

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

*The Inward Turn of Consciousness:
Gods, Metaphors, Necessity, and the Continued Relevance of Greek Tragedy*

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Abstract

This paper was written to examine Greek Tragedy in its entirety, specifically through the playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. We focused on the “Inward Turn of Consciousness,” or the movement from the great gods of Olympus authorizing actions, through supra-human forces informing character, to a conflicting psychic drive that condition human lives and motivate actions. We looked at the backgrounds of all three playwrights, analyzed each play, and ultimately concluded that Greek Tragedy is still important today. Greek Tragedy remains profoundly relevant today because it tries to explain ourselves, our relationship to others, our relationship to the world, and our relationship to the divine.

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*The Inward Turn of Consciousness:
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This independent study focused on a historical and comparative study of Greek Tragedy. Throughout the semester, I closely read and created detailed analyses on selected plays by the three great Greek tragedians: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. These analyses set the plays in their cultural, historical, and social contexts, in 5th century BCE, while focusing on the formal and thematic qualities of the genre. As I read and drew connections between many of the different works, I looked at individual plays by each of the playwrights, others that dealt with common myths or characters, and still others that together formed a whole or partial thematic connection. I became conversant with the history, techniques, and themes of Greek Tragedy and was able to see its continued relevance in my own life and times.

Ever since Aristotle's first analysis of tragedy in the *Poetics*, the dramatic impact of Greek Tragedy, "is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, while its function is—by rousing pity and fear—to provide catharsis, or purging, of these and like emotions. The idea tragic hero, continues Aristotle, must be highly renowned, though not a pre-eminently virtuous, man whose misfortune is brought upon by some error of judgment or frailty, rather than by vice and depravity" (Robinson viii). Typically, that flaw leads to a moral transgression that begets retribution, but the tragic hero nonetheless arouses pity, fear, and ultimately, empathy, in the audience. Normally, the audience is enlightened and transformed by the recognition, reversal, and dramatic irony within the play. Thus the terrible suffering of the tragic hero is revelatory rather than harrowing.

The main purpose of this analyses was to observe and trace the idea of an, "Inward Turn of Consciousness." Throughout the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and

Euripides, the audience can observe a shift in 5th century BCE Greek Tragedy. Originally the culture of the Greeks stemmed from a belief in the all-comprehensive perfection of the state, in which all citizens devoted their lives to protect. It also came from the traditional belief of the “power, wisdom, and goodness of the gods, in the superiority of the fathers, in the beneficence of the heroes of old” (Robinson viii). However, during the late fifth century BCE the hereditary faith of the Greeks changed steadily, as seen in the writing of Sophocles and Euripides, by a growing individualism and focus on the person.

Greek Tragedies shifted from the religious to the secular, from orthodoxy to skepticism, and from certainty to doubt; and in this movement, the overarching theme of transformative insight and wisdom is especially apparent in many of their finest plays. “Some people turned from the cold Olympian gods to the new mystery religions and the strange deities” (Robinson viii). Also, individuals began to rationalize many of the traditional stories passed down. For example, while Euripides treated the many myths with forbearance, he made it plain that many supernatural powers, customarily assumed, had no real existence. Observed together, these plays and their analyses reflected an increasingly inward turn of consciousness that suggests an evolving moral imperative, one that was apparent to the original audience and remains compelling for contemporary readers and theatergoers.

Aeschylus’s plays revolve around the theological and the religious. Sophocles’s basic orientation centers on character and personal psychology. Lastly, Euripides’s basic orientation is personal and psychological, but he also takes Sophocles’s psychological awareness of tragedy and the human condition and creates an inner longing or necessity within every person.

This independent study followed how the moral significance of Greek Tragedy moved from the great gods of Olympus (theological and religious), through supra-human forces informing character (character and personal psychology), to conflicting psychic drives that condition human lives and motivate actions (personal and psychological). It explains why the inward turn of consciousness remains profoundly relevant in today's world, and how it is continuously needed to understand ourselves, our relationships to others, our relationships to the world, and our relationship to the divine. Ultimately, I showed how the tragic vision of Greek Tragedy's is inherent in our western experience, how it informs our consciousness, and ultimately is the starting point for moral understanding and personal transformation.

In ancient Greece, Athens was the administrative center of Attica. Attica, according to the Greek historian Thucydides, was a peninsula of southeastern Greece, originally consisted of many independent states ruled by kings who sometimes were friendly and sometimes hostile to Athens, its principle city. Around 8th century BCE Theseus did away with these separate governments and unified Attica under the domination of the king of Athens. Gradually as time passed the Athenian nobles created the positions of archons (magistrates, three at first and later, during the 7th century BCE, nine), elected at first every ten years and later annually, to replace the king in power. However, even after Athens later became a republic, one of these archons was the "king." This "king" had no regal powers; his role was a judicial one in cases of homicide. In the classical period the government was headed by three elected magistrates- the archon,

highest judge in civil suits; the king-archon; and the polemarch, highest commander of the army, who also had judicial powers—and by a council or senate, the *Boule*.

By the middle of the 7th century BCE, the members of the merchant class threatened the ruling nobles of the aristocratic republic of Athens with rebellion. The merchant class had developed some wealth and demanded more power within the government. The peasants and workers, who suffered from poverty and increasingly high debts, demanded less harsh laws than those administered by the nobles. In 621 BCE Dracon, whom many consider the first legislator in Athens, was appointed to codify the laws of Athens, so that the common man would be protected by the law rather than subject to the noble's harsh punishments. Ironically, Dracon's laws were so harsh that his name came to symbolize extreme severity. Once again rebellion threatened, and in 594 BCE Solon was given dictatorial powers to reform the laws of Athens.

Despite Solon's efforts to prevent the seizure of the Athenian government by a tyrant, Athens, like many of the Greek city states during 6th century BCE, fell under the rule of autocrats for a period of time. Finally, in 510 BCE exiled nobles formed an alliance, with the aid of Sparta, and succeeded in driving the final autocrat, Hippias, out of power. Under Cleisthenes, the leader of the Democratic Party, the government of Athens was reconstructed and the city-state became a democracy. Cleisthenes reorganized the *Boule* and, by organizing the territories, did away with the system of voting by clan.

