Tragic Heroes In Sophocles Essay, Research Paper

Heroic characters have been portrayed in many ways in literature. The hero character has been shown to be both infallible and imperfect, both strong and weak, and both superhuman and ordinary. Consequently, this central figure has evolved over time to become a very complex character. In his Theban plays, Sophocles presents to the reader typical Greek hero figures: strong and resilient, morally virtuous, but with some flaw that ultimately causes their respective demises. In both Antigone and Oedipus the King, it is the title character that serves as this hero; Sophocles presents both characters as having this single underlying cause of their demise. Both Antigone and Oedipus are tragic heroes.

Sophocles portrays Antigone as a virtuous young woman, one whose piety and loyalty are among her strongest traits. Unfortunately for her, these are also the traits that cause her demise; when she is forced to choose between the laws of the city and what she believes is religiously right, she makes a martyr of herself. Even when faced by Creon the king, Antigone not only does not deny that she has defied his decree, she refuses to express regret for her actions, or even beg for the mercy of the king. In fact, she spends much of what remains of her short life insisting that Creon is an unjust and impious ruler. It would seem, then, that the heroic character here is being represented as stoic and uncompromising in her beliefs; she is an intensely moral character, willing to die for her beliefs.

Oedipus, from Sophocles Oedipus the King, seems a noticeably more flawed character. He is a very intelligent ruler, making his decisions mainly based on logic and messages from his seer Tiresias. He is also a very proud and stubborn man, which of course ultimately turns out to be his downfall. He is in almost every sense the typical king, believing in his own sovereignty to the point where the belief covers much else. When, as the oracle instructs, he is looking for the murderer of Laius, he discovers the possibility that he is involved somehow. At this point, his personal goals take over from the good of the city as his main concern. In the end, it is his insistence that Tiresias reveal to him what Tiresias does not wish to that causes Oedipus actions. One gets the sense, however, that it was personal pride that causes Oedipus to badger Tiresias into revealing said information. Once again, then, Sophocles portrays the hero character as one that is worthy of his hero status, and yet possesses within him the very trait that brings him down.

In Sophocles Antigone and Oedipus the King, the heroic character is seemingly painted as being strong and of moral value; both Oedipus and Antigone exhibit the characteristics that make heroes considered to be such. In both, however, exists some trait that contradicts those hero characteristics, and ultimately causes the demise of each of them. For Antigone, her piety and loyalty were both her strengths and her achilles heel, so to speak; for Oedipus, his logic and reason worked for him, but his pride and stubbornness did not. It is because they each contain within themselves the reason for their own demise that they are tragic heroes.

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