HIGH SCHOOL

LESSON 1:

What are the characteristics of a Tragic Hero?

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

During the time of The Greeks and Romans, theatrical performances were part of the great festivals to celebrate the gods. During these religious festivals sung performances were presented to large audiences. The most important performances were tragedies.

VOCABULARY

Catharsis – Tragic stories create a catharsis for the audience who view the Tragic Hero’s story. The word catharsis is Greek and it means- to purify, purge or to clean. During the course of a successful tragedy the audience feels a combination of pity and fear as they watch the hero’s terrible fate unfold.

Hubris – a synonym of hubris is arrogance. It is a characteristic of someone who believes they can outwit fate or are smarter than the gods.

The Tragic Hero. The protagonist or central character in a tragedy is called the Tragic Hero. Heroes in tragic stories remind us that even the best of us are at the mercy of the fates and that we may be undone by our own best attempts to live in this world.

1. The Tragic Hero is thought of as a good person, renowned or prosperous. He or she may be noble-born or a great leader. He or she must behave in a noble way. He or she must also have free will.
2. The Tragic Hero is someone the audience admires. But he or she can’t be so great that the audience doesn’t identify with him or her.
3. The Tragic Hero has hubris and will do something to cause his or her downfall. This downfall will be at least partially the Tragic Hero’s own doing, it is not an accident or an act of villainy. This is referred to as the Tragic Flaw.
4. The Tragic Hero must suffer. The punishment inflicted on the Tragic Hero is greater than the crime or mistake he or she has made.
5. The Tragic Hero develops new self-knowledge as result of his or her downfall.
6. The audience experiences a catharsis watching the Tragic Hero.
LESSON
Guided Practice

Literature and popular culture are full of Tragic Heroes. Let's examine a familiar story together to identify how our vocabulary and ideas can be used to identify the Tragic Hero.

**Oedipus Rex**
by Sophocles

**Characteristic #1** - The Tragic Hero is thought of as a good person, renowned or prosperous. He or she may be noble-born or a great leader. He or she must behave in a noble way. He or she must also have free will.

Evidence: Oedipus was Prince of Corinth and now he is the King of Thebes. His subjects and family love him. He is a fair leader. He chose to come to Thebes from Corinth of his own will.

**Criteria #2** - The Tragic Hero must be true to life and yet idealized. He or she must be someone the audience admires, but he or she can't be so great that the audience can't identify with them.

Evidence: When Oedipus comes to Thebes he answers *The Riddle of the Sphinx* and frees the city of a plague. The citizens are grateful and make him their king! Oedipus learns that his father, the King of Corinth is dead

**Criteria #3** - The Hero has hubris and will do something to cause his or her own downfall. This downfall will be at least partially his or her own doing. It is not an accident or an act of villainy. This is referred to as the tragic flaw.

Evidence: Oedipus learns that the current plague will be lifted when the killer of old King Laius is discovered. Oedipus promises the citizens of Thebes that the killer will be cast out of Thebes forever. Oedipus doesn't realize that he was Laius' killer.

**Criteria #4** - The Tragic Hero must suffer. The punishment inflicted on the Tragic Hero is greater than the crime or mistake he or she made.

Evidence: Oedipus discovers that he was Laius’ killer and his wife/mother Jocasta hangs herself. Oedipus pulls the broaches from Jocasta's clothes and plunges them into his eyes.

**Criteria #5** - The Tragic Hero develops new self-knowledge a result of his or her downfall.

Evidence: Oedipus, now blind, remembers Tiresias’ prophesy that a blind man will see. He understands this prophesy in a profound new way.

**Criteria #6** - The audience experiences a catharsis watching the Tragic Hero.

Evidence: Through the course of the story the audience learns that King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes learn a prophecy made at the Temple of Apollo when their first son is born. The prophecy announced that their son will kill his father and marry his mother. Jocasta and Laius attempt to outwit fate (their own hubris). They bind the tiny baby's feet and give him to a shepherd to leave in the hills to die. But the shepherd shows mercy and gives the baby to a family in Corinth. This family gives the baby to the childless King and Queen of Corinth who raise him as their own. When Oedipus grows up, he hears the same prophecy—he will kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus flees Corinth to escape his fate and protect The King and Queen of Corinth who he believes to be his parents. But as Oedipus flees Corinth, he confronts King Laius at the place where three roads meet. Oedipus kills him.

The audience admires the brave Oedipus who strives to be a good king, a good son and a good husband. Yet he is caught in the jaws of cruel fate. The audience knows they are not as brave or good as Oedipus and his destiny is horrible. As a consequence, they feel pity and fear for him.
TRY THIS ON YOUR OWN!
Now that we have done a practice analysis together, click on one of these familiar stories and create your own character analysis for a Tragic Hero!

We’ve selected four familiar characters to choose from: Hamlet by William Shakespeare, The Crucible by Arthur Miller, and The Harry Potter Series by J. K. Rowling. Then compare your thoughts with ours!

CLICK HERE FOR Hamlet - Student Analysis
Character: Hamlet

CLICK HERE FOR Hamlet – Analysis key

CLICK HERE FOR The Crucible - Student Analysis
Character: John Proctor

CLICK HERE FOR The Crucible – Analysis key

CLICK HERE FOR The Harry Potter Series - Student Analysis
Character: Severus Snape

CLICK HERE FOR The Harry Potter Series – Analysis key
Wrap up
Now we understand the criteria for a Tragic Hero, let's look at the protagonist of *Murder in the Cathedral* Thomas Becket and decide if he fits our criteria for a Tragic Hero.