

TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION HIGH SCHOOL

**EXTENDED ESSAY**

**ENGLISH B**

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**RESEARCH QUESTION:** Comparison and analysis of the downfalls and the reasons of the downfalls of the tragic heroes in William Shakespeare's three tragedies: Othello, Hamlet and King Lear.

## **ABSTRACT**

The pattern of tragedy involves the tragic downfall of a certain tragic hero. This extended essay attempts to analyze the differences and similarities between the downfalls of tragic heroes, in William Shakespeare's three tragedies; Hamlet, King Lear, and Othello. This extended essay covers the effects and the severity of the downfalls of tragic heroes. The downfalls of the tragic heroes are primarily affected by a certain flaw in their characters. After certain events, the tragic heroes suffer from extreme inner and external struggles. Apart from this, the effect of family members and the role of fate are also important since they accelerate their downfalls. All these elements are studied in the scope of this extended essay. The research question of this extended essay is: "Comparison and analysis of the downfalls and the reasons of the downfalls of the tragic heroes in William Shakespeare's three tragedies: Othello, Hamlet and King Lear. To enable better analysis the topic is divided to certain subtitles. These subtitles are respectively: traffic flaw, inner and external struggles, family, madness, revenge, fate, last words and death. In addition to this, in the conclusion part a general comparison of the downfalls of the tragic heroes is done referring to the arguments analyzed under these subtitles.

(207 words)

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## INTRODUCTION

Almost all of Shakespeare's tragedies develop around the theme of the tragic flaw and the inevitable downfall of the tragic hero, who mainly is of a high-ranking status. However, the reason why Shakespearean tragedies are still popular worldwide is not simply due to the moving and extremely appealing story of a sudden, yet inevitable and ordinary fall of some tragic hero around which the entire plot is built. Besides the emotional and psychological depth of the tragic heroes are reflected in his plays so wisely and skillfully that the readers and audience find the opportunity to explore the unknown, disregarded and restrained human characteristics and experiences through analyses of these tragic heroes. It is quite likely that the reader and the audience, mostly, identify themselves with the characters in plays, since plays hold a mirror to all human beings in general, at all times.

In his book "Shakespearean Tragedy", A.C. Bradley claims that many Shakespearean characters are, in fact, real human beings with their emotional and psychological states of mind. It is generally accepted that these characters, with their own individual experiences and emotions, represent real human experiences, which allow the reader and the audience to identify themselves with them and thus, make their own self-evaluation and self-analysis.

The scope of this study, therefore, will be the comparison, contrast and analyses of the downfalls of the tragic heroes in William Shakespeare's tragedies Othello, Hamlet, King Lear and to the extent which their downfalls reflect real life experiences as far as the uncontrollable human feeling, emotional states and weaknesses are concerned.

## I. The Tragic Flaw

The pattern of tragedy involves a tragic flaw in the character of noble soul. This tragic flaw causes Hamlet, Othello and King Lear to be doomed to make serious errors in their judgments and shows tragic heroes' own contribution to their downfall. In addition to this, the flaws in the characters of the heroes have both similarities and differences.

Hamlet, parallel to the complexity of his character, has more than one simple tragic flaw. First of all, Hamlet's actions are inhibited by his thoughts. Although he promised to the ghost of old Hamlet to take his revenge from Claudius, he is reluctant to take immediate action, and can only fulfill his promise at the end of the play. Despite knowing the fact that thinking stops acting; "*Thus conscience does make cowards of us all*" (Hamlet, 105), and having promised to act many times, his over-thoughtfulness results in inaction: "*Like John- a-dream, unpregnant of my cause*" (Hamlet, 95). Hamlet puts forward his lack of courage as the reason of his inaction. "*I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall*" (Hamlet, 95). The intensity of his emotions causes his melancholy, and together with his confused mind, melancholy results in the downfall of the noble prince of Denmark. Hamlet's continuous questioning and his refusal to understand his mother's marriage, his father's murder, and the corruption in Denmark also show that he is far too good and naive for the world he lives in. In other words, the conflict in his mind and soul is so irresolvable that even though he is conscious of his downfall, he is unable to stop it.

