

3 Short Stories, by Japinder Kaur
49 GRE words

Oedipus versus Destiny

Kuku and Kiki

Arjun's Intention

Once upon a time in ancient Greece, there lived a prince named Oedipus. He was the much- adored, only child of King Polybus and Queen Merope, who ruled over the city-state of Corinth. Oedipus too loved his parents dearly.

‘Hah! Parents? They are not your parents. You are not their son. You are adopted! Do you hear me? *Adopted!*’ A drunkard blabbered to the prince one evening.

Oedipus boxed him down, and squashed him for his **effrontery**. How dare he say that about him, about his parents! When he told his parents, they too were outraged and told him that he had served that man right. When she saw a few hours later that Oedipus was still upset, Queen Merope **chided** him for taking a useless man’s **inebriated** words so seriously.

Oedipus *knew* what that man said could not be true. Yet, his words kept **rankling**; he could not sleep that night.

effrontery

(n) disrespectful boldness
Done on [Day 15](#) of the Vocab Program.

1. chide

(v) to scold, to express disapproval

2. inebriated

(adj) drunk

3. rankle

(v) (*used for wounds, unpleasantness etc.*) to continue to hurt, irritate or anger greatly

Early next morning, he went to the **Oracle** of Delphi and asked if he was or not the son of the King and the Queen.

Instead of answering his disturbed mind, the **Oracle** dropped a new bombshell: she said that he was going to kill his father and marry his mother!

Oedipus was **flustered**. *No, no! He could do no such thing!*

4. oracle

(n) the person through whom the gods communicated their message; the message thus communicated; a person who gives very wise advise.

Adjective: **oracular**

5. flustered

(adj) behaving in a very confused and nervous manner

- *Late by ten minutes, he was so flustered when he walked into the test center that the invigilator asked the peon to get a glass of water for him.*

Horrified by this **sinister** prophecy, he rushed his chariot in the opposite direction from his city Corinth, towards the city of Thebes. *He would never return to Corinth, would never let Fate make him do those **heinous** crimes!*

The entrance to Thebes was guarded by the Sphinx . She was a monster with the head and breasts of a woman, the body of a lioness and the wings of an eagle. She asked one riddle to all the passersby:

*It has four legs at morn, at mid-day two, in evening three;
and more the legs it has, the weaker it will be.*

6. sinister
(adj) evil

prophecy
Done on [Day 7](#) of the Vocab Program.

7. heinous
(adj) hateworthy

- *As the criminal showed no guilt for his heinous crimes, the judge was especially severe in his sentence.*

No one had ever answered it correctly and so the Sphinx had killed and **devoured** every single visitor to the city. Now, she posed the same

8. devour

(v) to gobble up hungrily

- *The child devoured the Ruskin Bond books.*

Origin:

Latin *de-*, down + *vorare*, to eat
=> 'to thrust down the throat'

Another word from the root *vorare* is **voracious**.

9. Voracious

(adj) extremely hungry

- *The child was a voracious reader of Ruskin Bond books.*

question to Oedipus and **gloated** in the anticipation of having such a handsome fellow as lunch.

Oedipus said the answer was Man, who crawled on all fours as a baby, then walked upright, and needed a stick in old age.

It was the correct answer! Thus **vanquished**, the Sphinx threw herself off her high rock and died.

The people of Thebes hailed Oedipus as their hero and said that only he deserved to be their new king. Their previous king, Laius, had been killed a day ago by a gang of robbers.

“What a lucky coincidence,” Oedipus thought and inwards smiled. Then he saw Queen Jacosta, Laius’ widow. She was beautiful!

The people of Thebes requested that as he was their King now, he should also marry their Queen. “Of course!” he thought. “Only a fool would turn down such a lovely bride!”

They were married that evening.

