

"aristotle's definition of the tragic hero and irony in tragedy" oedipus rex, oth...

[Art & Culture](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Classification and definition of tragedy are among many things widely disputed in the all too equivocal realm of composition and literary studies. These erroneous concepts happen to be directly correlated in Aristotelian theory which leads us to his definition of the tragic hero. Aristotle's conceptualization of tragedy and all that it encompasses is widely revered and accepted; setting the standard previously and contemporaneously.

The interpretation of his definition of tragedy is ambiguous, but generally states that tragedy should evoke pity and fear within the viewer for the purpose of catharsis, or purgation of senses sequencing the climax of a tragedy. (Battin) This elicits his definition of the tragic hero, which states that a character of exceptionally high stature is relegated (literally, figuratively, or both) and is forced to succumb to misfortune due to some flaw of character or failure to find/some deviation from the moral and righteous path, which is referred to as the hamartia. Myers) However, he cannot be of paramount virtue or righteousness for this would objectify him, in turn isolating him from human perceptivity and compassion though he must be of high or noble character. The hamartia at some point must be realized by the character and this experience is known as an anagnorisis; it is to be noted that the relationship between these aspects of the tragedy is in itself ironic. Moreover we cannot define the tragic hero without giving heed to irony, which may find its origin in ancient Greek playwriting and sustains its prevalence in modern times. Hutchens) Irony allows us as the audience to collectively comprehend the situation on a level that the characters themselves can not. Oedipus Rex, Othello, and Death of a Salesman are three tragic and relatively prominent plays, all written in different time

<https://assignbuster.com/aristotles-definition-of-the-tragic-hero-and-irony-in-tragedy-oedipus-rex-othello-and-death-of-a-salesman-assignment/>

periods, which can be examined comparatively with Aristotle's philosophy of the tragic hero and may draw certain parallel to one another by means of dramatic irony. Oedipus Rex, written in approx. 428 B. C. , quite literally is the embodiment of Aristotle's explanation of the tragic hero.

It is also to be noted that Aristotle himself often exemplified Oedipus in his definition and writings on tragedy. Simply put, Oedipus is of familiar virtue and morality, falls into misfortune due to hamartia, and sustains a significant and auspicious position in social hierarchy (he is King). (Mullens) It would appear that Oedipus' hamartia would lie within his pride and failure to subdue his destructive and rabid tendencies. If we wish to view the hamartia as being a matter of moral flaw (character-tragic flaw), it would certainly be attributed to his murdering his father. If Oedipus' proclivity to anger and his undue self-reliance account for his downfall, hamartia in Aristotle is moral: if Oedipus is without responsibility for his fate, then there is no place for morality in Aristotle's hamartia. " (Kirkwood) If hamartia is indeed directly coordinated with morals rather than fate it seems as though cognizance of his supposed impending misfortune is what destroyed him. He would not have escaped initially if it were not for fear of what he believed would be so, ironically spawning the adverse outcome he intended to avoid.

Conversely, we could view the theory of character flaw being responsible as an oversimplification of complex tragic issues. According to Aristotle himself in Poetics: a person who is neither perfect in virtue and justice, nor one who falls into misfortune through vice and depravity, but rather, one who succumbs through some miscalculation". Therefore, hamartia might better

be translated as "tragic error". Disaster ensues as a result of some miscalculation in judgment or action and as an incident of the plot.

Taken into perspective there are several events in the story which fail to demonstrate pride as a motivation such as his escape from Corinth to protect his "perceived" parents, his success in solving the riddle, and the altercation he was involved in which subsequently resulted in the murder of his father was not necessarily a flaw of character. (Brown) We must also consider that during that time period murder was sanctioned to a radically different degree than today.

Accordingly, his hamartia could very well be mistaken identity and failed recognition which stimulates the viewer's sense of pity and causes him to be viewed more as a "victim of ironic fate". (Brown) Line 1118 marks the point of the play where Oedipus comes to realization that his prophesy has indeed come true. It is at this point that he experiences an anagnorisis-discovering his hamartia. He acquired the throne due to his ability to solve a riddle that proved to be impenetrable to any who had attempted to decipher it, due exceptional logical-reasoning capacity (ironic).