King Lear's major tragic flaw, which causes his downfall, is his moral blindness.

*LEAR: Out of my sight*

*KENT: See better Lear (King Lear, 11)*

He makes his biggest mistake at the beginning of the play by thinking that he can measure the intensity of love. He wants unquestioned, ultimate love and absolute obedience. His other characteristics that caused his misjudgments are: his capriciousness, and his lack of self- awareness. He disowns his most beloved

daughter, Cordelia, when she rejects to flatter him. He is unable to see that she loves him truly as she simply states: “*according to my bond*” (King Lear, 7). It is too late at the end when he understands his mistake and bemoans about his blindness and foolishness: “*I am a very foolish fond old man*” (King Lear, 171).

Contrary to Hamlet, who contemplates and philosophizes far too much before acting, Othello and King Lear do not think either sufficiently, or wisely before taking action. Therefore, they act with rage and fury, which consequently lead them to misjudgments, and to their downfalls. Just like King Lear, who is deceived by the flatteries of his elder daughters; Othello is also trapped by the praises of Iago. Both King Lear and Othello understand their foolish acts and feel remorse when it is actually too late. “*O fool! fool! fool!*” (Othello, 118) Apart from the similarities, Othello is doomed with other tragic flaws, too. First of all he is jealous. His jealousy is one of the reasons of his foolishness and blindness. “*I see, sir, you are eaten up with passion.*” (Othello, 67) Besides, he is a very proud man. He commits suicide because he is too proud to admit the fact that he killed Desdemona in vain. Moreover, he is a gullible person. He trusts Iago without recognizing his evil intentions. “*Iago is most honest.*” (Othello, line 6, act 2,3)

## **II. Inner and External Struggle**

The inner and external struggles of tragic heroes are other reasons which cause their downfall. Through soliloquies, audiences can get direct experiences of heroes' minds. These soliloquies also reflect the severe inner struggles of characters, because these are the moments when the hidden self of the tragic hero reveals itself. On the other hand, the external struggles are displayed through imageries of fierce natural conditions.

Hamlet's inner struggle is considerably more intensive than any other tragic hero; thus the audience can know more about his inner world and his true feelings. He suffers from his melancholy after his father's death and his mother's marriage with

his uncle. His most famous soliloquy that reveals the extremity of his inner struggle is undoubtedly:

*“To be, or not to be, that is the question-  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them” (Hamlet, 105)*

His dilemmas are so painful that death turns out to be more preferable to life for him. His questioning of life ends towards the end of the play since his soul, tired of all the calamities, accepts the fate and says: *“Let be” (Hamlet, 227)* Therefore, the play exhibits Hamlet’s emotional and philosophical journey which is caused by his inner struggles.

External and inner struggle of King Lear is reflected to the audience by the storm in Act II. The actual storm is in his mind so the storm is an imagery that is used to show his emotional state. On the other hand he suffers both physically and mentally during the storm. The storm does not hurt him much when the pain caused by the hostility of his daughters is worse.

*“Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm.  
Invades us to the skin. So 'tis to thee.  
But where the greater malady is fixed  
The lesser is scarce felt.” (King Lear, 109)*

King Lear is a character who has learned through his sufferings so there is a constructive part in his sufferings, too. As Regan also indicated: *“...to willful men,/ The injuries that they themselves procure /Must be their schoolmasters.” (King Lear, 95)*

Othello’s suffering resembles both Hamlet’s and King Lear’s. Just like King Lear, Othello also physically suffers from the storm in his journey to Cyprus after the battle. However, this storm only shows Othello’s external struggle. His inner struggle is his suspicions about Desdemona, fired up by his jealousy. Similar to Hamlet, his thoughts

torture him. "*Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!*" (Othello, 65). When he feels he can no longer bear the torment of his doubts, thoughts and jealousy, he also thinks committing suicide just like Hamlet. "*If there be cords or knives, / Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams, / I'll not endure it. Would I were satisfied!*" (Othello, 67)

### **III. Family**

The tragic heroes are not introduced as solitary individuals; the events take place in their social environment in which they interact with people around them. In most of the plays people who have a strong influence and effect on the downfall of the tragic hero is generally a family member.

