

Oedipus the King, Part I, by Sophocles

Literary Analysis: Tragic Hero and Tragic Flaw

In a dramatic tragedy such as *Oedipus the King*, the main character is called the **tragic hero**, and he is generally defined by a tragic flaw that leads to his downfall. Our fundamental understanding of tragedy and tragic characters comes from the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who considered *Oedipus* the exemplary presentation of a tragically flawed hero. Aristotle's tragic hero is always male and neither completely bad nor completely good. The **tragic flaw** is a character trait that in all other circumstances is admirable.

Aristotle suggests that the tragic hero meets with misfortune not through his own wickedness—not through a moral failing—but because of some “mistake.” The mistake results from the very traits that ordinarily define the hero’s success. Oedipus, for example, pursues the secret of his identity as he tries to discover who killed Laius and thus save his city. In the course of his dogged pursuit of this noble goal, he exercises ordinarily admirable traits. Oedipus does what he has always done. Oedipus is acting like Oedipus. The mistake, or tragic flaw, is that this time these traits lead to tragic revelations and a tragic end.

DIRECTIONS: Complete the chart by writing in the first column five character traits that define Oedipus. In the second column, give an example or a quotation that illustrates each trait. In the third column, explain how that trait becomes part of the tragic flaw that leads to Oedipus’ downfall.

Admirable Character Traits of Oedipus	Example of Trait	Explanation of How Trait Turns Tragic
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		