What is tragedy?

Fill in the blanks below with information given in class. These terms will appear on a test.

The Greek philosopher ___________________ defined the term _______________ around ___________________ as a work of literature that:

Ø is _______________ and _______________; people are tested by ___________________ ___________________.

Ø illustrates a ________________________ ________________________ about mankind.

Ø uses ______________________ language.

Ø contains a ___________________ ___________________ who:

is ______________________; of ______________ standing.

possesses a ____________ ____________, a trait or ______________ (such as ____________, ____________, or ______________) that brings about ________________________

Ø is about the ________________________—not necessarily his ______________—because of his ___________________ ________________.

Ø arouses feelings of ___________ and ___________ in the audience.

Ø brings about ______________ or cleansing of these emotions through the by resolving the dramatic tension and bringing the plot to a _______________________.

______________________________
1. Drama was developed in ancient Greece to honor ________________ the god of _________________.

2. The chorus was a group of actors who would __________________ and __________________ the story of the major character.

3. How many people typically made up the chorus?

4. Who was Thespis, and why is he famous?

5. In order to make sure everyone could see and hear the action, the actors in ancient Greece wore large _______________ and possibly __________________

6. Define the following terms related to ancient Greek theatres.
   a. Skene:
   b. Theatron:
   c. Orchestra:

7. What genres of theatre were created by the ancient Greeks?

8. This type of play depicts the downfall of a character of high status, who is neither completely good or completely evil.

9. A ________________ ________________ (2 words) is usually what brings about the downfall of the main character.

10. Sophocles, author of *Oedipus Rex*, was born in what year and died in what year?

11. What ancient Greek philosopher is credited with first defining the term “tragedy”?

12. In addition to being a writer, Sophocles also served as a __________________________.

13. Sophocles wrote how many plays for competition? How many won first prize?

14. How many of his plays survive today in their entirety? List the titles of his surviving plays below.
15. Besides Sophocles, name three other important ancient Greek playwrights, and next to each name, give the title of one of his plays.

   a. .
   
   b. .
   
   c. .

16. What did he say about the form of a tragedy?

17. What type of language did he feel was most appropriate for a tragedy?

18. What is the significance of the following words within Aristotle’s definition of tragedy?

   a. Imitation:
   
   b. Magnitude:
   
   c. Catharsis:
   
   d. Hamartia:

19. Define Parthenon

20. Define matricide
As you read Part 1 of *Oedipus the King*, answer the questions below. Your responses do not need to be written in complete sentences.

1. At the beginning of the play, why has Oedipus come to hear the suppliants?

2. Based on lines 10-12, what is your first impression of Oedipus?

3. Based on the Priest’s speech in lines 13-65, what do the people of Thebes seem to think of Oedipus? Quote specific lines (with line numbers) which support your response.

4. Why does the priest express confidence that Oedipus can save the kingdom?

5. What action has Oedipus taken to discover the cause of the plague that threatens Thebes?

6. Think back to the background information about the play. In what two ways is Creon related to Oedipus?

7. What news does Creon bring back from the oracle? Why is it difficult to carry out the Apollo’s demands?
8. What did the only survivor from Laius’s party say about the slaying of the king (lines 141-143)?

9. How do Oedipus’s words differ from this man’s version of events?

10. What prevented the people of Thebes from seeking out and punishing Laius’ killer shortly after the murder?

11. In what sense is it true that Oedipus is “a stranger to the story, / a stranger to the deed” of Laius’ murder (line 235-236)?

12. What punishment does Oedipus promise to the murderer?

13. Why does Oedipus call for Tiresias?

14. What is Tiresias’s first response to Oedipus’s questions?

15. Of what does Oedipus accuse Tiresias in lines 380-386? Why does he make this accusation?

16. What does Tiresias reveal in lines 404-405 and lines 410-412? How does Oedipus react?
17. What does Oedipus say about Tiresias’s blindness? Who is he really describing?

