

---

**A Comparative Analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Philoctetes*  
in the light of Aristotelian Principles of Tragedy**

---

**Asra Afrin<sup>1</sup>**, Research Scholar, Dept. of English, VSKUB.  
**Prof. Robert Jose<sup>2</sup>**, Dept. of English, VSKUB.

---

Paper Received on 10-12-2024, Accepted on 08-01-2025  
Published on 10-01-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.1.78

---

**Abstract:**

The article analyzes the tragedies of Sophocles, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus Tyrannous* in the light of Aristotle's doctrine of tragedy. *Oedipus Tyrannous* is put forth by Aristotle as an example of the best tragedy with a complex plot. My attempt is to compare the structure and techniques of these two tragedies written by the same playwright/poet. The paper highlights the difference in the plot. It attempts to find the purgation of pity and fear in these two tragedies. Considering Aristotle's statement that the aim of a tragedy is to purge pity and fear, the article examines the techniques (suggested by Aristotle) used in both the tragedies and their intended effect.

**Keywords:** Anagnorisis, Peripeteia, Hamartia, Pity and Fear.

**Introduction:**

Aristotle, in his book *Poetics*, defines tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude; in a language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (*poetics*). As per his definition, tragedy aims at purifying emotions or purging pity and fear. "The primary aspect of Greek tragedy is the emotional effect it has on the audience through formal and affective conventions, as Aristotle postulated. Since the primary emotions transferred in a Greek tragedy are fear and pity, the protagonist should invoke these emotions by his reactions to his environment and setting both in act and word" (Judkins 55).

The techniques used in a complex plot are peripeteia, anagnorisis, and hamartia. Aristotle says, "The most important devices by which tragedy sways emotion are parts of the plot, i.e., reversals and recognitions" (Heath 12). Peripeteia is translated as reversal and anagnorisis as recognition. Judkins, in his article, highlights Aristotle's idea of hamartia in a tragedy, "the plot must have the protagonist falling in action not due to evil, but to hamartia. Hamartia is either a definite action or failure to

---

act” where the fortunes of the hero of a tragedy are reversed” (55). Hamartia is translated as error, mistake, and flaw. However Judkins states “hamartia is an archery term defined as “to miss a mark” (“ἀμαρτάνω”). But I stress that hamartia is an action taken without complete awareness of the consequences (55-56).

The error or hamartia, however, is not wickedness in the character. Hamartia is of two types. One was committed in ignorance, and the other was done due to external force. Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannous* has a complex plot containing peripeteia, hamartia, and recognition. Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother without knowing the truth (of his relationship with them). He does so not because of the external force but in ignorance. Dodd argues, "Had they [Oedipus and Thyestes] acted knowingly, they would have been inhuman monsters, and we could not have felt for them that pity which tragedy ought to produce. As it is, we feel both pity, for the fragile estate of man, and terror, for a world whose laws we do not understand” (20). The intended effect of tragedy is that pity and fear are produced when things are done in ignorance.

Besides, the hamartia in *OT*, as some scholars believe, is Oedipus' pride. Cabrera argues, "Hubris, defined as 'exaggerated pride or self-confidence often resulting in retribution' (Lewis, 2011, p. 2), is the earmark character trait of King Oedipus of Thebes . . ." (04). According to chorus and seer Tiresias, killing King Laius is the hamartia of Oedipus. J.M. Bremer in *Hamartia: Tragic Error in Aristotle's Poetics and Greek Tragedy* insists “it would have been easy for the poet to add a line or two and make Oedipus the aggressor as Euripides did in his *Phoen* [*Phoenician Women*]. But Sophocles prefers to show Oedipus, who is being attacked on a lonely mountain path, defending himself against an unprovoked assault. For such a homicide committed in self-defense, Athenian justice would have pronounced him innocent” (156). Oedipus blinds himself after knowing that Jocasta is his mother. “Morally innocent though he is and knows himself to be, the objective horror of his action remains with him, and he feels he has no longer any place in society” (qtd. in Bremer 157).

