Influence Of Hamartia And Hubris On The Fall Of Oedipus In The Play Oedipus Rex By Sophocles

Oedipus Rex is a Greek Tragedy that was written by Sophocles before the birth of Christ. The foundation of this play is based on a prophecy which said that; the son of the king will murder him and marry his mother. This son goes by the name Oedipus who is the tragic hero of the play and this essay will set out to analyze how the influence of hamartia and hubris lead to the doom of this character in the play Oedipus Rex. Hamartia is a personal error in a protagonist's personality that brings about his downfall in a tragedy. It equally shows a point in the story where the hero makes a decision or critical mistake that seals his fate. Hubris is extreme pride, arrogance and the disrespect for the natural order of things demonstrated by a character or characters in a story. This flaw is very common in characters who are of noble birth or high position in society and overestimates his capabilities and loses his/her touch of reality. Equally, this flaw can come as a result of trying to manipulate or do an action that may lead to a change in reality.

In Oedipus Rex, Oedipus is a victim of Hamartia. For Hamartia to occur at least two conditions that have to take place in the play, which the audience will gradually observe in the course of the play and witness his downfall.

The circumstances that Oedipus the king finds himself in, lead him to commit Hamartia. Oedipus is king of Thebes and his nation is suffering from a plague. Creon reports from the Oracle of Apollo that the plague was caused as a result of the murder of Laius. Given Oedipus' high position in the Kingdom of Thebes, his character is flawed but perfect for his position. Oedipus who is proud, hot-tempered, forceful, ready to find the truth and shows genuine concern for his people, promises to find the murderer of Laius, whom he eventually curses. Also, Oedipus' sealed fate dates back to the crime committed by Laius, his father when he raped Chrysippus, the son of his host Pelops. The gods then punish Laius for his hideous act by ordering him not to have a child with his wife Jocasta. But he gets drunk and sleeps with Jocasta. She eventually gets pregnant for Oedipus and the prophecy from the gods is declared. These circumstances bring about Hamartia in the character of Oedipus in order for him to face his fate (Laius. 2019. Laius).

Ignorance is one of the main motifs of the play as Oedipus lacks knowledge of the truth and his fate, thus leading to Hamartia. Oedipus' ignorance is first shown in Corinth when a drunk tells him that; Polybus and Merope are not his true parents and he decides to consult the Oracle of Delphi. The "calamitous future" (Kindle location 680) is prophesied to him and out of wary he decides to leave Corinth. If he was knowledgeable enough, he would have taken his time to find the truth about his origin and his parents, but he does not. On his way to Thebes, he encounters Laius his biological father and they quarrel about the upper hand on the way, but the quarrel develops to a fight, and he eventually kills Laius. Here Oedipus expresses ignorance still. He ignores the prophecy and the fate he must face. He understands that the prophecy says he will kill his father. Since he doubts his origin already, the best solution for him was to flee or avoid killing someone, but he does. After this brawl, he encounters the Sphinx on his way to the land of Thebes. He defeats her by answering her riddle which goes; "What is four-footed in the morning, two-footed in the afternoon, and three-footed in the evening?" (Kindle Locations

1326-1327) and she throws herself down from her high stone and dies. With all this “intelligence” and “prophetic insight” (Kindle Location 445). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition. he claims to have, he is ignorant of the signs and traces that show that he is the prophesied son. Although he ignores these signs, he wants to solve the riddle of his life and origin. He keeps digging and when he discovers the truth and how aggravated the problem had become because of his ignorance, he gorges his eyes.

Another catalyst that leads to Oedipus’ doom is hubris. Hubris is demonstrated in Oedipus Rex by Oedipus and some other characters in the story.

Hubris is first committed by Oedipus’ parents who pin his legs together and “expose” him at the feet of the mountain to get rid of him to stop the prophecy. This demonstrates their arrogance towards the gods as they try to alter Oedipus’ fate and theirs. Thus, declaring themselves more powerful than the gods. Equally, we see hubris being committed by Polybus and Merope as they do not tell the truth to Oedipus about his origins. They accepted Oedipus as a son but their pride for their new son prevents them from telling the truth to Oedipus. Thus, this made Oedipus believe that they were his biological parents. Rumours from a drunk and the prophecy Apollo confess to him and force Oedipus to run away.

Oedipus hubris makes him feel superior. He thinks he can outrun his fate with his arrogance as he commits a murder and marries a spouse which are two conditions for the prophecy to be fulfilled. From these actions, we can deduce that he outrightly puts himself first before the god’s words. During his reign, the land of Thebes was suffering from a plague and the Oracle of Apollo stated that the murderer of Laius was the cause of it. Oedipus is determined to find the murderer by all means; his hubris does not permit him to see the truth as his pride and position blinds him completely. He eventually premeditates how his fall will look like as he curses the murderer (Kindle Locations 347-352).

Furthermore, on his quest for the truth, Oedipus portrays hubris when he considers Tiresias as a stupid blind man as he dismisses the words of this prophet with arrogance. Tiresias fires back by spotting out the pride in him as he says; “You have mocked at my blindness, but you, who have eyes, cannot see the evil in which you stand” (Kindle Location 455) and foreshadows Oedipus’ doom. Also, Oedipus pours out his rage on Creon and claimed that Creon paid Tiresias to tell lies so that he could become the King of Thebes when Oedipus falls. He already sees the atrocities and the events that occur around him and prefers to put the blame on someone else. Sadly, for Oedipus his hubris makes him hear only what he wants to hear which blinds him from the truth.

Hamartia and hubris are two powerful elements that mould Oedipus and create the subsequent course of the story. These two works together because Oedipus is a child of prophecy and certain conditions must take place as the prophecy is an order from the gods and punishment to his father Laius and his descendants. Thus, Hamartia and hubris became flaws in Oedipus’ character as they influence his fall and his fate in every decision in his life thus affecting the characters of the play and the course of the play. Also, these elements brought about nemesis to Oedipus as divine retribution could not be avoided. According to Aristotle, a tragic hero is supposed to have both Hamartia and hubris as the intent of these two, is to evoke pity for the tragic hero due to his weaknesses. The reason behind this is for the audience to identify with the tragic hero and learn a lesson from the story.

In Oedipus Rex, Oedipus' unfortunate fate that has been predetermined by the gods and had to be fulfilled by some means and fate is interwoven with his decisions. To some extent, fate can be avoided in the short run but not in the long run as our decisions are already connected to our destinies. Laius and Jocasta thought they escaped from their fate by "killing" Oedipus, but we see how the decision of the shepherd countered the actions of the King and Queen of Thebes as Oedipus was given to another shepherd from Corinth who took the baby to the childless royal couple of Corinth. When Oedipus flees Corinth because of the prophecy we see how Hamartia and hubris play their roles for the prophecy to come true until Oedipus finally knows the truth.

Hamartia and hubris are two flawed values found in a Tragic hero just as Oedipus in Oedipus Rex as it lays a foundation for the fall of the hero. The importance of Hamartia and hubris is very pertinent as they help the audience to identify themselves with the tragic hero thus arouse twin feelings of pity and fear in the audience. They equally affect the course of the play as Oedipus attachment to hubris and Hamartia justify his reasoning, emotions and decisions. All this became known to him and he learned a valuable lesson from his mistake. Hamartia and hubris contributed to the fall of Oedipus in many as stated above and it shows us how heroes of good qualities and positions in the society fall due to flaws in their characters, which leads to their own doom.