

Aristotle's tragic hero has certain characteristics which can be applied to Oedipus the King and Milton's Satan. Aristotle states that a tragic hero can be classified as a person that falls from the state of being happy to one of misery because of his own mistake. This can be seen in both Oedipus and Satan, since they are miserable as a result of their own doing. According to Aristotle, the tragic hero must fall through his or her own error, or hamartia. This term is also interpreted as "tragic flaw", usually applied to overwhelming pride, or hubris, which causes fatal error. Satan and Oedipus show that they have hubris and this is probably one of the main contributing factors for their fall. Although, the main characteristic of the tragic hero, as stated by Aristotle, is their ability to make the reader or audience to empathize with them, he wants there to be a sense of fear and mistrust because of their devious nature.

In Milton's Paradise Lost, Satan, one of the main characters in the story, exhibits all the qualities of a tragic hero. He has fallen, literally and figuratively, from grace. Once one of God's more powerful angels in heaven, Satan questions God's power and forms an alliance to overthrow Him. Satan's army fights diligently only to have God "...cast him out from Heaven, With all his host of rebel angels..." (Paradise Lost, Book1, Line 37). Book One of Paradise Lost describes Satan being cast out of Heaven and down to Hell. This is consistent with Aristotle's criteria for the tragic hero, "... suffering a change in fortune from happiness to misery because of a mistaken act..."

Satan also possesses hubris; pride or overwhelming self-confidence.

"Here we may reign secure, and in my choice;

To reign is to worth ambition, though in Hell;

Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven." (line 261)

Here, Satan has so much pride that he would rather rule in Hell than serve God in Heaven. This shows that Satan possesses hubris, which is, as described by Aristotle, “...*pride or overwhelming self-confidence*”.

Satan’s character as a tragic hero emerges further in later books. Book Four of Paradise Lost is a good example. It begins with Satan’s only soliloquy of the epic. As he awakes in Hell, he stares up at the sun and begins to speak;

*“Oh Sun! to tell thee how I hate thy beams,
That bring to my remembrance from what state
I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere;
Till pride and worse ambition threw me down” (Book IV, line 37-40)*

As he sees the sun, he remembers how high he was in heaven until his pride and ambition brought him down. This is a very important quote as it satisfies the criteria for Aristotle’s description of a tragic hero. It highlights the character “*suffering a change in fortune... because of a mistaken act...*” Also, hubris is once again revealed as Satan states that his pride and ambition threw him down. This example is even more profound because it comes directly from the character.

Milton is also successful in portraying this super-human character as one with humanistic qualities. This allows the reader to relate to the character, which satisfies yet another criteria for Aristotle’s tragic hero, “...*we recognize similar possibilities of error in our less and fallible selves.*” Satan’s human qualities are magnified in his soliloquy as he even contemplates begging for forgiveness. “*Is there no place left for repentance, none for pardon left?*” (Book IV, Line 79-80)

As Satan contemplates repentance, he decides against it, as he is afraid of the shame that he might draw from his followers,

“My dread of shame Among the Spirits beneath,

Whom I seduced with other promises

Boasting I could subdue The Omnipotent”. (Line 83-86)

Since he has boasted that he can defeat God, Satan now shows fear and doubt as he realises that he really cannot fulfill his promises.

Milton reveals a different side to Satan. He depicts a character that shows remorse and shame, and, someone who fears disgrace. The common person can identify with these human characteristics; this allows the reader to evoke some amount of sympathy for Satan as they now see him in a helpless situation; fighting a losing battle for fear of disgracing his followers. This emphasizes Aristotle’s description of recognising *“...similar possibilities of error in our less and fallible selves.”*

In Oedipus the King, Oedipus is the tragic hero and fits Aristotle’s description almost exactly. Aristotle states that a character should reveal goodness in terms of moral judgment and choices that he makes. Oedipus has compassion for his subjects and seeks the truth to end their suffering, and, continuously strives to be a saviour to the people. When the priests of Thebes approach Oedipus, who is pleading on the behalf of his people who are suffering from famine and death, he agrees. He says that he will do what he can to solve the situation, *“bring everything to light”*.

Although Oedipus does have some admirable qualities, being the tragic hero, he too possesses hubris. Oedipus’s tragic flaw is that he is stubborn, impulsive, and pretentious. When Oedipus does a self evaluation his talents, beauty, and his own

achievements blind him. These traits are similar to Satan who also has hubris, a flaw that leads to his defeat.

Another reason for Oedipus' brutal demise is his lack of judgment and impulsive actions. These attributes are humanistic qualities that the reader can relate to, yet still question. When he leaves Corinth, he meets an entourage on the way to Thebes. There, the '*leader*' of the horse-drawn carriage orders him '*out of the way*'. Oedipus' impulsiveness drives him to kill everyone in the entourage; this leads to him being crowned King, where he ultimately suffers.

It can be argued that both Oedipus and Satan are tragic heroes according to Aristotle's definition. However, a question arises; were Oedipus and Satan acting on their own free will or were they destined to do so. According to Christian theology, it is said that God foresees everything that will happen in life. This leads many to speculate that Satan suffers, not because he chooses to, but because he is chosen to. This is another reason why the reader can empathize with Satan because God knows of his betrayal.

The same can be said for Oedipus, who has no free will; it is under the control of the Gods. When he is born, Apollo's oracle predicts that Oedipus will kill his father and marry his mother. This foretelling leads Oedipus' parents to abandon him on the mountain-side and leave him to die. However, fate intervenes and Oedipus soon finds himself adopted by the King and Queen of Corinth. When he finds out that the King and Queen are not his natural parents, Oedipus leaves Corinth, solves the Sphinx's riddle, and becomes the successor of King Laius as the King of Thebes. When the gods could '*no longer brok in silence the affront of Oedipus's unwitting sins*', they punish the city by sending plague and famine upon the city. When approached by the priests, Oedipus could

only promise them his help, which starts the chain of events, eventually leading him to discover his sins and his subsequent downfall. When Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx, he could not have known that he would end up marrying his own mother. When Oedipus meets King Laius, he is unaware as to who killed his father. Eventually, he sets out to find the truth, as the oracle prophesizes. He does the best he could as a ruler, son and husband but is still played out in the end. Therefore, Oedipus is seen as a tragic hero and is comparable to Satan who also has no freewill. The fate or God knew that the actions were going to occur and had the power to stop it.

Satan and Oedipus are tragic heroes according to Aristotle. They have characteristics that make them suite their role as a tragic hero. Aristotle said that tragic heroes should suffer a fall of fortune through a mistake of their own. Both Satan and Oedipus suffer this fate. Aristotle also states that a tragic hero will is led by hamartia which is hubris. "*Till pride and worse ambition threw me down*" (Milton) this line was spoken by Satan who openly admits that he is proud and ambitious. "Twit me with that wherein my greatness lies"

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*

Sophocles. *Oedipus The King*

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