Oedipus Rex
Introduction to drama

Drama is a literary form involving parts written for actors to perform; it is a Greek word which means action. The origin of Western theatre is supposed to be found in Ancient Greece. Drama probably developed in Ancient Greece from the festivals, honouring Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility and wine. In the Middle Ages, drama in Europe dealt with religious characterizations. The plays were mainly Biblical, thus had substantial relevance to Christian elements. Although the Christian church did much to suppress the performance of plays, it is actually in the church that medieval drama began. Mystery plays, the most famous of which is The Second Shepherd's Play, depicted Biblical episodes from the Creation to Judgment Day. Another important type that developed from church liturgy was the miracle play, based on the lives of saints rather than on Bible. The miracle play reached its peak in France and the mystery play in England. However, both types gradually became secularized. The Second Shepherds' Play, despite its religious seriousness, is most notable for its elements of realism and farce, while the miracle plays in France often emphasize comedy and adventure. A third type of religious drama is the morality play. The morality plays, which were mainly religious allegories, appeared early in the 15th century, the most famous being Everyman.

Drama has always been a target of the government and society. The reason why drama was criticized in Middle Ages was probably because actors were considered to be persons who were taking on other people's personalities, and were therefore thought either to be insane or possibly possessed by evil spirits. A second reason why drama was so often criticized might have been because theatre was considered immoral, blasphemous or subversive - we must note that theatrical performances were sometimes used as criticism of the government, able to awaken people. A third reason might have been religious since many of the medieval dramas were based on Christian church. Many of the plays were Biblical and were applicable to the Church.

Drama in England reached its peak during Queen Elizabeth's reign. Elizabethan drama "... has been called a great national utterance because in it spoke the spirit of England, despite all its imitations and borrowings from alien sources" and "... there has never been an age which so immediately responded to an artistic appeal" (Schelling xiii). We should notice the fact that "... no plays closely resembling those of the great Elizabethans appeared before the last quarter of the sixteenth century, before the tragedies of Kyd and Marlowe and the comedies of Lyly and Greene" The public theatres were being built in 1576; and "the first powerful plays appeared about 1587" (Wells 4).

Queen Elizabeth died in 1603. In 1642 The English Civil War broke out between the Parliamentarians (Puritans) and the Royalists in England and theatres were closed to prevent public disorder. In 1644 The Globe Theatre was demolished by the Puritans. From 1642 onward for eighteen years, the theatres of England remained closed. They probably illegally performed plays but those performances were given in secrecy. Neither actors nor spectators were safe during those days of the Puritan rule. The dramatists were not allowed to be inspired during this time. The Puritans led by Oliver Cromwell opposed theatrical performances. "Puritanism declared [theatre] an ungodly and frivolous thing and decreed that it should be no more" (Schelling 274). In 1649, the
English Civil War resulted in the execution of King Charles I and the establishment of a commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell. Finally in 1660 the Stuart dynasty was restored to the throne of England and the theatres were reopened.

Charles's death marked the beginning of the eleven-year Interregnum in which Oliver Cromwell ruled as Lord Protector. After Cromwell's death, England turned to Charles's son and acknowledged him as Charles II. The exhumed heads of Cromwell, his son-in-law, and the High Court's President were placed on public display atop Westminster Hall. The anniversary of Charles's execution became a date of commemoration on the liturgical calendar of the Anglican Church. (Sirico 51)

Charles II, the king, had been in France and he naturally brought with him some French fashions. That French influence was felt particularly in the theatre since "Charles returned from his exile with a very definite love of the drama and of literature in general (Nicoll 8). The drama of the Restoration, Thorndike states, ". . . was separated from the earlier periods by sixteen years of closed theatres and a virtual cessation of all dramatic composition;" ". . . the Restoration brought not only a revival but also a revolution - new fashions, new models, new foreign influence, a new age, and a changed society" (Thorndike 243).

Although the Puritans had lost their authority in political power, they had not lost courage in abusing the stage. The most violent attack was made by Jeremy Collier, a clergyman, in 1698, in a pamphlet called A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage, Collier's attack on drama has three points: the so-called obscenity of the plays, the frequent references to the Bible and biblical characters, and the criticism, "slander and abuse flung from the stage upon the clergy". He criticized Shakespeare's Desdemona showing her love and chastity; he was opposed to any reference to anything connected to the Church or religion; and he was against any portrayal of the clergy. Collier even accused playwrights of glorifying all the sins, passions which they portrayed in their characters.

The Puritan Revolution was fought not only against the King, but also against theatre; but the theatre was never so finally and roundly defeated as the King. The skirmishes and battles were equally protracted and bitter, but the growth of the Elizabethan--Jacobean drama was so hardy and so dear to so many Englishmen that it never completely died. Ordinance after ordinance was passed against stage plays, but there was hardly a year in London from 1842 to 1660 when plays were not being given. The records are full of recurrent raids by the soldiers of Parliament, the seizure of players and their goods, the ransacking of playhouses and their forcible demolition, and the jailing of theatre people. But these very records show that the Puritans had not succeeded in destroying theatrical activity. (Roberts 228)

With the accession of Queen Anne in 1702, drama was again a target of criticism since Queen Anne "was completely disinterested in the arts, literature, and theatre" (Roberts 250). The beginning of the reign of Queen Anne in 1702 ". . . marked the final withdrawal of court interest in drama" Thus English theatre was no longer for the court but "the property of citizens (Roberts 252). The Age of Reason valued science, logic, and rationality; denied emotionalism and wanted an ordered society. In the area of literature, authors declared their independence of patrons, and writing became a form of
earning one's living. Prices for theatres were higher than today, and considerably higher than under Elizabeth I. Since drama became a commercial field, there had been innovations on the theatre buildings as well as stage props and costumes of the actors.

In the political turmoil of the nineteenth century in Europe, drama was sometimes abused. The ruling classes tended to use theatre as a propaganda instrument during the French Revolution (Roberts 350). In the twentieth century, on the other hand, drama consisted of realist settings true to life. The growing popularity of the motion picture affected drama. Soon radio and television increased in popularity, which foreshadowed the possible end of live theatre; yet it did not end.

Despite all the attacks and difficulties, theatre has always been alive. It has survived since the fifth century B.C. In its long history, theatre has always had rivals. However it has never been defeated; on the contrary, it has accomplished glorification. Theatre is not only an important part of a particular society that is depicted in plays; it is also the most human form of art that has ever existed.

**The Contributions of Greek Theatre to Drama**

The ancient Greeks are famous for their many contributions to the world. Among these contributions is one that has changed culture and the arts permanently. This contribution is theatre.

Greek theatre is considered the beginning of theatre as we know it. Theatre began in Athens, circa 600 BC, developing out of rituals at the Dionysia. The Dionysia was a festival for followers of the cult of Dionysus, god of wine and festivities. Greek theatre really began to take shape, however, around 400 BC. The first actor was named Thespis, and it is from his name that the word "thespian" originated. Thespis was born in Attica, in 534 BC. He began performing speeches from epic poems and stories of the day, speaking from that character's point of view. His shows were also interactive, as he often spoke with the audience. Since no theater really existed at the time, he traveled from place to place with a handcart. He used masks, makeup, and costumes to make his monologues more realistic.

Over time, theatre was changed and developed by forward-thinking playwrights. One such playwright, Aeschylus, introduced the concept of using a second character, so that dialogue and the interaction of the characters could be used as a plot device. Years later, another playwright, Sophocles, added another actor, steadily decreasing the importance of the chorus while increasing character interactions. Around the same time, Euripides gradually made theatre more natural and realistic, rather than the rigid, structured form of acting.

The theater itself was outdoors and known as an Amphitheater. It was semi-circular in shape, and terraced, allowing for each visitor to have perfect view. These seats were called the theatron, literally meaning the viewing area. On average, the Amphitheater was able to fit 1,500 viewers and was designed to have near perfect acoustics. There was usually a theater in each town, as theaters were also used for religious rituals and processions as well as entertainment. In the center was a circular platform called the orchestra. On the orchestra was an altar where sacrifices to Dionysus were performed. The stage itself was called the Proscenio. It was situated behind the orchestra, and was
constructed much like stages today, although most of the acting took place in the orchestra. The back of this stage had painted backgrounds to create the settings for each scene.

These buildings were most likely brightly painted, although the paint would have faded over time [Phillips]. Behind the stage, machines used for the performances were kept. These machines were advanced technology for their day, and included the Aeorema, the Ekeclema, and the Periactoi.

The Aeorema was one of the more commonly used. It was a large crane used to pull actors through the air. This was most often employed to create the illusion of gods, which led to the expression, "Deus ex Machina". The Ekeclema was a wheeled platform. This sometimes ferried dead bodies across the stage, as murders and suicides were not shown on stage. This tradition stemmed from the superstition that to kill a person on stage would be foretelling of their actual death. The Periactoi consisted of two pillars, one on each side of the stage, which could turn to change the background setting without need of stagehands [Ancient]. All of these were constructed of simple machines, such as pulleys, levers, and wheels, made from wood, rope, and metal. They were put to use in many famous plays.

The plays themselves were very similar to the modern musical. They had singing and dancing, sometimes accompanied by music. The cast was comprised of many actors, called "hypocrites", both professional and amateur. The main character, or protagonist, was usually played by a professional and often highly-famed actor specifically chosen by the playwright, although some playwrights would portray this character themselves. Like most present musicals, there was also a chorus. The chorus provided the mood of the play by singing and dancing. Generally the lead chorus member was a professional dancer and singer, and the rest of the chorus was made up of amateurs. All the actors were men, as women were forbidden to appear on stage. The actors wore masks when portraying a woman or animal. These masks were built from wood, cloth, and clay, sometimes covered in animal or even human hair. The holes for the eyes were very small, but the opening for the mouth was large to allow the actor's voice to resonate more easily. The actors were sometimes required to wear wooden platform shoes, or kothomoi, in order to appear taller. Actors would also use optical illusions to seem taller or shorter. Vertical stripes were worn to appear taller and horizontal stripes to appear shorter.

Greek plays generally fell into one of two categories: comedy or tragedy. Other than in satirical plays, these categories would never mix. The modern symbol of drama, a smiling comedic mask and a weeping tragic mask, stems from these categories. These different types of plays varied greatly, especially in their topic. Comedy plays included base, vulgar humor. Comedy plays were humorous representations of peasant life and values. They encouraged tradition and criticized what they considered immorality. They were generally far more popular with the lower class, as they joked about topics that the upper class would have been unable to relate to. They were considered by the Greeks to be the easiest to write and perform. Costumes for comedic plays usually depended on the characters of the play. As many of these plays were about animals, so were the costumes. The actors’ masks were exaggerated and grotesque, suggesting that the audience should not take them too seriously. The most notable comedic playwright was Aristophanes, and his major plays include The Frogs and Lysistrata.
Tragedy plays were not sad or depressing, but they were about more serious subjects than the comedic plays. Instead of a chaotic, meandering plot, tragic plays had a set rhythm and pattern to them. They also excluded vulgarity, tending not to offend their viewers. Tragedy plays explored the depth of human emotion and character. They were famous for their ability to cause the audience to relate to each character in a more empathetic way. They were more sophisticated and suited to the upper class than their humorous counterpart. Costumes were generally everyday clothing, if somewhat nicer and more elaborate. Notable playwrights of the genre included Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. Prometheus Bound, Oedipus the King, and Medea are prime examples of tragic plays.

Satirical plays emerged as a compromise to the two categories. These plays dealt with the same topics and ideas of a tragic play, but presented them in a comical manner. The actors mocked the clichés and styles of a tragedy, and were often exaggerated in their mannerisms. These were popular with both the upper and lower classes, and were known for being very witty, a trait the Greeks admired greatly. They were generally as amusing as comedic plays, but not as rude and offensive. Cyclops, written by the poet Euripides, and The Scouts by Sophocles are the only known existing satire plays [Ancient]. Historians know of their existence in ancient Greece from other archaeological sources. Satire plays were considered the most difficult, for both the actors and playwrights. In competitions, a playwright would often submit a satire play to prove his worth, as well as their usual comic or tragic plays. They were also much shorter than the other plays, usually only half as long as a tragedy.

Greek plays were inextricably tied to the gods. Before each play, a sacrifice would be made to Dionysus, to whom theatre really owes its beginning. Apollo was also important. As the god of music and poetry, Apollo was especially honored by actors and playwrights. Equally important to the theatre were the Muses. The muses were the 9 goddesses of the arts. Terpsichore, Euterpe, Calliope, Thalia, and Melpomene were the most significant to the theatre. Terpsichore and Euterpe personified dance and music respectively, both key elements of Greek theatre. Calliope embodied epic poetry, which was usually the basis of most plays. Thalia and Melpomene represented the two categories of theatre, comedy and tragedy.

The Greeks have given much to our modern world through theatre. Every actor, of course, owes his or her livelihood to the Greeks' innovative thinking. Many Greek plays still exist today, preserving the culture and traditions of their time. The basics of many modern machines come from the Aeorema, the Ekeclema, and the Periactoi, all machines created specifically for theatre productions. The Greeks have also provided the fundamentals of theatre. We still use stages, costumes, and make-up in acting today. We still have comedy, tragedy, and satire, although often combined, in present movies, television shows, and dramatic performances. Many theaters are modeled after Greek amphitheaters, in order to achieve their nearly flawless acoustics.

No doubt exists, however, that Greek theatre has affected our society in deeper ways as well. Since the beginning of history, stories have been used to pass on values, such as integrity, bravery, and respect. Theatre continues today to bring life to these stories, forever imprinting itself into the minds and consciences of its audience. Each person can empathize with and relate to the characters, gaining insight to their own plights and personalities. Theatre also probes deep inside the heart of humanity, for the actors as well as the audience, as if through becoming another person, you learn more about
yourself. Without theatre, culture as we know it could not exist. It has been changed permanently through theatre. A simple tradition of the Greeks has become a vital part of our identity as human beings.

**Sophocles; 496-406 B.C.**

Sophocles, the son of a wealthy arms manufacturer, was born probably in 496 B.C.E. in the deme Colonus near Athens. Of all the ancient playwrights, he scored the most wins in dramatic competitions, and won the most important dramatic festival, the City Dionysia, an unmatched 18 times. He received an education in music, athletics, and dancing, and as a boy of fifteen was chosen to lead the paean (hymn of praise) sung by the chorus of boys after the victory of Salamis. Like most of the ancient playwrights, he acted in the plays he wrote. He showed his musical skill in public, when he played the blind singer Thamyris in his drama of the same name, and played the cithara with such success that he was painted as Thamyris with the cithara in the famous Stoa Poecile ("painted colonnade"), a prominent gathering place in ancient Athens. Sophocles was also involved in Athenian political and military affairs. Owing to his practical gifts with language he was involved in negotiations with the allies of Chios and Samos. During the Peloponnesian War he was one of the generals. In 435 B.C., fulfilling the office of Hellenotamias, he was at the head of the management of the treasure of the allies, which was kept on the Acropolis; and in 413 B.C., when the question arose of giving to the state an oligarchical constitution, he was on the commission of preliminary investigation. He also filled a priestly office.

The charm and the refinement of his character seem to have won him many friends. Among them was the historian Herodotus. He was also deemed by antiquity as a man especially beloved by the gods, particularly by Asclepius, god of medicine, whose priest he probably was, and who was said to have granted him health and vigor of mind to extreme old age. By the Athenian Nicostrate he had a son, Iophon, who won some repute as a tragic poet, and by Theoris of Sicyon another son, Ariston, father of another Sophocles who gained fame for himself by writing tragedies of his own, and afterwards by the production of his grandfather's dramas. There was a legend that a quarrel arose between Sophocles and his son Iophon, on account of his preference for this grandson, and that, when summoned by Iophon before the court as weak in mind and unable to manage his affairs, he obtained his own absolute acquittal by reading the chorus on his native place in the Oedipus Coloneus. The tales of his death, in 405 B.C., are also mythical. According to one account, he was choked by a grape. According to others, he died either when publicly reciting the Antigone, or from excessive joy at some dramatic victory. The only fact unanimously attested by his contemporaries is that his death was as dignified as his life. We are also told that the god Dionysus, by repeated apparitions in dreams, prompted the general of the Spartans, who were then attacking Athens, to grant a truce in order to bury the poet in the family grave outside the city. On his tomb stood a Siren as a symbol of the charm of poetry. After his death the Athenians worshipped him as a hero and offered an annual sacrifice in his memory. In later times, on the proposal of the orator Lycurgus, a bronze statue was erected to him, together with Aeschylus and Euripides, in the theatre, and an authorized and standard copy of his dramas was made to preserve them.
Even in his lifetime, and indeed through the whole of antiquity, he was held to be the most perfect of tragedians; one of the ancient writers calls him the "pupil of Homer". If Aeschylus is the creator of Greek tragedy, it was Sophocles who brought it to perfection. He extended the dramatic action (1) by the introduction of a third actor, so that three people could be on stage in addition to the chorus, while in his last pieces he even added a fourth; and (2) by a due subordination of the chorus, to which, however, he gave a more artistic development, while he increased its numbers from twelve to fifteen persons. These moves made dialogue all the more important. He also perfected the costumes and decoration. But Sophocles' great mastery of his art appears, above all, in the clearness with which he portrays his characters, which are developed with a scrupulous attention to details, and in which he is not satisfied, like Aeschylus, with mere outlines, nor, as Euripides often did, with copies from common life. His heroes, too, are ideal figures, like those of Aeschylus. While they lack the superhuman loftiness of Aeschylus' creations, they have a certain ideal truth of their own. In contrast to Euripides, Sophocles, like Aeschylus, is profoundly religious, and the attitude which he adopts towards popular religion is marked by an instinctive reverence. The grace peculiar to Sophocles' nature makes itself felt in his language, the charm of which was universally praised by the ancients. With his noble simplicity he takes in this respect also a middle place between the weightiness and boldness of the language of Aeschylus, and the smoothness and rhetorical embellishment which distinguish that of Euripides.

Sophocles was a very prolific poet. The number of his plays is given as between 123 and 130, of which above 100 are known to us by their titles and by fragments. Only seven have been preserved complete: The Trachinice (so named from the chorus, and its treating of the death of Heracles), the Ajax, the Philoctetes, the Electra, the Oedipus Tyrannus, the Oedipus at Colonus, and the Antigone. The last-mentioned play was produced in the spring of 440 B.C.; the Philoctetes in 410 B.C.; the Oedipus at Colonus was not put on the stage until 401 B.C., after his death, by his grandson Sophocles. Besides tragedies, Sophocles composed paeans, elegies, epigrams, and a work in prose on the chorus.

The Greek Theatre : Evolution and Influence

Without a doubt, the Greek theatre remains one of the most recognized and distinctive buildings in the world. While we associate many features of modern theatres with their Greek counterparts, the ancient theatre was a very different animal. The size, shape, and functions of the various pieces, though analogous to the modern theatre, were quite different in ancient times. The Greek theatre evolved to fit the changing specifications of tragedy, eventually into the form that survives at hundreds of sites around the Mediterranean. At the same time, the overarching simplicity of the Greek theatre, despite the many changes, demanded certain features of the tragedies. As tragedy evolved from choral songs to works such as Oedipus the King, a unique, reciprocal relationship developed with the theatre.

The earliest Greek theatres recall tragedy's origins in choral songs sung to local heroes and divinities. Choral songs were an early Greek performative art, in which a large group of people, the chorus (in Greek, literally = "dance"), would dance and sing rau cous songs in honour of a god. Choral performances in honour of the god Dionysus evolved into what we know as tragedy, an enduring art form that the Greeks invented in the 6th
c. B.C.E. These performances took place in a large, circular orchestra, or dancing area, in which the chorus performed. The orchestra was simply a flattened patch of earth, unpaved, and delimited by a rim of large stones. At the centre of the orchestra, stood an altar to Dionysus, the patron god of tragedy. The chorus did not use the altar per se during performance; instead, the altar acted as a focal point around which the chorus danced and sang. A simple, undecorated wooden tent, or skene, stood behind the orchestra and provided a place for the chorus to store instruments or other props needed during the dance. Audiences began to attend these performances, and orchestras started to be built against hillsides. The rising earth formed a natural seating area, a theatre (in Greek = "watching place"), from which spectators could view the performances.

These choral songs evolved into tragedy with the addition of actors. The actors, naturally, needed some way to physically separate themselves from the chorus and the orchestra. The small tent gave way to larger wooden buildings. These new and improved skene provided a degree of separation for the actors, as well as doors through which the actors could enter and exit. These wooden platforms, though still temporary, were painted with architectural features; though our word "scene" comes from the Greek skene, these paintings were purely decorative and in no way influenced the tragedy or its content. During this time, other areas of the theatre became more defined. First, the orchestra was sunk just below the level of the audience, thus formalizing the stone rim; the orchestra was also paved with large, flat stones. Second, rows of wooden seats were built on the hillside. These benches wrapped more than halfway around the orchestra and began the Greek theatre's distinctive architectural form.

Over time, the actors supplanted the chorus as the dominant characters in tragedy, and theatre design reflected this important shift. The skene evolved again, this time into a complex and permanent stone structure. This generation of skene allowed the actors to perform on stage level as well on the roof. The building became large and sturdy to accommodate the various machines that became popular in tragic performances; such skene were also higher and elaborately decorated with sculpture and architectural features. The new tragic pattern also had ramifications for the orchestra. As the prominence of the chorus diminished, the orchestra got smaller and smaller; late Greek and Roman theatres often reduced the orchestra to a semi-circle. Further modifications came to the audience: Stone seating replaced the wooden benches, and large walkways partitioned the seats for easy access.

Even in its later form, the Greek theatre remained starkly simple, and this heavily influenced the tragedies' performance. First, the Greek theatres were much larger than their modern counterparts, and some theatres held over 14,000 spectators. On these grand scales, actors' tools for communication with the audience were entirely different than modern ones. Body language, facial gestures, and vocal tones, though very effective in a small, modern theatre, would have been lost in the sheer size of an ancient one. Instead, the actor wore a huge tragic mask to roughly depict his state of mind and relied on his speech to do the rest. Lengthy monologues were the only means available for character development. These passages contrast with modern drama, but in ancient times were entirely necessary. Second, the theatre provided no special effects, save a crane in the skene capable of raising and lowering characters onto the stage. Lighting, background changes, curtains, and sounds - the staple special effects in modern dramatic performance - were unavailable to the Greeks. Instead, all "special effects" had to be done through the script. Murder, sex, natural disasters, suicide, and battles all took
place offstage; messengers then reported the results. Given the practical constraints, this was the only sensible way of doing business. Modern readers often desire to "see" these important actions, as they are often the critical points in the tragedy. They take place off-stage not because of incompetence, but because of the limitations of the theatre.

Greek tragedy and the Greek theatre influenced each other in such a way that the discussion of one necessarily involves the other. As Greek tragedy developed from hymns of praise to local gods to the complex works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the theatre adapted accordingly. All the while, the theatre remained an essentially simple building and affected the way the tragic poets developed their works. In the end, the distinctive features of Greek tragedy and the Greek theatre resulted from the interaction between the two.

**Oedipus: The Greek Period**

The Greek period, in the fourth and fifth centuries of B.C., evolved from a small city called Athens, Europe. In this era, a sweep of talent and creativity placed a historical advance on theatre that will dominate for years to come. This spirit most likely emerged from the defeat of the Persian Empire, along with the sense of freedom and expression from the Athenian democracy. Four great writers derived from this ancient astonishment. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were three writers of tragedy, whereas Aristophanes was a famous comic dramatist. From these original works came the play festivals using masks and boots to accommodate for the size of the Greek theatre. These tragedies the Athenians went to see consisted of five episodes, and one in particular, Oedipus the King, is made up of five choral odes, featuring the mystery behind the riddle of the sphinx. The dithyrambs were a beginning stage or rough draft of what the plays would soon come to be. Dionysis is the name of a theatre where people like Thespis and other Greek actors performed, using the three unities to keep the audience's attention alarmed and suspense building.

Aeschylus was the first of the tragedy writers. He took the theatres origins and focused less on reciting patterns, dealing more with the presentation of action. Born under tyranny, he grew up during the period in which the Persian Empire was attempting to conquer Athens. Aeschylus was born in 525 B.C. His youth was most likely spent in the city of Pallene with his father, Euphorion, and his brother. It was a repressive time, under the rule of Peisistratus.

The play festivals at which these writers competed were at “City Dionysia” and the Lenaea. The “City Dionysia” was held at the end of March. The people of Athens put on a folk festival at which they would boast of their success, theatrically and politically, to all the prosperous men visiting from outside the state. This festival consumed all of six days, the second day full of dancing and singing, following the previous day of comedies. Then came three days of tragedy performances within the competition of five authors. The second celebration, Lenaea, at the end of January is the older of the two. It started off as a wine festival and gradually included play contests. These contests mainly used comedies to entertain them.
In these productions, masks and boots were the eye-catching features of their wardrobe. The masks attracted attention to their dramatic expressions. This allowed the emotions to be conveyed to the spectators farthest away. The masks, made of linen cork and wood, could be changed by the three actors whom had speaking parts. Therefore, these actors could play many parts. The hole in the mask, disguised as a mouth, is used as a sounding board to project the voice of the actor.

The boots had high painted soles, and while accompanied with a tall headdress, created the effect of a change in height. This change could be even more than one and a half feet. Larger than life, the height was proportioned with bright colours, extravagant padded costumes, and lent colour. Although, the unstableness of the boot created a hazard in walking, it gave a great addition to the intensity of the theatre.

The stage of the open-aired Greek theatre of the fifth century B.C. was surrounded by a seating capacity of fourteen thousand. The marble benches arranged around the circular stage known as the eccyclema, a form of wagon-stage. Behind the dancing floor was the stage building with doors and maybe even columns. This setting would represent a palace or temple which would be the main setting of action. This is also were the actors make their entrance. There was a lack of curtains and lighting and only a few props were used. The gods in the play were sometimes lifted in by cranes while other times they performed on a special platform.

In the Greek tragedies there is a basic outline that the authors followed consisting of five episodes with choral odes between them. Prologos, was the first scene which was an introduction. Episode, is the second scene which is dramatic one. Parodos, was the third scene, served as an entrance lyric by the chorus. Stasimon is a choral ode, and the fifth Exodos delivers the parting lines by the chorus and leaves the orchestra.

The choral odes in Oedipus the King is a good example of how the chorus was used to create a reaction from the audience. The first choral ode was a prayer to the gods, which reveals the reality of the plague as seen through the eyes of the people as a whole. The second reflects the reactions from the accusations and counteraccusations of Oedipus and Tiresias. The third deals with the truth or falsity of the divine prophecy. The fourth shows the chorus in a mode of feverish excitement dealing with the secret birth of Oedipus. The last deals with the fate of Oedipus.

These tragedies started off as Dithyrambs which formed from myths to stories that were translated into words of song in addition to physical movement. They were the first step toward a literary drama with both tragedy and comedy. These plays were demonstrated at the city of Dionysus featuring Greek actors such as Thespis.

The plays consisted of three unities, the unity of action, time and place. The all united to form a whole with a ‘certain degree of magnitude’ according to Aristotle. They were part of a trilogy.

The Greek theatre was an extravagant event that allowed the people of the city of Athens to release their magic upon the world. They changed the theatre and that change will last for many years to come. They set a standard for comedy and tragedy that will entertain and influence people forever.
Oedipus Myth

The King of Thebes was Laius, a descendant of Cadmus, and an oracle predicted, before the birth of his son that this son would one day be his father’s murderer. When born, Laius (and, in some versions of the myth, Jocasta, Oedipus’ mother and Laius’ wife) gives the child to a herdsman and orders him to take him out beyond the city and kill him. Out of pity for the child, the herdsman gave the baby to another herdsman, tying his feet together and wounding them (in some versions, Laius pierces Oedipus’ feet and exposes him to die, where the herdsman finds him by chance). This herdsman took the baby to Polybus, King of Corinth, who adopted him as his own son.

Oedipus, now fully grown, is told that he is not the son of Polybus, and seeks help from an oracle, who tells him he is destined to kill his father and sleep with his mother. Oedipus – presumably still thinking that Polybus is his father – flees from Corinth to Thebes in an attempt to escape the fate the oracle has predicted for him. As he is travelling, he gets involved in a dispute at a crossroads with a man in a chariot (Laius, his birth father) – and kills him.

As he approaches Thebes, Oedipus is approached by the Sphinx, who proposes her famous riddle: ‘What walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three at night?’ – the answer is man, who crawls, walks upright, and in his age, walks with a stick. The Sphinx, who has been plaguing Thebes, is defeated – Oedipus has solved the riddle that no Athenian could solve. In gratitude, the Thebans appoint Oedipus the king of Thebes (in Laius’ place) and reward him with the dead king’s wife, Jocasta, his birth mother. Oedipus and Jocasta have four children: two daughters (Electra and Ismene) and two sons (Polyneices and Eteocles).

At this point, Sophocles’ play begins. Years later, a plague strikes Thebes, and Oedipus as King promises to end it. He sends Creon, Jocasta’s brother, to the Delphic Oracle to seek guidance and is told that the murderer of Laius must be found and either killed or exiled (depending, again, on which version you read). As he begins to search for the killer, he encounters (or sends for) Tiresias, who tells him that he is the killer of Laius and warns him that he will only be seeking out himself. Oedipus ignores this advice.

A messenger arrives from Corinth giving Oedipus the news that Polybus is dead, and it seems the oracle’s prophecy for Oedipus has failed to come true. The herdsman who delivered him to Corinth then appears and informs Oedipus that he is an adopted baby. Jocasta, hearing this, realizes what has happened and kills herself. Oedipus seeks out the herdsman initially ordered to murder him as a baby, and learns that the infant raised by Polybus and Merope (his wife) was in fact the son of Laius and Jocasta. He finally realizes that, at the crossroads, he killed his father, and is married to his own mother. Notably in Sophocles' play, the Corinthian Messenger is also the first herdsman: a small, but concise tweak.

Oedipus finds Jocasta dead, and blinds himself. He then (in Sophocles) leaves the city, and with his daughter Antigone as his guide, wanders blindly through the country, dying finally at Colonous. Some versions of the story have Oedipus commit suicide in Thebes, rather than leave or be exiled.
Oedipus Rex : Summary

Oedipus Rex unfolds as a murder mystery, a political thriller, and a psychological whodunit. Throughout this mythic story of parricide and incest, Sophocles emphasizes the irony of a man determined to track down, expose, and punish an assassin, who turns out to be himself.

When the play opens, Thebes is suffering a plague which leaves its fields and women barren. Oedipus, the king of Thebes, has sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to the house of Apollo to ask the oracle how to end the plague. Creon returns, bearing good news: once
the killer of the previous king, Laius, is found, Thebes will be cured of the plague (Laius was Jocasta's husband before she married Oedipus). Hearing this, Oedipus swears he will find the murderer and banish him. The Chorus (representing the people of Thebes) suggests that Oedipus consult Tiresias, the blind prophet. Oedipus tells them that he has already sent for Tiresias.

When Tiresias arrives, he seems reluctant to answer Oedipus's questions, warning him that he does not want to know the answers. Oedipus threatens him with death, and finally Tiresias tells him that Oedipus himself is the killer, and that his marriage is a sinful union. Oedipus takes this as an insult and jumps to the conclusion that Creon paid Tiresias to say these things. Furious, Oedipus dismisses him, and Tiresias goes, repeating as he does, that Laius's killer is right here before him - a man who is his father's killer and his mother's husband, a man who came seeing but will leave in blindness.

Creon enters, asking the people around him if it is true that Oedipus slanderously accused him. The Chorus tries to mediate, but Oedipus appears and charges Creon with treason. Jocasta and the Chorus beg Oedipus to be open-minded: Oedipus unwillingly relents and allows Creon to go. Jocasta asks Oedipus why he is so upset and he tells her what Tiresias prophesied. Jocasta comforts him by telling him that there is no truth in oracles or prophets, and she has proof. Long ago an oracle told Laius that his own son would kill him, and as a result he and Jocasta gave their infant son to a shepherd to leave out on a hillside to die with a pin through its ankles. Yet Laius was killed by robbers, not by his own son, proof that the oracle was wrong. But something about her story troubles Oedipus; she said that Laius was killed at a place where three roads meet, and this reminds Oedipus of an incident from his past, when he killed a stranger at a place where three roads met. He asks her to describe Laius, and her description matches his memory. Yet Jocasta tells him that the only eyewitness to Laius's death, a herdsman, swore that five robbers killed him. Oedipus summons this witness.

While they wait for the man to arrive, Jocasta asks Oedipus why he seems so troubled. Oedipus tells her the story of his past. Once when he was young, a man he met told him that he was not his father's son. He asked his parents about it, and they denied it. Still it troubled him, and he eventually went to an oracle to determine his true lineage. The oracle then told him that he would kill his father and marry his mother. This prophecy so frightened Oedipus that he left his hometown and never returned. On his journey, he encountered a haughty man at a crossroads - and killed the man after suffering an insult. Oedipus is afraid that the stranger he killed might have been Laius. If this is the case, Oedipus will be forever banished both from Thebes (the punishment he swore for the killer of Laius) and from Corinth, his hometown. If this eyewitness will swear that robbers killed Laius, then Oedipus is exonerated. He prays for the witness to deliver him from guilt and from banishment. Oedipus and Jocasta enter the palace to wait for him.

Jocasta comes back out of the palace, on her way to the holy temples to pray for Oedipus. A messenger arrives from Corinth with the news that Oedipus's father Polybus is dead. Overjoyed, Jocasta sends for Oedipus, glad that she has even more proof in the uselessness of oracles. Oedipus rejoices, but then states that he is still afraid of the rest of the oracle's prophecy: that he will marry his mother. The messenger assures him that he need not fear approaching Corinth - since Merope, his mother, is not really his mother, and moreover, Polybus wasn't his father either. Stunned, Oedipus asks him how
he came to know this. The messenger replies that years ago a man gave a baby to him and he delivered this baby to the king and queen of Corinth - a baby that would grow up to be Oedipus the King. The injury to Oedipus's ankles is a testament to the truth of his tale, because the baby's feet had been pierced through the ankles. Oedipus asks the messenger who gave the baby to him, and he replies that it was one of Laius's servants. Oedipus sends his men out to find this servant. The messenger suggests that Jocasta should be able to help identify the servant and help unveil the true story of Oedipus's birth. Suddenly understanding the terrible truth, Jocasta begs Oedipus not to carry through with his investigation. Oedipus replies that he swore to unravel this mystery, and he will follow through on his word. Jocasta exits into the palace.

Oedipus again swears that he will figure out this secret, no matter how vile the answer is. The Chorus senses that something bad is about to happen and join Jocasta's cry in begging the mystery to be left unresolved. Oedipus's men lead in an old shepherd, who is afraid to answer Oedipus's questions. But finally he tells Oedipus the truth. He did in fact give the messenger a baby boy, and that baby boy was Laius's son - the same son that Jocasta and Laius left on a hillside to die because of the oracle's prophecy.

Finally the truth is clear - devastated, Oedipus exits into the palace. A messenger reveals that he grabbed a sword and searched for Jocasta with the intent to kill her. Upon entering her chamber, however, he finds that she has hanged herself. He takes the gold brooches from her dress and gouges his eyes out. He appears onstage again, blood streaming from his now blind eyes. He cries out that he, who has seen and done such vile things, shall never see again. He begs the Chorus to kill him. Creon enters, having heard the entire story, and begs Oedipus to come inside, where he will not be seen. Oedipus begs him to let him leave the city, and Creon tells him that he must consult Apollo first. Oedipus tells him that banishment was the punishment he declared for Laius's killer, and Creon agrees with him. Before he leaves forever, however, Oedipus asks to see his daughters and begs Creon to take care of them. Oedipus is then led away, while Creon and the girls go back in the palace. The Chorus, alone, laments Oedipus' tragic fate and his doomed lineage.

**Oedipus Rex : Major Themes**

In the play Oedipus Rex, by Sophocles, two themes appear; one that humans have little control of their lives because fate always catches up with them and the theme that when someone makes a mistake, they will have to pay for it.

The theme that the **lives of humans are controlled by the gods**, in Oedipus, show that everything humans do are futile and result in no gain but only loss. This theme is mainly shown by the character Oedipus, king of Thebes. In the beginning of his life, Laius the king planned to kill his son by leaving him on Mount Cithaeron to die. "...at the moment I was your savior."

From the very beginning, Oedipus was destined to fulfill Apollo's prophecy of killing his father. Even though King Laius tries to kill Oedipus to stop the fulfillment of this shameful prophecy, fate drives the Corinthian messenger to save Oedipus. What the gods fortell will come true and no human can stop it from happening, not even the kings. Oedipus is once again controlled by this power when he leaves the place of his childhood...
after he hears that he is to kill his father and marry his mother. "I shall shrink from nothing...to find the murderer of Laius...You are the murderer..." Oedipus tried to stop the prophecy from coming true by leaving Corinth and only fate can make Oedipus turn to the road where he kills his true father. Leaving Corinth makes Oedipus lose his childhood by making him worry of such issues young people should not have to worry about and becoming a king of a strange land. Last of all, Oedipus carries the last part of the prophecy out, marrying his mother. "I would... never have been known as my mother's husband. Oedipus has no control over the outcome of his life. Fate causes Oedipus to have known the answer to the Sphinx's riddle and win his marriage to his mother, Jocasta. Had fate not intervened, the chances of marrying Jocasta would have been small since there is an enormous number of people and places to go. Oedipus loses his sense of dignity after he discovers he is not only a murderer, but also that he had committed incest. From his birth to the end of the play, fate intervenes when Oedipus is saved from Laius' wrath as a baby, when Oedipus goes to the fork in the road where he kills his true father, and lastly, when he answers the Sphinx's riddle and marries Jocasta.

The second theme, mistakes and wrongs toward other people will be paid, for is told by Tiresias, the prophet, and carried out by Jocasta, and once again, King Oedipus. Tiresias states, after being accused of being a fool and mocked by Oedipus, "These reproaches you fling at me, all these people here will fling them at you..." Tiresias realizes that mockery and false accusations will not go unpaid forever. This foreshadows the mockery Oedipus will experience after the truth to his marriage is discovered; these people will jeer at him. Jocasta makes a detrimental mistake when she marries Oedipus. She even says, "...he had more or less the same build as you." Jocasta ignores all the obvious features between Laius and Oedipus because she was so in love. If she had taken notice of these things, her pain would be more endurable because Oedipus would not know that the prophecy was being fulfilled. Lastly, King Oedipus made a mistake losing his temper when he meets King Laius. "The driver tried to push me off the road...he aimed at my head with a two-pronged goad, and hit me. I paid him back in full...I killed the whole lot of them." Oedipus wronged Laius here by killing him over a small incident and fit of anger. Had Oedipus not killed Laius, the murderer of would not have to be searched out and ultimately, the truth about his marriage to his mother would not be told and the kingdom would continue to thrive along with the family happiness. The statement by Tiresias and the mistakes of the royal family, show that the mistakes and insults toward others will be returned to that person who has wronged the other.

**Oedipus Rex : Critical Concepts**

**Light and darkness:** - Darkness and light are tightly wound up with the theme of sight and blindness in Sophocles' play. Oedipus - and all the other characters, save for Tiresias - is 'in the dark' about his own origins and the murder of Laius. Tiresias, of course, is literally 'in the dark' with his own blindness - and yet manages to have sight over everything that is to follow. After Oedipus finds out what has happened, he bemoans the way everything has indeed "come to light".

**Sight and blindness:** - Tiresias holds the key to the link between sight and blindness - for even though he is blind, he can still see and predict the future (if not the present). At the end of the play, moreover, Oedipus blinds himself, because what he has
metaphorically seen (i.e. realized) leaves him unable to face his family or his parents in the afterlife). As with the previous theme, sight/blindness operate both literally and metaphorically within the play. Indeed, literal sight is juxtaposed with 'insight' or 'foresight'.

**Origins and children:** Oedipus embarks upon a search for his own origins, and though he does not realize it - for his real parents. As the child of his own wife, and thus father and brother to his children, Sophocles explores various interrelationships between where things began and who fathered who. Similarly, the play itself works backwards towards a revelatory start: the story has, in effect, already happened - and Oedipus is forced to discover his own history.

**The One and the Many (also Doubles/Twos):** Throughout the play, a central inconsistency dominates - namely the herdsman and Jocasta both believe Laius to have been killed by several people at the crossroads. The story, however, reveals that Oedipus himself alone killed Laius. How can Laius have been supposedly killed by one person – and also by many people?

Oedipus is searching for Laius’ murderer: he is the detective seeking the criminal. Yet in the end, these two roles merge into one person – Oedipus himself. The Oedipus we are left with at the end of the play is similarly both father and brother. Sophocles’ play, in fact, abounds with twos and doubles: there are two herdsmen, two daughters and two sons, two opposed pairs of king and queen (Laius and Jocasta, and Polybus and Merope), and two cities (Thebes and Corinth). In so many of these cases, Oedipus’ realization is that he is either between – or, more confusingly, some combination of – two things. Thus the conflict between “the one and the many” is central to Sophocles’ play. "What is this news of double meaning?" Jocasta asks (939). Throughout Oedipus, then, it remains a pertinent question.

**Plague and health:** Thebes at the start of the play is suffering from terrible blight which renders the fields and the women barren. The oracle tells Oedipus at the start of the play that the source of this plague is Laius' murderer (Oedipus himself). Health then, only comes with the end of the play and Oedipus' blindness. Again, 'plague' is both literal and metaphorical. There is a genuine plague, but also, to quote Hamlet, there might be "something rotten" in the moral state of Thebes.

**Prophecy, oracles, and predestination:** The origins of this play in the Oedipus myth (see 'Oedipus and Myth') create a compelling question about foreknowledge and expectation. The audience who knew the myth would know from the start far more than Oedipus himself - hence a strong example of dramatic irony. Moreover, one of the themes the play considers as a corollary is whether or not you can escape your fate. In trying to murder her son, Jocasta finds him reborn as her husband. Running from Corinth, from his parents, Oedipus murders his father on the way. It seems that running away from one's fate ultimately ensures that one is only running towards it.

**Youth and age:** ‘Man' is the answer to the Sphinx's question, and the aging of man is given key significance in the course of the play. Oedipus himself goes from childlike innocence to a blinded man who needs to be led by his children. Oedipus, it might be said, ages with the discovery of his own shortcomings as a man. In learning of his own weaknesses and frailties, he loses his innocence immediately.
Oedipus Rex as an Aristotelian Tragedy

The fifth century B is the golden age of Greek dramas. During that period, Sophocles wrote an outstanding tragedy named Oedipus Rex. Over the centuries, Oedipus Rex has been regarded as the Greek tragedy par excellence. In the Poetics, Aristotle listed many requirements of a successful tragedy. Oedipus Rex is Aristotle’s ideal tragedy because it fulfills so many requirements for a successful tragedy.

To begin with, Aristotle believes that “the first and most important part” of his ideal tragedy is *plot*. He requires the plot of a tragedy to be single and complex, which means there should be only one plot that includes peripeteia and anagnorisis. Additionally, all plots should have pathos. It is obvious that all those requirements are satisfied in Oedipus Rex. Peripeteia, which means reversal, occurs when Oedipus hears the news of Polybus’s death. The news first sounds good, but reverses to be a disaster in a moment. Anagnorisis means recognition, emerges in the story when Oedipus knows that he kills Laius. Oedipus kills his father in ignorance but learns the true relationship from a Theban people. Pathos means suffering. It is important for a successful tragedy because a destructive or painful act will earn the audience’s sympathy. When Oedipus finally understands the truth, he is so suffering from it that he blinds himself. In all, Oedipus Rex meets all Aristotle’s requirements of the plot of a tragedy.

The second important part of a successful tragedy, *characters* are required by Aristotle to be good, appropriate, true to life, and consistent. All characters in Oedipus Rex meet those requirements, and Jocasta is a perfect example. She is the queen of Thebe, and she commits suicide because she cannot bear the shame of the immoral truth.

Except fulfilling requirements of all characters, Oedipus Rex also meets the specialty of a *tragic hero*. The most important character in a tragedy is the tragic hero. Aristotle requires that this character should have an elevated status but imperfect, which means the character should be higher than common people but falls below. Oedipus, the king of Thebe, is absolutely high-ranking. However, he falls to the bottom when he recognizes that he kills his father and gets married to his mother. Oedipus might have left the plague to take its course, but pity for the sufferings of his people compelled him to find out the truth. He might have left the murder of Laius uninvestigated, but piety and justice required him to act. Tiresias, Jocasta the Theban people, each in turn tries to stop him, but in vain; he must read the last riddle, the riddle of his own life. What causes his ruin is his own strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes, and his loyalty to the truth.

In addition, Aristotle also mentions in the Poetics that the *hamartia* of a tragic hero is very important for a good tragedy. The Greek term "hamartia" means "tragic flaw." The character’s flaw must result from something that is also a central part of their virtue, which goes somewhat twisted. 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. It is obvious that Oedipus is a tragic hero with hamartia. His basic flaw is his lack of knowledge about his own identity. Moreover, no amount of foresight or pre-emptive action could remedy Oedipus' hamartia; 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.
Another requirement Aristotle mentions in the Poetics is **catharsis**. Aristotle uses the term catharsis to refer to the purging of excessive emotions of a person. In Oedipus Rex, Sophocles perfectly evokes catharsis to make the story to its climax. By watching the tragedy and feeling the strong emotions of fear and pity on behalf of the characters on stage, audiences experience a kind of cleansing of the soul. So the catharsis from watching tragedy gave the spectators a shared experience that bound them closer together. The catharsis occurs at the end when Oedipus, driven by the guilt of the impermissibility of incest and the emptiness caused by the loss of his beloved mother, blinds himself.

Fulfilled so many requirements by Aristotle, it is obvious that Oedipus Rex is a perfect tragedy. It has a proper plot, characters, tragic hero, hamartia, and catharsis.

**Oedipus : Aristotle’s Tragic Hero**

Sophocles’ Oedipus is one of the most well-known and influential fictional figure in the history of literature primarily because of the fact that Oedipus symbolizes many things – as a hero, as a son, as a leader and as an example of the conflicting issues affecting morality. Oedipus is the ideal man to exemplify Aristotle’s idea of the tragic hero based on several characteristics focused on the major flaw of Oedipus as an individual character and based on the actions Oedipus took that shaped his fortune and future.

There are several characteristics that define the tragic hero, as per Aristotle’s understanding of the concept, and the life and characteristics of Sophocles’ Oedipus fit perfectly in this framework. First, there is the idea of **evoking two important emotions: fear and pity**. The life of the tragic hero should make us feel fear as well as pity. The role of the hero is to represent the human nature and the innate weakness and futility of the human endeavor to counteract or go against the perceived path that destiny and the universe has set for an individual. These are two of the strongest characteristics of Oedipus and two of the most important facets of the overall story of Oedipus’ life.

We feel pity over Oedipus because of what Oedipus has to go through, and how he was powerless to fight a prophecy because he feels that it is the moral thing to do. First, Oedipus, as a baby, was cursed to die in the forest because his father believed that if Oedipus lives, it is by his hands that King Laius would receive his end. There is reason to celebrate and be happy because Oedipus somehow managed to get out of the forest alive as he was discovered by chance by some peasant farmers who eventually ended up handing them over to the king and queen of Corinth. However, what was thought to be the start of a better life for Oedipus was actually the opposite. On the contrary, it will be the start of a life that would have a grim ending not only for Oedipus but also for his mother and father.

The **feeling of pity** continues as we witness how Oedipus unknowingly slays his father and then **marries his mother**, and it then becomes the **reason for his mother’s intense feeling of guilt and confusion** that led her to kill herself. Finally, the feeling of **pity ends with Oedipus making himself** blind and then **throwing himself in exile**. He allowed all of these things happen to him in pursuit of saving the lives of those whom he thought were his parents. Despite Oedipus’ moral and righteous
goals, he nonetheless ends up doing what is wrong, illustrating the futility of the human being versus the power of destiny which is believed to be out of the control of human beings.

As we ponder about the life of Oedipus who becomes the symbol of the inability of a human being to run away from his destiny, and for that, we feel fear. He represents every human being. We feel fear because in our everyday lives, we make conscious choices and efforts in order to keep ourselves away from doing bad things or being subjected to bad experiences. We protect ourselves and do everything we can to be morally upright and to guarantee self-preservation. But Oedipus’ life and the lessons from it will become a deeply ingrained realization upon us that we, like Oedipus, are after all helpless versus our destiny, especially once it is revealed to us.

Another important characteristic of the tragic hero is the shift from a life of prosperity transforming towards the life of adversity. When Oedipus was born, he has in his hands the prospect of a prosperous life being the son of the King and the Queen. But this prosperity turns to adversity as a result of the response of King Laius to the prophecy. When he was growing up in Corinth, again he was presented by a life of prosperity to which he turned his back against because he does not want to murder his own father and marry his own mother, leading to a path that will saw him murder his true father, marry his own mother who would soon take her own life while Oedipus makes himself blind and them puts himself in exile – clearly a life filled with adversity and not prosperity.

Another important aspect of a tragic hero as presented by Aristotle is the presence of both the flaw and the state of being virtuous. This puts the tragic hero in a balanced human form – there is the presence of innate good enough to inspire moral actions. There is also the tendency of the tragic hero to demonstrate his frailty or weakness which will result in his error. In the story, Oedipus is the epitome of the tragic hero because he is virtuous.