Under Cleisthenes, Athens grew in strength and prestige, but was constantly threatened by the powerful Persian Empire, which had invaded and continued to invade Greek lands. After multiple defeats, the two most prominent cities, Athens and Sparta, led the combined Greek resistance to the Persian invasion in the years 490 to 479 BCE

and ultimately won. “The defeat of the solid Persian power by the divided and insignificant Greek cities surprised the world and inspired in Greece, and particularly in Athens, a confidence that knew no bounds (Knox 14). The Greeks defeated the Persians at Marathon in 490 BCE, again in the battles at Salamis in 480 BCE, and yet again in the battles at Plateau and Mycale in 479 BCE. This defeated was the basis for Aeschylus’s play, *The Persian Wars*.

Athens, at this time, was a democracy, the first in Western history. Athens’ power lay in the fleet with which she had battled against Persia, and Sparta’s land army was superior to any other in Greece. After the Persian War, the two allies, Sparta and Athens, became enemies. The idle years of the fifth century was disturbed by the constant hostility and both cities flirted with the ides of a full-scale war to come; as years passed this war seemed to become inevitable. The Peloponnesian War began in 431 BCE. Athens was defeated in his war in 404 BCE, and was practically destroyed.

By the end of the Peloponnesian war, the reputation Athens had achieved during the 5th and 4th century BCE as a center of intellectual and artistic achievement productively remained. Although the style of the playwrights had changed through the up and down years within the city-state, Athens was still the cultural center of the world. Athenian democracy, prior to the Peloponnesian War, encouraged, “the maximum development of the individual’s capacities and at the same time inspired the maximum devotion to the interest of the community” (Knox 15). It became a time of a delicate balance that fostered intellectual and artistic growth. At the height of its material and cultural prosperity, Athens produced one of the most impressive bodies of dramatic

literature the world has ever seen. Prior to the three great playwrights Aeschylus (c. 525-455 BCE), Sophocles (c. 496-405 BCE), and Euripides (c. 480-406 BCE), little is known about the origin and evolution of drama before their time period.

The origins of drama stretch back in time beyond the evidence of archeological and literary research. The main root seems to have been the worship of a god in a ritual dance. This type of ritual dance was a form of primitive magic designed to increase fertility. It stemmed from man's need to worship powers beyond his own control. The dance was in supplication to a god, the dance worked as a prayer. Imitation or impersonation (an primitive form of acting) began when one dancer portrayed the god in these dances. "What no one has explained (and it is perhaps inexplicable) is why the religious dances which are to be found in all primitive cultures, gave rise in Greece, and in Greece alone, to what we know as tragedy and comedy" (Knox 15). The spoken word was added when the dancer god chanted. There is no approximate date for when this primitive drama was created. Tradition, an interesting substitute for history, credits the final synthesis to Thespis of Athens (c. 535 BCE), "Father of the Drama."

The god whose celebration gave birth to drama was Dionysus, a god represented in Euripides's play, *The Bacchae*. Dionysus is presented as a bull or goat normally. It is told that because of him the vines yearly renewed themselves, the crops gave their yield, and the cattle multiplied. The celebration of Dionysus became so important to the Athenians that in 534 BCE the Festival of Dionysus was created as an official state holiday.

By the 5th century Greek tragedy had developed recognizable characteristics. In connection to its ritual origin, its prime function was religious and moral: many of its

themes mirrored a person's endless conflict both with nonhuman forces controlling his or her destiny and with him or herself. These conflicts, both internal and external, were embodied in the stories familiar to the Greek. Many were represented within the myths and legends that constituted their cultural heritage. Also, similar to the dance portion of the ritual, the form of early tragedy was choric and lyric rather than dramatic; theme overwhelmed character; narrative and interpretive elements overshadowed the limited actions of the protagonists.

Greek plays were normally presented in Athens during the Great Dionysian. The audience visited the theater not only to be entertained, but also to be enlightened. The orchestra, or dancing ground, was the central feature of the theater. Somewhere on or around the orchestra was the altar of Dionysus, where sacrifices were made before the plays began. The plays were written, nominated and selected from production, and staged in groups of four—three tragedies and one satyr-play, a short and usually obscene comedy. A jury of the citizens awarded prizes to the best playwright and to the star actor. Sometimes, as in the *Oresteia*, the plots were drawn from a single myth and developed; other times the three tragedies were not linked at all. The production was stylized: movements of the characters were slow, sets and costumes were simple, and the actors wore masks and elevated shoes.

The plays contained only two elements: the choral and the dramatic. Although Greek Tragedies came from ritualistic origins, they were structurally rigid. Plays normally began with some type of prologue to explain to the audience where the play was taking place and explains the situation. It continued with alternating long choral odes and acted scenes, and concluded with a finale. The long choral lyrics provided the audience

with as much comment on and interpretation of action as it unfolded action itself. Closer to the end of the 5th century, enacted scenes became more important and provided the audience with the ability to make their own interpretations of the play.

Normally the dramatic impact of a Greek tragedy relied on the audience's previous knowledge of the plot. The playwright relied on three main devices: recognitions, reversals, and dramatic irony. "In a recognition scene the protagonist learns an important truth about himself and his circumstances. This knowledge precipitates a reversal of situation, in which the action changes direction completely. Because the audience knows the truth before it is unfolded to the hero, dramatic irony compact with plot structure" (Franklin). The audience sat enthralled, awaiting the protagonist's recognition of the truth, but similarly the audience pitied the hero and feared his future.

The earliest of the great tragedians was Aeschylus (c. 525- 455 BCE). He was born near Athens at Eleusis. Aeschylus came from an aristocratic family and desired above all else to be considered a loyal citizen who had fought for his country at Marathon. "He belonged to the generations of the Persian Wars: in his day the man of deeds was greater than the artist, and it is almost in spite of himself that we describe him as a literary man. Nevertheless, in his hands the drama became a new and fully developed art that had cast off all traces of its primitive beginning" (Robinson x). Prior to his death in 455 BCE, he saw Athens develop into the center of Greek civilization. Also, Aeschylus began to observe the change in religion in Athens. Greek religion was emerging from tribalism and moving towards universalism, shedding barbaric tendencies and reaching for more humanistic qualities. The gods of Homer who were portrayed at

immoral, jealous, and motivated by internal wants were reproduced as gods who portrayed ethical human behavior. Main themes that appear when reading Aeschylus's plays are triumph of democracy over tyranny, and Enlightenment and order over irrationality and violence.

