

**Oedipus was a tragic hero.**

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## **Oedipus was a tragic hero.**

The play, "Oedipus the King", follows the story of the mythological king Oedipus, the king of Thebes who was cursed by prophecy to bed his mother and kill his father, which would in turn doom Thebes and his family. During the play, Oedipus shows very obvious examples of being a tragic hero and is regarded as one. As such, Oedipus shows various heroic traits, but makes mistakes throughout the play that end up causing his downfall, hence why he is a tragic hero as a result. In Greek literature, the trope of a tragic hero was always explored by playwrights like Sophocles, who created the character Oedipus, from Oedipus Rex. The character trope of a tragic hero was first outlined by Aristotle in Poetics: "A character of noble stature who falls due to a combination of fate and personal flaws. (Aristotle, 54)". The journey that Oedipus goes through, being rife with his own pride and fate itself playing a cruel joke on him, As such, this essay plans to explore the reason that he was a tragic hero.

### ***Birth***

The first reason, being his birth. One of the key points of a tragic hero, which is something that most of them have, is the fact that they were all of noble birth or of a high standing. Oedipus began his journey as being the adopted son of King Polybus and Queen Merope of Corinth.

Both of which are of royal blood. His actual parents, however, were King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes. He is unaware of this for a majority of his life. This leaves him as technically speaking, double noble. Not just in birthright, but in a metaphoric sense. He rises to the title of King of Thebes through intellect and bravery. He gained the crown not just through his title and nepotism, but through solving the riddle of the sphinx, saving Thebes in the process from the curse that had been pushed onto it. Thus, he is elevated by his Intelligence and leadership skills, which makes his downfall become much more tragic than it would have been, should Oedipus The King have been historically accurate. His position of power and the respect he held only deepened the grave, as his initial placement of being of nobility contrasted by his tragic fate. As stated by Aristotle in Poetics: "The change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity. (Aristotle 50)." His commitment to finding the cause of the plague showed his skill as an honorable leader. He held high concern for the health and well-being of his people, which is also another characteristic of a tragic hero. He was a noble leader with good intentions.

### ***Hubris***

Hubris, as defined by Dictionary, is "exaggerated pride of self-confidence." Sometimes, it is even the fatal flaw or "Hamartia" of a tragic hero. In this case, Oedipus, this is in fact his fatal flaw. Hubris in Greek tragedy's are usually manifested in the main character via the belief that

they can, in fact, defy the gods or defy fate itself. And in many cases, this is never a good idea, as Greek gods usually inflict cruel and inhumane punishments that give academy game roleplayers ideas. This usually leads to extremely poor decisions to be made that lead to their own downfall. An example of this with Oedipus and his confidence and pride, is when he used his intellect to solve the sphinx's riddle, blinds him to the fact that the prophecy that foretold his own fate would actually apply to him. As stated by Aristotle in Poetics, "The tragic hero's fall is often precipitated by their own flaws. (Aristotle, 53)." By thinking he could outsmart fate itself by fleeing Corinth, he ends up walking directly into the plan that fate had for him. During interaction with others, his hubris is on display at every given point. When questioned, he becomes angered quickly. An example of this is when during a confrontation with Tiresias, a prophet, who at first refused to tell the truth about the murder of Laius, is accused by Oedipus to be conspiring against him. He refuses to believe that he could even be the one responsible for the king's death. In Oedipus Rex, he particularly says "You scoundrel! You'd enrage a heart of stone. You'll never make me think you were blind to the murder" (Sophocles, 382). His pride even causes him to dismiss any who could pull him out of his blindness and make him see the truth, but sadly, all of it was planned out by fate. His own hubris prevents him from seeing his limits, which in turn, blinds him to the fact that he is dependent on outside forces beyond the scope of his own control. Which fits him into the classification of a tragic hero, and leads into my next point.

## ***Anagoris***

Anagoris, or recognition, is something crucial to the trope of a tragic hero's journey. It is the moment where the protagonist, the hero of the story, realizes that they are truly in too deep.

They realize the truth of their situation, and they are typically too far gone to avoid its consequences. This moment for Oedipus occurs when he figures out via putting the pieces together of his birth and murder of King Laius, that he has already been subjected to the prophecy of the Sphinx. His search for the truth was originally driven and orchestrated by a need and want to rid Thebes of its curse, and had him find a revelation in the process: He had already fulfilled the prophecy. Dodds states that, "Oedipus' relentless search for truth is not an ordinary quest but a tragic one, driven by a compulsion to discover the horror of his own identity (Dodds, 40)." He had already killed his mother, and he had already married his mother.