Perhaps it was this same power of reason that provoked him to believe that he could escape fate, inversely leading to his destruction. Oedipus states "Ah God! / It was true! / All the prophesies! / -Now,/ O Light, may I look on you for the last time! / I, Oedipus,/Oedipus, damned in his birth, in his marriage damned,/ Damned in the blood he shed with his own hand! ". (4. 1118-1123)

It was the acquisition of this throne that fulfilled the remainder of prophesy.

He realizes that he is the provocation of the plague which ravages his

<https://assignbuster.com/aristotles-definition-of-the-tragic-hero-and-irony-in-tragedy-oedipus-rex-othello-and-death-of-a-salesman-assignment/>

(former) kingdom. Thereafter he concedes his anagnorisis: " Apollo-/ He brought my sick, sick fate upon me. But the blinding hand was my own! " (3. 1286-288) He is conclusively a product of his own demise. As tragedy in itself is ironic there typically several underlying patterns of irony which can be recognized and interpreted. It is the depth of irony in this play which characterizes it. To further heighten our sense of acuity and emotional connection with the speaker as well as to emphasize certain points, Sophoclean (dramatic) irony is used throughout the play. However, it seems as though the irony of fate governs the play as whole (depending on your interpretation) as the gods seem to be toying with Oedipus and his fate renders him blind.

The nature of his blindness is based on an ironic and figurative level, and at the climax of the story he literally gouges his eyes out. This physical state of blindness parallels his cognitive impediment. The audience is initially presented with dramatic irony before the play even begins because they are aware that he has already fulfilled a dreadful prophesy which he believes he has diverted. The story opens with Oedipus exiting his palace to find numerous citizens of all ages at his steps; they have come to plead for salvation from a deadly plague threatening to conquer their beloved city.

This plague overruns their city as a result of the unjust death King Laios was forced to submit to. He proceeds to declare: " It is for them I suffer, more than for myself. " (1. 96) This evokes certain irony, for he fails to realize that they are indeed suffering for him. He goes on to unconsciously insinuate formidable levels of irony with statements such as: " Thus I associate myself

with the oracle/And take the side of the murdered king...I pray that a man's life be consumed in evil and wretchedness...I say I take the son's part, just as though/ I were his son". (1. 30-252) Oedipus is speaking of his own impending doom on account of the fact that he himself is the murder. To further compound the level of irony he even states that he will fight for the King as if he were his son-and he is. Soon after, Teiresias (a prophet) comes to speak with Oedipus and as he refuses to give heed to the culprit of this heinous crime the King vilifies him: " if you had eyes, / I'd say the crime was yours, and yours alone. " (1. 332-33) This implicitly represents a paradox that is sustained throughout the remainder of the play; it is Oedipus who is visionless.

As Teiresias informs him that he has committed the treachery that will prompt his ultimate collapse he denies this fact and immediately seeks a scapegoat (blaming Kreon and Teiresias). This exemplifies mans failure to recognize the truths of the weaknesses and evils which lie within himself, both innately and not. He seeks refuge in the belief that this is a scheme to purge him from the unconsciously deceitful throne which he occupies and continues to deceive himself above all others. He imposes the greatest threat to himself as the weaver of his own doom. (1. 64) As Oedipus mocks the prophet for his blindness he retorts with " But I say that you, with both your eyes, are blind/ You can not see the wretchedness of your life. " (1. 399-400) This reinforces his distorted perception of self and failure to acknowledge ultimate truth. Iocaste seems to follow this sequence by attempting to detract from the situation at hand in the denial of her genuine apprehensions due to her overwhelming shame. Conclusively, following his <https://assignbuster.com/aristotles-definition-of-the-tragic-hero-and-irony-in-tragedy-oedipus-rex-othello-and-death-of-a-salesman-assignment/>

discernment of the truths of his origin and his reality his wife (otherwise referred to as his mother) commits suicide.

Subsequently, Oedipus gouges his eyes out which are the embodiment of his true blindness throughout the span of his life. His self-induced newly found state of blindness sufficiently completes the irony of the situation. Lastly, the riddle which he solved prior to the start of the play: What goes on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and on three legs in the evening? A man, who crawls on all fours as a baby, walks on two legs as an adult, and walks with a cane in old age. This is ironically the manifestation of his life.