18. What prediction does Tiresias then make in lines 460-485?
19. What does Oedipus’ treatment of Tiresias show about the king?

20. What is Tiresias’s final prophecy to Oedipus?

21. Why is the Chorus still unwilling to believe Oedipus is guilty of the murder?

22. During Creon’s conversation with the Leader of the Chorus, whose side does the Leader seem to take? What words lead you to this conclusion?

23. What “evidence” does Oedipus believe points to Creon’s guilt?

24. Summarize the primary argument Creon uses to support his innocence in his long speech on p. 489.

25. What punishment does Creon suggest for himself if he is found to be guilty?

26. How does Jocasta react when she finds the two men arguing?

27. How does the Chorus try to smooth over the conflict between Creon and Oedipus?

28. Why is Jocasta relieved to hear that the charges against Oedipus come from a prophet? Why does she feel this way about prophets?

29. What five important facts does Oedipus learn—to his growing horror—through his questioning of Jocasta (lines 811-837)?
30. Why do you think the servant asked to be sent away from the city following the murder of Laius?

31. What prompted Oedipus to seek the truth about his parentage (lines 858-929)? What did he learn instead?

32. What did Oedipus do to try to avoid his fate? In what way did his attempt to escape his fate contribute to fulfilling the prophecy?

33. Although Oedipus recognizes that he probably killed Laius, what does he apparently fail to recognize about Laius and himself?

34. What detail of the shepherd’s story does Oedipus want to clarify? Why is this detail so important to him?

35. How does the Chorus feel about the gods at the end of Part One? How do they seem to feel about prophecies?
As you read Part 2 of *Oedipus the King*, answer the questions below. Your responses do not need to be written in complete sentences.

1. What metaphor does Jocasta use in lines 1011-1012 to describe the situation in Thebes?

2. Why does Jocasta rejoice at the news of Polybus’s death? What conclusion does she reach about the role of fate and the gods in human existence?

3. Despite the news of Polybus’s death, why is Oedipus still worried?

4. What other news does the messenger bring in lines 1106-1110? How is this information significant?

5. Jocasta pleads with Oedipus not to keep seeking information about his birth. What does she fear?

6. How does Oedipus react?

7. How does the Chorus engage in some “wishful thinking” at this point in the play (1201-1208)?

8. What does the Chorus say about the Herdsman’s character in lines 1216-1218?
9. How does the Herdsman feel when questioned about the child he found? Why do you think he feels this way?

10. What command from Oedipus suggests that an obsession to know the circumstances of his birth has overwhelmed his sense of justice?

11. Why did the Herdsman give the infant Oedipus to the Messenger?

12. In what words does Oedipus recognize and summarize the triple curse that has haunted his life?

13. What conclusion about human happiness does the Chorus reach on p. 513?

14. What news about Jocasta does the Messenger bring from the palace?

15. What harm does Oedipus inflict upon himself? Why does he do this?

16. How does the Chorus seem to feel when Oedipus is led back into their sight? Cite specific words or lines that support your opinion.

17. Whom does Oedipus curse in lines 1465-1469? Why?
18. What does the Chorus think Oedipus should have done instead of blinding himself? Why do they think he should have done this? Do you agree with the Chorus? Explain.

19. Why does Oedipus feel that the punishment he has given himself is appropriate?

20. Why, according to Oedipus, shouldn’t the Chorus fear to touch him? What has Oedipus recognized about himself?

21. How does Oedipus treat Creon?

22. Why does Creon tell the servant to “be quick and take him in”? How does Creon treat Oedipus at this point in the play?