10. gloat

(v) to look at something with an evil smile on ones face; to feel such an evil satisfaction over something

- *The killers gloated as the stabbed man struggled to reach the telephone. They had cut the telephone line before entering the house and so knew that nothing would come of the man wriggling to the phone with so much effort.*

11. vanquish

(v) to defeat, overcome

Years passed by happily. Two sons and two daughters were born to Oedipus and Jacosta.

Then, plague struck the city.

Oedipus once again consulted the Delphic **Oracle** for guidance. The **Oracle** said that the pestilence would end only when the murderer of King Laius was killed or exiled.

Eager to find out that felon, Oedipus sent for a blind **prophet**, Tiresias. Tiresias came to the court but **entreated** the king to not pursue the matter.

Oedipus was **inexorable**. “How can you say that?” he thundered. “People are dying each moment and you ask me not to pursue the matter? I refuse to follow your advice and command you to tell me who the murderer is. Out with it, now!”

Tiresias was much distressed and **dithered** a lot but when Oedipus threatened to hang him, he blurted out that Oedipus himself had murdered Laius!

entreat

Done on [Day 22](#) of the Vocab Program.

inexorable

Done on [Day 28](#) of the Vocab Program.

12. dither

(v) to hesitate

“How dare you?” Oedipus exclaimed and ordered that the old man be immediately arrested for his **impudence**.

13. impudence
(n) offensive boldness

This deed done, he retired to his chamber in great distress. Surely the prophet was wrong? When he had never even met Laius, how could he have murdered him? Why did all these **oracles** and **prophets** say things to upset him?

Queen Jacosta saw him worried. “Cheer up, my dear,” she said tenderly. “**Prophets** are not always right. Look at me. I’ve long stopped taking them seriously. You know, many years ago, when I was pregnant with Laius’ child, we visited an **oracle**. He told us that Laius would be killed by his son, but see! He was wrong! We killed our son as soon as he was born. Laius lived for long after that and was killed only by bandits on the way to Delphi.”

Delphi? Oedipus was thunderstruck. “Tell me how Laius looked!”

Jacosta was surprised by how agitated Oedipus became as she described the appearance of her former husband to him. He immediately sent for the former servant who was the only eye-witness to Laius’ murder.

Just then, a messenger arrived from Corinth with the sad news that King Polybus had passed away. Oedipus heaved a sigh of relief- at least one half of the loathsome **prophecy** could never be true now...*but*, he **lamented**, he still could not go back, even when his dear mother needed him the most, because he was fated to commit incest with her.

The messenger tried to **alleviate** the king's distress by telling him that he *could* go to Queen Merope because she was not his real mother. "I know," the old messenger said fondly, "for I was the one who took you to them. I had found you lying **forsaken** near Thebes."

A black fear started to grip Oedipus and Jacosta.

Soon the witness of King Laius' death arrived. He was Laius' most trusted servant, the same man to whom Laius and Jacosta had handed over their newborn son with instructions to kill the baby.

14. lament

(v) to express grief or sorrow

Also, noun: an expression of grief or sorrow

alleviate

Done on [Day 4](#) of the Vocab Program.

15. forsaken

(adj) given up, left all alone with no support.

forsake

(v) to abandon

Now, when Jacosta asked him strictly, the **wizened** old man confessed that he had been unable to kill the child and had instead left him on the road. He also confirmed that King Laius had been killed by Oedipus.

That day years ago when, after hearing the **Oracle** of Delphi's **prophecy**, Oedipus had left Corinth forever and gone in the direction of Thebes, he had encountered a chariot coming from Thebes towards Delphi. In the stupid ego fueled by his anxiety, he had not stepped off the road for that chariot. Neither had the other man. This had led to a minor accident between the two chariots and a heated exchange of words between their owners, during which Oedipus had angrily thrust his sword into the other man, left him to die and gone onwards in his journey.

He now turned white at the realization that it was his father whom he had killed!

Jacosta ran to her room. By the time Oedipus reached her, she had hung herself. He took out a few pins from her gown and **gouged** out his eyes. Thus blinded, he left the palace and spent his remaining years as a wanderer.