The reason of Hamlet's melancholy, which causes his downfall, is due to family matters. After the shock of his father's death, he cannot accept the incestuous marriage of his mother and uncle. Due to his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle and her inconsiderate attitude and ignorance towards his father's death and his memory, Hamlet becomes overwhelmed with strong feelings of confusion, hatred, misogyny and disgust about incest and male-female relationships. "*She married. Oh most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets. / It is not, nor it cannot come to good.*" (Hamlet, 23) The appearance of ghost of Hamlet's father also has a strong effect on his downfall because it is the ghost who stirs and pricks his suspicions and inner conflict and who asks him to take his revenge.

The effect of family in the tragedy of King Lear is evident. He falls from the condition of a king to a wretched beggar. He has two disloyal daughters whom he calls "*pelican daughters*" (King Lear, 113). On the contrary, his other daughter Cordelia, who is disowned by Lear, saves her father and tries to cure his wounds by her affection. She forgives her father and performs all her duties as a child. However, King Lear cannot put up with the treachery of Regan and Goneril and feels incredible remorse. "*I will forget my nature, so kind a father*" (King Lear, 53), "*I gave you all*" (King Lear, 91).



Othello's wife, Desdemona has an indirect effect on his downfall. Although Desdemona is a loyal, obedient and affectionate spouse, due to the provocations of Iago, Othello doubts her faithfulness and tortures himself with his skepticism. As a result of his improper jealousy and distrust he kills her cruelly. "*What should such a fool / Do with so good a wife?*" (Othello, 115)

#### **IV. Madness**

The symptoms of madness can be observed in all three of the tragic heroes after a certain period of suffering. The madness is either an excuse for the mistakes of the tragic hero or an outcome of harsh inner and external struggles. In both cases, madness is a part of the downfall of tragic heroes.

Hamlet's madness is quite difficult to be defined or explained. Hamlet is labeled as a "mad man" on many occasions in the play. Almost all other characters, especially Polonius, Gertrude, Ophelia and Claudius interpret his strange behaviors as an obvious symptom of madness. However, Hamlet refuses the imputations of madness. "*...It is not madness / That I have uttered. Bring me to the test, / And I the matter will reword, which madness / Would gambol from.*" (Hamlet, 149) "*I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.*" (Hamlet, 87) On the other hand, when Hamlet apologizes to Laertes, he admits that his madness is the reason for his misbehavior. "*His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy*" (Hamlet, 229). In addition to this, after the apparition of the ghost, Hamlet warns Horatio about his future lunacy. Therefore, Hamlet might have been pretending to be mad. To sum up, Hamlet's insane behaviors are the signs of the distress caused by the continuous debates going on in his inner world.

King Lear's experiences of pain, sorrow and frustration torment his mind tremendously and cause his madness. Unlike Hamlet or Othello, King Lear performs real symptoms of madness, partly as a result of his old age.

*FOOL: "Prithee, nuncle, tell me whether madmen be a gentlemen or a yeoman?"*

*LEAR: "He is a king." (King Lear, 121)*

People who are used to Othello's calm and dignified manners consider his uncontrollable rage, fury, jealousy and thus, overreaction as madness. For example, when he hits Desdemona on the face in public, Lodovico finds this extremely strange and he immediately associates his behavior with madness. "*Are his wits safe? Is he not light of brain?*" (Othello, 87)

## **V. Revenge**

Hamlet is a tragedy about revenge but it does not fit in the category of revenge tragedy since Hamlet is not obsessed with vengeance; on the contrary, he delays his revenge. Since the main theme of the play is revenge, its effect on Hamlet's downfall is evident. Hamlet hesitates to avenge the murder of his father because he is distracted by the thought that revenge is a forbidden act and a sin according to Christianity. His reluctance to take revenge and inability to leave all the hatred behind and take action draws Hamlet into unresolved inner conflicts and intense confusion.

