

Corinne Bass

Mr. Schoenborn

AP Literature

20 November 2016

## Tragedy:

### It's Many Faces

Google doesn't accurately summarize the meaning of tragedy, "an event causing great suffering" (google) doesn't encompass the journey a tragedy takes a character on, reaffirming the strength of man. Some of the earliest interpretations came from Greek philosophy. Aristotle created the fetal ideas of tragedy that have sculpted how it has been used and applied for many years. Aristotle felt that "tragedy is characterised by seriousness and involves a great person who experiences a reversal of fortune" (Wiki). Which was often depicted by the Romans and the Greeks in plays. He relied heavily on emotions, "the best tragedy should not be simple but complex and one that represents incidents arousing fear and pity" (Wiki) which explains why Sophocles plays were labeled "tragedies."

Sophocles wrote plays with unusual circumstances, plays entailing men and women who

battle with something inwardly, that affects them outwardly in a

negative way, and they have to fix it. This is relatable to

Aristotle's definition of tragedy as, "a change from ignorance to

awareness of a bond of love or hate" (Wiki) is typically resulting

from this form of tragedy. Though not agreeing to everything



Aristotle said about tragedy, Joseph Krutch does promote the idea that “the great ages tragedy is not an expression of despair but the means by which they saved themselves from it” (Krutch 3), so to associate tragedy with something gloomy and depressing would be misunderstanding what it’s truly about, “the elation which its celebration of human greatness” (Krutch 2). Though Krutch is considered to have a more modern interpretation of tragedy, you can still apply his statements to ancient plays. *Antigone*, despite her unethical death, died for her brother. She defied the law and accepted the consequences as they were and went down with pride because she knew she was doing what was right. Even though she died, her actions changed the law and Creon.

Arthur Miller wrote “tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself justly” (Miller 2), which he connected to the idea that “we are often held to be below tragedy” (Miller 2) which is exemplified by the many plays and stories involving kings and royalty. He is saying that common people feel that they cannot be affected by tragedy because of a hierarchy. He follows this with his belief that “the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were” (Miller 1). He explains his reasoning behind this, that although the common man cannot relate to these situational issues that the kings and royalty experience, they can comprehend and apply to their emotional situations. Another thought he had was that the lack of tragedies in today’s world stem from modern psychiatry, the idea that the struggle is in our mind therefore we are incapable of heroically defeating it. Similar to Krutch and Aristotle, Miller is against the “idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism” (Miller 3). Instead, he argues, it is moreso about optimism and overcoming whatever problem a person may be facing.

Success is related to tragedy as well. In a “Ted Talks” the discussion being held relates tragedy to our desires. The speaker presents us with the idea that our goals and achievements are based on what society says is commendable. For example, there may be a student who was accepted into Harvard Law school, everyone in their family is thrilled because this is a respectable and society approving goal. The person is going to an Ivy League, and will most likely be very wealthy afterwards, however the person's true desires may be to become an artist. Most of society feels that there is no money in making artwork, so they don't accept it. It does not result in large paychecks and a luxurious life, so the person might never get to fulfill their dreams because of everyone else's standards. This along with the idea that if you fail you are a failure are tragic. Meritocracy, as Alain de Botton said, can tear people apart as it classifies those who succeed, successful and those who fail, failures. There are many factors one must take into account as the playing field is not leveled. It is a tragedy that some people will see these standards and be discouraged to chase their dreams in fear of failure and judgment. This is another tragedy that the common man can relate to, success and reaching it.

Before reading the many pieces about tragedy and understanding the ancient plays, I, like google, saw tragedy as a sad event. I didn't see the potential it had to be something much more. I focused on the physical aspect of what happens, like death, as opposed to what rose because of the death. I find that tragedy is something that has to be observed



in order to evaluate oneself. Our examples of tragic occurrences are based off of tragedies others have experienced and we measure our situations to theirs in order to determine if what we are going through is in fact a tragedy. Usually they are measured against those of elevated places in society, like celebrities. I don't think a tragedy has to result in a positive outcome. When de Botton talked about how success and failure relate to tragedy I found that the cycle of shaming people for doing what they love if it doesn't meet certain standards will never end. A plethora of people will be affected by this, and because of their decision to not follow their heart, their talent and gifts may never touch the world they were supposed to become a part of. This situation is tragic to me, and it's more of an inner battle one would have to fight. Constantly thinking if they should conform to societal norms or break away from the process. I feel that everyone experiences tragedy, that it is not above anyone. This idea only came about because of it's association with plays and the involvement of kings. Which were a relevant thing in ancient times, unfortunately the idea is still accepted and preached by many. I say that there is light at the end of the road for anyone involved in a tragedy. Though it may seem like it's too far off in the distance to ever reach, with strength and determination you will.

It seems as though nearly everything is tied into tragedy somehow, and the law is not an exception. Whichever law is being used, it can result in good and bad. In *Antigone*, she understands that there are laws created by man and she chooses to "appeal to a higher law" (Stange 1). She steps outside of what is accepted by man and follows the rules created by a higher being, which is not something that usually happens. In other instances like Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and excerpt from *The Trial, Before the Law*, the characters fail to go beyond the man made rules. The man in *Before the Law* is told he can't enter into the law, so he spends his entire

life waiting for the moment that the guard will let him in. He's done nothing to try and enter into the law, and because of this he misses his chance. K. in *The Trial* is accused of committing a crime that no one will tell him about. His entire life after this point is shadowed by the "higher" law and although he does try harder than the man in *Before the Law*, he is killed in the end without any explanation. These higher powers controlled the situations and in Antigone's case it was for the better, albeit her fate was death she knew it was justified, so K. let the higher power cloud over his life. Though impacted differently by it, a higher power still played a role in their lives, they were both killed and both tragedies.

