

The Downfall of Men:

A comparative analysis between Sophocles' Oedipus the King and Camus' The Stranger

World Literature Assignment #1

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Both Sophocles' Oedipus the King and Camus' The Stranger are two literary works in which the protagonist experiences a downfall. The protagonist of Oedipus the King is Oedipus who is a king of great power, and who throughout the play experiences a great downfall. Meanwhile the protagonist of the The Stranger is Meursault, who although a man of less power than Oedipus, experiences a very similar downfall for very similar reasons. Both these men commit murder, which will eventually cause their downfall; also the reasons why each of the man commits murder are very similar. Both Meursault and Oedipus have very similar traits, which lead them to commit murder in an indifferent carefree state of mind. Both these men are impulsive impatient people who kill another person because that person was annoying them in one-way or another. Both these men stumbled across their victim on random, and in an impulsive action, with no consideration of consequences these men decided to kill. These men were used to having everything their own way, hence for Meursault killing the Arab, and for Oedipus killing Laius was simply part of their habit of getting everything their way. Although Oedipus is used to getting everything his way because he is a royal prince, while Meursault is used to getting things his own way simply because he does not care about anything or anyone. Meursault says: *"When I was a student, I had lots of ambitions like that. But when I had to give up my studies I learned very quickly that none of it really mattered"* (Pg. 41). This shows that since nothing actually matters to him he does as he pleases. For Oedipus this belief that everything must go his way causes him to be a ruler who makes rash decisions which will be the main cause of his downfall. Both men seal their fates by acting hasty and impulsively never considering the consequences of their actions.

Oedipus began the play as the all mighty king only to end it as a blinded beggar. Oedipus has only himself to blame for his downfall, this was not a coincidence and

throughout the play the traits that cause his downfall (haste, impatience, and impulsiveness) are very evident. First the killing of Laius was an impulsive action, which resulted from his impatience. Oedipus stumbled across a stranger on a bridge, that stranger did not want to move out of his way, out of the prince's way, and the prince decided to foolishly kill him. Oedipus knew about his prophecy of killing his father and marrying his mother, and yet he killed a stranger who at least age wise could have been his father. Oedipus was used to everything going his way, and when that stranger refused to move out of his way Oedipus was enraged. Had Oedipus not been so impatient, had he acted less impulsively he could have avoided this murder, and therefore avoided his downfall. Meursault's downfall is also due to very similar traits. Meursault very much like Oedipus exhibits traits of haste and impatience when he murders the Arab. The most absurd meaningless things annoy Meursault when he murders the Arab. Meursault's description of the murder is as follows:

"The scorching blade slashed at my eyelashes and stabbed at my stinging eyes. That's when everything began to reel. The sea carried up a thick, fiery breath. It seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire. My whole being tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver. The trigger gave; I felt the smooth underside of the butt; and there, in that noise, sharp and deafening at the same time, is where I tall started. I shook off the sweat and sun. I knew that I had shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I'd been happy. Then I fired four more times at the motionless body where the bullets lodged without leaving a trace. And it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness" (Pg. 59).

Meursault gives the most simplistic and absurd reason as to why he killed the Arab. He talks about the light reflected from the blade of the knife, which was annoying him; this is

direct reflection on Meursault's lack of patience as he kills a man because that man was bothering him. This action came very natural for Meursault, however he could have just as easily asked the Arab to move out of his way, since he had a gun in his hand it is more than likely that the Arab would have obliged, however for Meursault it was just as easy, if not easier to shoot the Arab. Aside from this being an example of Meursault's impatience it is also a reflection of Meursault's attitude towards the world as he does not care about anybody but himself, and his belief that he can do whatever he wants. Meanwhile although Oedipus does care about other people, he does believe (and for a man at his power it might be true) that he can do as he pleases.

Although these two men are of different social rankings, and have very different characteristics, they experience a very similar downfall caused by their few similar traits. For Meursault, the impatience trait is derived from the fact that he is an unemotional, undetached person who does not care about anybody in his life. Not caring about anyone causes Meursault to feel as though he deserves everything and everything must go his way, when something does not go his way, like when he accidentally runs into the Arab, his impatience is evident and in that case he kills the Arab. For Oedipus this trait of haste and impatience seems to be derived from a completely different place. Oedipus does very much care about the people who rule over, however he does have the same sensation as Meursault that everything must go his way. For Oedipus everything must go his way because he is such a powerful man, and as the king of Thebes everything has to go his way. This trait of Oedipus is evident throughout the entire play, it begins by the murder of his father, but it is also evident in the way he rules Thebes. As soon as Oedipus hears about the prophecy of the plague, in a hasty somewhat impulsive reaction, he declares a manhunt for the murder of Laius, never even considering that it could very well be him. Also when

Oedipus is faced with the possibility that he might in fact be the murderer he is very hostile and impatient about it. This is an example of another one of Oedipus traits, which was a factor in his downfall. Oedipus is also in a way an angry man. Oedipus describes his murder as *"I struck him in my rage"*.

The last trait, which caused the downfall of these men, is their brutal truthfulness and honesty. Oedipus throughout the entire play whenever new evidence is presented to him about the murder of Laius he truthfully considers it. Yes when Tiresias tells Oedipus the truth he gets extremely angry and dismisses it, but that is because Tiresias does not present him with any facts, just his vision, and also it trigs Oedipus' other traits of anger and impatience. When the evidence presented suggested that Oedipus was the murder he in way attempted to hide that evidence and truthfully accepted it by saying: *"I think that I myself may be accurse by my own ignorant edict"*. Oedipus could have lied and hide the evidence that incriminated him, however his truthfulness did not allow him to do that and he gave every evidence presented in front of him a fair shot. Meursault also had the truthful trait in him.