Greek Tragedy and Medieval Romance

In today’s popular culture, heroes are celebrated in movies and TV shows. Centuries ago, other cultures immortalized their heroes in literature. Consider ancient Greek tragedy and medieval romance. One features ill-fated heroes who face defeat with dignity, and the other follows gallant, knightly heroes on perilous quests. Each type of hero reflects the values of its time and its society, but these values still appeal to us, many centuries later.

Part 1: Greek Tragedy

In literature, a tragedy is a form of drama that shows the downfall of a dignified, superior character who participates in events of great significance. The ancient Greeks, who developed tragedy, used it to explore ideas about humans’ relationship to the gods, often delving into such serious subjects as duty, suffering, and fate. These ideas were often developed through motifs, concepts or elements that recur throughout the play to help advance its plot and reveal its theme.

Familiarize yourself with the characteristics of Greek tragedy by examining this chart.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF GREEK TRAGEDY

**Tragic Hero**
The tragic hero at the center of a tragedy is a person of high rank who accepts his or her downfall with dignity. The tragic hero is one common archetype—a model from which similar heroes have been copied for centuries in mythic, traditional, and classical literature.

**Tragic Flaw**
A tragic flaw—an error in judgment or a weakness in character, such as pride or arrogance—helps bring about the hero’s downfall. The tragic hero recognizes this flaw and its consequences but only after it is too late to change the course of events.

**Catastrophe**
A tragedy ends with a catastrophe—a disastrous conclusion that usually involves multiple deaths. If the tragic hero does not die, then he or she suffers complete ruin.

**Chorus**
Throughout a tragedy, the chorus—a masked group of actors—observe and comment on the action through songs. Their responses and values were supposed to reflect those of the audience.

### CENTRAL BELIEF

**Fate**
The ancient Greeks believed in the idea of fate, or a destiny preordained by the gods no matter what action a person takes in the present. The Fates, or Moirai, were three goddesses who determined the length of a person’s life and how much suffering it would contain. Greeks held that it was impossible to escape one’s fate. This belief is reflected in such ancient tragedies as Oedipus the King and Antigone.
**MODEL: CHARACTERISTICS OF GREEK TRAGEDY**

*Oedipus the King* is one of the most famous Greek tragedies; the philosopher Aristotle based his definition of *tragedy* on this play. Which characteristics of Greek tragedy do you notice in this excerpt?

**from**

**Oedipus the King**

Tragedy by *Sophocles*, translated by Robert Fagles

**Oedipus.** My father was Polybus, king of Corinth. My mother, a Dorian, Merope. And I was held the prince of the realm among the people there, till something struck me out of nowhere, something strange . . . worth remarking perhaps, hardly worth the anxiety I gave it. Some man at a banquet who had drunk too much shouted out—he was far gone, mind you—that I am not my father’s son. Fighting words! I barely restrained myself that day but early the next I went to mother and father, questioned them closely, and they were enraged at the accusation and the fool who let it fly. So as for my parents I was satisfied, but still this thing kept gnawing at me, the slander spread—I had to make my move. And so, unknown to mother and father I set out for Delphi, and the god Apollo spurned me, sent me away denied the facts I came for, but first he flashed before my eyes a future great with pain, terror, disaster—I can hear him cry, “You are fated to couple with your mother, you will bring a breed of children into the light no man can bear to see—you will kill your father, the one who gave you life!” I heard all that and ran. I abandoned Corinth. . . .

*At the end of the scene, the chorus sings.*

**Chorus.** Destiny guide me always Destiny find me filled with reverence pure in word and deed. Great laws tower above us, reared on high born for the brilliant vault of heaven— Olympian sky their only father, nothing mortal, no man gave them birth. . . .

**Close Read**

1. What do you learn about the tragic hero Oedipus in lines 1–3? Consider his background and how others regard him.

2. What incident disturbs Oedipus’ happy existence?

3. According to the god Apollo, what tragic fate awaits Oedipus?

4. Reread the boxed text. Consider Oedipus’ response to the disturbing news at the banquet and the vision that Apollo flashes before his eyes. What possible tragic flaw does Oedipus display?