16. wizened

(adj) old, shrunk and wrinkled with age

17. gouge

(v) to force the eye out of its socket by the pressure of one's thumb

In the context of price **gouging**:
to overcharge

- *Any shopkeeper who sells goods above their Maximum Retail Price is guilty of gouging his customers.*

Oedipus versus Destiny

Kuku and Kiki

Arjun's Intention

When Kuku Koel and his wife, Kiki, came to live in the Sundar Jungle, all the animals immediately fell in love with his beautiful voice. His songs made them forget all their stress and sorrows, they said.

In a few months, the annual 'Sundar Number One' contest came up, and, everybody decided **unanimously** to straightaway award the title to Kuku without first going through the formality of holding a competition. Kuku was now the uncontested 'Number One Talented Individual' in the jungle.

When he and his wife returned after **foraging** for food the next evening, they found their eggs lying cracked on the ground. Being deeply religious

18. unanimously
(adv) with one mind

The adjective form of the word is **unanimous**, and the noun form is **unanimity**.

- *There was unanimity in the animals about giving the title to Kuku.*
- *The animals were unanimous about giving the title to Kuku.*

19. forage
(v)) to make a search for food etc.

- *The poor child had to forage the garbage dumps for food. The rag-pickers foraged it for plastics, metals and broken glass.*

cuckoos, they bore their loss with **equanimity**. “It was God’s will,” they sadly consoled each other. Such accidents happened sometimes.

But, it happened again, then again and then again. They were horrified at the realization that someone was doing it on purpose! But who? And why? Whose **animosity** had they earned?

They went to Billi Maasi for counsel. She was known for her **astuteness** and ran the highly successful ‘Billi Advisory Services’ which helped all animals who were unable to solve their problems themselves. Presently, she listened to Kiki’s woes, deeply lost in thought. “I do not know who hates me so much, Maasi, and why. I have never done wrong to anyone!” Kiki broke down once more.

20. equanimity

(n) calmness, even in tough situations

- *During the job interview, two of the three interviewers deliberately talked rudely to the candidate and made fun of him because they wanted to see if the candidate could face stressful situations with equanimity.*

21. animosity

(n) hatred that expresses itself in actions

- *On a good day, the animosity levels between the sisters were usually at ‘Code Red.’ On bad days, they were at ‘Code I’ll kill you!’*

22. astuteness

(n) cleverness and wisdom in practical matters

Adjective: **astute**

“You should have come to me earlier, my child,” Billi said. “Perhaps we could have saved some of those eggs. Ok now, dry your tears. I will tell you what to do. Lay your eggs in another bird’s nest, the color of whose eggs matches yours. But beware, that bird should not come to know. No one is so **magnanimous** that they will willingly look after another bird’s eggs. No, you must do it secretly. Spot a nest in which an egg similar to yours is already lying, throw that egg some distance away and put yours in its place.”

Kiki protested. “But that’s immoral! I will be doing to another what someone is doing to me!”

Billi smiled and said affectionately, “Then, I request you, young lady, to develop similar **qualms** about eating meat. After all, the insects and caterpillars that you eat too are somebody’s fathers, mothers or children, aren’t they?”

Both Kuku and Kiki still felt uncomfortable about Billi Maasi’s suggestion but they agreed to follow it.

23. magnanimous
(adj) big-hearted

Noun: **magnanimity**

- *Receiving the rich man’s donation of a million dollars, the manager of the charity thanked him profusely for his magnanimity.*

24. qualms

(n)) the uneasiness that one feels because the inner voice says that one is not doing the right thing.

- *He lied to his mother without any qualms.*
- *The man had no qualms in having an affair with his best friend’s wife.*

In a few days, their chicks started hatching in the nests of crows, mynas and reed warblers, to the utter shock of the host parents. Then they thought that the chicks were God's present to them and so they cared for them with full devotion, brought them food and kept them secure till they **fledged** and flew away.

25. fledge

(v)) to grow feathers

Origin: related with 'fly' => 'to become capable of flying.'

