

Tragic characters: antigone and othello essay sample

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The model of the tragic hero and heroine has enthralled audiences from antiquity to date. Few, if any themes are more fascinating than seeing a larger than life character pursue an errant action which results in personal catastrophe, only to be reborn through the trial by fire and restored to great status. Even when predictable the portrayal of the concepts of reversal of fortune, results of arrogance, lessons learned and redemption can add electric suspense to otherwise-dull plots. Sophocles and Shakespeare will always be premier masters of their craft; their creations Antigone and Othello will always stand as emblematic of the dramatic tragic hero.

Othello's pathetic reaction to a fiction created to cause him harm pales in comparison to Antigone's action in response to what she knows is an evil royal edict. Antigone, a true and more convincing heroine, is able to die proud of her actions while Othello can take only horrific regret to his grave.

Antigone's tragic life has been predestined by her parentage; she asks her sister Ismene "...can you think of any of all the evils that stem from Oedipus that Zeus does not bring to pass for us, while we yet live?" (Sophocles 181). She is the progeny of a noble house ruined by sins she had no part in; her nobility will not allow her to leave her brother unburied. Asking Ismene for assistance, she tries to raise the point. "There you have it", she proclaims, "soon you will show yourself as noble both in your nature and your birth, or yourself as base, although of noble parents" (182).

By contrast, Othello, the "Moor" thus a valued, but "outside" commander considers his nobility to be of his own design: "I fetch my life and being from men of royal siege; and my demerits may speak unbonneted to as

proud a fortune as this that I have reached" (Shakespeare 11). However, early on his arrogance seems to intrude on his nobility; he believes his "parts, my title, and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly" (11). He is able to marry into nobility, over his father-in-law's objections and with the blessings of the Duke of Venice, who admonishes the father-in-law "(i)f virtue no delighted beauty lack, your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (24).

Despite the nobility of his actions and accomplishments, Othello's tragic flaw is in being perhaps blinded by his battlefield successes to the point of ignoring the character and machinations of those who surround him. As his demoted lieutenant Iago begins to launch his conspiracy he is able to cleverly manipulate Othello. He cannot see through Iago's falsity concerning Othello's favorite lieutenant Cassio. Iago shrewdly begs to be hesitant in the report; he would "rather have his tongue cut from his mouth" rather than speak poorly of Cassio (48). Iago could only be delighted, and spurred on to further manipulation of Othello when he acknowledges that Iago's "honesty and love doth mince this matter, making it light to Cassio" (49). Iago could only rejoice at this early evidence of Othello's flaw. Othello is also headstrong and prone to jealousy; emotions not lost on Iago. Seeing Othello and his wife Desdemona embracing on Othello's return, Iago's aside to the audience foreshadows his treachery. While the couple's kiss is "great music", Iago will "set down the pegs" and detune the instrument (37).

Othello is so blinded by his love for Desdemona and his jealousy for her he completely ignores her entreaties to restore Cassio to grace; instead, Othello ignores her request, and is left questioning if Cassio and Desdemona are

having an affair. Ultimately his tragic flaw of judgment will keep him from the truth, and therefore keep him from taking action which could have prevented his immense loss and reversal of fortune.

Antigone is warned by her sister that she is “so headstrong” in light of King Creon’s edict (Sophocles 183). She is overwrought with emotion at the debasement of her dead brother, and is blinded by her focus, and will not take her sister’s counsel. She responds “(b)e as you choose to be; but for myself I myself will bury him. It will be good to die, in so doing” (183). She will not even accept her sister’s vow of silence; “(s)hout it out. I will hate you still worse for silence—should you not proclaim it, to everyone” (184). If being “headstrong” is a tragic flaw, Antigone does not believe it. She is solid in her convictions, and does not flinch before Creon. She did what she did believing the law of Zeus overruled the law of Creon:

I did not believe your proclamation had such power to enable one who will someday die to override God’s ordinances...if I dared to leave the dead man, my mother’s son, dead and unburied, that would have been a real pain. The other (disobedience) is not. Now if you think me a fool to act like this, perhaps it is a fool that judges so. (198).