23. What does Oedipus fear will happen to his daughters? What does he ask Creon to do?

24. What is Oedipus’s final punishment?

25. What does the final speech by the Chorus suggest about life?
Irony can be defined as the difference between appearance and reality. Oedipus has trouble seeing the reality of his situation; however, the audience would have been well aware of the truth. This is known as dramatic irony—the difference between the “initiated” audience and the “uninitiated” audience. The initiated audience is “in on it.” Oedipus, though, is uninitiated because he is unaware of what is truly going on. Because of this, the audience can recognize many of his statements as ironic. As you read, look for Oedipus’s ironic statements. Quote them below and give line number for each statement. Then explain why each statement is ironic.

1. Ironic Statement:

Why it demonstrates dramatic irony:

2. Ironic Statement:

Why it demonstrates dramatic irony:

3. Ironic Statement:

Why it demonstrates dramatic irony:

4. Ironic Statement:

Why it demonstrates dramatic irony:
Use your Oedipus study guides, Greek tragedy notes, and the text of the play to respond to the following questions.

1. Is Oedipus to blame for the trouble in Thebes? Justify your response.

2. Is Thebes purged? Has justice been achieved? Justify/support your response.

3. How well does Oedipus fit Aristotle’s definition of “tragedy”? Respond to each of the following points to formulate your answer.

   a. By definition, a tragic hero must be a person that others can admire, despite his tragic flaw. What admirable traits does Oedipus demonstrate?

   b. What is the tragic flaw that leads to Oedipus’s downfall?

   c. How does the play provide catharsis? What specific events or details create catharsis?

   d. Does the play exemplify a universal truth of human existence? Explain. If so, what is the universal truth that the play illustrates?
4. Explain the irony in each of the following examples from the text.

a. On p. 471, the Priest says about Oedipus’s victory over the Sphinx, “Once you have brought us luck with happy omen.”

b. In the first scene, Oedipus states, “I will speak out now as a stranger to the story, / a stranger to the deed” (477).

c. On p. 504 the messenger from Corinth tells Jocasta that he has “good news—/ for your house and for your husband.”

d. Tiresias, the prophet, is blind.

5. The play’s events result from both chance (or “fate”) and characters’ choices. What elements of the story depend on chance? What elements result from Oedipus’s choices?
Oedipus the King has been studied by countless scholars and literary critics. One critic argues that “several crucial events in the plot are not motivated by pride at all: (1) Oedipus leaves Corinth to protect the two people he believes to be his parents; (2) his choice of Thebes as a destination is merely coincidental and/or fated, but certainly not his fault; (3) his defeat of the Sphinx demonstrates wisdom rather than blind stubbornness. True, he kills Laius on the road, refusing to give way on a narrow pass, but the fact that this happens to be his father cannot be attributed to a flaw in his character.”

How would you respond to these arguments? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your response.
Aristotle on Greek Tragedy
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The word tragedy literally means "goat song," probably referring to the practice of giving a goat as a sacrifice or a prize at the religious festivals in honor of the god Dionysos. Whatever its origins, tragedy came to signify a dramatic presentation of high seriousness and noble character which examines the major questions of human existence. Why are we here? How can we know the will of the gods? What meaning does life have in the face of death? In tragedy people are tested by great suffering and must face decisions of ultimate consequence. Some meet the challenge with deeds of despicable cruelty, while others demonstrate their ability to confront and surpass adversity, winning our admiration and proving the greatness of human potential.

Background information on Greek Theater

Ancient writers give us tantalizing glimpses of the possible origins of Greek theater. The fifth century historian Herodotus (5.67) notes that in some cities the worship of Dionysos, god of wine and fertility, replaced earlier hero cults which had memorialized the hero's sufferings with tragic choruses. In his Poetics (1449a) Aristotle records that tragedy developed from improvisations on dithyrambs, a type of choral poetry celebrating mythological subjects. The Latin author Horace adds that Thespis invented tragedy, apparently being the first actor to portray the legendary characters of myth instead of narrating their exploits in song (Ars Poetica 275f).