King Lear takes his revenge from Cordelia by not giving her dowry and disowning her. This mistake is the cause of his downfall, so revenge has an effect on his downfall, too. Moreover, although King Lear swears to take his revenge from his elder daughters, with the anger after their betrayal, he cannot manage to do that.

Othello believes that Cassio and Desdemona have an illegal affair so he wants to take his revenge by killing them. So, he kills Desdemona for vengeance. However, unlike Hamlet, neither Othello's nor King Lear's downfall is directly related with the thought of revenge.

## **VI. Fate**

All tragic heroes express their belief of fate in all three tragedies. In spite of Hamlet's persistent refusal of fate at the beginning of the play, he also comes to accept this fact at the end of the play. "*There's a divinity that shapes our ends*" (Hamlet, 217). In this quotation, Hamlet states that important and crucial events in one's life are determined by divine forces despite the fact that many human beings think they can plan and control their lives. Othello also indicates that he believes in destiny: "*Tis destiny unshunnable, like death. / Even then this forkèd plague is fated to us / When we do quicken.*" (Othello, lines 280, act 3,3 ). As Hamlet claims that important matters are decided by divine forces, King Lear demonstrates this belief by appealing to divine justice for the injustices he faces. As far as the concept of fate is concerned, no tragic hero has control over his/her downfall since everything is pre-determined and based on fate.

## **VII. Last Words and Death**

All the miseries and sufferings of the tragic heroes come to an end with their death. The reader/audience witnesses the hero's fall from grace and ultimate downfall which ends with his death. The audience can either sympathize and pity the downfall of the tragic hero, or keep the distance. The reaction of showing mercy to the character is related to how much psychological involvement of the audience is let by the author. Another reason of the tragic sympathy is that, though the tragic heroes are not necessarily good, Othello, Hamlet and King Lear are good in their nature, so they win sympathy for their errors. In addition to this, while their story comes to an end the audience can learn more about the whole journey of the tragic hero.

Hamlet seems to be prepared for his death since the beginning of the play. Throughout the play, he questions life and death, and before the duel, he reveals his surrender to his fate. Furthermore, he apologizes before dying so his soul is repented

when he dies. Therefore, unlike Othello and King Lear, he is prepared for his death and after his death at least people think that he is a good man and if he had the chance, he would be a good king. Hamlet also wants Horatio to save his reputation by telling his story to the others. “... *And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story....*” (Hamlet, 235) Hamlet’s last words: “...*So tell him, with th’occurrences more and less / Which have solicited – the rest is silence.*” (Hamlet, 237), also tell a lot about the mood of a man whose over-thoughtfulness leads to his death; his confused mind and soul reach eternal silence and peace at last.

King Lear dies in wretched condition, overwhelmed with extreme grief. He witnesses the death of his daughter and he dies with the hope that Cordelia might be alive. Due to his mental illness, too, his last words are: “*Look there, look there*” (King Lear, 199), by showing the dead body of Cordelia. He dies as a father, not as a king. His journey to redemption continues through his last words until he gives his last breath.

*“And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life?  
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never.  
Pray you, undo his button. Thank you sir.  
Do you see this? Look on her! Look, her lips.  
Look there, look there...”* (King Lear, 199)

Although he ends up with nothing after his fall from grace, he is not completely wicked and has good qualities, too. Therefore, the audiences end up feeling sorry for him. Albany, Cordelia, Gloucester, Edgar and Kent, believe that King Lear is a good man.

