

Standards to abide by: tragedy essay sample



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Tragedies are mostly similar creatures. Whether it's William Shakespeare's Othello or Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, a tragedy must abide by certain standards to be called a tragedy. Of course, it must be fatal; someone or something must die. Certain complexities like tragic flaws or foreshadowing may also appear. Irony plays a key part and takes many forms, including tragic, dramatic, or cosmic irony. There is, however, another necessary mechanism to create a solid, working tragedy: hamartia. Defined as the "error of the tragic hero which causes his fall" (Scheepers 1) or simply a "miscalculation" (Brown), hamartia can be easier to explain than identify.

Romeo and Juliet, for example, has many scenes or dialogue that could be deemed such a fall: Mercutio's accidental death or Romeo and Juliet's marriage may spring to mind. The Greek tragedy Agamemnon may find its hamartia in the prelude to the Trojan War when Agamemnon sacrifices his own daughter to secure a victorious war abroad or the past offenses of his family towards Aegisthus' family. Sophocles' brilliant tragedy Oedipus Rex, however, seems to be an exception to this rule. Many claim that pride or birth is the hero Oedipus' failing, but it is not so easy to discover, as there is no single action that causes his downfall.

In her article "The Tragic Flaw: Is It A Tragic Error?", Isabel Hyde claims Oedipus' hamartia is "his ignorance of his true parentage" that led him to "unwittingly [become] the slayer of his own father" (322); however, this is a mistake. Ignorance is no "error" (Scheepers 1), "mistake" (Brown), or even an action. From lines 507 to 526 of the play certain phrases and wording show Tiresias the seer believes Oedipus is already doomed no matter what

he does. The ill-fated sovereign could not control his ignorance. He never purposely acted in a way that turned the story into a tragedy; if anything, just the opposite occurred. Tiresias' final speech in Oedipus Rex shows Oedipus is without a hamartia and cursed from birth.

Truly, when studied, these lines contain a multitude of clues to convict Oedipus while showing he has no control over his destiny. Tiresias, the renowned seer, has been rebuffed by the prideful King Oedipus who turns his back to the seer and walks towards his palace. Even with such a snub, the faithful prophet delivers his prophecy; Oedipus "[couldn't] destroy [him]" (Oedipus 510), the symbol of his fate. Tiresias explains the murderer, clearly stated earlier as Oedipus (413), is a stranger uninformed of his actual "native Theban" (515) status. This itself begins to hint at Oedipus' blamelessness in his sin. One never controls their own birth and the circumstances surrounding it. If his evil is a result of his birth, he had no part in its inception.

Tiresias goes on to speak the most important lines in proving Oedipus' absence of a tragic action leading to his downfall. Ironically, the blind seer points to the proud king as the one without sight: "Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich" (517). It is interesting to note Tiresias does not say "one who has eyes will be blind" or "rich man who will beg". Although painfully prophetic on the surface, the way in which these descriptions are constructed shows Oedipus is already blind and already a beggar. There is no sense of a future realization. Tragically, Oedipus has the facade of sight and riches but will be "revealed at last, brother and father both to the children he embraces, to his mother son and husband both" (520-522). The <https://assignbuster.com/standards-to-abide-by-tragedy-essay-sample/>

use of the word “revelation” conjures up an image of pulling away this facade, as someone pulls a sheet away from a new statue or monument. The statue was always there, if only cloaked by an obstruction.

Of course, these same lines may seem to destroy this argument. As said earlier, Oedipus does “turn his back on Tiresias” in the stage directions. He mounts the steps to his gorgeous palace, the head of his sovereign authority. Surely, this rude lord is guilty of hubris, an arrogant pride rising before the omniscient gods and their prophet. Indeed, the first lines of the poem demonstrate the vane megalomania Oedipus suffers from. He begins by asking who he calls “his” children why they “huddle at [his] altar, praying before him” (1-3). He further lauds himself declaring “the world knows my fame: I am Oedipus” (7-8). He has forgotten the gods and Tiresias is here to pull Oedipus back to the reality that he too must bow to the their power.

Yet this prideful flaw is just that: a flaw and not an action. The fact remains that damnation tainted Oedipus from birth. Laius and Jocasta received an oracle clearly stating “doom would strike [Laius] down at the hands of a son”, so they cast him away only for him to survive. (787). As a youth in Corinth, he travelled to Delphi where the Oracle warned him “You are fated to couple with your mother... you will kill your father” (873-875). Terrified, Oedipus left home and never returned. At all turns he thought he had “escaped the worst” (930); however, he always was a blind beggar fated to do the unthinkable.

Hamartia remains absent throughout the play, but perhaps that is the point. Surely, Oedipus is flawed with “no fear of justice, no reverence for the

temples of the gods" (974-975), but flaws and actions don't generate destiny. Especially in the time of the Greeks where so much was explained by religion and myth, one had to respect the way the world was. People do precipitate their own tragedies, but sometimes life just happens. Destiny and fate explained why there is war, famine, earthquakes, and much more; therefore, they had to be respected and then taught. Sophocles' Oedipus Rex did that in a remarkable, cathartic way which has lasted more than two thousand years, teaching humanity that even though one may have eyes or riches, that doesn't necessarily mean you aren't blind or poor.

Works Cited:

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