He was a good son to his surrogate (alternate) parents and his being virtuous was demonstrated in two important events in his life. The first one was during the time he discovered that he was doomed to kill his father. It broke his heart to leave his parents behind but he knew that even though this is a very painful step for him, this was the only way that he could keep the prophecy from becoming true, saving the life of his father and saving his mother from shame that will result in the marriage of a son to his own mother.

The other event which showed Oedipus innate characteristic of being virtuous is during the time he took it upon to punish his own self for his wrong doings. When he discovered his own crime and accepted his own shame, he was the one who took his very own eye sight, symbolizing how he was blinded and how his punishment means, not allowing him to visually enjoy life because of what he did. He also threw himself in exile as part of the punishment he himself embraced, knowing that this is the right and moral thing to do.

Despite these moral actions, Oedipus is not perfect. He is also flawed and is a man who is characterized with errors. One of his flaws is his temper. It is because of his anger that has led to his killing his father. Another flaw of Oedipus is his belief that he is more powerful than destiny and fate. He believed that he could change the course
of his life based on his own actions. This belief has sent him towards the path which he was trying to avoid. He believed that he can outrun destiny and change it over time, and this sense of overconfidence in what he can do doomed him. Had he been humble enough to allow destiny to reveal itself without any effort to change it, things would have been different. Anyone would risk doing anything and everything hoping that things turn out for the best.

Lastly, the most important aspect of the tragic hero is death. Tragedy pertains to a sad ending to a story or a life. The tragic hero’s life is a tragedy not because of death. Every human being dies, but the essence of tragedy is seen in the details leading towards the death of the hero, a life characterized by misfortune that the tragic hero has to carry with him to his grave. This is a tragedy because even in his own death, Oedipus knew that there is nothing he can do to redeem himself from his sins. He is a hero because he tried to do the right thing but he only ends up doing the wrong things nonetheless. He was a tragic hero because while we praise him for his values, he is also forever stained by the reality that he can never be redeemed from his errors brought about by his flaws and weaknesses as a man who is powerless against the power of destiny and fate, which is a very significant ideal during the time of Sophocles.

**Oedipus Rex: Hamartia**

According to Aristotle, a tragic hero is a distinguished person occupying a high position or having a high status in life and in very prosperous circumstances falling into misfortune on account of a “hamartia” or some defect of character. He should be good or fine man though not perfect. There is nothing to arouse the feelings of pity or fear in seeing a bad character pass from prosperity into misfortune while the ruin of a man who represents near-perfection in the moral sense is repugnant and horrible. The tragic hero is neither a moral paragon nor a scoundrel. He should be true to type, and consistent or true to himself. Aristotle would attribute disaster or catastrophe in a tragedy to an error rather than a deliberate crime.

The main requirements of Aristotle in regard to the tragic hero are thus (1) high social standing, (2) moral excellence or goodness, and (3) some fault of character, or error committed by the hero in ignorance. Oedipus answers to all these requirements. Oedipus is a man of royal birth; he is brought up by a King and a Queen and he himself afterwards becomes a King and marries a Queen. He is thus a man of social eminence and possessing excellent qualities of character, though his is by no means perfect. We cannot say that his misfortune is due to any defect in his character, though his defects do produce the impression that such a man must pay for his defects. It would be wrong to say that he is a puppet in the hands of fate. Within certain limits he is a free agent, though it must be recognized that the prophecy of the oracle would yet have been fulfilled.

Oedipus is a good king, a great well-wisher of his people, a man of integrity, an honest and great administrator and an outstanding intellect. He is a pious man who believes in oracles, respects the bonds of family, and hates impurity. His belief in the prophecies of gods is the very basis of the whole play. The suppliant people approach him almost as a god and he is honoured as a saviour. When Creon reveals the cause of the city’s suffering, Oedipus declares his resolve to track down the criminal and he utters a terrible
curse upon him. We can say that Oedipus is almost an ideal King. He also shows himself as a devoted husband and a loving father. He shows due consideration for the opinions and feelings of Jocasta and he lavishes all his affection on his daughters. His relations with the Chorus are also very cordial and he shows all due courtesy to them. In short both as a man and as a king Oedipus is worthy of high respect.

However, Oedipus has his faults. He is hot-tempered, hasty in his judgment, proud of his intelligence, and random in his decisions. He quickly loses his temper when he finds the prophet reluctant to reveal the things that he knows. He jumps to the conclusion that Tiresias and Creon have hatched a conspiracy against him. This attitude of distrust towards the prophet is in sharp contrast to Oedipus’s genuine piety. Oedipus belongs to the world of politics and human standards rather than to the divine order of the world. His piety fails also later on when, under the influence of Jocasta, he becomes somewhat skeptical regarding the oracle.

An outstanding feature of Oedipus’s character is an inherent feeling of pride in his own wisdom. Because of this arrogance, Oedipus certainly alienates some of our sympathy. When self-confidence takes the form of pride, haughtiness, arrogance or insolence, it becomes disgusting and obnoxious. His attitude of intolerance towards both Tiresias and Creon and his highly offensive and insulting words to both of them create in us the impression that he is paving the way for his own downfall. Of course, Oedipus has already committed the crimes which make him a sinner in the eyes of the god, in his own eyes, and in the eyes of other people. But the tragedy lay in discovery that he is guilty of them. If the crimes had remained unknown there would hardly have been any tragedy. Tragedy comes with the fact for discovery both for Jocasta and himself.

It would be a flaw in the logic to say that Oedipus suffers because of his sin of pride, but his pride is not the direct cause of his tragedy. He tried to avoid the fulfillment of the prophecies made by oracle. He killed his father and married his mother. His tragedy is a tragedy of error. If he had been a little more careful, things would have taken a different shape. He might have avoided the quarrel on the road if he had not been so proud or hot-tempered; and he might have refused to marry a woman old enough if he had not been blinded by the pride of his intelligence in solving the riddle of the Sphinx. But, then, the prophecies of the oracle would have been fulfilled in some other way, because nothing could have been prevented their fulfillment. Pride has little to do with Oedipus’s killing his father and marrying his mother.

If Oedipus had not relentlessly pursued his investigations, he might have been spared the shock of discovery. Something in him drives him forward on the road to discovery. After Tiresias has first refused to tell him anything and then uttered some frightening prophecies. Oedipus is discouraged by Jocasta to continue his investigations. But he pays no heed to her philosophy of living at random. She makes another effort to stop his investigations when she has herself realized the truth, but again she failed. The Theban shepherd too tries, but in vain. It is this insistence on the truth that leads to the discovery in which lies the tragedy. We may interrupt this insistence on the truth as a form of pride, the pride of intellect, or the pride of knowing everything. The link of cause and effect is unmistakable between Oedipus’s pride of intellect and Oedipus’s discovery for his sins. But there is no strong link between his pride and the actual committing of his sins because the sins would have been committed in any case, if the oracle was to be
fulfilled. The oracle did say that Oedipus would be guilty of those crimes but no oracle said that Oedipus must discover the truth.

Oedipus is thus an **authentic tragic hero** in the Aristotelian sense because his tragedy is as much due to his own initiatives in discovering the truth as to external circumstances. To the modern mind, a high social position is not necessary for the tragic hero nor do they recognize the validity of oracles too.

In Oedipus we see the **helplessness of man in the face of the circumstances and his essential greatness**. The manner in which Oedipus blinds himself after realizing his guilt and in which he endures his punishment raise him high in our esteem. The spirit of Oedipus remains unconquered even in his defeat and that is the essential fact about a tragic hero.

**Oedipus Rex: Catharsis**

According to Aristotle tragedy should arouse the feeling of pity and terror – pity for the hero’s tragic fate and terror at the sight of the dreadful suffering befalling particularly the hero. By arousing pity and terror, a tragedy aims at the catharsis of these and similar other emotions and cures these feelings which always exist in our hearts. A tragedy, hence, affords emotional relief and the spectators rise at its end with a feeling of pleasure. This, according to Aristotle, is the aesthetic function of tragedy. Through catharsis the emotions are reduced to a healthy and balanced proportion. Besides pity and fear an audience also experiences contempt, hatred, delight, indignation, and admiration. Still, these emotions are less important or less intense. Pity and fear are the dominant emotions and they are intensely produced.

Tragedy, by means of pity, fear and other emotions also provides exercise and nourishment for the emotional side of human nature. It also satisfies our love of beauty and of truth, of truth to life and truth about life. Experience, and more experience, is a natural human craving. Tragedy leads to an enrichment of our experience of human life. It may teach us to live more wisely and widen the boundaries of our experience of life. Tragedy shows the eternal contradiction between human weakness and human courage, human stupidity and human greatness, human frailty and human strength. Tragedy gives us pleasure by exhibiting human endurance and perseverance in the face of calamities and disasters.

Pity and fear are the dominating feelings produced by the play “**Oedipus Rex**”. Apart from catharsis of these feelings, the play deepens our experience of human life and enhances our understanding of human nature and human psychology. The prologue produces in us pity and fear, pity for the suffering population of Thebes and fear of future misfortunes which might befall the people. The Priest, describing the state of affairs, refers to a tide of death from which there is no escape, death in the fields and pastures, in the wombs of women, death caused by the plague which grips the city. Oedipus gives expression to his feeling of sympathy, telling the Priest that his heart is burdened by the suffering of all the people. The entry-song of the Chorus following the prologue heightens the feelings of pity and fear. The Chorus says:

“**With fear my heart is riven, fear of what shall be told. Fear is upon us.”**
Oedipus’ proclamation of his resolve to track down the murderer of Laius brings some relief to us. But the curse, which Oedipus utters upon the unknown criminal and upon those who may be sheltering him, also terrifies us by its fierceness. The scene in which Oedipus clashes with Tiresias contributes to the feelings of pity and terror, the prophecy of Tiresias is frightening because it relates to Oedipus. Tiresias speaks to Oedipus in alarming tones, describing him in a veiled manner as “husband of the woman who bore him, father-killer and father-supplanter” and accusing him openly of being a murderer.

In the scene with Creon, the feeling of terror is much less, arising mainly from Oedipus’ sentence of death against the innocent Creon which is soon withdrawn. The tension reappears with Oedipus’ suspicion on hearing from Jocasta that Laius was killed where three roads met. Oedipus’ account of his arrival at Thebes arouses the feeling of terror by its reference to the prophecy which he received from the oracle, but both terror and pity subside when Jocasta tries to assure Oedipus that prophecies deserve no attention. The song of the Chorus harshly rebuking the proud tyrant revives some of the terror in our minds, but it again subsides at the arrival of the Corinthian after hearing whom Jocasta mocks at the oracles. The drama now continues at a rather low key till first Jocasta and then Oedipus find themselves confronted with the true facts of the situations. With the discovery of true facts, both the feelings of pity and fear reach their climax, with Oedipus lamenting his sinful acts of killing his father and marrying his mother.

But the feelings of pity and fear do not end here. The song of the Chorus immediately following the discovery arouses our deepest sympathy at Oedipus’ sad fate. The Chorus extends the scope of its observations to include all mankind:

“All the generations of mortal man add up to nothing.”

Then comes the messenger from the palace and he gives a terrible account of the manner in which Jocasta hanged herself and Oedipus blinded himself. The messenger concluded his account with the remark that the royal household is today overwhelmed by “calamity, death, ruin, tears and shame”. The conversation of the Chorus with Oedipus who is not blind is also extremely moving. Oedipus speaks of his physical and mental agony and the Chorus tries to console him. Oedipus describes himself as:

“...... shedder of father’s blood, husband of mother, Godless and child of shame, begetter of brother-sons”.

The feeling of deep grief by Oedipus is experienced by the audience with an equal intensity. The scene of Oedipus’ meeting with his daughters is also very touching. His daughters, laments Oedipus, will have to wander homeless and husbandless. He appeals to Creon in moving words to look after them.

The feeling of pity and fear has been continuously experienced from the very opening scene of the play. Other feelings aroused in our hearts were irritation with Oedipus at his ill-treatment of Tiresias, anger against Tiresias for his obstinacy and insolence, admiration for Creon for his moderation and loyalty, liking for Jocasta for her devotion to Oedipus, admiration for Oedipus for his relentless pursuits of truth and so on. But the feelings of relief, delight and pleasure have also been aroused in us. These feelings are
the result partly of the felicity of the language employed and the music of poetry, but mainly the result of the spectacle of human greatness which we have witnessed side by side with the spectacle of human misery. The sins of Oedipus were committed unknowingly; in fact Oedipus did his utmost to avert the disaster. Oedipus is, therefore, essentially an innocent man, despite his sin of pride and tyranny. Jocasta too is innocent, in spite of her sin of scepticism. There is no villainy to be condemned in the play. The essential goodness of Oedipus, Jocasta and Creon is highly pleasing to us. But even more pleasing though at the same time saddening is the spectacle of human endurance seen in Jocasta and Oedipus inflicting upon themselves a punishment that is awful and terrible. In the closing scene, the blind Oedipus rises truly to heroic heights, displaying an indomitable spirit. Blind and helpless though he now is, and extremely ashamed of his parricide and incestuous experience as he is, he yet shows an invulnerable mind and it is this which has a sustaining, cheering, uplifting and exhilarating effect upon us.

Jocasta’s fate underlines that of Oedipus. So does the great song of the Chorus on the laws which are “enthroned above”. The song and in particular the denunciation of the tyrant are relevant to Oedipus and Jocasta. The song begins with a prayer for purity and reverence, clearly an answer to Oedipus’ and Jocasta's doubts about the oracles. It ends with an even more emphatic expression of fear of what will happen if the truth of the divine oracles is denied. Between the first and the last stanzas the Chorus describes the man who is born of hybris, such hybris as is displayed by the King and the Queen. The description follows to a large extent the conventional picture of the tyrant, mentioning his pride, greed and irreverence. Not every feature fits the character of Oedipus, nor should we expect that. The Chorus fears that he who behaves with presumption, pride and self-confidence will turn tyrannical and impious, and they foresee that Zeus, the true King of the world will punish the sins of the mortal King. If he does not do so, all religion will become meaningless, and all will be lost.

**Oedipus Rex: Tragic Irony**

*Tragic irony* was used initially in ancient Greek tragedy and later almost in all tragedies. Irony consists essentially in the contrast of the two aspects of the same remark or situation. A remark made by a character in a play may have one meaning for him and another meaning for other character and the audience or one meaning for the speaker and the other characters and another meaning for the audience. Similarly, a situation may have a double significance in the sense that a disaster may be foreseen by the audience while the characters may be ignorant of it. Irony heightens the tragic effect. Sophocles has used irony with striking effect in his plays.

“Oedipus Rex” is replete with tragic irony and is found in most of the speeches and situations. There are many occasions on which the audience is aware of the facts while the speaker is ignorant of those facts and some other characters, on the other hand, present a contrast which lends an increased emphasis to a tragic fact or to the ultimate tragic outcome. The proclamation of Oedipus that he will make a determined effort to trace the murderer of Laius and the curse that Oedipus utters upon the killer and upon those sheltering the criminal, possess a tragic irony in view of the audience’s knowledge that Oedipus himself will ultimately prove to be Laius’ murderer. Oedipus proclaims that no house in Thebes is to provide shelter to the guilty man and that the gods will curse those who disobey his command. Thus, without knowing the real meaning of his words,
Oedipus announces the sentences of banishment against the murderer and heightens the tragic effect of the discovery which comes towards the end of the play. Oedipus does not know that he himself is to become the victim of the punishment which he is proclaiming but the audience knows it. In this contrast between Oedipus’ ignorance and our knowledge of the true fact lies the tragic irony.

The **scene between Oedipus and Tiresias** is fraught with tragic irony throughout. Tiresias is the prophet who knows everything while Oedipus does not know himself as such. Tiresias would not like to disclose the secret but Oedipus quickly loses his temper thus provoking the prophet to say what he never wanted to say. Tiresias tells Oedipus that he himself is the guilty man he is seeking and that he is living in a sinful union with the one he loves. The impact of these words is totally lost upon Oedipus. The charges of Tiresias enrage him and he insults the prophet by calling him a sightless sot showing his own inner blindness. An irony lies in the fact that Tiresias, physically blind, knows the truth while Oedipus, having normal eyesight, is totally blind to that truth. There is irony also in the contrast between what Oedipus truly is and what he thinks himself to be. To Tiresias he boasts of his intelligence citing his past victory over the Sphinx. The terrible predictions that Tiresias makes regarding the fate in store for Oedipus also possess irony in the sense that, while we know their tragic imports, Oedipus treats them as the ravings of a madman. These predictions become more awful when we realize that they will prove to be true and valid. Tiresias warns Oedipus that the killer of Laius will ultimately find himself blind, an exile, a beggar, a brother and a father at a same time to the children he loves, a son and a husband to the woman who bore him, a father-killer and father-supplenter. Even the Chorus, ignorant of the facts, refuses to believe what Tiresias has said about Oedipus. Thus both Oedipus and the Chorus are unaware of the truth while Tiresias and the audience is fully aware of it.

Tragic irony is also found in the **scene with Creon**. Creon begs Oedipus not to think him a traitor and not to pass the sentence of death or exile against him. But Oedipus blinded by his authority and his anger shows himself relentless. This situation is ironical of the final scene where the roles are reversed. There Oedipus begs Creon to look after his daughters, and entreats him to pass the order of banishment against him. Creon, being a moderate man, does not show himself unrelenting in that scene. The pathos of the final scene is intensified.

Then there is the **scene with Jocasta**. Oedipus and Jocasta are ignorant of the true facts. The audience, aware of the facts, experiences a deep sorrow at the fate which is going to overtake these characters. Jocasta is sceptical of oracles. She thinks no man possesses the secret of divination and as a proof she tells what she and her husband did to the child, who, according to the oracle, was to kill his father. There is palpable irony in Jocasta’s unbelief in oracles and her citing as proof the very case which is to prove the truth of one oracle received by her and the late Laius. This irony deepens Jocasta's tragedy.

There is **irony also in the account of his life which Oedipus gives to Jocasta**. Oedipus thinks himself to be the son of Polybus and Merope: he fled from Corinth after the oracle had told him of the crimes he would commit: he has all along been under the impression that he has avoided committing the crimes foretold by the oracles. But all the time Oedipus has been unknowingly performing certain actions leading to the fulfillment of those very prophecies which he had been striving to belie, just as King Laius had
earlier taken desperate but futile measures to prevent the fulfillment of the prophecy which has been communicated to him by the oracle.

When the Corinthian messenger brings the news of Polybus’ death, Jocasta gets another chance to mock at the oracles without realizing that her mockery will turn against herself.

“Where are you now, divine prognostication?”

Jocasta tells Oedipus that this news proves the hollowness of oracles because Polybus whom Oedipus believed to be his father has died a natural death. There is irony also in the simple remark of the messenger that Jocasta is the “true consort” of a man like Oedipus. Neither the messenger nor Jocasta knows the awful meaning of these words.

Jocasta makes an exultant speech on the desirability of living at random and on mother marrying as merely a figment of the imagination. Jocasta makes this speech only a few moments before the truth dawns upon her. The Corinthian, who wanted to free Oedipus of his fear of marrying his mother, ends by revealing, unknowingly, the fact that Jocasta's husband, Oedipus, is really her son, although this revelation is at this stage confined to Jocasta. The tragic irony of this situation and in what is said by the Corinthian and Jocasta in this scene is evident.

The song of the Chorus, after Jocasta has left in a fit of grief and sorrow, is full of tragic irony. The Chorus thereby pays a tribute to what it thinks to be the divine parentage of Oedipus. There is a big contrast between this supposition of the Chorus and the actual reality. The arrival of the Theban shepherd is the point at which the climax of the tragedy is reached.

After the discovery there is hardly any room for tragic irony. The concluding part consists of a long account of the self-murder and the self-blinding, a dialogue between Oedipus and the Chorus, and a scene between Oedipus and Creon including the brief lament by Oedipus on the wretched condition of his daughters. The concluding portion of the play is deeply moving and poignant, but contains little or no tragic irony.

Oedipus Rex bristles with tragic irony. It opposes Oedipus against those who know i.e. Tiresias. Where characters themselves are not omniscient, the audience is. The audience knows the gist of the story and can be surprised only in the means by which the necessary ends are achieved. They know that Oedipus is, in all sincerity, telling a falsehood when he says:

“I shall speak, as a stranger to the whole question and stranger to the action.”

The falsehood is, however, qualified in the term stranger: the stranger who met and killed King Laius, who met and married Queen Jocasta, the stranger who was no true stranger at all. At the outset, he says:

“For I know well that all of you are sick, but though you are sick, there’s none of you who is so sick as I.”

Here he is, indeed, speaking the truth, but more truth, than he knows, because he is using sickness only in a symbolic sense while actually it is true of him in a literal tense.
In addition to this irony of detail, there is a larger irony in the *inversion of the whole action*. The homeless wanderer by delivering the city of Thebes from the sphinx and marrying Jocasta became a King in fact, but this revelation turned him once more into a homeless wanderer, who had once gone bright eyed with his strong traveller’s staff, now uses the staff to feel the way before him.

The *reversed pattern* is seen again in the fact that the cruel oracles have their darkest moment just before they come clear. Jocasta’s words mocking the prophecy of the gods are echoed and amplified in Oedipus’ typical tyrant-speech of unbelief. The role of the helpers is another example. Sophocles provides at least one helper, or rescuer, for every act. The appeal in the prologue is to Oedipus, himself a rescuer in the past. Oedipus appeals to Creon who comes from and represents Apollo and Delphi. It is as a rescuer that Tiresias is called. Jocasta intervenes to help. So does the Corinthian messenger, and the last helper, the Theban shepherd, is the true and original rescuer. Those who do not know the reality are eager to help; those who know are reluctant. But all helper alike push Oedipus over the edge into disaster.

**Oedipus Rex: Character is Destiny**

“*Oedipus Rex*” is a *tragedy of fate*. The *crucial events* in the play have been *pre-determined by fate or the gods*. Man seems *helpless* facing the circumstances which mould his destiny. King Laius was told that his own son by Jocasta would kill him. Laius did *everything possible* to prevent such a disaster. Once Jocasta gave birth to a son, Laius had him chained and handed him over to a trustworthy servant with strict orders that the child be exposed on Mt. Cithaeron and allowed to perish. But the servant, out of compassion, handed over the child to a Corinthian shepherd who passed him on to the Corinthian King. The child grew up as the son of the King and Queen of Corinth and later killed his true father, Laius, in complete ignorance. Apollo’s *oracle was fulfilled* even though Laius and Jocasta took the extreme step to escape the fate foretold by the oracle.

Oedipus had also to *submit to the destiny* which Apollo's oracle pronounced for him. He learnt from the oracle that he would kill his own father and marry his own mother. He, too, tried his utmost to avert a terrible fate and fled from Corinth. His wanderings took him to Thebes, where people were facing a great misfortune. King Laius had been killed and the city was in the grip of the Sphinx, who was causing a lot of destruction because nobody was able to solve her riddle. Oedipus solved the riddle and put an end to the monster. Oedipus was joyfully received by Theban people as their King and was given Laius's widow as his wife. Thus, in complete ignorance of the identity of his parents, he killed his father and married his mother. He performed these disastrous acts not only unknowingly, but as a result of his efforts to escape the cruel fate which the oracle at had communicated to him.

It is evident that the occurrences which bring about the tragedy in the life of Laius, Oedipus, and Jocasta are the work of that *mysterious supernatural power* called *fate or destiny or be given the name of Apollo*. This supernatural power had *pre-determined certain tragic events* and even informed the human beings in advance. These human beings take whatever measures, to avert those events; and yet things turn
out exactly as they had been foretold by the oracles. Oedipus has done nothing at all to
deserve the fate which overtakes him. Nor do Laius and Jocasta deserve the fate they
meet,

According to Aristotle the tragic hero is a **prosperous man** who falls into misfortune due
to some serious **defect or hamartia**. No doubt that Oedipus is an **able ruler**, a **father**
of his people, a great **administrator** and an **outstanding intellect**. His chief care is
not for himself but for the people of the State. The people look upon him as their **savior**
and **worshipped him**. He is also a **religious man** in the orthodox sense. That such a
man should meet the sad fate is unbearably painful to us.

Oedipus is not, however, a **perfect man or a perfect King**. He does suffer from
a **hamartia** or a defect of character. He is **hot-tempered**, **rash**, **hasty** in
judgments, **easily provoked** and somewhat **arbitrary**. Though in the beginning his
attitude towards Tiresias is one of reverence, he quickly **loses his temper** and speaks
to the prophet in an **insulting manner** accusing both him and Creon of treason and
showing a **blind suspicion** towards friends. His **position and authority** seem to be
leading him to become a **tyrant**. Creon has to remind him that the city does not belong
to him alone. Even when blinded he draws the reproach:

“**Do not crave to be master in everything always.**”

All this shows that Oedipus is not a man of a **flawless character**, not completely **free
from faults**, not an **embodiment of all the virtues**. His **pride** in his own **wisdom** is
one of his **glaring faults**. His success in solving the riddle of the Sphinx further
developed his inherent feeling of pride. There is in him a **failure of piety** even. Under
the influence of Jocasta, he grows **sceptical of the oracles**. Thus there is in him a **lack
of true wisdom** which took him on the verge of becoming an impious tyrant.

If Oedipus had **not been hot-tempered**, he might not have got entangled in a
**fight** on the road and might have not been guilty of **murdering his father**. Similarly, if
he had been a little **more cautious**, he might have hesitated to **marry a woman old
enough to be his mother**. After all there was **no compulsion** either in the fight or in
his marriage. Both his acts may thus be **attributed to his own defects** of character. All
at once it has to be accepted that the **decree of the oracles were inescapable**. Even
if Oedipus had taken the **precautions**, the prophecy was to be fulfilled. The oracle’s
prediction was **unconditional**; it did not say that if Oedipus did such and such a thing
he would kill his father and marry his mother. The oracle simply said that Oedipus would
kill his father and marry his mother. What the oracle said, was bound to happen.

If Oedipus is the **innocent victim** of inescapable doom, he would be a **mere
puppet** and the play becomes a **tragedy of destiny** which denies **human freedom**.
Sophocles does not want to regard Oedipus as a puppet; there is reason to believe that
Oedipus has been portrayed largely as a free agent. The attendant in the play insistently
describes Oedipus’ **self-blinding as voluntary** and distinguishes it from his **involuntary murder** of his father and **marriage** with his mother. Oedipus’ actions
were **fate-bound**, but everything that he does, he does as a free agent – his
**condemnation** of Tiresias and Creon, his **conversation** with Jocasta to reveal the
facts, his **pursuing his investigation** despite the efforts of Jocasta and the Theban
shepherd to stop him, and so on. Oedipus, **freely choosing a series of actions**, led to
his own ruin. Oedipus could have left the plague to take its course but his pity over the sufferings of his people forced him to consult the oracle. He could have left the murder of Laius uninvestigated, but his love of justice obliged him to inquire. He need not have forced the truth from the reluctant Theban shepherd but he could not rest content with a lie. Tiresias, Jocasta, the Theban shepherd each tried to stop Oedipus, but he was determined to solve the problem of his own parentage. The direct cause of his ruin is not fate; no oracle said that he must discover the truth. The cause of his ruin lies in his own weakness. His own strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes and his love of truth causes his ruin. All this shows him a free agent.

In spite of the facts that Oedipus is a free agent in most of his actions, still the most tragic events of his life – his murder of his father and his marriage with his mother – had inevitably to happen. Here the responsibility of fate cannot be denied. The real tragedy lies in the discovery of truth, which is due to his own traits. If he had not discovered the truth, he would have continued to live in a state of blissful ignorance and there would have been no tragedy and no suffering. But the parricide and the incest were pre-ordained and for these fate is responsible.

**Oedipus Rex: Role of Chorus**

Greek tragedy is said to develop itself from the group of dancers and singers who used to partake in the worship of various gods. According to Aristotle the Chorus should be like one of the characters. Gradually the role of the Chorus became less and less important in classical tragedy, until in Roman tragedy the speeches of the Chorus were supposed to be made in between the acts.

Chorus discharges some broad functions in all classical tragedies. The structure of a Greek tragedy is determined by the Chorus. After the prologue, it is with the entry of the Chorus that a Greek tragedy begins. Various episodes are also marked off by choric odes. The conclusion of a Greek tragedy occurs with the exode or the exit song of the Chorus. It is the function of the Chorus to comment on actions and events. It also sometimes questions the characters. Its standard role is that of the moderator. At times it represents the view-point of the common spectator and in some cases it represents the view-point of the dramatist himself.

The functions of the Chorus are very well performed in Oedipus Rex. In the very first ode the Chorus depicts the horror of the plague and expresses an apprehension about the message from the oracle of Delphi. Other odes comment on the action that has taken place after the last ode and build an atmosphere appropriate to that stage of the play. It plays the role of a peace-maker between the king and Creon and succeeds in getting the king’s pardon for the latter. After the exit of Tiresias it comments on the terrible predictions which Tiresias has made but shows determination to support the king. Its most significant response is when Oedipus and Jocasta have expressed irreverent thoughts against the oracles. At many other times also they reflect the dominant mood and help to deepen it. When Oedipus imagines that he is the son of the goodness of luck, the Chorus, immediately sing that their master, Oedipus, might be the son of Apollo.
In the fifth or last choric ode in Oedipus Rex, the Chorus reflects the dejection of Oedipus and says that all the generations of moral man add up to nothing. This ode must not be regarded as reflecting the final mood and impression of the play, for the impression is as much of the greatness of the human spirit as of the insignificance of man and the transitoriness of his happiness. This ode must, therefore, be looked upon only as reflecting a final judgment of it. Oedipus remains forceful even in his downfall; in a sense he is still heroic.

The Chorus takes part in the dialogues also. When Oedipus consults them about ending the plague in the city, they express disappointment that the oracle had not guided them about the identity of Laius’ murderer. They also tell him what they know about the murder of their previous king and its circumstances. When Creon, learning that the king has accused him of treason, comes on the stage he talks to the Chorus, who tell him that the king’s accusation was probably made in the heat of anger. Creon asked if the king looked absolutely serious while making the charge and they rightly say that it is not for them to look into the eyes of his master when he speaks. When Oedipus has almost passed a sentence upon Creon, Jocasta arrives on the scene and first talks to the Chorus. They request her to settle the difference between the two men. They are worried when they see Jocasta going into the palace in a very dejected mood, and they give expression to their apprehension. Oedipus asks them about the shepherd who gave the infant to the Corinthian, they answer that his queen would be able to answer the question better. They sympathize with Oedipus when they see him after he has blinded himself. It is clear, thus, that the Chorus never takes a direct hand in the action. It does not consist only of spectators but influences the action in various subtle ways.

The contribution of the Chorus in Oedipus Rex is considerable. They link the play with common humanity. In some sense they are often in the position of the ideal spectator. They fill in the gaps in the action when no other character is there on the stage. They add to it the element of melody which must have been one of the attractions of Greek tragedy. They provide an appropriate shift between the titanic, heroic figure of Oedipus and the mass of common humanity represented by the two shepherds in Oedipus Res. The tragedy of Oedipus and its relevance to common life is very well stressed by the Chorus in its exit ode or exode.

**Oedipus Rex : Fate**

In the Greek tragedy Oedipus the King written by Sophocles, the antagonist is fate. The theme of fate is deeply intertwined in the plot. In this play, all meet their fate despite attempting to escape it. Two characters bring about a fate worse than their original fate as punishment for trying to cheat fate.

The first instance-involving fate occurs when Oedipus sends Creon, Jocasta’s brother, to the temple of Apollo, the god of prophecy and healing, to find the fate of Thebes and how to rid Thebes of the plague the people are suffering from. Oedipus says,

**I acted at once. I sent Creon,**  
**My wife’s own brother, to Delphi—**  
**Apollo the Prophet’s oracle7—to learn**  
**What I might do or say to save our city. (Sophocles, 81-84)**
It is important to note that Apollo made the prophecy to King Laius, Jocasta's former husband, and Jocasta, Oedipus's wife, that they would bear a son who would kill King Laius, and Apollo made the prophecy to Oedipus that he would kill his biological father and sleep with his biological mother.

Fate is next brought into the play when Creon is sent in search of the blind prophet of Apollo, Tiresias. Against his will, Tiresias reveals Oedipus' fate. Oedipus is so anxious to find the murderer of King Laius that he will not give up until the murderer is found. Oedipus relentlessly pursues the truth, unwilling to give up until the truth is found.

After Oedipus repeatedly provokes Tiresias, he reveals what Oedipus is and who Oedipus really is. Tiresias says to Oedipus,

You cannot imagine...I tell you,
you and your loved ones live together in infamy,
you cannot see how far you've gone in guilt. (Sophocles, 417-419)

Tiresias is alluding to the fact that Oedipus unknowingly is married to his mother and has produced offspring through her. Oedipus is too blind to comprehend what Tiresias is saying. Tiresias goes on to say, "I pity you, flinging at me the very insults / each man here will fling at you so soon" (Sophocles, 423-424). Tiresias is warning Oedipus that everything he thinks he has is not really his. People will turn against Oedipus and he will lose everything. Oedipus blasphemes against the gods when he tells Tiresias that he does not have the gift of prophecy. This is blasphemy because Tiresias is the messenger between gods and humans, and when Oedipus calls him a liar he is denying the words of the gods.

Upon further provocations, Tiresias tells Oedipus that Oedipus does not know where he is living or who his parents are. Tiresias insinuates that Oedipus is both father and sibling to his children when he says, "And a crowd of other horrors you’d never dream / will level you with yourself and all your children" (Sophocles, lines 485-486). Next Tiresias predicts, "This day will bring your birth and your destruction" (Sophocles, 499).

In his final speech towards Oedipus, Tiresias tells Oedipus that he is the murderer. Tiresias further tells Oedipus that though he is a stranger to Thebes, he will soon discover that he is a native Theban. Oedipus will also discover that he is both father and brother to his children, and both son and husband to his wife. Tiresias aptly foretells that Oedipus will lose everything; that Oedipus will be blind and exiled (Sophocles, 510-525).

After first arguing with Tiresias and then Creon, Oedipus talks to Jocasta, bringing about our third example of fate as an antagonist. Upon learning what the argument was about Jocasta relays that an oracle had come to King Laius and told him that he would "die a victim at the hands of his own son" (Sophocles, 786-787). The king had pierced the infant's ankles and sent him to die, and besides King Laius was killed by highwayman. Jocasta argues that Oedipus should not fear prophecy because of the following, Apollo brought neither thing to pass. My baby,

no more murdered his father than Laius suffered,
his wildest fear—death at his own son’s hands.
That's how the seers and all their revelations. (Sophocles, 794-797)
Jocasta should have known that she could not outwit the gods, or fate. Fate next comes into play when Oedipus, who has begun to think he is King Laius' killer, recounts the dinner where the drunken man accused Oedipus of being a bastard. Oedipus goes to the oracle at Delphi to find his destiny. The oracle tells Oedipus as follows:

**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 your life!** (Sophocles, 873-875)

After hearing the oracle's prediction, Oedipus flees Corinth to protect Merope and Polybus and to escape his destiny, which gives us our fifth instance of fate.

The change in the curse was brought about by Jocasta, who feared the oracle's prophecy. Jocasta sent the infant, Oedipus, to his death. In doing this Jocasta was attempting to cheat fate. Jocasta thought that if she killed the baby, she could change her husband's destiny. The added prophecy that Oedipus would lie with his mother and produce cursed offspring is a result of Jocasta's attempt to cheat fate. Oedipus is really an innocent victim of fate.

Again fate is seen when the messenger brings news that Polybus has died a natural death. Both Oedipus and Jocasta rejoice briefly in this news for it further proves that oracles are wrong. Yet, Oedipus still has fear of prophecy for he will not return to Corinth as long as Merope is alive, for fear that he will lay with her. The messenger tells Oedipus that Merope is not Oedipus' true mother, as he himself gave Oedipus to her and to Pelops as a gift (Sophocles, 1113-1119). It is a strange twist of fate this messenger both took Oedipus to Corinth, but also is one of the final puzzle pieces in Oedipus' true identity.

When the shepherd arrives on the scene he is forced by Oedipus to verify that Oedipus is the child of Jocasta and King Laius. Oedipus' is now forced to realize that he has not escaped his fate. The entire prophecy has been fulfilled. After finding Jocasta's body, "And there we saw the woman hanging by the neck" (Sophocles, 1396), Oedipus does the following:

**He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins**
**holding her ropes—and lifting them high,**
**looking straight up into the points,**
**he digs them down the sockets of his eyes, crying.** (Sophocles, 1403-1406)

In the end of the play Oedipus is blind, ruined, and exiled just as Tiresias foretold when he said,

**You are the scourge of your own flesh and blood,**
**And the double lash of your mother and your father's curse**
**Will whip you from this land one day, their football**
**Treading you down in terror, darkness shrouding**
**Your eyes that now can see the light.** (Sophocles, 474-479)

Fate came out victorious in the end. In the Greek vision Fate cannot be altered or cheated. Even the gods cannot change Fate. Instead of claiming one victim, many were
ruined. If Jocasta had not tried to cheat fate, perhaps King Laius would be the only death. Instead King Laius and Jocasta are both dead, Oedipus is ruined and his children are cursed by this incestuous pollution. Fate is a force not to be reckoned with.

Considering all the facts, we can say that Oedipus is neither a free agent nor a mere victim of fate. The major events of his life are determined by fate, but his own acts such as fleeing from Corinth, killing an old man, marrying an aged woman, without knowing his whole identity, showing over-confidence and milking the shepherd for information all have contributed in precipitating the disaster.

**Oedipus Rex : Plot Construction**

Plot is the “first principle,” the most important feature of tragedy. Aristotle defines plot as “the arrangement of the incidents”. According to him; “The plot must be “a single whole,” with a beginning, middle, and end. It must be “complete,” having “unity of action.”

By this Aristotle means that the plot must be structurally self-contained, with the incidents bound together by internal necessity, each action leading inevitably to the next without any intervention.

“The worst kinds of plots are “episodic,’ in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence” The plot must be “of a certain magnitude,” both quantitatively (length, complexity) and qualitatively (“seriousness” and universal significance). It should not be too brief; it may be either simple or complex, although complex is better. Simple plots have only a “change of fortune”. Complex plots have both “reversal of intention” and “recognition “connected with the catastrophe (disaster).”

Oedipus Rex is the finest example from plot construction point of view and it has been envied by many of the writers. According to Aristotle, the plot of Oedipus Rex satisfies all the requirement of a good plot in a very nice way and he, in his book “the poetic”, presents Oedipus Rex as a model tragedy from all dramatic convictions’ point of view. When we analyse critically Oedipus Rex from plot construction point of view we can say that the first thing which strikes us is its unusual plot.

Oedipus Rex has an extremely unusual plot. It is the story of a King who is brought down by the unforeseen consequences of his own oath. From beginning to end it is concerned with the investigation of some past events. The play unites two parallel problems. One is the detection of murderer of Laius and the second is the identity of Oedipus himself. The two problems are one in a way and solving of either of them is like solving the both.

The general pattern of the story is that of finding of a lost one. The theme can be applied at several levels. We can say that Oedipus finds his parents or Thebes and Corinth discover their lost prince. This is very old theme. The foundling story has certain set features. For example, the child is generally believed to be dead, though it often escapes miraculously or by some kind human beings. The child grows up in the house-hold of a poor man but at the appropriated time, his identity is discovered by some physical signs or tokens. The Oedipus story is an exception in the sense that here the prince is brought up still as a prince, though in the family of another king. The token are not used by
Sophocles towards the solution – he has another use for them, but they are there in the form of pins stuck through the baby’s ankles. Often this theme is used in many comical stories but Oedipus is a true tragedy.

**Unity of Action:** Each of the incidents in this play is part of a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain. The plague in Thebes prompts Oedipus to send Creon to consult the oracle of Delphi; the oracle’s reply that the murderer of Laius must be banished from Thebes prompts Oedipus pronounce a solemn curse on the murderer and to send for Tiresias. Tiresias states that Oedipus is the murderer, but since the king knows himself to be innocent (or thinks he knows), he accuses Creon of plotting with Tiresias against him. The quarrel of Oedipus and Creon brings Jocasta from the house; seeking to calm down her husband and prove that oracles cannot be trusted, she tells again of how Laius died. When she mentions that he was killed “at a place where three roads meet,” Oedipus suddenly begins to suspect that he may indeed have killed the king without knowing who he was. To settle the matter, they send for the Herdsman who is the only survivor of that attack. Meanwhile a messenger arrives from Corinth to inform Oedipus that his supposed father, King Polybus of Corinth, has died. Oedipus rejoices that he did not kill his father as the oracle had prophesied but is still worried that he may marry his mother, the Messenger, seeking to relieve him of this fear, innocently tells him that Polybus and Merope were not his real parents.

The arrival of the Messenger is the only action in the play that is not directly caused by a previous action. However, this is a perfect example of Aristotle’s contention that if coincidences cannot be avoided, they should have “an air of design,” for this messenger seems brought by fate, since he is the missing link in Oedipus’ story, the very man who received Oedipus as a baby from the Herdsman. Thus, when the Herdsman arrives and they tell their respective stories, the whole truth emerges. This is the climax, or turning point, of the plot—the truth about Oedipus leads directly to the suicide of Jocasta and Oedipus’ self-blinding and request to be exiled. The departure of Oedipus from Thebes will lift the plague, thus resolving the problem that started off the chain of events and concluding the plot.
This plot is also a perfect example of the exclusion of the irrational and the skillful handling of traditional elements of the myth on which the play is based. Sophocles does not dramatize any of the admittedly irrational parts of the myth (e.g., why did Laius and Jocasta not kill the baby outright? If Oedipus was afraid of marrying his mother, why did he marry a woman old enough to be his mother? etc). Instead, in a brilliant move, he constructs the play as an investigation of the past. The tremendous sense of inevitability and fate in this play stems from the fact that all the irrational things have already been done; they are unalterable. Once Oedipus begins to investigate the murder of Laius, the whole truth about the past is bound to emerge; as he himself says,

“O, O, O, they will all come,
All come out clearly!”

**Complex Plot:** The peripeteia of the play is the Messenger's reversal of intention; in seeking to help Oedipus by telling him that Polybus and Merope were not his real parents, he instead creates the opposite effect, providing the crucial piece of information that will reveal that Oedipus has indeed killed his father and married his mother. As Aristotle recommends, this is directly connected to the anagnorisis, for the Messenger and Herdsman piece together the whole story of Oedipus, enabling him to “recognize” his true identity, to gain the essential knowledge he has lacked. The peripeteia and anagnorisis directly cause Oedipus’ catastrophe, or change of fortune from good to bad, and lead to the emotional “scenes of suffering” with Creon and his children. In a sense, each of Oedipus’ actions can be considered a reversal of intention, and each gives him a little more knowledge of the dreadful truth that will lead to his downfall.

**Role of the Hamartia:** The play offers a perfect illustration of the nature of the hamartia as “mistake” or error rather than flaw. Oedipus directly causes his own downfall not because he is evil, or proud, or weak, but simply because he does not know who he is. If he really wanted to avoid the oracle, leaving Corinth was a mistake, killing an unknown older aristocrat was a mistake, and marrying an older queen was a mistake. Seeking to uncover the past, cursing the murderer of Laius, sending for the Herdsman—each of the actions that he pursued so vigorously and for such good reasons led to his doom. Oedipus is not morally guilty, but he is radically ignorant, and Sophocles does not present him as a unique case but rather as a paradigm of the human condition, as “a man like ourselves.” In the words of the Chorus:

What man, what man on earth wins more of happiness than a seeming and after that turning away?

Oedipus, you are my pattern of this,
Oedipus, you and your fate! (stasimon 5)

**Oedipus Rex : Relationship b/w man and the gods**

**Crucial Events Pre-determined:**— Oedipus Rex is, to a large extent, a tragedy of fate. The crucial events in the play have been pre-determined by fate or the gods. Human beings seem rather helpless in the face of the circumstances which mould their destiny.
King Laius was told that his own son by Jocasta would kill him. Laius did everything possible to avoid such a disaster. As soon as Jocasta gave birth to a son, Laius had him chained and handed him over to a trustworthy servant with strict and precise instructions to the effect that the child be exposed on Mt. Cithaeron and allowed to perish. No child could have survived under the circumstances. But the servant, out of compassion, handed over the child to a Corinthian shepherd who passed him on to the Corinthian King. The child grew up as the son of Polybus and Merope, the King and Queen of Corinth, and subsequently killed his true father, Laius. Of course, the son killed his father unknowingly and in complete ignorance of the real identity of his victim. But Apollo’s oracle was fulfilled in the case of Laius even though he and his wife Jocasta took the extreme step of ordering the death of their own child, in order to escape the fate which had been foretold by the oracle.

**Oedipus’s Efforts to Avert His Fate Thwarted:** - Oedipus, the son whom Laius had begotten, had likewise to submit to the destiny which Apollo’s oracle pronounced for him. Oedipus learnt from the oracle that he would kill his own father and marry his own mother. Like his parents, Oedipus tried his utmost to avert a terrible fate. He fled from Corinth, determined never again to set eyes on his supposed father and mother as long as they lived. His wanderings took him to Thebes the people of which were facing a great misfortune. King Laius had been killed by an unknown traveller (who was none other than Oedipus himself) at a spot where three roads met; the city was in the grip of a frightful monster, the Sphinx, who was causing a lot of destruction because nobody was able to solve the riddle which she had propounded. Oedipus was able to solve the riddle and thus put an end to the monster. As a reward for the service he had rendered to the city, Oedipus was joyfully received by the people as their King and was given Laius’s widow as his wife. Thus, in complete ignorance of the identity of both his parents, he killed his father and married his mother. He performed these disastrous acts not only unknowingly and unintentionally, but as a direct result of his efforts to escape the cruel fate which the oracle at Delphi had communicated to him.

**Characters Not Responsible for their Fate:** - It is evident, then, that the occurrences which bring about the tragedy in the life of Laius, Oedipus, and Jocasta are the work of that mysterious supernatural power which may be called fate or destiny or be given the name of Apollo. This supernatural power had pre-determined certain catastrophic events in the life of these human beings. These human beings are even informed in advance that they will become the victims of certain shocking events; these human beings take whatever measures they can think of, to avert those events; and yet things turn out exactly as they had been foretold by the oracles. How can we attribute any responsibility for the tragic happenings to characters? Oedipus, the greatest sufferer in the play, has done nothing at all to deserve the fate which overtakes him. Nor do Laius and Jocasta deserve the fate they meet.

**The Goodness and Intelligence of Oedipus:** - Let us, however, take a closer look at the character of Oedipus, the tragic hero of the play. Aristotle expressed the view that the tragic hero is a man, esteemed and prosperous, who falls into misfortune because of some hamartia or defect. Now, there can be no doubt at all about the essential goodness of Oedipus. He is an able ruler, a father of his people, an honest and great administrator, and an outstanding intellect. His chief care is not for himself but for the people of the State. The people look upon him as their saviour. He is adored and worshipped by them. He is also a religious man in the orthodox sense; he believes in oracles; he respects the
bonds of family; and he hates impurity. Indeed, in the prologue of the play we get the feeling that Oedipus is an ideal King. That such a man should meet the sad fate which he does meet is, indeed, unbearably painful to us.

**Oedipus’s Defects of Character:**

Oedipus is not, however, a perfect man or even a perfect King. He does suffer from a hamartia or a defect of character which makes him liable to incur the wrath of the gods. He is hot-tempered, rash, hasty in forming judgments, easily provoked, and even somewhat arbitrary. Even though in the beginning his attitude towards Tiresias is one of reverence, he quickly loses his temper and speaks to the prophet in a highly insulting manner accusing both him and Creon of treason. His sentencing Creon to death even though subsequently he withdraws the punishment shows his rashness and arbitrariness. Indeed, in the two scenes with Tiresias and Creon, Oedipus shows a blind suspicion towards friends, an inclination to hasty inference, and a strange vindictiveness. When he meets opposition, or thinks he does, he easily loses all self-control. His position and authority seem to be leading him to become a tyrant. (That is the reason why this play is also called Oedipus Tyrannus). Creon has to remind him that the city does not belong to him alone. Even when blinded he draws the reproach; “Do not crave to be master in everything always.” All this shows that Oedipus is not a man of a flawless character, not a man completely free from faults, not an embodiment of all the virtues. His pride in his own wisdom is one of his glaring faults. His success in solving the riddle of the Sphinx seems to have further developed his inherent feeling of pride. No seer or prophet found the solution: this is Oedipus’s boast, pride and self-confidence that induce him to feel almost superior to the gods. There is in him a failure of piety even. Under the influence of Jocasta, he grows sceptical of the oracles. Thus there is in him a lack of true wisdom and this lack is an essential feature of the man who is on the verge of becoming an impious tyrant.

**The Oracle’s Predictions Inescapable:**

But the question that arises is: what is the connection between these defects of character in Oedipus and the sad fate that he meets. It may be said that if he had not been hot-tempered, he might not have got entangled in a fight on the road and might thus have not been guilty of murdering his father. Similarly, if he had been a little more cautious, he might have hesitated to marry a woman old enough to be his mother. After all there was no compulsion either in the fight that he picked up during his journey or in the act of his marriage with Jocasta. Both his killing his father and his marrying his mother may thus be attributed to his own defects of character. At the same time it has to be recognised that the pronouncements of the oracles were inescapable. What was foretold by the oracle must inevitably happen. Even if Oedipus had taken the precautions above hinted at, the prophecy was to be fulfilled. The oracle’s prediction was unconditional; it did not say that if Oedipus did such and such a thing he would kill his father and marry his mother. The oracle simply said that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother. What the oracle said was bound to happen.