He had become the source of the suffering of Thebes as a consequence. This Anagoris, or recognition, can bring the downfall of a character to fruition, both literally and figuratively, not to mention narratively speaking. It becomes completed once he actually blinded himself as a symbolic act to punish himself and to atone for his sins. His physical blindness becomes somewhat ironic, given his inability to see the truth of his circumstances prior, and in fact becomes ironic due to being a hero that prior could see clearly and take a situation head on. As Knox states, "Oedipus' self-blinding is the ultimate irony of a hero who once saw everything so clearly, only to be blinded by the truth he sought. (Knox, 121)." Oedipus recognizing his own

sins doesn't give him any sort of redemption in the process, but instead greater suffering. His prior accomplishments and achievements are reduced to pure ash, as he becomes only a pitiable figure who self-exiles himself from Thebes.

### ***Free Will***

While his own hubris plays a hand in his fall, the concept of fate is something ever-present in the play. From beginning to end, he is doomed to fulfill the prophecy that is set forth onto him. Despite the intervention that his parents tried to do in order to prevent it from occurring, he still gets done-in by fate. The give and take between fate and free will is a theme that is common amongst Greek Tragedies. It also complicates the characterization of Oedipus as one in the trope of a tragic hero. Vernant states that, "In the tragedy of Oedipus, fate is a force that no human being, however noble or intelligent, can escape. (Vernant, 124)." The downfall of Oedipus is not solely just due to his own flaws, but due to things and forces beyond the scope of his own control. However, choices made via using his own free will did not help dampen the fall, but even made it worse. His refusal to heed warnings led him down to the grave. This way, Oedipus is the physical embodiment of the relationship between human agency and divine will. Being a victim of fate and an active participant in his own ultimate demise. As Segal states, "Oedipus' tragedy lies in the simultaneous affirmation and destruction of his will (Segal, 45)." The contrast and duality of it makes him compelling in the trope of a tragic hero, as it brings up questions about how much a person can shape their own destinies. His tragedy is not only in his actions, but in the anagnosis that he cannot escape fate.

### ***Conclusion***

The story of Oedipus serves as an example of the tragic hero trope. Especially in Greek literature. From his noble birth, to his tragic end, he shows all the traits of the classic Tragic Hero. His hubris, which led to the fatal flaw that ultimately leads to his demise, to him challenging fate overall. He dismisses a majority of the warnings given to him. But he overall dismissed them. During the play, Oedipus shows very obvious examples of being a tragic hero and is regarded as one. As such, Oedipus shows various heroic traits, but makes mistakes throughout the play that end up causing his downfall, hence why he is a tragic hero as a result. To conclude, a quote from Vernant. "Oedipus' tragedy illustrates not only the inevitability of fate but also the limits of human knowledge in the face of divine will. (Vernant, 131)."

## **Citations**

**Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by S.H. Butcher, Macmillan and Co., 1895.**

"The change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity" (Aristotle, 50).

"The tragic hero's fall is often precipitated by their own flaws" (Aristotle, 53).

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"You scoundrel! You'd enrage a heart of stone. You'll never make me think you were blind to the murder" (Sophocles, 382).

"I must pursue this trail to the end" (Sophocles, 379).

**Dodds, E.R. *On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex. Greece and Rome, vol. 13, no. 1, 1966, pp. 37-49.***

"Oedipus' relentless search for truth is not an ordinary quest but a tragic one, driven by a compulsion to discover the horror of his own identity" (Dodds, 40).

"Oedipus seeks to run from fate, but he runs straight into its jaws" (Dodds, 42).

**Knox, Bernard. *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time*. Yale University Press, 1998.**

"Oedipus' self-blinding is the ultimate irony of a hero who once saw everything so clearly, only to be blinded by the truth he sought" (Knox, 121).

"He uncovers the very truth he was running from, making his downfall inevitable" (Knox, 130).

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"In the tragedy of Oedipus, fate is a force that no human being, however noble or intelligent, can escape" (Vernant, 124).

"Oedipus' tragedy illustrates not only the inevitability of fate but also the limits of human knowledge in the face of divine will" (Vernant, 131).

**Segal, Charles. *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1999.**

"Oedipus' tragedy lies in the simultaneous affirmation and destruction of his will" (Segal, 45).

"The contrast between Oedipus' former power and his ultimate fall defines the nature of tragic irony" (Segal, 48).