Aeschylus was the first to introduce a second actor onto the stage, thus creating actual dialogue that could progress a scene. He initiated the use of appropriate costumes, masks, and boots to promote characterization of characters. As mentioned previously, Aeschylus's main focus was on theological and religious. Most of the human tragedy of his characters is self-caused, as with Agamemnon in the *Oresteia*, but they do not necessarily serve as the cause of their end (they do not normally kill themselves). Most of the moral decisions are sanctioned by Olympians powers, such as Zeus, who personifies the Law or Reason of the world. The characters want to conform to their religious devotions or to spirituality (humility) overshadows the tragic characters of Aeschylus's dramas.

The Persians is an Athenian tragedy by Aeschylus. It was first produced in 472 BCE, and it is the oldest surviving play in the history of theatre. The play dramatizes the Persians response, emotionally, to their military defeat in the Battle of Salamis, which occurred in 480 BCE. It is also the only Greek tragedy that is based on contemporary events. Aeschylus shocked his audience by creating a compassionate portrayal of the enemy of his people; Euripides later does this in *The Trojan Women* as well.

Although the victory of the Greeks over the Persians is mentioned multiple times within the play, the underline warning to the audience is clear. Greeks should not allow

the cockiness of victory overshadow the Greek's win. The voice is solemn throughout the entire play, not celebratory. The word "woe" is used multiple times to express the sorrow of the Persians. The protagonists of the play are the Persians, not the Greeks, and Aeschylus uses that as a way to invite empathy and understanding into his audience. He creates an enemy who has human qualities, so that the Greek audience can identify with the "other." For example, when Atossa, the Persian queen, brings libations to the gods, Greeks can relate to this because they also bring libations to the same gods.

The Persians is an ideal place to begin to explain the "Inward Turn of Consciousness," because it is where the gods are introduced as all powerful. Even though the gods are not included in the sense of actually being part, in person, during the play, the gods are mentioned to explain why certain events happened. The message being, if you do not respect the gods you will pay the price. For example, Darius, the ghost of the previous king of Persia, accuses Xerxes, the current king of Persia, of being too proud when he built a bridge over the Hellespont, explaining that he upset the gods and brought this destruction on himself. Basically, Aeschylus was saying that one man's actions could create the downfall of an entire nation, and a person must not become proud and offend the gods. Unlike with later plays, Aeschylus's plays give the gods full power. He focuses on the religious aspect and relates all misfortune to the anger of the gods. The Persians caused their own downfall, by offending the gods, even though the gods were the ones who "carried out" the actual destruction.

In today's world, this play is still relevant. Although people do not believe that gods are in full control of a person's, and society's, future; people must still heed Aeschylus's warning. The battle of the Greeks versus the Persians could easily be

compared to the war occurring between the Middle East and the United States. If a society becomes too proud and sure of itself, it is possible they can become lazy and ultimately be taken over, much like the Persians.

Both *The Persians* and Aeschylus's play, *Prometheus Bound*, were written during the height of Athens. *Prometheus* was written in 430 BCE. Everyone in the audience would have known the background history for the Persian war and everyone would know the myth about Prometheus. The audience would know prior to the gods of Olympus there for the Titans. The Titan's king was Kronos, and he was the father of Zeus. Zeus overthrew Kronos, with the help of Prometheus, a Titan himself. However, Zeus ultimately imprisoned Prometheus because he wanted to save the humans and gave them the gifts of the Gods (fire, art, wisdom, etc—i.e. civilization). He is doomed for something unjustifiable; he is being punished for possible actions. *Prometheus Bound* introduces an important aspect of, "The Inward Turn of Consciousness," that people must suffer into wisdom. Although *The Persians* touches on this concept, it is highlighted fully in *Prometheus Bound*.

In Prometheus's case he is physically suffering for helping the humans. The war in this play is essentially humans versus gods, but the gods would do anything to remain in control. Humans are slowly becoming truth-seekers, which are later fully developed in Sophocles and Euripides, and breaking out of bondage. Aeschylus, like Sophocles and Euripides, gives the audience knowledge within a story, but does not necessary go any further than that. The human's actions, or lack of actions, are still because of the Gods. Prometheus gives humans the will to break out of bondage, but still is a god who

provides them with the tools. Later, Sophocles gives knowledge, but it takes an inward turn that requires the character to understand themselves from a psychological sense.

Aeschylus begins to introduce a tragic vision in his plays; the idea that to arrive at knowledge we must understand there is always pain and suffering. Knowledge is an essential piece of being human, so humans continue to search for it. We are born, we suffer, and we die. Although, at this point in Greek tragedy, gods are still in control of human's doom. Ironically, Aeschylus shows that all-power without all-knowledge will destroy itself (as Zeus will marry Thetis and conceive his own destroyer) and all knowledge without power can do nothing but suffer and threaten, as Prometheus does by knowing Zeus's future but refusing to tell him. Prometheus provides humans the opportunity to go from savagery to civilization, and brings humans from the dark into the light. "In Shelly's famous poem Prometheus stands for the democratic movement of the nineteenth century Europe in its struggle against the Holy Alliance of the king, emperor, and tsar" (Knox 19).

The final play analyzed by Aeschylus was *The Oresteia* trilogy—*Agamemnon*, *The Libration Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. *The Oresteia* is the only trilogy to have survived from antiquity. It was also written during the high time in Athenian history. Athens had just given rise to the Arepagus, or the Supreme Court of Greece. Everyone was elated about the idea of fair, juried, justice. *The Oresteia* is the story of the succession of curses that fell on the House of Atreus. Once again Aeschylus's audience would have know prior to the performance about the curse on the House of Atreus. The curse began prior to Atreus and his brother Thyestes, but came full circle when Thyestes seduced Atreus's wife. Atreus became so angered that he kills Thyestes children and

feeds them to his brother as revenge. This began the blood lust within the House of Atreus. Atreus's sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus, inherited the curse that had fallen on their father. When Menelaus's wife, Helen, fled to Troy he asked his brother to lead an expedition to bring her back. The winds were against the ships and eventually Agamemnon had to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, thinking that would appease the gods. Clytemnestra, at the opening of the play, is plotting to kill Agamemnon for shedding the blood of their daughter.

