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World Literature Assignment
Part 2c: A Formal Essay
Sample 3: Formal Essay.
Topic: Oedipus, The Tragic Hero.

Oedipus, the classic Greek tragedy by Sophocles, is one in which the protagonist is portrayed as a tragic hero. The author does this by combining the elements of irony, personal tragedy and heroism. In the play, Oedipus's character evokes pity because of his misfortune appears to be greater than he deserves hence the reader is left to empathise with him. His actions are controlled by fate and the reader is left to wonder why such a terrible thing is happening to such a good man.

Power corrupts but absolute power corrupts absolutely. Humans seem to have a common running trait, and that is one of power and heroism. The quest for heroism becomes the basis of Oedipus the King's demise. If this power however gets into ones mind, the results could be detrimental, and Oedipus the King is a living testimony of this. Since his actions are controlled by fate, no matter how hard he tries, he can not prevent good or bad things from happening to him. Since fate is cannot be prevented from taking its course, his actions are quite futile.

Aristotle said "A tragic hero evokes our pity and terror if he is neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly evil but a mixture of both. The tragic effect is stronger if the hero is more mortal than we are." Oedipus is a mixture of both good and evil. In the opening scene he is seen as a compassionate king who is intelligent and caring. Oedipus prides himself on his intelligence and it is this along with his questioning personality that lead to his downfall. These are his good sides with his evil side being that is guilty of killing King Laois and sleeping with his own mother. Oedipus tries his best to be morally upright with everything that he does, which is more than the average person does. Aristotle also goes on to say "the tragic hero suffers a change in fortune from happiness to misery because an error in judgement which leaves the tragic hero to ignore or violate a divine warning or moral law." In the play, Oedipus runs away from Corinth to Thebes and solves the riddle of the sphinx and is thus made the king of Thebes. He however marries the widowed queen and has children with her thus violating a moral law. His fortune changes from happiness to misery when he realises what he has done. "A tragic hero evokes our pity because he is not evil and his misfortune is greater than he deserves. He evokes our fear because we realise we are fallible and could make the same error" said Aristotle. Oedipus is flawed in many ways and as a result comes out as imperfect since he has a balance mixture of both good and evil. His fortune in saving Thebes becomes his downfall when he fulfils the oracle by sleeping with the queen, who unknown to him is his mother.

Oedipus is imperfect and this is seen through his moral and physical flaws. He

limps as a result of his feet being pinned together when he was quite young. Unknowingly sleeping with his mother and killing his father is his moral flaw. Thus, combining the heroism of Oedipus with his flaws makes him imperfect though higher than the ordinary man in many ways. Sophocles portrays the result, a classic example of a tragic hero in this play.

Sophocles use of irony throughout the play brings to bear on the reader the gloom of Oedipus's situation. We constantly find Oedipus trying to escape the Oracle, but in doing so, ends up fulfilling it. This is seen when he says in the opening scene "Everybody everywhere knows who I am." This ironic statement is said in the opening scene of the play when Oedipus comes out to meet the people. His true identity is unknown to him but he exclaims that everyone else knows who he is. Also, since he is such a great riddle solver, you would think he would be able to solve the riddle of his identity but he is unable to in the sight of overwhelming evidence, which is quite ironic. An example of the irony of his fate is when his parents try to prevent the oracle from being fulfilled by sending him away to be killed. He however returns and on his way fulfils the oracle by killing his father and later on marrying his mother. It seems strange to the reader that Oedipus is not more careful about what he does. For example, when he killed king Laois at the crossroads, he should have realised with the oracle in mind that anybody he kills is likely to be his father. He however reacts carelessly by succumbing to his emotions when the King annoys him. Oedipus returns to Thebes and saves it by solving the riddle of the sphinx. However, he leads to its destruction since he is the cause of the plague. It is destroying themes. Thus his fortune tends to be his misfortune. These examples show how Oedipus fulfils the oracle even though he is trying to escape. The reader gets a haunting glimpse into the mindset of Oedipus's wife and mother. This is portrayed to the reader through the actions that she takes. She is a woman who after all who wanted want to kill her son to prevent the oracle from being fulfilled only to find out years later that she is married to him, which leads her to commit suicide later on. She expresses her disbelief in the oracles by telling Oedipus that they are powerless, however, in the next scene she is praying to the oracles to help Oedipus to stop his strange behaviour. Also in this scene, a messenger brings news from Corinth that Polybos is dead and Oedipus should return to Corinth. Though Oedipus is pleased about the king's death since he proves that the oracles don't come true. Yet still he refuses to return because Merope is alive. His fear is that he will fulfil the prophecy since his "mother" is alive.

Oedipus, remains a mystery to both the reader and himself. He does not know his true identity and this becomes the source of his demise. He comes to find out his true identity, but in doing so, his sudden tragic end is brought closer. The reader at this point is left to wonder, what is the way out. Unfortunately, the answer as we come to realise in the latter parts of the book is one that is not easy. Fate has already chosen Oedipus's

destiny and nothing can change it. A feature of tragic plays by Shakespeare. The writer connotes a certain sombre picture and depressing mood, which is characteristic of most of Shakespearean tragedies. The employments of understatements that lead to humour are also evident in most parts of the text, and this makes for an interesting reading. For example throughout the play, there are references to sight such as, "you cannot see, yet you know the nature of this plague" and "light, o light, light now everything is clear" which are ironic because Oedipus blinds himself later on. Also, the blind prophet Teiresias knows about Oedipus's true identity but Oedipus who isn't physically blind does not know his true identity. His servant Kreon whose name means king is also an irony since he turns from a messenger to a king.

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There are three hero archetypes that suit the character of Oedipus: The quest, the initiation and the sacrificial scapegoat.

Oedipus delivers Thebes by solving the riddle of the sphinx and thus fulfils the first archetype which is that of a hero who solves an unanswerable riddle to save his kingdom. He does this on his journey to discover his true identity.

The second archetype is that of the phase of separation. This happens when he leaves Thebes, is transformed and returns to become king and save his kingdom.

The third archetype is when in order to save Thebes he has to banish himself from the kingdom to restore it back to fruitfulness. This has the elements of a tragedy because no matter the decision he makes he it is going to be detrimental to him.

Even though Irony plays a crucial role, other elements such as heroism and tragedy come in the text. We find Oedipus entangled by his own principles. He is always in that twilight zone, one between acceptance of the harsh reality and total rejection of the things he goes through. The choice of the latter is detrimental to both his character and that of the people he leads and governs and he thus chooses the former remaining a true tragic hero.