**Oedipus Not a Puppet, But a Free Agent in His Actions on the Stage:**

If Oedipus is the innocent victim of a doom which he cannot avoid, he would appear to be a mere puppet. The whole play in that case becomes a tragedy of destiny which denies human freedom. But such a view would also be unsound. Sophocles does not want to regard Oedipus as a puppet; there is reason to believe that Oedipus has been portrayed largely as a free agent. Neither in Homer nor in Sophocles does divine fore-knowledge of certain events imply that all human actions are pre-determined. The attendant in the present
play emphatically describes Oedipus’s self-blinding as voluntary and self-chosen and distinguishes it from his involuntary murder of his father and marriage with his mother. Some of Oedipus’s actions were fate-bound, but everything that he does on the stage, from first to last, he does as a free agent—his condemnation of Tiresias and Creon, his conversation with Jocasta leading him to reveal the facts of his life to her and to his learning from her the circumstances of the death of Laius, his pursuing his investigation despite the efforts of Jocasta and the Theban shepherd to stop him, and so on. What fascinates us in this play is the spectacle of a man freely choosing, from the highest motives, a series of actions which lead to his own ruin. Oedipus could have left the plague to take its course but his pity over the sufferings of his people compelled him to consult the oracle. When Apollo’s word came, he could still have left the murder of Laius un-investigated, but his piety and his love of justice compelled him to start an inquiry. He need not have forced the truth from a reluctant Theban shepherd, but he could not rest content with a lie and, therefore, wanted to prove the matter fully. Tiresias, Jocasta, the Theban shepherd, each in turn tried to stop Oedipus, but in vain; he was determined to solve the problem of his own parentage. The immediate cause of his ruin is not fate or the gods; no oracle said that he must discover the truth. Still less does the cause of his ruin lie in his own weakness. What causes his ruin is his own strength and courage, his loyalty to Thebes, and his love of truth. In all this we are to see him as a free agent. And his self-blinding and self-banishment are equally free acts of choice.

The Responsibility of fate and the Responsibility of Character: - What is our conclusion, then? In spite of the evidence to prove Oedipus a free agent in most of his actions as depicted in the play, we cannot forget that the most tragic events of his life—his murder of his father and his marriage with his mother—had inevitably to happen. Here the responsibility of fate cannot be denied. But the discovery by Oedipus of his crimes or sins is the result of the compulsions of his own nature. The real tragedy lies in this discovery, which is due to the traits of his own character. If he had not discovered the truth, he would have continued to live in a state of blissful ignorance and there would have been no tragedy—no shock, no self-blinding, and no suffering (assuming, of course, that Jocasta too did not discover the truth). But the parricide and the incest—these were pre-ordained and for these fate is responsible.

Oedipus Rex : Role of Hubris in the Play

Hubris means great and unreasonable pride. On the surface there are ample evidences that Oedipus falls because of his excessive and unreasonable pride. His pride starts when he runs from Corinth. He runs from Corinth when he is told by an oracle that he is doomed to kill his father and he marry his mother. He runs because he is proud of his intelligence and think that he can avoid his fate through intelligence Had he not been proud, he would have asked the oracle to avoid this fate. The oracles might have told him some way to avoid the immoral situation but he runs away and leaves the city trusting his intelligence.

He kills his father, though he does not know the real identity at that time, in a fit of pride. From the details of the encounter we come to know that Oedipus refused give way to the king because of his pride and when the king tried to force his will he killed him and all his company except one person who escaped.
Again when he embarks to investigate the murder of the king, he is motivated by pride. The following lines bear testimony to this statement: “then once more I must bring what is dark to light.”

Each and every word spoken by Oedipus to Tiresias shows his pride. The following speech is noteworthy in this respect: when that hellcat the Sphinx was performing here, what help were you to the people? .... Your birds what good were they? Or the gods, for the matter of that? But I came by, Oedipus the simple man who knows nothing— I thought it out for myself, no birds helped me! And this the man you think you can destroy.”

He thinks himself solver of riddles; therefore, he becomes crazed with zeal to unveil the murder of Liaus. It is his pride that leads him to think that Creon was hatching a conspiracy against him. This pride blinds him to all other consideration and he blames Creon in open. He also does not spare the blind soothsayer and charges him of treason against his throne and life. He does not even stop to think why the blind soothsayer would be in league with Creon.

When Oedipus hears the news of Polybos’ death, he is overjoyed. The following speech of Oedipus also shows his excessive pride: “ why should a man respect the Pythian heart, or give heed to the birds that jangle above his head? They prophesied that I should kill Polybos, kill my own father— he packed the oracle off with him underground. They are empty words.”

All these detail may delude the readers to think that Oedipus was punished for the pride that he professes in his talents. It is true that Greeks thought any disrespect and blasphemy towards gods as great sin and believed that those who committed these sins cannot avoid sins. But things are not as simple in the case of Oedipus. We must bear in mind that the playwright wants to show something more involved than this. Therefore before we decide the cause of Oedipus’ fall, we will have to keep a lot of things in mind.

We must be clear in our mind that Oedipus was doomed to kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus falls not because of his pride but because he kills his father and marries his mother. No doubt he commits both these acts without knowledge but as soon as he comes to know his crime, he blind himself. All this has nothing to do with his pride. He does not blind himself out humiliation or disgrace rather he punishes himself for not being able to see the difference. This points to the fact that the playwright wants to show that man has but little freedom to choose what he likes and he is fated to get what is written in his fate in spite of this he tries to fight all forces that annihilate his significance. At the end of the play the writer seems suggesting that man is not “like butterflies to the wanton boys to the gods” but he is responsible what happens to him.

In short we can say that Oedipus falls because he was doomed to fall even before his birth. His pride has nothing to do with his fall. It is true that his pride hastens his fall but it is his pride makes him the real tragic hero. The reader may feel temporary dissatisfaction with Oedipus for his pride but his pride leads him to discover the greatest truth of his life and once he succeeds in discovering this truth he punishes himself adequately. At the end we feel that all who were advising Oedipus not to probe into the murder of Liaus were wrong and Oedipus was right.
Oedipus Rex : Moral Lesson in the Play

Oedipus Rex is a play of inexhaustible interest. Literary critics and students of Greek religion in our times continue to turn to it. Anthropologists and Psychologists find it useful as a reflection of an ancient myth and man's unconscious mind. In short, the play continues to be a subject of intensive discussion.

Certain things about it are clearer than others. For instance, it can easily be analysed as a piece of stagecraft; the methods used to arouse the interest and excite the emotions of the audience are evident to the analytical reader. But the meaning or significance of the play has aroused a lot of controversy. Briefly speaking, there are two major considerations regarding this play i.e. Sophocles’ dramatic craftsmanship, and Sophoclean thought—the former presenting no problem and the latter giving rise to considerable differences of opinion. Most critics have found a profound meaning in the play and they have offered a variety of interpretations ranging from the didacticism of Plutarch to the more complex explanations of the 20th century (such as Freudian, post-Freudian, Marxist, and existentialist).

Matching Wits with the gods: - The plot of this play is a search for knowledge, and its climax is recognition of truth. The hero here is a man whose self-esteem is rooted in his pride of intellect. The gods here manifest themselves not by means of any miracle but by a prediction which is proved true after a long delay. Various formulas have been imposed on this play. For instance, the play has been interpreted to mean that a wicked man is punished, or that an imprudent man pays the price, or that a family curse returns, or that an innocent man is victimised by fate. However, a more appropriate formula would be to say that in this play a man matches wits with the gods. We might even lend universality to this formula by saying that here man (and not a man) matches wits with the gods.

The gods always Win: - The play appears to dramatize the conventional Greek wisdom that, when mortal man vies with the immortal gods, the gods always win. The theme is as old as Homer, who tells this story to illustrate it in the sixth book of the Iliad. In this particular play the specific point of contention is knowledge. This is Sophocles’ way of translating the old theme into a form suited to the age of enlightenment and it creates a fine contrast or opposition between knowledge as power and self-knowledge. In short, the awareness that man is less than the gods is undoubtedly an element in the play.

Victory in Defeat: - “Oedipus Tyrannous of Sophocles combines two apparently irreconcilable themes, the greatness of the gods and the greatness of man, and the combination of these themes is inevitably tragic, for the greatness of the gods is most clearly and powerfully demonstrated by man’s defeat. The god is great in his laws and he does not grow old. But man does grow old, and not only does he grow old, he also dies. Unlike the gods, he exists in time. The beauty and power of his physical frame is subject to sickness, death, and corruption, the beauty and power of his intellectual, artistic, and social achievement to decline, overthrow, and oblivion. His greatness and beauty arouse in us a pride in their magnificence which is inseparable from and increased by our sorrow over their imminent death. Oedipus is symbolic of all human achievement, his hard-won magnificence, unlike the everlasting magnificence of the divine, cannot last and, while it

Prepared by Atta Ur Rahman Jadoon 03335499069
lives, shines all the more brilliant against the sombre background of its impermanency. Sophocles’ tragedy presents us with a terrible affirmation of man’s subordinate position in the universe, and at the same time with a heroic vision of man’s victory in defeat. Man is not equated to the gods but man at his greatest, as in Oedipus, is capable of something which the gods cannot experience; the proud tragic view of Sophocles sees in the fragility and inevitable defeat of human greatness the possibility of a purely human heroism to which the gods can never attain, for the condition of their existence is everlasting victory.”

The Lesson of Modesty or Self-Restraint: - It might be held that the play teaches us the precept: ”know thyself”. If we agree, we shall have to support the view that the play is didactic and that Sophocles is a teacher; for what the Delphic maxim just quoted amounts to is a warning to cultivate sophrosyne, a word best translated as modesty or self-restraint. It may be asserted that the play teaches the reader to cultivate the virtue of modesty, or self-restraint, or self-control, or caution. According to a strong supporter of this view, the touchstone by which Oedipus is to be judged is Creon. Creon’s “pious moderation” and “modest loyalty” are the ideals against which the arrogance of Oedipus is measured and found to be wrong. If the play teaches the lesson of self-control and self-restraint, then we have to admit that Creon’s personality illustrates this virtue. Creon explicitly claims this virtue in one of his speeches. He is at all-time respectful, cautious, and reverent. Even at the end, he insists that he will not exile Oedipus until he is absolutely sure that this is what the gods desire. It is he who points the obvious moral in the last scene, that now perhaps Oedipus will put his faith in the gods. His last, minor dispute with Oedipus is over a question of caution. Oedipus wants to be exiled immediately but Creon will not promise this until the will of the gods is made quite clear. Twice in the course of the play Creon makes a statement that may be taken as his motto. The statement is to the effect that Creon will not do or say anything unless he possesses definite knowledge to justify his doing or saying it.

The Contrast with Creon: - This trait in Creon contrasts him sharply with Oedipus who suffers from the pride of knowledge. Creon shows a desire to avoid the responsibilities of kingship because they are dangerous and painful. Creon would be content instead with public approval and with honours that bring gain. Creon is a just man; he is even a kind man who brings the children in the last scene to meet Oedipus. He is also an innocent man unjustly accused who reacts mildly and seems not to bear any grudge at the end. But he is humdrum and poor spirited and self-satisfied. He is thoroughly decent in his way, but Oedipus with his boldness and intelligence and ease of command is a much greater personality.

The Contrast between Oedipus & Other Main Characters: - The contrast between Oedipus and the other two principal characters is also noteworthy. Tiresias represents and defends the wisdom of the gods in his opposition to human folly. But Tiresias, as a person, stands no comparison with Oedipus. His first words in the play show that Tiresias finds his knowledge unbearable, and he is quite prepared to go back home until Oedipus provokes him to anger. As for Jocasta, she has raised irresponsibility to the status of a principle. Besides, neither Jocasta nor Tiresias is willing to face the truth, while Oedipus is not only willing but determined. Neither Tiresias nor Creon desires the responsibility that comes with office and power, but Oedipus does. Tiresias and Creon are both wiser men than Oedipus and at the end of the play Creon is still
giving to Oedipus a lesson in sophrosyne or self-restraint. But the brilliance and the courage of Oedipus make him a greater man than both Tiresias and Creon.

**The True Greatness of Man:** Oedipus may be taken to represent all mankind. He represents also the city which is man’s greatest creation. His resurgence in the last scene of the play is a prophetic vision of a defeated Athens which will rise to greatness beyond anything she had attained in victory. In the last scene, we witness a vision of a man superior to the tragic reversal of his action and the terrible success of his search for truth, reasserting his greatness not this time in defiance of the powers which shape human life but in harmony with those powers. In the last scene we see beyond the defeat of man’s ambition the true greatness of which only the defeated are capable.

**No Moral Lesson:** There is no moral lesson here. No moralist would present human folly in such bright colours and depict wisdom and temperance as dull. The kind of play Sophocles was writing in Oedipus Rex was intrinsically unsuited to be a lesson. The play does not persuade that Creon is a nobler man; it only shows him to be a wiser man. It does offer some comfort to the pious reader, but only a little, though it creates a difficulty for a philosopher like Plato who believed in the unity of human virtues. Nor could this play have pleased humanists of the fifth century, who attached great importance to the human intellect. Here we have a play showing man at his noblest and greatest when he is most foolish and in the very actions which exhibit his folly. We may accept that gratefully as a great artistic triumph, but we should not expect a moral lesson from it.

**Blindness in Oedipus Rex**

People can be “blinded” to the truth. The answer to their question or solution to their problem may have been obvious. Yet, they could not "see" the answer. They were blinded to the truth. Associations have been made between being blind and enlightened. A blind person is said to have powers to see invisible things. They "see" into the future. The blind may not have physical sight, but they have another kind of vision. In Sophocles' King Oedipus, Tiresias, the blind prophet, presents the truth to King Oedipus and Jocasta. Oedipus has been blinded to the truth his whole life. When he does find the truth, he loses his physical vision. Because of the truth, Oedipus blinds himself. Jocasta was blind to the true identity of Oedipus. Even when she found out the truth, she refused to accept it. In this case, those who are blind ultimately do have a higher vision - the truth.

Kind Oedipus started life with a prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. In an attempt to avoid this fate, his parents, Laius and Jocasta, sent him into the mountains to die. However, a shepherd saved Oedipus. This shepherd gave Oedipus to Polybus and Merope. When Oedipus learned of his prophecy, he fled his home, thinking these people were his real parents. On his flight, he met Laius. He ended up killing Laius. He continued on, answered a riddle of the evil Sphinx, and ended up king of Thebes. With this kingdom, Oedipus married Jocasta. He had lived out the prophecy without even knowing he had. Thebes fell onto bad times, and a prophet put the blame on a polluter of the lands. Oedipus called on Tiresias, and Tiresias informed him that the
polluter was the King. As Oedipus searched further and further, he discovered that he was the polluter and that the prophecy had come true. When Oedipus finally discovered the truth, he was so distressed that he ran pins into his eyes, blinding himself. He had been blinded to the truth for so long.

Oedipus was blind in more than one way. He was blind to the truth about his own life. Oedipus had no idea that his real parents were Laius and Jocasta. He was so blind that he got mad at anyone who was foolish enough to suggest such an idea. As more and more of the story started to fall into place, Oedipus was forced to open his eyes to the truth. Oedipus did kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus was the person causing the bad times in Thebes. As soon as Oedipus knew and accepted the truth, he blinded himself. Just as Tiresias was blind and open to the truth, so was Oedipus.

Oedipus was also physically blind. Oedipus' physical blindness played into the whole role of the Greek tragedy. The blindness completed the tragedy for Oedipus. Every Greek tragedy was supposed to end with the main characters experiencing their own, personal tragedy. For Oedipus, this tragedy was discovering the truth and becoming blind. It completed the prophecies that Oedipus received from the blind prophet, Tiresias. Tiresias told Oedipus that he had come into Thebes with his sight, but he would leave Thebes without it. Oedipus' physical blindness also left Oedipus to the wrongs of his life. With nothing to look at, Oedipus was forced to think about his life and what had happened. He was forced to deal with it. He had the blackness and the physical pain he had inflicted on himself as reminders and as punishment. Oedipus' physical blindness was just as painful as his blindness to the truth. Both were intertwined in each other.

Jocasta's blindness was different then Oedipus'. She knew about the prophecy, but she thought Oedipus was dead. She had no idea that she had married her son. As pieces of information came to point to the whole truth of the matter, Jocasta refused to accept what had really happened. She realized what had happened, and she knew that she had played a role in them. Her way of dealing with the whole deal was to kill herself. Jocasta's blindness ultimately led to her downfall.

Tiresias' blindness was of the physical nature. Tiresias played the role of the typical prophet in the Greek tragedy. He was physically blind, but he had vision into the future. When he presented the truth to Oedipus, Oedipus attacked his blindness. He told Tiresias that the only reason he was not blaming him for the whole situation was that Tiresias could not see. Oedipus used his blindness to prophesize that Oedipus would leave Thebes blind, poor, and shamed. This statement irritated Oedipus even more. Oedipus began to turn away from the idea of a prophet and seeing into the future. Tiresias' physical blindness led to Oedipus' physical blindness.

Figurative blindness can be harder to deal with than literal blindness. A person who is physically blind knows that he will probably be blind the rest of his life. That person will learn to deal with the blindness. However, if a person is blind to the truth, there is nothing that person can do until they learn the truth. The person may not even know that he is wrong. When the person does learn the truth, he tends to feel ignorant. The person wonders if things could have been avoided had the truth only been known. For Oedipus and Jocasta in Sophocles' King Oedipus, this scenario was just the case. When Oedipus learned the truth, his way of dealing with his figurative blindness was to blind himself. When Jocasta learned the truth, her way of dealing with her figurative blindness
was to kill herself. In this play, blindness led to the truth, and the truth led to blindness. Oedipus, Tiresias, and Jocasta were all blind, yet all found the truth.

**Oedipus the King : Reason and Passion**

In the play, Oedipus the King, there are dual parts of reason and passion. Oedipus primarily acts with both reason and passion at different stages in the play. There are several points in the play where Oedipus acts with reason. The first such point occurs when he is asked by his followers to help save Thebes. He acts with reason when he immediately decides to heed to their demands and find help for them. However, he may also have been deciding to do this through passion. His need for his land to be perfectly normal might have prompted this immediate decision.

Reason also occurs through the character of Oedipus himself. He has a heroic confidence in his own abilities, and he has good reason for such confidence, both from his own sense of past achievements and from the very high regard everyone has of those achievements. He is conscious of himself as a great man. He feels that he can achieve anything.

The central metaphor in this play is blindness. For the tragic hero is, in a sense, blind from the start, at least in the sense that he is not alert to the fact that the way he sees his situation may not be true, may be only a partial take on the reality of things. Oedipus is not prepared to admit that he might be wrong. Why should he? He has always been right in the past; no one else in Thebes is acting resolutely to meet the crisis, any more than they were when the city was threatened before. His vision may well include a certain narrowness, and yet because he sees the world that way, he is also the one with the most confidence in his own sight and the one most ready to act in accordance with what he sees. The way he sees the world lies at the very source of what makes him a great man now and in the past. Those around him rely upon that confidence in order for the crisis to be dealt with.

It is ironic that the only way that the curse will be lifted from Thebes is by finding the murderer of Laius. Oedipus starts on a powerful trip to find the murderer, and this ends up throwing him into a passionate search within himself to find the truth. Because Oedipus will not compromise, and will only go after the answer to Apollo's requests in one way, this sets him up for a horrific downfall. When Oedipus's reason ends up meeting his passion for finding the murderer, he finds that he is in a whirlpool of bad things that are going to bring him down.

Even when the full truth of what he has done strikes home, he will not abandon his faith in himself but will see himself out to the end. To the very end of this play, Oedipus is still insisting that he is the one who has blinded himself that he will accept his exile that he is fully prepared to accept the self-destructive consequences of what he has done.

Jocasta's attempt to put his mind at rest about killing his father - "don't believe seers, e.g. they were wrong about Laius being killed by his son" - the very thing that starts Oedipus on the suspicion that he is guilty.
Where did Oedipus go wrong? Leaving Corinth? Killing Laius? Marrying Jocasta? Pursuing his identity-search in the play? Certainly the latter, but this not the first, or major mistake. Is ill temper, jumping to conclusions as distinctive of Emotion = Dionysus. Oedipus has characteristics both Apollonian and Dionysian.

We have observed that one key to Oedipus's character is that he will not compromise. He must see life through on his own terms, no matter what the cost. He is prepared to acknowledge no authority outside his own will. Hence, if he is to be satisfied the world must answer to him.

As his situation gets more complicated and things do not work out as he has imagined they might, Oedipus does not adapt, change, and learn. He becomes more and more determined to see the problem through on his own terms; he becomes increasingly inflexible.

Having accepted the responsibility for saving Thebes, he will on his own see the matter through, without compromise, without lies, without deceit. Anyone who suggests that he proceed differently is simply an obstacle who must be overcome. That attitude, as we know, leads to the most horrific conclusions.

Oedipus is prepared only to do things in the way he sees fit. Whatever stands in his way he sees as an obstacle that he must overcome publicly, directly, and without compromise. He is anything but a flexible character. His sense of his own worth is so strong that he will not admit of any departure from his characteristic way of doing things. In fact, he is probably incapable of imagining acting in any other manner. He has no ability for the sort of delayed emotional response. Whatever he feels, Oedipus immediately reacts to, usually in public.

What makes Oedipus so compelling is not that he suffers horribly and endures at the end an almost living death. The force of the play comes from the connection between Oedipus's sufferings and his own actions, that is, from the awareness of how he himself is bringing upon his own head the dreadful outcome.

We can say Oedipus is capable of doing what he does because he is uniquely brave, excellent, and intelligent. But the tragedy reminds us, even the best and the bravest, those famous throughout the world for their knowledge, are doomed if they set themselves up against the mystery of life itself and if they try to force life to answer to them, they are going to self-destruct. Oedipus and his reasoning were correct in the way he followed them, but his passion and his ignorance of viewing the world properly led to his horrific downfall.

**The Punishment of Oedipus the King**

At the end of Oedipus Rex, Oedipus, king of Thebes, ends up banished forever from his kingdom. Additionally, Oedipus physically puts out his own eyes, for several reasons. The question is: Did Oedipus deserve his punishments? There are many factors that must be considered in answering this, including how Oedipus himself felt about his situation. His blinding was as much symbolic as it was physical pain.
It is important to keep in mind the whole basic reasoning for Oedipus' search for Laius' killers: he wished to put an end to a deadly plague, and that plague would only be stopped when said murderer is killed, or driven from the land. Thus, when it is revealed that Oedipus himself murdered Laius, then banishment seems to be the only option. Death, in my mind, is not valid simply because of what it might do to the kingdom's people. Even though it seems that Oedipus has not been a particularly good monarch, in fact his only major accomplishment seems to be killing the Sphinx all those years ago; having a king put to death could have serious repercussions on the rest of the kingdom. So in the end, the only way to cure the plague and keep the kingdom stable seems to be the banishment of Oedipus. In this case, the question of whether or not he deserved to be punished seems irrelevant; Oedipus' only goal was to stop the plague and by leaving, he has accomplished that goal. Banishment was the only choice.

But what exactly was Oedipus being punished for? Even after re-reading the play, this still seems to be a grey area. Incest? Immoral, to be sure, but Oedipus was obviously ignorant to his actions, and to my knowledge, in Sophoclean times, there was no written law against it and therefore no punishment for it. Oedipus' punishment may have been for killing Laius, but how could you punish someone for being a victim of fate? Greeks believed at the time of the play's writing that a man's life was "woven" by the 3 fates and that he was irrevocably bound to that destiny. Knowing this and knowing that Oedipus became king of Thebes only because it was his destiny to murder Laius and kill the Sphinx, how could he rightfully be punished? Even Oedipus himself knows that his actions are not by choice, but by acts of the gods, he mentions this twice in the play: "Some savage power has brought this down upon my head." As well as "My god, my god -- what have you planned to do to me?" Such quotes clearly show that Oedipus knew that he had no choice in his actions. In this manner and in this manner alone, Oedipus is undeserving of said punishment. Oedipus may not have been a particularly good man, but in the end he knew what was best for his kingdom: "Out of this kingdom cast me with all speed" ...for only that would save his former subjects.

Were that Oedipus' only punishment, the play might have been quite a bit simpler (and this essay quite a bit shorter), but Oedipus, in a fit of rage, stabs his own eyes with Jocasta's dress pins. This was Oedipus' way of trying to punish himself, as well as an escape. Oedipus would no longer gaze upon the faces of his subjects, his brother (uncle?) Creon or even those of his children. He is plunged into a world of darkness. It must be noted that this was more than simply a punishment, though I'm sure that it was one of the ways Oedipus intended it. The physical pain alone seems to prove that. There are much easier ways of becoming blind to the world than stabbing one's eyes out. As we have stated before though, Oedipus was blinded by his foolish pride long before the beginning of the novel. He only realized the truth behind Laius' murder when it was right in front of his nose. He was by no means stupid, in fact he came off as quite a clever man, but his was a world of blindness because of pride and power.

We have been concentrating on the two most obvious of Oedipus' punishments, but there is another one that may not seem so clear. Keeping in mind that Sophocles made it very clear that Oedipus was a man of so much pride that he may have thought himself to be akin to a god, was not Oedipus basically stripped of that pride at the end of the play? The true punishment has been revealed.
Oedipus’ life was based on pride. It was what led to the murder of Laius, which in turn led to the killing of the Sphinx, which led to his becoming king. As he continues on his particular thread of life, Oedipus becomes more and more powerful, and as such, his pride also increases proportionately. He threatens both Tiresias and Creon, and single-handedly tries to unravel the mystery of Laius’ death. What must go on inside his mind when he finds out that not only did he murder his father, the king, but he also slept with his mother? Knowing full well that his kingdom would eventually find out his acts, how could he hold his head up when walking through the city streets? How could his subjects respect and revere a king who was a murderer and committer of incest? Oedipus is thusly stripped of his pride, the driving force behind his whole personality. He has been crushed, and that which he had so much of before has been denied him. Where he was once at one extreme (hubris), he is now at the other. To take away the very thing that drives a man is worse than any physical pain or even death itself. That is truly, as Sophocles intended it, Oedipus’ ultimate punishment.

When the curtain falls and the lights go out on Oedipus Rex, the king’s punishments total three. Though in my mind at least, one far outweighs the other two, they are all important and they all contribute to the total experience of the Greek tragedy. In the end, I do not feel that Oedipus truly deserves the punishments he is handed, but that is only because of the fact that I place myself in the time period that this was written in, using the beliefs of that time for my own. Were this story to have taken place in modern times, Oedipus certainly would have deserved his punishment, but this idea is irrelevant because, quite simply, this did not take place in our “advanced” civilization. Oedipus was a victim of fate, incapable of free will, and as such he should have not been punished, save banishment only to cure the plague.
Doctor Faustus
THE RENAISSANCE (1500 -1600)

Meaning and Scope: - Renaissance means the Revival of learning, and it denotes in its broadest sense the gradual enlightenment of the human mind after the darkness of the Middle Ages. With the fall of Constantinople in 1453 A.D. by the invasion of the Turks, the Greek scholars who were residing there, spread all over Europe, and brought with them invaluable Greek manuscripts. The discovery of these classical models resulted in the Revival of learning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The essence of this movement was that “man discovered himself and the universe”, and that “man so long blinded had suddenly opened his eyes and seen”. The flood of Greek literature which the new art of printing carried swiftly to every school in Europe revealed a new world of poetry and philosophy. Along with the Revival of learning, new discoveries took place in several other fields. Vasco da Gama circumnavigated the earth; Columbus discovered America; Copernicus discovered the Solar System and prepared the way for Galileo. Books were printed; and philosophy science, and art were systemized.

The chief characteristic of the Renaissance was its emphasis on Humanism, which means man’s concern with himself as an object of contemplation. This movement was started in Italy by Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio in the fourteenth century, and from there it spread to other countries of Europe. In England it became popular during the Elizabethan period. This movement which focused its interest on ‘the proper study of mankind’ had a number of subordinate trends.

Spirit of Discovery: - The second important aspect of Humanism was the discovery of the external universe, and its significance for man, but more important than this was that the writers directed their gaze inward, and became deeply interested in the problems of human personality. In the medieval morality plays, the characters are mostly personifications; Friendship, Charity, Wickedness and the like. This tendency led to the rise of a new literary form “the Essay”, which was used successfully by Bacon. In drama Marlowe probed down into the deep recesses of the human passion. His heroes, Tamburlaine, Doctor Faustus and Barabas, the Jew of Malta, are possessed of uncontrolled ambitions. Shakespeare, a more consummate artist, carried Humanism to perfection. His genius, fed by the spirit of the Renaissance, enabled him to see life whole, and to present it in all its aspects.

Another aspect of Humanism was the enhanced sensitiveness to formal beauty, and the cultivation of the aesthetic sense. It showed itself in a new ideal of social conduct, that of the courtier. An Italian diplomat and man of letters, Castiglione, wrote a treatise entitled Cortigiano (The Courtier) where he sketched the pattern of gentlemanly behavior and manners upon which the conduct of such men as Sir Phillip Sidney and Sir Walter Raleigh was modeled. This cult of elegance in prose writing produced the ornate style called Euphuism by Lyly. Though it suffered from exaggeration and pedantry, yet it introduced order and balance in English prose, and gave it pithiness and harmony.

Men’s actions: - Another aspect of Humanism was that men came to be regarded as responsible for their own actions, as Cassius says to Brutus in Julius Caesar: -

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.
Instead of looking up to some higher authority, as was done in The Middle Ages, during the Renaissance Period guidance was to be found from within. Lyly wrote his romance of
Euphues not, merely as an exercise in a new kind of prose, but with the serious purpose of inculcating righteousness of living based on self-control. Sidney wrote his Arcadia in the form of fiction in order to expound an ideal of moral excellence.

**Elizabethan Drama:** One of the results of the humanist teaching in the schools and universities had been a great development of the study of Latin drama and the growth of the practice of acting Latin plays by Terence, Plautus and Seneca, and also of contemporary works both in Latin and in English. These performances were the work of amateur actors, school boys or students of the Universities and the Inns of Court, and were often given in honour of the visits of royal persons or ambassadors. Their significance lies in the fact that they brought the educated classes in touch with a much more highly developed kind, of drama, than the older English play. About the middle of the sixteenth century some academic writers made attempts to write original plays in English on the Latin model. The three important plays of this type are Nicholas Uall's Ralph Roister Moister, John Still’s Grammar Gurton's Needle, and Thomas Sackville's Gorbodue or Ferrel- and Porrer--the first two are comedies and last one a tragedy. All these plays are monotonous and do not possess much literary merit.

**The University Wits:** The second period of Elizabethan drama was dominated by the “University Wits”, a professional set of literary men. Of this little constellation, Marlowe was the central sun, and round him revolved as minor stars, Lyly, Greene, Peele, Lodge and Nash.

(a) Lyly (1554-1606) the author of Euphues, wrote a number of plays the best known of them are Compaspe. (1581), Sapho and Phao (1584), Endymion (1591), and Midas (1592). These plays are mythological and pastoral and are nearer to the Masque (court spectacles intended to satisfy the love of glitter and novelty) rather than to the narrative drama of Marlowe. They are written in prose intermingled with verse. Though the verse is simple and charming prose is marred by exaggeration, a characteristic of Euphuism.

(b) George. Peele (1558-1597), formed, along with Marlowe, Greene and Nash, one of that band of dissolute young men endeavoring to earn a livelihood by literary work. He was an actor as well as a writer of plays. He wrote some half dozen plays, which are richer in beauty than any of his group except Marlowe. His earnest work is the Arrangement of Paris, (1584); his most famous is David Und Bathsheba (1599). The Arrangement of Paris., which contains an elaborate eulogy of Queen Elizabeth, is really a court play of the Masque order. David and Bathsheba contains many beautiful lines. Like Marlowe, Peels was responsible for giving the blank verse musical quality, which later attained perfection in the deft hands of Shakespeare.

(c) Thomas Kyd (1558-95) achieved great popularity with his first work, The Spanish Tragedy, which was translated in many European languages. He introduced the blood and thunder’ element in drama, which proved one of the attractive features of the pre-Shakespearean drama. Though he is always violent and extravagant, yet he is responsible for breaking away from the lifeless monotony of Gorbodue.

(d) Greene (1560-1592). He lived a most dissolute life, and died in distress and debt. His plays comprise Orlando Furioso, Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, alphonson King of Aragon and George a Greene. His most effective play is Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, which deals partly with the trick of the Friar, and partly with as simple love story between two men with one maid. Its variety of interest and comic, relief add to the
entertainment of the audience. But the chief merit of the play lies in the lively method of presenting the story. Greene also achieves distinction by the vigorous humanity of his characterisation.

(e) Christopher Marlowe (1564 – 1593). The dramatic work of Lodge and Nash is not of much importance of all the members of the group Marlowe is the greatest. In 1587 his first play Tamburlaine was produced and it took the public by storm on account of its impetuous force, its splendid command of blank verse, and its sensitiveness to beauty. In this play Marlowe dramatised the exploits of the Scythian shepherd who rose to be “the terror of the world”, and “the scourge of God” Tamburlaine was succeeded by The Tragical History Doctor Faustus, in which Marlowe gave an old medieval legend a romantic setting. The story of the scholar who sells his soul to the Devil for worldly enjoyment and unlimited power, is presented in a most fascinating manner Marlowe’s Faustus is the genuine incarnation of the Renaissance spirit. The Jew of Malta, the third tragedy of Marlowe, is not so fine as Doctor Faustus, though it has a glorious opening. His last play, Edward II, is his best from the technical point of view. Though it lacks the force and rhythmic beauty of the earlier plays, it is superior to them on account of its rare skill of construction and admirable characterisation.

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE (1564-1593)

Christopher Marlowe was born in 1564, the year of William Shakespeare's birth. His father worked in Canterbury, England, as a cobbler, and Christopher was one of many children to be born into their middle-class household (Bakeless 3-30.) After attending the King's School on a scholarship, he won another scholarship to attend Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Marlowe completed his BA degree in four years and then stayed on at Cambridge to work towards an MA. Students who did so were granted an extended scholarship and were expected to take Holy Orders.

During the following three years, Marlowe began to absent himself from the college for weeks on end. Although such absences were not uncommon among BA students, Marlowe's spotty attendance seems to have earned the ire of the college administration. Rumors arose that Marlowe planned to defect to the Catholic seminary of Rheims, France. Amidst such rumors, it became a matter of the Queen's Council that Marlowe should receive his degree at graduation--the Privy Council conveyed to the college that Marlowe had been in government service all along. The evidence suggests that he had been serving England as a spy in Rheims.

When Marlowe left Cambridge in 1587, it was to write for the stage. Before the end of the year, both parts of his Tamburlaine were produced in London. The plays basked in a decidedly popular and vernacular spirit. Renaissance scholar David Riggs notes that the chaotic stage of Tamburlaine, featuring a blasphemer and murderer protagonist, "challenged the limits of public behavior" (220). In any case, Marlowe's debut earned him an excellent standing among contemporary playwrights. His plays, of a quality astonishing for a man in his twenties, constantly produced crowd-pleasing spectacles. In the following six years before his early death, Marlowe continued to achieve success through such works as Doctor Faustus, The Jew of Malta, and The Massacre at Paris.

The last part of Marlowe's life was violent and contains some suspicious coincidences. While living near London in 1592, a year before his death, scholar Lisa Hopkins reports that Marlowe appeared so threatening and was thought so dangerous by two constables...
of the town of Shoreditch (the suburb in which Marlowe lived and where the theatres for which he wrote were located) that they formally appealed for protection from him. As many researchers of Marlowe's life have noted, it is puzzling what a person must do in order to make the police afraid of him. In September of that same year Marlowe was involved in a fight in his native Canterbury, attacking Williame Corkine with a sword and dagger. This year, too, was the one in which Marlowe's good friend Thomas Watson died. There is the possibility that during this time Marlowe had a relationship with Thomas Walsingham, nephew of the Sir Thomas Walsingham who was the head of the spies in Queen Elizabeth's service. However, the relationship is by no means proved. It is a matter of record, however, that Marlowe was staying at Walsingham's country house in Scadbury at the time he was killed.

The circumstances of Marlowe's death provide much for speculation. On May 30, 1593, when Marlowe was only twenty-nine, he was feasting in a rented private room in a Deptford house (the home of Dame Eleanor Bull, not a tavern as is often recounted) with a group of four men. He reportedly quarreled with Ingram Friser (the personal servant of Sir Thomas Walsingham), who killed Marlowe on the spot by stabbing him above the right eye. Friser claimed self-defense and was pardoned shortly thereafter, despite the mysterious circumstances. David Riggs points out that the Queen herself had ordered Marlowe's death four days before (334). Was the Friser incident merely a coincidence? And how had Marlowe earned the anger of the Queen?

Two days after Marlowe's death, a man named Richard Baines sent a document to the police accusing Marlowe of blasphemy and homosexuality. Among other things, the document recounts Marlowe's barely concealed atheism, his public denouncement of faith, and his sacrilegious speech against Jesus himself. The document also notes that Marlowe was not content merely to keep these opinions to himself; at every opportunity, he supposedly tried to win men over to his views. His allegedly heretical views were in fact already known to the government. When the famous playwright Thomas Kyd-Marlowe's former roommate-was arrested in possession of blasphemous papers, Kyd confessed that he had received the documents from Marlowe. Seen in this light, the Queen's order and Marlowe's consequent death seem to be of a piece. Harold Bloom is convinced that Marlowe was "eliminated with maximum prejudice by Walsingham's Elizabethan Secret Service" (10.)

If these events are linked, the details remain obscure. Allegations abound. Men reported that Marlowe was cruel, violent, homosexual, and foul-mouthed, cursing all the way to his last breath. Although these reports cannot be discounted easily, little conclusive evidence supports any of these allegations. As J. B. Steane puts it, "as for Marlowe the man, atheist and rebel or not, we have to acknowledge that there is no single piece of evidence that is not hearsay-only that there is a good deal of it, that it is reasonably consistent, and that on the other side there is no single fact or piece of hearsay known to us" (16). Who was Marlowe, really?

Further complicating our picture of Marlowe is the relationship between author and work. Marlowe's works have been interpreted as atheistic and blasphemous; they also have been understood as traditional and Christian. The two sides stand apart in their proximity to any picture of Marlowe's personal life. To be sure, an author does not necessarily (if ever) write through autobiography or self-expression, or to communicate an ideological position. Yet, it is significant that the young poet, dead before his thirties, is a man who studied to take Holy Orders, who likely served his country in espionage
missions, and who died violently under the taint of scandal. Such a colorful and ambiguous character cannot help but loom behind Marlowe's work. Where biography has relevance for literary interpretation, readers can profit from meeting the challenge of seeing Marlowe's plays from the perspective of his life; at the same time, one should remember that his works were intended for English audiences who did not know as much about his life.

**Historical Perspective of Drama before Marlowe**

**The Greek Drama**

In order to fully grasp the rise and content of the English drama, we must peer into the dim past and retrace our steps to the early days of ancient Greece. The beginnings of drama in general get lost in the ‘mimes’ or crude performances of the Dorian Greeks in honour of Dionysus, the God of Wine, whose name stood for carousal, revelry and merriment.

The addition of dialogue to the dumb mimicry marked an important stage, but it required yet the infusion of action into the dialogue to complete the transformation. This crude drama of the Greeks was a commentary upon the lives and manners, not of human beings, but of the pantheon of gods and other mythological persons: it dealt with things of heaven, not with the problems of mundane existence. But its tone and treatment were generally comic. It was this farcical element that led, by devious and zig-zag paths, to the rise of the famous Athenian Comedy. The supernatural theme made room for the human. The ludicrous representation of the heavenly life which they combined to produce an essentially secular mind, but the religious elements were not altogether done away with. The drama, we may say, was brought down from the heavenly heights to suit the earthly needs.

In the days of Aristotle, the Greek drama almost completed its process of growth and received some final touches at the hands of this master-mind. It gathered all those attributes which constitute its distinctive marks. Two characteristics distinguished it mainly, the Chorus and the Unities. The Chorus was a band of singers and dancers who played in concert and sang odes to the God of Wine, and sometimes followed up the music with a lively dialogue. This dialogue came to supplant in the long run, the musical part of the performance. “The lack of scenery and of stage effect was made up for by descriptions and explanations sung by the Chorus and the limitations imposed by the three unities were met in a similar manner. The Chorus served to give a break and relief in the gloomy and often tragic monotony of the Greek drama. The Shakespearean devices of relieving tragedy by a comic element would not have been admissible.”

The Chorus was as old as the drama itself, but the rules of the Unities began with Aristotle. He observed that good plays must conform to these rules and must observe the three Unities of Time, Place and Action—

(i) **The Unity of Time.** The duration of the action or story must not exceed 24 hours.

(ii) **The Unity of Place.** The incidents of the drama must be represented in an unbroken link: the scene should be invariable and should not be so located that the dramatis personae are unable to visit it in the time allotted for the duration of the play.
(iii) The Unity of Action. The main interest or plot of the story should be uninterrupted and its course should not be deflected by side-issues and minor plots or incidents. The unity of action must be smooth and straight; all characters and scenes must directly contribute to it.

In addition to the ‘Unities’, Aristotle touched upon the form of the drama and divided it into five parts:—

(i) The Exposition. This constitutes the opening of the play; the characters are introduced to the audience and are portrayed in their respective situations which gradually work up to the dramatic action.

(ii) The Rising Action i.e., the development of the dramatic situation from the incidents in the Exposition and the gradual rise of the pitch in the dramatic plot.

(iii) The Crisis or Climax. This is the highest pitch in the drama, the turning point in the plot. It represents the effect of the incidents which have already taken their rise in the Exposition and have passed through the second stage. It marks the culmination of the dramatic action and is followed by a lowering of the tone in the play.

(iv) The Descending or Falling Action, in which the action is toned down to a lower pitch.

(v) The Denouement or Catastrophe or Solution, where the various forces in the dramatic action converge towards the solution of the plot.

**The Drama and the Christian Church:** - In its days of decadence, the art of drama fell into the hands of wandering minstrels called Jongleur who travelled from place to place and visited the courts of kings as well as the village greens. Their art consisted in a crude representation of the life and manners of that age, but it did not achieve a height of excellence.

In the 9th century A.D. or thereabouts, the dramatic stage shifted from the village green to the altar of the church. The churchmen saw in the stage an effective means of the propagation of Christianity and succeeded in substituting a religious theme for the secular art of the Jongleurs. Certain striking episodes in the life of Jesus Christ were cast into a dramatic form—his Birth, Crucifixion, Resurrection and many others—and these were represented on the stage on appropriate occasions. The drama thus became the handmaid of Christianity.

**The Altar and the Stage:** - There was another swing of the pendulum. The church could not keep up the vigour of the art which the Jongleurs had exhibited and there was a return to the village green. The Churchmen tried their best to suppress this secular tendency. The village green or the market square now became the scene of the simple plays, mainly based on Biblical themes, and called the Miracle and Mystery plays. The Elizabethan drama is usually considered to be a development of these. “Miracles” and “Mysteries,” and it is more than probable that Shakespeare witnessed the performance of some of these. The Creation of the world, the Fall of Man, the Deluge, the Birth of Christ, and Resurrection were some of the commonest themes of these ‘Miracles.’
The Didactic Drama: “Moralities” or Allegorical Plays: - The next stage in the growth of the drama was the change from the religious to the didactic theme. The latter half of the 14th century witnessed a strong wave of allegorical influence throughout Europe, and the dramatic art could not but put on the colour and catch the tone of the times. A new type of drama—the Allegorical plays or the Moralities—came into being. Characters in these plays were not human beings, but abstract qualities like Vice, Virtue, Avarice, Pride, Ignorance, Love, Mercy, Justice, Life, Death etc. The object of the Moralities was wholly didactic: the eternal warfare of evil and good, the struggle of Truth against Falsehood and a dramatic representation of the interaction of human misery and happiness formed the theme of these plays. The Moralities had a happy innovation in the shape of comic element. Satan was represented as a low jocular buffoon who kept the audience in a 'fit of mirth.' The introduction of the seeds of Comedy and the new romantic treatment of the theme were a happy relief to the otherwise serious monotony and dryness of the Moralities. (The Cradle of Security, Hit the Nail on the Head, Second Shepherd’s Play were some of the famous Moralities).

The Morality play was a distinct improvement upon the Miracle play. The Miracle Play was purely religious in character while the Morality Play was chiefly concerned with human nature. The latter dealt with morals and the eternal conflict between the forces of good and evil and with the misery that emanates from vice. The theme of the Miracle Play was superhuman, while that of the Moralities was mainly human and earthly. The Miracle Play left no room for originality; its subject-matter was borrowed from the Bible; the rough-and-ready incidents from the Old Testament supplied abundant material so that the dramatic genius of inventing new plots and sub-plots could not be brought to play. The Moralities, on the other hand, gave free rein to the fertile imagination of the playwright. He could invent a new scheme as well as draw upon the old sources. The addition of the comic element proved the way for the Elizabethan comedy, and provided a short spell of mirth and sunshine in the dull and irksome monotony of the Miracles. The Miracle Play, however, had one advantage over the Morality in that the characters who figured in the Miracle Play had distinct individualities, whereas the Morality dealt with abstractions, the personification of abstract qualities.

Interludes and Comedies (Secular Drama): - The importance of the comic element in the Moralities has been emphasised above. It was at first employed to relieve the dreary monotony of the play, but soon it outgrew its function and expanded into a regular dramatic composition. This comic element or the Interlude as it was often called was the mother of the later Elizabethan comedy. The Interludes were short lively pieces, with characters mostly drawn from real life, though these characters still represented types rather than individuals. But they formed a happy transition from the bare abstractions of the Moralities to the clear-cut individualistic characterisation of the Shakespearean play. The Interludes gave an impetus to the growth of regular drama. They emphasised the element of diversion just for its own sake and offered a contrast to the religious motive of the Miracle Plays or the didactic of the Moralities. The range of subjects grew; the life and manners of the contemporary age came to be reflected truthfully. “Moreover there was now arising the feeling of the need for division on the classical model into regular acts and scenes, and with the Interludes now claiming independent existence, a rough and ready division may be made of Tragedy, Comedy, and plays which are a mixture of both.”
English Drama and the Renaissance: - At this time, Europe was animated by a new spirit and fresh ideals. The wonderful Renaissance Movement kicked the slumbering continent into energy. The Muses bore the torch of new knowledge to all parts of Europe. This Revival of Learning brought in its train a passionate zeal for the classical literature of Greece and Rome. It had its influence on the English stage too. The “Miracles”, “Mysteries” and the “Moralities” were driven out by a new type of drama which took its rise in Oxford and Cambridge and derived its inspiration from Greece and Rome. English dramas came to be written on the classical model; of these all, Gorboduc was the most striking example. It was based on the tragedies of the illustrious Seneca and it contained all the traits of the Greek drama—the Chorus, the three Unities and the division of the dramatic action into five parts. Many plays belong to this period of infancy of the English stage e.g.

(i) Ralph Roister Doister, a comedy written by Nicholas Udall in 1550-51, but actually published in 1566.

(ii) Gorbodue or Ferrex and Porrex (1562), tragedy.

(iii) Damon and Pythias, (1564) a tragi-comedy by Richard Edwards, based upon the classical mythology.

The Renaissance, combined with the Reformation, tended to produce the Romantic drama. To this drama, therefore, we should now turn.

The Romantic Drama of the Renaissance or the Elizabethan Age: - The Romantic drama was a product of the Elizabethan age. The English dramatists, after a few experiments on the classical model, noted above, altogether discarded the three unities. The classical drama was followed in two ways: (a) a dignified form and (b) a luxuriant expression. The treatment of the English drama grew to be romantic rather than classical. The three unities of time, place and action were not observed, so that an English play of this period could cover an indefinite period of time, the action could “move from place to place” and subsidiary plots or by-plots could exist side by side with the main plot. Thus in King Lear, Othello and some other plays we notice sub-plots running alongwith the main thread of the story.

The Praise of Marlowe among the University Wits: - Christopher Marlowe, though the youngest of the University Wits and the earliest to die, except for Robert Greene, was the most important among them in the world of drama; he is still regarded as the mighty and wonderful dramatic genius who gave to the English tragic drama a permanent direction and life. He collaborated with some of his fellows and most probably was associated with Shakespeare. “It has been suggested from internal evidence that he was the part-author of Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus. He perhaps also wrote parts of Henry VI, which Shakespeare revised and completed, and of Edward III.” Be that as it may, the four plays, all tragedies that make Marlowe foremost among the predecessors of Shakespeare are Tamburlaine, Parts I and II, The Jew of Malta, Doctor Faustus, and Edward II.

Marlowe: A Typical Product of the Renaissance: - Renaissance, which literally means ‘re-birth’ or ‘re-awakening’ is the name of a Europe-wide movement which closes the trammels and conventions of the medieval age and makes for liberation in all aspects of life and culture.
Though the influence of the spirit of the Renaissance marks all the writers of the latter half of the age of Elizabeth,—in poetry, drama, and prose romances and novels, that can be seen working with particular force on Marlowe and his fellows who together are called the University Wits. Of them again, the writings of Marlowe are the most prominent embodiment of the spirit of the Renaissance. Generally speaking, Marlowe himself is the spirit of Renaissance incarnate. A reckless Bohemian in life, a daring atheist setting not much value on moral worth but all value on the Machiavellian virtue, living a life of imagination rather than of thought, of gaiety full of the zest for life, Marlowe is the typical product of the Renaissance. In the conception of the central characters of his dramas, he is impelled by the Renaissance spirit for unlimited power, unlimited knowledge for the sake of power, unlimited wealth, again, for the sake of power. Aspirations, unbounded desire of love for the pleasures of the senses, infinite longing for beauty rather than for truth—these are the characteristics of the imaginative life which glittered before his eyes in that great age of daring adventures. On the aesthetic side, love of physical beauty mentioned above goes in him hand in hand with love of the beauty of harmony; the high astounding terms of his blank verse, the thrills and echoes of his phrases, the resounding roll of his declamations, the surfeit of mythological allusions—all these run into excess; but the excesses only point to the essential ambition of reaching beyond the narrow and the limited into the infinity of achievement, which is the noblest gift of the Renaissance.

