

# Nemesis

## Nemesis Definition

Nemesis is a literary device that refers to a situation of [poetic justice](#), where the good characters are rewarded for their virtues, and the evil characters are punished for their vices.

The term nemesis comes from Nemesis – the goddess of revenge in Greek mythology – and divine retribution sought against the people guilty of [hubris](#). In a general sense, nemesis refers to an indomitable rival, or an inescapable situation that causes misery and death. For instance, you may have encountered your nemesis at school – a boy who is no more capable than you are, but who somehow always finishes ahead of you in school examinations, making you feel frustrated.

## Examples of Nemesis in Literature

We find a number of examples of nemesis in both ancient and modern literature. Let us analyze a few:

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

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In a famous Greek [tragedy](#) *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles, the nemesis of King Oedipus is his hubris or excessive pride. He is so proud that he does not even shrink from defying prophecies of the gods. We see that the king ends up doing what he fears and tries to avoid.

The Oracle of Delphi tells him that he will kill his father and marry his mother. In his attempt to defy the gods' prophecy, he leaves Corinth, and travels towards Thebes. On his way, he kills an old man in a quarrel. He later marries the queen of Thebes as he ascends the throne, after delivering the city from a deadly sphinx.

One can argue that Oedipus commits all of these sins in complete ignorance, yet he deserves retribution because he becomes so swollen with pride that he does not even shy from attempting to revolt against his fate. Thus, his nemesis is his arrogance.

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### **Example #2: *Doctor Faustus* (By Christopher Marlowe)**

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In Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Faustus' nemesis was his pride in his scholarship, and his overambitious nature. Overcome by his irresistible desire, he sells his soul to Lucifer, by signing a contract with his blood. He defies Christianity by learning the art of black magic, consequently paying for his arrogance and his pride. As the time mentioned in the contract with the devil exhausts, the devil takes his soul to Hell, where he suffers eternal damnation.

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### **Example #3: *Hamlet* (By William Shakespeare)**

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We find two nemesis examples in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: Hamlet, and Hamlet's indecisiveness. Hamlet acts as a nemesis for Claudius, who kills Hamlet's father and marries his mother. Claudius' devilishness calls for immediate retribution. The ghost of Hamlet's dead father appears to him, and convinces him to exact revenge. He finds Claudius as the real murderer, and after much indecisive thinking kills him.

In the same play, Hamlet's nemesis is his indecisiveness. He is unable to make up his mind about the [dilemma](#) he confronts. He discloses his state of mind in the following lines in Act 3, Scene 1 of the play:

“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...”

He wants to take vengeance on his father's murderer, Claudius. but destroys his own life by postponing the act as he looks for [evidence](#) to validate his action. In the process, however, he spoils his relationship with

his mother, and sends Ophelia into such a state of depression that she commits suicide.

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#### **Example #4: *Frankenstein* (By Mary Shelley)**

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In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the [protagonist](#) Victor exhibits hubris in his venture to become an unrivaled scientist. After years of experiments, he triumphs in creating a "monster," which he calls "Frankenstein."

Ironically, the thing which he considers his supreme invention proves his nemesis. Frankenstein ultimately becomes the source of Victor's disaster, punishing him justly for his over-ambition.

#### **Function of Nemesis**

The main function of nemesis in a literary work is to establish grounds for poetic justice. Nemesis acts as a source of punishment for hubristic and wicked characters on universal [moral](#) grounds. Wicked and evil individuals should be penalized for their evilness.

Besides, it imparts a moral lesson to the readers to develop and refine the characters, in order to ensure they remove certain flaws which can prove to be their nemesis in time to come.