Some believe Oedipus' search for the murderer is an error. As per J.M. Bremer, searching for the slayer of the king cannot be morally wrong (160). He believes Oedipus' responsibility as a ruler urged him to initiate the inquiry. He says, "his energy and probing intelligence did not allow him to give up the search until he had discovered all" (160). Cabrera says, "he did not listen to advice. He rejected logical reasoning and followed his impulses and passionate sense of justice. He was driven to unearth the murder and solve the plague. He was self-confident and proud in solving these two problems before the whole city of Thebes, in the presence of his people" (Cabrera 11).

Bremer, further, draws our attention to D.W Lucas mention of hamartia: “Oedipus was famous for his cleverness, yet his cleverness serves only to enmesh

---

him in a net of illusion. He starts from no faults of his own, from a false premise; he does not know who he is, that is his hamartia" ("Hamartia" 160). Jamie Cabrera believes, Oedipus decision to gouge out his eyes and to exile himself from Thebes are hamartia (12).

In contrast to this, J. M. Bremer (and Waldock) believe "the play is not about the faults of Oedipus. It may be conceded that he has his failings, but these are merely incidental to the pattern" (158). Judkins concludes, "The Greeks were not primarily concerned with the specific morality of the tragic protagonist at all, especially because he "is one who is not preeminent in virtue and justice, and one who falls into affliction, not because of evil and wickedness [ . . .]" (Judkins 56). Furthermore, he believes that tragedy's effect on pity and fear is a matter of concern. The virtue or vice in the protagonist's character was not a matter of concern. The spectacle of tragedy that connects the audience with the play or character is the most significant part of the tragedy. However, Aristotle says, "Character is what makes us ascribe certain moral qualities to the agents" (Bywaters 12). The moral quality is ascribed to the agents by their thoughts and actions.

For Aristotle, a discovery is "a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, in the personages marked for good or evil fortune. The finest form of Discovery is one attended by Peripeties . . ." (Heath 16). The reversal in position is connected with anagnorisis. The recognition or discovery is the unfolding of truth or some fact in a tragedy. Aristotle presents six ways in which recognition is made. The play *Oedipus Tyrannous* has anagnorisis that results in a change of position. The revealing of truth also displays the errors made by the protagonists, either in ignorance or knowingly due to the circumstances that compel them to do so. Oedipus, at the beginning of the play, is a nobleman who is respected in society. Who, with his intelligence, solves the riddle of the sphinx. At the end of the play, he is not wicked but a person who is ruined completely, whose destruction arouses pity and fear among the viewers or readers.

Some researchers believe Jocasta was not unaware of the truth and the real identity of Oedipus. Writers also highlight the norm of Athens/Greece wherein a son married his mother after the death of his father. This norm is also referenced in the play *Trachinae* by Sophocles. Hercules, while dying, tells his son to marry Iole as no other man can marry her except Hyllus. If marrying a mother after the death of their father was the norm, Oedipus wouldn't feel shameful and would not blind himself to marrying Jocasta. However, the play, through its chorus, presents the killing of the king (Laius) as a mistake that made the gods angry.

The unfolding brings a reversal in the position of the protagonist. The reversal, as Aristotle says, is from the good fortune to the bad fortune of a noble person, causing pity for his situation. Elizabeth Belfiore, in *Tragic Pleasures*, highlights Aristotle's statement from *The Rhetoric*: "Fear and pity are aroused at the

---

spectacle of the sufferings of those who do not themselves expect to suffer as they do, and whose objective situation also makes their suffering unlikely, in the opinion of others” (133). Furthermore, when it is better for people to be afraid, it is necessary [sc, for the rhetorician] to put them in such a state [as to believe] that they are such as to suffer, for others who are greater have also suffered And [it is necessary] to show people who are like [those in the audience] suffering or having suffered, and by means of those from whom they did not think [to suffer] this, and things they did not think to suffer, and at a time when they did not think to suffer. (qtd. in Belfiore 133; *Rhetoric* 2.5.1383a8—12)

When Oedipus was the king of Thebes, he did not expect suffering. Rather, the beginning scenes of the play present him as a ruler who wants happiness and prosperity for his city. In order to solve the calamities that fell on his subjects, he undertakes the task of finding solutions to the problems that lead him to suffering. His suffering causes extreme pity and fear since the action is not between two enemies but between family members, who are never expected to harm each other. The reversal happens at a time when he has not expected it. Some scholars believe it is Oedipus’ hubris that brought his downfall, and some say it is his hamartia. Cabrera argues, "If it is hamartia, he aimed to know the killer and instead achieved something else – an accusation. If it is hubris (pride), it should seal his doom. By itself, it is hamartia; fate would not happen. However, by holding it in a public forum, fate happened” (Cabrera 12).