Antigone is duty-bound to accomplish her brother’s burial. There is a sense of pride in her actions; “how could I win a greater share of glory than putting my own brother in his grave?” she asks Creon (200). She does so, and goes to her grave unmarried. Betrothed to Creon’s son, Haemon, she knows she will never experience the pleasure of marriage, and her action leads to his

suicide in her tomb. It is not necessarily because of excessive pride she takes the action she does; the chorus hints that “ perhaps it was for some ordeal of your father that you are paying requital” (214).

Conversely, Shakespeare gives a sense of blind pride being the undoing of Othello. After murdering his wife and confronted by Gratiano Othello challenges him: I have seen the day that with this little arm and this good sword I have made my way through more impediments than twenty times your stop. But O vain boast! Who can control his fate? (Shakespeare 124). Certainly Othello could have he been less proud, more willing to listen to Desdemona’s reason than Iago’s false flattery and information.

Othello’s downfall began early. The unsophisticated warrior was not of noble birth and had once been a slave. His courage in combat was his reputation, not his knowledge or wisdom. Obviously many in his nation and beyond feared him, but those close to him knew his soon to be fatal flaw. He was oblivious to the conspiracy whirling around him as Iago preyed on his pride and jealousy. As Iago’s wife Emilia succinctly said, “ Oh, thou dull Moor” (123). Iago was the perfect foil; shrewd and a master at saying just the right thing—or hesitating to speak—to convince Othello of his sincerity. He professes his love for Othello, who believes Iago is “ full of love and honesty” (61). Even though Othello is of a belief Iago “ conspires against my friend” and Iago laments he should “ beware of jealousy”, Othello falls into the trap (62-63). As the conniving Iago reminds Othello that Desdemona “ did deceive her father, marrying you”, Othello’s downfall is clear; to Iago he proclaims “ I am bound to thee forever” (64). Othello could not imagine his

trust of a false friend would eventually cause him to murder his wife and then kill himself once his error was apparent.

The origin of Antigone's downfall could be retraced to her parentage, as set forth above; it could also be considered to be her obstinacy in maintaining a course of action she knew would be her doom. She acted with a single-mindedness of purpose, aware and uncaring of Creon's response, yet completely oblivious to the far-reaching effects. She was noble, proud, and adamant in her confrontation with Creon: "(n)othing that you say pleases me; God forbid it ever should" (Sophocles 200). It is all but certain she would have pursued the same action had she known Creon had chosen the "wrong" body. Would she have continued the path had she known Haemon would soon follow her in death? Would it matter to her Haemon's mother would also kill herself in grief over her dead son? Did she realize her actions would result in the fall of Creon? The consequences of her actions affected tragedy well beyond her own, despite her honorable purpose; as Othello questioned, who controls fate?

Othello was not fortunate to be restored to glory; quite the opposite. Any nobility he possessed was lost in his own eyes as well as his patrons. When the existence and horrific results of Iago's manipulations upon the hapless Othello become obvious, even Othello realizes the depth of his fall.

Ludovico, one of the Venetian noblemen, questions "(w)here is this rash and most unfortunate man?" to which Othello sadly replies "(t)hat's he that was Othello, here I am" (Shakespeare 125). His fortune is sealed; Ludovico correctly observes " O thou Othello that was once so good, fall'n in the

practice (plotting) of a cursed slave, what shall be said of thee?"

(Shakespeare 125).

Antigone's nobility was never really lost; according to her fiancé "the city mourns for this girl; they think she is dying most wrongly and most undeservingly of all womankind, for the most glorious acts" (Sophocles, 208). Her sister realizes the import of Antigone's actions, and pleads to die with her: "I am not ashamed to sail with you the sea of suffering" (202). Eventually Creon realizes his dreadful errors he proclaims "(t)he mistakes of a blinded man are themselves rigid and laden with death. You look at us the killer and the killed of the one blood. Oh, the awful blindness of those plans of mine" (229). As the chorus responds, he did indeed learn justice, only too late to affect the outcome.