The earliest definite record we have of dramatic contests in Athens occurred in 501 BC (the typical date of 534 is based on an unreliable medieval text, see Scullion). The majority of evidence about Greek theater comes from the literature and performance records of the fifth century. This "Golden Age" witnessed major military encounters both with foreign invaders and fellow countrymen. A league of small city-states led by Athens defeated the Persian empire in two key battles at Marathon (490) and Salamis (480). Our earliest extant tragedy, Persians by Aeschylus, records the humiliation of Xerxes and his mighty army. The downfall of the Persian king demonstrates the folly of pride which provokes the wrath of the gods. During the following years Athens, under the leadership of Pericles, rose to prominence, celebrating its civic pride with a newly rebuilt Parthenon on the Acropolis. The annual festival held at the Theater of Dionysos, which lies on the hill beneath the Parthenon, brought visitors from miles around to see the dramatic contests and experience the glories of the city. In the final third of the century, civil war broke out between the Athenian league and the Spartan confederacy. Most of our extant plays come from this dark period: Euripides' Trojan Women depicts the horrors of war for the innocent victims left behind, while Aristophanes offers an unusual comic solution for ending the war: a sex-strike by the women of both sides, in Lysistrata [correctly pronounced Ly-SIS-tra-ta]. The themes of Greek tragedy and comedy reflect the political and social concerns of these exciting and troubled times.

Each spring Athens held a festival at which the contests for best tragedy (and comedy after 486) held a central part. Tragic playwrights submitted three serious dramas and a mythological spoof called a satyr play, often on a similar theme. Each playwright had a sponsor (choregos) who hired the three actors and the chorus of 12-15 performers. The playwright probably rehearsed his own cast much like a director would today. Actors wore masks which covered their entire heads like a helmet. These could be exchanged backstage to allow the same actor to play different characters; thus, only three actors were needed for all the parts in one play. The chorus often portrayed the people of the city, responding to the protagonist as an ideal audience. During the choral odes their singing and dancing provided variety and spectacle, allowing time for the actors to change into other costumes for the next scene.

Plays were performed outdoors, often on a hillside which provided a natural seating area for the spectators. Benches of wood or stone surrounded an open circle of ground called the orchestra, or dancing space. The seating area, known as the theatron (literally "viewing space"), has given us our word for theater. Some ancient theaters could seat as many as 15,000 people. Excellent acoustics permitted such large audiences to hear the performance. At the back of the orchestra where most of the action took place stood the skené (pronounced "skay-NAY") or scene building, which provided a place to change costumes and store props. Actors could enter and exit from doors on the front of the skené or from large aisle ways on either side of the orchestra. There was little attempt at creating the illusion of a location other than using the scene building for a palace or temple. One popular special effect was the mechna or crane which lowered a god from the roof of the skené to the stage. In several plays gods or the spirits of dead heroes appear to proclaim a prophecy or resolve a crisis. We use the Latin phrase deus ex machina (god out of the machine) to describe a last-minute rescue which brings the play to a surprising, if improbable, conclusion. Another common device was a rolling platform (ekkyklemna, literally "something rolled out") on which scenes of bloody carnage could be briefly revealed.

According to Aristotle, tragedies had certain recognizable sections which most of our surviving plays follow (Poetics, ch. 12). A prologue, spoken by one or two characters, introduces the play's setting and major action. The parodos brings the chorus into the orchestra to become an audience and respondent to the characters. The body of the play alternates between episodes involving the principle actors and chorale odes sung and danced by the chorus, to allow for the actors to change costumes and indicate the passage of time. The exodos concludes the play with all performers leaving the stage. Plays were written entirely in verse, although lyric passages and dramatic dialogue differed considerably in style. Choral odes exhibit a wide variety of meters, nearly impossible to convey in translation, which indicate changes in mood and subject, whether religious, solemn, excited, etc. Actors spoke verse sounding more like common speech but using heightened rhetoric for specific purposes: thesis (persuasive speech), monody (musical solo), agon (formal debate), stychomythia (rapid exchange of dialogue) are the major forms. These make up the formal elements of tragedy.

