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Conflict’s Role in Greek Tragedies

Greek tragedy are most often connected to and seen as an extension of drama. They are based around a protagonist’s eventual downfall as a result of a fatal flaw or mistake. They are also said to include some type of conflict, “whether that conflict is between two characters, two different sets of laws, two different conceptions of justice, or a tragic hero struggling against his fate” (Moodle). Two parts in the Oresteia by Aeschylus; The Libation Bearers and The Eumenides, as well as Antigone by Sophocles are all representative of this natural tragic conflict.

Antigone by Sophocles bares all marks of a true tragedy. Antigone herself is a quintessential tragic hero, as the play follows her events and eventual death. The tragic conflict in Antigone is the conflict between two different types of laws. It deals with mortal laws versus holy laws; the laws of the God’s, and it questions which one overwhelms the other. Creon, now ruler of Thebes, has made it so that the brother of Antigone; Polyneices; leader of the rebels, will not have holy rites, nor will his body be buried. His body was chosen to be left on the battlefield as food for wild animals. At the time, this was considered the ultimate insulting act. Antigone however, believes that no matter who the person is or was, they should have a proper burial. This is where the conflict between different types of laws originates. Antigone is a believer that no matter what sins the person committed, they deserve a proper burial and holy rites. Not only is this to respect the person, but it is also a way of respecting the God’s. As burial is a holy act, it is therefore an act that must be done in order to maintain the Gods’ respect. “But I will bury him; and if I must die, I say that this crime is holy: I shall lie down with him in death, and I shall be as dear to him as he to me.” (Antigone, 56-58) Antigone shows that she believes holy law is more powerful than mortality. She says if she is to die then she will do so willingly. Her crime is holy, pure, she is doing what the Gods would want, and so they shall not judge her when she enters the afterlife. In contrast, Creon’s view of this is that Polyneices was a rebel leader, and does not deserve the right to burial. He decides this, being the ruler of Thebes, and expects it to be done. The conflict arises when Antigone will not allow mortal power and law, even the ruler of Thebes, to contradict a holy act and law that should always take place to respect the Gods.

The Oresteia by Aeschylus, prominently The Libation Bearers, is a play where there are many conflicts. The main conflict that arises from this play is the conflict between perceptions of what is truly just. Throughout the play, you are told constantly about how vengeance is the only true form of justice. Bloodshed leads to more bloodshed. A common view is that the only way for justice to occur is to murder the person who committed the act. However, this leads to someone looking to avenge the person who was just killed. “Hostile words for hostile words-let it be done. One murderous stroke is paid off by another lethal blow. The one who acts must suffer. So runs the ancient saying, now three generations old…” (The Libation Bearers 310–315) The chorus in the play knows how this justice works and offers no solution to the problem, they merely say that it is natural law and how things go. This concept of justice is challenged in the play, taking place at the end. Following the original concept of justice, Orestes, son of Agamemnon, avenged his father by killing his mother and her lover. Because of this, he is now haunted by the furies. Following this natural law of justice, he must now meet his death for the murders he committed. The concepts of justice conflict when Orestes is in court for his crimes. He is tried by the furies, and instead of the normal sentencing at the time, death, Orestes has a chance to defend himself for his crimes. Orestes is eventually seen to be not guilty. This concept of justice differs from the ancient view, but with the help of the Goddess Athena, this new type of justice is made law in Athens. Because of this, there are now ways for people to defend themselves, and for justice to be fair and different rather than always completely set in stone. Athena’s actions stop this endless cycle of murder being the only solution for murder, and allow everyone in the future to be tried fairly. This concept of justice was the stepping stone for modern law, and acts as one of the first examples of modern democracy.

In The Eumenides, the conflict that is present is between the old Gods and the new. The story takes place after Zeus overthrew the older Gods, and follows the idea of his making way for the Olympians; the new Gods. There is a struggle that takes place between the different entities. The two types of Gods are represented by one of their own. Apollo is shown representing the new Gods, the Olympians. He is part of the new group in power, young, and representing what they fought for and achieved. The Furies represent the Old Gods. Being one of the ancient deities overthrown, castaways, they are seen as below the new generation of God’s. Apollo and the Furies however, do not just represent the old and the new. They represent the ideology behind each side, and these play an integral role in initiating the eventual conflict. Apollo also represents youth, civilization and order, which was lacking when the old God’s were in power. The Furies represent chaos and the uncivilized, which was abundant when they were in power. The conflict in this play is resolved by Athena. Dealing again with how Orestes should be punished, Athena decides that everyone should have a right to be tried, and fairly, but also shows that there is a place for the older way of thinking. “Older art thou than I, and I will bear with this thy fury. Know, although thou be more wise in ancient wisdom, yet have from Zeus no scanted measure of the same” (Eumenides 59) Athena states that while the new Gods and their ways are needed, represented by a fair trial, the old God’s will continue to play a large role in modern Athens. They are older and wiser, and Zeus is younger and stronger. According to Athena, the conflict should not be decided through assimilation of the old ideologies with the new, but rather through a compromise of both societal views.

Many Greek tragedies and plays revolve heavily around the conflicts that come about in them. The protagonist’s downfall occurs due to a flaw or mistake. Oresteia by Aeschylus; The Libation Bearers and The Eumenides, as well as Antigone by Sophocles are all prime examples of how a fatal imperfection on the protagonist’s part ultimately leads to their downfall. The protagonist, in these situations, struggles with fighting his or her fate but in the end, must surrender to the destiny that has been chosen for them. These tragedies always involve conflict, and the plays follow these conflicts as the story unfolds. These characters downfalls are inevitable whether it be between two characters, laws, or conceptions of justice. Conflict plays an integral role in all tragedies, because it does not just add to the story, conflict is what makes tragedies tragic.

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