Fear may be felt in scenes of pathos and not only at the climax. The fear that we feel for Oedipus is, firstly, when he is going to marry Queen Jocasta (as the Sophoclean audience is aware of the truth that she is his mother). Secondly, when this truth is unfolded in the play, the reversal occurs. The former is the product of the idea of transgressing the religious or cultural law (the idea of committing a sin), and the latter is the fear of the punishment that would befall as a consequence of the error.

One common element in all tragedies (either with a complex plot or simple) is pathos. In *Philoctetes*, the pathos is only in the beginning, and this, as we see, is not the suffering that falls as a consequence of reversal. Moreover, the pathos in this play cannot be compared with the pathos of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, which comes as a result of a change of fortune. Unlike *Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Philoctetes* has a simple plot. It doesn’t contain the devices that a complex plot would have. The play does not contain a reversal of fortune from good to bad. The plot of *Philoctetes* is not similar to that of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, where the protagonist commits a mistake, and when he realizes it, his fortune changes from good to bad. The play *Philoctetes*, unlike *OT*, begins with grief. Bremer thinks application of Aristotelian theory to *Philoctetes* is difficult since at the beginning of the play protagonist is seen suffering and when it closes the suffering of protagonist is at an end (“Hamartia” 165). The play doesn’t have peripeteia, hamartia, and anagnorisis. Although Odysseus attempts to persuade

---

Neoptolemus to err knowingly, no character in the tragedy makes any mistake/hamartia. Philoctetes' refusal to go with Neoptolemus and Odysseus and later his willingness to go with them and hand over his bow to them are all represented as actions of the play, but none of these actions are considered hamartia. "Neither is it permissible to qualify Philoctetes' stubbornness as a tragic flaw: far from being his weakness, it is the core of his strength" (Bremer 166). The author further draws our attention towards Whitman's statement, "he [Philoctetes] is right in his judgment of the Atreidae and Odysseus, and he is right to refuse to help them; his position is just and courageous, his refusal represents firm integrity" (qtd. in Bremer 166).

Odysseus wants Neoptolemus to cheat Philoctetes and take Hercules' bow and arrow from him using a trick. Neoptolemus is the son of a nobleman who considers trickery and lies immoral. He would rather persuade Philoctetes to join them and save the Greek army. Neoptolemus is shown correcting himself before committing the error, as taking the bow from Philoctetes using a trick would be a mistake. He tells him the reason for his arrival to the forest. Neoptolemus doesn't commit errors. Rather, he recognizes it as immoral to take the bow with trickery. The recognition that Aristotle talks about is followed by peripeteia. But this change of fortune from good to bad doesn't occur in *Philoctetes*. Nor is the recognition a proper one. The recognition of a mistake is often found after the commitment of the mistake. Here, the character is seen in a dilemma, either choosing the right method or a false method to achieve the bow and arrow of Hercules from Philoctetes. However, against the Aristotelian principles, the play *Philoctetes* has a reversal of fortune from bad to good. "One might conceivably see a hamartia in Philoctetes' surrender of the bow: he does not realize he surrenders his life to his enemies. But just as in the *Electra*, the full tragic force is absent because Philoctetes will finally recover his bow and sail for Troy" (169). Philoctetes, who is living in the forest, far from the society, is at the end of the play and is taken back to the Greek army with his own will and desire.

Philoctetes has a simple plot, but one important element in the play is a reversal of fortune from good to bad as opposed to what Aristotle suggests (Bywaters 17). In the beginning of *Philoctetes* feel pity, but this doesn't involve the destruction of bad fortune. The play starts with Philoctetes living a tough life alone in the forest and ends with Philoctetes willingly joining Odysseus and Neoptolemus to fight against Troy.

