**Oedipus the King**  
**Gateway-Type Writing Assessment**

**Introduction:** A tragic hero is a protagonist who displays many positive traits but who also has a tragic flaw, also known as a fatal flaw, that eventually leads to his demise. The concept of the tragic hero was created in ancient Greek tragedy and defined by Aristotle. Oedipus is regarded by many scholars as the exemplary tragic hero.

- **Writing Task:** Based on your understanding of tragedy and the tragic hero, as well as your knowledge of Sophocles’ play, defend Oedipus as a tragic hero.

**Documentation:**

In addition to what you already know about the play, use the documents provided to develop your answer. Be sure to appropriately cite all sources used as evidence in your paper by simply including the name of that document in parenthesis after your reference to it.

**Example of paraphrase:** Catharsis probably means a cleansing or cleaning out of our feelings (Doc. A).

**Example of quote:** “Aristotle’s term for this emotional purging is the Greek word *catharsis*” (Doc. A).

**DOCUMENT A**

In his famous "Poetics," the philosopher Aristotle laid the foundations for literary criticism of Greek tragedy. His famous connection between "pity and fear" and "catharsis" developed into one of Western philosophy's greatest questions: why is it that people are drawn to watching tragic heroes suffer horrible fates? Aristotle's ideas revolve around three crucial effects: First, the audience develops an emotional attachment to the tragic hero; second, the audience fears what may befall the hero; and finally (after misfortune strikes) the audience pities the suffering hero. Through these attachments the individual members of the audience go through a catharsis, a term which Aristotle borrowed from the medical writers of his day, which means a "purging." Clearly, for Aristotle's theory to work, the tragic hero must be a complex and well-constructed character, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. As a tragic hero, Oedipus elicits the three needed responses from the audience far better than most; indeed, Aristotle and subsequent critics have labeled Oedipus the ideal tragic hero. A careful examination of Oedipus and how he meets and exceeds the parameters of the tragic hero reveals that he legitimately deserves this title.

Oedipus' nobility and virtue provide his first key to success as a tragic hero. Following Aristotle, the audience must respect the tragic hero as a "larger and better" version of themselves….

The complex nature of Oedipus' "harmartia," is also important. The Greek term "harmartia," typically translated as "tragic flaw," actually is closer in meaning to a "mistake" or an "error," "failing," rather than an innate flaw. In Aristotle's understanding, all tragic heroes have a "harmartia," but this is not inherent in their characters, for then the audience would lose respect for them and be unable to pity them; likewise, if the hero's failing were entirely accidental and involuntary, the audience would not fear for the hero. Instead, the character's flaw must result from something that is also a central part of their virtue, which goes somewhat awry, usually due to a lack of knowledge. By defining the notion this way, Aristotle indicates that a truly tragic hero must have a failing that is neither idiosyncratic nor arbitrary, but is somehow more deeply imbedded -- a kind of human failing and human weakness. Oedipus fits this precisely, for his basic flaw is his lack of knowledge about his own identity. Moreover, no amount of foresight or preemptive action could remedy Oedipus' harmartia; unlike other tragic heroes, Oedipus bears no responsibility for his flaw. The audience fears for Oedipus because nothing he does can change the tragedy's outcome…

(taken from “Oedipus as the Ideal Tragic Hero,” by Peter T. Struck)
**DOCUMENT B**

A "reversal" is a change of the situation into the opposite, this change being, moreover, as we are saying, probable or inevitable...A "discovery," as the term itself implies, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing either friendship or hatred in those who are destined for good fortune or ill.

**DOCUMENT C**

It is time now to turn to a term which I have deliberately kept out of the discussion until this point, the word *tragedy* and its corollaries *tragic hero* and *tragic vision*. But now, having considered very cursorily some of the major points about *Oedipus the King*, I would like to introduce it in order to amplify the discussion of the play and to place that in a wider context.

Oedipus's story, I have argued, focuses our attention on a very particular heroic character, one who insists upon acting according to his own vision of experience, who persists freely in the course of action he has initiated, brushing aside or shouting down the objections or alternative suggestions of other people. He imposes on his life his own views of what he thinks is right, refusing to attend to what others are saying (he insists on agreement, rather than listening to others and weighing what they tell him). Oedipus, in his freedom, sets in motion a chain of events for which he accepts full responsibility and, even as disaster looms, he continues as before, not flinching or assigning blame or tasks to anyone else.

