

## Compare and contrast the use of tragedy in two or more plays:

When the term 'tragedy' is used, certain plays are at the forefront of ones mind. There are, manifestly, Shakespeare's great tragedies – *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* and of course *King Lear*; and in the time of ancient Greece, there is the great classic play - Sophocles' *King Oedipus*.

The similarities at first seem great. Oedipus and Lear are Kings, and the themes dealt with in the plays are comparable, as are the questions they pose. Both Kings fall from their pinnacles. Oedipus finds out that he has committed incest and murdered his own flesh and blood. Whereas Lear degenerates from being a mighty ruler to a mad beggar. They are fallen heroes their hierarchy destroyed, reduced to mere men - a tragedy in itself to become loathed and ostracised.

Tragedy tears us apart; it shatters our sense of the world and ourselves. The terrifying power of tragedy is suggested by Sir Philip Sidney, when he speaks, in *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), of

high and excellent Tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds, and show us forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours; that, with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world and upon weak foundations gilden roofs are builded.... (117-18), (Bennett and Royle 99)

Pain is an essential ingredient in both plays. Oedipus evokes a feeling of sheer pain. Due to a foreknowledge of Oedipus' story, you read with a sense of dramatic irony. This happens in *King Oedipus*, when Oedipus declares that the murderer of Laius should be:

Expelled from every house/If, with my knowledge, house or hearth of mine  
Receive the guilty man, upon my head  
Lie all the curses I have laid on others. (Sophocles 32)

He has no idea that he is the murderer himself. The fact that the reader is aware of this, and he himself is not, becomes almost too much to bear.

When Oedipus utters the line 'Nor do I exempt myself from the imprecation'. He is saying the guilty will not be protected. He has no idea that he is denouncing himself as the murderer. This all provides a backdrop for the play and consequent actions develop into a long drawn out agony leaving the audience longing for a resolution.

Oedipus cannot escape his own fate. The climactic action is over. He has murdered his father unknowingly and has had four children with his mother. He can change nothing. For this reason alone there is an overwhelming sense of the unavoidable. His own parents tried to cheat fate and failed dismally, as did our flawed tragic hero Oedipus. Freewill has no place here. There are no choices, because their choices are fated to lead them into the very thing they are trying to avoid.

No one is capable of judging without availability of information. Indeed, as Creon says, 'I do not speak beyond my knowledge'. Laius does not know his son is alive, and thinks himself safe. In reality by sending Oedipus away he deprives him of the knowledge of his parents' true identity. Consequently Oedipus is unable to make a decision about the issue of fate for himself. This all contributes to the inevitable tragedy of King *Oedipus*.

In King Lear such intense circumstances are not apparent. Both Lear and Gloucester are blind in that they cannot see that they have both made misjudgements about the virtues of their children. Their misjudgements come from their own character flaws, whereas Oedipus' misjudgements are fated due to his own lack of information.

Gloucester wrongs Edgar by believing Edmond. Gloucester is given several chances to see through Edmond's charade, but is tricked by his bastard son into believing that Edgar is plotting his death. Gloucester knows both sons well enough; he has no reason to assume Edgar as the guilty party, other than Edmond's testimony. If he were thinking clearly he would be aware of this; however, because of his preference for his bastard son it does not occur to him to assume Edmond is lying.

He does not wish to believe either son as evil. He is though, easily convinced. Again it is his character that causes this gross misjudgement not the lack of information. In virtually the same way Lear esteems Goneril and Regan's declarations of devotion over Cordelia's blunter statement of duty, even though Cordelia is as sincere as they are false. As their father he must surely be aware of their characters and be able to judge them fairly.

Lear Asks:

Which of you shall we say doth love us most,  
That we are largest bounty may extend  
Where nature doth with merit challenge? (Shakespeare, 5)

He seems as though he is deliberately wronging Cordelia, in spite of his obvious affection for her. He is a King in every sense of the word. He lives a life of ostentation rather than what is true and simple.

A constant theme in each of these plays is that of blindness either physical or metaphorical.

In *King Lear*:

Lear acquires wisdom only after he has been driven mad; Gloucester sees clearly only after he has been blinded. Gloucester and Lear both die of joy, the one on being reconciled to Edgar, the other in the delusion that Cordelia is still alive. (Muir, K 26)

In *King Oedipus*:

In his horror at this discovery, and at the self-inflicted death of Jocasta, he destroyed the sight of his own eyes, and, obedient to the curse his own lips had pronounced upon the author of his country's shame and misery, had prayed Creon, now successor to his throne, to banish him forever from the land. (Sophocles, 69)

Both Lear and Gloucester have an opportunity to redeem themselves by recognising their mistakes. Gloucester obtains forgiveness from Edgar, as does Lear from Cordelia. In Lear we know harm has been done but it is not irrevocable, there is still hope in the character of Albany. For Oedipus there is no redemption, his fate is set.

One of the main differences between both tragedies is the question of blame. There are no villains as such in Oedipus. In Lear we can personalise our anger towards Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Edmond. They are liars, plotters and cause the downfall of the protagonist. It is easy to therefore blame the tragic consequences on them. But whom do we blame in Oedipus? There are no truly evil characters. The fate of Oedipus, Laius and Jocasta is predestined, and despite their best efforts they cannot escape. Laius wanted to protect himself and Oedipus wanted to protect the couple he thought to be his parents. We can therefore understand their actions. Are the Gods to blame then? Does it satisfy us to blame them? We cannot externalise our inner feelings as we can with Lear because, 'Who are these gods? They are apparitions, voices, and the air'. It doesn't seem as emotionally satisfying to blame this higher order. Did the characters bring it on themselves by thinking they could outwit fate that had been set by the gods?

We cannot pin down the blame as we can in Lear and questions are left to hang without resolution.

The same questions are asked in Lear as in Oedipus but appear less obvious than the former. In Lear the intense plot distracts us whereas we are confronted with them in Oedipus 'head on', because the action has already occurred. Therefore Lear seems to come to a more acceptable resolution.

At the end of *King Oedipus*, Sophocles leaves one with the burden of unresolved issues. Whereas Shakespeare, though not coming to a resolution makes them more acceptable and less sad. Lear seems more cathartic than Oedipus and there seems to be less agony about its 'tragic nature'.

At the time Oedipus was conceived, scholars and the masses that attended performances truly believed in the concept of the gods, fate and the inevitability of predestiny. It was the birth of classical concepts and the humanities. Shakespeare's Lear is written in a different era and borrows many ideas from Grecian concepts but pays homage to more modern concepts of the Elizabethan/Jacobean sensibilities.

There are more romantic notions in Shakespeare whereas in Sophocles there is a more allegorical moral, although both provide didactic functions.

The major theme of tragedy involves a mighty and respected figurehead dragged down from a great height by circumstance or fate to the human condition of pathos and suffering and is consequently reduced to everyman. Tragedy is the tool that awakens the audience's senses so we pity and empathise with the flawed hero.

### **Bibliography**

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Word count: 1,506