Related words:

Fledgling

(n) a bird that has just grown feathers and is now learning to fly; someone who is new and inexperienced.

- *Within eight months of its independence, the fledgling country was attacked by its powerful neighbor.*

Unfledged

(adj) not having grown feathers yet and so, incapable of flying; totally inexperienced.

Meanwhile, Kiki and Kuku were troubled by the ugly gossip that was floating around. The animals had started using the word ‘cuckold’ for anybody whose wife was unfaithful to him. The **insinuation** of course was that *Kiki* was unfaithful to her husband.

To be talked about in this manner, to be the subject of people’s gossip felt very degrading to the devoted married couple, but what choice did they have except bearing it? This hypothesis of **infidelity** was much less damaging than the true explanation for how their eggs came to be in other birds’ nests. If people knew the truth, Kuku and Kiki would be **castigated** as the murderers of other birds’ babies, no one would look after the couple’s eggs, and the mysterious enemy would start to eat the eggs once

26. insinuation

(n) something said indirectly.

Related: **insinuate**

(v) to say or do indirectly

27. infidelity

(n) unfaithfulness; cheating on one’s sexual partner.

Opposite: **fidelity**

(n) faithfulness

Origin: Latin *fidelis*, faith

28. castigate

(v)) to criticize or punish very harshly for a wrongdoing

again. No, Kuku and Kiki could not afford to set the record straight. At least their chicks were able to survive now. What was a little loss of reputation in front of that **colossal** joy?

One day, Billi Maasi called them. “I have found out the egg-cracker,” she told them proudly. “I had had a hunch that day itself when you had told me, but I wanted to verify before telling you. Well, he is Rang Rangeela Mor.”

“Rang Rangeela!” Kiki **gasp**. “But why?”

29. colossal

(adj) huge

Origin: Greek *kolossus*, statue

The Colossus was a huge statue of the Greek god of Sun that was erected on the harbor of the city of Rhodes around 300 BC. It was 30 meters high, which was so huge by the standards of the ancient world, that people considered it as one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

30. gasp

(v) to take in breath suddenly, out of shock; to struggle for breath

- *The asthmatic man gasped for breath.*

“Envy, darling. These peacocks are **egotistical** creatures. They think too highly of themselves because of their beauty. And, the moment someone else gets praised, they become insecure. When the animals who had always been in awe of Rang Rangeela’s beauty, started showering **encomiums** on Kuku’s voice, he became extremely jealous. He realized that his own voice

31. egotist

(n) a self-centered person

Adjective: **egotistical**

- *“As each man is to himself the most important thing in the world, each man is an egotist in his thinking, in his desires, in his fears. It does not, however, follow that each man must be an egotist in his speech.” Alexander Smith*

32. encomium

(n) great praise

Adjective: **encomiastic**,
showering great praise

- *The media and the general public heaped encomiums such as ‘the greatest captain of all times’ on the captain of the Indian cricket team after the team’s fifth consecutive win in an international series.*

must appear to be rather **grating** as compared to Kuku's and could not bear that thought. How could *he*, the very **paragon** of beauty, be lesser than someone in some department? Then, Kuku became 'Sundar Number One', a title that had been Rang Rangeela's for the last seven years. He could

33. grating

(adj) irritating; so annoying that it seems as if someone is scraping your nerves or ears with sandpaper

grate

(v) to shred by rubbing against an abrasive surface; to make a harsh sound by rubbing against an abrasive surface

- *Cheese graters and vegetable graters are common kitchen tools.*

34. paragon

(n) the perfect example

- *The politician posed as a paragon of purity and incorruptibility.*

take no more and out of **spite**, started breaking your eggs.”

Kiki only cried.

“And, my child, the sad truth is that his children will continue to feel similarly threatened by your children and will resort to similar measures as him. In order to protect your species, you will have to instruct your children to always lay their eggs elsewhere. That really is the only way. You may think of dragging Rang Rangeela to the court, but that will be **futile**. You know how cases in the Sundar Jungle court drag for ages. So, you cannot jail him, and till he is free, he will keep harming you.”