“Above all [curses, war, etc] stands Zeus, who brings all things to pass, but the characters...are given some opportunity for the display of personal initiative” (Robinson x). So, although Zeus and the Olympian gods control everything, they occasionally allow humans to take initiative and think for themselves, but they must face the consequences of their actions. As with Aeschylus's previous works, the gods are the main controllers of all human action and fate. However, at this point in history, probably due to the rise of the Arepagus, people are beginning to become partially self-aware of themselves and their actions. This is seen more in *The Libration Bearers* and *The Eumenides*. Also, in the 5th Century BCE, Greek religion was undergoing a basic change—moving from tribalism and moving towards universalism. According to Dr. Franklin, Ph.D, Greeks were:

“shedding barbaric practices and reaching for more humanistic ideals...In the *Oresteia* Aeschylus reexamined the traditional gods and the old moral codes. In the actions of the heroes and gods, he projected his convictions about the relationship between divine law and human justice, the source and the nature of evil and suffering, and the extent of man's responsibility for his behavior” (Franklin).

Agamemnon, the first piece of the trilogy, introduces the idea that justice is not simple. Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife, and Agestrus, her lover, motives for killing Agamemnon are solely based on revenge. They do not think of the consequences that may follow. In killing Agamemnon, Clytemnestra serves solely as a link in the "resistless chain of blood-revenge, a tool, as it were, of the inevitable retribution that overtakes evil" (Robison xi). Even though Clytemnestra believes she is achieving justice for her daughter, and in many ways a modern audience can empathize with her, in actuality she is only feeding the curse. Justice in the first part of the trilogy is subjective and formal; the characters have no self-awareness of actions. The characters have blindly accepted their retributive actions, making the audience question the cost of personal, retributive "justice."

In the next piece of the trilogy, *The Libration Bearers*, the children of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's children, Electra and Orestes, avenge their father by killing their mother. Orestes, the person the title, *The Oresteia*, is based on, is the murderer and ends up being chased down by the Furies, who are trying to gain justice for the dead Clytemnestra. Unlike like *Agamemnon* characters, Orestes questioned himself and became painfully aware that he had no options at this point. He cannot escape fate, or the pain of being human (as mentioned in the previous two Aeschylus plays). Aeschylus expands the tragic vision making it neither black nor white, but merely a choice between two equally bad alternatives. Orestes is given orders to revenge his father by Apollo, but now the Furies want to kill him as well. He is given no easy choice. Orestes is innocent, as much as he is guilty. How can a person be both innocent and guilty? This is a concept later developed in Sophocles writing.

The greatness is finally reached in *The Oresteia* during *The Eumenides*. In this final part, the Furies, who seem to represent an old justice, or a savagery type justice, pursue Orestes, but he expiates the crime he had to commit as a duty to Apollo; with his suffering came obedience and wisdom. He is ultimately purified by Apollo and acquitted by the Athenian Council of the Aeropagus, probably based off of Athens new Supreme Court system. However, this Athenian Council is still sitting under the presidency of Athena. The gods of Olympus aid a family to stop its constant suffering, but still seem to control the new, modern form of justice. The Athenian council is the symbolic creation of a social, objective justice system. Aeschylus uses the *Oresteia* to not only validate the world he was living in, but call out things as well. Orestes knew what he did as wrong, and was ultimately forgiven because he was aware of his crimes.

“This tempering justice with mercy...was in keeping with the growing sense of kindness and the religious spirit of the day, which expressed itself in diverse forms. Progressive as he was, Aeschylus held fast to the hereditary faith of his race...he could only conceive Zeus as combining the highest degree of power, splendor, and sublimity” (Robinson xi). Aeschylus pictured his society as perfect state, but wanted to warn people of the power of greed and disrespecting the gods. The gods, in Aeschylus’s plays, symbolized the ultimate fate; they were not solely religious figures but represented justice as well. If humans accomplished anything, like those in *Prometheus Bound*, it was due to the assistance of a higher power. Gods helped move humans from a savage world, filled with chaos, into a lawful civilization still cushioned by Zeus and the other Olympian gods. The “Inward Turn of Consciousness,” is still set primarily on the gods, as the

authorizing figures, and all moral imperatives made by humans still require some type of supernatural sanction by Zeus, who personifies the Law.

After Aeschylus came Sophocles (c. 496- 406 BCE). He was born at Colonus, the scene of Oedipus' death (the protagonist in the *Theban Plays*). Sophocles came from a wealthy family who gave Sophocles a traditional education in music, dancing, and gymnastics. He led a successful life; Sophocles was elected *strategus*, or general, twice and was appointed one of the ten *proboulio*, or commissioners. Robinson states,

“Certainly Sophocles did not consciously regard himself as a teacher or a innovator in religious matters; in his plays the gods had a conventional role and he presented as normal their more appealing aspects. The real concern of Sophocles was the human fortunes of his characters. This inevitability grew out of his background...” (xi)

Sophocles was interested in what effect life had on a man's character and soul. Even though Sophocles wrote about human suffering and conflict with more understanding and truthfulness, it is ironic that he achieved a life of a fulfilled and happy man. No other Greek tragedian surpassed him, “in depicting the suffering and the dignity of humans in their search for the truth about themselves, which is both the terrible price and the reward of our engagement in fate” (Franklin).

Sophocles introduced many new innovations into Greek theatre as well. He introduced the third speaking actor, a more extensive use of scenery, and an increase in the number of the chorus from twelve to fifteen. Most importantly, Sophocles based most

of his plays on the old legends. So, his characters are both individuals and universal figures that the audience would have known about.

Sophocles, as stated above, mainly focused on the character and person psychology. As in Aeschylus's plays, human tragedy is largely self-caused, but unlike Aeschylus the moral imperative informing his plays is not a result of, or does it require, supernatural sanction. "Human tragedy is less a transgressing divine command than a psychological reality arising from the human condition itself" (Franklin). Humans are now tragic because they are humans; this concept was touched on in Aeschylus's plays. The human condition always includes tragedy, but for once it is not because of divine law.

