

Fate-al flaw



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Aristotle describes a tragic hero as a noble character with a tragic flaw that ultimately ensures his own downfall. This tragic flaw is usually something an audience can relate to, and may arouse feelings of pity and fear. Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare's *Othello* are characters commonly referred to as tragic heroes. Both characters are noble men, but only one is truly a tragic hero. Oedipus's downfall is caused by Fate, not by some tragic flaw. Othello is a true tragic hero, and his tragic flaw is jealousy, that "green-ey'd monster", which ultimately destroys him (Shakespeare 1002). Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* introduces King Oedipus as a concerned ruler trying to rid the city of its curse. In order to lift the curse from the city, Oedipus must find the murderer of the late King Laios. In the quest to find the murderer, horrible family secrets are revealed, and like an out-of-control train, there is no turning back. From the beginning, Oedipus is doomed by Fate to carry out his part in the tragedy. After learning that Laios would be killed by their newborn child, Iokaste sent their baby away. She gave the baby to a shepherd who was to hang him on a mountainside to die. Iokaste was trying to outwit Fate by killing the baby, but Fate had other plans. If Iokaste had kept the baby instead of sending him away to die, Oedipus would have grown up knowing his true parents. Possibly, Fate could have been better tested if the truth was revealed sooner. Because Iokaste did not keep the baby and the truth was not revealed to Oedipus until it was too late—Fate won. The shepherd who was charged with hanging Iokaste's baby on the mountainside committed the act of hubris by overriding her decision to kill him. The shepherd "pitied the baby" so he gave him to another shepherd (Sophocles 215); the first shepherd hoped the second shepherd would take him to live in a different country. What would have happened if the shepherd

had done what he was instructed to do? One may never know the answer to this question. The actions of the shepherd certainly prove that Fate cannot be outmaneuvered. The second shepherd took Oedipus back to his country and gave him to his king and queen who had no children of their own. The second shepherd never tried to test fate; he took an unwanted child and gave him to a couple who did want him. It was only when the shepherd brought the news to Oedipus about the death of Polybus that Oedipus learned the truth of his birth. Unknowingly, the helpful shepherd was destined to play a part in carrying out this tragedy. Polybus and Merope seemed to be kind and loving parents to Oedipus; they took him in and raised him as their own. When Oedipus was older, he heard rumors that he was not his father's son. He went to his parents and questioned them, but they assured him that the rumors were false. Their lies about Oedipus's true identity set Fate's prophecy in motion. Oedipus only left Corinth because an oracle told him he would have children with his mother and kill his father. If Polybus and Merope had told Oedipus the truth, would he have still fled? Fate would not allow the truth to be known until the time was right. Fate was Oedipus's worst enemy. Oedipus was cursed from the time of his birth; predictions about his life made him an unwanted child. He escaped death to go live with parents who loved him but lied to him. Had Oedipus believed his parents lies, he would not have visited the oracle. Had he not visited the oracle, he may not have left Corinth. If any of those things had happened one could say that Oedipus was a tragic hero. But unlike the tragic hero Othello, Fate was in control of Oedipus's actions. Oedipus wanted to know the truth about his life more than anything else. When Iokaste tells Oedipus that he could not have murdered Laios, he does not believe her. She goes on

to tell him that Laios's only son died before him, but Oedipus is still not satisfied. Iokaste is defeated and says that Oedipus "will listen to any voice that speaks disaster" (Sophocles 208). Oedipus was so determined to know the truth that he could not see the disastrous fate laid out in front of him. Neither Iokaste nor anyone else could save him from it; he was damned to fulfill the prophecies laid out for him at birth. Oedipus's Fate was exactly like what the Hoffmans described in their literary criticism; they wrote, "For the Greeks, fate was a tendency toward an end, like the 'fate' of a plant to grow toward the sun; the plant can be temporarily turned away, but it will always grow back toward the light" (par 4). In other words, the more the characters tried to change Fate, the more it stayed the same. If Iokaste had kept the baby, if the shepherd had killed the baby, if the second shepherd had raised the baby as his own, and if Polybus and Merope had been honest with Oedipus, then maybe things would have been different. For Oedipus, neither the truth, nor fate, could be escaped. Fate was unfair to Oedipus. Although he was not perfect, he did try to do the right thing. Throughout his life he tried to avoid patricide and incest because he knew that was what the oracle predicted for his life. However, Oedipus could not run far enough or later deny the truth that stared him in his face; his fate was sealed, and he could not escape it. William Shakespeare's Othello shows its audience the wickedness of jealousy, and how the most innocent of actions may be turned into something devious if looked upon with a false eye. Othello, the gentle Moor, is turned into a murderous villain after listening to the whispers of the slithering snake Iago. Iago, the master manipulator, sets his plan in motion by deceiving almost everyone around him. After listening to tales of infidelity, the gentle Moor is no more; his tragic flaw is revealed, and he will

