

# Example of oedipus and his hamartia essay

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The play "Oedipus the King" by Sophocles begins with Oedipus the king explaining his concern about his citizens thus: "My zeal in your behalf ye cannot doubt; Ruthless indeed were I and obdurate, If such petitioners as you I spurned" (11-15). These lines clearly establish the fact that Oedipus is a good king and looks after his kingdom, Thebes, quite well. However, this is not enough. No matter how well Oedipus governs his kingdom or how valiant he is, tragedy befalls Oedipus through what can be said as "Hamartia". Hamartia or tragic flaw is what brings down a great character and thus, forms the basis of a good tragedy. According to Aristotle, Sophocles's Oedipus the King made for a perfect tragedy. Having all the elements of a classic tragedy - great valiant character, possessing of a Hamartia or a tragic flaw or error of judgment, falls as destiny or fate works - the character of Oedipus is a perfect tragic hero.

It may be said that it was Oedipus's pride and recklessness itself that led to his ultimate fall. Had he not taken it to his pride to solve the mystery of King Laius's murder, he would have focused better on how to solve the issue of plague in the city instead of further plundering the city into turmoil by getting himself banished. Further, it was his recklessness and fear for the prophesy made in his name that led him to the course of his doom. From the very beginning, as the shepherd later tells, "through fear of evil oracles" (1351), the King Laius and queen Jocasta bid baby Oedipus to be killed. However, the shepherd responsible for the killing took pity on the child and passed him onto a shepherd in a far away land of Corinth, who, in turn, gave the child to the king and queen of Corinth. Even in Corinth, when Oedipus heard of the prophesy following him, he left the kingdom in a jiffy so as not to let the prophesy prevail itself. Taking an objective outlook, all these

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actions only establish further that the prophesy prevails. Had the King Laius and Jocasta not initiated the action to kill Oedipus, chances of the prophesy coming true were slim. From the very beginning, reckless actions kept paving way for Oedipus towards fulfilling this prophesy and ultimately, to his fall. In all this, fate plays an extremely significant role. In the end, though, Oedipus is humbled and he realizes his hamartia and proclaims, " It was Apollo, friends, Apollo, that brought this bitter bitterness, my sorrows to completion. But the hand that struck me was none but my own" (1517-1520).

## **Oedipus and Athenian Society**

While reading Oedipus, one point that strikes to the readers persistently is the belief people in Athens those days had in oracles and prophesies. The entire episode of Oedipus took place because this very belief in prophesy let certain people to take a certain set of actions, which ultimately ensured that the prophesy was carried out in its entirety. For almost all problems, people would consult the oracles for a solution. Even in Oedipus the King, Oedipus bids Creon to go visit an oracle to find a way to rid Thebes from the plague. In the contemporary world, these actions and belief system does seem obscure, even as people these days would try to fight off any plague through science than depending on an oracle. Other than this, a sense of false pride in oneself is another tragic flaw that Oedipus had, which ultimately led to his fall. From the very beginning, Oedipus proclaims himself as Oedipus the Great. Throughout the play, he is a boastful, full-of-pride king. He is proactive to the extent that sometimes may be called reckless. Nevertheless, in his

pride in himself, he is blinded to a few of his follies such as the murder of King Laius.

### **Athens' Lessons Learned and its Contemporary Relevance**

Had Athens taken lesson from the story of Oedipus, they would have learnt to not be so proud of one's own self. Taking an objective outlook is what matters. When in an influential position, one must have a practical outlook. Had Oedipus maintained such practical outlook, he would not have done two things - sent for the oracle nor dug further into the mystery of the death of King Laius. It was his curiosity and pride of being a master puzzle solver that brought the devastating truth about his existence to front, ultimately resulting in his fall.

In contemporary society, the same lessons would still hold. The simple fact is that personality flaws exist in all societies similarly. Therefore, irrespective of the society being contemporary or that of Athens in 3 BC, the same lessons still apply. In the paragraphs to come, we will discuss a modern tragic hero, with the same Hamartia as that exhibited by Oedipus centuries ago.

### **A Modern Tragic Hero similar to Oedipus**

While the changing times have changed the definition of tragedy (from what Aristotle once proclaimed in his Poetics (1996)), essentially the characters are all still the same, exhibiting similar character flaws. In a recent play "Death of a Salesman" by Arthur Miller (1994), the protagonist of the play, Willy Loman, has a similar hamartia to Oedipus. Willy Loman too is marred by his pride and ego (hubris). Throughout the play, we as readers, feel a need to shake Willy out of his pride and bring him back to reality. It is Willy's pride in him as a salesman that he refuses the job offers for a steady job, <https://assignbuster.com/example-of-oedipus-and-his-hamartia-essay/>

despite knowing that the job of a salesman is now in its last phase of life. He believes in the great American Dream and the fact that anyone who is good looking and well liked by others can make it big. What he doesn't know is the need for hard work, goal setting and luck you need to make it big in America. Nevertheless, he teaches his kids as well that no qualification is more important than to be liked by people. He maintains a false façade all throughout the play, which results in Willy's son Happy too living in a dreamy world, away from all reality. His second son, Bill, though, learns the truth about his father and becomes an anti-thesis of Willy. In the end, Willy starts suffering from a psychological disorder and in order to hide from the present (where he has lost his job, and is unsuccessful from all parameters of life), he keeps delving into the events of the past.

## **Difference between Classic and Modern Tragedy**

According to Aristotle in his book Poetics (1996), a good tragedy should consist of:

- A life-like story, i. e., a story which is realistic and narrow in focus.
- A tragic hero – this tragic hero should be a “ hero”, i. e., better than us, an above average man either in his stature or characteristics.
- This hero should not simply be good, but a mix of good and bad both. The bad here should lie in his intentions, rather a tragic flaw or hamartia, which owes to the hero's fall in the story.
- The tragic hero should belong to a high class of society and be prosperous (at least in the beginning of the story/play).
- The play should be unified and based in one span of time.

**However, in recent years, the definition of modern tragedy has changed. In recent times,**

- The tragic hero must come from common man.
- The tragic hero should have higher aspirations, ambitions.
- The time frame varies.

**Lessons for Modern Society**

Despite the fact that the definition of the tragedy has changed significantly, the fact is that there are always lessons to be learned from the characters at the end of the day. The case of Willy Loman, a modern day tragic hero, is no different. From the play we learn the how disastrous conceited notions are to oneself. It is always better to have a superlative view in life rather than live in an imaginary cocoon inside the real world.

**Reference List**

Aristotle (1996). Poetics. UK: Penguin.

Miller, Arthur (1994). Death of a Salesman. UK: Heinemann.

Sophocles (1978). Oedipus the King. UK: Oxford University Press.