Sophocles search for the truth in the existing moral order helped him produce many works that questioned right and wrong. One of which was the play *Electra* (418 BCE). *Electra* centered on Electra, sister of Orestes and daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. In this version, Electra sends her brother Orestes away in order to protect him. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus rule the kingdom, and mistreat the rebellious Electra. Electra prays for the return of Orestes to revenge their father, and ultimately Orestes comes and kills his mother.

While Aeschylus wrote during the greatness of Greek civilization and chose not to include Electra as a main character, Sophocles wrote during the impending downfall and chose to not only include Electra as an important but as a character with human strengths and psychological dimensions. Even Clytemnestra is portrayed not so much as a villain in this play, but as woman who was wronged and did the only thing she could

have done—killed Agamemnon as revenge for her daughter. Both female characters have new well-rounded dimensions that draw pity from the audience. Clytemnestra says:

“Thy father—this is thy pretext—was slain by me. Yes, by me—I know it well; it admits of no denial; for justice slew him, and not I alone,—justice, whom it became thee to support, hadst thou been right minded; seeing that this father of thine, whom thou art ever lamenting was the one man of the Greeks who had the heart to sacrifice thy sister to the gods—he, the father, who had not shared the mother’s pangs” [530-550]

Another woman introduced is Chrysothemis, sister of Electra and Orestes, is the opposite of Electra. She would be more relatable to the Greek community, because she is more of a passive, insubordinate woman figure. Electra and Chrysothemis are parallel forms to Antigone and her sister, Ismene, later seen in the *Theban Plays*. Sophocles creates a variety of women, but Electra, the main character, is a strong, important woman who still is reliant on men. The audience during plays in the 5th Century was mainly male, so why include women who undercut authority (Medea, Antigone, Electra)? It could be to have the audience begin questioning and thinking about the different dimensions of every character within a play. A person could be, guilty but innocent, as with Clytemnestra and killing her husband. Every character was given new humanistic qualities that made the audience question if they deserved their fate.

Another play Sophocles wrote titled, *Ajax*, would cause the audience question if the protagonist was innocent, but guilty. This play took place during the last years of the Trojan War at an Argive camp. Ajax means “aiai” which means “to cry out.” Ajax was one of the bravest Greek warriors and his story taught the audience that a man can excel

in strength and riches, but he should never boast against the gods. Ajax is angered he does not receive Achilles shield and under Athena's power he believes he kills all of the men at his camp out of anger for having not gotten the shield.

"I stopped him. I threw him down into his eyes an overwhelming sense of murderous joy and turned his rage against the sheep and cattle and those protecting them—the common herd which so far has not been divided up. He launched his attack against those animals and kept on chopping down and slaughtering..." [65-70]

Self-destruction, or self-caused tragedy, is a regular theme in Greek tragedies as mentioned previously, and Ajax is not an exception. When Ajax realizes what he has done, he is instantly apologetic and ashamed. His pride is gone; he is at irretrievable ruin. He is an object of scorn and detestation, and shame to his honored father. Ajax's only resource left is suicide. Yet, unlike prior plays, his death is a free act, a deliberate resolve. Ajax does not know if he would have still killed all of the men if he had not gone insane, and his courage distains compassion and sympathy from the audience. Again the audience is faced with a man, whom can be considered guilty but still innocent. Ajax chose the end of his story, he was aware of human nature and himself, and chose to die. Sophocles created a character with deep psychological dimensions, unlike the characters in Aeschylus's plays.

A question Sophocles poses to the audience is, "Would Ajax have actually killed the men? Did Athena make him crazy out of her own amusement?" Another thing different in this play was that Sophocles indirectly shed a negative light on the gods. The

audience seems empathetic towards Ajax, because he is a self-conscious hero, and look scornfully on Athena, whose motives are unknown.

Philoctetes was produced in 409 BCE, and continues the inner battles within the Sophocles's well-rounded characters. The audience would have been familiar with the story of Philoctetes, the man who light the pyre on Mount Oeta and received Heracles' famous bow and arrows, tipped with poison, which never missed their mark. He fought for the Greeks, but on an island near Lemnos, stepped on a serpent sacred to the Goddess Chryse, and received a wound that would never heal. Odysseus advised the men to abandon him in Lemnos. There, Philoctetes remained for ten years, until the last years of the Trojan War, when a prophecy stated that the Greeks could not win without Philoctetes and Heracles' bow and arrows. Odysseus, accompanied by Neoptolemus, the young son of Achilles, plan to manipulate Philoctetes to help the Greek army.

Sophocles, *Philoctetes*, like in *Electra* and *Ajax*, has characters with multiple dimensions. His orientation is towards the character and their personal psychologically, rather than how the gods make them act. Although Zeus is the one who decrees that Philoctetes will rejoin the Greek army, the humans must carry about the actions. Also, it is the humans, or specifically Odysseus, who puts the Greek army in this position to begin with by leaving Philoctetes on the island.

The main thing Sophocles seemed to allude in the play was the effect of war on the personal psychologically of a person. For example, Neoptolemus is a soldier, who has not yet been to war. So, in a sense, he is still "innocent," which is why he cannot trick Philoctetes like Odysseus can. However, as myth shows, Neoptolemus will eventually become a killer. He will be the one to kill Prime, the king of Troy, in cold-blood, on an

It is the contrast between the supreme will of the gods and the vain attempts of mankind to escape the evil that threatens them. Oedipus originally tries to escape the prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother, but instead runs straight into the situation. Oedipus falls to fate not because of some type of divine intervention, but because he is the man he is. All aspects of his character (proud, man of action, kingly) good and bad alike lead him straight into his self-caused downfall. Oedipus says in his opening speech, "How can I, being the man I am, being King Oedipus do other than all I know?" The development of the action right through to the reveal shows the audience all aspects of Oedipus's character at work in his process of self-revelation and self-destruction. For example, his first decision in the play to listen to Creon's message from Delphi in public rather than in private is evidence of Oedipus's solicitude for his people and his trust in them. The audience related to the Athenian characteristics held by Oedipus, and probably felt he suffered more than he deserved

Oedipus at Colonus, continues the story, and places the audience at the last hours prior to Oedipus's death. The third piece of the trilogy was the last play Sophocles ever wrote and was not performed until after his death. Oedipus was banished from Thebes to wander as a blind man, accompanied only by his daughter Antigone.

