Tragic Heroes Essay, Research Paper

The Tragic Hero In literature, there are many different styles that can be used to convey a story to the reader. One of these styles is Tragedy. When an author writes a tragedy, he has to make the readers feelings sympathetic to the ideas or plot that he is putting forth. S. H Butcher correctly points out that “Tragedy, according to definition, acts on the feelings, not on the will”(269). Because this is so the author must play on the readers feelings in order to create a well crafted tragedy that will been seen as a great literary work. The author of a tragedy must create the feelings of pity and fear. This is to make the reader feel the impact of the tragedy that occurs in the story. The author creates pity so that the reader will start to open up their feelings to the subject at hand. Aristotle defines pity as: The kind of pain we feel at the sight of a fatal or painful evil which happens to one who does not deserve it, an evil which we might expect to befall ourselves or one of those close to us . Clearly, to feel pity a person must think that he himself, or someone belonging to him, is liable to suffer..(Aristotle xxiii) So this is the feeling the author must make the audience experience when writing a tragedy. Fear is the other component of composing a good tragedy. The reader needs to experience fear coupled with pity in order to get the complete affect of the drama that is presented to them. As Butcher explains, pity transforms into fear when the object is so closely related to the reader that the suffering seems to be the suffering of the reader himself (256). This simply means the when someone reads a tragedy that person must feel that suffering is his also. Therefore, in general, the author must make the reader feel pity or sympathy for the people in the tragedy and they must also feel the situation is their dilemma also. There are a couple of ways that the author can accomplish the fulfillment of these needs, but the one that will be discussed is the tragic hero. A tragic hero is a prominent character in the story that possesses certain qualities that cause the character to have a tremendous fall in the story. Aristotle feels that a character in a tragedy has to have a number of required personal attributes in order to be considered as a tragic hero. First, the character must be of high social status like a king, prince, or some other high ranking figure in the story. Secondly, the character must not be ” outstanding in righteousness, or in wickedness and vice (269). To put in simple terms the character must not be perfect nor should they be evil. Next, the character should posses some great hamartia, through which he should fall by (269). A hamartia is either a moral weakness or a mistake in judgement. Lastly, Aristotle feels that the ending of the tragedy cannot be a happy it must be one that fills the reader with “the thrill of fear or tragic awe” (Butcher 311). Aristotle is correct in his definition of a tragic hero. The observations that he has made about the personal traits that are needed to be a tragic hero are completely accurate and each of these qualities has a purpose in being part of the characters personality. By making the character a person that has a prominent position in society the repercussions of the characters hamartia is felt by more than just the character himself, but also many other people in the play. This function also causes the reader to begin to think about how important this character is and if it can happen to a person of high status then it could happen to someone like me. The next trait is that the character should not be perfect, nor should he be evil. This is important because it connects the reader to the character in the sense that even though the character is high in social status the character is still just a regular person like them. Moving on, the character must have in his personality some great hamartia. It is my considered opinion that a hamartia is more of an error of judgement, rather than a moral weakness. So that when a tragic hero is given his fate it is rather a result of something that he has decided earlier in story and not some type of punishment that is being handed out in consequence to a moral weakness. The last thing that must be completed by the author to have created a tragic hero is the tragic ending. In the end of a tragic drama, the tragic hero must suffer some tragic event at the hand of his hamartia. This is true because if the character holds true to the definition of a tragic hero he will not produce the feeling that the character is a martyr, who is mourned and seen by the people adoringly, but will rather fill the reader with a feeling of fear and tragic awe (Butcher 311). These are the qualities that must be possessed by a character in order to be referred to as a tragic hero. There are many examples of characters that could be classified as a tragic hero. There are two characters in particular that have been examined and discussed. The names of these to characters are Oedipus from Sophocles’s Oedipus Rex and Othello from Shakespeare’s Othello. Both of these characters are excellent specimens of what a tragic is and what they should be. Both of the characters had a prominent position within the place that they lived and the people all loved both Othello and Oedipus. The positions that were held were not the same exact things though, but none the less these men both had very high offices in the government and were in great standing with the people of the society. The status in society in both Oedipus and Othello was high, but was the product of totally different actions. The people that are associated with Oedipus hold him in high regard and the respect that they have for him is immense. The people also feel that they owe him a debt that they cannot pay because as the priest comments to Oedipus, “You saved us from the Sphinx, that flinty singer, and the tribute We paid to her so long;” (Abcarian and Klotz 167). This act by Oedipus caused the people to try to repay the debt by making him the king. The people of Venice similarly feel that they owe Othello a debt of gratitude because what he has done for the city in times of war and for this they made Othello the leading general of their city-state. So there are two main differences between the status of Oedipus and the status of Othello. First, Oedipus is the king of his country or the ruler of it. Whereas, Othello was the head general in the army, this made him a servant of the government rather than the head of one. The other difference between the two is that Oedipus used his mind to get where he ended up and Othello used his body/physical strength to get the position that he held.