**Doctor Faustus : Background**

Marlowe lived in a time of great transformation for Western Europe. New advances in science were overturning ancient ideas about astronomy and physics. The discovery of the Americas had transformed the European conception of the world. Increasingly available translations of classical texts were a powerful influence on English literature and art. Christian and pagan worldviews interacted with each other in rich and often paradoxical ways, and signs of that complicated interaction are present in many of Marlowe's works. England, having endured centuries of civil war, was in the middle of a long period of stability and peace.

Not least of the great changes of Marlowe's time was England's dramatic rise to world power. When Queen Elizabeth came to power in 1558, six years before Marlowe's birth, England was a weak and unstable nation. Torn by internal strife between Catholics and Protestants, an economy in tatters, and unstable leadership, England was vulnerable to invasion by her stronger rivals on the continent. By the time of Elizabeth's death in 1603, she had turned the weakling of Western Europe into a power of the first rank, poised to become the mightiest nation in the world. When the young Marlowe came to London looking to make a life in the theatre, England's capitol was an important center of trade, learning, and art. As time passed, the city's financial, intellectual, and artistic importance became still greater, as London continued its transformation from unremarkable center of a backwater nation to one of the world's most exciting metropolises. Drama was entering a golden age, to be crowned by the glory of Shakespeare. Marlowe was a great innovator of blank verse, unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter. The richness of his dramatic verse anticipates Shakespeare, and some argue that Shakespeare's achievements owed considerable debt to Marlowe's influence.

Like the earlier play, Tamburlaine, Doctor Faustus is a play of deep questions concerning morality, religion, and man's relationship to both. England was a Protestant country since
the time of Queen Elizabeth I's father, Henry VIII. Although theological and doctrinal differences existed between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, the former still inherited a wealth of culture, thought and tradition from the latter. Christianity was a mix of divergent and often contradictory influences, including the religious traditions of the Near East, the heritage of classical Greco-Roman thought and institutions, mystery religions, and north European superstition and magic.

Sorcery and magic were part of widespread belief systems throughout Europe that predated Christianity. These early beliefs about magic were inextricable from folk medicine. Women in particular used a mix of magic and herbal medicine to treat common illnesses. But as Christianity spread and either assimilated or rejected other belief systems, practitioners of magic came to be viewed as evil. In the fifth century CE, St. Augustine, perhaps the most influential Christian thinker after St. Paul, pronounced all sorcery to be the work of evil spirits, to distinguish it from the good "magic" of Christian ritual and sacrament. The view of the sorcerer changed irrevocably. Magic was devil-worship, outside the framework of Church practice and belief, and those who practiced it were excommunicated and killed.

The Protestant Reformation did not include reform of this oppressive and violent practice. Yet magic continued to keep a hold on people's imaginations, and benign and ambiguous views of magic continued to exist in popular folklore. The conceptions of scholarship further complicated the picture, especially after the Renaissance. Scholars took into their studies subjects not considered scientific by today's standards: astrology, alchemy, and demonology. Some of these subjects blurred the lines between acceptable pursuit of knowledge and dangerous heresy.

As this new Christian folklore of sorcery evolved, certain motifs rose to prominence. Once Christ was rejected, a sorcerer could give his soul to the devil instead, receiving in exchange powers in this life, here and now. Numerous Christian stories feature such bargains, and one of the most famous evolved around the historical person Johann Faustus, a German astrologer of the early sixteenth century. Marlowe took his plot from an earlier German play about Faustus, but he transformed an old story into a powerhouse of a work, one that has drawn widely different interpretations since its first production. Marlowe's Doctor Faustus is first great version of the story, although not the last. In the nineteenth century, the great German writer Johann Wolfgang van Goethe gave the story its greatest incarnation in Faust. Faustus' name has become part of our language. "Faustian bargain" has come to mean a deal made for earthly gain at a high ethical and spiritual cost, or alternately any choice with short-lived benefits and a hell of a price.

The chronology of Marlowe's plays is uncertain. Doctor Faustus's composition may have immediately followed Tamburlaine, or may not have come until 1592.

Two versions of the play were printed, neither during Marlowe's life. The 1604 version is shorter (1517 lines), and until the twentieth century was considered the authoritative text. The 1616 version is longer (2121 lines), but the additions were traditionally thought to have been written by other playwrights. Twentieth century scholarship argues that the B text (of 1616) is in fact closer to the original, though possibly with some censorship. The Penguin Books edition used for this study guide uses the longer B text as the basis while incorporating sections of A that are recognizably superior.
Doctor Faustus: Summary

Doctor Faustus, a talented German scholar at Wittenburg, rails against the limits of human knowledge. He has learned everything he can learn, or so he thinks, from the conventional academic disciplines. All of these things have left him unsatisfied, so now he turns to magic. A Good Angle and an Evil Angel arrive, representing Faustus' choice between Christian conscience and the path to damnation. The former advises him to leave off this pursuit of magic, and the latter tempts him. From two fellow scholars, Valdes and Cornelius, Faustus learns the fundamentals of the black arts. He thrills at the power he will have, and the great feats he'll perform. He summons the devil Mephistopheles. They flesh out the terms of their agreement, with Mephistopheles representing Lucifer. Faustus will sell his soul, in exchange for twenty-four years of power, with Mephistopheles as servant to his every whim.

In a comic relief scene, we learn that Faustus' servant Wagner has gleaned some magic learning. He uses it to convince Robin the Clown to be his servant.

Before the time comes to sign the contract, Faustus has misgivings, but he puts them aside. Mephistopheles returns, and Faustus signs away his soul, writing with his own blood. The words "Homo fuge" ("Fly, man) appear on his arm, and Faustus is seized by fear. Mephistopheles distracts him with a dance of devils. Faustus requests a wife, a demand Mephistopheles denies, but he does give Faustus books full of knowledge.

Some time has passed. Faustus curses Mephistopheles for depriving him of heaven, although he has seen many wonders. He manages to torment Mephistopheles, he can't stomach mention of God, and the devil flees. The Good Angel and Evil Angel arrive again. The Good Angel tells him to repent, and the Evil Angel tells him to stick to his wicked ways. Lucifer, Beelzebub, and Mephistopheles return, to intimidate Faustus. He is cowed by them, and agrees to speak and think no more of God. They delight him with a pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins, and then Lucifer promises to show Faustus hell. Meanwhile, Robin the Clown has gotten one of Faustus' magic books.

Faustus has explored the heavens and the earth from a chariot drawn by dragons, and is now flying to Rome, where the feast honoring St. Peter is about to be celebrated. Mephistopheles and Faustus wait for the Pope, depicted as an arrogant, decidedly unholy man. They play a series of tricks, by using magic to disguise themselves and make themselves invisible, before leaving.

The Chorus returns to tell us that Faustus returns home, where his vast knowledge of astronomy and his abilities earn him wide renown. Meanwhile, Robin the Clown has also learned magic, and uses it to impress his friend Rafe and summon Mephistopheles, who doesn't seem too happy to be called.

At the court of Charles V, Faustus performs illusions that delight the Emperor. He also humiliates a knight named Benvolio. When Benvolio and his friends try to avenge the humiliation, Faustus has his devils hurt them and cruelly transform them, so that horns grow on their heads.

Faustus swindles a Horse-courser, and when the Horse-courser returns, Faustus plays a frightening trick on him. Faustus then goes off to serve the Duke of Vanholt. Robin the Clown, his friend Dick, the Horse-courser, and a Carter all meet. They all have been
swindled or hurt by Faustus' magic. They go off to the court of the Duke to settle scores with Faustus.

Faustus entertains the Duke and Duchess with petty illusions, before Robin the Clown and his band of ruffians arrives. Faustus toys with them, besting them with magic, to the delight of the Duke and Duchess.

Faustus' twenty-four years are running out. Wagner tells the audience that he thinks Faustus prepares for death. He has made his will, leaving all to Wagner. But even as death approaches, Faustus spends his days feasting and drinking with the other students. For the delight of his fellow scholars, Faustus summons a spirit to take the shape of Helen of Troy. Later, an Old Man enters, warning Faustus to repent. Faustus opts for pleasure instead, and asks Mephistopheles to bring Helen of Troy to him, to be his love and comfort during these last days. Mephistopheles readily agrees.

Later, Faustus tells his scholar friends that he is damned, and that his power came at the price of his soul. Concerned, the Scholars exit, leaving Faustus to meet his fate.

As the hour approaches, Mephistopheles taunts Faustus. Faustus blames Mephistopheles for his damnation, and the devil proudly takes credit for it. The Good and Evil Angel arrive, and the Good Angel abandons Faustus. The gates of Hell open. The Evil Angel taunts Faustus, naming the horrible tortures seen there.

The Clock strikes eleven. Faustus gives a final, frenzied monologue, regretting his choices. At midnight the devils enter. As Faustus begs God and the devil for mercy, the devils drag him away. Later, the Scholar friends find Faustus' body, torn to pieces.

Epilogue. The Chorus emphasizes that Faustus is gone, his once-great potential wasted. The Chorus warns the audience to remember his fall, and the lessons it offers.
Marlowe’s Contribution to English Drama

Tragedy before Marlow: Swinburne’s remarks, “Before him there was neither genuine blank verse nor a genuine tragedy in our language. After his arrival the way was paved for Shakespeare.” With the advent of Marlowe, Miracle and Morality plays vanished. He brought Drama out of the old rut of street presentation and made it a perfect art and a thing of beauty. After the Reformation, the Mystery and Morality plays were disliked by the public at large until the advent of University Wits the greatest of whom was Marlowe.

It was in the fifteenth century that tragedy came to English dramatic field. This was due to the Revival of Learning in Europe commonly referred to as the Renaissance and the translation of great Italian tragedies. Italian Renaissance exercised a vital influence on the development of English Drama. The first English tragedy was Gorboduc (1565) by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville. In style and treatment of theme Seneca was very much their model. Although this tragedy showed some innovation, yet most of the Senecan qualities such as long speeches, ghosts, gruesome murders and talks and talks were very much there. The tragedies that followed Seneca had the same qualities and properties. It required the mighty efforts of a genius to free the Elizabethan Drama from the worst features of the Senecan tragedies and it was Christopher Marlowe who has achieved this foundation for the realm of English Dramatic Literature. There are umpteen characteristic of Marlovian tragedies. In discussing Marlowe, we can point out how he formulated the English Drama and especially Tragedy which was improved upon and perfected by a genius like Shakespeare who owes Marlowe for all his greatness and grandeur. Because had there been no Marlowe, there would have been no Shakespeare. It is also due to Marlowe that English Drama for the first time was bestirred with the vigorous poetry and passion. He has rightly been called the Morning Star of English Drama.

Marlow’s Great Tragic Heroes: The first great thing done by Marlowe was to break away from the medieval conception of Tragedy. The Medieval Drama was a game of the princes and imperial classes – the kings and Queens and their rise and fall. But it was left to Marlowe to evolve and create the real tragic hero. All of his tragic heroes are of humble parentage, Tamburlaine, Barabas in the Jew of Malta and Faustus, but they are endowed with great tragic and heroic qualities. His tragedy is a tragedy of one man – his rise and fall, his fate and actions and finally his death for his own failings and incapacities. All the other characters fade into insignificance besides the towering personality and the glory and grandeur of the tragic hero. Even various incidents revolve round the hero. His heroes are men fired with indomitable passion and inordinate ambition. His Tamburlaine is in full-flooded pursuit of military and political power, his Faustus sells his soul to the Devil to attain ultimate power through knowledge and gain the deity and His Jew of Malta discards all sense of human values with his blind aspirations. What Marlowe depicts and dramatizes is that all his mighty and towering heroes with all their sky-high designs and aspirations ultimately fall into failure and doom exhibiting their tragic and doomed end. Herein lies the greatness of Marlowe.

Working of a passion: We have previously studied that Marlowe’s heroes are dominated by the inordinate desires and passions. These passions take the form of wealth, spirit of learning, high power. Through these, Marlowe imparts vehemence, fire and force in the drama. But in this way, we may trace the distinct influence of Machiavelli on Marlowe. Marlowe must have read his famous book, The Prince and
derived this idea of ambition and spirit from him. Marlowe discarded the old concept of tragedy as decent from greatness to misery and supplanted it greatness by the greatness of individual worth. His heroes truly reflect the new Spirit of Learning because he himself was the product of Renaissance.

The Inner Conflict: Another great achievement of Marlowe was to introduce the element of conflict in the tragic hero especially in Doctor Faustus and Edward II. The conflict may be on the physical or spiritual plane. The spiritual and moral conflict takes place in the heart of man and this is of much greater significance and much more poignant than the former. And a great tragedy most powerfully reveals the emotional conflict or moral agony of the mighty hero. In the realm of England’s dramatic literature, Doctor Faustus may be reckoned the first spiritual tragedy or the tragedy of the soul. In this epoch-making drama, true and deep moral agonies and painful spiritual conflict has been superbly laid bare before us by Marlowe. Like the old Greek heroes, Marlovian Heroes are not helpless puppets in the hands of Fate and they are never destined by gods. They have free thinking of religion and carve their way themselves. The tragic end they meet is caused by the tragic flaw in their personalities and they achieve this end through their actions. This is the greatest contribution of Marlowe to the English Drama.

Moral Conception: It was Marlowe who first discarded the medieval conception of tragedy as it was distinctly a moral one. In old Morality Plays, the purpose was to simply inculcate a moral lesson by showing the fall of the hero. There is no such thing in Marlovian plays. The main interest centers on the sky-touching personality of the heroes with their tremendous efforts to attain the limit and their rise and fall in their struggle.

Blank Verse: Another great achievement of Marlowe was to introduce a new type of blank verse in his tragedies. A new spirit of poetry was breathed into the artificial and monotonous verse of the old days. In fact, the whole of Elizabethan Drama was enlivened by a new poetic grandeur.

Seriousness and Concentration: Another notable characteristic of Marlowe’s work is seriousness and concentration on the theme and there is complete lack of humor. According to many critics, the clownish scenes and the other absurdities were interpolated by the later authors. There are also no women characters in Marlowe’s works; this is also a typical quality of his. The episodes of Helen in Doctor Faustus and other female figures in other plays are only shadows or figure-heads. Most of these features may also be regarded as the drawbacks, however; it was Marlowe’s distinct way of writing which is typical of him. Or perhaps, for these reasons, he couldn't reach the towering high plane of fame as did Shakespeare. But we must remember that he was a pioneer and path-finder. He was the Columbus of a new literary World in England. It is due to Marlowe that we have Shakespeare whom we know and read, but had Marlowe not written such these works, there would have been Shakespeare, but not the one we know today. Shakespeare, without him, would have been only another writer.
Renaissance Elements in Doctor Faustus

The word ‘Renaissance’ itself means ‘rebirth’. “The idea of rebirth originated in the belief that Europeans had discovered the superiority of Greek and Roman culture after many centuries of what they considered intellectual and culture decline.” Thus the question what was the renaissance about is answered as the widespread cultural revival marking the division between the so called ‘dark ages’ and the modern world. The Renaissance was a period of fundamental change in human outlook once dominated by religious dogma and Christian theology. The age was marked by a great yearning for unlimited knowledge; by love for worldliness – supreme power, sensual pleasures of life; by love for beauty; respect for classicism; by skepticism, individualism and Machiavellian influence.

Christopher Marlowe was a product of the Renaissance. Therefore it was usual for him that his play Doctor Faustus would contain Renaissance spirit. We see in Doctor Faustus a wonderful expression of Renaissance elements and the character Doctor Faustus as a renaissance man.

The most important thing in the Renaissance is craving for ‘knowledge infinite’. This characteristic has been injected in Faustus properly. He has achieved knowledge of all branches. Yet he feels unfulfilled. So he wants to practice black art and with this he would be able to know all things: "I will have them read me strange philosophy."

After selling his soul, he, at the very first, questions Mephistopheles to know the mystery of the universe, about the position of hell.

“First, will I question with thee about hell,
Tell me where is the place that men call hell?"

Faustus’ longing for material prosperity, for money and wealth, which is also a Renaissance element, has been expressed in the following lines where he desires to gain the lordship of Embden a great commercial city-

“Of wealth!
Why, the signiority of Embden shall be mine.”

He further wants to enjoy a splendid life full of worldly pleasures. He says,

“I will have them fly to India for gold,
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
....
And search all the corners of the new found world.
For pleasant fruits and princely delicates.”

Here we see another inherent thing characterized by Renaissance in Faustus i.e. love for adventure.

Faustus’s eagerness to get the most beautiful German maid to be his wife and Helen to be his paramour and to find heaven in her lips proves his love of beauty along with love for sensual pleasure which is also a Renaissance element. He says to Mephistophilis,

“For I am wanton and lascivious
And cannot live without a wife.”

Dominance of classical literature, art and culture is a prominent feature of the Renaissance. And it is frequently expressed by Faustus in his allusions, examples,
references. One of such examples can be noticed in the following couple of lines where Faustus says,

"Have I not made blind Homer sing to me
Of Alexander's love and Oenon's death?"

"The Renaissance was marked by an intense interest in the visible world and in the knowledge derived from concrete sensory experience." "It turned away from the abstract speculations and interest in life after death that characterized the middle Ages." Faustus raises question and gives answer to that question in the following lines-

"That, after this life, there is any pain?
Thus, these are trifles and mere old wives tales."

Thus Renaissance allows Scepticism and secularism.

In the Renaissance, "the unique talents and potential of the individual became significant. The concept of personal fame was much more highly developed than during Middle Ages." Actually Faustus is an individualistic tragic hero. His tragedy is his own creation. He does not think like traditional heroes or men. He crosses his limit while common people do not generally cross that.

Renaissance movement is greatly influenced by Niccolo Machiavelli, his The Prince and his ideal "ends justify the means." Similarly Faustus also wants to reach his goal by any means, even by selling his soul to Devil – "Faustus gives to thee his soul." Furthermore, Faustus earns money by selling a false horse to a Horse-course deceitfully. The Renaissance has made Faustus fascinated by supreme power. Faustus says-

"A sound magician is a mighty God
Here, Faustus, tire thy brains to gain a deity."

Finally we must say that Faustus is a faithful embodiment of the Renaissance. He bears all the characteristics of the age. Actually Marlowe has pictured Faustus with great care and interest of the age. George Satayana justly says in this regard – "Marlowe is a martyr to everything, power, curious knowledge, enterprise, wealth and beauty."

Faustus as an Individualistic Tragic Hero of Renaissance

Christopher Marlowe, in his Doctor Faustus, his master piece, draws an excellent character before us. This character can be regarded as a strong individual, an embodiment of Renaissance and a tragic hero. Indeed, each and every man possesses two forces going on in him.one is social that abides by the set up rules of his surroundings. Another is individual that thinks things in his mind particularly from his own demand, dream and thought. In Doctor Faustus’s case, it is the second one- he has a firm individuality, that’s why he is called an individualistic hero

As an embodiment of Renaissance, Doctor Faustus, having attained knowledge, power and fame, wants more and more, unparalleled possession. He has achieved knowledge of all branches. Yet he wants to do whatever he pleases. So he would like to practice necromancy.

Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please
.........
I will have them fly to India for gold,
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
And search all corners of the new-found world
For pleasant fruits and princely delicates;
I'll have them read me strange philosophy,
And tell the secrets of all foreign kings;
Thus he will compel them to build a wall of brass around Germany and to make the river Rine divert its course to flow round the lovely city of Wittenberg; will be able to supply plenty of silk garments to the public school; will drive Prince of Parma form his country and become the supreme monarch of all the provinces; and will have wonderful and powerful weapons of war.

But before and after attaining the black art, there runs a conflict in him between the good and evil, between the good and bad which is at the beginning symbolized by good angel and evil angle. (Act 1, Scene 1)

In order to attain his purpose, Doctor Faustus racks the name of God

Faustus is an individual tragic hero. He is the maker of his own tragedy, his fate, good or bad. He falls, not by the fickleness of fortune or the decree of fate, or because he has been corrupted by Mephistopheles, the agent of Lucifer, the devil, but all things happen to him because of his own will. He commits sin by wanting like God or to exceed God and by rejecting God and accepting Beelzebub, the devil. So he must suffer in fine.

Faustus always experiences a conflict between his consciousness and free will which is also found in great tragic heroes of Shakespeare, namely Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello.

Faustus is a tragic hero, individual in character. But through his death he proves the loftiness of God, Almighty. O.P. Broclbent says- “Faustus’s passion for knowledge and power is in itself a virtue, but diverted from the service of God it threatens to become totally negative and self-destroying”.

However, if we go through the depth of Faustas’s tragedy, we observe that Faustus stands not for a character, not for a single man, but for man, for every man. His tragedy is not a personal tragedy, but a tragedy that overtakes all those who dare “practice more than heavenly power permits” In this way, Faustus’s individualistic tragedy turns to a universal too.

To sum up, we must say that Doctor Faustus is an embodiment of Renaissance, a tragic hero, individual and forceful. At the same time, he represents us too. But the only difference is that we dare hardly avoid the established concepts of society, religion, but Faustus boldly went ahead to his individual demand. However in religious point of view, he committed a great sin and suffered a lot - that is, it is a morality play too.

**Renaissance ideals vs Medieval morals**

Faustus's inner turmoil gives way to the dominant meaning within the play: Medieval morals versus Renaissance ideals. Marlowe's characterization of Faustus leads one to the predominant idea of duality in society of his era in which Medieval values conflict with those of the Renaissance. His refusal to see what is fact and what is fiction is a result of his pompous persona. In his quest to become omnipotent, Faustus fails to see that there is life after death and that his material possessions are of no consequence. Faustus is a combatant in his own internal war of knowledge or salvation.
In the opening of the play Marlowe uses the chorus to announce the time, place, and most importantly, to introduce Faustus. The chorus refers to the Greek myth of Icarus while characterizing Faustus –

"Till swoll’n with cunning, of self-conceit  
His waxen wings did mount above his reach  
And melting, heavens conspired his overthrow!"(Prologue. 19-21.)."

His waxen wings did mount above his reach" is an ironic comparison between Icarus and Faustus. It is ironic because Icarus directly disobey his father, which ties into the idea of moral sin. However, in Faustus' case it is disobedient to become too learned. Also, the line: "heavens conspired his overthrow" could be a reference to Lucifer's attempt to overpower God. Thus, the Chorus would ultimately be making reference to Faustus attempting to outwit God. This is the contrast between Medieval and Renaissance values; the medieval world shunned all that was not Christian while the Renaissance was a re-birth of learning in which people openly questioned divinity as with much more. The chorus makes it seem that Faustus is a 'bad' man because he seeks knowledge. In essence, it portrays Faustus as a "Renaissance man who pays the medieval price for being one."

Faustus's constant struggle to explore Renaissance principles is heightened by the Good Angel and Bad Angel. The Good Angel pulls Faustus towards Medieval values. He represents Faustus's Medieval instincts:

"O Faustus, lay that damned book aside  
And gaze not on it lest it tempt thy soul  
And heap God's heavy wrath upon thy head!  
Read, read the Scriptures - that is blasphemy!" (1.1.67-69).

The Angel is eluding to Medieval ideals by saying that books are 'damned' and will bring 'God's heavy wrath'. 'That is blasphemy' is yet another reference to books not being of God. The Good Angel is Faustus key to salvation. Again, Faustus's inner conflict gives way to the ultimate theme of redemption and sin. While the Good Angel represents the medieval era, the Bad Angel signifies the Renaissance:

"Go forward Faustus, in that famous art  
Wherein all nature's treasure is contained.  
...  
Lord and commander of these elements!"(1.1.71-74).

The Bad Angel feeds Faustus's thirst for knowledge by telling him that 'all nature's treasure is contained' in his books. Going even further, the Angel tells Faustus to be 'Lord' and 'commander' of these elements ultimately telling Faustus that he could be God if he so chose. Both angels are ultimately signify duality within society. Where half are pulled towards the righteous Medieval morals and the others toward liberated Renaissance ideals.

Faustus embraces his Renaissance persona by acknowledging his life choices. In his never ending quest to obtain knowledge, Faustus conjures Helen of Troy so that he may marvel at her beauty:

"Was this the face that launched a thousand ships  
And burnt the topless towers of Illium?  
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss."
Her kiss suck forth my soul.  
See where it flies!” (5.1.95-99).

Helen is an apt person for Faustus to gawk at. She was considered to be the most beautiful women in the entire world. However, Faustus lives in a time and place of sexual repression. Thus, Helen represents sin and sexual freedom - an end to Medieval morals. The word 'immortal' implies that Helen’s kiss allows men to live forever and that Helen herself is 'immortal'. This ironical comparison demonstrates that Faustus is still in denial about death. However, with 'Her kiss suck forth my soul', Faustus suggests that Helen has taken his life. This is ironic on many levels, most noticeably being that many men died to rescue Helen from the Trojans. In addition, Faustus is the only one responsible for his lost soul. The conjuring of Helen of Troy represents Faustus's decision to accept what he has done with his life and follow his Renaissance persona. In calling on Helen, Faustus has yielded himself to immortal sins. First and foremost, Faustus has sinned by using black magic to call on Helen. Lastly, Faustus is openly sexual with Helen of Troy. His kissing of Helen is ultimately a symbol of accepting that which has already been done and preparing to face eternal damnation.

Faustus's epic battle between Medieval morals and Renaissance ideals results in his eternal damnation. Faustus has many chances to repent, yet not once does he decided to put an end to seeking knowledge and practicing magic. His decision is ultimately a signal for the end of Medieval beliefs in 'religion being the key' and the emergence of free thinking. Faustus has been said to be "a Renaissance man who paid the Medieval price for being one". He was an intellectual in a society of ignorance imposed upon by the clergy of the Catholic Church.

Though Faustus is the tragic hero of the play one must really consider if in fact Faustus's demise is tragic. Faustus makes his own decisions and knows where they will take him to in the end. He refuses to see that heaven and hell do exist and despite the many warnings given to him about the heinousness of hell, he still follows the path of damnation Faustus's harrowing demise results in eternal damnation is tragic. He is a man with the charisma and courage to follow his passions in life. Faustus is told time after time that he can still repent and save himself from the wrath of God. Several times he does in fact repent, yet because of his inner conflict he 'takes it back'. Not till Faustus utters his last words is one completely sure that Faustus's story is tragic, at best. Ultimately, he dies unhappy and still a combatant in his own internal war.

At the end we can say that in spite of being a man of medieval period, Faustus was a Renaissance man. And by his activities we find the elements of Renaissance where medieval values are buried because of the emergence of Renaissance ideals.

**Doctor Faustus as an Over-Reacher**

Doctor Faustus is what Harry Levin calls, ‘an over-reacher.’ The play is a tragedy of presumption in which a man of humble origin but great learning over reaches and ruins himself. It presents the pathetic figure of a great mind going to ruin. Doctor Faustus is a typical Renaissance hero. He reveals an important aspect of the Renaissance temper. He like other Marlovian heroes is distinguished by his **fiery passion**, capacity for **infinite struggle** and the Renaissance **lust for power**, **beauty**, **wealth** and **knowledge**.

Marlovian heroes are the embodiments or manifestations of single qualities and single forces. They are projected from his subjectivity and made convincing by sheer
imaginative insight into the dark mysteries of nature. They are all massively drawn. They are all Titanic figures who challenge the forces which ultimately prove too great for them. They stand all by themselves and dwarf and over-shadow all other characters. They are lonely figures in a world of Lilliputians. Faustus seeks infinite knowledge and the satisfaction of physical desires. Barabas has an unlimited passion for revenge. They seem to illustrate Machiavelli’s Prince whose only desirable virtue is ambition and who denies all morality except that which operates for his own good. But man, by nature, has limited power. His desire to transcend himself is bound to be frustrated. This is the typical tragic predicament (situation). As informed by the chorus, Faustus is swollen with cunning of a self-conceit; his waxen wings did mount above his reach.

Faustus, in the opening soliloquy shows his dissatisfaction with various branches of knowledge. He has studied Aristotle’s logic but that has only sharpened his thirst for knowledge, he rejects the study of medicine as it has failed to put life into the dead. He disapproves of the study of law which provides only petty gains. The study of religion is considered futile as it only tells of the essential sinful nature of man.

Yet art thou still but Faustus and a man. He wishes to acquire unlimited knowledge. This he feels is possible only through the study of magic.

Divinity, adieu!
These metaphysics of magicians,
And necromantic books are heavenly;
Lines, circles, scenes, letters, and characters;
Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires

He is prepared to sign the contract in his own blood to give away his soul to Satan in order to seek infinite knowledge. He is obviously tired of orthodox learning. As soon as Mephistophilis appears, he starts questioning him about the nature of hell and heaven, of earth and the stars, of God and devil. Immediately after signing contract, he moves in a dragon-drawn chariot through various planets in the universe. Obviously this doctor of divinity has forgotten the Christian dictum that the fruit of knowledge is forbidden. He suffers because he is tempted to explore the mysteries that are forbidden by heavenly powers.

True to a typical Marlovian hero, Faustus treats God and Devil not merely as rival centres of power but himself wishes to be a similar centre of power. It is with this end in view that he pursues the study of “black art”. This pursuit of magic will put at his command all things that move between the quiet poles. He believes that ‘A sound magician is a demi-god’. Like Tamburlaine, he wishes to be a great emperor of the world:

I’II join the hills that bind the Afric shore
And make that country continent to Spain
And both contributory to my crown:
The Emperor shall not live but by my leave.
Nor any potentate in Germany.

Like the Prince of Machiavelli, Faustus doesn’t bother about the traditional morality. He appears to be at least as great as Devil, if not as God. He seeks a vision of greatness
which is denied by the laws that govern human beings. A king commands power only in his kingdom but Faustus through magic wishes control over the elements.

The trade with the countries of Asia and Africa was bringing a lot of wealth into the country. This created an insatiable desire for wealth. Faustus shares Barabas’ **thirst for wealth**. That is perhaps why Faustus is keen to call forth spirits and says: -