It's worth noting that, even when he learns the horrific truth of his life, Oedipus himself takes on the full responsibility for his own punishment. First, he stabs out his own eyes and then he insists on banishment. At no time in the play does he compromise: what needs to be done is what he decides needs to be done. And even in the face of the disastrous truth, Oedipus does not bend or break or start asking advice. He will act decisively until the very end.

In this respect, Oedipus stands in marked contrast to Gilgamesh, who, in response to the death of Enkidu is placed in a similar situation and for similar reasons—he thought he knew all there was to know about life. But Gilgamesh learns from that experience and changes. His behaviour towards others undergoes a significant transformation, and he comes back to Uruk at the end of the story a changed personality. Oedipus remains at the end of the play, for all the total reversal of his fortune, still the self-assertive man exercising full free control over his own life. If he is going to suffer, then he will determine what form that suffering will take.

Oedipus, of course, is more than just a particular character: he is also a character type. In fact, his story helps to define a certain heroic response to experience which we call *tragic*, and this play is commonly hailed as our greatest dramatic tragedy. While Sophocles's Oedipus is by no means our first tragic hero, he is certainly the most famous (outside of Shakespeare) and hence has exerted a decisive influence on literature in the West. Thus, I would like to spend a few moments looking at the general characteristics of his character, indicating how these help us to understand what we mean by a tragic hero (as opposed to other kinds of heroes), and then suggesting some observations about the vision of life which such a tragic hero exemplifies.

One major component in Oedipus's personality which helps to define him as a character we label as tragic is his attitude towards fate. Rather than aligning himself with it (as Moses does) or learning through experience to accept the mystery of fate (as Gilgamesh does) Oedipus chooses to defy fate. He will make his own decisions in his own way, and he will live with the consequences those bring. He will answer to his own sense of himself, rather than shape his life in accordance with someone else's set of rules or an awareness of something bigger and more important than himself. That's true of Oedipus at the start of the play, and he's doing the same thing at the end. At no point is he willing to compromise.

He is, if you like, a man totally committed to his own freedom to be what he thinks he must be, to live up to his own conception of heroic greatness. If there is an obstacle in the way (like Teiresias, for example), then that obstacle must be forcibly removed—it interferes with his sense of what's going on. Oedipus makes no effort to conceal what he is feeling or to
hesitate about acting on those feelings. Why should he? After all, he is Oedipus, whose greatness manifests itself in being entirely true to itself, without duplicity.

Obviously he has an enormous ego—the central purpose of his life is to assert that sense of himself. With this powerful ego comes a certain narrowness of vision, which has no room for alternative opinions or dissenting views, and often a very powerfully assertive voice (dominated, as I have observed, by the pronouns *I* and *me*). But (and this is crucial) he is also prepared to accept any and all the consequences of his actions. That, too, is a measure of his greatness. The Chorus at the end of the play (like the reader) may blame fate or the gods or the impossible demands of life. Oedipus does not. He remains the master of what happens to him. The responsibility is his, and what happens to him is entirely up to him.

We need to remember that he is always in a sense the chief architect of what is happening to him. What underscores the irony I referred to earlier is that the Oedipus is dealing with a situation in which he is increasingly having to cope with circumstances initiated by his own decisions. This last point is an essential one. What makes Oedipus so compelling is not that he suffers horribly and endures at the end an almost living death (a great many other non-tragic heroes suffer wretchedly). The force of the play comes from the connection between Oedipus's sufferings and his own freely chosen actions, that is, from our awareness of how he himself is bringing upon his own head the dreadful outcome. His freely chosen decisions are (we know) bringing things closer and closer to an inevitable conclusion. Looking forward in the play we can see that Oedipus is free to go in different directions; in that sense he is not compelled to do what he does. Looking back over the action from the conclusion of the play, we can see a link of inevitable consequences arising from the hero's free decisions.