Kuku **bemoaned** that the voice which he had always seen as a boon had proved to be a bane for him and his family. The cuckoos to this day lay their eggs in others’ nests.

35. spite

(n) strong ill will, a strong desire to do harm to a particular person

- *When the promotion went to Janet instead of Joe, jealous and full of spite, he started rumors that she was having an extra-marital affair with their boss.*

futile

Done on [Day 7](#) of the Vocab Program.

36. bemoan

(v) to express grief over, to lament

lament

Done earlier in this file (Word #14)

Oedipus versus Destiny

Kuku and Kiki

Arjun's Intention

Sayontan's idleness was the greatest factor in his mother's decision to send him- her only child and hope- to America. He flatly refused and, when she tried to convince him, exploded.

"Oh *ma!* Will you *please* be quiet? Oh, why did that Arjun have to come at all? I know what you are thinking right now; that if Arjun had been your son, he would not have shouted at you like that; aren't you? Well, my dear mother, I am rather glad that I am not like that **factitiously** polite Arjun. I cannot **affect** politeness when I am angry, just in order to impress somebody. I cannot flash the **wily** smiles that guy flashes all the time while **fawning** all over you.

'Oh dear *maasi*'

'My dear *maasi*'

'May I, *maasi*?'

'For you, *maasi*.'

Hah! He sure knows how to impress his *maasi*. I bet he would do cartwheels of joy when he sees his *maasi* trying to make her own son

37. factitious

(adj) artificial, not real

- *factitious laughter*
- *factitious story*
- *factitious love*

38. affect

(v) to pretend

- *She affected an American accent.*

39. wily

(adj) seeking to fool or trap

wile

(n) a trick meant to fool or trap

40. fawn

(v) to try to please by showing extreme friendliness and flattery; to wag one's tail before someone like a dog does before his master

to be like her super-perfect nephew. '**Beguiling** *maasi* was easy!' he would **gloat**. But I am not his *maasi* and I am not charmed. I do not trust that guy. Yes, I do not; do not look at me like that.

You are thinking that I am jealous, aren't you? Ma, it's not jealousy but suspicion. Tell me, why has this Arjun turned up suddenly at our doorstep

41. beguile

(v) to cheat, mislead

Origin: be- + guile

guile

(n) a clever trick used to cheat or make someone do what you want

- *He introduced himself at the charity event as the priest of a church in a nearby village and acted so well that he beguiled even the cleverest people into giving him money. He told them that he would use their money to organize a medical camp in his village. No one ever suspected his guiles.*

gloat

Done earlier in this file (Word #10)

and is showing such **solicitude** for our welfare? He or his mother did not even talk to us all these years. His mother still hasn't talked to us. He comes out of nowhere, bearing gifts and tears in eyes. Then, almost immediately he starts offering to send me to America and you go gaga over how caring your just-rediscovered nephew is! If America is as great as he says, then why did he himself leave it and come back here?

Mark my words. His suddenly-discovered-love-for-*maasi*-and-her-son is nothing but an **artifice** to make me go, so that you are left alone here: a rich, old woman, totally dependent on him. Now, isn't that a nice situation

42. **solicitude**

(n) anxiety, concern

- *Mr. Prem Prakash had been brought up by a fond mother whose chief solicitude had been to keep her fatherless son screened from what she called the coarser realities of life.*

solicitous

(adj) showing anxiety or concern

43. **artifice**

(n) a clever trick; cleverness

- *Raavan brought Sita out of the Laxman Rekha by artifice.*

to be in? But I am not going to let his plans fructify . I will not go. Try tears, try **fiat**. I will not go.”

Sayontan’s mother and Arjun’s mother were sisters who had had a falling out years ago over their father’s property. There had been much bitterness; the matter had gone to court and each sister had vowed to die before looking at the other again. Arjun, who was only twelve then, had been much saddened by that breach; he had loved his *maasi* very much. A few years later, Arjun’s family had migrated to America and he had never heard of his *maasi* again.