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I'll have them fly to India for gold,
Ransack the ocean for the orient pearl.
```

Beauty was a passion with the Elizabethans. True to this spirit, Faustus wishes to live in all voluptuousness and yarns to have “a world of profit and delight”. He summons blind Homer to sing of Alexander’s love and Oenon’s death. He listens to the music of Amphion who raised the walls of Thebes with music. He calls the spirit of Helen, the face that launched a thousand ships and burnt the topless towers of Ilium. He yearns for a kiss of Helen that will make him “immortal”. He is thus truly a microcosm of Renaissance humanism. This love for sensuous pleasure is reflected when one of the first desires mentioned by Faustus is to have a wife. This craze for carnal delights is both the cause and effect of his suffering. It is this passion that leads him astray and he drowns his inner conflict in these very physical pleasures.

Faustus as a tragic hero introduces the element of inner conflict for the first time in English drama.

“Faustus remains an almost unique record of spiritual tragedy.” The conflict in this play is not between man and man, nor in the interaction of a group of characters but between the divine will and the human will, between curiosity and conscience. Faustus, ambitious like Milton’s Satan, undergoes a similar deterioration and degeneration and therein lies his tragedy. He seeks to have “a world of profit and delight, of power, of honour, and of omnipotence”. He does start with an ambition of world conquest and securing all knowledge. He does satisfy his lust for knowledge and power but forgets all about his claims. He neither builds any brass wall around Germany nor any bridge joining Spain with Africa. Instead of becoming a world-emperor, he is reduced to the level of an entertainer and a juggler. His mischief with the Pope reduces him to the level of a buffoon. His trick with the horse-dealer is like that of a clown. His fetching the grapes in winter is cheap show that jugglers perform even now. He had rejected medicine because it could not turn the dead into living. He had decided to pursue the black art because it would help him control the elements. But in actual practice, he fails to avoid his own death and cannot stop the movement of time. The comic scenes rightly parody his efforts. But all this deterioration and degeneration is not sudden. The change in him is gradual like in Satan in Paradise Lost. From the ridicule of Pope, to the ridicule of a knight and then to the ridicule of an ordinary horse-dealer indicates this steady downfall. In the beginning he calls Mephistopheles and can command him. Later he depends on Mephistophilis to do everything. But ultimately the evil spirits dominate him and he seeks to drown his grief into sensuous pleasures. To conclude we can rightly say that Faustus presents the pathetic figure of a great mind going to ruin.

**Blank verse in Doctor Faustus**

Blank verse is a literary device defined as un-rhyming verse written in iambic pentameter. In poetry and prose, it has a consistent meter with 10 syllables in each line.
(pentameter); where, unstressed syllables are followed by stressed ones and five of which are stressed but do not rhyme. It is also known as un-rhymed iambic pentameter.

Marlowe has always been regarded more of a poet rather than a dramatist. Both his contemporaries and the moderns have waxed eloquent in praise of his poetic excellence. Helen Rex Keller calls Doctor Faustus a tragic poem rather than a play. Pinkerton observes, "It is neither the philosophical nor the teaching element that attracts us now. The play touches us, I think, by the quality of its poetry". Swinburne regards this play as the most remarkable of all great poems in dramatic form. He believes that a few masterpieces of any age in any language can stand beside the tragic poem for the qualities of terror and splendor, for intensity of purpose and sublimity of note. J. A. Symonds remarks that Marlowe traced the outline of the legend of Faustus with a breadth and dignity, beyond the scope of the prose legend. He filled it with the power of a great poet and with the intensity of life belonging to himself. Leigh Hunt declared, “If there was a born poet, Marlowe was one.” Robertson could never think of him except as a poet, Marlowe was one”. Robertson could never think of him except as a poet. Saintsbury regards Marlowe as one of the greatest poets of the world whose work was caused by accident and caprice into an imperfect mould of drama. Marlowe masters us by poetry. He is lifted above his fellows-reaching the pedestal on which Shakespeare stands alone.

All these estimates make us praising Doctor Faustus as a great dramatic poem rather as a great play overlooking the remarkable acting quality of the chief scenes. This acting quality is proved by the successful performances both in Marlowe's time and in ours when properly staged. However, it is true that Doctor Faustus has far more passages of superb dramatic poetry than any other play of Marlowe. The subject here, more than even Tamburlaine, lends itself to passionate outbursts and lyrical raptures. Marlowe has few equals in the expression of such lyrical raptures. Faustus’ apostrophe to Helena is the most memorable of such passages. Many a times, in many other speeches, Marlowe’s imagination glows with a similar brightness. Feeling is here expressed in the same rich phrases, and in the same sonorous music. Most of these passages in Doctor Faustus represent the ecstatic quality of his poetry. Marlowe is the rapturous lyrist of infinite passions. This ecstatic quality finds its best expression in the following lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?} \\
\text{And burnt the topless towers of Ilum!} \\
\text{Sweet Helen! Make me immortal with a kiss.} \\
\text{Her lips suck forth my soul’ See, where it flies!}
\end{align*}
\]

Similarly, Faustus depicts his delight secured through magic in the following lines of poetic excellence:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Have not I made blind Homer sing to me} \\
\text{Of Alexander’s love and Oenon’s death?} \\
\text{And hath not he, that built the walls of Thebes} \\
\text{With ravishing sound of his melodious harp,} \\
\text{Made music with my Mephistophilis?}
\end{align*}
\]

Again, when Faustus’ passion to conquer the secret forces of nature is described, his words have same glow of poetic ecstasy: Simple, Pictorial, Vitalising.

Marlowe’s poetry, apart from being ecstatic, is simple, pictorial and Vitalising. Classical legends are used as images in the description of Helen’s beauty:
Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter
When he, appeared to hapless Semele;
More lovely than the monarch of the sky
In wanton Arethusa’s azur’d arms,

Marlowe is neither rhetorical nor obscure. He speaks with a bright and lucid simplicity. Many of his happiest lines are woven from the words of everyday speech, often a sequence of monosyllables:

Her lips suck forth my soul,' see, where it flies'

Even in its less exalted verse passages, as in Chorus narratives and in some of the speeches, this play is almost entirely free from the rhetorical declamation. The vitalizing energy of Marlowe’s poetry lends a beauty and lifting power to this play. We admire even the horrible imagination and vibrant music.

This play very well demonstrates the extent of Marlowe's mastery over blank verse was dull and monotonous. Marlowe uses the end-stopped line. He changes the fall of stress and the internal pause to introduce variety. There is, for example, consistently regular rhythm in the Chorus passages. It creates an effect of stately rigidity. But the opening soliloquy of Faustus has flexibility introduced through variation in rhythm and pause. The last soliloquy of Faustus shows Marlowe’s highest attainment as a meterist. Here, in response to the stress of the passions, the blank verse is worked into new beautiful rhythms. The blank verse before Marlowe was like a dried preparation. It seemed to wait for infusion of new blood. Earlier blank verse was rendered lifeless by stiff rules, rigid regularity and monotony. Marlowe brought an end to this old wooden versification. He liberated blank verse from the shackles of formalism, rigidity and regularity. His verse is throbbing with life and vitality. It gives full play to his poetic power and passion. It permits the ebb and tide of diction. It is pervaded with the rhythm of thought and feeling. His exceptional poetic genius helped him to achieve absolute freedom, flexibility and range for his blank verse. The leaden ore of the meter of Gorbodue was transformed by him into the liquid gold of his mighty lines.

We may conclude with Bradley that Marlowe had many of the makings of a great poet ¾ a capacity for Titanic passions which might with time have become Olympian. His imaginative vision which was already intense must have deepened and widened with time. He had the gift of style and making words sing which is unique and unparalleled.

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Plot in Doctor Faustus

Marlowe has been criticized by many critics for his defective and faulty plot-construction. Dr. Faustus has been called a failure in construction though it has a quite natural and impressive introduction and exposition. Ifor Evans believes that the play is not wholly successful. He agrees that its opening speeches, in which Faustus barters his soul, are magnificent. The closing presentation of the final hour of retribution reaches a depth of pathos which Marlowe never equaled. The weakness, according to him, lies in the middle scenes, some of which are crude, and even farcical. Indeed they are considered so inadequate that some critics have even doubted Marlowe’s authorship of these scenes.
Helen Rex Keller calls it rather a tragic poem than a play. It consists of fourteen scenes without any grouping into acts. Felix Schelling thinks that the play is little more than a succession of scenes, void of continuity or cohesion. The only factors of unity are the central figure and his unrelenting progress towards catastrophe. Nicholas Brooke believes that the play is wandering, ill-constructed and ill-written affair despite its flashes of greatness. R. S. Knox and Harry Levin, like Ifor Evans take strong exception to the middle scenes of the play.

There is much art in the simple, quiet opening. Faustus is in meditation among his books. This soliloquy reveals the working of Faustus’ mind. His keen intellect rejects all subjects. The mastery over these subjects is inadequate to satisfy his lust for power and position. He dreams of superhuman force through magic. It reflects the spirit of Renaissance with its yearning for new realms of art and learning and passion for unlimited power. The silent entry of the Angels and their whispered device have a great dramatic impact. It is not just a continuation of the tradition of Miracle and Morality plays. It shows a conflict in Faustus’ mind between moral and religious ideas of Reformation and the worldly ambitions of Renaissance. Faustus’ enraptured cry, as he thinks of the glorious future offered to him, makes an impressive picture if seen in a setting approaching bare Elizabethan stage:

**O what a world of profit and delight.**
**Of power of honour of omnipotence,**
**All things that move between the quiet poles**
**Shall be at my command.**

The signing of the contract with the devil vigorously portrays Faustus’ excitement, his terror and his almost hysterical haste to put his new power to the test.

The end of the play culminates in great emotional moments like the reappearance of the Old Man and Faustus’ cry of ecstasy as he gazes at the symbol of conscience in Faustus’ soul. Old man represents Christian faith with its ideas of prayer and penitence, salvation and redemption. He makes Faustus aware of his polluted soul and the need for sincere repentance. But Faustus is plunged into deep despair. The love for physical pleasures so degrades him that he asks Mephistophilis to torture the Old Man. The physical tortures are treated by the Old Man as a test of his faith in God which ultimately triumphs. It gains its dramatic value by contrast with Faustus who is terribly afraid of physical tortures. The craving for Helen’s beauty to drown his despair has a deep psychological basis. Most effective is, however, the ecstatic praise of Helen’s beauty

**Was this the face that launch’d a thousand ships.**
**And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?**
**Sweet Helen! make me immortal with a kiss.**

The last soliloquy reveals Faustus’ tragic discovery of the reality of hell and its tortures and the prospect of eternal damnation because Faustus vomits out his inner mental corruption. It is the deep agony of a terror-stricken soul;

**If thou will not have mercy on my soul.**
**Yet for Christ’s sake, whose blood hath ransom’d me,**
**Impose some end to my incessant pain,**
**Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years.**
**A hundred thousand. and at last be sav ‘d.**
Most of the critics have condemned the middle scenes, the comic scenes, in Dr. Faustus. These scenes have been called crude, grotesque and even farcical. J. A. Symonds believes that they might be easily transposed without any material injury to the plan. Dr. Lopez, a contemporary of Marlowe, has referred to the interpolation of comic scenes. The diary of Marlowe’s actor-manager suggests that he had engaged the services of William Birde and Samuel Rowley for changing the text of Dr. Faustus. Harold Osborne and Arnold Wynne dismiss these scenes as crude buffoonery in the tradition of native comedy to tickle the fancy of the groundlings.

The presence of comic scenes can be justified on many grounds. The introduction of cheap buffoonery in a tragedy was in keeping with the taste of contemporary audiences. T.S. Eliot has suggested that it is wrong to suppose that Marlowe had no sense of humour. He gives the example of Marlowe’s Dido. Queen of Carthage, and Tamburlaine to show his sense of humour. J.C. Maxwell has suggested that comic scenes in this play are quite consistent with its main theme. The same genius that shows itself in the tragic scenes is manifested, though less strikingly, in the selection exercised on miscellaneous buffoonery. Marlowe brings some order out of chaos by presenting the high-life scenes side by side with low-life scenes.

Most of the comic scenes parody the main plot. They thus introduce the ironic element in the play and deepen its significance. In the first scene, Faustus announces his intellectual supremacy and his decision to acquire god-like power through magic. In the second scene, Wagner apes his master’s display of learning by arguing with the two scholars. In the third scene Faustus agrees to sell his soul for power and sensuous pleasures. Immediately after this, the Clown considers selling of his soul for a shoulder of mutton and a taste of wenching. In the next scenes he launches his career as a magician by snatching away the Pope’s food and drink. Similarly Raphel and Robin parody Faustus’ magic and try to steal a goblet from a Vintner. In the latter half of the play, the mighty Faustus parodies his own ambitious thoughts just as Wagner and the Clown had parodied them earlier. As Faustus becomes invisible, the tragic-comic contrast begins to merge. Scene by scene, the images approach one another until at last we discover the figure of the fool beneath the exalted appearance of the fearless rebel. When Faustus steals the Pope’s cup and Robin steals the Vintner’s goblet, the tragic and the comic images nearly merge. The difference between the hero and the clown is one of degree, not of kind.

The balance of tragic and comic elements in Faustus is somewhat comparable to that in Paradise Lost. C. S. Lewis has suggested that Satan might have been a comic figure if Milton had chosen to emphasize, more than he does, the absurdity of diabolical ambition. Like Faustus, Satan changes his shape. Satan, however, is the unwitting fool of God, the brilliant schemer whose victory turns to ashes. Faustus' destiny is more obscure and pathetic. He is Lucifer’s fool, not God’s.

Dr. Faustus doesn’t have a plot construction in the ordinary sense. But it has a better construction than Tamburlaine or The Jew of Malta. R. G. Lunt points out that the play has five well-marked natural movements or divisions corresponding to the five acts of a play. Similarly Ellis Fermor divides the play into six episodes followed by a catastrophe. In the first episode, Faustus surveys his position and chooses to study magic that begins the action and sets it moving towards the crisis. In the second episode, Mephistophilis is summoned. Next episode presents the crisis - the contract with the devil and the resulting wavering of mind. Faustus regrets in the fourth episode but the evil powers
triumph. It is followed by the period of disintegration and loss of ideals. The last episode, after a brief conflict between good and evil forces, presents a confirmation of the terrible bond and the appearance of Helen.

Harry Levin discovers in the play the main plot, the sub-plot and the over-plot. The main plot deals with the ambitions and ideals of Dr. Faustus, his struggle to achieve his ambition and his ultimate tragedy. The comic sub-plot presents an anti-climax to the main plot. It shows Faustus’ ideals and aspirations in a comic light. It emphasizes the fact that the comic and the serious, the ridiculous and the sublime, are closely interlinked. They are two sides of the same coin. The over-plot or the philosophical plot represents the struggle between the forces of good and evil in the universe and in the human soul. This struggle makes the play so gripping.

So to sum up we can say that the general disapproval of the middle or comic scenes of Dr. Faustus is largely misconceived because of the failure to discover a traditional plan of construction in the play. The play has also another and different kind of unity through the dominating character of Faustus and the presentation of his inner conflict. This conflict lends dignity because the conflict is not between men for domination of one character over another or in the interaction of a group of characters. This conflict is between man and the spiritual powers as in Greek tragedy and this imparts organic unity to the play.

**Themes in Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus**

**Absolute Power, Sin and Redemption, and the Divided Nature of Man**

Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus" stands as one of the most influential and frequently referenced pieces of literature in history. The play is the story of Doctor Faustus, a man who considers study in the fields of logic, medicine, law, and divinity and instead chooses to forsake them all to practice black magic. He enters into a deal with Mephastophilis, a servant of the devil, in which Faustus gains the services of the demon but has to give up his soul after 24 years. The play deals with several important themes. The corrupting influence of power, sin and redemption, and the divided nature of man are interwoven throughout the piece.

**Absolute power corrupts Faustus thoroughly.** In the beginning we are introduced to a man at the top of his game. He’s mastered several important disciplines and is seeking a further, more rewarding, challenge so he turns to black magic. Faustus dreams of the many amazing things he’ll accomplish with his new powers. He muses on sending spirits to India to fetch him gold, ponders having them "Ransack the ocean for orient pearl," and contemplates how he will use his spirits to gain knowledge of "the secrets of all foreign kings." His ambitions even extend to the throne of Germany.

When finally granted the power he so desires, Faustus proceeds to do very little with it. He starts out auspiciously enough with an adventure in a chariot pulled by dragons so that he may unlock the mysteries of astronomy. Faustus seeks to test the accuracy of maps of the coasts and kingdoms of the world as well and eventually ends up in Rome. Soon after, however, he basically lets his amazing power go to waste. He spends his time impressing various noblemen, playing petty tricks on people, and conjuring up specters of Alexander the Great and Helen of Troy.
The underlying statement Marlowe is making is one of the basic tenets of modern psychology. People simply don't appreciate things they didn't have to work to gain. In the beginning, Faustus is a great man, full of ambition and at the top of his field. While he 'earns' his new-found power in a sense by forfeiting his soul, he has done no actual work to acquire it. Throughout the course of the play we see the formerly-ambitious Faustus reduced to a petty conjurer and celebrity because of the corrupting influence of his power. Instead of choosing to act on his lofty ambitions or, heaven forbid, use his power for unselfish reasons; he simply wastes his days amusing himself with practical jokes and beautiful women.

Marlowe also comments on the nature of sin and redemption. Faustus essentially commits the ultimate sin by signing a pact with the devil. He chooses of his own free will to give up his eternal soul in exchange for an earthly reward. According to Christian mythology, one can be forgiven of any sin, one has only to repent and ask God's forgiveness. Despite the severity of his sin, Faustus is given several opportunities to repent his sin and be saved, and is encouraged to do so both by the good angel who appears several times and by the old man in scene 12. Each time he chooses to remain loyal to Hell. He seems to consider repenting at the very end, but Mephistopheles threatens to tear his body apart, so he chooses instead to send Mephistopheles to torture the old man whose words he finds himself unable to heed. Even though an easy answer to the problem of losing his soul exists, and he is several times reminded of it, in the end his own weakness prevents him from making the choice to repent and dams him for all eternity.

The divided nature of man is literally personified in the play by the good and evil angels that appear to Faustus periodically. These characters represent opposing sides of Faustus' own psyche, as well as representing emissaries of heaven and hell. Faustus is continually undecided whether he should continue his bargain or repent and seek salvation. He is clearly afraid for his eternal soul but is unable to relinquish the amazing power his bargain has afforded him. Marlowe may have intended the two angels as literal beings, but it's obvious he also intended them as an allegorical representation of Faustus' own internal struggle.

Themes are an integral part of the play, but Marlowe's work has truly stood the test of time. What is it about Doctor Faustus' story that has made it resonant to countless generations of readers since it was written?

The good doctor is a character with whom readers can sympathize. This is not to necessarily say that he is a 'sympathetic' character, but simply that he's a man who faces temptation and a tough choice. Human beings face tough choices every day, and like Faustus we are forced to weigh the consequences of yielding to those temptations.

Every human being faces temptation almost every day of their lives. These temptations range from the miniscule, such as being tempted to eat a slice of bread in spite of your pledge to adhere strictly to the Atkins diet, to the extreme, such as your best friend's drunken girlfriend coming on to you. The story of Faustus rings true with readers even today because of this. It speaks to every reader because there are no people who have lived without temptation. We all have our "good angel" and "bad angel," the voices inside our heads that spell out consequences of choices we're faced with. In most cases, people who give into temptation are aware of the consequences of that choice. The fact that Faustus' temptation is a far greater one than any of us is likely to face and has far
greater consequences than any of us will ever be up against just makes it even more resonant. Everyone has given in to a strong temptation at some point in their lives and it makes us feel good to see someone doing the same despite the enormous consequences that follow for Faustus.

Despite the fact that Faustus has committed the ultimate sin by choosing of his own free will to give up his immortal soul for an earthly reward, the possibility of salvation exists for him until the very end. We as people want to believe that the possibility of salvation and forgiveness exists for us no matter how heinous the deeds we have committed are. Marlowe's play speaks to this desire within us, telling us that, like Faustus, the possibility of repentance and forgiveness exists for us no matter how badly we screw up. It's a very comforting thought, especially to those living with guilt over some past transgression.

Another reason that the story in "Doctor Faustus" is as relevant today as it was when Marlowe wrote it is Faustus himself. Some may see him as a tragic hero, and it's very possible to consider him in this light, but it's also not much of a stretch to call him a villain. Men like Faustus exist even today, people who are willing to do whatever it takes to get what they want regardless of the consequences to themselves or to others. Ken Lay in the recent Enron scandal comes to mind as an example of this. Mr. Lay was perfectly willing to practically destroy the lives of thousands of people by taking their hard-earned money and squandering it on yachts and other expensive trifles. He, in effect, sold his soul. Faustus' selfish deeds remind us that people like him exist in real life. When Faustus is corrupted by his power and basically squanders it we are both angry at his inability to find a way to do good with his powers and pleased that he is getting what he deserves. Society likes it when people who commit evil deeds have it blow up in their face. We want to see justice served, whether it be Faustus' eternity in hell or Mr. Lay's recently-handed-down prison sentence, it feels good to know that evil people are punished.

"Doctor Faustus" has truly stood the test of time as a great piece of classical literature. Countless indications of its influence exist even today, ranging from the film "The Devil's Advocate" to the good and evil angels that appear on the shoulders in Warner Brothers cartoons. Marlowe's use of complex themes and subtle commentary on the nature of man coupled with the underlying messages that speak to the human psyche have established "Doctor Faustus" as a pinnacle of the writer's craft and a treatise on the human condition.

**Conflict in Doctor Faustus**

Conflict is the essence or the soul of the tragedy and it is born of some strong motivating cause. This conflict may be on two planes: physical plane and spiritual plane. Hence there may be external conflict, and internal or spiritual conflict.

The external conflict generally occurs between the forces of two rival groups. The hero belongs to one of these rival groups and the conflict often takes the form of a battle, a conspiracy or the like. Marlowe's Tamburlaine, Edward II and the Jew of Malta, all illustrate this external conflict as it takes place between the hero and his adversaries. But the hero's heart and soul is the great battlefield for the internal or spiritual conflict. Two opposite thoughts, desires, emotions, loyalties or affiliations may contend against each other in human soul giving rise to most acute spiritual conflict. And of all tragic conflicts, the most tragic one is the losing battle of the good in man against the evil that
ultimately comes out triumphant. Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, the most outstanding tragedy before Shakespeare, illustrates this supreme spiritual conflict in the most forceful manner.

“Doctor Faustus”: Internal or Tragic Conflict

Marlowe’s contribution to English or Elizabethan drama was great and manifold. And one of his greatest is the introduction of this internal or spiritual conflict in the mind of his proud and ambitious hero in Doctor Faustus.

In Doctor Faustus we find the conflict or the psychological struggle raging in the heart and soul of the hero. In fact there is hardly any external action in this play—“the delineation of a psychological struggle or spiritual conflict in the mind of the hero is the chief thing.”

Generally this inner conflict takes place when a man is faced with two alternatives, one of which he must have to choose but finds himself pulled in opposite directions. Now Faustus is inspired by the spirit of Renaissance, by dreams of gaining limitless knowledge and super-human powers. These he can attain only by taking to unholy necromancy, by discarding godly order or by denouncing doctrines of Christianity. Faustus may reject all these intellectually but he is definitely attached to them emotionally. The conflict may be said to be the conflict between will and conscience externalized by the Bad Angel and Good Angel respectively. So the heart of Faustus is the field where the forces of good and evil are trying to overwhelm each other. We can follow this conflict and career of Faustus in the play in three stages.

The First Stage

In the first part of the drama we have the scenes that depict how intellectual pride and inordinate ambition lead Faustus into a vicious (malicious) bargain with the Devil. In the very first scene we find that Faustus is disappointed with all branches of knowledge like Physic, Philosophy, Law and Divinity as they are absolutely inadequate to serve his purpose. Finally he decides in favour of the black art of magic as:

“These metaphysics of magicians,
And necromantic books are heavenly.”

And he convinces himself that:

“A sound magician is a mighty god”

The dramatic tension of Faustus lies in the fact that he is determined to satisfy the demands of his nature as God has made him—to be himself a deity—that is forbidden: it can be achieved by a conscious rejection of God who created him in his own image, but denied him (as much as Lucifer) fulfillment of that image. But Faustus’s emotional attachment to the medieval doctrines of Christianity is too deep to be rooted out. Hence just after his final decision in favour of necromancy he feels the prick of conscience and in this very scene the Good Angel and the Evil Angel make their first appearance on the stage. These two Angels, in fact, represent the two aspects of human mind. Hence here the Angels are externalizing the inner conflict between vice and virtue, between will and conscience raging in the mind of Doctor Faustus. We find that the entire action of the play is fluctuating between the weak and wavering loyalties of Faustus to these two opposing forces. The Good Angel urges Faustus to shun ‘that damned book’ and to read the scriptures. But the Evil angel scores a victory by luring away Faustus with the assurance that by mastering the black art of magic Faustus will be: “Lord and
commander of the elements.” After meeting and talking to his two friends who also encourage and inspire him to go for necromancy Faustus is determined that: “This night I’ll conjure, though I die therefore.” Then at the end of third scene of Act I we find Faustus telling Mephistopheles that he has already abjured the Trinity of his own will and has absolutely made up his mind to sell his soul to the Devil to gain limitless powers with the help of Mephistopheles as his abject slave and ‘to live in all voluptuousness’ for twenty-four years. His imagination takes wings and he tells us:

“Had I as many souls as there be stars,
I’d give them all for Mephistophilis.
By him I’ll be great emperor of the world.”
And then he starts indulging in day-dreams.

Undoubtedly, Faustus abjured God and the Trinity and decided to surrender his soul to the Devil of his own will, but in the beginning of Scene I of Act II, we find Faustus experiencing the **prick of Conscience and a tussle between will and conscience** starts raging in his soul. It begins to dawn on him that he is going to be eternally damned and can in no way be saved and he gives vent to his sense of despair thus:

“Ay, and Faustus will turn to God again,
To God? He loves thee not:
The god thou serv’st is thine own appetite,
Wherein is fix’d the love of Belzebub:”

The Good Angel and the Evil Angel, the symbols of his passion and conscience make their appearance again. But the lure of wealth and honour scores over the voice of conscience that urges him to pray and repent. He is now determined to write the bond with his own blood for surrendering his soul to the devil. But when Faustus starts writing the bond his blood coagulates. Then again when he has already ‘bequeath’d his soul to Lucifer’ he has optical illusion: the words ‘Homo, fuge’ have been inscribed on his arm. All these are outward expressions of the voice of virtue in him.

**The Second Stage**

In this stage is depicted Faustus’s pathetic struggle to escape his impending doom and damnation and his deep sense of helplessness. This is revealed when he confesses to Mephistopheles that:

“When I behold the heavens, then I repent,’
And curse thee, wicked Mephistophilis,
Because thou hast depriv’d me of those joys.”

The two Angels appear again—one urging him to pray and repent so that he may still have God’s mercy and the other tells him that as he is a spirit, God can never pity him. Faustus very sadly realizes “**My heart’s so harden’d, I cannot repent:**” And he would have killed himself out of despair had the sweet pleasures provided by Mephistopheles not dispelled his gloom of despair. Again at the end of this very scene the conflict in his soul becomes very acute when Mephistopheles refuses to answer some of his questions and the Good and Evil Angels reappear to externalize his inner conflict.

This time the Good Angel’s appeal has some effect on his mind. But the Evil Angel tells him that the devils will tear him to pieces if he listened to the voice of conscience. Realizing the critical situation Lucifer himself, Beelzebub and Mephistopheles appear before him and finally warn him not to think of God so that there may not be any breach
of his bond. And Faustus has to submit to the demand of the Devil once more. And to pull up his drooping mind the Devil puts up the flimsy show of Seven Deadly Sins.

The spiritual conflict takes the most acute turn in the first scene of Act V after Faustus has raised the spirit of Helen and when the Old Man, the symbol of the good and divine in him, appears before him. His was the last attempt to guide his steps 'unto the way of life'. The acute mental tension is revealed forcefully in the following lines:

"Where art thou Faustus, wretch what hast thou done:
Damn'd art thou, Faustus, damned, despair and die."

Out of desperation, Faustus is just going to commit suicide; but it is the same Old Man who prevents him from taking this desperate step with a fervent appeal 'to call for mercy, and avoid despair.' But alas! Faustus ultimately seals his own fate by surrendering himself into the arms of sweet Helen to make him 'immortal with a kiss' just to forget the intense agony of his troubled and despairing soul.

The Final Scene

In the closing scene we find the climax culminating into a terrible catastrophe. Faustus has realised that he is doomed to eternal damnation without the least hope of redemption. The most poignant soliloquy of Doctor Faustus starting just before an hour of his final doom reveals forcefully the deep agony of a horror-struck soul. His last-minute frantic appeal to the ever-moving spheres of heaven to stand still or to the sun to rise again to 'make perpetual day' “That Faustus may repent and save his soul!”—is absolutely of no avail. And when the final hour strikes the Devil’s disciples snatch away the agonised and trouble-torn soul of Faustus to hell to suffer eternal damnation.

We may now conclude with the very illuminating remark of Ellis-Fermor. “In Marlowe’s great tragic fragment, the conflict is not between man and man for the domination of one character over another, or in the inter-action of a group of characters. But as in Aeschylus’s Eumenides, the protagonists are man and the spiritual powers that surround him, the scene is set in on spot upon physical earth but in the limitless region of the mind and the battle is fought, not for kingdoms or crowns, but upon the question of man’s ultimate fate. Before him lies the possibility to escape to spiritual freedom or a doom of slavery to demoniac powers. Thus, and in such terms is staged the greatest conflict that drama has ever undertaken to present.”

"Doctor Faustus”: A Link between Morality and Drama

Introduction: - Marlowe has rightly been called the ‘Morning Star’ of the great Elizabethan drama. Among the first pioneers of Elizabethan drama, he was definitely the greatest. Undoubtedly, it was Marlowe who raised the matter and the manner of the English drama to a high level and set it firmly on the straight road to greatness by drawing it from the old rut of Morality and rambling Interlude.

So Marlowe’s contribution to the evolving of Romantic drama was really great. But the fact is that the Romantic drama was a curious blend of indigenous and classical traditions. Hence some of the characteristics of medieval Miracle and Morality plays are quite evident in the plays of Marlowe. And in this respect Doctor Faustus may be treated
as a connecting link between the Miracle and Morality plays and the illustrious drama of Elizabethan period.

**Miracle and Mystery Plays and "Doctor Faustus"**: The English dramas of the Middle Ages which presented the miracle of the saints and, very often, scenes from the Bible were generally and correctly, called Miracle plays. Scholars, from time to time, have attempted to distinguish between the Miracle play and the Mystery—the former as the saints-play and the latter as the Bible play. But both terms are still used for both types with very little discrimination. The production of these plays was at its height in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Saints-plays were earlier than Biblical plays. Those who wrote and produced them called them Miracles, shows or pageants. There is no doubt that the chief purpose of these plays was religious and ethical teaching, but between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, these plays, which developed from liturgical dramas became secularised. In such plays, generally a large number of scenes depicting the life of a saint was stringed together and the structure was always loose. But in the process of secularisation, comic scenes with coarse buffoonery found their place. The story of the plays was confined to the two books of the Bible. The Devil had also its part to play, though the plot, if there was any, centered round the main character allowing very little scope to minor figures.

In Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus we can easily trace some of the characteristics of the Miracle plays. In Scene IV of Act I we find two devils, Baliol and Belcher, entering just to frighten the clown. Devils also appear in Act II, Sc. I and II and also in Act IV, Sc. III and Act V, Sc. II. The tradition of Chorus is also maintained. We find the Chorus introducing the story just before the beginning of the first scene and subsequently filling in the gaps in the narrative and announcing the end of the play with a very solemn moral. The looseness of the structure is quite evident, and as in the Miracle plays the story centres around a single towering figure, Doctor Faustus. From the very name of this type of plays it is obvious that the main figures must have performed some outstanding miracles. And here in this drama we find Faustus performing amazing feats of Miracle.

**Morality Plays and "Doctor Faustus"**: The Morality play is really a fusion of the medieval allegory and the religious drama, of the Miracle plays. It developed at the end of the fourteenth century and gained much popularity in the fifteenth century. In these plays the characters were personified abstractions of vice or virtues such as Good Deeds, Faith, Mercy, Anger. The outstanding Morality play, Everyman, has characters like Wealth, Good Deeds, Death and others. The general theme of the Moralties was theological and the main one was the struggle between good and evil powers for capturing man’s soul and the journey of life with its choice of eternal destinations. Very often the Seven Deadly Sins were found engaged in physical and verbal battle with cardinal virtues. Even though the Morality plays were essentially religious or ethical and didactic, they were also not dull like the Miracle plays. The antics of vices and devils etc., offered a considerable opportunity for low comedy or buffoonery and thus farcical elements developed in a great way.

The Morality play, more or less, disappeared after mid-fifteenth century but the trace of its influences appears in Elizabethan drama. In this respect we may call Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus a belated Morality in spite of its tragic ending. And even Shakespeare’s Macbeth is not free from its influence as this play also presents a conflict between the good and the evil.
“Doctor Faustus”: - Let us take up Doctor Faustus exclusively. If the general theme of Morality plays was theological dealing with the struggle of the forces of good and evil for the soul of man, and the aim was to teach doctrines and ethics of Christianity, then Doctor Faustus may be called a religious or Morality play to a very great extent. The play definitely worked out in a tone of medieval theology. We find Marlowe’s hero, Faustus, abjuring the scriptures, the Trinity and Christ. He surrenders his soul to the Devil out of his inordinate ambition to gain super-human power through knowledge by mastering the unholy art of magic. And thus he says to himself to make up his mind regarding the subject he wishes to study in future:

“Divinity adieu! These metaphysics of magicians, And necromantic books are heavenly.”

By selling his soul to the Devil he lives a blasphemous life full of vain and sensual pleasures just for twenty-four years. He does not shirk from insulting and even assaulting the Pope with the Holy Fathers at Rome. Of course, there is a fierce struggle in his soul between his overweening ambition and conscience, between the Good Angel and Evil Angel that externalise the inner conflict. But Faustus ultimately surrenders to the allurements of the Evil Angel, thereby paving his way for eternal damnation. And what does happen to this great egotist as well as agonistic with his craze for limitless power and pelf, with his inordinate ambition to unravel all the mysteries of the universe? When the final hour approaches, Faustus, to his utmost pain and horror, realises that his sins are unpardonable and nothing can save him from eternal damnation. And before the devils snatch away his soul to burning hell, the excruciating pangs of a deeply agonised soul find the most poignant expression in Faustus’s final soliloquy:

“My God, my God, look not so fierce to me! Adders and serpents, let me breath a while! Ugly hell, gape not: come not Lucifer: I’ll burn my books: Ah, Mephistophilis!”

Thus we find Marlowe in keeping with the traditions of Miracles and Moralities, depicts the destiny of a man who denies God to be finally doomed to eternal damnation.

Moral Sermon or Didactic Aim: - The chief aim of Morality plays was didactic—it was a dramatized guide to Christian living and Christian dying. Whoever discards the path of virtue and abjures faith in God and Christ is destined to despair and eternal damnation—this is also the message of Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus. And it has found the most touching expression in the mournful monody of the Chorus in the closing lines of the play:

“Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight, And burned is Apollo’s laurel-bough, That sometimes grew within this learned man. Faustus is gone; regard his hellish fall. Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise. Only to wonder at unlawful things, Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits To practise more than heavenly power permits”

Hudson has rightly said: “No finer sermon than Marlowe’s Faustus ever came from the pulpit. What more fearsome exposure was ever offered of the punishment man brings upon himself by giving way to temptation of his grosser appetites.”
Allegory or Personified Abstractions: - It has already been mentioned that in Morality plays the characters were allegorical—they were personified abstractions of vice or virtues. So in Doctor Faustus also we find the Good and Evil Angels, the former standing for the path of virtue and the latter for sin and damnation. Then we have the Old Man appearing in Scene I (Act V) “to guide thy steps unto the way of life.”—symbolising the forces of righteousness and morality. The Seven Deadly Sins of good old Mystery and Morality plays are also very much there in a grand spectacle to cheer up the despairing soul of Faustus. And the old favourite and familiar figure of the devil is also not missing. Mephistopheles, an assistant if Lucifer, appears as servile slave of Faustus in many scenes in the guise of a Franciscan Friar symbolizing power without conscience. But Marlowe’s Devil is a devil with difference, as he has been endowed with some original traits.

Comic Element: - The comic scenes of Doctor Faustus also belong to the tradition of old Miracle and Morality plays. The comic scenes with its buffoonery were not integral parts of those plays but were introduced to entertain and to raise hoars-laughter, as in the case of a realistic comic scene where Noah was shown beating his wife for refusing to enter the ark. The same is the case with almost all the five comic scenes in Doctor Faustus—especially in Scene I of the third Act where Faustus is found playing vile tricks on the Pope and the 2nd scene of Act IV where the horse-courser is totally outwitted and befooled by Faustus.

Other Elements: - In the earlier plays there is no inter-play of character. In Doctor Faustus, also there is only one towering central figure and all the action and incidents centre round him. Then, just like the earlier Miracle or Morality plays, it also suffers from looseness of construction—especially in the middle part of the play.

Conclusion: - In spite of all its links with medieval Miracles or Moralities, Doctor Faustus can never be treated wholly as a Morality play. It is the greatest heroic tragedy before Shakespeare with its enormous stress on characterization and inner conflict in the soul of a towering personality. We may conclude in the words of a critic: Doctor Faustus is both the consummation of the English Morality tradition and the last and the finest of Marlowe’s heroic plays. As a Morality, it vindicates humility, faith and obedience to the law of God; as a heroic play it celebrates power, beauty, riches and knowledge, and seems a sequel to the plays of “Tamburlaine the great.”

Autobiographical Note in Faustus

Introduction: A study of Marlowe’s great tragedies cannot but convince us that Marlowe possessed the power in its fullest degree of projecting himself into his chief characters. The most important quality of his works is the subjective or autobiography note. Here lies the greatest difference between Shakespeare and Marlowe as dramatists. There is a complete effacement of Shakespeare’s personality in his plays. We cannot say that this or that passage reveals Shakespeare’s personality or mind. But Marlowe couldn’t but project his personality into the chief characters of his plays – especially in his four great tragedies: Tamburlaine, Doctor Faustus, The Jew of Malta and Edward II.

Marlowe’s Life and the Spirit of Renaissance: Before discussing the subjective note in his plays any further, we should have a fair idea of Marlowe’s life, his career, the influence of the Renaissance on him, and his ambitions. Marlowe came of parents ‘base of stock’. He was the son of a shoe maker. But he was fortunate enough to get school
education and had a chance to go to Cambridge to specialize in theology and got Doctorate in Divinity. But his abandoned his career in theology and joined the theatrical companies in London to become a dramatist. But seeing a difference between himself as poor and his companions as rich, though they were much inferior to him in intellect, Marlowe rebelled against the established norms. This was also perhaps the main cause of his rebellion against religion and its normal orders. He was much criticized and branded as the Atheist. He also possessed a dual personality. He was a dramatist and poet in London, but also had relations with the underworld. However, Marlowe was a man of the Renaissance and an embodiment of the spirit of his age. He was a saturated with the spirit of learning, exploring and experimenting with its hankering after sensual pleasure of life and with its inordinate ambition and supreme lust for power and pelf. He was profoundly influenced by Machiavelli, the famous Italian social and political writer, who discarded all conventional moral principles to achieve the end by any means, fair or foul.

**Reflection of Marlowe in his tragic Heroes** A close and critical study of works of Marlowe convinces us that all his tragic heroes clearly reveal the chief characteristics and temperament of the great dramatist. All his tragic heroes are absolutely dominated by some uncontrollable passion. To achieve their end, they throw overboard all established moral scruples or religious sanctions and never avoid using horrible means, for example, his cruel and tyrant Tamburlaine with his craze for limitless power defies all authorities on earth and in the heaven. His stone-heated Barabas is dominated by a senseless craze for gold and doesn't shirk from committing the worst type of crimes to achieve his end, thus he seems to be an embodiment of Machiavellism. To gain super human powers through knowledge, his Doctor Faustus sells his soul to the Devil in pursuit of his passion. His heroes have a scant regard for religion as Faustus says, “I count religion but a childish toy” another significant point is that all tragic heroes of Marlowe are poets and convey their feelings and emotions to the audience in the superb poetic language, but of all Faustus is a poet par excellence just like Marlowe himself.

**Marlowe and Faustus-A Striking Parallelism:** Of all the tragic heroes of Marlowe, Faustus bears the most striking reflection of Marlowe’s own self. We know that Marlowe was the second child of a Canterbury shoe-maker and in the very beginning of the play, we are told of Faustus’ parentage as: Now is he born, his parents base of stock. Harold Osborne has pointed out that Marlowe like Faustus came of parents ‘base of stock’ and was destined for the church but turned elsewhere. We should not press the analogies too far, but we cannot ignore them as the parallelism is too obvious.

**Personal Tragedy: Spiritual Suffering:** Doctor Faustus very powerfully expresses Marlowe’s innermost thoughts and authentic experiences. So it can be regarded the spiritual history of Marlowe himself. Marlowe’s inordinate ambition led him to revolt against religion and society, to defy the laws of man and laws of God and such defiance is bound to bring up acute mental conflict resulting in deep despair and certain defeat. So, both Marlowe and Faustus experience terrible mental pangs and agonies. Osborne has rightly observed:

The descriptions of Faustus’ repentance, despair and mental anguish are among the most vivid and poignant parts of the play. It is, of course, possible to suppose that Marlowe had passed through a stage of youthful skepticism in religion and that with a sounder and deeper faith he had come to the knowledge of repentance.
Conclusion Doctor Faustus’ tragic death also has resemblance. After living twenty four years in sensual activities, Faustus had to surrender his soul to the Devil. Marlowe’s Bohemian and boisterous life, too came to a tragic sudden end in tavern brawl at the hands of a shady character of the London Underworld at the age of twenty nine. Marlowe lost himself into his works.

Doctor Faustus is strewn with unmistakably autobiographical suggestions. Reading the play we cannot refrain from concluding that it is the spontaneous expression of its writer’s innermost thoughts and authentic experiences.

**Doctor Faustus – a Psychological tragedy**

**Spiritual Combat:** Tragedy is regarded as the highest aspect of the dramatic art as in it our emotions are more profoundly stirred than in comedy thereby rendering it more universal in its appeal. And conflict is the essence of or soul of tragedy. All previous dramas including Tamburlaine had dealt with single-minded individuals. If a struggle in the heart of the hero was introduced, it was like that of Morality plays.

It was external as in the Jew of Malta because it was between the hero and his adversaries. Doctor Faustus attempted something different. It is a drama of spiritual combat within the soul of man. This struggle is certainly somewhat primitive in its expression but it is a foretaste of those inner characteristics towards which a drama in its development inevitably trends. Faustus in this respect is unquestionably the greatest tragic figure in sixteenth century outside the work of Shakespeare. It is also a modern tragedy because Marlowe broke away from the old Aristotelian concept of tragic hero as being a royal figure of some very lofty stature. He introduced Faustus who is not a prince or a king but a common learned man whose parents are base of stock.

**Tragic Flaw – cause of his tragedy** According to Aristotle, the tragic hero must have some inherent weakness – a tragic flaw which he referred to as Hamartia. He should be neither totally vicious nor good. As per Doctor Faustus, he is puffed with pride and his wisdom. He has studied all branches of knowledge and wants to get infinite knowledge. The boundless mastery of all sciences. So, he acquires necromancy in order to gain the ultimate. He says,

> A sound magician is a mighty god:  
> Here, Faustus, tire thy brains to gain a deity.

Despite all his scholarly personality and his learning, we witness how he surrenders his soul to the Devil for a span of twenty four years and instead of gaining the deity and mastering and commandeering all the elements, he stands doomed and cursed.

**Internal Tragic Conflict:** Marlowe’s contribution to the English or Elizabethan drama was great and many fold. One of his contributions was the introduction of internal tragic conflict in the mind of the tragic hero. Nicoll has rightly observed: “All previous dramas including Tamburlaine had dealt with single-minded individuals. If a struggle in the heart of the hero was introduced, it was like that of Morality plays. In Doctor Faustus, Marlowe attempted something new – the delineation of struggle in the mind of the hero. This struggle is certainly somewhat primitive in its expression but it is a foretaste of those inner characteristics towards which a drama in its development inevitably trends. Faustus in this respect is unquestionably the greatest tragic figure in sixteenth century outside the work of Shakespeare.”
So in Doctor Faustus, we find the conflict or the psychological struggle raging in the heart and soul of the hero. In fact, there’s hardly any external action. The delineation of a psychological struggle or spiritual conflict in the mind of the hero is the chief thing. Then why is this struggle and to what is it due? Generally, the inner conflict takes places when man is faced with two alternatives, one of which he must have to choose, but he finds himself pulled in opposite directions. Now Faustus is inspired by the spirit of the Renaissance, by dreams of gaining limitless knowledge and super-human powers. These he can attain only by resorting to necromancy, discarding religious dogmas and abjuring the Trinity and denouncing the established religious norms. Doctor Faustus may reject all these intellectually, but he is very much emotionally attached to them. He may be acting like an atheist, but his flesh and blood is saturated with Christianity. Here the conflict starts between will and conscience externalized by the Good and Bad Angel. We can follow this conflict in the play at three stages: The First Stage: we see how pride and ambition lead Faustus into the vicious bargain with the Devil. He convinces himself that: A sound magician is a mighty god. He also says with perfect faith in Mephistopheles, “Had I as many souls as there are stars, I would give them all for Mephistopheles, By him I will great emperor of the world” Nicholas Brooke says: Faustus wants to satisfy the demands of his nature as God has made him. He wants to be the Deity. For this, he must deny Christianity as did Lucifer, but Faustus’ attachment to religion is too deep to be rooted out. Throughout the play we find Faustus pricked by his conscience, we find him in tussle between will and conscience in the form of Good and Bad Angel. The Second Stage: At this stage, we see Faustus struggling hard to break away from the impeding doom and he turns to repentance.

When I behold the heavens, then I repent
And curse thee, wicked Mephistophilis,
Because thou hast depriv’d me of those joys

The two angles appear again. One advises him to return to repentance and the other tells him that he is a spirit and God will not help him now and that he will tear his body to pieces if he repents. He has to submit to the will of Lucifer and refresh his bond with him. The show of Seven Deadly Sins and the best of all the apparition of Helen temporarily soothe his damned soul. The Third and Final Scene: In the closing scene, we find the climax culminating into a horrible catastrophe. Faustus knows that he is eternally doomed; but his poignant soliloquy and appeal for redemption is pathetic and pitiable. His last minute frantic appeal, to the ever moving spheres of heaven to stand still or to the sun to rise again to make perpetual day, stirs the readers’ soul and refresh in him the spirit of religious faith. Later, his soul is taken away by the devils leaving a short visual scene repeating itself in the reader’s mind. The show of Seven Deadly Sins is presented to please Doctor Faustus and remove his internal conflict between the good and the bad. So the seven sins – Pride, Covetousness, Wrath, Envy, Gluttony, Sloth and Lechery. Some critics are of the view that the show is meant for comic relief for the audience. But this is hardly to accept. In fact the show is not meant for a comic relief, but is really meant for bringing back Faustus to the path to hell when he was much irritated by Mephistopheles for not telling him the right answers. In fact, the sins already abide in Doctor Faustus’ soul; the show merely symbolizes or externalizes them.

**Disintegration:** Doctor Faustus is thus the tragedy of a man who in striving boundlessly, misdirects great gifts of mind and spirit and hence progressively loses his soul by disintegration. Progressive disintegration in Faustus brings low comedy into the
tragedy. In the last act, Faustus repents, then despairs and is about to commit suicide. But his distressed soul is comforted by the Old Man. The feeling cannot exist, however, without the support of the Old Man’s presence; as soon as he goes Faustus exclaims: I do repent; and yet I do despair. Mephistopheles forces him to sign another bond to strengthen the contract.

**Psychological tragedy:** Thus we find that in Doctor Faustus, Marlowe reveals for the first time in English drama the full possibilities of psychological tragedy, the anguish of a mind at war with itself. The play depicts the tragedy of the human soul, and in the closing scene it achieves end with a strength and intensity as yet unknown in English drama. We conclude with the words of Una Ellis Fermor: In Marlowe’s great tragic fragment the conflict is not between man and man for the domination of one character over another or in the interaction of a group of characters. Thus and in such terms is staged the greatest conflict that drama has ever undertaken to the present.

**The Last Scene: Helen of Troy and the Old man in "Doctor Faustus"**

**Introduction:** - Faustus’s great final soliloquy consummates the play. The last scene of the play is the most poignant. The last scene, be it in the form of Helen’s presence or the final beseeching of Doctor Faustus, makes Marlowe reach the flights imagination. We may divide last scene of the play into three parts: First the Helen Episode, Second the Old Man and the Last soliloquy of Doctor Faustus. The three parts of the play make up the whole last scene to abide in our thoughts.

**The Helen Episode:** - When ‘music sounds’ and Helen passes across the stage, her sanctity is mirrored in the awed calm of the scholars. Her “heavenly beauty passeth all compare” She is the pride of the nature’s work. Here outburst the eternal words of praise for Helen from Doctor Faustus who, in the most ravishing way, loses himself in the arms of Helen to avoid his imminent doom.

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Was this the face that launch’d a thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.
Her lips suck forth my soul: see where it flies!
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again,
Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips,
And all is dross that is not Helena.
I will be Paris, and for love of thee.
Instead of Troy, shall Wittenberg be sack’d:
And I will combat with weak Menelaus,
And wear thy colors on my plumed crest;
Yes, I will wound Achilles in the heel,
And then return to Helen for a kiss.
O, thou art fairer than the evening air,
Clad in the beauty of a thousands starts;
Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter
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Faustus’s poetry for Helen shows his ultimate desperate condition and his futile effort to evade the eternal doom.
The Old man: - Doctor Faustus is ‘But a man condemned to die.’ Soon after the appearance of Helen, the old man approaches Doctor Faustus to reconcile him. The Old Man’s compassionate advice to Faustus adds a new dimension to our senses of the human predicament.

Yet, yet, thou hast an amiable soul if sin by custom grows not into nature.

The Old Man is, rather the last man trying to pull Faustus from the snare of death. But Faustus, as he is eternally doomed, must reach his self-imposed torments of hell.

The Last hour: - As Faustus’s fascination for Helen, ‘The only paragon of excellence’ reveals the Renaissance characteristics of love and adoration of classical art and beauty, Helen epitomizes the charms of classical art, learning and beauty. And her shade of apparition may also be the symbol of sensual pleasures of life which is but transient, and leads to despair and damnation. If it is so, the old man represents Christian faith with its obedience to the laws of God and its needs for prayer and penitence that can assure eternal joys and bliss. Doctor Faustus knows that his end is approaching. The proud and puffed scholar of Wittenberg, who once dreamed of becoming a Jove on the earth, ironically craves to be transformed into some mean creature so as to escape his doom. And when the last hour strikes, we find the anguished cry of a terror-stricken man who is facing his damnation.

O, it strikes: No body turn to air,
Or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell,
O, soul, be changed into little water drops.
And fall into the ocean, never be found!

Critics and scholars of one opinion that the last scene of the play is highly consummate and grim.

Doctor Faustus: Hero, Villain, or Hybrid?

Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus is a complex character. Whether or not to feel pity for the misguided scholar is a debatable issue, but he does seem to possess some “evil” qualities. Some consider him a tragic hero, while others would argue he better fulfills the role of a villain. But really, who is Doctor Faustus? Taking into consideration the defining characteristics of both the tragic hero and the villain while comparing them to the doctor leads one to the conclusion that Faustus does not completely fit into either category, but rather belongs to the more specific genre of the Elizabethan villain-hero, which encompasses both his hero and villain sides.

The concept of the “tragic hero” was defined by Aristotle, and applies to many protagonists in a variety of plays. According to Aristotle’s definition, in order to be classified as a tragic hero, the character must fulfill the following criteria: be born into a noble standing, possess a tragic flaw which causes his downfall, experience an unfortunate event as a result of this flaw, eventually acquire an increased sense of self-awareness, and be pitied by the audience. It is important to note that Aristotle also argued that a man cannot be considered a tragic hero without realizing the cause of his downfall (Perrine). Doctor Faustus only fulfills some of these requirements, and falls short of the most important and necessary characteristics needed in order to be classified as a tragic hero. Most importantly, Faustus seems to have too many amoral tendencies in order to be considered a hero of any sort. It seems that Marlowe kept the
distinction between Faustus as a hero and Faustus as a villain so ambiguous as a
reflection on the ambiguity of morality itself. Marlowe would argue that many organized
religions make morality into a very black and white concept; those that pray and attend
church services are good, while those who renounce God and do not repent are bad. In
actuality, even someone like Faustus, who sold his own soul to the devil, does not seem
one hundred percent evil, nor fully good.

Faustus, on one hand, does possess what can be considered a tragic flaw: ambition. In
Act I of Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, Faustus is contemplating his life and suggests to
himself,

“Be a physician, Faustus. Heap up gold,
And be eternizd for some wondrous cure”

. Here, the audience begins to see that Doctor Faustus has many goals and dreams in his
life, and he has already achieved much success as a doctor and a scholar. It seems that
Marlowe would not view ambition as a negative trait under usual circumstances. The
reason why it became a problem for Faustus was because it was coupled with pride, and
a frustration with worldly pursuits. Faustus became bored with mortal matters and felt
he could master the realm of dark magic, which ultimately led to his deal with the devil
and his own downfall. Ambition alone is not what doomed Faustus. Without his pride and
overwhelming desire to go beyond the limits of what man should know, he could have
been safe from an eternity in hell.

It could be argued that Faustus both experiences a reversal in fortune and that he is, as
a character, pitiable. The ultimate instance in the play in which Faustus’ luck takes a turn
for the worst is when he first summons Mephistopheles, and subsequently signs the
contract with the devil, selling his soul to Lucifer. However, the actual reversal of fortune
occurs when Faustus dies and is taken to hell by Lucifer’s demons, because when he first
sells his soul, Faustus has no problem with what he is done and is not yet affected
negatively by his choice, but when he is taken to hell he is extremely upset and