This is an important point because in common language we often use the term *tragic* or *tragedy* as a loose synonym for *terrible*, *pathetic*, or *horrible* (e.g., a tragic accident). But strictly speaking in a literary sense, true accidents are never tragic, because they are accidents; they occur by chance. What makes Sophoclean tragedy so moving is the step-by-step link between the hero's own decisions throughout the play and the disaster which awaits. As Aristotle points out, Sophoclean tragedy works, in part, through this sense of inevitability. Oedipus is doomed, mainly because he is the sort of person he is. Someone else, someone with a very different character, would not have suffered Oedipus's life. They would have compromised their sense of freedom in the name of prudence, custom, politics, or survival.

Such a powerfully egoistic character is entirely different from someone like, say, Moses, who sees his life in terms of service to the Lord and the community of Israelites (there's little sense that Moses has anything we might call an ego) or like Gilgamesh, who is prepared to wander adrift throughout the world looking for answers and learning from others so that he accepts limitations on own sense of personal freedom. Moses and Gilgamesh both suffer a great deal, but they learn from that suffering and encourage others to do so. Oedipus learns that he has been horribly wrong about life, but that does not induce him to change, or beg forgiveness, or transpose the blame onto someone else or seek to put his life on a different footing.

And the effects of the stories are quite different. Moses's story serves to confirm the validity of the existing social order, to endorse the vision of social order which the Lord has passed down to His people through Moses. Yes, Moses dies, but he has lived a full life and is in sight of the promised land, which his people will reach very soon. And Gilgamesh's story (like the *Odyssey*) confirms the social order of the community (particularly as that is enshrined by relationships with women) as the very centre of the good life.

Oedipus's story has a different effect. Because of what he has done, we have been given a privileged glimpse into the ineluctable mysteriousness and malignancy of fate. Here the social order is not confirmed as an eternal decree of fate: it is, by contrast, exposed as something of an illusion. The story of Oedipus, that is, offers us no consolation that what we believe about
the order of the world or the benevolence of the ruling powers or the eternal rightness of our ways of dealing with them bears any relationship to what they are really like. In that sense it is a much more disturbing narrative (more about that later).

(taken from “Fate, Freedom, and the Tragic Experience: An Introductory Lecture on Sophocles's Oedipus the King,” delivered by by Ian Johnston at Malaspina University-College)

DOCUMENT D

If we take a step back from the story of Oedipus for a moment, we might want to ask ourselves this question: What is the point of telling such a story, or, more interestingly perhaps, why would we ever celebrate such a vision of life? This question is all the more compelling for us because the tragic hero and the vision of life his story holds up for us are something unique to the West, an inheritance passed onto us by the Greeks, something profoundly at odds with most of our religious sensibilities.

Put another way, we might wonder what there is to admire in a character like Oedipus, who confronts the world with a heroic self-assertion so strong that he will never compromise with social custom, prudence, or political strategy—not even when his own survival is at stake. Why should we admire a character who is willing to endure so much rather than to swerve from his self-directed course, even when that leads him to disaster?

The answer to such questions is very complex and much contested, and I can offer only a general indication. But I think it has something to do with our cultural obsession with personal freedom and integrity. For Oedipus (and tragic characters based on a similar vision of life) see life primarily in terms of these two qualities: freedom and integrity. So strong is their sense of the importance of these qualities that they simply ignore all the things which most of us do to remain in a stable well-functioning community, that is, to adjust our sense of our integrity and what we demand out of life to the demands of living in a community, limiting our desires and shaping our identity under certain pressures to conform.

Sophocles's play forces us to confront the disturbing reality about such an attitude: this ultimate expression of my own freedom to express myself, to demand from the world that it answer to me rather than the other way around, leads by a step-by-step process to inevitable destruction. For the fates that rule the cosmos are powerful and mysterious, and we have no right to assume that they are friendly. The human being who sets himself up to live life only on his own terms, as the totally free expressions of his own will, is going to come to a self-destructive end. However grand and imaginatively appealing the tragic stance might be, it is essentially an act of defiance against the gods (or whoever rules the cosmos) and will push the tragic hero to an series of actions (which he initiates in the full sense of his own freedom) culminating in destruction. We cannot live life entirely on our own terms for very long. We may think we can, but Oedipus is a reminder of the consequences. Fate is so much more powerful, complex, and hostile than we can possibly imagine it, no matter what our consoling social narratives tell us.

