the supernatural on the main characters. In "Oedipus Rex" the speaker's prophecy and the intervention of the gods are heavy on Oedipus, framing the narrative with a general sense of divine inevitability. Likewise, the witches' prophecies and apparitions in "Macbeth" insert supernatural elements into the story, and work out Macbeth's choices and motives of his fate.

Both Oedipus and Macbeth grapple with the blurred boundaries between the realms of mortals, as their lives struggle with forces beyond human comprehension. The influence of the supernatural on their actions generates tension and tragedy, and reveals the complexity of the human experience in confrontation with otherworldly influences. To summarize, "Oedipus Rex" and "Macbeth" share common threads under the influence of prophetic fate and supernatural elements in their heroes' struggles. These themes explored in both texts, talking about human challenges, emphasizing the enormous impact of external forces on individual freedom.

There are differences in both cases as well. The depiction of fate and free will in "Oedipus Rex" revolves around Oedipus' journey of self-discovery. Oedipus, unaware of the prophecy that foretells his tragic fate, embarks on a relentless quest to discover the truth about his origins.

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<sup>11</sup> Folger Shakespeare Library. (n.d.). Macbeth. Folger Shakespeare Library. <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/macbeth/read/>

Investigating the murder of King Laius, Oedipus unknowingly reveals details of his murder and incest. The unveiling of Oedipus's true identity inevitably becomes an act of self-discovery, revealing how destined his fate is. In "Oedipus Rex" the emphasis is on revealing a predestined fate. Oedipus's quest for knowledge is tragically ironic, while his attempt to escape fate brings him closer to the prophetic implication of the play.

In contrast, "Macbeth" shows a different dynamic between fate and free will through Macbeth's descent into conscious choices and moral decay. Unlike Oedipus, Macbeth is well aware of the witches' prophecies. His ambitious nature and the influence of Lady Macbeth urge him to make deliberate choices in his quest for power. Macbeth's free will is the primary force that frames the events of the play, as he willingly adopts the path of treachery and murder to gain the kingdom. Macbeth's descent into moral corruption is marked by a series of conscious decisions. It was clearly visible in the murders of the family, reflecting the neighbors' tendency to ignore ethics in doing what is necessary. Oedipus' journey is characterized by a predestined fate that unfolds in tragedy, while Macbeth's story emphasizes the impact of conscious choices in corrupting individual morality. In summary, the depictions of fate and free will in "Oedipus Rex" and "Macbeth" differ in the nature of the protagonists' journeys. Oedipus' realization reveals the inevitability of fate, while Macbeth's conscious choice of his moral lineage highlights the complexity of free will in the face of will and outside influence.

## **V. Conclusion**

Fate and the quest for free will in Sophocles's "Oedipus Rex" and William Shakespeare's "Macbeth" play an important role in two separate but related narratives. In "Oedipus Rex" the life of Oedipus of the unfolding melancholy surrounds the prophecy of his fate. Inevitably nature is emphasized as Oedipus's attempts to violate his preordained course move further toward fulfillment. On the other hand, "Macbeth" presents a story about irresistible will and conscious choice. The witches' predictions play a crucial role in the story, but Macbeth's plays a central role in the tragic sequence of events. His deliberate decisions, driven by lust for power, lead him down a path of moral ruin and ultimate ruin.

Both "Oedipus Rex" and "Macbeth" emphasize the exploration of the tension between fate and free will. The protagonists Oedipus and Macbeth have been swallowed up by outside forces shaping their fate, whether it be the oracle's prophecy in "Oedipus Rex" or the witch's prophecy in "Macbeth." Their choices and predetermined ways of interacting create aesthetic tension,

emphasizing the intricate link between human agency and the inevitable pull of fate. In "Oedipus Rex," the tension is heightened by the tragic irony of Oedipus's unintentional journey to the fulfillment of his prophecy. The protagonist's conscious choices in "Macbeth" exacerbate the struggle between personal autonomy and outside influences. Both texts highlight the enduring human challenge of navigating the fine line between fate and free will.

The themes of fate and free will explored in "Oedipus Rex" and "Macbeth" are timeless and still resonate in literature. The complexity of agency in the face of fate, the inner conflict of purpose, and the moral consequences of conscious choices are enduring aspects of human experience. These works mirror as it shows the enduring struggle of individuals as they confront the forces that are structuring their lives. The tension between fate and free will, as portrayed in these classics, transcends the boundaries of time and culture. Through such narratives, literature explores deeper into the human condition, inviting readers to consider the complex dance of fate and individual identity. Sustained discussion of these themes in literature emphasises on the universality and enduring relevance of the question of human free will that extends within the vast fabric of destiny.

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