panicked. As far as Faustus’ pitiable nature is concerned, Marlowe left this rather
ambiguous. Again, this is most likely a commentary on how morality, like Faustus, can
be extremely ambiguous, and the lines between good and evil are often blurred or
unclear. Additionally, the “noble birth” of Faustus is debatable. His social and economic
standing is comfortable, probably above average and definitely not impoverished, but he
is not of standard nobility. He has no title, and his highest degree of ranking is that he is
a scholarly doctor. Most importantly, Faustus never takes full responsibility for his
damnation, which Aristotle would argue is the most important quality of the tragic hero.

Doctor Faustus as a villain is a difficult argument to make. For starters, there are no set
guidelines for what qualifies a character as a true “villain,” like there are qualifications
for the tragic hero. Villain is such a broad and vague term that it makes more sense to
discuss Doctor Faustus as a subtype of a villain: the Elizabethan villain-hero. Clara F.
McIntyre discusses the qualities of this villain-hero in her article for the PMLA journal.
Quoting Clarence Boyer, McIntyre notes that a villain is most commonly identified as “a
man who, for a selfish end, willfully and deliberately violates standards of morality
sanctioned by the audience or ordinary reader” (McIntyre 874). This description fits
Doctor Faustus well, but Boyer goes on to comment that if the villain is cast as the main
character of the play, than he fulfills the role of the villain as a hero. Since Faustus is
quite obviously the main character of Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, it is clear that he would
fit into this villain-hero category. Furthermore, he clearly “violates standards of morality”
by selling his soul to the devil, an act which modern audiences still find immoral and reprehensible, feelings which were even stronger for the more religiously-influenced audiences of the Elizabethan time period. After deciding he wants to dabble in black magic, Faustus even proclaims “Divinity, adieu!” clearly turning away from God, the epitome of morality (I.i.78).

McIntyre also explains that the villain-hero is different from the standard villain in that he does not act out of “personal malignity,” but rather from “an unwavering determination to further [his] own interests” (McIntyre 878). This describes Faustus extremely accurately, especially when one examines his motives for working with black magic in the first place. Faustus did not want to call upon devils in order to seek revenge, rule the world, or for assistance in any other selfish or evil plan. Ultimately, he was bored with all he had accomplished so far and wanted to learn something new, something which he originally intended to use to help other people.

When he was first contemplating what he would do with the kind of power dark magic would bestow upon him, Faustus fantasizes about what he would have his demons do:

“I'll have them fly to India for gold,
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
And search all corners of the new-found world
For pleasant fruits and princely delicates.”

Nothing about “princely delicates” seems malignant or malicious in the slightest, proving the Faustus was seeking self-satisfaction in an albeit material, but harmless way. Faustus continues his musings, saying:

“I'll have them fill the public schools with silk,
Wherewith the students shall be bravely clad
I'll levy soldiers with the coin they bring,
And chase the Prince of Parma from out land”

Again Faustus is proving that not only were his original intentions harmless and self-indulgent (an example of “furthering his own interests”), but he also had thoughts of using this power to help other people, such as students.

One of the most interesting points McIntyre makes is that some villain-heroes are capable of genuine remorse, which often is not typical of a regular villain. McIntyre does point out that this remorse is most often on the villain-hero’s deathbed, and “seems to proceed less from genuine repentance than from a sense that the game is up” (McIntyre 877). Of all the characteristics of the villain-hero previously discussed, Faustus shows the strongest evidence of this one. In the final hour of his life, Faustus realizes his fate and desperately calls out to the forces of nature and the heavens, begging for more time on earth. Faustus calls out to God, Lucifer, and everyone in between, trying to grapple with the consequences of his actions and see if there is anyone he can appeal to for salvation. He cries out:

You stars that reigned at my nativity,
Whose influence hath allotted death and hell,
Now draw up Faustus like a foggy mist
Into the entrails of yon laboring cloud,
That when you vomit forth into the air,
My limbs may issue from your smoky mouths,
So that my soul may but ascend to heaven.
Faustus expresses his desire for more time to live, for repentance, and yet he never actually repents. Perhaps he does this because he is not physically capable of repenting because of the contract he made with the devil, but more likely it is because his repentance and remorse would not be genuine. He is not actually sorry for what he has done because he still has not taken responsibility for his actions. Ultimately, he just wants to avoid suffering in hell, and only tries to call out to God during the last minutes of his life.

Although many would argue that Faustus fits the mold of the typical tragic hero, close examination of the qualities necessary for this role makes it obvious that Faustus cannot be considered a hero in any sense of the word. He never takes responsibility for his actions, he barely evokes any sense of pity out of the audience, and he gains limited self-awareness and knowledge from his experience. However, he is not a clear-cut villain either. There are no real set guidelines for what makes a character a villain, but in a general sense, Faustus is not fully evil. A more accurate term for Faustus would be a villain-hero, a character typical during the Elizabethan time period. By name alone, a villain-hero sums up Faustus’ conflicting personality traits that make the audience see him as both a good man, and also an immoral fool. Neither fully bad nor fully good, Faustus straddles the fence between hero and villain, ultimately combining characteristics of the two to become the Elizabethan villain-hero.

Doctor Faustus : Tragedy of an aspiring intellect doomed to failure

Introduction: - Doctor Faustus, a unique creation of Christopher Marlowe, conveys a deep conception of tragedy. In awe inspiring and terror, the play fulfils one of the true functions of tragedy. It thrills us because there is something of the ‘desire of the moth for the star’ of Faustus’s desire to conquer human limitation, in all of us, and we are fascinated by the audacity with which he persists in his desperate course.

Extraordinary Courage and Indomitable Will: - Doctor Faustus deals with the heroic struggle of a ‘great souled’ man doomed to inevitable defeat. The entire interest in a Marlovian tragedy centres round the personality of the hero, and the pleasure comes from watching the greatness and fall of a superhuman personality. And ordinary German scholar, in the beginning, Faustus’s intellectual endowment raises him to the status of a great hero. He has the genuine passion for knowledge infinite. With his inordinate ambition he soars beyond the petty possibilities of humanity, leagues himself with superhuman powers and rides through space in a fiery chariot exploring the secrets of the universe.

Marlowe’s Faustus aspires to be more than man and therefore repudiates his humanity and rebels against the ultimate reality. Being a true Renaissance hero, he surpasses his mortal bounds to be as powerful on earth as Jove in sky. He finds some hope only in Necromancy. He, therefore, turns to Magic and is elated by its prospects of profit, delight, power, honour, for:

All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command...........
A sound magician is a mighty God........
Endowed with extraordinary courage and will to pursue his goal relentlessly and recklessly, without caring for good and evil, Faustus is really a tragic hero. He strives to satisfy his overriding desires, rejecting the will of God or servitude, and asserting his will both in opposition to God as well as the Devil.

**Tussle between orthodoxy and quest for intellectual freedom:** - Marlowe’s Faustus, the tragic hero, is afire with an indomitable passion. He discards all moral codes and ethical principles and plunges headlong to achieve his end. But in rejecting Christian values, there arises in his mind a deep conflict between the pull of tradition, the Will of God, and the desire to learn more and more to taste the fruits of the forbidden tree. The heart of Faustus turns out to be the battlefield where the forces of good and evil are trying to overwhelm each other. Faustus makes his own choice to take to the black art of magic deliberately and then sells his soul to the Devil of his free will. Faustus is a modern man whose conscious self is opposed by the subconscious self which is deeply attached to the conventional doctrines and dogmas of Christian theology.

Throughout the play, Faustus staggers between doubt and faith symbolised by the warnings of the God Angel and the seductions of Bad Angel, as he moves towards his inevitable doom. He has been told by Mephistophilis the meaning of Hell, but in his blind arrogance, he refuses to really grasp the implications of his action. Indeed, before the end of the play Faustus undergoes the mental torture born out of the opposing pulls of his rational and emotional selves. To Mephistophilis, he can arrogantly assert:

**Thinkest thou that Faustus is so fond to imagine**
**That after this life, there is any pain?**
**Tush! these are trifles and mere old wives’ tales.**

But Faustus cannot avoid the mental tortures that must follow every act of sin or crime. A guilty conscience pricks him almost from the beginning to the end of this tragic drama. Doctor Faustus is a tragedy connected with man's intellectual faculties and his rejection of voluntary subjection of them to an orthodox order of Christianity.

**Tragedy: the outcome of the hero’s inherent weakness and presumption:** - Marlowe’s Faustus prides himself in his great learning and scholarship. He is dominated by ambition to acquire knowledge infinite and through it to gain superhuman power and satisfy his sensuous and mundane pleasures of life. His weakness is not a mechanical outcome of his pact with the Devil. The seeds of decay are in his character from the first, half hidden in the Marlovian glamour cast about him, though he has intense desire to know the truth and he comes to make his rash and fatal bargain. Furthermore, in the true Aristotelian sense, he is blind to the actual implications of his action. This is the tragedy. His sensual pleasures override all other passions and blind him to the dreadful truth. The vision of Helen conceals the vision of Absolute Truth from the eyes of Faustus. Faustus is conscious of the weakness, but he has no control over his overriding desires. ‘The vision of Helen’ allures him and her unrealisable beauty penetrates his spirits to the depths:

**Was this the face that launch’d a thousand ships**
**And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?**
**Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.**

Faustus, we realize, is doomed, far from being able to reach immortality.
Tragic irony: The essence of all great tragedy, and Doctor Faustus embodies this irony poignantly: - Possessed with supernatural powers to perform great things, Faustus fails due to his uncontrollable human weakness. He sets out to gain a deity, but ends with a wish to be turned into something inanimate. He comes to understand his predicament towards the end and cries: “But Faustus’s offence can never be pardoned, the serpent that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus.” In the last but one hour of his life, Faustus stands on the brink of everlasting ruin and damnation, waiting for the fatal moment. He realizes that the pact with the Devil has got him nothing. He had sought to control the stars once but they:

Move still, time runs, the clock will strike.
The devil will come and Faustus must be damned……..

The play, in its final twist, turns supremely tragic as Faustus collapses into simultaneous submission to both his bosses, Lucifer and Christ. Doctor Faustus depicts the human soul as a tragic battlefield where the hero meets with tragic failure.

Cathartic effect: the emotions of pity and fear:- In the hands of Marlowe, Faustus acquires a spiritual greatness which, in the finest moments of the play, wins him our sympathy, and at his death arouses that pity and terror which great tragedy demands. Marlowe has felt and conveyed the sense of tragedy in Faustus’s aspirations and downfall. Faustus is seen as a symbol of Marlowe’s times when wonders of the mind and of the world were being discovered and people’s hopes of the attainable were full of ardour.

Faustus’s summoning of Mephistophilis, his signing of the contract, his vision of Helen, and his final death and damnation are the outstanding scenes of the play, in which “the medley of desire and fear, the poignancy of regret, the ecstasy and the terror are depicted with sureness and strength which give them a place among the greatest emotional situations in Elizabethan tragedy.” Faustus’s final monologue is unsurpassed in English drama, in the expression of sheer agony and horror. As he cries with ringing despair:

O I’ll leap up to my God, who pulls me down?
See, see, where Christ’s blood streams in the firmament,
One drop would save my soul, half a drop, ah, my Christ…..

The tragic emotions of pity and fear at the plight of such a great man tugs at our heart. The tragedy achieves its climatic cathartic effect in Faustus’s last shriek, “Mephistophilis.”

Conclusion: - Doctor Faustus is a tragedy of an aspiring intellect which seeks to pierce through to the centre of all knowledge. Such ambition is doomed to failure because of its very nature, for man is a limited being. The courage of the challenge, however, is awesome.

Atheism in Doctor Faustus

Christopher Marlowe’s theological disposition is one that has been debated and particularly comes into focus in the play Doctor Faustus, where the central theme is the eternal salvation or damnation of Faustus. While it was the common thematic focus of theatre at the time, one might question why a man who was believed to be atheist would
compose a tragedy with heavy religious themes. The reason for this is most likely to critique the Christian belief systems at the time.

The initial instance in which divinity is addressed in the play is in the first scene where Faustus analyzes popular metaphysics. In his rejection of Christianity, he cites that belief in Christianity only leads to death, the result of sin. The irony of this is that he neglected to read the rest of the passage which states that God provides eternal life. Marlowe uses this moment as a hyperbole to draw attention to the Calvinistic belief of predestination. When Faustus states “Che Sera Sera,” what will be shall be, he is essentially saying that there’s no point in studying religion when the outcome would be determined regardless of your actions. This causes Faustus to believe that religion will cause him to die an eternal death, the logical opposite to eternal life.

The topic of the “eternal death” is also one discussed in the play through the character of Mephistopheles. Mephistopheles states in the fifth scene that he is in hell wherever he is because Hell is not a place, but rejection from the gates of Heaven. Faustus, on the other hand conceives Hell as a location. This is shown through his disbelief of Mephistopheles’ statement about hell. This is also portrayed when he swears by Hell’s waterways of Styx, Archeron, and Phlegethon, as described by The Divine Comedy. Faustus’ represents the proverbial Everyman; he I inherently flawed. This representation applies to man’s view of Hell and how it is unsound. Mephistopheles, on the other hand is a heavenly being whose understanding of the afterlife is empirical. Through this scene, Marlowe conjectures that religion is fallible, because the embodiment of Hell, one of its main components, is conceived by man, not created by God. This would mean that Christianity could not be taken seriously.

The most easily recognizable scene that enforces Marlowe’s opinions regarding religion is when Faustus plays childish pranks on the pope. Aside from being an entertaining aspect for the largely protestant audience of British theatre, it provides a charge on both Catholicism and the protestant split. Marlowe utilizes the opulence of the Pope’s lifestyle to satirize the fact that Catholics venerate the pope, who is no more divine in his ambitions than the next man. Faustus’ pranks also serve as a comparison to the protestant church challenging the Catholic Church. The childish antics of Faustus seem to say something about Marlowe’s opinions about the schism in the church.

In the end of the play, an old man urges Faustus to repent. While Faustus could still repent according to most Christian beliefs, his refusal to do so results in his eternal damnation. At this point, it appears that Faustus has the ability to repent when the old man attempts to convince him to. The reality of the matter, however, is embodied in Mephistopheles’ threat to Faustus. He states that he will “arrest” Faustus’ soul if he does not come with him. This means that, while it appears he has had a chance for salvation, his consorting with the devil has made repentance an impossibility.

Throughout the play, Faustus does little wrong in terms of his actions. These are petty pranks with no real negative implications. Despite this, he ends up separated from God. Marlowe uses this point as a satirical commentary of the beliefs of the protestant church. He shows how the Protestants belief that the eternal fate of an individual’s soul is not dependant on the dealings that person has done in life, but solely on whether or not the person accepts that Christianity is an absolute truth.
Christopher Marlowe uses his tragedy, Doctor Faustus to contest and satirize Christianity. His commentary addresses many different denominations. The underlying remarks further reinforce the belief that Marlowe was an atheist. Multiple instances throughout the play support his views on the church and explain his motives in writing Doctor Faustus.
Othello
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE; 1564-1616

Personal History

Many books have assembled facts, reasonable suppositions, traditions, and speculations concerning the life and career of William Shakespeare. Taken as a whole, these materials give a rather comprehensive picture of England's foremost dramatic poet. Tradition and sober supposition are not necessarily false because they lack proven bases for their existence. It is important, however, that persons interested in Shakespeare should distinguish between facts and beliefs about his life.

From one point of view, modern scholars are fortunate to know as much as they do about a man of middle-class origin who left a small country town and embarked on a professional career in sixteenth-century London. From another point of view, they know surprisingly little about the writer who has continued to influence the English language and its drama and poetry for more than three hundred years. Sparse and scattered as these facts of his life are, they are sufficient to prove that a man from Stratford by the name of William Shakespeare wrote the major portion of the thirty-seven plays that scholars ascribe to him. The concise review that follows will concern itself with some of these records.

No one knows the exact date of William Shakespeare's birth. His baptism occurred on Wednesday, April 26, 1564. His father was John Shakespeare, tanner, glover, dealer in grain, and town official of Stratford; his mother, Mary, was the daughter of Robert Arden, a prosperous gentleman-farmer. The Shakespeares lived on Henley Street.

Under a bond dated November 28, 1582, William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway entered into a marriage contract. The baptism of their eldest child, Susanna, took place in Stratford in May, 1583. One year and nine months later their twins, Hamnet and Judith, were christened in the same church. The parents named them for the poet's friends, Hamnet and Judith Sadler.

Early in 1596, William Shakespeare, in his father's name, applied to the College of Heralds for a coat of arms. Although positive proof is lacking, there is reason to believe that the Heralds granted this request, for in 1599 Shakespeare again made application for the right to quarter his coat of arms with that of his mother. Entitled to her father's coat of arms, Mary had lost this privilege when she married John Shakespeare before he held the official status of gentleman.

In May of 1597, Shakespeare purchased New Place, the outstanding residential property in Stratford at that time. Since John Shakespeare had suffered financial reverses prior to this date, William must have achieved success for himself.

Court records show that in 1601-1602, William Shakespeare began rooming in the household of Christopher Mountjoy in London. Subsequent disputes over the wedding settlement and agreement between Mountjoy and his son-in-law, Stephen Belott, led to a series of legal actions, and in 1612 the court scribe recorded Shakespeare's deposition of testimony relating to the case. In July, 1605, William Shakespeare paid four hundred and forty pounds for the lease of a large portion of the tithes on certain real estate in and near Stratford. This was an arrangement whereby Shakespeare purchased half the annual tithes, or taxes, on certain agricultural products from parcels of land in and near Stratford. In addition to receiving approximately 10 percent income on his investment, he almost doubled his capital. This was possibly the most important and successful investment of his lifetime, and it paid a steady income for many years.

Shakespeare is next mentioned when John Combe, a resident of Stratford, died on July 12, 1614. To his friend, Combe bequeathed the sum of five pounds. These records and similar ones are important, not because of their economic significance but because they
prove the existence of William Shakespeare in Stratford and in London during this period.

On March 25, 1616, William Shakespeare revised his last will and testament. He died on April 23 of the same year. His body lies within the chancel and before the altar of the Stratford church. A rather wry inscription is carved upon his tombstone:

Good Friend, for Jesus' sake, forbear  
To dig the dust enclosed here;  
Blest be the man that spares these bones  
And curst be he who moves my bones.

The last direct descendant of William Shakespeare was his granddaughter, Elizabeth Hall, who died in 1670.

These are the most outstanding facts about Shakespeare the man, as apart from those about the dramatist and poet. Such pieces of information, scattered from 1564 through 1616, declare the existence of such a person, not as a writer or actor, but as a private citizen. It is illogical to think that anyone would or could have fabricated these details for the purpose of deceiving later generations.

Shakespeare's Work

In similar fashion, the evidence establishing William Shakespeare as the foremost playwright of his day is positive and persuasive. Robert Greene's Groatsworth of Wit, in which he attacked Shakespeare, a mere actor, for presuming to write plays in competition with Greene and his fellow playwrights, was entered in the Stationers' Register on September 20, 1592. In 1594, Shakespeare acted before Queen Elizabeth, and in 1594-1595, his name appeared as one of the shareholders of the Lord Chamberlain's Company. Francis Meres in his Palladis Tamia (1598) called Shakespeare "mellifluous and hony-tongued" and compared his comedies and tragedies with those of Plautus and Seneca in excellence.

Shakespeare's continued association with Burbage's company is equally definite. His name appears as one of the owners of the Globe (a theater) in 1599. On May 19, 1603, he and his fellow actors received a patent from James I designating them as the King's Men and making them Grooms of the Chamber. Late in 1608 or early in 1609, Shakespeare and his colleagues purchased the Blackfriars Theatre and began using it as their winter location when weather made production at the Globe inconvenient.

Other specific allusions to Shakespeare and to his acting and his writing occur in numerous places. Put together, they form irrefutable testimony that William Shakespeare of Stratford and London was the leader among Elizabethan playwrights.

One of the most impressive of all proofs of Shakespeare's authorship of his plays is the First Folio of 1623, with the dedicatory verse that appeared in it. John Heminge and Henry Condell, members of Shakespeare's own company, stated that they collected and issued the plays as a memorial to their fellow actor. Many contemporary poets contributed eulogies to Shakespeare; one of the best known of these poems is by Ben Jonson, a fellow actor and, later, a friendly rival. Jonson also criticized Shakespeare's dramatic work in Timber: or, Discoveries (1641).

Certainly there are many things about Shakespeare's genius and career that the most diligent scholars do not know and cannot explain, but the facts that do exist are sufficient to establish Shakespeare's identity as a man and his authorship of the thirty-seven plays that reputable critics acknowledge to be his.
**Nature and Definition:** Tragedy is a very difficult concept to define. Despite what modern critics have labored on the subject, Aristotle’s definition of tragedy in his Poetics, still remains the best and comprehensive with some minor difference in the 21st century. Tragedy is a representation of an action which is serious, complete in itself, and of a certain magnitude; it is expressed in speech made beautiful in different ways in different parts of the play; it is acted, not narrated and by exciting pity and fear gives a healthy relief to such emotions.

However, A.C. Bradley most perceptively comments the Shakespearean Tragedy: A tale of suffering and calamity conducing to death. Although this remark captures what is common to Shakespearean Tragedies. It must be noted that ever Shakespearean Tragedy in unique in its way. There are very few observations which one may make about one of them which are applicable to others.

**The Tragic Hero:** Shakespeare’s tragedies are built of a single man who towers above the other characters. So Shakespeare’s major tragedies such as Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth are all tragedies of character. The central character, for the most part, may be regarded as a double entity. Shakespeare’s tragic heroes have many qualities in common. One of the qualities are their intense concern for someone, some thing or some aspect of life. In the case of Othello, we find the character to be deeply concerned about Desdemona. It is doubtful whether Shakespeare knew Poetics; all his heroes except the possible exception of Macbeth are good. His tragic heroes are of an extremely sensitive and poetic nature. Hamlet being the most intellectual and Othello being the most poetic and romantic of them. They also belong to the higher order of society. The lowest in rank is Othello who is at least general whose progeny may be traced to kings. Still he is no common man. In every one of Shakespeare’s tragedies, the hero is either faced with making a moral choice of grave consequences or initiating some action which has far-reaching consequences.

**The Tragic Flaw:** Shakespeare’s tragedy is above all a tragedy of character, though environment, coincidences and chance play their parts. However, it is some flaw in the tragic hero which causes his tragedy. The example being Othello whose tragic flaw is jealousy. The tragic flaw is not always a shortcoming in itself. It is only in the particular situation in which the hero is placed that the particular quality of the hero becomes damaging to him. For example, Hamlet’s habit of carefully weighing the pros and cons of everything before taking action would have proved an asset to Othello, while precipitateness of action would have cut-short Hamlet’s agonies.

**The Role of Chance and Fate:** Chance and fate, the latter sometimes in the form of supernatural, also play their part in Shakespearean tragedies. However, they are never the starting point of tragedies, but are led into when the story has taken a definite course. The incident of handkerchief in Othello is an example of pure chance which is exploited by the villain, but this chance crops up when the seeds of jealousy in Othello’s mind have become strong trees.

**Theme and Action:** Shakespearean tragedies have well-defined themes which are also capable of being expressed in moral terms. For example, the theme of King Lear is regeneration while that of Othello is one of making a choice. His stories involve themes such as murder, madness, duels etc. Shakespeare doesn’t conform to the classical view of tragedy which insisted on the purity of genres and the unities of time and space. For Shakespeare, the prime unity is the tragic effect created by a strong sense of inevitability.

**Characterization:** Shakespearean tragic hero is the only and the one in the play; however, there is at least one character near him which is also highlighted. In his tragedies, male characters have a dominant role and female characters, although unforgettable, usually play little action. Shakespeare also uses double plots and comic scenes for comic relief.
Tragic Effect: Even without knowing the Poetics, Shakespeare is able to arouse strong pity and fear in the minds of his readers and theatre viewers. In Shakespearean tragedies, only these emotions are not aroused; but according to A.C. Bradley, the characteristic emotion aroused by Shakespeare's tragedies is a profound sense of waste. This is derived from the idea of human worth and dignity which the plays express and the missed opportunities or wrong choices which lead to man's defeat without affecting his essential dignity. Shakespearean tragedies embody a sense of profound suffering and sadness and some of them end in a number of deaths which enhance Shakespeare's intended tragic effect. For example, Hamlet and King Lear end in so many deaths that the stage is littered with dead bodies in the last scene.

Passion versus Reason: The predominantly tragic conflict in the minds of Shakespearean heroes is between passion and conflict. The opposition between reason and passion, first isolated – through Othello and Iago - in a dramatic conflict of personalities and then projected in Macbeth and Lear, beyond the original hero to the state and universe which surround him in an eternal fight between good and evil.

Shakespeare’s Personal Views: Many books have been written on subjects such as ‘Shakespeare’s Religion’, but there’s nothing definitely coming from his own plays. On the whole, Shakespeare is the most impersonal writer. That’s perhaps what makes him the greatest writer in the world. Shakespeare was greatly religious and compassionate; but we don’t know his brand of Christianity. It is, however, very difficult to get insight into Shakespeare.

Othello : Background

The plot of Shakespeare's Othello is largely taken from Giraldi Cinthio's Gli Hecatommithi, a tale of love, jealousy, and betrayal; however, the characters, themes, and attitudes of the works are vastly different, with Shakespeare's play being a more involved study of human nature and psychology. There are, however, a few deviations from Shakespeare's source, one of which being the motivations of the Iago figure. Cinthio's Iago was driven to revenge when Desdemona refused to have an affair with him; Iago's motivations are not nearly so plain in Shakespeare's version. Cithio's Iago was driven to revenge when Desdemona refused to have an affair with him; Iago's motivations are not nearly so plain in Shakespeare's version.

Othello also touches upon a major issue in Europe of this time period; the intermingling of Muslim religion and culture with the West. Written just a century after the Muslims were driven out of Spain as a part of the Reconquista, there are obvious threads of hostility within the play about Othello's Moorish origins, and his differences in religion and culture. The hostility between the West and the East is also shown in the conflict between Venice and the Turks; the Christian Venetians want to protect Christendom from the influence of the Muslim Turks, and ironically, Moorish Othello is the one sent to complete this mission.

Othello is considered to be a prime example of Aristotelian drama; it focuses upon a very small cast of characters, one of the smallest used in Shakespeare, has few distractions from the main plot arc, and concentrates on just a few themes, like jealousy. AS such, it is one of the most intense and focused plays Shakespeare wrote, and has also enjoyed a great amount of popularity from the Jacobean period to the present day.

The character of Iago is a variation on the Vice figure found in earlier morality plays; he deviates from this model because of his lack of a clear motivation, and because of his portrayal as a very malignant figure. However, Iago is less of a character than a changeable device for the plot, and in this sense, he is a clear descendant of the omnipresent "vice" figure. Iago's great cunning, manipulative abilities, and almost supernatural perception mean that he is a very formidable foe, and this makes Othello's fall seem even more inevitable and tragic.
One reason for the overwhelming popularity of the play throughout the ages is that it focuses on two people who defied society in order to follow their own hearts. Shakespeare scholar Walter Cohen cites the popularity of Othello during times of great rebellion and upheaval; the play was most popular during the European wars of the mid-19th century, the fall of Czarist Russia, and also during World War II in America. These productions tended to emphasize the nobility and love of Othello and Desdemona, and made their fall seem more tragic and ill-deserved.

**Othello : Summary**

**Act I:**

Othello begins in the city of Venice, at night; Roderigo is having a discussion with Iago, who is bitter as being passed up as Othello's lieutenant in favor of the Venetian gentleman Cassio. Iago says that he only serves Othello to further himself; he is playing false, and admits that his nature is not at all what it seems. Iago is aware that Desdemona, the daughter of Brabantio, a Venetian nobleman of some stature, has run off with Othello, the black warrior of the Moors. Brabantio and many others know nothing of this coupling; Iago decides to enlist Roderigo, who lusts after Desdemona, and awaken Brabantio with screams that his daughter is gone.

Roderigo is the one speaking most to Brabantio, but Iago is there too, hidden, yelling unsavory things about Othello and his intentions toward Desdemona. Brabantio panics, and calls for people to try and find his daughter; Iago leaves, not wanting anyone to find out that he betrayed his own leader, and Brabantio begins to search for her.

Iago joins Othello, and tells him about Roderigo's betrayal of the news of his marriage to Brabantio. Cassio comes at last, as do Roderigo and Brabantio; Brabantio is very angry, swearing that Othello must have bewitched his daughter, and that the state will not decide for him in this case. Othello says that the Duke must hear him, and decide in his favor, or else all is far from right in Venice.

Brabantio and Othello address the assembled Venetian leaders, who are discussing this military matter, and Brabantio announces his grievance against Othello for marrying his daughter. Othello addresses the company, admitting that he did marry Desdemona, but wooed her with stories, and did her no wrongs. Desdemona comes to speak, and she confirms Othello's words; Brabantio's grievance is denied, and Desdemona will indeed stay with Othello. However, Othello is called away to Cyprus, to help with the conflict there. Othello and Desdemona win their appeal to remain together, and Desdemona is to stay with Iago, until she can come to Cyprus and meet Othello there.

Roderigo is upset that Desdemona and Othello's union was allowed to stand, since he lusts after Desdemona. But Iago assures him that the match will not last long, and at any time, Desdemona could come rushing to him. Iago wants to break up the couple, using Roderigo as his pawn, out of malice and his wicked ability to do so.

**Act II:**

A terrible storm has struck Cyprus, just as the Turks were about to approach; this bodes badly for Othello's ship. A messenger enters, and confirms that the Turkish fleet was broken apart by the storm, and that Cassio has arrived, though Othello is still at sea. They spot a ship coming forth; Iago, Desdemona, and Emilia are on it. Somehow, Iago and Desdemona enter into an argument about what women are, and Iago shows how little praise he believes women deserve. Othello arrives at last, and is very glad to see his wife arrived, much earlier than expected. Iago speaks to Roderigo, convincing him that Desdemona will stray from Othello, as she has already done with Cassio. He convinces Roderigo to attack Cassio that night, as he plans to visit mischief on both Othello and Cassio.
Iago and Cassio are on the watch together; Iago gets Cassio to drink a bit, knowing that he cannot hold his liquor at all. Iago also tries to make Desdemona seem tempting to Cassio; but Cassio's intentions are innocent and friendly, so this approach fails. Iago says that he intends to get Cassio drunk, which will hopefully cause a quarrel between Cassio and Roderigo, who has been stirred up against Cassio. Iago wants to see Cassio discredited through this, so that he might take Cassio's place. Montano and others come, and Iago entertains them with small talk and song. Cassio fights offstage with Roderigo, and comes forth, chasing him; Montano tries to hinder Cassio, but Cassio just ends up injuring him. All the noise wakes Othello, who comes down to figure out what has happened. Montano tells what he knows of it all, and Iago fills in the rest making sure to fictionalize his part in it all too.

Cassio laments that he has lost his reputation along with his rank, which is very dear to him. Iago tries to convince him that a reputation means little; and, if he talks to Desdemona, maybe he can get her to vouch for him with Othello. Iago then gives a soliloquy about knowing that Desdemona will speak for Cassio, and that he will be able to turn that against them both.

Act III:

Iago enters, and Cassio tells him that he means to speak to Desdemona, so that she may clear things up with Othello. Emilia comes out, and bids Cassio to come in and speak with Desdemona about his tarnished reputation. Desdemona believes Cassio is a good person, and has been wronged in this case; she pledges to do everything she can to persuade her husband to take Cassio back. Cassio leaves just as Othello enters because he does not wish for a confrontation. Iago seizes on this opportunity to play on Othello's insecurities, and make Cassio's exit seem guilty and incriminating. Desdemona expresses her concern for Cassio; she is persistent in his suit, which Othello is not too pleased about.

Iago then gets Othello to believe, through insinuation, that there is something going on between Desdemona and Cassio. Othello seizes on this, and then Iago works at building up his suspicions. Soon, Othello begins to doubt his wife, as Iago lets his insinuations gain the force of an accusation against her. Desdemona enters, and they have a brief conversation; Othello admits that he is troubled, though he will not state the cause.

Desdemona drops the handkerchief that Othello gave her on their honeymoon; Emilia knew that her husband had wanted it for something, so she doesn't feel too guilty about taking it. Emilia gives it to Iago, who decides to use the handkerchief for his own devices. Othello re-enters, and tells Iago that he now doubts his wife; Othello demands "ocular proof" of Desdemona's dishonesty, so Iago sets about making stories up about Cassio talking in his sleep, and says that Cassio has the handkerchief that Othello gave to Desdemona. Iago knows how important this handkerchief is to Othello; it was his first gift to Desdemona, and was given to him by his mother. Othello is incensed to hear that Desdemona would give away something so valuable, and is persuaded by Iago's insinuations and claims to believe that Desdemona is guilty. Othello then swears to have Cassio dead, and to be revenged upon Desdemona for the non-existent affair.

Desdemona is looking everywhere for the handkerchief, very sorry to have lost it. Othello enters, and asks for Desdemona's handkerchief; she admits that she does not have it, and then Othello tells her of its significance and alleged magical powers. Desdemona interrupts Othello's inquiry by bringing up Cassio's attempt to get back into Othello's favor; Othello becomes angry, and storms out. Desdemona and Emilia both note that Othello is much changed; he is unkind and seems jealous, and they are suspicious of the change in him.

Cassio then enters, with Iago; he laments that his suit is not successful, and that Othello does not seem likely to take him back. Desdemona tells Cassio and Iago that Othello has
been acting strange, and is upset, and Iago goes to look for him, feigning concern. Emilia thinks that Othello's change has something to do with Desdemona, or Othello's jealous nature; they still cannot fathom what has happened, and exit, leaving Cassio. Bianca comes in, and Cassio asks her to copy the handkerchief that he found in his room; it is Desdemona's handkerchief, though Cassio has no idea. He claims he does not love her, and gets angry at her for allegedly suspecting that the handkerchief is a gift of another woman. But, Bianca is not disturbed, and leaves with the handkerchief.

Act IV:

Othello is trying, even after swearing that Desdemona was unfaithful, not to condemn her too harshly. He is talking with Iago about the handkerchief still, and its significance in being found; but, soon, Iago whips Othello into an even greater fury through mere insinuation, and Othello takes the bait. Othello falls into a trance of rage, and Iago decides to hammer home his false ideas about his wife. Iago calls Cassio in, while Othello hides; Iago speaks to Cassio of Bianca, but Othello, in his disturbed state, believes that Cassio is talking of Desdemona, which is the last "proof" he needs before declaring his wife guilty.

Now, Othello is resolved to kill Desdemona himself, and charges Iago with murdering Cassio. Lodovico, a noble Venetian whom Desdemona knows, has recently landed; Desdemona and Othello welcome him there. But, when Desdemona mentions Cassio, Othello becomes very angry and slaps her in front of everyone; she rushes off, very upset. Ludovico especially is shocked at this change in Othello, and has no idea how such a noble man could act so cruelly.

Othello questions Emilia about Desdemona's guilt, or the chance she has had an affair with Cassio. Emilia swears that she has seen and heard all that has gone on between Cassio and Desdemona, and that Desdemona is pure and true. Othello believes that Emilia is in on all this too; he accuses Desdemona, and her insistence that she is innocent only infuriates him further. Emilia thinks that someone has manipulated Othello into accusing Desdemona, and has poisoned his mind; however, Iago is there to dispel this opinion. Upon leaving the women, Iago comes across Roderigo; he is not pleased with how Iago has failed to deliver on his promises regarding Desdemona. Iago quiets him by making him believe that if he kills Cassio, then he will win Desdemona; Roderigo decides to go along with it, but Iago is coming dangerously close to being revealed.

Othello tells Desdemona to go to bed, and dismiss Emilia; Emilia regrets Desdemona's marriage, although Desdemona cannot say that she does not love Othello. Desdemona knows that she will die soon; she sings a song of sadness and resignation, and decides to give herself to her fate. Desdemona asks Emilia whether she would commit adultery to win her husband the world. Emilia, the more practical one, thinks that it is not too big a price for a small act; Desdemona is too good, and too devout, to say that she would do so.

Act V:

Iago has Roderigo poised and ready to pounce on Cassio, and kill him; if either of them is killed, it is to Iago's benefit, so that his devices might not be discovered. Roderigo and Cassio fight, and both are injured badly. Iago enters, pretending that he knows nothing of the scuffle; Gratiano and Lodovico also stumble upon the scene, having no idea what has happened. Roderigo is still alive, so Iago feigns a quarrel, and finishes him off. Bianca comes by, and sees Cassio wounded; Iago makes some remark to implicate her; Cassio is carried away, and Roderigo is already dead.

Othello enters Desdemona's room while she is asleep; and though she is beautiful, and appears innocent, he still is determined to kill her. Desdemona awakens, believes there is nothing she can do to stop him from killing her, and continues to assert her innocence.
Othello tells her that he found her handkerchief with Cassio, though Desdemona insists it must not be true; she pleads with Othello not to kill her right then, but he begins to smother her. Emilia knocks, curious about what is going on; Othello lets her in, but tries to conceal Desdemona, who he thinks is already dead. Emilia brings the news of Roderigo's death, and Cassio's wounding.

Emilia soon finds out that Desdemona is nearly dead, by Othello's hand; Desdemona speaks her last words, and then Emilia pounces on Othello for committing this horrible crime. Othello is not convinced of his folly until Iago confesses his part, and Cassio speaks of the use of the handkerchief; then, Othello is overcome with grief. Iago stabs Emilia for telling all about his plots, and then Emilia dies; the Venetian nobles reveal that Brabantio, Desdemona's father, is dead, and so cannot be grieved by this tragedy now. Othello stabs Iago when he is brought back in; Othello then tells all present to remember him how he is, and kills himself. Cassio becomes temporary leader of the troops at Cyprus, and Lodovico and Gratiano are supposed to carry the news of the tragedy back to Venice.

**Battle of Good vs. Evil in Othello**

Shakespeare presented the classic battle between the deceitful forces of evil and the innocence of good in Othello. The forces of evil ultimately lead to the breakdown of Othello, a noble Venetian moor, well-known by the people of Venice as an honourable soldier and a worthy leader. His breakdown results in the murder of his wife Desdemona who is representative of the good in nature.

The evil contained within the play is represented by the character of Iago who is cunning, untrustworthy, selfish, and plotting. He uses these traits to his advantage by slowly planning his own triumph while watching the demise of others. It is not only his own nature of evil that he succeeds but also the weaknesses of the other characters. He uses the weaknesses of Othello, specifically jealousy and his devotion to things as they seem, to conquer his opposite in Desdemona. From the start of the play, Iago's scheming ability is shown when he convinces Roderigo to tell about Othello and Desdemona's elopement to Desdemona's father, Brabantio. Confidentially Iago continues his plot successfully, making fools of others, and himself being rewarded. Except Roderigo, no one is aware of Iago's plans. This is because Iago pretends to be an honest man loyal to his superiors.

The fact that Othello himself views Iago as trustworthy and honest gives the evil within Iago a perfect unsuspecting victim for his schemes. The opportunity to get to Desdemona through Othello is one temptation that Iago cannot refuse. He creates the impression that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio in order to stir the jealousy within Othello. It is this jealousy and the ignorance of Othello that lead to the downfall of Desdemona; the one truly good natured character in the play.

Iago has been appointed the position of servant to Othello instead of the more prestigious position of lieutenant. Michael Cassio has been appointed this position. Iago feels betrayed because he considers himself more qualified than Cassio to serve as lieutenant. Iago then foreshadows his plans for Othello to Roderigo,

"O, sir, content you;
I follow him to serve my turn upon him"

Iago already realizes that Othello thinks about him as an honest man. Roderigo is used by Iago as an apprentice and someone to do his "dirty" work. Roderigo is naively unsuspecting. As the play shifts from Venice to Cyprus there is an interesting contrast. Venice, a respectful and honourable town is overshadowed by the war torn villages of Cyprus. It could be said that Venice represents good or specifically Desdemona and that Cyprus represents evil in Iago. Desdemona has been taken from her peacefulness and brought onto the grounds of evil. Iago commits his largest acts of deceit in Cyprus,
fittingly considering the atmosphere. Ironically, the Venetians feel the Turks are their only enemy while in fact Iago is in hindsight the one man who destroys their stable state. Act II Scene III shows Iago's willing ability to manipulate characters in the play. Iago convinces Montano to inform Othello of Cassio's weakness for alcohol hoping this would rouse dissatisfaction by Othello. Iago when forced to tell the truth against another character does so very suspiciously. He pretends not to offend Cassio when telling Othello of the fight Cassio was involved in, but Iago secretly wants the worst to become of Cassio's situation without seeming responsible. Cassio is relieved of his duty as lieutenant. With Cassio no longer in the position of lieutenant, this gives Iago the opportunity to more effectively interact with and manipulate Othello. By controlling Othello, Iago would essentially control Desdemona.

To reach Desdemona directly is unforeseeable for Iago considering that Othello is superior to him. It is for this reason that Iago decides to exploit Othello. If Iago can turn Othello against his own wife he will have defeated his opposition. Act III Scene III, is very important because it is the point in the play where Iago begins to establish his manipulation of Othello. Cassio feels that it is necessary to seek the help of Desdemona in order to regain his position of lieutenant and therefore meets with her to discuss this possibility. Iago and Othello enter the scene just after Cassio leaves, and Iago wistfully tries to make it look like Cassio left because he does not want to be seen in the courtship of Desdemona. Iago sarcastically remarks:

"Cassio, my lord! No, sure, I cannot think it
That he would steal away so guilty-like,
Seeing your coming."

When Desdemona leaves, Iago takes the opportunity to strengthen Othello's views of honesty and trust towards him by saying ironically,

"Men should be what they seem;
Or those that be not, would they might seem none!"

This cleverness by Iago works upon one of the tragic flaws of Othello. Othello has a tendency to take everything he sees and everything he is told at face value without questioning the circumstances. Iago wonders why someone would pretend to be something they are not, while in fact that is the exact thing he represents. Finally, after hearing the exploits of Iago and witnessing the events surrounding Cassio, Othello for the first time is in conflict about what is the truth. This is the first stage of Iago's scheme to control Othello. As Emilia becomes suspicious about Othello's development of jealousy, Desdemona defends her husband by blaming herself for any harm done. This once again shows Desdemona's compassion and willingness to sacrifice herself for her husband. Othello begins to show his difficulty in maintaining his composure:

"Well, my good lady.
[Aside] O, hardness to dissemble --
How do you, Desdemona?

Act IV, Scene I is a continuation of the anxiety and indifference Othello is undergoing. Iago takes advantage of this by being blunt with Othello about his wife Desdemona. Iago suggests that she is having sexual relations with other men, possibly Cassio, and continues on as if nothing has happened. This suggestion put Othello into a state of such emotional turmoil that he is lost in a trance. Iago's control over Othello is so strong now that he convinces him to consider getting rid of Desdemona and even suggests methods of killing her. Iago, so proud of his accomplishments of underhandedness:

"Work on.
My medicine work! Thus credulous fools are caught;
And many worthy and chaste dames even thus,
All guiltless, meet reproach."
As a result of Desdemona’s mention of Cassio, Othello commits his first act of violence against Desdemona by hitting her. This shows now Othello’s other tragic flaw. He made himself susceptible to Iago and the jealousy within him begins to lead to the demise of others. By his actions Othello has isolated himself from everyone except Iago. This gives Iago the perfect opportunity to complete his course of action. Iago does not tolerate any interference in his plans, and he first murders Roderigo before he can dispel the evil that Iago represents. Finally, Othello is so full of the lies told to him by Iago that he murders his wife. Desdemona, representative of goodness and heaven as a whole blames her death on herself and not Othello. Iago’s wife, Emilia, becomes the ultimate undoing of Iago. After revealing Iago’s plot to Othello, Iago kills her. This is yet another vicious act to show the true evil Iago represents. Othello finally realizes after being fooled into murder:

“I look down towards his feet; but that’s a fable
If that thou best a devil, I cannot kill thee.”

Iago says: “I bleed, sir, but not killed,”

This is the final statement by Iago himself that truly shows his belief in evil and that he truly thinks he is the devil. That is the destruction of all that is good. Hell over heaven and black over white.

Iago has one major motivational factor that leads him to lie, cheat, and commit crimes on other characters. This motivation is the destruction of all that is good and the rise of evil. This contrast is represented between Iago and Desdemona. Desdemona is described frequently by other characters as “she is divine, the grace of heaven”, while Iago in contrast is described as hellish after his plot is uncovered. Iago uses the other characters in the play to work specifically towards his goal. In this way, he can maintain his supposed unknowingness about the events going on and still work his scheming ways. Iago's schemes however at times seem to work unrealistically well which may or may not be a case of witchcraft or magic. Iago's major mistake, ironically, is that he trusted his wife Emilia and found that she was not as trustworthy as he thought. Although not completely victorious at the conclusion of the play, Iago does successfully eliminate the one character representative of heaven, innocence, and honesty. Finally, everything Iago pretended to be led to his demise: Honesty, Innocence, and Love.

**Othello as a Tragedy of evil : Evil in Iago**

In Othello, evil it is **personified** in one character who wears the mask of seeming virtue. In the character of Iago, we see evil as deception and as a direct challenge to the order and harmony of the universe. Iago’s superficial brilliance and self-control is the ‘reason’ for renaissance skepticism which in Shakespeare’s day was challenging the great vision of harmony and order.

Despite his hypocrisy, Iago reveals himself to the reader as an **active force of evil** right from the first scene of the play. It is Roderigo alone who is given the insight into Iago; but he is foolish and doesn’t understand the implications of Iago’s plans. Iago stands for **social disintegration**. He is not one of the servants who get paid by their masters for their service and are loyal to them. He is the wicked one whose loyalty is a mask.

The supreme **egotism of Iago** is a manifestation of the code of ‘reason’ by which he lives. True human reason in terms of Renaissance Christian humanism was a reflection of the supreme wisdom of God and it consisted in submitting one’s will to the purposes of Go. **Iago’s reason is the sin of pride**, for it denies the supremacy of God and sees man as the sole author of his destiny, able to control himself and others by the power of his mind. It is expressed in his speech to Roderigo which begins the words “**Virtue! A fig! ’tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus.**” In denying the purposes of the power of God, Iago strikes at the very roots of Christian Humanism. He has a lust
for the blood and a permission of the will. He is conceited and excessively proud of his intelligence and wisdom which ultimately cause the fall of his personality.

Iago’s betrayal of himself is quite expected and possible despite Bradley’s wonder that how his supreme intellect should finally betray him into such colossal errors as his misjudging the relationship between Othello and Desdemona and the character of his own wife, Emilia. But it is in the very nature of Iago’s intellect that he should be so. He sees that Desdemona’s love for the Moor was only animal lust and nothing else. He can perceive only the outward appearance of Othello; he can’t see the qualities for which Desdemona married him; and thus their relationship seems only a product of lust which lust must destroy. Out of Iago’s failure of perception will come his own destruction, but his failure is inherent in the very ‘reason’ by which he lives.

The audience doesn’t have the same views about Iago as the other characters in the play do. The audience knows him to be a Semi-devil, the very incarnation of Devil and the negation of moral values. To the audience, he is devil; but to Othello, he is ‘Honest Iago.’ Honest is very much like that of Claudius in Hamlet. He stands for false appearance and it is fitting that Shakespeare should give the celebrated lines:

Who steals my purse steals trash
But he that filches from me my good name
Rob me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.

Such a concern for reputation is a manifestation of pride

Iago personifies evil in the guise of good whereas in Othello himself, we have a depiction of true virtue which seems to be wearing many of the signs of evil. As in Cinthio’s story, Othello’s wedding with Desdemona was unnatural. Cinthio doesn’t mention the blackness of the Moor, mentioning it only once in the story. In the Renaissance, the color black was a symbol of lechery. It was so commonly used in the books that it was also the color of the devil whose redness is a fairly recent innovation. To Shakespeare’s audience, Othello would have all the outward appearance of the blacker devil which Amelia calls him. His marriage to Desdemona would appear as aberration in nature. Iago awakens Brabantio with a description of the marriage in these terms, punctuated by images of brute sexuality - comparing Othello to a black ram that is going to take advantage of Brabantio’s white ewe.

Finally, the unnaturalness and Appearance plays a vital role in the play. The first two acts of the play these themes, the evil of the unnatural marriage and that of Iago’s mask of seeming virtue. Othello has the blackness of Satan, Iago the whiteness of truth and virtue. True virtue bears the mark of evil and evil is marked with the semblance of honesty. Shakespeare assures the audience that of the falsity of these outward sign, that Iago is seemingly honest and that Othello, despite his appearance, is a man of true nobility whom Desdemona can love for his ‘honours and his valiant parts’. We see his dignity before the consul where he denies the very lechery which his outward color represents. Shakespeare’s deliberate reversal of normal appearance is so shocking that the audience must be left till incredulous, with an uncertain fear that appearance be still be truth. This fear is supported by Brabantio’s warning:

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see
She has deceived her father, and may thee

Upon this seeming violation of nature, Iago will work his temptation of Othello and under Iago’s influence; Othello will see Desdemona exactly Brabantio has seen her. So we can conclude that the play is filled with the combat between good and evil and the heinous acts of evil to dominate the good are exposed beautifully by master dramatist William Shakespeare.

Othello: Shakespeare's Aristotelian Tragedy
Aristotle described a tragedy as “an imitation of an action of high importance, complete and of some amplitude: in language enhanced by distinct and varying beauties...by means of pity and fear effecting its purgation of these emotions”. William Shakespeare’s famous play Othello is concerned with the downfall of a Moorish general having the elements of jealousy, suspense, intrigue, murder, and suicide to create a magnificent tragedy of the highest Aristotelian order. Aristotle prescribed three main ingredients for a tragic drama: hamartia, or a tragic flaw in the tragic hero’s character that brings about his downfall; catharsis, or a purgation of the audience’s emotions so that they feel that they have learned something from the play; and anagnorisis, or the character’s revelation of some fact not previously realized.

Shakespeare’s protagonist Othello fulfills all of Aristotle’s requirements for a tragic hero, as Othello is a character of noble status who falls from that position of power to one of shame because of his hamartia. Moreover the plot of Othello contains a powerful catharsis through its climax and conclusion, and an anagnorisis when Othello realizes that Iago and Desdemona are not who they seemed to be.

First of all, the Moorish general Othello, fits Aristotle’s definition of a tragic hero. Aristotle states that a tragic hero must have three dominant qualities: he must be a person of high estate, he must fall from that position into unhappiness, and his downfall must be brought about by his hamartia, or his tragic flaw. Othello is not only a successful general in the Venetian army but is also well respected, admired, and well liked. Since Othello enjoys a position of power and happiness at the beginning of the play, this status makes his downfall from beloved general to despised murderer infinitely more tragic and moving.

According to Aristotle, however, the tragic hero’s collapse cannot be a simple deterioration from success to misery. The most distinctive feature of the Aristotelian tragic hero is hamartia; his downfall must be brought about by a character flaw or flaw in judgment that leads to his destruction. Hamartia is more than a moral weakness; it is a crucial mistake on the part of the tragic hero that causes him to plunge from greatness to grief. Othello’s mistake as a tragic hero is that he believes Iago’s treacherous lies about Desdemona’s unfaithfulness. Instead of investigating the matter further, he rashly jumps to the worst conclusions about his wife and believes every lie that Iago whispers into his ear.

Iago recognizes that he can use these weaknesses of Othello’s to hasten his downfall. Therefore Othello fits Aristotle’s description of a tragic hero who has descended from high estate to destruction because of his hamartia.

A true Aristotelian tragedy also contains what the Greeks called a catharsis, or a purgation that leaves the audience feeling justified and uplifted. In a tragedy like Othello, where almost all of the characters wind up dead, the audience is certainly not expected to feel happy or cheerful about the play’s conclusion, but they do feel a sort of justification at the lessons learned by the play’s characters and satisfaction in the villain’s punishment. Aristotle said, “The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear, and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation”. The drama must arouse feelings of pity and fear in the audience and then expunge those feelings through a satisfactory conclusion. In Othello, Shakespeare certainly moves the audience to feel pity for Othello, for Desdemona, for Cassio, and even for Iago. They also fear for the fate of the happy couple, and realize their worst fears when Othello smothers his innocent wife in a jealous rage. Once more the audience pities Othello when he recognizes afterwards that Desdemona is innocent and stabs himself in remorse. Even though the play does not end “happily ever after,” the deaths of the unhappy couple and the punishment of the villain Iago bring a sort of closure to the drama.

The ultimate purpose of catharsis in a tragedy is to purify our feelings, refining them into something more ennobling. The audience certainly feels as though they have
learned something important and witnessed an epic drama that has affected them morally and spiritually. This is the purpose of tragedy – to dramatize the weaknesses, despair, and failings of the human spirit and to demonstrate how to better ourselves through this experience. Through this emotionally charged plot filled with intrigue and conflict, Shakespeare has certainly met all of Aristotle's requirements for catharsis.

The last element of Aristotelian tragedy found in Shakespeare's Othello is anagnorisis, a fact that was previously unknown to the tragic hero. Aristotle's literal Greek definition of anagnorisis consists of two parts; "The first part of the definition characterizes recognition as a change from ignorance into knowledge, leading either to friendship or enmity". Shakespeare brings out this particular feature of anagnorisis towards the end of the play when Othello realizes that his trusted friend Iago has trapped him in a web of lies and has deceived him into thinking Desdemona is unfaithful. Iago's wife Emilia cries out before she dies, "Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor.
So come my soul to bliss as I speak true" (5.2.258-259)
and suddenly Othello understands that it is Iago who has misled him, not Desdemona. This anagnorisis causes Othello to cry,

"Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!
O Desdemona! Dead, Desdemona! Dead! O! O!" (5.2.289-290),
to stab and wound the villain Iago, and then to kill himself in remorse.

The second aspect of the Greek word anagnorisis is its more superficial, general connotation. Anagnorisis usually involves revelation of the true identity of persons previously unknown, as when a father recognizes a stranger as his son, or vice versa”. It is the simple epiphany experienced by the tragic hero as he realizes something significant, like the fact that he has killed the woman he loves for no reason.

This moment of revelation for Othello is the climax of Shakespeare’s play as everything comes together before the tragic hero’s eyes and the full extent of Iago’s treachery and deceit is made clear to him. For the audience, the moment is especially climactic, because we have known the truth all along. In the tragedy of Othello, we witness an imitation of an action. The audience knows that Desdemona is innocent; thus, Othello’s baseless accusations and crime against her arouse special pity and loathing. This makes the Othello’s anagnorisis at the end of the play exceptionally touching.

