

English Coursework

Compare and contrast the theme of tragedy in relation to “Hedda Gabler”, by Henrik Ibsen, and “Oedipus the King”, by Sophocles.

The plays “Oedipus the King” and “Hedda Gabler” are often seen as an ancient and modern tragedies respectively. However, defining the term ‘tragedy’ is more complex than it looks. We all know that tragedies, opposed to comedies, don’t have a happy ending. In “Hamlet” we see the same thing happening. Most of the characters die in the end, including our tragic hero, Hamlet. This is another important element for a good tragedy. The same happens in “Hedda Gabler”, where Hedda, the tragic heroin commits suicide in the end of the play. However, in “Oedipus the King” the events are different, because as far as we know, Oedipus doesn’t die, nor is killed, but he does pierce his own eyes out. This represents the tragic end of “Oedipus the King”, because Oedipus believed he knew everything, even though he was metaphorically blind. That’s why he pierces his own eyes out, because even though he had them, he did not use them properly, due to the fact that he didn’t see the truth.

“Oedipus: Apollo, friends, Apollo was he that brought these my woes to pass, these my sore, sore woes: but the hand that struck the eyes was none save mine, wretched that I am! Why was I to see, when sight could show me nothing sweet?”¹

Another tragic moment in Oedipus’ life is when he finally sees the truth, and is shunned from the city of Thebes. This is because people believed that due to Oedipus’ assassination of his father and marrying his mother that Thebes was affected by various plagues. There is some irony in all this, because Oedipus, who was once seen as the saviour of Thebes, and also as an almost God like figure, ends up as the man who was to blame for all the problems in Thebes.

Both plays have a tragic hero, which is an essential component of a good tragedy. According to Aristotle, who wrote in his ‘Poetics’ what a tragedy can contain, a tragic hero must also have a tragic flaw. Just like in “Hamlet”, where Hamlet’s tragic flaw is that of procrastination, Hedda Gabler and Oedipus also have one, as emerges throughout these tragedies. According to Hedda, she has only one flaw, which see happens to see as a talent.

“Hedda:(By the glass door) I said be quiet. I often think there’s only one thing in the world I have any talent for.

Brack: (Approaching her) And dare I ask what that is?

Hedda: (Standing, looking out) Boring myself to death. Now you know.”²

In this quotation it is clear that Hedda is aware of her own tragic flaw, which is something that does not occur in “Hamlet” or “Oedipus the King”. But that does not mean that the tragic hero doesn’t have a tragic flaw. In “Oedipus the King”, not only is the tragic hero completely blinded from the truth, but he also tried everything in his power to change

¹ “Oedipus the King”, by Sophocles.

² “Hedda Gabler”, by Henrik Ibsen.

his own fate. From this tragedy, we learn something that Oedipus wasn't able to understand. According to Greek tragedy, it does not matter what we do, because the gods have already decided our fate, and there is nothing that can change that. This is the lesson that Oedipus learned the hard way, due to his stubbornness and pride, and this is another reason why "Oedipus the King" is a tragedy.

As one goes through the tragedy of "Oedipus the King", it's noticeable that Oedipus has actually more than only one tragic flaw. One of them being that he believes that his power and wisdom are so great, that nothing of tragic can occur to him.

"Priest of Zeus: ...It is not as deeming thee ranked with Gods that I and these children are suppliants at thy hearth..."³

Here we notice how the Priest of Zeus advises Oedipus that he should be aware that he is a human being like any other person, who can commit mistakes just like anybody else, and that he shouldn't believe that he's immune to any kind of punishment from the gods. In a way this demonstrates the irony of it all, because Oedipus' quest in his life is to avoid his tragic fate. The blind prophet, Teiriasias, told Oedipus that he would kill his father, marry his mother and rule Thebes. However, this would also cause the plague and bring disaster to all of its inhabitants. Oedipus' parents committed the same mistake as Oedipus, in the sense that they also tried to avoid their fate. In order for the prophecy not to happen, they tried to get rid of Oedipus.