5. Summarize what the chorus says about destiny and the laws that rule human life.
Part 2: Medieval Romance

The heroes who populate the pages of medieval romances are not suffering, flawed figures but knights in shining armor. A **romance** is an adventure tale that features extravagant characters, exotic places, heroic events, passionate love, and supernatural forces. Romances first appeared in Old French literature of the 12th century and quickly spread throughout Europe. The best-known English romances concern the legendary King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

Romance literature expresses the ideals of chivalry, an elaborate code of honor that is described in the chart. As the stories entertain readers, they also convey medieval values of loyalty and Christian faith.

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**CONVENTIONS OF MEDIEVAL ROMANCE**

**Romance Hero**
The **romance hero** is a knight of superhuman strength, intelligence, and virtue who follows the code of chivalry.

**A Quest**
The hero of a romance often proves his worth by undertaking a **quest**, a journey motivated by love, religious faith, or a desire for adventure. He must overcome many obstacles on this quest.

**Exotic Setting**
Romances are set in imaginary kingdoms with great castles, enchanted lakes, and forests populated with giants and monsters.

**Supernatural Elements**
Sorcerers and magic spells, giants and dragons, mysterious evil forces and foreknowledge of future events—such supernatural elements all play a part in romances.

**Hidden Identities**
In a romance, others are often unaware of a character’s true identity. The truth is usually revealed at the climax of the tale.

**Episodic Structure**
Romances are not tightly structured; characters simply go from one adventure to the next.

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**CENTRAL BELIEF**

**Chivalry**
The code of chivalry required that a knight
- swear allegiance to his lord
- fight to uphold Christianity
- seek to redress all wrongs
- honor truth by word and deed
- be faithful to one lady
- act with bravery, courtesy, and modesty

These ideals guide the behavior of the knights in the romance literature you will read.
MODEL: CONVENTIONS OF MEDIEVAL ROMANCE

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a famous romance originally composed in verse. Gawain is a knight of King Arthur’s Round Table. On New Year’s Day, when all are gathered at the court, a giant green knight issues an unusual challenge: any man may strike him with an axe, provided the Green Knight can return the blow a year later. Notice how Gawain responds to the challenge.

from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
Romance retold by Constance Hieatt

The knight leaped down from his horse and handed the great axe to the king. While Arthur swung it to test its weight, the tall knight waited calmly. He tossed off his cloak, with no sign of fear.

But now Sir Gawain, who had remained quietly in his place at the table, spoke courteously to Arthur: “I beg you, let this contest be mine, dear lord—allow me to take your place. It is not seemly that you, our king, should accept such a challenge when all around you sit the bravest knights in the world. I am the least of them, and my life is worth little. But I am the first to ask. Let me be the one to take this knight’s dare.”

After Gawain accepts the challenge, the Green Knight prepares for Gawain’s blow.

The knight in green bent and pulled his long hair forward over his head, so that his neck was bare. Gawain gripped the weapon with both hands and raised it high over his head. He leaned forward on his left foot, and swung the axe down with such force that it went straight through the neck and bit into the floor. The Green Knight’s head fell to the ground and tumbled toward the high table, where knights and ladies drew back in horror as it rolled.

Yet the bleeding, headless body did not fall! The green man stood up, walked briskly over to his head, and picked it up by the long hair. Then he turned to his horse, caught hold of the bridle, and swung into the saddle, sitting there as easily as if nothing had happened. He held up the head, turning it to face the high table. It opened its red eyes and spoke: “Gawain, Gawain, remember the promise you made before your king and this company. I am the knight of the Green Chapel. Next New Year’s Day you will find me there. If you will look for me, you will find me. Therefore come, or be called coward by all men!”

Close Read

1. Reread Gawain’s speech in the boxed text. In what ways does he show the traits of a romance hero?

2. What elements of the supernatural are evident in this tale? Cite specific details to support your answer.

3. If he does not meet the Green Knight next New Year’s Day, how will Gawain violate the code of chivalry?
Part 3: Analyze the Text

Now you will read two excerpts from works you will study in this unit. The first excerpt is from *Antigone* (ān-tīg’ə-nē), which tells the story of Oedipus’ grown daughter and her conflict with Creon, her uncle and the king of Thebes. Here, Antigone tells her sister, Ismene, that she intends to bury their brother Polyneices, who died on the battlefield fighting against their country. Burying the dead is a sacred act, but Creon, by law, has forbidden this particular burial.