He is an infant initially (though his legs were bound), he is a man during the course of the story, and ultimately must use a cane as a result of his newfound state of physical blindness. Othello, written in 1603, is considered to be among Shakespeare's greatest tragedies and may surely be identified with Aristotle's paradigm of such. Othello, the protagonist of the play, is a noble, reliable, respectful, and trustworthy Venetian general of the armies (who is eventually appointed as Governor).

In the first two acts his honorable persona is frequently noted; exemplary in his being referred to as "Valiant Othello" by the Duke of Venice. His character certainly does not represent him as infallible or an anomaly in the human race, for he can certainly be identified with the common human as he evokes traditional human flaw. This identifies him with Aristotle's first requirement of a tragic hero. This is emblematic in his "hamartia" which can be his trustworthy nature and his nobility.

If taken into a separate perspective it can be the misjudgment of Iago's projected persona and acquiesce to his cruel manipulation. There is debate over whether or not Othello truly encounters his anagnorisis due to the fact that his final words may appear to depict his pity for himself and attempt to justify his actions rather than his attainment of insight of a truth within himself. (Andrews) Personally, I do not advocate this theory and I will sustain that he experiences anagnorisis. His anagnorisis occurs in act 5 at the peak of his impassioned jealousy.

He murders his lovely wife, Desdemona, in the belief that she has committed adulterous acts against him. He comes to find that he has indeed been deceived in that the handkerchief dropped was dropped by Iago. It is at this point that he delivers his final speech and takes his own life. Typical of tragedy, Othello is wrought with irony. We can initially establish that there is much irony in that Othello and the majority of the characters in the play consistently refer to Iago as "honest Iago" when he is in fact the opposing.

As previously noted Othello is the "actual" honest character and is renowned for being such. As the play progresses we witness Othello as he succumbs to Iago's trickery and eventually himself becomes mad with jealousy, the very same feeling that initially drives Iago to cultivate his scheme when Cassio was promoted rather than him. I find it to be conjointly ironic that Cassio is one of the few who survive the effects of the scheme. It cannot be excluded when Iago states: "Oh, beware, my lord, of jealousy. / It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on" (1. . 167-69) This is overwhelmingly ironic as it is jealousy which is the sole instigator

of this play, and coming from Iago makes it so to the furthest extent. Death of a Salesman, written in 1949, is a highly regarded American play and has certainly been an object of modern controversies, one of which orienting around whether or not it should be classified as a tragedy. Whether or not Death of a Salesman should be classified as a tragedy at all is a discussion all to itself. However, its conformance with the Aristotelian prototype is what will be reviewed here.

In accordance with Aristotle's standards pity is certainly evoked following Willy's tragic end as his psychological distortions and perceptions lead to his demise. This is largely the only aspect of the play that pertains to Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero, although it wholly embodies Arthur Miller's (author) definition. Firstly, he does not match the archetype for tragic hero as he depicts a common man rather than a high or noble character therefore is surely not a hero in the classical sense.

According to an essay provided by the Calverton School: Arthur Miller names his hero "Loman" (that is, "low man"), as if to emphasize the gulf between modern human beings and kings and princes. Modern tragedians have loosened the structure of tragic plots, lowered the level of language, and also have stressed the mechanistic nature of the universe and the hopelessness and inevitability of misfortune. Though Willy does not fit the profile of Aristotle's tragic hero, many truths are conveyed and the play is left to be interpreted in a largely equivocal manner.

What can be outlined is that there are a plethora of tragic flaws which flood his persona. B. S. Field Jr. suggest that Willy's hamartia lies in his inability to

<https://assignbuster.com/aristotles-definition-of-the-tragic-hero-and-irony-in-tragedy-oedipus-rex-othello-and-death-of-a-salesman-assignment/>

combat the standard which society has set for him, his lack of insight into his own being and identity, lack of spirituality and love, and the debauched children he has raised. I am not quite sure this would be classified as hamartia, especially since these qualities are not particularly strengths that would contribute to his downfall.