"He [Oedipus] is about to become what the Greeks called a "hero," that is, a man whose achievements, character, and suffering in his life are almost superhuman and who after his death remains in some strange way alive, still powerful for good and evil in his grave, where he is worshipped and placated by offerings and prayer" (Knox 26).

At the beginning of the trilogy, Oedipus is presented to the audience a man chastened by adversity. He realizes little by little the prophecy about him has been fulfilled, and by his choice he chooses where he will die. He, like Ajax, cannot escape his fate, but he can change how he reacts to the situation. Oedipus at the beginning of the play constantly seeks for the truth; there is a shift in the “Inward Turn of Consciousness.” It is not the gods whom interfere with fate, but we are instead just fated to live. Since we are fated to live, we are fated to suffer. But it is our attitude towards fate that changes our own perspectives.

The final piece of the trilogy is *Antigone*, and it is based after Oedipus’s death. His sons, Eteocles and Polynices, did not try to help their father when he was banished wandering around and after Oedipus died in Colonus, they fought for the throne of Thebes. Both brothers end up killing one another in battle, and the throne of Thebes fell into the hands of Creon. He forbids the burial of Polynices, the traitor who brought foreign troops against his own city. Antigone, unlike her sister, goes against the decree and putting dirt on her brother in the dark of the night. Ultimately, Creon buries Polynices, but by this point Antigone had already gone and killed herself.

Once again, Sophocles creates a female character that dominates the stage. Unlike Electra though, Antigone acts completely on her own. Ismene is the foil to Antigone within the story. As soon as Ismene hears Creon’s orders, she says she can do nothing. She believes she is not a free agent to make decisions. The audience of Sophocles would have been used to a lowly woman status in Greek, and so Ismene reaction would not have been surprising. It is Antigone who argues with Creon about the morality of the edict and the morality of her actions who would baffle the audience. Sophocles makes the audience

question, which law is greater, god or man? Also, could a woman be right over the judgment of a man?

Sophocles, once again, probably wanted to warn the audience about hubris. Creon was the chief agent in the play who caused his own suffering, as well as Antigone's suffering. At the end of the play he loses his son and his wife, to suicide, and has only his position on the throne left. Creon could not escape the prophecy that he would lose a son of his own loins, and instead of accepting that and reacting in a different manner, his actions lead to his downfall. Like Oedipus, Creon's actions, not divine intervention, caused his ruin. Sophocles cleverly confronts two major themes—state versus god, and fate versus self-caused destruction. He continues the, fate versus self-caused destruction, in his last play, *Women of Trachis*.

In *Women of Trachis*, Deianeira is worried about her husband, Heracles, who has been away longer than she expected. The audience eventually learns Heracles has completed his labors for the gods and has taken on a new wife. Deianeira is hurt by her jealousy, but not angered at the woman, Iole, because she understands how beauty can bring down a nation. Even though the new woman does not anger Deianeira, she still wants Heracles back as her own and offers him a love charm, which turns out to be poison. When she realizes she killed her beloved, she takes her own life. "Directly after, Heracles is brought onto the stage, raging against his death and trying to control his emotions, the manner of his death, and the future of his tree" (27). He decides that he will die without a sound, in a funeral pyre beside a friend, and his son will marry Iole.

The first conflict within the play is between a woman and a man, but the audience cannot blame one or the other for their actions. Heracles is a man with a demanding life,

and during that time taking on another wife was not taboo. Deianeira is a lonely woman, who has been waiting for her husband; only to find out he has married someone else. Both characters are well rounded, and full of dimensions. Deianeira and Heracles are the tragic heroes in this play. Deianeira is responsible for Heracles death, although unknowingly at first. He did not intend to kill him, much like Oedipus and his father, and so once again she is guilty but not guilty for her crimes. Unlike Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon*, Deianeira remains compassionate towards Iole because she herself has been the spoils of war before and can empathize with a woman's flaw, beauty, being her downfall. Sophocles character are progressing along the idea of an "Inward Turn of Consciousness," and are becoming more aware of themselves, of others, and recognizing it is their own actions that create their downfall, not a divine intervention.

The last of the great Greek Tragedians was Euripides (480 BCE- 405 BCE). He was born in Salamis and came from a family of high social position. Euripides is considered one of the first of the moderns. "The apostle of humanism, Euripides issues his dramas as epistles to mankind. His message was a moral and spiritual interpretation of the utterance of Protagoras: man is the measure of all things" (Robinson xiii). He was the first of the three to cast off traditional moorings; he wanted his audience to empathize with beggars, cripples, slaves and women; all of whom hold lowly statures in society. Euripides was a skeptic, and a bitter realist. His realist ideas came out of his writing, and hit the audience over the head with his opinions about god and human nature. The change in play type and message was clear even in Euripides' choice of subject and central character. He would still include myths, but the myths he chose would be exotic and

disturbing, and the protagonist, in many cases, were women not men. His tragic heroes are no longer kings like Oedipus, but instead strong woman, like Medea.

Euripides took the personal and psychological approach, but unlike Sophocles who focused on the psychological awareness of tragedy and the human condition, Euripides examined the, “mysterious and subterranean realm of psychic necessity—a world haunted and stalked by daemonic power and the “great gods of existence”—to reveal the deep and primordial psychic states that inform and motivate individuals, consciously or otherwise” (Franklin).

Basically, as Sophocles focused on the awareness of choice, Euripides focused on the awareness of choice and the urges behind that choice. For example, originally in Aeschylus that gods would intervene in human’s life and physically get involved, or the gods would be the ones to cause the harm or revenge. Sophocles created characters that were aware that their downfalls were self-caused, and did not rely on divine intervention. Euripides took it a step further and introduced the idea of the urges or yearning within an individual. Aeschylus would have thought of Aphrodite as an actual flesh and blood figure. Euripides saw her as a passion, the longing or wants within every person.