When business prospects brought him back to Delhi for a year, the first thing he did was to visit *maasi* and try to mend the broken bonds. His *maasi* too took him in her arms. They observed one another; she was delighted, and he disturbed, by the changes they saw. His dear *maasi* was now a widow and Sayontan had turned out to be **feckless** fellow who did nothing but live off his inheritance. *Maasi* was much worried about Sayontan, he noticed. So, he offered to use his contacts to help Sayontan set

44. fiat

(n) an authoritative order

- *The king’s words were seen by his people as a fiat from God.*

45. feckless

(adj) irresponsible, ineffective

Origin: effect + less

- *At a time when foreigners were building up their presence in India, the rulers of most Indian states were feckless and cared for nothing beyond their personal entertainments or rivalries.*

up a business in America. Nobody can survive in America without working hard, he told his *maasi*. That rekindled her hopes of seeing her son become serious about life and it was in that hopeful state that she had broached the topic with her son.

Sayontan did not know it but his outburst had been too loud. Arjun, who had just entered the house, had heard the whole **tirade**. That his cousin could **impute** such low motives to him was difficult to digest for the proud Arjun. He felt too humiliated, too angry to stay there one minute longer. He packed his bags and giving his surprised *maasi* some quick excuse, left. How easily he used to tell his mother to forget the past and start talking to *maasi* again! It was only now that he understood how **disaffecting** hurtful words could be; he could well imagine that Sayontan's words would continue to **rankle** him even after years. He would not be able to talk nicely to Sayontan again, he knew; and so (his eyes filled up at the thought)

46. tirade

(n) a long and angry speech

47. impute

(v) to attribute, to assign as a characteristic

48. disaffect

(v) to make one lose his affection and loyalty

Origin: Latin *dis-* + 'affect', to inspire with affection

- *The king who spent all his time in pleasures soon disaffected the people.*

rankle

Done earlier in this file (Word #3)

with the only peacemaker too having given up, the **rancor** between the two families would last forever. He had failed!

But he had not.

Arjun's efforts were not wasted. Soon after he went, his *maasi* called his mother and complimented her on her fine son. Awkwardly at first, the sisters started talking. Both felt as if a huge burden had lifted off their hearts. The same day, Sayontan called Arjun, and with much **discomfiture**, apologized. Arjun was surprised at how easily he forgave his 'little brother.' The pair of sisters and the pair of brothers forgave and forgot. The phone calls ended with four beaming faces on two continents.

49. rancor

(n) long-lasting resentment and bitterness

discomfiture

(n) confusion, embarrassment
Done in [Sunday Read 1](#) of the Vocab Program.

3 Short Stories, by Japinder Kaur

49 GRE words

- | | | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
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| 2. Inebriated | 15. Forsaken, forsake | 27. Infidelity, fidelity | 39. Wily, wile |
| 3. Rankle | 16. Wizedened | 28. Castigate | 40. Fawn |
| 4. Oracle, oracular | 17. Gouge | 29. Colossal | 41. Beguile, guile |
| 5. Flustered | 18. Unanimous | 30. Gasp | 42. Solicitude, solicitous |
| 6. Sinister | 19. Forage | 31. Egotist, egotistical | 43. Artifice |
| 7. Heinous | 20. Equanimity | 32. Encomium, encomiastic | 44. Fiat |
| 8. Devour | 21. Animosity | 33. Grating, grate | 45. Feckless |
| 9. Voracious | 22. Astuteness | 34. Paragon | 46. Tirade |
| 10. Gloat | 23. Magnanimous | 35. Spite | 47. Impute |
| 11. Vanquish | 24. Qualms | 36. Bemoan | 48. Disaffect |
| 12. Dither | 25. Fledge, fledgling,
unfledged | 37. Factitious | 49. Rancor |

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Japinder Kaur

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