However, he goes on to say " he is a criminality, a hamartia, for which the punishment, that miserable life, that miserable death, and that miserable funeral too, are appropriate and decorous consequences. " He never recognizes his anagnorisis, for he ends his life in the fabricated reality he has woven for himself, failing to realize that pursuit of happiness is of paradoxical nature for it is a state of mind. What would strike one as ironic in the situation presented in this play is that it is not solely Willy who is blind throughout this experience.

His wife Linda is jaded by his facade as well; failing to recognize that he has interbred the very same web of lies he has concocted for himself within her. " Biff: Because I know he's a fake and he doesn't like anybody around who knows! Linda: Why a fake? In what way? What do you mean? " (Act 1 pg. 1475) She fails to see that he has been unfaithful to her and that he is indeed unfaithful to himself. It is also to be found to be dramatically ironic how Willy's sons, Biff and Happy, are turning out to become a precise replication of their father.

Throughout the play, most discernibly in the end, Happy portrays the very same qualities his father has exhibited throughout the play and Biff is the only one who recognizes this fact. Ironically, he commits suicide under the

<https://assignbuster.com/aristotles-definition-of-the-tragic-hero-and-irony-in-tragedy-oedipus-rex-othello-and-death-of-a-salesman-assignment/>

premise that his family will collect the 20, 000 dollars from the life insurance policy and they do not receive the money because suicide is not covered. His funeral which he valiantly claimed to his brother (whom he was ever so jealous of) would be overrun with people who lived throughout the country and only his family and neighbor attend further reinforcing his illusion.

We are left with the words of his wife " Why did you do it? I search and search and search, and can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. We're free and clear. We're free..... "(Act 2 pg. 1524) Conclusively, it can be delineated that as time progresses adherence to Aristotle's standard of what the tragic play should encompass is deviated from accordingly. The definition itself shall remain intact although the genre seems to become diversified.

Oedipus, Othello, and Death of a Salesman may all be categorized as being tragic by both unified and separate standards; all sustaining greatness and maintaining comparable levels of irony as well as recognizably similar elements. * I desperately wanted to delve deeper into this paper and the matters it encompasses (and more) but simply scratching the surface proved to be a feat in itself as far as maintaining the length guidelines went. I have separate plausible perspective but I certainly did not have the space to do so. There was also much to speak of in that Iago seemed to possibly be Othello's alter ego.

This generates a whole new level of irony. I recognized quite a bit in this arena of perception, however I had already reached the maximum page

<https://assignbuster.com/aristotles-definition-of-the-tragic-hero-and-irony-in-tragedy-oedipus-rex-othello-and-death-of-a-salesman-assignment/>

limit. However, I felt it was quite important, recognized it, and felt that I should inform you of it. It was not excluded due to my ignorance of its existence. I had sources to support it as well. ? " Work Cited" Andrews, Michael C. " Honest Othello: The Handkerchief Once More" *Studies in English Literature* 13 (1973): 273-284. JSTOR

Arp And Greg Johnson, *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*. th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2006.

Battin, Pabst M. " Aristotle's Definition of Tragedy in the Poetics. " *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33 (1975): 293-302. JSTOR. ; Stable URL: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021>; Bradley, A. C.. " The Nature of Tragedy. " *The Calverton School*. . Brown, Dr. Larry A.. *Aristotle on Greek Tragedy*. Jan. 2005. . Field, B. S. Jr. " Hamartia in *Death of a Salesman*. " *Twentieth Century Literature* 18 (1972): 19- 24. JSTOR

Golden, Leon, trans. *Aristotle's Poetics. With Commentary by O. B. Hardison, Jr.* New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967. Rpt. Florida UP, 1981. Hutchens, Eleanor N. " The Identification of Irony. " *ELH*. 27 (1960) 352-363. Kirkwood, G. M. Rev. of " Hamartia. Tragic Error in the Poetics of Aristotle and in Greek Tragedy. " By J. M. Bremer *The American Journal of Philology* 92 (1971): 711-715. JSTOR. < <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002>> Mullens, H. G. " Oedipus and the Tragic Spirit. " *Greece & Rome* 7 (1938): 149-155. JSTOR. Myers, Henry Alonzo. " Aristotle's Study of Tragedy. " *Educational Theatre Journal*. 1 (1949): 115-127.