In an attempt to discover what is causing the plague, Oedipus calls upon Teiriasias, the blind prophet. He tells Oedipus that he himself is to blame. In disbelief, Oedipus mocks his handicap, and by doing so he annoys Teiriasias.

"Teiriasias:...And I tell thee – since thou hast taunted me even with blindness – that thou hast sight, yet seest not in what misery thou art, nor where thou dwellest, with whom....for no one among men shall ever be crushed more miserably than thou."⁴

In this quote, we see how Teiriasias is warning Oedipus about his fate, and how he will eventually collapse. We also see another ironic situation, because Teiriasias is a blind prophet, who cannot see, however he can 'see' the future, whereas Oedipus does have sight, but is unfortunately blinded from the truth (metaphorically blind).

Another important aspect to a good tragedy is the progression of the tragic hero from a high position to a low position. This seems to be the case in both tragedies. However in "Oedipus the King" it appears to be more obvious than in "Hedda Gabler" and this is due to the character of Hedda. The impression one could get from Hedda is that she is a person with no particular ambition. It's just like when she confesses to Judge Brack that the only talent that she has is to bore herself to death. Even though she does like to manipulate people, as she so often does, it's not everyone that can be manipulated. This seems to be the case with Judge Brack, who I believe she wants to manipulate the most, but in fact it is he who manipulates her, and that is one of the things that leads Hedda to commit suicide, because she does not want to be trapped.

³ "Oedipus the King", by Sophocles.

⁴ "Oedipus the King", by Sophocles.

The only time that Hedda seems to be excited about anything throughout the play is when she is in position of Lovborg's manuscript, and also when she's able to manipulate Lovborg to commit suicide. **"For once in my life I want the power to control a human destiny."**⁵ This seems to be Hedda's ultimate wish, and it is possibly the only thing that can put a stop to all the boredom that surrounds Hedda, which is also mainly caused by the marriage between her and George Tesman, who is an extremely pampered, gullible, and childish person.

Here we see a clear connection in the two tragedies, even though they are from completely different eras. The topic of controlling destiny takes a big role in both tragedies. Both tragic heroes wish to control their own destiny. In Hedda's case, she wishes to control the destiny of others, by manipulation, and she succeeds with Eilert Lovborg. In Oedipus' case he wishes to control his own destiny by changing or avoiding it, however, he does not succeed. Even though there are these similarities between both plays, the societies differed from each other. Both authors have created their characters to represent a particular part of society. Ibsen's characters are more of the middle-class to aristocratic society, who, in most cases, are extremely sophisticated and discuss futile issues, like the discussions between Hedda and Judge Brack. However, the characters of Sophocles are more of the noblemen to royalty type of society. Many Greek tragedies involve royalties, because that tends to build up the tragedy.

In Aristotle's 'Poetics' he stated all the necessary aspects to a good tragedy. And when analysing "Hedda Gabler" and "Oedipus the King" it is clear that both of them contain most of the aspects required. Both of them do not have a happy ending, because Hedda commits suicide, and Oedipus finally realises that his prophecy has come true, and therefore he pokes his own eyes out, as a demonstration of despair. Both 'tragic heroes' have a tragic flaw, which will be the cause of their downfall. **"There remains, then, the character between these two extremes – that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty."**⁶ This extract from Aristotle's 'Poetics' describes how the tragic hero falls from a high position to a low position, and the cause of this is the tragic flaw. And once again, according to Aristotle, a good tragedy should arouse **"pity"** and **"fear"** to the readers, and these two words together are also known as **"catharsis"**. Therefore, if the tragedy contains all the necessary elements stated by Aristotle in his 'Poetics', the reader should experience a balancing of those feelings, which is exactly the feeling one would get after reading both tragedies.

Bibliography:

- "Hedda Gabler", by Henrik Ibsen.
- "Oedipus the King", by Sophocles.
- "Poetics", by Aristotle

Word Count: 1498

⁵ "Hedda Gabler", by Henrik Ibsen.

⁶ "Poetics", by Aristotle.

