

# Oedipus and hamlet compare and contrast term paper sample

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



## **Introduction**

Sophocles' play " Oedipus the King" and William Shakespeare's " Hamlet" impose philosophical discussions about fate versus divine providence, supernatural and they both set examples of tragic heroes dealing with tragic events. Although they share common themes and motifs, there are both similarities and differences between the two plays, which will be further explored within the current paper.

## **Paragraphs**

### Similarities and Differences

Both Oedipus and Hamlet are sons of kings, they are young princes, who become men by facing the vicissitudes in their lives. In addition, they both face the deaths of their fathers, but at this point a dissimilarity appears: while Hamlet learns by the ghost of his own father that he was murdered by his own brother (Hamlet's uncle), Oedipus finds out from a prophecy spoken by the Oracle that he will be the one to murder his father, and indeed, he does.

Oedipus is a respected man and he earns the trust and admiration of the people of Thebes, after killing the Sphinx, the beast who created panic in Thebes by murdering its men. On the contrary, Hamlet does not enjoy the same attitude from behalf of his people, who consider him disoriented, even mad and irrational, inclining to believe that he is has a negative influence upon his country, as he is thought to be trapped in the past and living with the frustration of losing his father.

Incest is another common point to both plays. But while in " Hamlet"

incestuous relationships appear between Hamlet's mother, Gertrude and his uncle and the killer of his father, Claudius, in "Oedipus the King" the incestuous relationship is a fateful one, between Oedipus and his own mother, as prescribed by the prophecy.

Both Oedipus and Hamlet are influenced by a supernatural force in the decisions they make for themselves, only that in Oedipus' case, this supernatural force (empowered through the Delphi Oracle who makes the prophecy about his fate) is stronger than him, while for Hamlet, the supernatural force (his father's ghost) only contributes to the decision that he will make and it does not control his destiny.

## **Fate versus Divine Providence**

In "Oedipus the King", Sophocles illustrates the Ancient Greek tragism entrenched in the uselessness of the intention of running away from the destiny. The play imposes philosophical discussions about the free will, as Oedipus, being aware of his fate of marrying his mother and killing his father attempts to escape it, by leaving the home of his adoptive parents and while on the run, killing a homeless person who would not allow him to advance in his journey (who proved to be his natural father, Laios) and married his own mother, after killing the Sphinx. Nevertheless, the play challenges the validity of the free will, as it suggests the fact that regardless of what humans may choose for themselves for avoiding their destiny, in the end the fate reaches them, making them and their free will helpless.

The fate in "Hamlet" takes another shape, as Shakespeare opts for exploring the divine providence. Divine providence implies that God governs

over people's actions and decisions, through providence, but this concept also includes and accepts the human reasoning in deciding for oneself and accomplishing one's ends (Pearce 264). In this play the poet empowers his hero with free will, as Hamlet chooses for himself whether to kill or not Claudius, his uncle, and the murderer of his father. He spends quite a lot of time in analyzing this action, which makes Hamlet a reflexive character, calculating why such an action would be good or wrong. However, Shakespeare induces the fact that Hamlet's decision to murder his uncle was an action of the divine providence, which is the eponymous of fate in ancient Greek. Divine providence is considered to be God's will in Catholicism, and this is actually simply an adaptation to the Shakespeare's play context, considering the fact that "Hamlet" is set in Denmark, which is a Catholic country.

Therefore, in "Oedipus the King" the fate is the sole controller of people's lives and their ends, practically making them slaves to a supreme power that seems to mock any attempt that humans make to change their destinies. Oedipus seems like a puppet in fate's hands, as without realizing it falls right into its trap. Moreover, in "Oedipus the King" fate seems to express a dark humor, being macabre considering the methods followed for reaching the prescribed prophecy.

On the other hand, in "Hamlet", Shakespeare applied the principle of divine providence, which also implies humans' self - choices and their ability to decide for themselves. Shakespeare empowers Hamlet with free will, which has the effect of actually analyzing his situation and taking an in - depth reasoning process, so that, for the critics of the play, the character seems to

be weak and hesitant, trapped in the sorrow of lament for his murdered father (Pearce 212), when, in fact, he is actually very attentive with gathering all the facts for taking an informed decision on whether to act or not towards killing his uncle.