Antigone was dead before she could know of the people's support of her and their anguish of Creon's actions. She did not realize her actions would result in the deaths of Haemon and his mother; there was no recognition in her of her actions and the result. Sophocles leaves it questionable whether she would have gained insight from her actions; obviously at the time of her imprisonment in the death chamber she has no such thoughts. She has a sense of vindication: "(w)hat law of God have I broken? Why should I look to the gods in my misery? ... But if Creon and his people are the wrongdoers let their suffering be no worse than the injustice they are meeting out to me" (216). Doubtful she would say that knowing Haemon would follow.

Othello finally gains insight when “ the dull Moor” sees firsthand Iago’s plot and the destruction he caused. If suicide is accepting responsibility then he does so; likely it is just as well a means of rejecting it. He would have no doubt been executed for murder, based on nothing more than the circumstances, not to mention the reaction of nobility. In his epitaph he wants to be thought of as “ one that loved not wisely, but too well; of one not easily jealous, but being wrought, perplexed in the extreme” (Shakespeare 127).

The tragic circumstances of the character are directly related to their “ mission”. . Othello had no real mission; he was in a sense a victim of an evil plotter as much as his own pride and jealousy. Rueben A. Brower, author of *Hero and Saint*, considers Othello “ a man of either-or propositions, of simple absolutes simply contrasted” (Brower 8). When Othello is convinced Desdemona “ must die”, Brower believes Othello “ has found his way back to singleness of purpose and grandeur of gesture, and terribly wrong as he is, we cannot help but feeling this is *greatly* wrong” (21) (emphasis in original).

However, as Brower later points out Othello “ is the least analytic of men” (25). He failed to take action against the one who plotted so ably against him, and was persuaded into horrific action with help of his emotions. Like Creon, he learned a great deal too late, and erroneously believed he was immobile in the hands of fate. Family history of the character can be an essential foundation and measurement of heroism, and we have none for Othello. Given his background we can see how he could be susceptible to tragic and poor influence, thus diminishing any hope of heroic stature.

Othello can be characterized as “‘valiant’ and ‘ noble’; but his heroic simplicity was also heroic blindless” (28). He is susceptible to the influence of those who will corrupt his as well as his own emotions. By contrast, according to Richard Capobianco in “ Limit and Transgression: Heidegger and Lacan on Sophocles’ *Antigone* ” she cannot be swayed: “(i)n Lacan’s strong words, she “ trembles before nothing, and especially not before the good of the other” (Capobianco 22) She goes forward in her mission; of royal blood and heritage, with the directness of action of the heroic figure, knowing it will seal her fate. She goes willingly, having neither knowledge nor fear of the repercussions of her actions. In his essay, quotes Charles Sheperdson:

It is this supreme waywardness and detachment that cuts the hero off from the community, leading her to act in haughty solitude and indifference, but at the same time in a manner that turns out to have incalculable effects, so that her act still reaches the world of the living, to whom it was not addressed. (Capobiano 23)

She may be gratified to know of the popular support and the inner knowledge of being righteous; regardless she takes her punishment as equal to her duty. The death of the hero usually adds poignancy and finality to the drama. However, with Othello comes the remembrance of his evil, unnecessary murder of his wife. With Antigone we know full well she will go to death unmindful of marriage and leaving Haemon behind; there can only be speculation whether she would repeat the action knowing he would follow.

Ultimately, she is the better hero; regardless of the repercussions she followed the edict of the gods and sacrificed hers to insure a proper burial for her brother. The people supported her and Creon suffered greatly as a result of his actions. Death has swirled around both characters; however, Antigone, unlike Othello, did not die with blood on her hands nor mandated others kill for her. Her tragedy was to face injustice in a manner she believed was necessary; Othello allowed himself to be manipulated into a tragedy beyond his comprehension.

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