The hamartia that is possessed by each of these men was only similar in the respect that both of the hamartia were decisions. These errors in judgement are both decisions that Oedipus and Othello make and these judgement errors are the source of all of the problems that would proceed to follow after the decision is made. Oedipus decided, when he recovered from being thrown away as a child, to come to the city and on the way he ends up getting in a fight with these men inside a chariot. He ends up killing these men. This is the cause of everything that would come to follow in the story. Because of this act, he ends up getting married to his own mother. This decision also causes him to have illegitimate children with his mother. The decision caused Oedipus to kill his own father, who was one of the men on the road. Finally, the decision causes him to eventually go crazy and maim himself when he finds out what he has done. All of these things happened to Oedipus because of a decision that he made before the story started and it is mentioned throughout the story. Othello made a different choice. His choice was made during the story and it led to some tragic endings. Othello chose to only listen to Iago on the subject of Cassio, his lieutenant, and desdemona, his wife, being active in extra-marital courtship. This choice caused Othello to kill his wife, a plot to kill Cassio, Cassio being maimed, Emilia, Iago’s wife, to die, and Othello to kill himself. These consequences all came about because Othello did not confront his wife and Cassio, but rather he believed everything that he was told by Iago. Both of these situations could have been avoided if only the Oedipus had not decided to kill the men that passed on the road while he was on his way to the city. Othello could have also avoided his fate if he had chosen to think reasonably and go to his wife and his lieutenant and confront them with what he had supposed to be true.The character of both Oedipus and Othello had severe flaws in them to make them, as Aristotle said, ” in between the other two: a man who is not outstanding in righteousness, or in wicked ness and vice (Aristotle 24). These flaws in their character cause the reader to be able to identify with them. The two characters share no similarity in their character traits and their flaws are just as different. Oedipus has the problem of being to arrogant and he feels that he is totally responsible for when he is now and no one else helped him attain the position that his is in. This trait can be seen in the quote from Oedipus himself in the opening act when the peasants are outside with a problem. Oedipus says:My children, generations of the living in the line of Kadmos, nursed at his ancient hearth: Why have you strewn yourselves before these altars In supplication, with your boughs and garlands? The breaths of incense rises from the city With a sound of prayer and lamentation. Children, I would not have you speak through messengers, And therefore I have come myself to hear you- I, Oedipus, who bear the famous name (Abcarian and Klotz 166-67). The repetition of the word I and myself show his arrogance, but he also claims to be a descendent to the founder of Thebes, Kadmos. He calling his own name famous also shows this flaw. Othello on the other hand suffers from insecurity. Othello is not from Venice and is not comfortable with this. He is surprised when Iago tells him that the wives of Venice often cheat on their husbands and just keep quite (Abcarian and Klotz 1086). He is also insecure because he is a warrior and not a lover he even states ” little of this great world can speak, more than pertains to feats of broil and battle” (Abcarian and Klotz 1086). This proves that he even admits to not knowing little more than war, which is why he is insecure. The last reason that Othello is not secure with himself is because not only is he an outsider, a warrior, but he is also black. These combined facts make Othello insecure and open to severe jealously. The combination of the natural flaws that both Oedipus and Othello possessed and the hamartia that was made by these men caused and chain of effects with tragic outcomes. These outcomes can be seen as the fault of the character himself or they can be blamed on fate and that these conclusions were some sort of judgement for a moral weakness possessed by the tragic hero. Because of the belief that the hamartia is an error in judgement, that I prefer to believe, the outcome is almost entirely the fault of the tragic character. Oedipus has a twisted end to his story. Because he kills some people Oedipus ends up becoming king of Thebes, marrying his own mother, having children with her, killing his father (as he finds out), and going crazy and poking out his eyes out by himself with the pins of his mother who committed suicide because of all of this. This set of circumstances would not have come about if Oedipus had not killed the men on the road on his way to Thebes. This outcome was some divine decree for his punishment, but rather a situation that he created because he made an error in judgement or mistake. Othello also made a horrible mistake in judgement when he let his insecurity take over his mind. Instead he let the flaws and insecurities that he had ruin the lives of everyone around him. The choice that he made caused Cassio to be maimed, him to commit murder, his wife to die, his death, and the death of Iago’s wife. All of this pain and death was caused by the decision that Othello made. His choice was to listen to Iago’s vengeful advice instead of confronting Desdemona and his lieutenant, Cassio, about having an affair. So again more tragic affairs happen because of a poor choice in decision making by a tragic character. The fate that he suffered was totally Othello’s own fault because of an error in his choice. In conclusion, Othello and Oedipus are perfect examples of tragic characters because they have every quality that is required to be one. They were of high social status, they were not entirely perfect, nor were they totally evil, they had a hamartia that caused their fate, and both of the endings were not happy ones. These are the qualities that are held by tragic hero’s and the hamartia is not a moral weakness it is an error in judgement by the character, which is clearly shown in both of these men’s tragic outcomes.

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