Both Hamlet and Othello attempt to write their own epitaph in which they want to tell the onlookers how they want to be remembered. In this way they attempt to explain what has happened to them. Hamlet tries but Othello gets the chance to explain. Hamlet wants Horatio to tell people his story:

*“Then must you speak*

*Of one that loved not wisely, but too well.  
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,  
Perplexed in the extreme. Of one whose hand,  
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
Richer than all his tribe. Of one whose subdued eyes,  
Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this,...*” (Othello, 119)

Similar to Hamlet’s apology to Laertes, Othello also apologizes to Cassio. “*I ask your pardon*”(Othello, 117). Moreover, similar to King Lear, he feels redemption and asks for forgiveness. He feels a profound remorse since he has murdered Desdemona in vain. He cannot stand this and finally kills himself. Othello’s realizing that he has killed Desdemona for nothing makes his death compulsory for him. In this respect, Othello’s death is different from the deaths of other tragic heroes.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the downfalls of three tragic heroes; Hamlet, Othello and King Lear; have been compared, contrasted and analyzed. All tragic heroes find themselves in a wretched condition after their fall from grace and downfall. All of them are people with high rank, and status who maintain the nobility in their souls even after their downfall.

The downfall of a tragic hero is a long process. Before reaching the final phase, the downfall, the hero goes through various stages. He has a mistake (tragic flaw) or some weakness which is fostered by inner and external conflicts and struggles, family matters, madness. When all these elements are combined with the urge or necessity for revenge and by fate, heroes finally encounter their downfall and their inevitable death.

In general, Shakespeare's tragic heroes; Hamlet, Othello and King Lear are responsible for their own downfall. Hamlet thinks too much whereas Othello and King Lear do not think sufficiently before taking action. Besides, all three heroes have quite complex characters, which cause them make several mistakes and reach false judgments which lead to their downfalls.

All three heroes have to combat the inner and outer conflicts and struggles. As mentioned and discussed before, each hero goes through a different process of suffering. The heroes' sufferings are mostly reflect to the reader/audience by soliloquies, which reflect their innermost feelings and psychologies. By this way, it becomes obvious that the heroes are not characters who are excluded from the society, their interaction with people around them; most of the time the family members, do have a significant impact on the process of their suffering that leads to their downfall.

Another significant cause that leads the hero to his downfall is “madness”, which remarkably affects his ability of reasoning and reaching correct judgment. Thus, the hero starts acting strangely and his insanity becomes obvious to all. Hamlet’s madness or his “antic disposition” is more like an excuse for his absurd and unusual behavior and attitude towards others, whereas King Lear’s is due to his loss of mental health. On the other hand, Othello’s overreaction and his exaggerated behaviors caused by his jealousy are perceived as madness.

The drive for “revenge” is another motif in tragedies which draws the hero towards his downfall. Hamlet must take his father’s revenge by killing Claudius; Othello should take his revenge from Cassio and Desdemona; King Lear thinks that he should take his revenge from Cordelia. As a result, all three heroes prepare their downfall and their inevitable death.

Fate is another factor that directly affects the downfall of tragic heroes. In a way the downfall of the tragic heroes are predetermined and they do not have any control over their downfall. On the other hand this belief contradicts with the concept of tragic flaw. However, all three of the tragic heroes express their belief in fate in one-way or another. Although Hamlet questions fate at the beginning of the play, he comes to accept it at the end. This belief is supported by the coincidental events in the plays. In other words, tragic heroes pursue their fate but at some point they make an irreversible mistake that will cause calamities and their fall from grace.

Besides all these elements, the last words of the tragic heroes are also significant in understanding their mood while dying and the journey they had undergone throughout the whole play. Although their deaths are different, they all feel repent and are ready to die. Moreover, despite their huge fall from grace, after their death, people at least believe that they are actually good. It can also be seen that both Hamlet and Othello attempt to write their own epitaphs. Lastly, as it can be observed from their last words, while Hamlet goes through an emotional journey throughout the play, King

Lear's journey is through redemption and Othello's journey is through self-devastation.

As a conclusion, Shakespeare's tragedies are pieces of a whole that try to show the bigger picture and the profile of the mankind in the past, present and the future. This profile is mostly framed by human weaknesses and follies that lead human beings.



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