Shakespeare's great play depicting the downfall of a Moorish general through jealousy and deceit is such a tragic drama. Aristotle's influence upon the sixteenth-century English playwright is evident in Othello. Through the character of Othello as a tragic hero with a fatal flaw, the purgation of emotion through the couple's deaths and the punishment of Iago, and the epiphany Othello experiences at the end of the play, Shakespeare demonstrates with eloquence each and every one of Aristotle's qualifications for tragedy. Othello is a tragic drama of epic proportions that has stood the test of time and continues to move audiences with its powerful themes of jealousy, intrigue, betrayal, faithfulness, death, and remorse.

Othello as a Tragic Hero

In Shakespeare's Othello, Othello can be considered a tragic hero because he follows Aristotle's six elements of a tragedy. Based on Aristotle's six elements of a tragedy, position, flaw, prophecy, recognition, catastrophe, and reversal, the character of Othello from Shakespeare's Othello can be considered a tragic hero.

The first element of tragedy is position, or status, that the hero is in. In Othello, Othello is the leader of the Italian army and is very important to the people of Italy. "Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you against the general enemy Ottoman." This quote
shows how important Othello is to the army and to the war. When Othello is chosen to lead the army overseas, he also makes Brabantio mad by marrying his daughter, Desdemona, without his permission.

"And, noble signior, if virtue no delighted beauty lack, your son- in-law is far more far than black (17)."

This quote shows that Othello is so respected that the Duke of Venice can see through the color of Othello's skin and gives him praise.

The second element of tragedy is prophecy, which can be seen when Othello is telling Desdemona the story about when he received the handkerchief.

"She told me her, while she kept it't would make her amiable and subdue my father entirely to her love, but if she lost it or made a gift of it, my father's eye should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt after new fancies (56)."

This quote lets the reader know that the handkerchief is not only important to Othello and Desdemona but it is also important to the play because it's the reason why Othello gets jealous. This prophecy leads to the downfall of the tragic hero. Another incident where prophecy occurred in the play was when Desdemona tells the story of Barbara, Desdemona's mother's maid, who sang a song of "willow". "An old thing 't was, but it express'd her fortune, and she died singing it: that song to-night will not go from my mind (75)." This quote is an example of prophecy because it's foreshadowing that Desdemona will die because she won't let the song go from her mind.

The third element of a tragedy is flaw. Flaw can be either hubris or anger. "By heaven, that should be my handkerchief (64)!" This quote shows the jealousy that Othello has over the fact that Desdemona is being unfaithful to him. In Oedipus the king anger can be seen when Tiresias tells Oedipus that he is the evil that haunts the town. "Good riddance too! You're nothing but a nuisance here, and one I can do without." This is an example of how powerful anger can be because of the anger that Othello feels, he can't even stand to look at the woman that he loves. Once Othello finds out that Desdemona is being unfaithful to him, he approaches her looking for an explanation. "O devil, devil! If that the earth could teem with woman's tears, each drop she falls would prove a crocodile. Out of my sight (67)!" This quote shows how Othello's jealousy has turned into rage, a form of anger.

The fourth element of a tragedy is recognition, which can be seen when Emilia hears Othello mentions the handkerchief, after he killed Desdemona. " with that recognizance and pledge of love which I first gave her; I saw it in his hand: It was a handkerchief, an antique token my father gave my mother (87)." Once Othello says this, Emilia knows that Iago is the person who set up Desdemona and Othello isn't the one to blame. Recognition can also be seen in Oedipus the King after the shepherd tells the story of the baby. "For if you are the one he says you are, make no mistake: you are a doom-born man (Sophocles 67)." At this point in the play, Oedipus knows that he is the one who is causing the problems in Thebes because the Tiresias was right.

The fifth element of a tragedy is catastrophe, which can be seen when Othello dies. "I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee: no way but this, killing myself, to die upon a kiss (91)." This is the last thing that Othello says before he dies which is the catastrophe in the play. Oedipus' catastrophe happens when Jocasta kills herself after she finds out that the prophet of Oedipus was true. "He frees the noose and lays the wretched woman down, then rips from off her dress the golden brooches she was wearing (Sophocles 70)." This quote shows the severity of the fact that Jocasta kills herself because it leads right into reversal.

The sixth element of a tragedy is reversal which can be seen when Desdemona kills herself. "Whip me, ye devils, from the possession of this heavenly sight! Blow me about
in the winds! Roast me in sulphur! Wash me down in steep-down gulfs of fire! O Desdemona! Desdemona! Dead! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh (88)!” This quote shows the pain that Othello felt when everything turned bad. In Oedipus the King, Oedipus went through the same kind of pain when he went through reversal. “Aah! A nightmare mist has fallen adamantine black on me-abomination closing. Cry, cry, oh cry again (Sophocles 72)!” Oedipus and Othello are in so much pain and suffering that they both inflict severe wounds upon themselves. When Othello finds out that Desdemona was being faithful to him, he asks for forgiveness. “I do believe it, and I ask your pardon. Will you, I pray, demi-devil why he hath thus enslaved my soul and body (90)? This quote shows that Othello is in so much pain that he feels enslaved in his own body.

Othello can be seen as a tragic hero because he follows all of Aristotle's six elements of tragic hero. These are the same six elements that define Oedipus as a tragic hero. The six elements of a tragedy can be seen throughout the plays Othello and Oedipus the King. That is why Othello is seen as a tragic hero through the eyes of the reader.

**Othello's Hamartia**

A Shakespearean tragedy is one that encompasses many different elements. Shakespeare presents all of these elements spectacularly in Othello. For a tragedy to occur there are five conditions. The protagonist, Othello in this case, must experience a death or a total loss of ranking in society. The audience must also be captured by the actors and feel some sort of connection to them. This is known as **catharsis**. In Shakespearean tragedies the protagonist always has a character defect or a **tragic flaw**. This tragic flaw along with pride will cause the protagonist to make an error in judgement leading him to his downfall and eventual death. These two elements are called hubris and hamartia. The unities of time, space, and action must also be followed. This means that the play must take place in a very short period of time, occur in one general area, and follow one main character throughout the play. Shakespeare orates for us a tragic occurrence in the life of a man who once had it all, throws it all away in a fit of jealous rage.

The **downfall of the central character** is the main concept of the tragedy. Without the main character's downfall there is no reason for the reader to feel pity, therefore, no tragedy. The **downfall of the protagonist in Shakespearean tragedies always originates from their tragic flaw**. Othello’s **tragic flaw** is his **jealousy**, which Iago constantly reminds him about. This is first brought about in act III, scene 3 when Iago asks Othello if he has seen a handkerchief spotted with strawberries. At this point Othello is jealous at Cassio for having won the heart of Desdemona and earned the handkerchief. Upon hearing this Othello flies into a mad fit by saying: **O, that the slave had forty thousand lives! (III, 3, 439).** By his jealousy Othello makes himself very prone to many attacks on him by Iago.

**Catharsis** is the part of the play that moves the audience and attempts to put them in the actor’s shoes. Shakespeare does this by attacking the issue of love. It is a very touchy and emotional subject. Anyone who has ever fallen in love can relate to Othello and Desdemona. They are viewed as the perfect newly-weds who have each other as compliments. Desdemona shows us this by protesting to the Duke and her father that she saw Othello’s visage in his mind, “**And to his honor and his valiant parts Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate**”. The **love** between **her** and **Othello** is one of **great passion and breaking barriers**. They were many years apart, came from different races, and were different colors of skin, something that was unheard of in their time. Obstacles such as these, even in our day, are very difficult to overcome. When reading or watching Othello one cannot help but to feel envy for the love they have. In this tragedy, catharsis presents something the audience cannot avoid.
Hubris and Hamartia are two components of a Shakespearean tragedy that are very much intertwined because of their basis on pride. Hubris is when the protagonist is consumed with pride and believes that fate can be beaten. Evidence of Othello’s pride is based on the thought; **No one messes around with Othello!** This becomes his eventual downfall. The reader remembers in act III, scene 3 when Iago had planted false evidence of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness; Othello reacted in a very calm way, mostly in disbelief. In act IV, scene 1 when Iago brings more evidence of Desdemona’s infidelity Othello reacts in a very different and violent way. **Let her rot, and perish, and be damned tonight; for she shall not live** (IV, 1, 183-184). This statement stems from Othello’s pride in being a man of high standing who will not be cheated on. Hamartia also comes into play where Othello believes that **fate can be beaten by killing Desdemona.** Even if Othello had escaped death here he would have been removed of his high military status and thrown in jail. Othello was truly a man consumed with pride and wrongly believed that he could defy fate and come out on top by killing what he loved most.

Othello could be considered not to be a tragedy because of its **violation of the unities of time, space, and action.** The unities of time, space, and action state that the story must take place in one city, occur in a short period of time more than 24 hours, and must follow one central character throughout the entire play. Othello does not occur in one city through the entire story. Othello went to war in Cyprus and spent most of his time living in Venice. Although there is very little time spent in Cyprus Othello, the story, does not work along the same lines as Hamlet. In Hamlet almost the entire story took place between the castle walls. As for the unity of action we see something quite different here. The play we studied is titled Othello; therefore, the reader assumes that Othello is the central character. If the book were not named this, it would be quite possible that many readers would believe the title could be Iago and not Othello. Although, Iago is not the good guy but he is in the play just as much or even more than Othello. At the beginning of the play Iago is present and Othello is absent. This is how it is many scenes are in the play.

To conclude, we can say that Othello is Shakespeare’s most perfect tragedy because it encompasses all of the elements of a tragedy so wonderfully. The love shared between Othello and Desdemona at the beginning of the play is so much more spectacular than that of Claudius and Gertrude in Hamlet or Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in Macbeth. The guilt and wrong felt by Othello after he realizes his errors in judgement are incomparable to the drama in Shakespeare’s other tragedies. Any audience viewing Othello for the first time would be captured by the characters because of their relation to the audience. Any experienced Shakespeare reader would have no problem giving Othello the title of most perfect tragedy because it covers all of the elements of a tragedy so wonderfully.

**The Themes of Othello**

The play Othello is one of the works written by William Shakespeare. It is written approximately in 1603 and was published in 1622, whereas the first performance of this play is in November 1604 (Wikipedia, Chronology of Shakespeare’s play). The main themes of Othello revolve around the issue of love, jealousy, fidelity, the incompatibility of military heroism and love and also pride. But as the play unwraps, much more issues come to visible and these will be discuss in details throughout this essay.

The first theme that can be found in this play is **jealousy.** This theme can be said act as the backbone of the entire play. All the events that happen in the play until that leads to Othello’s downfall are actually triggered by this form of mischief- jealousy. In this play, jealousy portrays by three characters which are Iago, Roderigo and Othello. Iago’s jealousy originates from his dissatisfaction towards Othello who happens to promote the lieutenant post to Michael Cassio, the less experience soldier, instead of him (line 8-22).
This then drives Iago to plan revenge on Othello in order to gain back his reputation. Iago’s jealousy is actually the most critical issue in this play. Things would go differently if Iago has respond in positive way about the promotion and Othello and Desdemona would have live happily with their marriage.

In Roderigo’s case however, his jealousy is derives from his disappointment of watching Desdemona (his first love) falls into Othello’s hands. In comparison to Iago, Roderigo’s jealousy basically is harmless because looking back at Roderigo’s ability, he is incapable to plan or even to perform evil tricks on his own. His jealousy is mostly fuels up by Iago who uses him as a pawn in order to play his evil tricks. For instance, in Act II, Iago purposely provokes Roderigo by telling him about Cassio’s feeling towards Desdemona so Roderigo will take action and create a trouble that he knows will put Cassio’s reputation at risk.

Still, Roderigo is not the only person who is affected by Iago’s jealousy. Jealousy is like a disease that will spread from one person to another which if not prevent can cause destruction to all. This is exactly what happens in this play. Iago’s hatred and jealousy towards Othello drives him to deceive many people around him including Othello. As part of his evil plans, Iago cunningly uses both Roderigo and Othello’s weakness which is Desdemona to entrap them in his wicked schemes. The story he makes up to Othello about Desdemona and Cassio results to another form of jealousy in the play which at the end leads to the death of Desdemona and finally Othello himself. These events show that Iago’s character plays as the main contributor to the theme jealousy.

Besides jealousy, the second theme of this play is reputation which also relates to pride. This play has abundance of characters that progress alongside the theme reputation. This includes Othello, Brabantio, Cassio and last but not least Iago. All of these characters depicts their reputation is as important as their pride through the way they reacts towards the situations that comes up to them. For examples, in the first act we have been introduce to Brabantio who much worries that his daughter’s elopement will mark him as a careless father despite his rank as a senator (191-197), while Othello on the other hand becomes depress after suspecting he has been cheating by his wife. The more obvious event that conveys the importance of reputation as one’s pride can be found in act II. In this scene, Cassio is at dismay after losing his rank as a lieutenant (253-256). For Cassio, his reputation is what makes him feels better about himself because it let people see him in positive ways.

But, above all the three characters, Iago relatedness with reputation is much stronger than the others. His jealousy, hatred, betrayal and the dark mischievous he creates are all arouses from the idea of reputation. In fact, as part of his revenge’s scheme, Iago trickily plays with words and actions to cover up his real intentions in order to gain and maintain his reputation in people’s eyes. Iago’s action conveys to us that reputation means a lot to him and he is willing to do anything to gain it. From these situations, it suggests that the theme reputation is importance in both domestic and political level.

The third important theme in this play is fidelity. In analysing this theme, it is crucial to understand the underlying keys of ‘what it is’ and ‘what is perceived to be’ (Maurer, K. 2000) because this is what actually the play Othello is all about. In Othello, fidelity can be analyse between husband-wife, father-daughter, friends and general-servants relationship. For example, in Desdemona’s case, although she is wrong by turning away from his father and elope with Othello, but she is the most faithful character of all. Desdemona’s love towards Othello is real but if only Othello has faith in her, she would not have become the innocent victim of Iago’s evil tricks.

Fidelity would not be complete without thrust and vice versa. Lacks of one of these elements will not promise a strong relationship. This for instance relates to Cassio-Othello-Iago of general-servants relationship. In scene II, Othello thrusts Iago more than Cassio, while as a matter of fact, Iago (the Janus faces) only pretends to be loyal to him.
Although Cassio is the truly faithful servant to Othello yet Othello shows that he lacks of faith in Cassio when he easily thrust Iago’s words and unprofessionally removes Cassio from his Lieutenant rank without further investigation. It is indeed an irony that someone with military skill like Othello fails to differentiate between the real enemy and friend. His careless at the end brings about to his own destruction.

Other theme that can be found in this play is woman status. In this play, the woman status is represent by two characters which is Desdemona and Emilia where both is similar in the way they are married. In Othello, women has lower status and always powerless than man. What is worse, the unmarried woman is often regards as a property to her father. This actually proves in Act I where Iago and Brabantio indicates Desdemona as if she is one of the properties “Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags!” (80- Act I scene I) and “she is abused, stol’n from me and corrupted (60-Act 1 scene III). Besides, men’s thought of woman is always weak and powerless can also be trace in this play. During the hearing at the court, it is Othello who voices up to call upon Desdemona and let her speak on her behalf. Desdemona proves that men are wrong and she actually is braver and confidence in voicing up her thought even though the truth will hurt her father.

Last but not least, the incompatibility of military heroism and love is also a notable theme of the play. Before and above all else, Othello is a soldier. From the earliest moments in the play, his career affects his married life. Asking “fit disposition” for his wife after being ordered to Cyprus, Othello notes that

‘the tyrant custom ...
Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war
My thrice-driven bed of down’.

While Desdemona is used to better “accommodation,” she nevertheless accompanies her husband to Cyprus. Moreover, she seems unperturbed by the tempest or Turks that threatened their crossing, and genuinely curious rather than irate when she is roused from bed by the drunken brawl in Act II, scene iii. She is, indeed, Othello’s “fair warrior,” and he is happiest when he has her by his side in the midst of military conflict or business. The military also provides Othello with a means to gain belonging in Venetian society. While the Venetians in the play are generally fearful of the prospect of Othello’s social entrance into white society through his marriage to Desdemona, all Venetians respect and honour him as a soldier. Mercenary Moors were, in fact, commonplace at the time.

Othello predicates his success in love on his success as a soldier, wooing Desdemona with tales of his military travels and battles. Once the Turks are drowned—by natural rather than military might—Othello is left without anything to do: the last act of military administration we see him perform is the viewing of fortifications in the extremely short second scene of Act III. No longer having a means of proving his manhood or honour in a public setting such as the court or the battlefield, Othello begins to feel uneasy with his footing in a private setting, the bedroom. Iago capitalizes on this uneasiness, calling Othello’s epileptic fit in Act IV, and scene I, “[a]passion most un suiting such a man.” In other words, Iago is calling Othello unsoldierly. Iago also takes care to mention that Cassio, whom Othello believes to be his competitor, saw him in his emasculating trance.

Desperate to cling to the security of his former identity as a soldier while his current identity as a lover crumbles, Othello begins to confuse the one with the other. His expression of his jealousy quickly devolves from the conventional—“Farewell the tranquil mind”—to the absurd:

Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars
That makes ambition virtue!
O, farewell, Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,  
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!"

One might well say that Othello is saying farewell to the wrong things—he is entirely preoccupied with his identity as a soldier. But his way of thinking is somewhat justified by its seductiveness to the audience as well. Critics and audiences alike find comfort and nobility in Othello’s final speech and the anecdote of the “malignant and ... turbaned Turk”, even though in that speech, as in his speech in Act III, scene iii, Othello depends on his identity as a soldier to glorify himself in the public’s memory, and to try to make his audience forget his and Desdemona’s disastrous marital experiment.

Like any others of Shakespeare’s works, the themes in Othello is equally revolves around the issues of human life. Besides love, jealousy, and pride are the common themes that can be found in his work. In conclusion, in Othello, jealousy is the main theme that is proves to be very harmful and can leads to destruction in one’s life. It is almost as disastrous as men greediness in gaining reputation. Men willing to do anything to secure their reputation but it still do not promise them that they will get it in the end. What is best is to always be grateful in what one has. The third theme is fidelity which is important in a relationship either between husband and wife, father and daughter, friends or servant and his master. Last but not least, woman has very low status in society compare to men. Their powerless state makes them the easy target to be use by men and easily been discriminate as unchaste which explain why Othello and Iago could be so suspicious with their wife.

Theme of Jealousy in Othello

Throughout Shakespeare’s Othello, the major theme of jealousy is apparent. The tragedy Othello focuses on the doom of Othello and the other major characters as a result of jealousy. “Othello” represents jealousy as one of the most corrupting and destructive of emotions. It is jealousy that prompts Iago to plot Othello’s downfall; jealousy, too, is the tool that Iago uses to arouse Othello’s passions. Roderigo and Bianca demonstrate jealousy at various times in the play, and Emilia demonstrates that she too knows the emotion well. Only Desdemona and Cassio, the true innocents of the story, seem beyond its clutches.

Like a classical tragic hero in the tragedy Othello falls from his position due to his ‘tragic flaw’ jealousy. Jealousy is the main tragic flaw that brings about Othello’s misfortune, suffering, and death. Though this flaw is fuelled by the external force like the witches in Macbeth, but jealousy seems to have a deep root in Othello’s character. It is the main factor that appears to destroy Othello. Iago is the initiator of the chain of events that sparks jealousy in Othello, and eventually leads to the downfall of not only the main character, but also of most of the significant characters of the play.

In Othello Shakespeare presents us with the tragic spectacle of a man who, in spirit of jealous rage, destroys what he loves best in the entire world. We will be able to best realize the tragic effect of jealousy if we consider first the nature of the relation between Othello and Desdemona. The marriage between Othello and Desdemona is a real ‘marriage of true minds’, a true love based on a mutual awareness and a true appreciation of each other’s worth, a love that has in it none of the element of sensual lust. The love of Othello and Desdemona transcends the physical barriers of colour, nationality and age. But this love is destroyed as soon as jealousyness enters into the mind of Othello.

It is Iago who plants the seeds of suspicion and jealousy in Othello’s mind. In Act III: Scene 3, Cassio speaks to Desdemona, asking her to intercede with Othello on his behalf. Desdemona willingly agrees, knowing that Cassio is an old friend of Othello’s. She promises to speak of him with her husband repeatedly until the quarrel is patched up and Cassio is recalled.
In the meantime, Othello and Iago enter and Cassio, who is embarrassed because of his antics the previous night, embraces Desdemona and departs. Iago seizes the opportunity to make an undermining comment — "Ha, I like not that" — that rankles in Othello's mind. Iago further insinuates that Cassio was not just leaving, but that he was "steal[ing] away so guilty-like" (39). Iago's words here are filled with forceful innuendo, and as he pretends to be a man who cannot believe what he sees, he introduces jealousy into Othello's subconscious.

Desdemona greets her husband and, without guilt, introduces Cassio's name into their conversation. Here, fate plays a major role in this tragedy; not even Iago wholly arranged this swift, coincidental confrontation of Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio, and certainly the pathos of Desdemona's position here is largely due to no other factor than fate. Desdemona speaks of Cassio, and Othello, to please her, agrees to see him, but he is distracted by his private thoughts. As Desdemona leaves, Othello chides himself for being irritated by his wife. Lovingly he sighs,

"Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul, But I do love thee! and when I love thee not, Chaos is come again" (90–92).

A conversation follows between Othello and Iago, in which Iago continues to imply that he knows something that he refuses to divulge, Othello denies that he would give himself over to jealousy. In his denial, he shows himself most vulnerable. He is consumed with doubt and suspicion. Othello voices his old fears that Brabantio was right, that it was unnatural for Desdemona to love him, that he was too horrible to be loved, and that it could not last. Iago leaves, and Othello contemplates his situation: He could be tricked, married to a woman who is already looking at other men, and he fears that he must wipe her out of his heart. He tries to tell himself that it is not true.

Iago also urges Othello to recall that Desdemona deceived her own father by marrying Othello. To Brabantio, Desdemona pretended to be afraid of Othello's dark looks; she pretended to shake and tremble at Othello's exotic demeanor, yet "she lov'd them [Othello's features] most" (207). The implication is clear; Iago does not have to state it: If Desdemona deceived her own flesh and blood, she might just as naturally deceive her husband.

When Desdemona re-enters, Othello's aspect is changed; he watches her intently, looking for signs, and brushes away her handkerchief when she seeks to soothe him. They go in to dinner, and Emilia picks up the fallen handkerchief, one that her husband, Iago, often urged her to steal from Desdemona. Emilia decides to have a copy made to give to Iago, but he enters, sees the handkerchief, and snatches it from her.

When Othello enters, Iago sees that Othello cannot regain his peace of mind. His speech is fevered, sweeping and frantic; he believes that his wife has been unfaithful to him. Othello then turns on Iago with savage intensity and demands to see the proof of Desdemona's infidelity. Cornered, Iago produces the dream story: Cassio spoke in his sleep, embraced him, called him Desdemona, and cursed the Moor. Iago tells Othello that he has seen Cassio wipe his brow with a handkerchief embroidered with strawberries; Othello recognizes this handkerchief as the one he gave to Desdemona.

Othello dismisses love and calls for vengeance. Certainty has freed his mind from doubt and confusion. Now he swears action, and Iago swears to help him. Othello wants Cassio dead, Iago agrees to do it, and then Othello wonders how to kill Desdemona.

The fire of jealousy is further inflamed in Othello in Act III: Scene 4. When Othello enters, he claims a headache and asks her for a handkerchief to bind his head, but he will have only the embroidered strawberry handkerchief. Desdemona cannot produce the handkerchief and tries to deflect his questions about the handkerchief, speaking again of Cassio. Othello walks out in fury.
But Othello is totally **engulfed by his jealousy in Act IV**: Scene 1, in which he sees his wife's handkerchief in the hands of Cassio's mistress Bianca. It is, for Othello, the "ocular proof" he sought. He is now convinced of Desdemona's infidelity and knows he must kill both Cassio and Desdemona that very night. This is the second time Othello has sworn to kill both Cassio and Desdemona.

Othello goes directly to the point: "How shall I murder him, Iago?" Othello swears also to kill his wife this night, he curses her and weeps over her at the same time, mingling love and murder: "for she shall not live; no, my heart is turned to stone . . . " (178–179).

Still Othello knows the **pull of love and asks for poison** so that he might kill her at a distance, but he sees justice in Iago's idea of strangling her in her bed, imagining that she has dishonored that bed. Again the agreement is made: Iago is to kill Cassio, and Othello is to kill Desdemona.

Thus we see how the **passion of jealousy**, which **derives from pride and breeds anger**, gradually gains control over Othello. The decline in the moral and spiritual stature of Othello goes hand in hand with the destruction of his love for and faith in Desdemona. The theme of jealousy is prominent throughout the play as it motivates the characters' actions.

The dramatic irony is that the most **jealous indignation is expressed over offenses that did not happen**: Othello jealous about his wife; Bianca jealous about Cassio; Iago formerly jealous about Emilia. Each character attempts to cope as an individual, except Emilia, who has a theory that jealousy is a constituent part of masculinity. The evidence before her own eyes backs up her assessment.

### The theme of ‘otherness’ in Othello

In this post-colonial context it is impossible to read Shakespeare’s Othello without considering the issues of race, color and hegemonic ideologies as they are presented in the play. As we go through the play we see a complex relation between a black man, a white woman and the state.

The **racial conflict** in Othello is evident from the very beginning of the play. Othello is depicted as an ‘other’ or outsider from the beginning of the play. Within the opening lines of the play, we see how Othello is distanced from much of the action that concerns and affects him. He is ambiguously referred to as "he" or "him" by Roderigo and Iago for much of the first scene and when they do begin to specify just who they are talking about, they use racial epithets, not names.

Iago uses racism in the opening scene of the play as a spark to inflame Desdemona’s father, Senator Brabantio, against Othello. After Iago and Roderigo raise a clamour outside Brabantio’s house late one evening, the senator awakens and comes to a window. Iago then uses vulgar animal imagery to slur Othello, telling Brabantio that the black Moor has seized his greatest treasure, his daughter, and at that very moment is defiling her.

Iago shouts to Brabantio

**... now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe. Arise, arise!**

There is an obvious racism in this quote. When Brabantio reacts with incredulity, Iago replies with a metaphor that this time compares Othello to a horse: ‘you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse’

Roderigo, whom Iago uses as a cat’s-paw, supports Iago’s story. Iago then says, "I am one, sir, that comes to tell you, your daughter and the Moor are now making
the beast with two backs”. Roderigo adds that Desdemona is indeed in the “gross clasps of a lascivious Moor”.

Brabantio, now convinced of the truth of the story, tells Roderigo to summon help. Roderigo also refers to Othello as ‘Thick lips’ and Iago continually uses the word ‘slave’, which are both racist terms.

The use of animal imagery is used to help convey Othello as a monster and the choices of animals shows the underlying racism: “Old Black ram” and “Barbary horse”. The references to witchcraft and the devil also help to emphasize Othello’s differences: “The devil will make a grandsire of you”, “the beast with two backs”. The playwright uses these characters to paint a picture of Othello as the embodiment of the black stereotype held by people at this time, labeling him as “different” to everyone else.

By and by, Brabantio and others appear. The senator, after denouncing Othello for taking Desdemona to his “sooty bosom”, accuses the Moor of having used “foul charms” and “drugs or minerals” to weaken Desdemona’s will.

The marriage between Othello and Desdemona was an inter-racial marriage. Previously Othello was a favourite to Brabantio and he along with Desdemona had had dinner many times with Othello. But why does he instantly react to the news of the marriage of Othello and Desdemona? It is because Othello is a Black. Instantly the matter becomes an issue in the Venetian council chamber, where the Duke and other senators are preparing for war against the Turks.

There is a clear theme of racism throughout, one which was firmly embedded in the Venetian society which rejects the marriage of Othello and Desdemona as wrong, 'against all rules of nature'. Nothing separates Othello from, ‘the wealthy curled darlings of our nation,’ except skin-colour. Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio combine to give us a portrait of Venetian racism.

After Othello speaks eloquently of his love for Desdemona and she speaks on his behalf, the Duke exonerates Othello. But in doing so, the Duke obliquely denigrates Othello because of his race—apparently unintentionally, in a Freudian slip—telling Brabantio, “Your son-in-law is more fair than black”, implying that fairness is superior to blackness. Brabantio reluctantly accepts the ruling.

The racial conflict becomes clearer when we consider of Iago’s ‘motiveless malignity’ against Othello. Iago seems to have few motives for his devious actions. Although he resents Othello being promoted before himself, it seems that from his speech that the thing he hates most about Othello is the colour of his skin. Because of this he uses unintelligent and colloquial racism to insult Othello. He refers to Othello as, ”Thick lips.”.

Essentially, Iago is a representative of the white race, a pre-Nazi figure who tries to inform the public of the impurity of Othello and Desdemona's marriage. He demonstrates how this miscegenation is threatening to the existing social order.

Having lost a battle, Iago continues to plot to win the war, still using racism as one of his weapons. Consider that in referring to Othello, he sometimes inserts the word black to remind listeners that the Moor is different, a man apart, a man to be isolated. For example, after referring to Othello in Act 1 as a “black ram,” he tells Michael Cassio in Act 2, Scene 2, “Come, lieutenant, I have a stoup of wine, and here without are a brace of Cyprus gallants that would fain have a measure to the health of black Othello” (25).

Iago’s scheme would not have worked without the underlying atmosphere of racial prejudice in Venetian society, a prejudice of which both Desdemona and Othello are very aware. Shakespeare’s Desdemona copes with prejudice by denying it access to her
own life: Her relationship with Othello is one of love, and she is deliberately loyal only to that.

The Jealousy and racism are both inter-connected. The thing that fuelled Othello’s jealousy was his belief that he is black and Desdemona is white. That he is unfit to retain her attention for long. Othello, in a fundamentally ethnocentric and racist society, finds himself confronted with the horrible reality of this self-contempt when there is cause to believe that Desdemona, whose loved had been the shield against his self-contempt, now betrays him too. Thus, Shakespeare's Othello is a psychoanalytic view of a self-loathing man and his doomed attempts to defend himself against a painful reality.

The society and culture, Othello finds himself, is one where racism and ethnocentrism prevailed and prejudices abounded. Othello, however, is not aware how deeply prejudice has penetrated into his own personality. This absorbed prejudice undermines him with thoughts akin to "I am not attractive," "I am not worthy of Desdemona," "It cannot be true that she really loves me," and "If she loves me, then there must be something wrong with her." These thoughts, inflamed by Iago's hints and lies, prevent Othello from discussing his concerns and fears directly with Desdemona, and so he acts on panicked assumption. In order to survive the combined onslaught of internalized prejudice and the directed venom of Iago, Othello would have had to be near perfect in strength and self-knowledge, and that is not a fair demand for anyone.

Thus racism plays a significant part in bringing the tragedy of Othello. Shakespeare is also sending an anti-racist message through his play Othello. Those who discriminate people racially are the truly devious characters and Shakespeare shows this clearly through Iago and Brabantio. Iago is portrayed as the most evil villain and also the hateful racist. By presenting the main villain of the play to have such deep-rooted racism, Shakespeare is denouncing those who attack people purely on the basis of the colour of their skin or their nationality.

**Theme of Honesty in Othello**

Shakespeare's well-known play Othello, first performed in 1604, explores the theme of honesty in detail. The words ‘honest’ and ‘honesty’ themselves are used 52 times in the text. On a deeper level, the characters in this play and their actions help to support the theme of honesty. The play’s villain, Iago, is the epitome of dishonesty and his untruthful nature is contrasted with the innocent Cassio and Desdemona. Emilia, Iago’s wife, is neither fully honest nor fully dishonest in her actions and dialogue, providing an interesting role in the play. The central theme of honesty is linked to motifs in the play, including reputation and irony.

Iago is an extremely manipulative character and a very good liar. He uses his skills in deception to lie to almost every other character in the play – in particular Othello, but also to Roderigo and Cassio. It is only the audience that knows of Iago’s true intentions and feelings. Iago tells the viewers in a soliloquy – “I do hate [Othello] as I do hell’s pains” and “nothing can... content my soul till I am even’d with him”.

Despite his consistent lying, he holds a reputation for being honest. It is this reputation that makes Othello believe every word Iago says, even calling him “honest Iago”. Othello’s appointment of Iago as an officer (because “a man he is of honesty and trust”) and also him giving Iago the duty of transporting his beloved wife to Cyprus clearly show that Othello had full trust in Iago. This ultimately leads to Othello’s death. Although certain aspects of Othello’s personality played a part in his downfall, Iago’s skill and care in his dishonest deeds could have fooled the biggest disbeliever. The original Elizabethan audience of Othello would have known that Satan is called ‘the father of lies’,...
so Iago’s dishonesty increases his villain status. The Elizabethan connection between the devil and lying is also seen when Othello “look[s] down toward [Iago’s] feet” when he discovers the truth about him – Othello was seeing whether or not Iago had devils hooves (the foot of a horse, deer, cow, or similar animal, covered with horny material) for feet. Iago is a main character whose dishonesty results in several main events in Othello. His personality emphasizes the central theme of honesty because his complete lack of it highlights the truthfulness of other characters.

Honesty in the 21st century is usually defined as telling the truth, but in the context of Othello is also means chastity. Desdemona is honest in both senses of the word. She remains completely faithful to her husband Othello and never tells a lie in the play. However, her secret marriage to Othello can be seen as deceptive. One can assume that she may have had to lie, or at least hide the truth from certain people, in order for her marriage to be carried out. She redeems herself somewhat when she whole-heartedly professes her love towards Othello in front of her father and the court. Still, the cunning Iago uses the fact that Desdemona betrayed her father to his advantage when trying to convince Othello of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness – “she did deceive her father, marrying you”. The one thing that Desdemona does which is somewhat untruthful is used by Iago, in a way that eventually leads to her murder. There is much irony in the fact that Othello chooses to believe everything the lying Iago says, while not believing anything the truthful Desdemona has to say. Furthermore, the more Desdemona tells the truth, the less Othello is inclined to trust her. When she repeatedly tries to convince Othello to reinstate Cassio, she thinks that she is doing a good thing, when she is really just increasing Othello’s suspicions. Shakespeare shows in Othello that though honesty is a worthy trait to have, there are many other factors that will affect other’s opinions of oneself. In the case of Desdemona, her honesty was not enough to save her life.

Iago’s dishonesty is contrasted with Desdemona, but is also contrasted with the character of Cassio. The word honest is used several times to describe Cassio. Although Cassio considers Desdemona to be “indeed perfection” he never pursues Desdemona, knowing that she and Othello are in a loving relationship. He is also the only attendant at their wedding. The differences in Iago and Cassio in terms of honesty relate well to the motif of reputation. Despite his lying ways, Iago retains his honest cover-up right until the end of the play. On the other hand, Cassio’s reputation is ruined when he takes part in a drunken fight, costing him his esteemed military position. From this point onwards, Othello no longer fully trusts Cassio. This demonstrates the importance of reputation, whether one’s reputation is actually valid or not. Othello continued to trust Iago throughout the play because Iago was still seen as a very honest man. If Othello ever doubted Iago, the play could easily have been very different. Iago may not have been honest but his honest reputation served him well and allowed him to carry out his scheming plans.

Emilia is an interesting character in Othello in regards to honesty. She did take Desdemona’s handkerchief and give it to Iago, which he then used to fully convince Othello of Desdemona’s infidelity. As Iago’s wife for a number of years, one assumes that she must have had some idea of Iago’s dishonesty. However, we must remember that in Shakespeare’s time women were always inferior to their husbands, and if Emilia were to risk her marriage she would also risk any hope of leading a respectable life. When Emilia does find out that Iago lied about Desdemona and Cassio, she is horrified – “My husband say that she was false?..If he say so, may his pernicious soul rot
“half a grain a day! He lies to the heart.” Despite threats from Othello she is the one that tells everyone that of Iago’s lies and that Othello killed Desdemona. There is irony when she speaks of the consequences of dishonesty in front of the most dishonest character in the play, Iago. She says that the person who lied about Desdemona is an “eternal villain, some busy and insinuating rogue, some cogging, cozening slave”. Emilia is important to the central theme of honesty in Othello because while she was technically, though unknowingly, Iago’s accomplice, she clearly did not stand for deceitfulness and was brave enough to tell the truth, even when it cost Emilia her life.

In Othello, the stark contrast between the innocence of Desdemona and Cassio and the double nature of the villainous Iago promotes the central theme of honesty. Through Iago’s plans, much tension is created as Othello continues to trust Iago due to his honest reputation, while holding his disbelief in the honest characters, Cassio and Desdemona. The irony of this situation keeps the audience engaged, while the role of Emilia as the truth teller of the play provides interest and also is another contrast with her lying husband Iago. The interactions between honesty and dishonesty are vital to the play Othello because they lead to the occurrence of significant events, most notably the event that makes this play a tragedy, the suicide of the protagonist Othello.

The Role of Women in Othello

In Othello by William Shakespeare, the role of Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca portray how women were during the 15th century. Women were portrayed as being loyal to their husbands; doing what they are told, and not going against their husband’s judgment or actions. These women represent three different characteristics in which women are being recognized in Othello. The women in Othello represent various levels of class, virtue, and intelligence. Desdemona is aristocratic, virtuous, and makes her own decisions; Emilia is the middle class, a maid, manipulated by Iago and loyal to Desdemona; and Bianca is the bottom of the line, being represented as a strumpet (prostitute). Iago states how women are weak, lazy, and inane and only desire physical pleasure.

Throughout the play Desdemona symbolizes innocence and helplessness. The first encounter with Desdemona, Shakespeare describes her as being mature and quite perceptive of events around her, especially when we meet Desdemona and how mature she is when she defends her love for Othello to her father Brabantio. Iago often tells Othello that she is unfaithful because Iago is implementing into Othello’s head that Desdemona is committing adultery with Cassio. She has a tendency to be sympathetic towards other people's situations, like Cassio. This also further inspired Othello's jealousy when Iago pointed out they were speaking in privacy. She often pays attention to other people's thoughts yet remains cynical if they differ to her own. She’s loyal to her husband in all aspects of life, whether it is mental or physical.

Desdemona is like a peacemaker because when Othello wanted to “fire” Cassio, she wanted peace between them. Therefore she talks to Cassio in private, which this leads to her husband accusing her of cheating. After the fight between Othello and Cassio, Desdemona wants to make peace between them. In today’s society, Desdemona is known as a housewife who cares for her husband and is behind him every step of the way. However, when it comes to the arguing with Othello, she becomes a woman being emotional abused by her husband, leading her death by her own husband at the end.

Emilia is Iago's wife, which says something about her submissive character already. She is also Desdemona's handmaiden; this is a vital part in her role in the play. She is the wife of pure evil, Iago, and the maid of the most kind, Desdemona. Emilia unknowingly plays a large role in Iago’s plan and is never suspicious. Emilia is, in some
cases, the opposite of Desdemona. Even though women should be faithful and loyal to their husband, she considers that women should have a voice; be more independent and not relying on their husbands’ all the time.

Emilia gets angry at the fact that Othello calls Desdemona an unfaithful wife, hence her stating, in Act 4, Scene 3, "But I do think it is their husbands' faults/ If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties, /And pour our treasures into foreign laps; /Or else break out in peevish jealousies, /Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us, /Or scant our former having in despite: /Why, we have galls; and though we have some grace, /Yet have we some revenge..." (217). Here Emilia is questioning men and how men can't be without women. Yes, men say that women are lazy and this and that, but women have more of a saying in this world then men do. The speech that Emilia gives talks about how women should not be a “slave” to their husbands. All women have a voice and that we should be independent and be respected.

Bianca is very obedient and sweet-tempered, leading her to have a good number of suitors. Bianca is the strumpet who Cassio is with; her role seems small but significant. Bianca, even though called a strumpet, she is also considering as a woman with a goal. Her goal is to feel love and trusted by a man, but she is deceived as a whore, especially from Emilia. Bianca is brought into this play as Cassio's jealous mistress; he gives her Desdemona's handkerchief, not realizing whose handkerchief it really was. She was aware of the great risk involved when she married a moor. All three characters feel that they, as women, should not be judged nor treated with any less respect as a man does because women have a voice and they need to be heard.

Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca live in a society where women can't do the thing men do. Desdemona generously nature tries to help Cassio retrieve his spot as Lieutenant back. Emilia had illusions about men or love or marriage vows, even after Desdemona explains the importance of the handkerchief. But, these three women live by their own wills. As Iago reminded Othello in Act 3, Scene 3 the faithless wife is a well-known member of Venetian society. Somewhat like Iago, Othello also see women as strumpets and unfaithful after the Iago convinces Othello in the adultery that Desdemona is committing. In Act 4, Scene 2, Othello says "Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, /Made to write "whore" upon? What committed? /Committed? O thou public commoner. /I should make very forges of my cheeks, /That would to cinders burn up modesty, /Did I but speak thy deeds" (197). As mentioned in this quote, Othello see women as being unfaithful and mostly consider them as whores, especially his wife.

Both Desdemona and Emilia are loyal to their husbands, however, Desdemona is more of a person who hides her true self because she feels that a women should not argue with her husband, the one she loves because during the Renaissance women were seen more as being the house wife and do agree to every decision and action their husband make. Hence the reason why she doesn't defend herself as well as she supposed to when Othello believes that she has committed adultery. Emilia is also respectful and loves her husband Iago, but when Othello calls Desdemona a whore we see another side of Emilia in which she thinks that calling his own wife a whore, is basically crossing a line. She questions the role of men because once you're married a trust and loyal bond is born; there shouldn't be any type of disrespect within "soul mates". Bianca is just a woman who is looking for some affection, but is independent to be with whoever she wants because she is not really committed with anyone.

Women during the 15th century were considered more as being a house maid/house wife. Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca represent the three different sides of women: the noble and loyal one, the one who believes in having a voice, and the one who wants affection from a guy who is easy (strumpet). These stereotypes, women are still being compared to in today's society. We learn something about each of these female stereotypes. Over a period of time, women have fought for the respect and equality; even though these stereotypes still exist today, women are stronger in
defending themselves and more respected. Shakespeare brings the theme of women roles because we learn how women felt during that time and how history brought women to be equal to men.

**Gender and Race in Othello**

In many of his works, William Shakespeare explores ideas of gender differences and racial tensions. Othello, a play whose characters are judged again and again based on appearances and outward characteristics, is one such work. The protagonist's different ethnic background provides a platform for probing ideas of racial conflict. Similarly, the presence of well-developed yet opposing female characters adds a dimension of gender conflict and feminist views. These seemingly separate themes of Othello-sexual difference and racial conflict-are closely connected because of similar ties of prej Judgment and stereotype. The play's treatment of sexual difference and gender roles strengthens Othello's racist tones and complicates ethnic tensions.

Women are an integral part of Othello. The chastity of a woman is highly valued, and Desdemona's perceived infidelity helps drive the action of the play, ultimately leading to the deaths of many characters, including herself and her husband Othello. Iago's hatred of women is evident throughout the play and could be part of his motivation to lead Othello to such jealousy. Desdemona and Emilia, her waiting lady, provide the central conflict for feminist and gender ideas. Women in Othello are portrayed with complexity and an obvious tension between feminist and anti-feminist ideals.

Desdemona, Othello's wife and Brabantio's daughter, is portrayed as the ideal woman. She is beautiful, chaste, and virtuous. Cassio describes her as "divine" (2.1.74) and tells Iago that "she is indeed perfection" (2.3.25). When her father questions her about her love for Othello, she gives the acceptable answer and professes loyalty to both Brabantio and Othello, claiming that the Moor is now her lord (1.3.183-191). Desdemona is eloquent and independent. She asserts herself and boldly professes her love for Othello to her father and the duke. She is honest in her love for her husband, wishing that "our loves and comforts should increase even as our days do grow" (2.1.193-194). Desdemona does not profess any feminist ideals or notions about love or relationships. She claims she would never cheat on her husband, not even "for the whole world" (4.3.82). She also appears to be submissive and passive in her marriage. She even identifies her own "simplesness" (1.3.249). On many occasions, Desdemona obeys her husband unalteringly and calls herself obedient (3.3.97). Even after Othello hits her, she does is bidding and leaves because she "will not stay to offend" him (4.1.250). Later after she has been abused, she asks Iago, "What shall I do to win my lord again?" (4.2.155). Desdemona remains subject to her husband even until he murders her, going so far as to tell Emilia that she killed herself (5.2.128), an admission of guilt for a crime she clearly did not commit. Desdemona is ideal in the sense that she is chaste and virtuous throughout the entire play. She also appears to be intelligent and is willing to stick up for herself to her father and defend her love for Othello. In her relationship with Othello, however, she is passive and submissive, the stereotypical meek wife.

Emilia, Iago's wife, is a stark contrast to Desdemona. In some respects, she too seems to be obedient to her husband. She picks up the handkerchief that Othello gave Desdemona because Iago "hath a hundred times wooed [her] to steal it" (3.3.308-309), also saying that she does "nothing but to please his fantasy" (3.3.315). In the same speech, however, Emilia also calls her husband "wayward" (3.3.308). After she gives him the handkerchief, she asks Iago why he wants it and threatens to take it back if it is not for some good purpose (3.3.333). Earlier in the play, Emilia talks back to Iago, asserting her independence when she says to him, "You shall not write my praise" (2.1.118). In her conversation with Desdemona about infidelity, Emilia informs her friend that she would commit adultery, giving the tongue-in-cheek response of "Nor I neither by this heavenly light; I might do 't as well i' the dark" (4.3.68-69). She professes her
opinion that if the wife falls, it is her husband's fault (4.3.89) and asserts her belief that women have "some revenge" (4.3.96-97). Emilia provides the feminist voice of Othello, asserting her independence from her husband and even admitting that she would commit adultery if the price were right. Her attitude towards men is somewhat cynical, as she says "They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; They eat us hungerly, and when they are full They belch us" (3.4.106-108).

The male characters of the play view women in varied ways. Cassio often idealizes Desdemona, praising her positive characteristics, even believing that she is "perfection" (2.3.25). Iago's attitude towards women is largely critical and negative. He tells Emilia that women are "pictures out of doors, Bells in your parlors, wildcats in your kitchens, Saints in your injuries, devils being offended, Players in your huswifery, and huswives in your beds" (2.1.111-114), meaning that women are often deceptive. He later says, "She never yet was foolish that was fair, For even her folly helped her to an heir" (2.1.137-138). Iago's cynical attitude towards women continues throughout the play, as he talks of women as being foolish and unfaithful creatures. Othello's views on women are more complex than Iago's. Othello loves and praises Desdemona often in the play. He tells Iago, "But that I love the gentle Desdemona, I would not my unhoused free condition Put into circumscription and confine for the sea's worth" (1.2.25-28). Othello tells his wife that he "cannot speak enough of this content...it is too much of joy" (2.1.196-197). After he believes that Desdemona is being unfaithful, however, his attitude changes dramatically. He becomes cynical and hostile, even hitting his wife (4.1.243). He accuses her, calls her a strumpet, and murders her because of her perceived infidelity (5.2). Othello's attitudes towards women transform from idealization into hatred.

There is a conflict in Othello between traditional views of women and more feminist views, as well as a conflict between the idealization of women and the resentment of women. Emilia is a feminist, assertive, independent model of womanhood, while Desdemona plays the ideal and passive female character. Women are portrayed in a varied and complex way in Othello.

The racial tension in the play is similar to the gender role tension because of opposing views. While Othello's specific ethnic background is not clear, he is obviously an outsider to Venetian society, of Northern African or African descent. His portrayal in the play is complicated, with evidence supporting both a racist view of the text and a non-racist view.

While Othello is the protagonist of the play, he is also responsible for Desdemona's murder. Iago holds strongly racist views towards him. He describes Othello and Desdemona's consummation as "an old black ram...tupping...a white ewe" (1.1.90-91) and "making the beast with two backs" (1.1.119-120). Iago calls him "an erring barbarian" (1.3.358) and claims that he is lacking in "a fresh appetite, loveliness in favor, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties" (2.1.230-231). He also describes Othello as "rash and very sudden in choler" (2.1.273). Iago is not the only character who holds racist attitudes towards Othello. Roderigo refers to him as "thick-lips" (1.1.68) and calls him "lascivious" (1.1.129). Brabantio cannot believe that his daughter could be happy with this outsider (1.1.167), and he thinks that the only way Othello could have wooed Desdemona is with charms (1.1.175-177). He accuses Othello, calling out, "O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?" (1.2.63). Brabantio claims that now Desdemona is "abused, stol'n...and corrupted By spells and medicines" (1.3.62-63). Othello himself says that he is "black and [has] not those soft parts of conversation" (3.3.279-280). When Othello believes that his wife has been unfaithful he claims that he will "tear her all to pieces" (3.3.446). In Act 4, he hits Desdemona, evidence of his violent temper and proneness to abuse (4.2.242). Othello could easily be read as a racist play. Its hero is often described in racist, degrading tones, and he is portrayed as abusive, jealous, and even murderous.
This play, however, also provides a contrasting view. While Othello is portrayed as violent in some scenes, he is the victim of the evil manipulation of Iago. Many characters in the play deeply respect Othello. Cassio entreats the "heavens [to] Give him defense against the elements" (2.1.46-47) and asks Jove to guard him (2.1.79). Iago himself admits that Othello is "of a constant loving, noble nature [and] will prove to Desdemona A most dear husband" (2.1.290-292). Montano describes him as "noble," (2.3.132) and many of his subordinates admire him. Othello is eloquent, as evident in his many speeches, such as the one in Act 1, Scene 3 (l.78-96). He claims that he won Desdemona's heart through his stories and words. He is confident, professing that his "parts, [his] title, and [his] perfect soul Shall manifest [him] rightly" (1.2.31-32). Othello asserts that he has "done the state some service" (5.2.349). While Othello is an outsider to this society in many ways, he is not completely excluded. He is a Christian, meaning he has accepted the religion of his society. He is a general in the army, so he has a respectable social status, and the majority of the population likes and admires Othello, even Brabantio, until he discovers the marriage of Othello and Desdemona. He is portrayed as courageous and honorable, and his love for his wife seems to be genuine. It is obvious throughout the play that Othello's jealousy and even his violence are a result of Iago's evil.

Racial tension in Othello is complicated because there are both racist and non-racist strains in the play. Iago is the most vocal racist character, but his racism and judgments are not portrayed positively. Other characters, however, also voice negative attitudes towards Othello because of his ethnicity. Although the protagonist is thought of as a brave and noble character, he is also portrayed as rash and violent, a common stereotype of "Moors." Othello's sexual relationship with Desdemona is described in carnal, beastial terms.

The negative language used to describe Othello is far stronger than the positive language used, and the images of Othello hitting and even murdering Desdemona are highly powerful. This language portrays Othello as animalistic and not as highly civilized because he cannot control his passions. These associations serve to perpetuate stereotypes of Africans and others of different ethnic identity. While Othello is certainly a victim of Iago's evil in this play, he is not a primarily sympathetic character. His deeds and his rage are not the result of any noble motivation, but simply mad jealousy. The racist tones of Othello are overpowering and outweigh the non-racist tones of the play.

Sexual difference and racial difference are both at the center of conflicts in this play. Women are judged by some characters as unfaithful and deceptive, simply because they are women. Othello is judged harshly simply because he is black. There is tension between the traditional ideal of woman and a more progressive view, just as there is tension between a racist society and an accepting society. The play's treatment of feminist tension and gender difference only serves to add to the racial overtones.

Women are treated as harshly as Othello is by Iago and other characters in the play. Women are assumed to be unfaithful, even by Othello himself, who has no real proof with which to accuse Desdemona of infidelity. Both Desdemona and Emilia are abused, either verbally or physically or both, by their husbands and other male characters in the play. Women are prejudged as guilty and wanton in Othello. These quick conclusions add to the overall tone of stereotyping, thereby strengthening the racist strains in the play.

Feminist and anti-feminist ideas are presented very clearly, with Desdemona representing one extreme, the passive ideal wife, and Emilia representing the other extreme, a progressive, independent, assertive woman. It is Desdemona, however, who is Othello's wife. It is Desdemona who is unfairly accused, abused, and strangled. While Emilia is also murdered by her husband, Desdemona is smothered (5.2.87), which suggests that she is controlled and manipulated to a greater degree than Emilia, whose murder is more rash and passionate. The portrayal of Desdemona's and Othello's
marriage plays up the stereotype of the violent Moor and the passive wife. This adds to the racial tones of the play and strengthens the racist view that Othello takes.

Gender differences and the tension between Emilia's feminist viewpoints and Desdemona's traditional ones serve to reinforce racism against Othello in this play. These tensions strengthen the view of Othello as a violent, even animalistic outsider. While Othello presents conflicting views on racism and stereotypes, the overall picture is one in which the play’s protagonist is treated with an edge of racist overtones.

Role of Chance and Coincidence in Othello

Othello is, among all the tragedies of Shakespeare, one in which the role of chance and accident is the most prominent. Iago’s skill was extraordinary, but so was his good fortune. Throughout the play we have instances of chances favouring Iago’s plot which otherwise would not have succeeded so easily.

A chance words from Desdemona, a chance meeting of Othello and Cassio, a question which starts to our lips and which anyone but Othello would have asked, would have destroyed Iago’s plot and ended his life. In their stead Desdemona drops her handkerchief at the moment most favourable to him, Cassio blunders into the presence of Othello only to find him in a swoon (loss of consciousness), Bianca arrives precisely when she is wanted to complete Othello deception and incense his anger to fury. All this and much more seems to us quite natural, so potent is the art of the dramatist; but it confounds us with a feeling (that) there is no escape from fate, and even with a feeling, absent from that play, that fate has taken sides with villainy”.