Tragedy reveals the power and ability of man. The strength it takes to overcome the "tragic flaw" that gets someone into a bad situation. It promotes emotions and can often create emotions that maybe someone hasn't felt before. This could stick with the person throughout their lives. It reveals pain and anguish that can come from relations to tragedy or simply observing tragedies, like ancient Greek plays. In this case the person feels these emotions for the person experiencing that tragedy and not within themselves because they relate to the other's feelings, not their situation. Tragedy divulges man's true potential to liberate himself from his tragic situation.

Tragedy reveals the power of man by testing him. One can never know their full potential unless they are forced to strive their hardest. In *Romeo and Juliet* both of the characters recognize that they are forbidden to be together because of their families hatred for each other. This is the test, if they were to just accept their parents wishes and moved on, this wouldn't be a tragedy and they would have accomplished nothing. Instead they decided to go past their parents and be together, and the only way that could happen, was in death. Their suicides made them

heroes and revealed that in order to achieve man's highest of capabilities, one has to first endure their tragic flaw, what arises because of it and be willing to fight to overcome it. I feel that this revelation is important because once people are made aware of it, they then know they have to fight it. Knowing, through plays or personal experiences, the ability of man is important. It helps us identify true nobility and differentiate tragedies from sad stories. It's inspiring to read about Antigone laying down her life to honor her brother's life. It should make anyone who is aware of it, want to reach their peak. If everyone in the world discovered how capable they are, nothing could stand in our way.

Character, plot and textual features are crucial in developing a tragedy. In both *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, Oedipus and Creon recognize their place in society. Oedipus reminds his citizens that he defeated the sphinx so there is nothing that he can't do, he assures them he will find Laius's killer. Creon is ruling in place of Oedipus, and makes sure that everyone follows the laws made by man. Oedipus wanted to know who his parents were, and he wouldn't let it go. It is this reason that he finds out the terrible thing he has done. Curiosity killed Oedipus. It was crucial that Oedipus had this curious trait, otherwise the plot wouldn't have made sense. The only way for the curse in Thebes to be lifted was to find Laius's killer and so when Teiresias finally gives in to his pleading, he is shocked to find out that he is the one who killed Laius, his father and he has slept with Laius's wife, his mother. Without the curiosity, the plot of the play wouldn't be the same. Similarly, if Creon hadn't abided by the rules to the extreme that he did, the plot would lose substance and it's tragic elements. Antigone wouldn't have had to die for her brother, Creon wouldn't have changed his uptight ways, because he wouldn't have had them. These characteristics benefit the plot, while text features in both of the plays included asterisks

by many words and sentences, which helped the reader to understand something they might now have been able to pick up on their own. It gives the dialogue more depth.

Knowing these things about characters and plots in the play reaffirms the idea of a “tragic flaw.” Oedipus’s tragic flaw was his curiosity, that’s what sent him spiraling. Creon’s flaw was his devotion to the laws of man. They blinded him from the laws of the higher powers that Antigone served. It also feeds my idea that everything happens for a reason and that we all have tragic flaws. If we didn’t and we would all just have sad moments, no one would experience tragedies and grow which Miller disagrees on. He feels that most common people are passive when identifying their flaws, that “only those who accept their lot without active retaliation are flawless” (Miller 1). I disagree, everyone has flaws and in order for them to be fulfilled and completed in a circle with a happy ending, the person has to liberate themselves from the flaw.

Tragedy involves many different elements depending on who is defining it. Without the ancient plays we wouldn’t be able to look for different standards of tragedy. Society has shaped the idea of tragedy as something sad and depressing, but if you do your research, you’ll find that although it involves depressing situations, the outcome is always a revelation.

[Rubric](#)

## Works Cited

- "Antigone." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2016.
- Kafka, Franz. "AP\_Sophocles\_Kafka\_Before the Law." *Google Docs*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2016.
- Krutch, Joseph. "AP\_Sophocles\_Tragic Fallacy\_Krutch.docx." *Google Docs*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2016.
- Middle, Arthur. "AP\_Sophocles\_Tragedy and Common Man (Miller).pdf." *Google Docs*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2016.
- "Oedipus." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2016.
- "Tragedy." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2016.
- Shields, Christopher. "Aristotle." *Stanford University*. Stanford University, 25 Sept. 2008. Web. 25 Nov. 2016.
- Sophocles. "Oedipus the King." *Oedipus the King Sophocles (430 BC)*: n. pag. *Abd.kafkas.edu.tr*. Web. 25 Nov. 2016.
- Sophocles. "Sophocles, Antigone (e-text)." *Sophocles, Antigone (e-text)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2016.
- "Sophocles." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2016.
- Stange, Mary. "AP\_Sophocles\_Antigone\_Burial at Thebes Review." *Google Docs*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2016.