**from Antigone**

*Tragedy by Sophocles*, translated by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, Lines 47–72

**Ismene.** We cannot fight with men, Antigone! The law is strong, we must give in to the law. In this thing, and in worse. I beg the dead To forgive me, but I am helpless: I must yield To those in authority. And I think it is dangerous business To be always meddling.

**Antigone.** If that is what you think, I should not want you, even if you asked to come. You have made your choice; you can be what you want to be.

But I will bury him [our brother]; 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.

*It is the dead,*
Not the living, who make the longest demands:

We die forever. . . .

You may do as you like,
Since apparently the laws of the gods mean nothing to you.

**Ismene.** They mean a great deal to me; but I have no strength To break laws that were made for the public good.

**Antigone.** That must be your excuse, I suppose. But as for me, I will bury the brother I love.

**Ismene.** Antigone, I am so afraid for you!

**Antigone.** You need not be:
You have yourself to consider, after all.

**Ismene.** But no one must hear of this; you must tell no one! I will keep it a secret, I promise!

**Antigone.** Oh tell it! Tell everyone!

Think how they’ll hate you when it all comes out If they learn that you knew about it all the time!

**Ismene.** So fiery! You should be cold with fear.

**Close Read**

1. Reread the boxed text. What is Antigone’s motivation for wanting to bury her brother?

2. What contrasting Greek social values are represented through the argument between Antigone and Ismene?

3. What traits of a tragic hero does Antigone exhibit? In your opinion, does she seem to have a tragic flaw? Explain.

4. A fearful Ismene hints that Antigone will have to face the terrible consequences of her future actions. What tragic outcome do you predict?
This excerpt is from *Le Morte d’Arthur*, a 15th-century English collection of Arthurian romances. Here, King Arthur discovers that King Pellinore has injured a young knight. Angered, Arthur challenges King Pellinore to a joust, a form of medieval combat in which two mounted knights armed with long spears try to unseat each other from their horses. Merlin, a prophet and magician, has accompanied Arthur to the challenge.

from *Le Morte d’Arthur*

Romance by Sir Thomas Malory, retold by Keith Baines

Merlin accompanied Arthur to the well, and when they arrived they found King Pellinore seated outside his pavilion. “Sir,” said Arthur, “it would seem that no knight can pass this well without your challenging him.”

“That is so,” said King Pellinore.

“I have come to force you to change this custom of yours, so defend yourself!”

They jousted three times, each time breaking their spears, until the third time, when Arthur was flung from his horse. “Very well,” said Arthur, “you have won the advantage jousting; now let us see what you can do on foot.”

King Pellinore was reluctant to dismount and lose the advantage he had won; however, when Arthur rushed at him boldly with drawn sword, he grew ashamed and did dismount.

They fought until both collapsed from pain and exhaustion; their armor was splintered and the blood flowed from their wounds. They fought again, until Arthur’s sword broke in his hand. “Now,” said King Pellinore, “you shall yield to me, or die.”

“Not so!” Arthur shouted as he sprang at him, and grabbing him around the waist, threw him to the ground. Arthur was unlacing his helmet when, with a sudden fearful effort, King Pellinore overturned Arthur and clambered on top of him. King Pellinore had loosened Arthur’s helmet and raised his sword to strike off his head when Merlin spoke.

> “Hold your hand!” he said; “you will endanger the whole realm. You do not realize who it is you are about to kill.”
>
> “Who is it, then?”
>
> “King Arthur.”

Hearing this, King Pellinore feared that he would receive little mercy from Arthur if he spared him—so he raised his sword once more. Merlin adroitly put him to sleep with a magic spell.

> “You have killed him with your magic,” said Arthur hotly. “I would rather that my whole realm were lost, and myself killed; he was a magnificent fighter.”

> “He is more whole than you are,” Merlin replied. “He will not only live, but serve you excellently: It is to him that you will give your sister in marriage, and she will bear two sons—Sir Percivale and Sir Lamerok—who will be two of the most famous of the Knights of the Round Table.”

