

# Oedipus rex: the quintessential tragic hero

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A hero revered by his people, a righteous king, and a man plagued by an inflated ego; Oedipus is the epitome of Greek tragic character. It is difficult to imagine a more accursed protagonist in literature than the King of Thebes in Sophocles's play, *Oedipus Rex*.

The idea of Oedipus's remarkable intelligence giving way to the development of the vice that catalyzes his downfall fits with the Greek proverb which states that "great abilities tend to produce great virtues—as well as great vices—in man". Oedipus's internal conflict between his vices and virtues leads to Oedipus's succumbing to his hamartia, which both enlightens and ruins him. Sophocles's transformation of Oedipus's character embodies the Greek aphorism and works as a model for Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero in his treatise *Poetics*. *Poetics*, a dramatic theory analysis written almost a century after the premiere of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, contains a detailed explanation in its fifth section of the characteristics that must be possessed by a character to label he or she as a tragic hero. The foremost of these is evidence of nobility.

The King of Thebes is highly respected for his wit and capabilities as a leader; the priest says to him at the commencement of the play: Haste thee most absolute sir, be the state's builder! / Haste thee, look to it; doth not our country now / Call thee deliverer, for thy zeal of yore? (2). The cleric beseeches the King on behalf of all Thebans for help in delivering their city free of calamity, and Oedipus responds by saying that what his "poor children" (3) come to seek is not unbeknownst to him. When Oedipus agrees to aid his people in ridding the city of the plague, the residents of Thebes feel a sense of security. However, the heroism Oedipus felt after conquering

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the Sphinx years prior to this established setting coupled with this new veneration he receives acts as a lethal combination that spurs on the birth of his deadly flaw—hubris. This theme of falling from a high standing is a major part of Aristotle's requisites for a tragic hero, which Oedipus exemplifies. The picture painted of The King of Thebes as a respected leader adds significantly to the play; if Oedipus were a man of lower stock rather than a person possessing higher-class traits, his metaphorical demise would not be so significant.

Oedipus's tragic fall begins as Tiresias reveals the truth about the source of Thebes' misfortune. Oedipus's hamartia, which is his hubris, leads to the disintegration of his prime virtues, intelligence and leadership, into the vices of rashness and arrogance. Oedipus, the cure of his community, becomes its poison or pharmakos; this is another trait of a tragic hero as defined by Aristotle (Thomassie). Tiresias warns Oedipus of his overconfidence: Go / Trample on Creon, and on this mouth of mine; / But know, there is not one of all mankind / That shall be bruised more utterly than you (14). The healthy Oedipus is unable to see, or accept, what the blind seer Tiresias is able to comprehend.

When Tiresias tells Oedipus that the latter is the reason for Thebes's plague, Oedipus refuses to heed any of the seer's warnings. Instead, Oedipus states: OEDIPUS: Ay, cast in my teeth Matters in which you must allow my greatness! TIRESIAS: And yet this very fortune was your ruin! (16). Tiresias boldly points out that Oedipus's greatness is, in fact, what is causing Oedipus's ruin. This notion characterizes both the ancient Greek axiom and Poetics; the meaning of Oedipus Rex is also advanced, as the reader <https://assignbuster.com/oedipus-rex-the-quintessential-tragic-hero/>

observes the situational irony of having sight and not seeing while also being blind and having insight. While the Greek tragic hero must be an extraordinary individual of high social standing who succumbs to hamartia, the person also has to be on the cusp of being realized before they experience their disintegration (Thomassie). This phenomenon, known as peripetia, is something that Oedipus certainly personifies.

When the protagonist of Oedipus Rex finds himself on the verge of being considered the healer of community and the savior of his people once more, he stubbornly seeks to smoke out the man who murdered Laius and thereby brought the Kingdom of Thebes into turmoil. Though his intentions may seem righteous, Oedipus's rashness in his quest to find the culprit tie back into the concept of his tragic flaw, hubris. This fault is best characterized when Oedipus superciliously tells his people: " You are at prayers; but for your prayers' intent / You may gain help, and of your ills relief, / If you will minister to the pestilence, / and hearken and receive my words (9). This statement, in essence, portrays Oedipus telling his people to allow him to grant their prayers instead of hearkening to the Gods. This hubris is amplified when Oedipus recognizes that he is on the cusp of being realized—therefore, when Oedipus experiences his reversal of fortune he exemplifies Aristotle's definition of a tragic character by, to some effect, triggering his own downfall by some error of judgment and not by accident or villainy.

Oedipus's vices associated with his reversal of fate are offset by the moment of anagnorisis of the play. When the Shepherd gives proof of Oedipus's true history, the audience no longer views the character of Oedipus through a lens clouded by his defects; instead, pity is granted to him. Although the <https://assignbuster.com/oedipus-rex-the-quintessential-tragic-hero/>

King of Thebes initially refuses to listen to anybody who dares to broach the possibility of his being the toxin of the community, he ultimately accepts his fate and punishment without complaint when the accusations against him are proven true. At this point in the play, Oedipus is portrayed as powerless, distraught and vulnerable; he is essentially a foil to the characterization of himself presented at the beginning of the drama. The protagonist's suffering is made apparent when he gouges his eyes out with his mother's brooches, crying, " Who on earth could have been born with more of hate from heaven?" (29).

The anguish of the King of Thebes is disproportionate to his culpability, and this woe is also redemptive in nature; the nature of the situation draws Oedipus's virtues to the forefront once again (Thomassie). Oedipus accepts ownership for his actions, and selflessly exiles himself for the benefit of his people. Thus, he embodies the essence of the Greek adage and the qualities of tragic hero in Poetics. The evolution of Oedipus Rex throughout Sophocles's play brings enlightenment to the protagonist and the audience as well. Thus, Catharsis is achieved for the reader experiencing the story when the travail of the tragic character is maximized by the gravity of his epiphany and his resulting personal growth. Oedipus succumbing to the tragic flaw that brings about both his self-realization and symbolic decay marks him as the dynamic character—and, in Aristotle's perspective, the character who has set the standard for all other tragic heroes in literature.

Transitioning from righteous leader to haughty monarch to disillusioned yet bettered man, the King of Thebes exemplifies the Aristotelian definition of

tragic hero and elements of the ancient Greek proverb correlating virtue and vice.