

Tragic Heroes: Oedipus, Antigone, and Medea

Aristotle assigned specific traits, thereby defining the tragic hero of Greek drama, and plays such as Oedipus Rex, Antigone, and Medea introduce three very different tragic heroes, which exhibit, for the most part, the characteristics described by Aristotle. The characters Oedipus, Antigone and Medea share qualities that make up a tragic hero: being of noble birth; being surrounded by an extraordinary circumstance, which spins out of control because of the hero's tragic flaw; gaining self-awareness or some kind of discovery through their downfall; and providing the audience with a sense of pity or fear.

By examining the character Oedipus, one can see that he successfully carries all of the traits of a tragic hero as defined by Aristotle. Oedipus is of noble birth, being the child of King Laios and Queen Iokaste of Thebes, and after being saved from death by a Shepherd, the King and Queen of Corinth, Polybos and Merope, took him in. By doing so, they keep Oedipus at a higher rank. He is placed into an extraordinary circumstance after leaving Corinth, the only place that he knows as home, to escape his fate, which according to the oracle is to kill his father and to marry his mother. Leaving the oracle, and heading away from Corinth, Oedipus thinks that he is escaping his fate; however, he ends up killing a man at the crossroads, who he later discovers was, in fact, his father. The extraordinary circumstance continues to develop as Oedipus, upon entering Thebes and answering the Sphinx's riddle, thus conquering a plague within the city, is offered a Kingship and marries the widowed Queen Iokate. The marriage seals Oedipus's fate, because his new bride is also his mother. Oedipus' downfall begins with his determination to discover the killer of his wife's former husband, King Laios. After calling upon the soothsayer, Oedipus still is blind to the fact of who he really is. Iokate finally figures it out and tells Oedipus to go no farther with the subject. He refuses to drop his investigation, thus revealing his tragic flaw, or hamartia, which seems to be pride. The Queen ends up killing herself in shame. Upon finding Iokate's dead body, Oedipus realizes his true identity. Reflecting his understanding of wrongdoing, he imposes a punishment for being "blind" by cutting out his own eyes. Sophocles' moral message seems to be that one cannot escape destiny. To complete the tragic hero profile, Oedipus inspires pity in audiences. Viewers realize that they, too, could behave as he does under these extraordinary circumstances.

Like Oedipus, Antigone also exhibits tragic hero traits, although not as conclusively.

Antigone is the daughter of King Oedipus and Queen Iokate, making her also of noble birth.

Her quagmire occurs when, against the tenants of King Creon, she buries her brother

Polyneices. In ancient Greece, this was considered to be Antigone's duty. The gods also

mandated proper burial, but since Creon identified Polyneices as a traitor, burial is forbidden.

He tells the people of Thebes that "...no one shall bury [Polyneices], no one mourn for him, But

his body must lie in the fields, a sweet treasure For carrion birds to find as they search for food"

(108). Antigone gets caught in the act of burying her brother, and this marks the beginning of

her downfall. Creon sentences her to be locked in a cave. His original decree would have had

her stoned to death, but he revised this since Antigone is not only his niece, but also the fiancée

of his son, Prince Haimon. She is left to die, apparently by suffocation or starvation; however,

she hangs herself before Haimon can come to save her. In the case of Antigone, there is no

apparent realization of wrongdoing. In other words, Antigone appears to never acknowledge

her tragic flaw, which, like Oedipus, seems to be pride. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of

discovery (or anagnorisis). She believes that what she did was not wrong; therefore, her

character strays from the strict tragic hero guidelines Aristotle introduced. The moral message

in the play Antigone seems to be that Antigone herself is standing up for a divine law that she

believes in. By standing against King Creon and his law, Antigone appears to be encouraging

audiences to stand up for what they believe in—and be prepared to die.

Similar to Oedipus and Antigone, Medea also, to some extent, displays Aristotle's

characteristics of a tragic hero. Medea is the daughter of Aeetes, who is the King of Colchis

and the son of Helios, the Sun god, thus making her of noble birth. Medea's downfall begins

early in the plot, when she finds out that her husband, Jason, is going to be married to Creon's

daughter Glauke. Medea turns completely against Jason, even though he carefully describes his

royal marriage to her: "...first, it was an act of common sense, secondly unselfish, and, finally, a

mark of [his] devotion to [Medea] and all [his] family" (144). Later, Jason again says that his

marriage to Princess Glauke is "to safeguard [Medea] and rear young princes to be brothers to

[their] sons... so make [their] family solid" (145). Medea justifiably refuses to accept Jason's

excuse, and she begins her rampage. She appears to do everything in her power to hurt Jason

in any way she can. After arranging a safeguard in Athens by King Aegeus, Medea begins her plot to revenge her hurt. Medea kills Jason's fiancée, Glauke, and Glauke's father, King Creon. She then continues her rampage by killing her own two sons and finally rides off into the sky with their bodies in a dragon-drawn chariot. The Gods seem to condone what she has done. Like Oedipus, there is a discovery of wrongdoing; however, the audience reaction of this play seems to shift. At the beginning of the play, our sympathies are with Medea and what she has to go through, but in the end, we feel pity for Jason and how he is left with nothing. It is interesting that Medea who would normally signify a character of reproduction is turned into a seemingly anti-reproductive demon. Still, she fits within the tragic hero definition because she does finally discover her wrongdoing and how it leads to her downfall. Medea's life becomes miserable after she kills her own children and when she realizes she will never know love again. She is also devastated after being exiled from her home city, and she identifies her pain and suffering as a "broken heart."

The Greek heroes Oedipus, Antigone and Medea share, in varying degrees, most of the qualities that make up a tragic hero: being of noble birth, being surrounded by an extraordinary circumstance, and gaining self-awareness or some kind of knowledge through their downfall, which, in some cases, helps audiences view them as sympathetic.