By way of underscoring the nature of the tragic hero, consider for a moment some different varieties of heroic conduct. In many narratives, the hero, like Oedipus, faces a critical situation. But he deals with them in a very different manner—by trickery, disguise, cooperative action, for example (Odysseus is the great example from Greek narratives of such flexible conduct). In Moses's case, his actions are determined, not by self-initiated assertions of a powerful ego declaring its own preeminence, but by following instructions of the Lord on behalf the people (and he has to learn to trust the Lord and even go against his own sense of his abilities in order to serve). Gilgamesh becomes a mature leader only because he is capable of learning to move beyond the assertions of his ego, to acquire humility and an acceptance of his community's values.

In all such cases, the emphasis is very strongly on getting back to the community or hanging onto the community at all costs—the hero will do whatever is necessary within the framework of a shared belief system. And his greatness is measured by his success at confirming the importance of that belief system. To do so, the heroes must frequently compromise or hide their identity or undergo humbling experiences or admit they have been wrong, and so on. Once they display these characteristics,
such heroes return home to a sense of continuity and happiness (hence, the frequent ending to such stories: "They lived happily ever after"). Such heroes we generally refer to as comic heroes, a term which does not mean necessarily that they are funny but rather that the ending of their stories is a celebration of community values, most often dramatically exemplified in the final dance (the komos).

The tragic hero, by contrast, rarely if ever displays such intellectual and emotional flexibility. He doesn't (in his mind) need to, since the purpose of his life is to live it openly on his own terms. And he ends his story with self-destruction, usually a self-chosen death (or suicide) because the only alternative to destruction (or self-destruction) is compromise, something he will not (or cannot) do. True, Oedipus does not die at the end of the story. But in a sense he is dead, moving out into the waste lands, beyond the community where he has created that sense of his own greatness. There is certainly no sense at the end of the play that Oedipus has anything to look forward to except death. In most of the plays we call tragedies the death is physical.

[Parenthetically, we might note here that it's not entirely clear at the end of the play whether Oedipus returns to the palace or stumbles out into the wilderness beyond the city. We know from the full Oedipus story that he eventually wandered out into the wilderness (as he wishes to do), but there are suggestions in the play that Creon is going to wait before allowing him to do that. However, there is no doubt that having Oedipus wander off away from the palace is the more dramatically compelling ending].

(taken from “Fate, Freedom, and the Tragic Experience: An Introductory Lecture on Sophocles's Oedipus the King,” delivered by by Ian Johnston at Malaspina University-College)

**DOCUMENT E**

According to Aristotle, the function of tragedy is to arouse pity and fear in the audience so that we may be purged, or cleansed, of these unsettling emotions. Aristotle’s term for this emotional purging is the Greek word *catharsis*. Although no one is exactly sure what Aristotle meant by *catharsis*, it seems clear that he was referring to that strangely pleasurable sense of emotional release we experience after watching a great tragedy. For some reason, we usually feel exhilarated, not depressed, at the end.

According to Aristotle, a tragedy can arouse these twin emotions of pity and fear only if it presents a certain type of hero or heroine who is neither completely good nor completely bad.

Aristotle also says that the tragic hero should be someone “highly renowned and prosperous,” which in Aristotle’s day meant a member of the royalty. Why not an ordinary working person, we might ask. The answer is simply that the hero must fall from tremendous good fortune. Otherwise, we wouldn’t feel such pity and fear.

Critics have argued over what Aristotle meant by the tragic hero’s “error or frailty.” Is the hero defeated because of a single error in judgment? Or is the cause of the hero’s downfall a tragic flaw—a fundamental character weakness such as destructive pride, ruthless ambition, or obsessive jealousy? In either interpretation, the key point is that the hero is on some level responsible for his or her own downfall. The hero is not the mere plaything of the gods—the helpless victim of fate or of someone else’s villainy. By the end of the play, the tragic hero comes to recognize his or her own error and to accept its tragic consequences. The real hero is humbled—and enlightened—by the tragedy.

Yet we, the audience, feel that the hero’s punishment exceeds the crime, that the hero gets more than he or she deserves. We feel pity because the hero is a suffering human being who is flawed like us. And we feel fear because the hero is better than we are, and still he failed. What hope can there be for us?

*(Connections: A Theory “What is a Tragic Hero?” Elements of Literature, Fourth Course)*