Close Read

1. The code of chivalry required that knights act with bravery and courtesy. How are these qualities reflected in Arthur’s and Pellinore’s behavior and actions? Support your answer with specific details.

2. What common characteristic of medieval romance is revealed in the boxed lines?

3. How does the supernatural play a role in the story? Is it a force for good or evil?

4. Which knight—Pellinore or Arthur—displays more qualities of a romance hero? Cite details from the excerpt to support your opinion.
Religious Origins  The drama of ancient Greece and Rome is referred to as classical drama. It arose in Athens from religious celebrations in honor of the Greek god Dionysus (dī’ə-nī’səs). These celebrations included ritual chants and songs performed by a group called a chorus. Drama evolved from these celebrations during the sixth century B.C., when individual actors began entering into dialogue with the chorus to tell a story.

The Theater  Greek drama was filled with the spectacle and pageantry of a religious festival. Attended by thousands, plays were performed during the day in an outdoor theater with seats built into a hillside. The action of each play was presented at the foot of the hill, often on a raised platform. A long building, called the skene, served as a backdrop for the action and as a dressing room. A spacious floor, the orchestra, was located between the skene and the audience, who sat in the theatron.

Actors and Chorus  The actors—all men—wore elegant robes, huge masks, and often elevated shoes, all of which added to the grandeur of the spectacle. Sophocles (sōf’ə-klēz’), an innovator in classical drama, used three actors in his plays; between scenes, they changed costumes and masks when they needed to portray different characters. The chorus—a group of about 15—commented on the action, and the leader of the chorus, the choragus (kə-rä’gəs), participated in the dialogue. Between scenes, the chorus sang and danced to musical accompaniment in the orchestra, giving insights into the message of the play. The chorus has often been considered a kind of ideal spectator, representing the response of ordinary citizens to the events unfolding in the play. Typically, the chorus communicated the values, beliefs, and ideas that were central to Athenian society.

Tragedy and the Tragic Hero  During Sophocles’ lifetime, three playwrights were chosen each year to enter a theatrical competition in the festival of Dionysus. Each playwright would produce three tragedies, along with a satyr (sā’tər) play, a short comic interlude.

As you recall, a tragedy is a drama that recounts the downfall of a dignified, superior character—a tragic hero—who is involved in
historically or socially significant events. The philosopher Aristotle was the first to define tragedy, theorizing that the form evokes both pity and fear in audiences—pity because they feel sorry for the tragic hero, fear because they realize that the hero’s struggles are perhaps a necessary part of human life. Tragedies often included archetypes, frequently used characters or events, and motifs, repeating elements that advanced the plot and illustrated the theme. At the end of a tragedy, an audience generally feels a sense of waste because a person who is in some way superior has been destroyed. Aristotle based his ideas about tragedy on Sophocles’ Oedipus the King, which he considered the perfect tragedy. Other Greek tragedies, such as Antigone, may not fit his model so perfectly.

**Mythological Sources** The subjects of Greek tragedy are myths and legends that were very familiar to a Greek audience. Myths, as you may know, are traditional stories about gods and goddesses; legends are stories about people believed to have once lived. Gods and goddesses are often characters in tragedies, and even when they do not appear on stage, they influence the fates of human characters. Usually a tragic hero’s downfall is the result of having offended the gods. The gods’ wishes are frequently made known through specially gifted characters—such as the blind prophet Teiresias in Antigone—who communicate with the gods. Because the myths and legends were so familiar, often employing archetypal characters and events, the audience already knew the outcome of events and could realize the significance of words and actions the characters were blind to. When the audience knows more than the characters do, the result is dramatic irony.

**Greek Deities** Some knowledge of Greek deities is needed to understand classical drama, as the dialogue is filled with allusions, or references, to gods and rituals. The ancient Greeks believed that their gods ruled the world from the top of Mount Olympus, Greece’s highest mountain. The gods’ ruler was Zeus, whose weapons were thunderbolts. Other deities included Ares, the god of war; Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty; Athena, the goddess of wisdom, for whom Athens was named; and Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility in whose honor dramas were first performed. The characters in tragedies honor and fear their gods and struggle to live in proper relationship to them. These characters’ struggles continue to fascinate audiences today.