

# What is Tragedy?

## Viewing Guide

### Tragedy Defined

- a great work of art
- ennobles and uplifts the audience
- creates catharsis in the audience (a purging of emotions)

### Tragic Figures

- noble figures better than the average person
- they suffer a reversal of fortune
- they endure great suffering
- they recognize the consequences of their actions

### “Terrible Beauty”

terrible – extreme suffering of the tragic figure

beauty – their dignity while suffering

### *Oedipus Rex*

- written around 500 B.C. by Sophocles
- economical play (contains no extraneous material)
- explores the depths of human suffering

### Plot Points

- Oedipus, the King of Thebes, must discover his past to save his city from a plague sent by the gods.
- Oedipus’s version of his history:  
He was told as a youth by an oracle that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother.  
He decides to leave Corinth and his parents.  
On the road to Thebes, he gets in an argument with a man at a crossroads and kills him.  
Thebes is terrorized by the Sphinx, a half-woman/half-lion monster.  
Oedipus arrives in Thebes; defeats the Sphinx by answering its riddle.  
Oedipus is made king of Thebes, then marries the widowed queen, Jocasta.
- Oedipus discovers:  
His “parents” were actually foster parents.  
He is the son of the man he killed at the crossroads, who was the king of Thebes.  
He married his mother.
- Horrified, he punishes himself by gouging his eyes out, and is banished from the city.

### The Tragic Figure Checklist

#### Oedipus

A mighty figure? *Yes*

Suffers a reversal of fortune? *Yes*

Endures uncommon suffering? *Yes*

Recognizes the consequences of his actions? *Yes*

Does his plight ennoble us? *Yes*

### Tragedy in the Middle Ages (A.D. 500 – A.D. 1500)

- tragic tales
- in the form of narratives
- the fall or death of main character is the tragedy
- meant to teach the audience moral lessons

### Examples:

*De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*, by Boccaccio

*The Mirror for Magistrates*

### Wheel of Fortune:

If a character is successful (at the top of the wheel), the wheel will turn and soon they’ll suffer from tragic events (at the bottom of the wheel).

### Shakespeare and Tragedy

- influenced by De Casibus tragedies
- his tragedies reflect the theme of life as a pattern controlled by Fortune

### Shakespeare’s Tragedies

*Titus Andronicus* – Shakespeare’s first tragedy.

A Roman general gets bloody revenge for crimes against his family.

*Romeo & Juliet* – a hybrid comedic/tragic structure.

Two young lovers from warring families fall in love and meet a fatal end.

*Hamlet* – Shakespeare’s most famous tragedy; philosophical play. A prince must decide whether to avenge his father’s murder.

*Othello* – very economical tragedy.

A Moorish general succumbs to his paranoid jealousy and kills his wife, then himself.

*Macbeth* – perhaps Shakespeare’s finest dramatic poetry.

An ambitious nobleman murders his way to the throne and destroys his soul in the process.

*King Lear* – perhaps Shakespeare’s greatest tragedy.

A fairy tale-like play of a king who rashly gives up his kingdom and exiles his loved ones. Through suffering and madness, he redeems himself.

Other tragedies include: *Julius Caesar*, *Antony & Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens*.

### Viewing Questions

1. What poet described tragedy as a “terrible beauty?”
2. How does Oedipus confront the facts of his past?
3. Which two tragedies by Shakespeare focus on TWO tragic figures?



# What is Tragedy? Worksheet



## A. Tragic, Schmagic!

The sentences below ALMOST match the definitions from your Viewing Guide, but not quite! Cross out the errors and correct the sentences.

Example: Shakespeare’s tragedies reflect the theme of life as a pattern controlled by ~~villains~~ **fortune**

- 1. Tragic figures are lowly figures beneath the average person. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Tragedy is a great work of art that makes people cry. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Catharsis is a purging of one’s stomach. \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Tragic figures suffer from bad luck. \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. “Terrible beauty” refers to young men playing the roles of women. \_\_\_\_\_
- 6. Medieval tragedies were told in the form of documentaries. \_\_\_\_\_
- 7. Medieval tragedies were meant to teach audiences civic law. \_\_\_\_\_
- 8. Shakespeare’s most famous tragedy is *Oedipus Rex*. \_\_\_\_\_

## B. Oedipus Rex Cause and Effect

Match the cause in the left-hand column with the effect in the right-hand column.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| _____ 1. Thebes suffers from a plague sent by the gods.   | A. Oedipus gouges his eyes out.                             |
| _____ 2. Oedipus saves Thebes from the Sphinx.  | B. Oedipus kills the man.                                   |
| _____ 3. Oedipus was told by an oracle he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother. | C. The citizens of Thebes make Oedipus their king.          |
| _____ 4. Oedipus discovers that he did kill his father and marry his mother.                    | D. Oedipus leaves Corinth so he can’t harm his parents.     |
| _____ 5. Oedipus encounters a man at a crossroads and argues with him.                          | E. Oedipus sets out to solve the murder of the former king. |

## C. Big William’s Greatest Hits, Volume One

Circle each logline (Hollywood industry term, folks—it’s a story squeezed into a sentence) below that matches one of Shakespeare’s tragedies. Note: Some of the loglines are for plays you might not know. For each you do know, write the title in the blank provided.

- 1. Two young lovers from warring families fall in love and meet a fatal end. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. A man looking for a fortune has a battle of wills with his argumentative wife. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. A Roman general gets revenge for crimes against his family. \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. An English king defeats the French at the Battle of Agincourt. \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. A Moorish general succumbs to paranoid jealousy and murders his wife. \_\_\_\_\_
- 6. An exiled duke tries to protect his daughter from men and monsters. \_\_\_\_\_



# What is Tragedy? Check Your Knowledge



Total Score  
/ 50

### A. The Play's the Thing

Match the title of each Shakespeare tragedy below to its logline. (2 points each)

1. \_\_\_\_\_ *Titus Andronicus*

2. \_\_\_\_\_ *Romeo and Juliet*

3. \_\_\_\_\_ *Hamlet*

4. \_\_\_\_\_ *Othello*

5. \_\_\_\_\_ *Macbeth*

6. \_\_\_\_\_ *King Lear*

- A. Two young lovers from warring families meet a tragic end.
- B. A King gives up his kingdom and exiles his loved ones. Through madness and suffering, he redeems himself.
- C. A Roman general gets bloody revenge for crimes against his family.
- D. A Scottish nobleman murders his king to become the King of Scotland and destroys his soul in the process.
- E. A Danish prince agonizes over whether or not to avenge his father's murder.
- F. A Moorish general succumbs to insane jealousy and murders his wife.

### B. The Tragic Figure Checklist

For each of the questions, write "yes" or "no" and explain your answer. (4 points each)

#### *Oedipus Rex*

- 1. Is Oedipus a mighty figure? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Does he suffer a reversal of fortune? \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Does he endure uncommon suffering? \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Does he recognize the consequences of his actions? \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. Does his plight ennoble us? \_\_\_\_\_

### C. Tragedy Timeline

Answer each question by filling in the blank with the correct term. (3 points each)

- 1. Shakespeare was influenced by which medieval tragedies? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. What is a purging of emotions called? \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Shakespeare's tragedies reflect the theme of life as a pattern controlled by what? \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. *Oedipus Rex* is a model of a great tragedy because it explores the depths of human suffering and because it is what? \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. Tragedies in the Middle Ages taught the audience what? \_\_\_\_\_
- 6. Successful characters who suffer from tragic events are said to be on what wheel? \_\_\_\_\_