Both Sophocles and Euripides wrote a play called, *Electra* (413 BCE), but Euripides took an entirely different approach crafting this tragic figure. Euripides’s *Electra*, unlike the virgin who never married in Sophocles version, is married, but still a virgin, and lives as an outcast in the countryside with her husband. Similar to before, she urges for Orestes to return and save her from such a miserable existence, and eventually ends up accomplishing her goals. She and Orestes kill Clytemnestra and her husband,

thee, for myself am not so exceeding glad at the deed that I have done, my child” [572-578]. Clytemnestra is not portrayed as an evil villain who deserves death, but rather a woman trying to make amends.

Electra and Orestes are not the tragic heroes in this tragedy, but rather come off as cruel and complaining siblings. Electra rants constantly about her, “hateful existence...thy path of tears.” Also, Electra and Orestes play a cruel, practical joke on the old man who had originally saved Orestes from death. They both appear as questionable characters, whose revengeful urges overtake them. At the end of the play, they do not seem joyful over their revenge but instead melancholy. Once they have accomplished this psychic necessity, they do not know what to do next.

Another play of Euripides titled, *The Madness of Heracles* (416 BCE), personifies madness. Even though Hera, Zeus’s wife, is involved with causing the madness of Heracles to occur and the killing of his wife and children—it is up to Heracles on how he handles the situation. Violence and madness are parts of nature, and Heracles needs to confront the issue and begin to forgive himself. Theseus, the King of Athens, arrives in the play to convince Heracles not to commit suicide for his actions. It is brought to Heracles attention, and the audience, that the gods whom everyone fears and cowers under commit evil acts and still continue to live on Olympus. Heracles argues that, unlike humans, gods have no desires and humans are driven by the urges within. Euripides seems to have created a redemption story, where Heracles realizes he must rely on himself and *not* the gods (moral goodness).

Although this seems to be a redemption story, there is still some speculation on Euripides real intentions. He takes an inspiring story and makes it ludicrous. The

ascension of Heracles at the end of the play appears ridiculous and out of place, making it seem like he was making fun of a serious event. The playwright is cynically self-aware, but more aware of the “meta” understanding. He uses mythic stories, but is a supposed Atheist himself. This could be why he put the gods in a negative light, and brought attention to the fact that gods make mistakes too. Gods now appear more human because they have the same human flaws and urges.

Euripides uses extravagant endings often in his plays. Another example is with, *Medea* (431 BCE), one of Euripides most popular plays. *Medea* is the story of a woman who is abandoned by the man she loves and for whom she has given up everything. Jason, Medea’s husband, finds out he can marry the daughter of a king and so dismisses Medea completely. Medea comes off as an awful villain because she kills their children as revenge against Jason for throwing her aside. She wanted to remove any future generations. Although Jason is the “victim,” Euripides portrays him as an egotistical rascal who does not care about Medea’s feelings whatsoever. And instead of hating Medea, the audience is left to observe a heartbroken woman who has the power to do as she wishes and reacts without thinking about the constraints of society. Euripides does not have a resolution to the problem, but instead has Medea flee to Athens in a magic chariot drawn by winged dragons.

“If *Oedipus* is, in one sense, a warning to a future generation which has embarked on an intellectual revolution, *Medea* is the ironic expression of the disillusionment that comes after the shipwreck. In this play we are conscious for the first time...the artist’s feeling of separation from his audience, the isolation of the poet” (Knox 27). Instead of writing plays that would entertain and not cause conflict, Euripides chose to write about

what interested him. As mentioned before, he still chose to write about popular myths but puts an exotic and disturbing twist on most. Medea, is both a woman and a savage, and would automatically cause the audience to have a prejudice towards her. The tragic hero is no longer a character as renowned and prosperous as Oedipus, but a woman, who, ultimately is not even punished for her wrongdoings. “Compared to her the credulous king [who she bargained sanctuary with] and her husband are children, and once her mind is made up, she moves them like pawns to their proper place in her barbaric game” (Knox 27). We think Euripides wanted to shake the audience from their complacent pride in the superiority of Greek masculinity.

All throughout the play the characters call out to the gods, but the only thing the gods to do is send Medea a chariot to make her exit. This raises the question of the attitude of the gods. Why would they help Medea escape after her crimes? Euripides once again probably wanted to dramatize disorder. “It is the nightmare in which the dream of the fifth century was to end, the senseless fury and degradation of permanent violence” (Knox 28).

The poetical genius of Euripides is most evident in *Hippolytus* (428 BCE). The play is about Phaedra’s passionate love for her stepson, Hippolytus, a young man who has sworn to be chaste. She wants to die because she is so distraught over her disgraceful passion. Although Hippolytus is technically the victim, who ultimately dies because of lies written by Phaedra, it is Phaedra who the audience feels sorry for. Phaedra is only giving into her natural urges, unlike Hippolytus who tries to suppress his natural yearning for love and passion. The two goddesses, Aphrodite and Artemis, symbolize the struggle of passionate over and rigorous, proud chastity. “A conflict which in the end

compels Hippolytus to consider whether in his scorn for one and his devotion to the other he has not disobeyed the Greek precept, 'Avoid excess' (Robinson xiv).

Also, Hippolytus, like many of Euripides other characters, figure out they cannot escape their self-caused destruction, but they can control their attitude towards the situation. At the end of the play, Artemis tells Theseus, Phaedra's husband, the truth about Phaedra, but it is too late. Theseus has already asked Poseidon to take revenge on Hippolytus. Ultimately, it is Aphrodite, or the uncontrollable passion, that ignites the situation and defuses the situation. Hippolytus takes control of his death, like Heracles, and forgives his father in his last moments. Originally, Hippolytus could not suffer into wisdom because he was denying his natural urges, but at the end he begins to realize he cannot deny the feelings of passion.

The next play by Euripides analyzed was, *The Bacchae*, a complex and disturbing play. The audience would have known the mythic background concerning the god, Dionysus, and his birth prior to the play. They would know Zeus fell in love with Dionysus's mother Semele, she conceived a child, and Hera became jealous and tricked Semele into asking Zeus to reveal his actual being and it killed her. However, Zeus was able to save the child, Dionysus, by sewing the child to his thigh. Dionysus is the god of wine, of intoxication or ecstasy, of productivity, and of tragedy. In the start of the play, he comes to Thebes, the home of his mother, to avenge his mother, whom no one believed had Zeus's child. Ironically, people not believing Dionysus's mother created this entire situation. It is parallel to not acknowledging your longing, and running the risk of destroying yourself, as Dionysus destroys Thebes and the royal family.