Tragedy, according to Aristotle, purges the emotions of pity and fear. The audience/readers of *Philoctetes* feel pity for Philoctetes not at his mistake but for the misery of life. If Neoptolemus had taken the bow of Hercules, that may have caused some kind of fear for Philoctetes living in the forest after losing his bow or would have aroused fear for Neoptolemus for indulging in the act of treachery and may thereby raging the anger of gods.

However, Neoptolemus retreats from committing the mistake, although

## Research Journal Of English (RJOE)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal Impact Factor: 8.16(SJIF),Vol-10,Issue-1(Jan-Mar),2025  
Indexed in: International Citation Indexing (ICI), Cite factor, International Scientific Indexing (ISI),  
Directory of Research Journal Indexing (DRJI) Google Scholar, Cosmos and Internet Archives.

---

Odysseus constantly provokes him to do so. As the character is protected from committing a mistake, it avoids the recognition, reversal and grieving of the character/protagonist. We see Philoctetes grieving as he is abandoned by the Greek army. His injury and life in the forest, too, arouse sympathy and pity in the audience, but this pity is not as we feel for Oedipus, who is cast out of Thebes. "Pathos arouses fear and pity because, as a destructive or painful action, it obviously involves bad fortune" (Belfiore 132). Since Oedipus' suffering is a consequence of his error, it involves bad fortune.

Though considered a tragedy, *Philoctetes* doesn't show bloodshed either between enemies or within family members. Rather, it does not contain any tragic scenes arousing fear. Aristotelian concepts of pity and fear may be found only in tragedies with complex plots. Tragedy without a tragic scene or murder, according to some scholars, may not even be called a tragedy. However, murder is not the essential element of a tragedy. *Philoctetes* is imitation. It is in action, not in narration. It is embellished in the language and represents noble characters. The play is complete in itself, having a beginning, middle, and end. On the other hand, it does not show the concept of fate and the role of gods, prophecies, or external forces that compel the protagonist to commit mistakes. However, Heracles appears in the sky at the end of the play, suggesting that he is happy with Philoctetes' decision to join the Greek army again.

The latter part of Aristotelian definition- 'purgation of emotion' happens in the other way in *Philoctetes*. The tragedy (*Oedipus Tyrannous*) ends despair, purging pity and fear. *Philoctetes* ends in solace, compassion and empathy. Both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes leave behind a message of goodness. The play *Philoctetes* conveys the message of forgiveness and shows benevolence as a way of life.

### References:

- Belfiore, Elizabeth S. *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion*. Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Bremer, J.M. *Hamartia: Tragic Error in the Poetics of Aristotle and in Greek Tragedy*. Adolf M Hackett Publishers, 1969.
- Bywater, Ingram. *Aristotle: On the Art of Poetry*. Oxford at The Clarendon Press, 1920.
- Cope, E. M. *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*. 3 vols. Revised by J. E. Sandys. Cambridge, 1877.
- Dodds, E.R. "On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex" Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Oedipus Rex, Updated Edition 2007. Chelsea House Publishers. pp.17–30.
- Jaime Cabrera, 31 Oct 2015. Fate, Hubris, and Hamartia in Oedipus Rex and in Helen

## Research Journal Of English (RJOE)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal Impact Factor: 8.16(SJIF),Vol-10,Issue-1(Jan-Mar),2025  
Indexed in: International Citation Indexing (ICI), Cite factor, International Scientific Indexing (ISI),  
Directory of Research Journal Indexing (DRJI) Google Scholar, Cosmos and Internet Archives.

---

of Troy. Academia.com Viewed on 24 Oct 2024.

Judkins, Luke Howard. "Still Misunderstanding the Oedipus Tyrannos," *Scientia et Humanitas: A Journal of Student Research*. Middle Tennessee State University, Spring, 2015. Pp. 53–60.

Lucas, D, ed. Aristotle: Poetics. Oxford, 1972.

Meineck, Peter and Paul Woodruff. *Sophocles: Four Tragedies* Hackett Publishing Company, 2007.

Taplin, Oliver. *Sophocles: Four Tragedies*. Oxford UP, 2015.

### How to cite this article?

**Asra Afrin<sup>1</sup> & Prof. Robert Jose<sup>2</sup>,** "A Comparative Analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Philoctetes* in the light of Aristotelian Principles of Tragedy" *Research Journal Of English (RJOE)*10(1),PP:72-78,2025, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.1.78