

### “Oedipus the King” Essay

Oedipus Rex lived his life knowing the fate to which he was destined. He tried at all costs to avoid Apollo’s prophecies; however, this only led him to a state of tragedy and despair. This outcome made it justifiable for the educated reader to label him as a “tragic hero.” Oedipus’ obvious identification made it all the more difficult to investigate the question as to whether there could be more than one “tragic hero” per novel. The supporting characters of Jocasta and Laius were possibilities, and in the following paragraphs, their likeness to a figure of tragedy will be expressed.

The character of Laius had already died the moment the play began, however, because his presence played such a significant role in the novel, the reader was still able to determine a great deal about him. The biological father of Oedipus had been the reigning king and he lived in riches with his wife Jocasta in wealth and riches. This state of prosperity eventually was transformed into a pathetic end when he was killed in the street by his own son. This fulfills the first property of a tragic hero. Laius also experiences pain that had been partially self-inflicted. He sent his son, Oedipus, away to be killed at an early age, and in the end, it was this discarded son that killed him. Laius then must have realized that this “pain” was the result of allowing others to do his dirty work. If he had had the courage to kill the infant himself, then the misfortune of dying at the hand of his son would have been avoided. Not wanting to sway from the stereotypical traits of a king, Laius exhibited a pride that was largely displayed in the situation that had him killed. Instead of leaving the road for Oedipus to pass, he insisted on maintaining his stature and he “tried to push [Oedipus] off the road” (p.56). This is more specifically defined as “hubris”, and is another essential characteristic of a tragic figure. Similar to the unyielding pride of a king, is the expression of one’s mind at the expense of his own body. Again, the crossroads situation can be used, as can the general nature of a typical king, a personality from which Laius did not sway. The preceding two points illustrate the main flaw of Laius, King of Thebes. It has many times been proven that pride can be one’s downfall, and the existence of this trait in Laius’ personality, and the fact that it was this that killed him, prove that he experienced hamartia in addition to many other “tragic hero” characteristics.

Collectively, the above points have definitely proven that there is a significant amount of information that supports the argument that Laius was indeed a tragic hero, however, the opposing argument is also strong. Many of the more important features (of a tragic figure) are evident neither in his character nor his life. For example, he does not seem to violate any existing codes, as he is king and determines what the codes will be. He does not express himself to the point of others suffering any more than the duty of king allows, nor does he suffer and become isolated, or destroy his body for enlargement of his spirit. For Laius then, it is impossible to clearly say that he is a model of one who has the qualities of a figure of tragedy, and therefore, he is not a tragic hero.

The lady Jocasta was a queen who believed in honour and stature. She was a mother and a respected person within her society. This all changed when she discovered that her son had not died, she had actually married him and produced his children. With this news, she experienced dishonour and eventual death, therefore, going from a state of prosperity to woe. Jocasta literally became “sick to death” by the end of the play (p. 77). The events surrounding her death were also caused “by her own hand” (p. 92). She hung herself in order to escape humiliation, which again fulfills a quality of a tragic hero. Unknowingly, Jocasta executed another element of a tragic figure with such efficiency that it was sickening to everyone that heard of it. As previously mentioned, she married her son Oedipus, and not only slept with him, but bore his children. Although she was a queen, this act was such a violation of the nature of the people of Thebes, that even if she had not killed herself, she would later have been scorned with such intensity, that her life would have been unbearable. Up until her death and following the discovery of her disgrace, Jocasta became very depressed and removed herself from socialization. She felt as if she were isolated, and suffered with more intensity than anyone else did.

The traits similar to those of a tragic hero that Jocasta possessed were strong and undisputed; however, the traits that she did not hold could be used as arguments against her tragic figure status. For example, she did not only cease to display the characteristic of reckless expression, she took opposition to it. Jocasta was undergoing inner turmoil at the thought of Oedipus uncovering the truth of their relationship, and she openly encouraged him to give up his plight for expression. She once stated, “May you never find out who you are” (p.78). This point in particular, as well as a lack of evidence

supporting the presence of tragic figure qualities, must draw the reader to the conclusion that Jocasta, like Laius, is not a true tragic hero. She lacks the essential elements of one, both within her actions, and more importantly, within her character.

Through this investigation, it has been discovered both that Jocasta and Laius are not strong models of tragic figures, and that Oedipus' tragic figure status is all the more deserved. It was difficult to place the characteristics of his parents in the same categories in which his are found, and the fact that it was almost effortless to do the same for him made it obvious that he is a prime example of one. Sophocles, the author of the play Oedipus Rex, must have planned to have one strong representation of a tragic hero in his play, and although others may have shared some of Oedipus' qualities, ultimately he was the true heroic figure.