Although hundreds of playwrights competed in the dramatic festivals in Athens and other cities, the works of only four have survived. Aeschylus (524-456) was the early master of the trilogy, three plays written to be performed together which continue the same story. Most of the seven plays we have of his were once part of trilogies, but The Oresteia, containing the plays Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, and Eumenides, is the only complete example still in existence. According to Aristotle, Aeschylus introduced the practice of using two actors, thus receiving credit for the invention of dramatic dialogue. His other plays include Persians, Suppliants, and Seven Against Thebes (the authorship of Prometheus Bound is disputed). Ironically, Aeschylus wanted to be remembered on his epitaph not for his tragedies but for fighting at the battle of Marathon.

Sophocles (497-405) is best known for his masterpieces Oedipus the King and Antigone. Both plays demonstrate excellent plot construction and skillful use of dramatic irony. Aristotle claims Sophocles was first to use a third actor. Other tragedies by Sophocles include Ajax, Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, and Oedipus at Colonus.
Euripides (485-406) was known as an innovator, experimenting with both the form and content of the traditional myths. Several of his plays depict women driven to violence because of their intense suffering, such as Electra, Medea, and Hecabe. Euripides seems to reflect current skeptical trends in philosophy in plays such as Heracles in which the title character questions the existence of the gods, at least in their popular manifestations. Because of his daring approach, Euripides was not as successful in the contests as the other two tragedians during his lifetime, but during the fourth century his fame grew; hence we have more of his plays (18) than the combined total of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

The only comic writer whose works survive from this period, Aristophanes (448-380) addressed current events in his plays, blending political satire with bawdy farce, in some of the most elegant Greek poetry ever written. Many of his plays are named after his fanciful choruses: Knights, Clouds, Wasps, Birds, Frogs. One other comic writer from the next century deserves mention. Menander (342-291) is credited with perfecting what ancient critics called New Comedy, which influenced most of the subsequent comedies written in Western Civilization including Shakespeare and Moliere. Two of his plays, The Grouch and The Girl from Samos, have survived almost intact. The apostle Paul quotes from a play by Menander in 1 Cor. 15:33: "Evil companions corrupt good morals."

Aristotle's Definition of Tragedy

Aristotle first defined tragedy in his Poetics around 330 BC, and all subsequent discussions of tragic form have been influenced by his concepts. According to Aristotle, "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of a noble and complete action, having the proper magnitude; it employs language that has been artistically enhanced . . . ; it is presented in dramatic, not narrative form, and achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such incidents" (ch. 6; Golden 11).

Several of these terms require clarification. "Imitation" (mimesis) does not refer exclusively to acting out something on stage. Aristotle recognizes many forms of imitation including epic poetry (Homer), painting, song, and dance. "Noble" does not mean that the characters are necessarily of high moral standing or that they must always be kings, heroes, or gods; the title character of Euripides' Medea is a wicked sorceress who kills her own children. According to Hardison, the term could be translated as larger than life, majestic, or serious (Golden 84).

"Magnitude" refers not to the greatness of the subject matter, as some have suggested, but to the appropriate length of a production. Earlier in the Poetics (ch. 5), Aristotle contrasts the shorter action of a play with that of an epic poem such as the Iliad. Dramatic action naturally is limited to what can be presented within two or three hours. "Enhanced language" refers to the fact that all plays at that time were written in poetic verse rather than the language of everyday speech. As Steiner explains, "There is nothing democratic in the vision of tragedy. The royal and heroic characters whom the gods honor with their vengeance are set higher than we are in the chain of being, and their style of utterance must reflect this elevation" (241).

Endless debates have centered on the term "catharsis" which Aristotle unfortunately does not define. Some critics interpret catharsis as the purging or cleansing of pity and fear from the spectators as they observe the action on stage; in this way tragedy relieves them of harmful emotions, leaving them better people for their experience. According to this interpretation, Aristotle may have been offering an alternative to Plato's charge that the dramatic poets were dangerous to society because they incited the passions.