not rest until he uncovers the truth. Unfortunately, the truth is discovered a few minutes too late when Othello learns that his tragic flaw has completely destroyed his life. Othello worships Desdemona and thinks of her as a virtuous woman until Iago starts planting seeds of doubt in his head. He tells Othello that Desdemona is a liar; she lied to her father to marry Othello, and she lied to Othello in their courtship. Iago says, “ And when she seemed to sake and fear your looks, she lov’d them most” (1003). Othello thinks about what Iago is saying and agrees that Desdemona had been deceiving her father and himself. In this particular scene, the wheels of jealousy begin to turn for Othello. After planting the first seeds of doubt in Othello’s mind, Iago gives Othello even more to think about by reminding him that Desdemona walked away from her own countrymen to marry him. He says that one day she may regret her decision to marry someone so unlike herself “ and happily repent” (1004). The plot thickens as Iago’s words put Othello into a tailspin; he begins to wonder why he ever got married. Iago’s plan to arouse Othello’s jealous-side is working. After this conversation, jealousy has certainly poisoned Othello’s mind, and he can think of nothing else but Desdemona’s unfaithfulness. He says that he wouldn’t have cared if Desdemona had slept with every man around as long as he had never found out about it. Now that he does know about her infidelity with Cassio, his life and love is over. He demands that Iago prove his “ love a whore” (Shakespeare 1007). He wants proof that he can see, and he threatens Iago’s life if he doesn’t come up with it. Othello is becoming unhinged! He demands for Iago to give him proof, and Iago obliges him with more lies that are guaranteed to send Othello’s jealousy into over-drive. Iago is a slippery snake. He sets up a meeting with Iago to talk about his affair with the

prostitute, Bianca. Iago tells Othello about the meeting, but says that they are to speak of his affair with Desdemona. Othello hides so that he can see Cassio as he speaks about his wife, and he is boiled over with jealousy and hatred when Cassio begins to laugh about his conquest. Othello feels like a fool, and he plans to make Desdemona pay for her adulterous actions. Who would ever believe that a ladies handkerchief would set murders in motion? This is exactly what happens when Iago mentions that he saw Cassio wipe his beard with Desdemona's handkerchief. Othello goes to Desdemona to ask about her handkerchief, but she couldn't produce it. This is all the proof that Othello needs to believe Iago's tale of her affair with Cassio. Although Othello doesn't ask his wife directly about the validity of Iago's accusations, he immediately calls for Iago to kill Cassio. Othello then begins to think of ways to kill the "fair devil" – his wife, Desdemona (Shakespeare 1011). It is Emilia who describes jealousy best when she says, "... 'tis a monster begot upon itself, born on itself" (1015). There was never anything for Othello to be jealous of with Desdemona. Emilia reports to Othello that Desdemona is doing nothing wrong after he instructs her to spy on his wife. Emilia begs him to believe that his wife is loyal to him only, but Othello's jealousy is only inflamed by her lack of evidence. He believes Desdemona is just a sly whore who has out-manuevered her servant. Although it had been hidden for many years, Othello was a jealous man by nature. All it took was an opportunistic devil like Iago to exploit Othello's insecurities that caused his unraveling. Sadly, jealousy was Othello's tragic flaw, and he could not overcome it. One could say that Oedipus and Othello have one thing in common: immense pride. Oedipus is so proud of the life he built on his own that he thinks he has outsmarted Fate. Othello thought that no one in his service would dare

betray him, but his lowest ranking officer makes him the biggest fool of all. Perhaps things could have been different if Oedipus had told his parents about the prophecy from the oracle or if Othello had taken the word of his beloved wife instead of “ honest” Iago. In the end, Oedipus realizes that his fate was written from the time of his birth and no man or woman could change that. However, things could have been different for Othello had he been able to overcome his fatal flaw – jealousy. Because Fate controlled Oedipus’s life, he cannot be considered a tragic hero. Jealousy was Othello’s fatal flaw, and this makes him the true tragic hero of these two plays.