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gods, as well as man's dependence on them. Gods are portrayed as jealous, headstrong, and capricious in the play. He recognizes that the Trojans fell due to their own actions, and now he shows the women are act more dignified than the whole Greek army. The only Greek woman written about was Helen, the woman who actually caused the Trojan War, and she puts the blame on everyone but herself. She is seen as obnoxious, and in many ways is the only one who actually deserves punishment for what she has done. Euripides deconstructs Greek's own victory, and humanizes the enemy. The only other time the enemy was humanized was in *The Persians* by Aeschylus. The play is an anti-war poem that puts a cold eye on what the Greeks were doing during the 415 BCE.

Greek Tragedy is still relevant in today's world, and when looking at ourselves and our relationships because every play carries a strong message of self-awareness, or lack there of. They examine the basic nature of human beings and their most basic conflicts. Since human nature does not change—we still have wants, needs, and urges—we will always experience the same conflicts. For example, when analyzing *Antigone*, an audience is not just observing the tension of moral law versus civic law, but instead notion of conscious objection and the idea of making self-aware choices. As a world, a society, and an individual we cannot become prideful of everything we have accomplished. I am not necessary saying, being overconfident will “offend the god,” but it will blind you, and you will become more likely to not listen to your conscious. People in our society repeat the past, never learning from past experiences or changing their attitude. I do not want our world to fall to the underdogs, like within *The Persians* and

The Trojan Woman. We must listen to the writers of the past, and even the writers of the present, and begin to open our conscious eye to urges and motivations around us.

Also, Greek Tragedies seek to answer the most basic question of all time—are there, or is there, a god(s)? The Greek Tragedians examine the debate between godly intervention and self-caused actions in life. Although the Greek Tragedians do this in many different ways; Aeschylus through an unwavering theological approach, Sophocles with a questioning approach, and Euripides as a full out question, each try to answer the question. The Greek Tragedians wonder if it's supernatural sanctions in Zeus, who personifies Law or Reason of the world, or if it is the human condition itself that creates tragedy. Are all humans tragic because they are human? It is a difficult question that many people have been trying to answer for ages.

Lastly, and I believe most importantly, the Greek Tragedies make you question yourself. In my study of Greek Tragedy, I realized how I began to recognize different decisions I was making on a daily basis and how it affected my life. I could not blame an divine intervention for causing me to be late for a class, or scream, “woo” to the gods because of family problems that were happening this semester. I needed to recognize, like Sophocles and Euripides, that most tragedy is self-caused. Humans were brought into life to suffer, which I know sounds like a pessimistic outlook on life, but it is because of the suffering you begin to appreciate yourself and your relationships, whether with god, the world, or the divine. Sophocles had it right when he wrote *The Oresteia*, tragedy will happen because we are human, we can only control our attitude towards it. Also, the Greek Tragedies, like so many works of the past, offer warning to its reader. This semester I, not only, read the Greek Tragedians, but I also began to question my moral

actions and their consequences. I would not say I am completely finished with my “personal transformation,” but this capstone helped me along my path at becoming a conscious human being.

This independent study was a historical and comparative study of Greek Tragedy. I closely read, analyzed, and tried to explain selected plays by the three Greek Tragedians: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. These analyses set the plays in their cultural, historical, and social context in 5th Century BCE, while focusing on the playwright’s thematic qualities. The more I read, the more I drew connections between play created by different playwrights. Many were based off known myths within Greek culture, like *Prometheus Bound* and *Medea*, but some were new creations all of their own, like *The Oresteia*—either way, all interrelated when looking at our idea of, “An Inward Turn of Consciousness.”

Through close analyses, an audience could observe a shift in 5th century BCE Greek Tragedy. This shift is not clean cut, by each individual playwright, but overlapping. We have observed that Aeschylus, and his writing, stemmed from an all-comprehensive perfection within that state, in which all citizens devoted their lives to protect. He focused heavily on the theological and religious, and in some cases, seemed to overshadow his own characters because of his religious devotion to the traditional gods. In his mind, and probably the mind of the audience in 5th Century BCE, moral imperative required supernatural sanctions in Zeus. Divine Law defined most decisions within his tragedies, even though they were self-caused.

This self-caused component is what overlapped Aeschylus and Sophocles. Sophocles's plays were written during a time when Athens was beginning to lose its power, and people were beginning to wonder if their society would be at war with Sparta. Also, it was during a time when, unlike Aeschylus, people began to question if it was divine intervention or moral imperative that motivated a person's actions. Sophocles's was most interested in the character and personal psychology, and although human tragedy was self-caused in the plays it was not a result of, nor did it require, supernatural sanction. People were beginning to take control of their attitude and recognize they may not control fate, but they control how they look at a situation.

Lastly, Euripides brought this concept of an, "Inward Turn of Consciousness," full circle. He did not focus at all on devotion to the Divine, but instead the personal and the psychological. As Sophocles's took the psychological awareness of actions and human condition, Euripides plummeted into the depths of a person's realm of psychic necessity. He wanted to look at the urges and needs that drove a person, and make the audience recognize it is not a supernatural sanction that motivates us, but instead the yearnings inside of us. Gods were not persons, in Euripides mind, but instead symbols of what they represented. He, probably purposefully, wrote over the top Divine interventions to show the audience that a god will not come down and help a situation, nor will you ascend like Heracles to Olympus. It is up to you how you begin a situation, you must deal with the consequences, and things are never necessary black and white. Euripides fully introduces the concept of gray.

Can a person be a tragic hero, but a villain? Can you be guilty but innocent? Greek Tragedians tried to explain those and many other questions on their quest for self-

understanding and personal transformation. I do not believe they thought their plays would still be relevant in today's world, but luckily for us they continue to be read and analyzed with new background knowledge. The "Inward Turn of Consciousness," is just a way to trace the change in thinking during the 5th Century BCE. The Greek Tragedians writing brings light to the conflicts that consumed both the playwrights and the audience. These plays will continue to baffle, to educate, and to relate to human nature, and provide humans with insight into themselves and the world around them.