However, it is uncharacteristic of Aristotle to define tragedy in terms of audience psychology; throughout the Poetics he focuses on dramatic form, not its effects on viewers. Therefore, commentators such as Else and Hardison prefer to think of catharsis not as the effect of tragedy on the spectator but as the resolution of dramatic tension within the plot. The dramatist depicts incidents which arouse pity and fear for the protagonist, then during the course of the action, he resolves the major conflicts, bringing the plot to a logical and foreseeable conclusion.

This explanation of catharsis helps to explain how an audience experiences satisfaction even from an unhappy ending. Human nature may cause us to hope that things work out for Antigone, but, because of the insurmountable obstacles in the situation and the ironies of fate, we come to expect the worst and would feel cheated if Haemon arrived at the last minute to rescue her, providing a happy but contrived conclusion. In tragedy things may not turn out as we wish, but we recognize the probable or necessary relation between the hero's actions and the results of those actions, and appreciate the playwright's honest depiction of life's harsher realities.

Notice that Aristotle's definition does not include an unfortunate or fatal conclusion as a necessary component of tragedy. Usually we think of tragedy resulting in the death of the hero along with perhaps many others. While this is true of most tragedies (especially Shakespeare), there are some examples which conclude otherwise. Aristotle acknowledges that several Greek tragedies end happily. In Aeschylus' trilogy the Oresteia, Orestes must avenge the death of his father by killing his murderer, who happens to be Orestes' mother. The conflict is successfully resolved when Athena appoints a court of law to uphold justice in such cases, and Orestes is acquitted of any guilt. In Oedipus the King the hero inflicts his own punishment by blinding himself, but he goes into exile instead of dying. Sophocles wrote a sequel to this play called Oedipus at Colonus in which the hero finds a peaceful death after years of suffering to atone for his misdeeds, but his demise is seen as a happy ending to an unhappy life. In tragedy people must make difficult choices and face serious consequences, but they do not always meet with death.

The Tragic Hero

Aristotle distinguishes between tragedy which depicts people of high or noble character, and comedy which imitates those of low or base character (ch. 2). Renaissance scholars understood this passage to mean that tragic characters must always be kings or princes, while comedy is peopled with the working or servant classes, but Aristotle was not talking about social or political distinctions. For him character is determined not by birth but by moral choice. A noble person is one who chooses to act nobly. Tragic characters are those who take life seriously and seek worthwhile goals, while comic characters are "good-for-nothings" who waste their lives in trivial pursuits (Else 77). While it may be true that, as Arthur Miller argued, the common man is a potential subject for tragedy (in the sense that one need not be a king or a demigod to act nobly), the one thing a tragic protagonist cannot be is common. Ordinary humanity belongs on the sidelines in tragedy, represented by the Greek chorus. The tragic protagonist is always larger than life, a person of action whose decisions determine the fate of others and seem to shake the world itself.

The hero of tragedy is not perfect, however. To witness a completely virtuous person fall from fortune to disaster would provoke moral outrage at such an injustice. Likewise, the downfall of a villainous person is seen as appropriate punishment and does not arouse pity or fear. The best type of tragic hero, according to Aristotle, exists "between these extremes . . . a person who is neither perfect in virtue and justice, nor one who falls into misfortune through vice and depravity, but rather, one who succeeds through some miscalculation" (ch. 13). The term hamartaia, which Golden translates as "miscalculation," literally means "missing the mark," taken from the practice of archery.
Much confusion exists over this crucial term. Critics of previous centuries once understood \textit{hamartia} to mean that the hero must have a "tragic flaw," a moral weakness in character which inevitably leads to disaster. This interpretation comes from a long tradition of dramatic criticism which seeks to place blame for disaster on someone or something: "Bad things don't just happen to good people, so it must be someone's fault." This was the "comforting" response Job's friends in the Old Testament story gave him to explain his suffering: "God is punishing you for your wrongdoing." For centuries tragedies were held up as moral illustrations of the consequences of sin.

