

# Tragic Flaw

## Definition of Tragic Flaw

Tragic flaw is a literary device that can be defined as a trait in a [character](#) leading to his downfall, and the character is often the hero of the literary piece. This trait could be the lack of self-knowledge, lack of judgment, and often it is [hubris](#) (pride).

The Greek word for Tragic flaw is *hamaratia* or *hamartanein*, which means “to err.” It was Aristotle who introduced this term first in his book *Poetics*, and his idea was that it is an “error of judgment” on the part of a hero that brings his downfall. A tragic flaw is also called a “fatal flaw” in literature and films. This is taken as a defective trait in the character of the hero.

## Examples of Tragic Flaw in Literature

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### Example #1: *Oedipus Rex* (By Sophocles)

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OEDIPUS:

“Aye, and on thee in all humility  
I lay this charge: let her who lies within  
Receive such burial as thou shalt ordain...  
But for myself, O never let my Thebes...  
The burden of my presence while I live...  
God speed thee! and as meed for bringing them  
May Providence deal with thee kindlier  
Than it has dealt with me ...  
His will was set forth fully — to destroy  
The parricide, the scoundrel; and I am he...  
But I am the gods’ abhorrence.”

Tragic flaw examples are found in tragedies – and *Oedipus Rex* is the major play that is set as a yardstick.

Oedipus is a perfect example of having a tragic flaw in this famous Greek [tragedy](#). The cause of his downfall was his inadvertent wrongdoings. The hubris of Oedipus is the cause which made him disobey the prophecy of the gods. Ironically, he ended up doing what he was scared of the most, such that he became an abhorrence to the gods, in his own words.

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### **Example #2: *Hamlet* (By William Shakespeare)**

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**HAMLET:**

“To be, or not to be—that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep...  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep...”

In *Hamlet*, the tragic flaw determines his downfall in the play. And his tragic flaw is his indecisiveness, which is due to grave thinking on the topic of whether vengeance is wrong or right, and whether to kill his father's murderer or not. In the course of time, his relationship with his mother is spoiled, and Ophelia commits suicide. He reveals this indecisiveness in this excerpt.

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### **Example #3: *Dr. Faustus* (By Christopher Marlowe)**

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**Faustus:**

“But Faustus' offense can ne'er be pardoned;  
The serpent that tempted Eve may be saved,  
But not Faustus ... God forbade it indeed but Faustus hath done it.

For

the vain pleasure of four and twenty years hath Faustus  
lost eternal joy and felicity ... Fair nature's eye, rise, rise again  
and make  
Perpetual day. Or let this hour be but a year,  
A month, a week, a natural day,  
That Faustus may repent and save his soul  
O mercy, heaven! Look not so fierce on me ... I'll burn my books."

The character of Dr. Faustus is also one of the best examples of tragic flaw. The tragic flaw of Dr. Faustus is his ambitious nature to learn. He made a contract with Lucifer and sold his soul in this connection. Finally, his soul is taken to hell, and then he realizes his sin and repents but it was too late.

### **Function of Tragic Flaw**

Tragic flaw is used for [moral](#) purposes, in order to encourage the [audience](#) to improve their characters and remove the flaws which could bring their downfall in life. The readers and the audience can identify themselves with the [tragic hero](#), since it imparts feelings of pity and fear among them, thereby completing their [catharsis](#) – or in other words, they are purged of bad emotions. Therefore, they can learn a moral lesson so that they might not indulge in similar actions in future.