## **The Role of the Supernatural**

Killing of the Sphinx is an action in its nature supernatural, because it involves a non - human creature, the Sphinx, which finds its death at the hands of a mortal. Moreover, previous to being killed, this creature has murdered itself many men and would have continued in doing so if Oedipus would not have killed it. This makes Oedipus a man with supernatural powers. But is he really? Murdering the Sphinx installed him exactly where he did not want to be, right in the place that he was destined to be, from which he ran: near his mother, sharing the throne of Thebes with her, as her husband. The prophecy of the Oracle is also supernatural, as it turns the man on all sides, playing with him, which indicate that a force external to humans' forces and capacities, rule over them. Likewise, the fact that the blind prophet was able to depict that Oedipus was the one who murdered King Laios is again, another supernatural aspect of the play.

While for Oedipus the supernatural acts against him, this does not necessarily occurs the same in Hamlet's case. The young prince is visited and actually hunted by the ghost of his death father and he is not the only one who can see him, but is the only one who can communicate with it.

Unlike Oedipus, Hamlet does not immediately jumps into believing what the supernatural force informs him, as he uses his rational abilities to put this

story on the account of his weakness at the death of his father, but also he questions the possibility that the ghosts is actually his father, taking into consideration that it might very well be the devil playing tricks on him.

“ The spirit that I have seen may be a devil hath power/To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps out of my weakness and my melancholy,/As he is very potent with such spirits,/Abuses me to damn me” (Shakespeare 95).

## **Oedipus and Hamlet – Tragic Heroes**

Sophocles portrays a tragic hero in “ Oedipus the King”, by attributing to his character, Oedipus, noble features and a tragic fall. As stated above, he is respected by his people and he gains this respect by acting in good heart and killing the Sphinx who caused panic in Thebes. However, he has an impulsive temper and reacts in accordance to his primary instinct, which seems to be controlled by his fate and his prophecy. This brings him to his own fall. Intending to do good, he actually acts against this goal. As he believes he murders a man who wanted to harm him, he actually kills his father. As he considers to be doing a good thing by killing the Sphinx, he pushes himself towards his incestuous fate, as the people of Thebes give their queen to marry him, who is nobody else than his mother. He considers himself wise but he comes to understand the foolishness of his actions and how blind he was for not seeing in all the actions he made rashly.

**“ why should I have eyes when nothing I could see would bring me joy?” (Sophocles 1320).**

At realizing that by wanting to escape his prophecy he fell right into it, he is mastered of an immense sorrow and madness and he pulls out his eyes, as a

metaphor for being blind for following exactly the road to meeting his fate. A good man with a tragic end, this makes Oedipus a tragic hero.

Likewise, Hamlet is also a noble man, and although he is not very well seen in Denmark, he has good qualities, because he is the only one that understands that his death father was not mourned, not even by his mother and he takes on this task, and because he seeks justice, and judges thoroughly whether he should kill the killer of his father for achieving justice. Therefore, a noble man, with good qualities, doomed to a tragic end - his own death, makes Hamlet a tragic hero.

## **Conclusion**

Sophocles' "Oedipus the King" and Shakespeare's "Hamlet" share similarities in the themes that their authors approach, but each play significantly differs from one another mainly because of the main characters, who are responsible for their own actions, hence, by the decisions that they make and by the roads they follow. Fate is irremediable in "Oedipus the King", this because Oedipus chooses to believe every word of the Delphic Oracle and to run from the prophecies it predicts. In "Hamlet", Shakespeare appeals to the catholic divine providence, allowing his character to judge for himself, analytically, driven by his free will. Both Oedipus and Hamlet are exposed to supernatural forces, but where Oedipus do not question them, Hamlet does. In the end, both characters are tragic heroes, being noble men, guided by their good intentions (mingled with a somewhat diffuse ill nature), and having a tragic end.

## **Works Cited**

Pearce, James. *Hamlet: with Contemporary Essays*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press. 2008. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet Shakespeare Library Classic*. 2007. Print.

Sophocles. *Oedipus the King*, Virginia: Richer Resources Publications. 2007. Print.