Given the nature of most tragedies, however, we should not define \textit{hamartia} as tragic flaw. While the concept of a moral character flaw may apply to certain tragic figures, it seems inappropriate for many others. There is a definite causal connection between Creon's pride which precipitates his destruction, but can Antigone's desire to see her brother decently buried be called a flaw in her character which leads to her death? Her stubborn insistence on following a moral law higher than that of the state is the very quality for which we admire her.

Searching for the tragic flaw in a character often oversimplifies the complex issues of tragedy. For example, the critic predisposed to looking for the flaw in Oedipus' character usually points to his stubborn pride, and concludes that this trait leads directly to his downfall. However, several crucial events in the plot are not motivated by pride at all: (1) Oedipus leaves Corinth to protect the two people he believes to be his parents; (2) his choice of Thebes as a destination is merely coincidental and/or fated, but certainly not his fault; (3) his defeat of the Sphinx demonstrates wisdom rather than blind stubbornness. True, he kills Laius on the road, refusing to give way on a narrow pass, but the fact that this happens to be his father cannot be attributed to a flaw in his character. (A modern reader might criticize him for killing anyone, but the play never indicts Oedipus simply for murder.) Furthermore, these actions occur prior to the action of the play itself. The central plot concerns Oedipus' desire as a responsible ruler to rid his city of the gods' curse and his unyielding search for the truth, actions which deserve our admiration rather than contempt as a moral flaw. Oedipus falls because of a complex set of factors, not from any single character trait.

This misunderstanding can be corrected if we realize that Aristotle discusses \textit{hamartia} in the Poetics not as an aspect of character (ch. 15) but rather as an incident in the plot (ch. 13). What Aristotle means by \textit{hamartia} might better be translated as "tragic error" (Golden's miscalculation). Caught in a crisis situation, the protagonist makes an error in judgment or action, "missing the mark," and disaster results.

Most of Aristotle's examples show that he thought of \textit{hamartia} primarily as a failure to recognize someone, often a blood relative. In his commentary Gerald Else sees a close connection between the concepts of \textit{hamartia}, recognition, and catharsis. For Aristotle the most tragic situation possible was the unwitting murder of one family member by another. Mistaken identity allows Oedipus to kill his father Laius on the road to Thebes and subsequently to marry Jocasta, his mother; only later does he recognize his tragic error. However, because he commits the crime in ignorance and pays for it with remorse, self-mutilation, and exile, the plot reaches resolution or catharsis, and we pity him as a victim of ironic fate instead of accusing him of blood guilt.

While Aristotle's concept of tragic error fits the model example of Oedipus quite well, there are several tragedies in which the protagonists suffer due to circumstances totally beyond their control. In the \textit{Oresteia} trilogy, Orestes must avenge his father's death by killing his mother. Aeschylus does not present Orestes as a man whose nature destines him to commit matricide, but as an unfortunate, innocent son thrown into a terrible dilemma not of his making. In \textit{The Trojan Women} by Euripides, the title characters are helpless victims of the conquering Greeks; ironically, Helen, the only one who deserves blame for the war, escapes punishment by seducing her former husband Menelaus. Heracles, in Euripides' version of the story, goes insane and slaughters his wife and children, not for anything he has done but because Hera, queen of the gods, wishes to punish him for being the illegitimate son of Zeus and a mortal woman. Hamartia plays no part in these tragedies.

Given these examples, we should remember that Aristotle's theory of tragedy, while an important place to begin, should not be used to prescribe one definitive form which applies to all tragedies past and present.

REFERENCES


Scullion, \textit{Classical Quarterly} (52.1) 2002