

# Compare and contrast the use of tragedy in two or more plays essay



**ASSIGN  
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When the term 'tragedy' is used, certain plays are at the forefront of one's mind. There are, manifestly, Shakespeare's great tragedies - Othello, Macbeth, and Hamlet and of course King Lear; and in the time of ancient Greece, there is the great classic play - Sophocles' King Oedipus. The similarities at first seem great. Oedipus and Lear are Kings, and the themes dealt with in the plays are comparable, as are the questions they pose. Both Kings fall from their pinnacles. Oedipus finds out that he has committed incest and murdered his own flesh and blood.

Whereas Lear degenerates from being a mighty ruler to a mad beggar. They are fallen heroes their hierarchy destroyed, reduced to mere men - a tragedy in itself to become loathed and ostracised. Tragedy tears us apart; it shatters our sense of the world and ourselves. The terrifying power of tragedy is suggested by Sir Philip Sidney, when he speaks, in *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), of high and excellent Tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds, and show us forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours; that, with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world and upon weak foundations gilded roofs are builded...

. (117-18), (Bennett and Royle 99) Pain is an essential ingredient in both plays. Oedipus evokes a feeling of sheer pain. Due to a foreknowledge of Oedipus' story, you read with a sense of dramatic irony. This happens in King Oedipus, when Oedipus declares that the murderer of Laius should be:  
Expelled from every house/If, with my knowledge, house or hearth of mine

Receive the guilty man, upon my head Lie all the curses I have laid on others.

(Sophocles 32) He has no idea that he is the murderer himself. The fact that the reader is aware of this, and he himself is not, becomes almost too much to bear. When Oedipus utters the line ' Nor do I exempt myself from the imprecation'. He is saying the guilty will not be protected. He has no idea that he is denouncing himself as the murderer. This all provides a backdrop for the play and consequent actions develop into a long drawn out agony leaving the audience longing for a resolution.

Oedipus cannot escape his own fate. The climactic action is over. He has murdered his father unknowingly and has had four children with his mother. He can change nothing. For this reason alone there is an overwhelming sense of the unavoidable.

His own parents tried to cheat fate and failed dismally, as did our flawed tragic hero Oedipus. Freewill has no place here. There are no choices, because their choices are fated to lead them into the very thing they are trying to avoid. No one is capable of judging without availability of information. Indeed, as Creon says, ' I do not speak beyond my knowledge'.

Laius does not know his son is alive, and thinks himself safe. In reality by sending Oedipus away he deprives him of the knowledge of his parents' true identity. Consequently Oedipus is unable to make a decision about the issue of fate for himself. This all contributes to the inevitable tragedy of King Oedipus. In King Lear such intense circumstances are not apparent.

Both Lear and Gloucester are blind in that they cannot see that they have both made misjudgements about the virtues of their children. Their misjudgements come from their own character flaws, whereas Oedipus' misjudgements are fated due to his own lack of information. Gloucester wrongs Edgar by believing Edmond. Gloucester is given several chances to see through Edmond's charade, but is tricked by his bastard son into believing that Edgar is plotting his death. Gloucester knows both sons well enough; he has no reason to assume Edgar as the guilty party, other than Edmond's testimony.

If he were thinking clearly he would be aware of this; however, because of his preference for his bastard son it does not occur to him to assume Edmond is lying. He does not wish to believe either son as evil. He is though, easily convinced. Again it is his character that causes this gross misjudgement not the lack of information. In virtually the same way Lear esteems Goneril and Regan's declarations of devotion over Cordelia's blunter statement of duty, even though Cordelia is as sincere as they are false.

As their father he must surely be aware of their characters and be able to judge them fairly.