However all of these are not due to mere chance or accident. The dropping of Desdemona’s handkerchief at the moment when it is just right for Iago’s plot, Cassio’s arrival in front of Othello when he is in a swoon, and Bianca’s arrival when it suits Iago happen so close together that they appear as a single stroke of “the devil’s luck” for Iago. They can be called coincidences, deliberately contrived.

Many of the events that seem to be “accidents” are actually due to Iago’s brilliant contrivance. Brabantio is deliberately brought in, after being inflamed by both Roderigo and Iago at Desdemona’s deception, to embarrass Othello with his outcry and also to pave the way for later accusations to encourage Othello’s distrust of her:

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:  
She has deceived her father, and may thee.

Through Iago’s skilful manipulation Cassio gets drunk, lapses from the duty assigned to him and gets involved in a brawl and Othello comes in the middle of the night to demote him. This develops the situation further leading to Desdemona’s pleas on behalf of Cassio’s reinstatement, thus providing Iago opportunity for counter-insinuations regarding Desdemona and Cassio’s relationship. Desdemona drops her handkerchief by accident; Emilia is there to pick it up and gives it to Iago.

From then on Iago guides the ensuing events. He takes the handkerchief and leaves it in Cassio’s chamber, uses it as evidence with which to convince Othello, and supplies the construction Othello places upon the subsequent history of the handkerchief. Othello, beguiled as he is by Iago, at this point, has no independent judgment regarding the “evidence” provided by Iago. He does not try to investigate further the circumstances but blindly follows Iago’s insinuations and suggestions.

These accidents do not in any way diminish the importance of “character” in the tragedy. Despite the accident, Othello carries the full responsibility of his actions on his shoulders. He allowed human reason tube over ruled by passions and the will. We see how Iago infects Othello, corrupt his power of reasoning, makes him “passion’s slave” so that he commits a tragic murder without realizing his mistake. Such is the power of evil
and the deliberate malice of Iago. Othello recognizes his fatal error and accepts full responsibility of the wrong he has done and the remorse he feels finally destroys him, which makes him a tragic hero.

The **role of accidents** in Othello is less significant because they are not simply the workings of fate but **situations cleverly manipulated and exploited by a human agent**-Iago. Iago plans most of the events, calculates the motives and responses of his victims, and profits with diabolical cleverness from the chances, which occur and uses them to serve his purpose. Desdemona happened to be a Venetian and woman of Venice did not have a good reputation:

> In Venice they do let God see the pranks  
> They dare not show their husbands, their best conscience  
> Is not leave’t undone, but keep’t unknown?

These are Iago’s words as he pollutes Desdemona’s character by his vulgar insinuations. Also,

> She did deceive her father, marrying you.

Iago uses the circumstances to his own advantage, which is how his evil mind works. Othello is a Moor and Iago also uses this racial difference and his advanced age to imply that Desdemona has lost interest in him. Being a man of vehement feelings he trusts Iago completely, which is his undoing. Once the doubt is planted in his mind it takes complete control over him and he is carried along in a whirlwind of jealousy and emotion. He admits,

> “No, my heart is turn’d to stone;  
> I strike it, and it hurts my hand”.

Iago builds a cruel hatred in his heart against Desdemona and in his agony Othello cries,

> “O, blood, blood, and blood!”

Once he is resolved, there is no turning back for him. He compares his desire for revenge to the “icy current and compulsive course” of the Ponitc Sea that keeps moving forward:

> "Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,  
> Shall ne’er look back, ne’er ebb to humble love,  
> Till that a capable and wide revenge  
> Swallow them up”.

Othello had not known Desdemona long and she was the first woman in his life. All his life he had spent in camps and campaigns, which gave him no experience where women were concerned. Iago on the other hand, was also a professional soldier and had served with Othello so he knew how his mind worked. It was easy to plant a doubt in Othello’s mind that young girl of Desdemona’s beauty and gentle breeding could feel more than a passing fancy for a Moor like him, no matter how great and noble he was. Othello’s jealousy rises to uncontrollable passion that blinds him making him fall into trance-like state, totally unlike his normal calm self. Iago spends much of his time, in his soliloquies, attempting to explain to us how and why it all happened. It is this element of credibility which minimizes the so-called role of chance. The end of this tragedy only vindicates human worth and dignity in the justice that Othello bravely administers to himself.

**The Theory of ‘Double Time’ in Othello**

We experience both a long and a short passage of time while reading or witnessing the play. The double impression is not troubling us while actually reading or seeing the play. In fact several plays of Shakespeare seem to produce the same effect. This is bound to be so in any powerful play because the actual time, in which a play is staged, is definitely shorter than the time required for the events in the real life. This is so in all romantic plays as compared with the ‘classical’ plays in which the unities of time and place are observed.
“Short time” is also needed in Othello to make the action credible. The intensity of the passion of jealousy cannot be prolonged for the reason that, if delayed, it will either cool down, or the plot of Iago will surely be revealed to Othello by Cassio who is not allowed to meet his master in the play after he (Cassio) is dismissed. For these reasons, it is necessary that the action of the play must be made to move most speedily. This is what happens in the play from scene to scene particularly from act two onwards when the main characters of the tragedy arrive from Venice to the Island of Cyprus.

It is indeed from this point onward that the tragic action begins. It is on the same day of their arrival in Cyprus that at night the marriage festivities take place. It is during these Cassio is involved in a drinking and is dismissed.

Next morning Iago makes Cassio to go and request Desdemona to plead his case to Othello. At the next meeting Iago brings Othello, and Desdemona, surprised and confused, requests Othello to restore Cassio. It is in this scene that Iago begins to poison the mind of Othello with suspicion of Desdemona’s love for Cassio. It is here; too, that Desdemona drops her handkerchief, which Iago picks up. He then tells Othello that the he saw Cassio whipping his lips with the handkerchief. Othello asks Iago to kill Cassio.

Next, Cassio meets Bianca and asks her to copy the design of the handkerchief, which he found dropped in his own room. Iago now proves Cassio’s guilt by concealing Othello in such a way that he could overhear Cassio’s talk with Iago. In this conversation, Cassio talks of his affairs with Bianca and Othello is made to believe that Cassio is talking about Desdemona.

Soon after this, Iago gets Cassio killed by Roderigo who is himself killed by Iago. Othello then orders Desdemona to go to bed alone and smothers her in the bed. Before she dies, he learns the truth about her innocence, and thus it happens that Othello kills himself.

All these actions are shown to be done on the same night, that is to say, on the night following the arrival of Othello and party on the Island of Cyprus. The time covered by is a day and a night. This is the impression of ‘short time’ as dramatized on the stage in Othello.

However, this impression of ‘short time’ is made on us against a background of ‘long time’, converging several days pass before the tragic action takes place. For example, Roderigo complains that Iago has made him several promises, which have not been fulfilled. He complains that he has been following him for several days and that all his money (and all his patience too) has been exhausted. Nest, Bianca complains that Cassio has not met her for more than seven days and seven nights. Besides these, we also note that some weeks should have passed before Othello was recalled from Cyprus. The voyage between Venice and Cyprus certainly took several days.

Thus we get an impression of a longer time of married life before Othello kills Desdemona. Any delay or long time would surely have brought out the truth of Desdemona or Cassio’s innocence.

Such an effort reveals to us the dramatic genius of Shakespeare who is able to play astonishing tricks is played at all. This is the willing suspension of disbelief, which is the essence of artistic illusion. We are not aware of the presence of double time while we are actually witnessing the performance of the play. We are aware of it when we critically examine the details of the text. We should clearly understand that Shakespeare is deliberately compressing the action of the play in order to achieve the speed and intensity of the same, which are necessary for the powerful tragic feelings they produce. The action and passion of jealousy should be quick in order to be credible and powerful. In the case of Othello’s jealousy we need to assume to have in the text of the play. The cause of his passion is evidently adultery, but there is no time during, which this could
have happened during the tempestuous voyage. As we know, Cassio and Desdemona sail in different ships. And in Venice itself there was no occasion for adultery because Desdemona starts for Cyprus on the very day of marriage.

Where, then could such a crime have happened? It is to answer such a question that Shakespeare produces the impression of a longer time for the action of the play. He throws several suggestions, gives several hints and indications in the course of the text, which point to the probability of such longer time. What he does is that he presents a series of continuous and unbroken events on the stage, but these events are presented against a background of other events, which are not presented but narrated, and it is because of these events that we suppose that a longer time was needed to create the suspicion of crimes—of adultery in particular. It is not real adultery but the supposition and suspicion of it which causes the real tragedy. Iago makes Othello imagine that adultery has been committed. It is in his efforts to produce this impression that the impression of long time is suggested.

Shakespeare’s dramatic art is precisely seen in taking this ‘long time ‘story and combining it with the impression of ‘short time’—without letting the audience realize that such a combination is at all made. So we conclude that there is evidently in Othello a parallel of ‘short ‘and ‘long’ time impression, and that both these are necessary for a fuller appreciation of the tragedy.

**Othello as a Domestic Tragedy**

The story and theme of Othello is one that comes home to the business and bosoms of mankind that again, is to say that Othello dramatizes an emotion with which we are familiar, and which some of us might very well be expected to experience, namely, the doubt and suspicion whether wives are always loyal in conjugal relations—Or husbands, for that matters, jealousy in married life is a common experience and therefore a play that deals with it might very well be regarded as a domestic one. The problem of happiness in married life is closely related with the harmony existing at home between husband and wife. And this is precisely the harmony that Iago, in his aside, intends to destroy when he exclaims. "**I will set down the pegs that make this music,**” this is what he says as he sees Othello in raptures with Desdemona, and hears him say:

> And this, and this, the greatest discords be.
> That ever our hearts will make.

That is how we also see Othello on the stage with Desdemona in his arms as they both arrive in Cyprus after the terrible stormy voyage they undertook from Venice. Othello is playfully, yet passionately, kissing Desdemona and utters these words as he does so. This is a domestic scene of exquisite joy and sweetness, and it is an emotion, which we can share.

Besides this principal theme, which is a domestic one, we meet with, in Othello the people who are not far removed from us on social position. They are not kings and queens and princes and princesses but common subjects of the state, where they serve in several capacities. In other words, we can understand and share their joys and sorrows; we are at home with them and their problems. Hence, it is that note of intimacy is struck between the dramatis persona and us. This account for the ‘domestic’ atmosphere of Othello. (The Moor of Venice)

It is interesting to note that **marital jealousy** was a very popular theme on the Elizabethan stage. Othello, thus, could very well be described as a domestic and private life do not rise to the heights of great tragedy and that they lack the emotive force of the latter where the figures belong to high life such of kings and queens. It may be said of this criticism that it is not sound. As Dr. Johnson long ago pointed out,
“Shakespeare is always thinking primarily on men and their emotions however exalted their lives on the worldly plane might be. Hamlet and Lear do not affect us because they are kings and sons of kings but because they are mortals with all the errors and weakness to which mortal life in there. Secondly, even if Othello and Desdemona and Roderigo and Cassio do not belong on the political plane to the same order as Hamlet and Lear do, they are still endowed with a dignity and virtue, which do distance them from the merely average human nature, which we ordinarily known. The agony and passion of Othello is jealousy, the pitiful innocence and grace of the pleading Desdemona, the beauty and frankness of Cassio, which even his worst enemy, Iago, has to acknowledge even Roderigo the fool, with his worship of beauty, which Desdemona inspires these certainly cannot be described as lacking in emotive force. If anything, their fate and fortunes affect us most powerfully because we recognize in their natures, which we share and understand. Life is life—whether lived in private or in public and in Shakespeare’s tragedies in particular life is piled on life, and therefore domestic story dealing with the private lives of common human nature is capable of exciting feelings of pity and terror as powerful as those that are excited by the lives of kings and queens. It all depends how life is dramatically presented. Shakespeare is perfect because he knows how to exploit life at all levels for the purpose of moving the hearts of his audience. Hence we conclude that private life can be as emotionally stirring and uplifting as life on any other level.”

The tragedy of Othello and Desdemona is made by Shakespeare one of the most soul-stirring subjects in this play. It is not merely the story of jealous husbands but the type and symbol of fate, which causes the suffering of people who are really innocent Othello a great figure worthy of our awe and admiration on account of which we feel his tragedy as one that might as well happen to every one of us. The turning of a loving husband into a vindictive Iago as the cause of tragic misunderstanding. Iago is indeed the type of tragic fate. And his villainy is so subtle that there is an element of universality in his evil nature.

So Othello is not the type of domestic drama that appeals merely to our sense of pathos and satire but it arouses in us the true emotions of pity and terror. It is not the private life of married people that affects us in this tragedy, but the fate and fortune of true lovers turned tragic by the forces of evil embodied in Iago.

**Conflict between Morality and Immorality in “Othello”**

Shakespeare’s drama ‘Othello’ is one of conflicting morals, ethics and values, and the consequences of these conflicts. Shakespeare focuses these conflicts on the character of Othello and his actions, which are the results of complex moral dilemmas. In Othello, societal influences are used as a catalyst to conflicting situations, and contribute to the character development of Othello and his actions. Through these factors, Shakespeare reveals the underlying theme of morality in conflict.

When pressured to select between two alternatives which both end negatively, the individual faces a conflict between morality and immorality, and their feelings and actions towards this conflict highlight the state of society. The quest for a moral resolution in Othello is a result and reflection of the 1570s society. Protagonist Othello is the great general of the Venetian Army, and during a majority of the duration of the play, is in Cyprus, Venice to fight the battle between the Turks. “I swear 'tis better to be much abused, than but to know't a little”.

Othello is in an agonising state of jealousy and fury after learning about his wife Desdemona’s extra-marital affair, which is in fact a false accusation made by villain Iago. ‘Ignorance is bliss’ could be the most appropriate translation to what Othello wishes had stopped him from entering a moral conflict. Outraged by Desdemona’s supposed act of infidelity, Othello decides that killing his wife would be the solution to eliminate the sources of evil in the world. To eliminate evil, Othello commits evil.
This is a classic example of morality trapped in a conflict of epic proportions, fuelled by the war-enraged society.

The crime which had been committed would seem considerably more outrageous now than it did in the era of Shakespeare’s writing of Othello. This is due to Othello being set in Cyprus which was attacked by Turks in 1570, leading to the wars between Venice and Turkey. The exposure to mass killings and lingering misery in the overall atmosphere was a major catalyst to the loss of faith and morality in society. It was perhaps this change in social behaviour which had resulted in Othello being trapped in conflict, and being able to consider even the idea of murdering his own wife. In fact war was a major catalyst to morality being questioned in literature. In Othello, the characters view the explicit nature of the wars between Venice and Turkey, leading to immoral acts being committed even in the absence of negative intentions.

The character of Othello is also one which has been interestingly developed with the leverage of Othello’s morals in conflict; killing the evil he sees in his wife Desdemona in the hope of ‘cleaning out evil’ in the world. Protagonist Othello is depicted not as a generic, fair-skinned perfectionist, but rather in a way which defies the physical norm for a “hero”. Othello is Moorish, a descendant from Northern Africa, hence the colour of his skin. He is a man of great passion, and a physique suited to his title. However, we as an audience are instantly challenged by the portrayal of Othello, whose characteristics sway well away from those of a typical hero protagonist. Shakespeare attempts to question our morality. In the sixteenth century where racial equality was far from understood, a dark-skinned man is unquestionably deemed and given the same rights as an “average” but “higher status” citizen. This challenging portrayal of Othello is further challenged when he murders his wife. It is the “hero” of the play who commits the inhumane act, bringing forward the situation of a positive character facing confusion with a negative act, hence a moral dilemma. Shakespeare suggests that the character whose morals are in conflict is uncontrollable, performing overwhelmingly immoral acts.

The internal moral conflict faced by Othello can also be observed through his change of language throughout the play. Desdemona claims to have married Othello because of his ability to tell magnificent stories of his adventures, therefore it can be seen that Othello is very good with his words.

“But I love the gentle Desdemona,
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumscription and confine
For the sea’s worth” (1.2.25-28)

Othello’s language at the beginning is very powerful and heroic as he compares the nature of his love for Desdemona with the treasures of the sea. The use of dramatic imagery of the sea is successful in depicting Othello’s certainty and confidence in Desdemona’s love. However, this certainty and confidence is long gone in the later stages of the play after Iago has corrupted Othello’s faith by making him believe that Desdemona has been unfaithful. Othello no longer speaks with pride and wholesomeness; his language becomes uncertain and chaotic - “O misery!”, “O monstrous, monstrous!” Shakespeare makes it clear that Othello is heavily weakened by the moral dilemma through his drastic change in language. This is the result of Othello being stuck between believing Desdemona and believing Iago. The two poles of morality in this situation are so extreme, i.e. killing Desdemona or letting Desdemona live but risking a tarnished reputation, that Othello becomes engulfed by the pressure. His strong language in the initial stages shows a strong natured man, and his incoherent remarks in the later stages are the outcome of a man who has been weakened by conflicting morality.

In Othello, Shakespeare reveals conflicting morals through the character of Othello. The aspects of the play which give rise to moral dilemmas are influences of society, the portrayal of Othello, and a change in Othello’s behaviour through language. Shakespeare
combines these aspects to give the audience insight into deep conflicts of morality, both internal and external.

**The Symbolic Meanings of the Handkerchief in ‘Othello’**

The handkerchief in William Shakespeare's 'Othello' is best-remembered as the damning, though circumstantial evidence of Desdemona's infidelity. Planted in Cassio's room by the scheming Iago, his possession of the handkerchief convinces Othello of Cassio's affair with Desdemona. Subsequently, Othello is driven mad by jealousy and murders his wife. In addition to this crucial function in the plot, the handkerchief serves as a powerful symbol with multiple meanings. The symbolic meaning of the handkerchief is changeable throughout the play and is dependent on the perspectives of the characters who exchange it. Although a seemingly trivial item, the many symbolic meanings of the handkerchief play an invaluable role in Othello.

As a gift given by Othello to Desdemona during their courtship, the initial symbolism of the handkerchief is love. For Othello, the handkerchief holds sentimental value because it had belonged to his mother, making the gift of it to Desdemona even more meaningful. The spirit of Othello's gift is not lost on Desdemona, and she always has the handkerchief in her possession "to kiss and talk to" (III.iii.296). The love Desdemona and Othello associate with the handkerchief leads Iago to covet it for use in his plot to ruin Othello.

The first mention of the handkerchief comes in Act III, when following a conversation with Iago, Othello complains of a headache. Desdemona produces the handkerchief and offers to bind his head, but Othello dismisses her efforts: "Your napkin is too little:" (III.iii.287). At this time, the handkerchief is fatefully dropped and lost, falling into the hands of Emilia. Because Emilia knows that her husband Iago wants the handkerchief, in her possession the handkerchief becomes a symbol of her husband's hard-won favor. Emilia gives the handkerchief to Iago who immediately implements it into his plan. With the handkerchief in his pocket, Iago plants further suspicion in Othello's mind when he claims that he saw it in Cassio's possession. Because of the special symbolism the handkerchief holds for Othello, Iago's allegation that Cassio had wiped his beard with the handkerchief serves to further embroil Othello's jealousy.

Moments prior to this conversation, Desdemona had attempted to bind Othello's head with the handkerchief, making Iago's story implausible. Had Othello recognized this inconsistency, Iago's deceit would have been revealed. However, Othello is blinded by his jealousy and taken in by Iago's manipulation. In this way, the handkerchief is symbolic of Othello's willingness to believe the lies and blindness to the truth. Othello sees the handkerchief only when it implicates Desdemona's guilt.

Iago's accusation concerning the handkerchief causes its transition from a token of love to a symbol of Desdemona's fidelity (or infidelity). Equating Desdemona's faithfulness with the tangible handkerchief, Othello asks her for it. When she admits she does not have it, Othello tells Desdemona that the handkerchief has been given to his mother by an Egyptian charmer. Othello goes on to tell Desdemona that the handkerchief has "magic in the web of it" and the embroidery of strawberries "(III. Iv. 69) was dyed in mummy which the skilful/Conserv'd of maidens' hearts" (II.iv.74-75). Although Othello's story appears sincere, it is inconsistent with Othello's confession at the end of the tragedy that the handkerchief was "an antique token" (V.ii.216) given to his mother by his father.

The grisly mention of the embroidery being dyed with the mummified hearts of virgins is a metaphor for virginal blood and the handkerchief a metaphor for the wedding sheets. For Othello's mother, the handkerchief possessed the power to "subdue" (III.iv.59) his father "Entirely to her love" (III.iv.60), much as Desdemona's fidelity gives her power over Othello.
The handkerchief again changes hands when Iago plants the handkerchief in Cassio's room. The appearance of the handkerchief is a mystery to Cassio who gives it to the prostitute, Bianca to copy. As it does for Othello, the handkerchief inspires Bianca's jealousy and in her eyes a symbol of Cassio's infidelity: "O Cassio, whence came this?/This is some token from a newer friend" (III.vi.180-181). A later argument between Bianca and Cassio over the handkerchief is witnessed by Othello. Refusing to copy the work in the handkerchief, Bianca returns it to Cassio telling him: "This is some minx's token, and I must take/out the work? There; give it your hobby-horse:/wheresoever you had it, I'll take out no work on't" (IV.i.153-155). Having witnessed this exchange, Othello is convinced Desdemona is the "minx" and "hobby-horse" Bianca refers to and plots the murder of his wife and Cassio.

The murder of Desdemona takes place in the bedchamber she shares with Othello. Keeping with the symbolism of the handkerchief, Emilia has made the bed with their wedding sheets as Desdemona requested. When Othello wakes and confronts the sleeping Desdemona, he throws several accusations at her, the worse of which is that she gave the handkerchief to Cassio. The weight of this accusation is found in the meaning of handkerchief to Othello - Desdemona's love and fidelity; both of which Othello believes Desdemona has given to Cassio.

After the death of Desdemona, the evidence that served to seal her fate ironically clears her name. When Emilia at last reveals the truth, the handkerchief becomes the evidence of Desdemona's innocence and the indictment of Iago's guilt:

\[
\text{O thou dull Moor! that handkerchief thou speak'\text{st} of} \\
\text{I found by fortune and did give my husband;} \\
\text{For often, with a solemn earnestness,} \\
\text{More than indeed belong'd to such a trifle,} \\
\text{He begg'd of me to steal it (V.ii.225-229).}
\]

Emilia refers to the handkerchief as a "trifle" (V.ii.228). Emilia is pointing to the absurdity of murder over a handkerchief, but her choice of words is also ironic given the many complex and weighty meanings the handkerchief represents throughout the play: love, infidelity, jealousy, deceit and so forth. Although a seemingly inconsequential item, the handkerchief's many symbolic meanings are imperative to the execution of the plot and its tragic conclusion.

Starting out as a token of love, the handkerchief in William Shakespeare's Othello becomes the fabricated evidence of Desdemona's infidelity. Exchanging hands throughout the play, the handkerchief morphs again and again into different symbolic representations. In this manner, the handkerchief ceases to be the "trifle" Emilia deems it to be and becomes a central plot device. The symbolism attached to the handkerchief makes it indispensable to the execution of Othello and earns it its reputation as an item of infamy.

**Dramatic Irony in Othello**

In Othello, written by Shakespeare, dramatic irony is used to develop our understanding of characters in the play. Through soliloquies and asides, dramatic irony gives the audience knowledge and information that other characters do not have. This creates tension and suspense because the audience wonders if the truth will come out in time. In Othello, Iago's soliloquies reveal his plans and also give us an understanding into his true nature that we would not get from his interactions with Othello. Through the soliloquy's, we also learn how trusting and easily lead Othello is.

Dramatic irony is used to develop our understanding of Iago as a character, it reveals who he is, not the mask of an honest follower he puts up for Othello. Iago is a
Machiavellian character. A Machiavellian character is deceitful, expedient and cunning. They are clever and ruled by their goals. Machiavellian characters are quite common in Shakespeare’s plays with Hamlet and Richard II from their eponymous works having the same characteristics as Iago. They are all out for themselves as exemplified in Iago’s own soliloquy: “Others there are who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty, keep yet their hearts attending on themselves... and such a one I do profess myself.” In that passage, we learn that although Iago seems that he has a duty to someone, he is really only out for himself, so he can get somewhere in life. We learn of Iago’s cunningness in another soliloquy: “After some time, to abuse Othello’s ear that he is too familiar with his wife; he hath a person and a smooth dispose to be suspected, framed to make woman false.” The audience learns of Iago’s clever plan to destroy his enemies. This teaches the audience of Iago’s deceitful nature.

As a true Machiavellian character, Iago is shown to be honest, reliable and people count on him for his opinions. But, as the audience learns through his soliloquies, he embodies the opposite of these qualities, which gives the play some dramatic irony. Here the audience is hoping that Othello can see his fault in relying and trusting in Iago before it is too late. The jealous part of Iago’s complicated character is revealed to the audience when he divulges to us why he detests Michael Cassio and Othello. “I hate the Moor, and it is thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets he’s done my office. I know not if’t be true yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind, will do as if for surety.” This shows the audience that Iago suspects Othello has slept with his wife, Emilia. Iago’s jealousy is displayed when Iago admits that he doesn’t know for sure if Othello has done what is rumoured but he will get back at him anyway in case it is true. The audience see that he doesn’t have any sustainable evidence against Othello but he will accuse him of sleeping with his wife anyway. Iago also makes it clear of his jealousy for Cassio: “Cassio’s a proper man: let me see now; to get his place and to plume up my will in double knavery.” Iago wants Cassio’s placing at lieutenant and believes he is better for the job. The audience can also see through this part of the soliloquy how depraved Iago is as he wants to “plume up my will”, meaning he wants to have a little fun while destroying Cassio, showing us that this is a game to him and he gets enjoyment out of his plan. Through dramatic irony, we get an understanding of Iago’s evil, deceitful and jealous character.

The audience also gets a deeper understanding of the character of Othello, the eponymous protagonist, through dramatic irony. We learn how trusting Othello is of others as he relies on his ensign Iago for advice and trusts him greatly. He mentions the words ‘honest’ or ‘honesty’ in relation to Iago over 50 times in the play. This shows the audience how assured he is that Iago is a reliable and reputable man. But what the audience knows that he doesn’t is how corrupt and untrustworthy Iago is. Through dramatic irony we know that Iago, in fact, despises Othello and the audience discovers that Othello must be very trusting not to see or want to see through the mask of honesty and companionship that Iago shows Othello. Othello is also very easily led, despite his title as Army General. Because of his fatal flaw, jealousy, he chooses to see what he wants to see. This makes him easily manipulated by Iago into believing that Desdemona has cheated on him with Cassio. The audience knew that Desdemona had been faithful and saw how easily Othello was tricked into believing that she wasn’t because of the weak evidence Iago gave him. “but such a handkerchief- I am sure it was your wife’s- did I today see Cassio wipe his beard with.” And Othello was quick to believe him: “O that the slave had forty thousand lives! One is too poor, too
weak, for my revenge. Now do I see 'tis true. Look here, Iago, All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven; 'Tis gone.” Because of dramatic irony, we see how easily manipulated Othello is into believing what isn’t true.

In Shakespeare’s play Othello, dramatic irony creates an understanding of character. We get to understand how cunning, deceitful and jealous Iago really is while he is perceived to be very honest and trustworthy. Through dramatic irony, the audience also understands Othello as a character because we see how trusting and easily led he really is. Dramatic irony shows us parts of characters we would not get to see otherwise, through dialogue with other characters.

**Stages of Iago’s attempt to seduce Othello**

**Introduction:** Conventionally Morality drama has a temptation scene in which man is subjected to the Devil’s allurements. The third act of Othello has a scene that corresponds to it. Othello is entangled in a situation where he must choose between the two, Iago’s poisoning or his love for Desdemona. At the end of the scene, he is embraced by Iago in a spiritual union and Desdemona is ultimately rejected. He sees through the eyes of Iago. The tools and threads, with which he will weave his net, have already been prepared. Othello has not yet learnt to question and he will be guided by the code of Iago and will be guided by him to the point of his devastation.

**Credibility:** Although the temptation scene has been criticized as incredible, it is quite convincing in its dramatic context. Shakespeare’s artistry infuses the scene with an illusion of reality which is remarkably effective in the theatre. The very speed of the action carries the audience along in Iago’s spell and gives it no opportunity to consider questions of logical probability. Shakespeare has certainly provided certain elements in the first two acts which make seduction of Othello plausible. He has stressed his simple trust in Iago, his unfamiliarity with civilized life and particularly with Venetian women, his role as an alien ever potentially hostile society. Perhaps most significantly, by a series of events, Shakespeare has caused Othello to doubt his own powers of judgment and perception. His marriage to Desdemona has resulted in an accusation of witchcraft from one who has always been his friend. Cassio, the officer he has so carefully chosen, in his drunkenness has caused Othello to question the wisdom of his choice. Othello is now ready to question the goodness of Desdemona in which he had believed as firmly as in the friendship of Brabantio and the soldiership of Cassio.

**Iago’s Offensive:** Iago excites Othello’s natural curiosity by his veiled remarks touching the honesty of Cassio and by the implication that he has secret knowledge which he will not reveal. There’s no evidence of jealousy on Othello’s part; however, until Iago himself raises the issue. O, beware, my lord, of jealousy. This suggestion Othello at first resists with the memory of Desdemona’s virtue and with a true awareness of his own excellence for which she married him. Othello’s awareness of how jealousy operates is in effect a rejection of jealousy. To this point of the scene, Iago has been unsuccessful. He has not been able to shake Othello’s faith in himself and Desdemona. Now he turns to Othello’s ignorance of Venus.

**In Venus they do let God see the pranks**
**They dare not show their husbands; their best**
**Conscience**
**Is not to leav’t undone, but keep’t unknown**
Here Othello’s belief is shaken and he tends to doubt whether the virtue of Venetian girls is a mask seeming virtue only and not the inner one for which he married Desdemona.

She did deceive her father, marrying you;  
And when she seem’d to shake and fear your looks,  
She lov’d them most.

Here, presenting the motifs of evil wearing the mask of apparent virtue, Iago gains his first victory, for Othello is forced to reply ‘And so she did.’ It is Othello who first raises the question of Unnaturalness which had earlier been pleaded by Brabantio before the Venetian Council. He is now inseparably stuck to the point of unnaturalness and is drawn to the side of Iago. He is fully convinced of Iago’s expertise in human psychology and dealing.

This fellow’s of exceedings honesty,  
And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit,  
Of human dealing.

After this attack of Iago, his spiritual union with Desdemona appears to him only a sensual appetite and he begins to see things through the eyes of Iago.

Othello’s Struggle: -  
There are moments in which, we find Othello breaking the net laid down by Iago. When Desdemona is before him, he finds her again the same beautiful and virtuous Venetian girl who saw Othello’s visage in his mind and not in his face. He rejects all doubts attached to her by Iago and says,

If she false, O, then heaven mocks itself!  
I’ll not believe it.

But when she tries to bind his temples, he is overcome by the poison fed by Iago. His honour is at stake and he farewells the soldier’s life. He says that he is ready to accept all evil attach to her; but hidden from him.

Othello’s Surrender: -  
Although, Othello still demands proof, jealousy has so maddened him and benumbed his reason that he is willing to accept whatever proof and evidence, Iago has to present as truth. Iago’s lie about Cassio’s dream and his sensuous descriptions are all enough for Othello to dig his own grave. He renounces his love for Desdemona and accepts hatred and revenge. Iago’s words have so worked upon him that Othello ends up with Desdemona as evil and Iago as his Lieutenant again and he even gives orders for the death of Cassio.

Othello’s Delusion: -  
Despite the fact that Othello has allowed himself to be ensnared by Iago, there is awe and solemnity in the culmination of the surrender scene. Othello, in his delusion, would convert his sinful vengeance into the guise of a lawful justice and his hatred into duty. Truth will appear as falsehood, love and loyalty as lust and betrayal. Always in his delusion, Othello will see himself as the instrument of justice executing his duty his duty in a solemn ritual, although his court-room will be brothel and his act of justice the destruction of love and truth.

Iago : Evil Personified

William Shakespeare has always been known for creating notable characters, who through sheer will and perseverance greatly affect the structure of their respective story worlds; Iago is no exception. He is widely considered to be one of the most prolific
villains in all of Shakespeare’s plays. Iago is not only one of the greatest villains of Shakespeare but also one of the cleverest. If Iago had used his incredible abilities for good, he would most likely be considered one of the greatest heroes in all of Shakespeare, instead of the greatest villain. However, this is not the path he chooses.

Iago is considered to be one of the greatest Shakespearean villains because he uses his incredible logic to deceive many characters in the play, his goals never change no matter how many times his motives might, and he does not stop until everyone in his way has been eliminated.

Without a doubt, Iago possesses a gift: the ability to instantly assess any situation he is in and then adapt to the situation to twist it in his favor, thus being able to deceive anyone without much trouble. This skill is first revealed in his first soliloquy:

“After some time, to abuse Othello’s ear
That he is too familiar with his wife.
He hath a person and a smooth dispose
To be suspected, framed to make women false.
The Moor is of a free and open nature
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
And will as tenderly be led by th' nose
As asses are” (1.3. 338-445).

Iago hadn’t already thoroughly organized his revenge at this point. He was only beginning to plot. He exhibits masterful thinking by devising a plan to destroy Othello on the spot. His goal quickly becomes to bring Cassio’s affection towards Desdemona to light. The realization that Cassio is a perfect target of Othello’s jealousy only furthers Iago’s enthusiasm. He understands that Cassio is a well-spoken and handsome gentleman, and it would seem completely natural that Desdemona would fall for him.

Then Iago makes a crucial discovery: Othello’s weakness. Othello is straightforward and never thinks twice about what he believes. Iago thinks that because Othello trusts men that seem honest without question, he can easily befriend him with his ability to deceive. After Iago has spoken to Othello about Cassio and Desdemona, he has another revelation and delivers yet another soliloquy:

“will in Cassio’s lodging lose this napkin
And let him find it. Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ. This may do something.
The Moor already changes with my poison.
Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons
Which at the first are scarce found to distaste,
But with a little act upon the blood
Burn like the mines of sulfur” (3.3. 369-377).

His objective here is to cause Cassio to believe that Desdemona has feelings for him. When more than one person is deceived, the truth is much harder to find. Othello wouldn’t be able to detect a lie because Cassio was well convinced as well; the one person Othello believes could reveal the truth doesn’t even know the truth himself. Iago knew that if Othello hadn’t already been jealous, the handkerchief would not have been a successful endeavor. However, Iago points out here that the smallest thing to a jealous man can blow up in his face, leaving him scarred with hatred.
Iago is pure evil because once he loses his main motive for revenge he continues the path of destruction anyway. He begins the play jealous of Cassio because Othello promoted Cassio to Lieutenant instead of him. Iago then goes about getting Cassio drunk so that he will be seen as unfit as a Lieutenant (2.3. 40-43). Once Othello had demoted him, Iago’s quest for revenge should have stopped there. Instead, Iago decides to ruin Othello. He also goes about ruining Desdemona and Cassio even further. Iago seems to be having too much fun with himself to stop at this point. He leads Othello on and convinces him that his wife is cheating on him (4.1. 190-196). This ruins Desdemona’s reputation to Othello as being pure and faithful. Desdemona will eventually be ruined beyond repair when a jealous Othello finally murders her. Iago apparently didn’t have enough with Cassio once he had gotten him demoted. Iago brings Cassio aside within earshot of a hidden Othello as he gets him to “admit” to sleeping with Desdemona. He is actually talking about Bianca when he says,

“I marry her! What? A customer? Pr thee bear some charity to my wit. Do not think it so unwhole-some. Ha, ha, ha!” (4.1. 138-140).

He calls Bianca a whore, but Othello believes that he is talking about Desdemona. So not only does Othello believe that Cassio has slept with Desdemona, he also thinks that Cassio doesn’t even respect her so he would turn around and cheat on her as well. He then vows to kill Cassio.

Iago plans to eliminate all opposition. Othello approaches Iago and says,

“How shall I murder him, Iago?” (4.1. 188-189).

Othello is willing to get rid of Cassio for Iago. Othello also plots to kill Desdemona. Othello gives the task of murdering Cassio to Iago who then gives the task to his loyal and naïve friend Roderigo. Roderigo fails and is killed by Cassio, but Iago stabs Cassio and flees without being seen. When Othello tells Desdemona that Cassio has been killed, she weeps for him: “Alas, he is betrayed, and I undone” (5.2. 96), which is the last straw and Othello makes up his mind. He then smothers her to death. Emilia begins to realize what is going on and tells Othello that Iago only spoke of lies. To shut her up, Iago stabs her; he kills his own wife. Only true evil could possess someone to kill their own wife only to preserve their own self-image.

There is no character more evil than Iago. He will do anything and everything to get what he wants and he does not care who he hurts in the process. He also has basically no motive for the majority of the play. He might’ve realized that what he was doing reached a point where it no longer had a meaning, but he simply shrugs his shoulders as if to say, “I might as well finish what I started”. This mentality when incorporated with jealousy can only stem from a truly evil and disturbed man.
The Importance of Being Ernest
Oscar Wilde, celebrated playwright and literary provocateur, was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford before settling in London. During his days at Dublin and Oxford, he developed a set of attitudes and postures for which he would eventually become famous. Chief among these were his flamboyant style of dress, his contempt for conventional values, and his belief in aestheticism—a movement that embraced the principle of art for the sake of beauty and beauty alone. After a stunning performance in college, Wilde settled in London in 1878, where he moved in circles that included Lillie Langtry, the novelists Henry James and George Moore, and the young William Butler Yeats.

Literary and artistic acclaim were slow in coming to Wilde. In 1884, when he married Constance Lloyd, Wilde’s writing career was still a work in progress. He had gone on a lecture tour of North America and been lampooned in the 1881 Gilbert and Sullivan operetta Patience as the self-consciously idiosyncratic philosopher-poet Reginald Bunthorne, but he was celebrated chiefly as a well-known personality and a wit. He may have been the first person ever to become famous for being famous.

During the late 1880s, Wilde wrote reviews, edited a women’s magazine, and published a volume of poetry and one of children’s stories. In 1891, his only novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, appeared and was attacked as scandalous and immoral. In that same year, he met Lord Alfred Douglas, who would eventually become his lover, and Wilde finally hit his literary stride. Over the next few years, he wrote four plays: Lady Windermere’s Fan, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband, and The Importance of Being Earnest.

Lady Windermere’s Fan and A Woman of No Importance enjoyed successful runs in the West End in 1892 and 1893, respectively. An Ideal Husband opened in January 1895, but it was The Importance of Being Earnest, which opened a month later, that is regarded by many as Oscar Wilde’s masterpiece. Its first performance at the St. James’s Theater on February 14, 1895 came at the height of Wilde’s success as a popular dramatist. Wilde was finally the darling of London society, a position he had striven for years to attain.

In many ways, The Importance of Being Earnest was an artistic breakthrough for Wilde, something between self-parody and a deceptively flippant commentary on the dramatic genre in which Wilde had already had so much success. Wilde’s genre of choice was the Victorian melodrama, or “sentimental comedy,” derived from the French variety of “well-made play” popularized by Scribe and Sardou. In such plays, fallen women and abandoned children of uncertain parentage figure prominently, letters cross and recross the stage, and dark secrets from the past rise to threaten the happiness of seemingly respectable, well-meaning characters. In Wilde’s hands, the form of Victorian melodrama became something else entirely. Wilde introduced a new character to the genre, the figure of the “dandy” (a man who pays excessive attention to his appearance). This figure added a moral texture the form had never before possessed. The character of the dandy was heavily autobiographical and often a stand-in for Wilde himself, a witty, overdressed, self-styled philosopher who speaks in epigrams and paradoxes, ridicules the cant and hypocrisy of society’s moral arbiters, and self-deprecatingly presents himself as trivial, shallow, and ineffectual. In fact, the dandy in these plays always proves to be deeply moral and essential to the happy resolution of the plot.

The Importance of Being Earnest was an early experiment in Victorian melodrama. Part satire, part comedy of manners, and part intellectual farce, this play seems to have
nothing at stake because the world it presents is so bluntly and ostentatiously artificial. Below the surface of the light, brittle comedy, however, is a serious subtext that takes aim at self-righteous moralism and hypocrisy, the very aspects of Victorian society that would, in part, bring about Wilde's downfall.

During 1895, however, a series of catastrophes stemming from Wilde's relationship with Lord Alfred, also a poet, led to personal humiliation and social, professional, and financial ruin. On February 28, 1895, two weeks after The Importance of Being Earnest's opening night, Lord Alfred's belligerent, homophobic father, the Marquess of Queensberry, publicly accused Wilde of "posing as a sodomite." The nobleman meant "sodomite," of course, an insulting and potentially defamatory term for a homosexual. Queensberry had for some time been harassing Wilde with insulting letters, notes, and confrontations and had hoped to disrupt the opening night of The Importance of Being Earnest with a public demonstration, which never took place. Against the advice of his friends, Wilde sued for libel and lost. Wilde probably should have fled the country, as the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had made homosexual acts punishable by up to two years' imprisonment. However, Wilde chose to stay and was arrested. Despite information about Wilde's private life and writings that emerged at the trial, the prosecution initially proved unsuccessful. However, Wilde was tried a second time, convicted, and sentenced to prison for two years.

Wilde may have remained in England for a number of reasons, including self-destructiveness, denial, desperation, and a desire for martyrdom. However, some historians have suggested that Wilde's relentless persecution by the government was a diversionary tactic. Lord Alfred's older brother was reportedly also having a homosexual affair with Archibald Philip Primrose, Lord Rosebery, the man who would become prime minister. Queensberry was apparently so outraged that he threatened to disclose the relationship, and the government reacted by punishing Wilde and his lover in an effort to assuage the marquess. In any case, Wilde served his full sentence under conditions of utmost hardship and cruelty. Following his release from prison, his health and spirit broken, he sought exile in France, where he lived out the last two years of his life in poverty and obscurity under an assumed name. He died in Paris in 1900.

For sixty or seventy years after Wilde's death, critics and audiences regarded The Importance of Being Earnest as a delightful but utterly frivolous and superficial comedy, a view that partly reflects the mindset of a period in which homosexuality remained a guarded topic. The decriminalization of homosexuality in England in 1967 and the emergence in American of an interest in gay culture, and particularly in the covert homosexual literature of the past, has made it possible to view the play in a different light. The play's danger and subversion are easier to see from a twenty-first-century perspective. In the ambiguity over exactly what people refer to when they speak of "wicked" or immoral behavior, we can detect a system of coded references to homosexuality, just as we can infer a more general comment on the hypocrisy of late Victorian society.

**Five Major Types of Comedy**

The main trends of English comedy can broadly be classified into Five groups, namely 'romantic comedy', 'comedy of manners', 'comedy of honours', 'sentimental comedy' and the 'tragi-comedy' or 'dark comedy'.

Romantic Comedy
The term ‘romantic comedy’ is a somewhat vague appellation, which denotes a form of drama is which love is the main theme and love leads to a happy ending. The team ‘romantic comedy’ is generally applied to plays developed by Shakespeare and some of his Elizabethan contemporaries. These plays are generally concerned with love affairs that involve a beautiful and idealized heroine; the course of this love does not run smooth, but ultimately overcomes all difficulties to end in a happy union. In the Anatomy of Criticism (P.P 182-183) Northrop Frye points out that some of Shakespeare romantic comedies involve a movement from the normal world of conflict and trouble into the ‘green world’ – the idyllic, pastoral world of the Forest of Arden as in As You Like It, on the fairy haunted wood of A Midsummer Night’s Dream – in which the problems and troubles of the real world are magically dissolved, enemies reconciled and true lovers united. Frye regards this phenomenon (together with other aspects of these comedies, such as their festive conclusion in the social – ritual of a wedding, a feast, a dance) as evidence that comic plots reflect Primitive myths and rituals celebrating the victory of spring over winter.

Comedy of Humours

Another important type of English comedy, conceived and popularised by Ben Jonson, is the ‘comedy of Humours’. The word ‘humours’ refers to bodily fluids to which medieval medicine attributed to the various types of human temperament according to the predominance of each within the body. Thus a preponderance of blood would make a person ‘sanguine’, while excess of phlegm would make him or her ‘plegmatic’, too much choler (yellow bile) would produce a melancholy one. In Jonson is ‘Comedy of Humours’ each of the major characters instead of being a well-balanced individual, has preponderant humour that gives him a characteristic distortion or eccentricity of disposition. Jonson expounds in his theory in the ‘Introduction’ to the play Every Man In his Humour (1598) and exemplifies the mode in his later comedies as well. Jonson himself wrote in his ‘Introduction’ to Every Man Out of his Humour:

As when some one particular quality
Doth so possess a man that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his power
In their confluxions, all to run way,
This may be truly said to be a humour.

For example in Every Man in his Humour, the rich merchant kitley has a young and pretty wife, of whom he is madly jealous; jealously is his humour, the passion that rules has whole life, the young hero’s father, Old Knowell, is always worried about his son’s safety; anxiety is his humour; captain Bobadill is the talkative but cowardly old soldier; boastfulness is his humour. In Bartholomew Fair, Jonson shows us how the humours of various types Londoners are taken advantage of by the quick witted market people.

Comedy of Manners

The Phrase ‘Comedy of manners’ is particularly applied in English to the plays of the Restoration dramatists, and especially to Congreve (1670 – 1729) and Wycherley (1640-1716), but is a type of comedy which can flourish in any civilized urban society and we see it again in Sheridan (1751-1816) and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). The ‘comedy of manners’ was early exemplified by Shakespeare’s Love’s Labour Lost and Much Ado
About Nothing. This form deals with the relations and intrigues of gentlemen and ladies living in a sophisticated society. It relies upon comic effect in great part on the wit and sparkle of the dialogues, and to a certain degree, on the ridiculous violations of social conventions and decorum by stupid characters such as would be wives, jealous husbands, foppish dandies. Excellent examples are Congreve’s The Way of The World, Wycherley’s The Country Wife. The main thrust in The ‘comedy of Manners’ is to make fun not so much of individual human being as of social groups and their fashionable manner. It is generally more or less satirical, though in a good-natured way. It is how ever a highly artificial drama, full of verbal with and sometimes inclined to be cynical and hard. This type of comedy was revived in the 18th century by Goldsmith (She stoops to Conquer) and Sheridan's The school for scandals and The Rivals). In the turn of the 19th century, Oscar Wilde rejuvenated this form of comedy in plays like The Importance of Being Earnest and Lady Winter Mere’s Fan.

Sentimental Comedy

A middleclass reaction against the immortality of situation and the frequent indecency of dialogue in the rise of the ‘sentimental comedy’ of the 18th century. Jeremy Collier (1650-1726) protested against the permissiveness of the ‘comedy of manners’ specially those of Congreve and Vanbrugh, and wrote his treatise entitled Short View of The Immortality and Profaneness of The English Stage. One result of this was the appearance of the new ‘sentimental comedy’. This form achieved some popularity with respectable middle-class audiences of the 18th century. It showed virtue rewarded by domestic bliss; its plots usually involved unbelievably good middle-class couple and emphasized pathos rather than humour. Pioneered by Richard Steele in The Funeral (1710) and more fully in The Concious Lovers (1722), it flourished in the mid-century with the French comedia larmoyonete (Tearful comedy) and in such plays as Huge Kelly’s False Delicacy (1768). The pious moralizing of this tradition also involved an element of preaching as a result of which the entertainment values of these plays was reduced.

Tragi-Comedy

There are many plays which do not totally subscribe to the spirit of comedy, nor do they embody the tragic emotions. In parts, they may be cheerful but they point to some darker aspects of life as well. But generally these plays are also classified as comedies. Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure and Eliot’s The Cocktail Party, for example, might both be called comedies but they have very little in common with the main stream of the English comedies. To these plays, the term ‘tragi-comedy’ or ‘black comedy’ or ‘dark comedy’ have been applied. Shakespeare’s later plays like The Winter’s Tale and Cymbeline are ‘tragi-comedies’ with the pattern of sudden release from delay danger involved in the sudden release from delay danger involved in the plots. In modern drama, the term black comedy is often used to describe a kind of drama in which disturbing or sinister subjects like death, disease, or warfare are treated with bitter amusements usually in a manner calculated to offend and stock. Prominent in the ‘Theatre of The Absurd’, ‘black comedy’ is best represented in Beckett’s Happy Days and Joe Orton’s The Loot.

**Historical Background to The Importance of Being Earnest**

The Importance of Being Earnest is first and foremost a farce, a comedy of manners whose main goal is to amuse the audience, rather than to make them think. As a
comedy, it is rooted much less in a specific history or place than many plays. Nevertheless, the play does contain a few references to contemporary historical events, which suggest a troubled society underneath the glossiness of the characters that Wilde portrays. One of the primary critiques of Wilde's play is that it is form without content, and does not deal seriously with any social issues (this, of course, is consistent with Wilde's doctrine of Aestheticism). In a contemporary review, the socialist playwright George Bernard Shaw reacted to The Importance of Being Earnest's seeming heartlessness--he would prefer to think that people are capable of speaking something other than nonsense.

However, some of the topics mentioned briefly in the play indicate larger political issues that were the subject of heated debate at the time that it was produced. One such subject was the issue of Home Rule for Ireland. William Gladstone created a controversy in 1886 when he committed the British Liberal party to support Home Rule--self-governance for Ireland within the framework of the British Empire. A contentious Home Rule Bill was suppressed by the House of Lords only two years before the production of the Importance of Being Earnest. As Lady Bracknell examines Jack's suitability as a partner for Gwendolen, she inquires about his politics. Jack is a Liberal Unionist, meaning that he is a Liberal who does not support Home Rule. Lady Bracknell appears relieved, saying: "Oh, they count as Tories. They dine with us." The political distinction matters only insomuch as it affects Lady Bracknell's social engagements, rather than having to do with the right or wrong of Home Rule for Ireland.

The only reason for Wilde's characters to get incensed about politics is if politics threaten to disturb their hedonistic lifestyle or the social hierarchy that they have grown comfortable with. The threat of a revolution like the French revolution continuously hangs over British society. Lady Bracknell is exceedingly alarmed to hear that the imaginary Bunbury died by explosion. "Exploded! Was he the victim of a revolutionary outrage? I was not aware that Mr. Bunbury was interested in social legislation. If so, he is well punished for his morbidity." Her unease reflects a general feeling of fear regarding social unrest in the 1890s, particularly after a working-class riot in Trafalgar Square in 1885. The word morbidity does well to describe Wilde's characters' attitudes toward politics. It is difficult for them to understand an interest in something that is so far removed from their daily pleasures.

In last analysis, it is unfair to suggest that The Importance of Being Earnest is a shallow, universal farce which has no ties to the historical context in which it was created; however, Wilde's references to the crucial issues of his time are usually overshadowed by his characters' own petty concerns.

**Character Map**
The Importance of Being Earnest; Play Summary

The play begins in the flat of wealthy Algernon Moncrieff (Algy) in London's fashionable West End. Algernon's aunt (Lady Bracknell) and her daughter (Gwendolen Fairfax) are coming for a visit, but Mr. Jack Worthing (a friend of Algy's) arrives first. Algernon finds it curious that Jack has announced himself as "Ernest." When Jack explains that he plans to propose marriage to Gwendolen, Algy demands to know why Jack has a cigarette case with the inscription, "From little Cecily with her fondest love." Jack explains that his real name is Jack Worthing, squire, in the country, but he assumes the name "Ernest" when he ventures to the city for fun. Cecily is his ward. While devouring all the cucumber sandwiches, Algernon confesses that he, too, employs deception when it's convenient. He visits an imaginary invalid friend named Bunbury when he needs an excuse to leave the city.

Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive. Algernon explains that he cannot attend Lady Bracknell's reception because he must visit his invalid friend, Bunbury, but he offers to arrange the music for her party. While Algernon distracts Lady Bracknell in another room, Jack proposes to Gwendolen. Unfortunately, she explains that she really wants to marry someone named Ernest because it sounds so solidly aristocratic. However, she accepts his proposal, and he makes a mental note to be rechristened Ernest. Lady Bracknell returns and refutes the engagement. She interrogates Jack and finds him
lacking in social status. On her way out, Lady Bracknell tells Jack that he must find some acceptable parents. Gwendolen returns for Jack's address in the country. Algernon overhears and writes the address on his shirt cuff. He is curious about Cecily and decides to go "bunburying" in the country.

In the second act, the scene shifts to Jack Worthing's country estate where Miss Prism, Cecily Cardew's governess, is teaching Cecily in the garden. Miss Prism sings Jack's praises as a sensible and responsible man, unlike his brother Ernest, who is wicked and has a weak character. She teaches Cecily that good people end happily, and bad people end unhappily, according to the romantic novel Miss Prism wrote when she was young. The local vicar, Canon Chasuble, arrives and, sensing an opportunity for romance, takes Miss Prism for a walk in the garden. While they are gone, Algy shows up pretending to be Jack's wicked brother Ernest. He is overcome by Cecily's beauty. Determined to learn more about Cecily while Jack is absent, Algernon plans to stay for the weekend, then make a fast getaway before Jack arrives on Monday. However, Jack returns early in mourning clothes claiming that his brother Ernest has died in Paris. He is shocked to find Algy there posing as Ernest. He orders a dogcart — a small horse-drawn carriage — to send Algy back to London, but it is too late. Algernon is in love with Cecily and plans to stay there. When Jack goes out, Algernon proposes to Cecily, who gets out a diary and letters that she has already written, explaining that she had already imagined their engagement. She has always wanted to marry someone named Ernest, so Algy, like Jack, needs to arrange a rechristening.

Just when it seems that Jack and Algernon couldn't get into worse trouble, Gwendolen arrives, pursuing Jack, and discovers that his ward, Cecily, is unpleasantly beautiful. In conversation, they discover that they are both engaged to Ernest Worthing. A battle follows, cleverly carried out during the British tea ceremony. The situation is tense. Jack and Algernon arrive, and, in attempting to straighten out the Ernest problem, they alienate both women. The two men follow, explaining that they are going to be rechristened Ernest, and the women relent and agree to stay engaged.

Lady Bracknell shows up demanding an explanation for the couples' plans. When she discovers the extent of Cecily's fortune, she gives her consent to her engagement to Algernon; however, Jack's parentage is still a stumbling block to her blessings. Jack tells Lady Bracknell that he will not agree to Cecily's engagement until she is of age (35) unless he can marry Gwendolen. Dr. Chasuble arrives and announces that all is ready for the christenings. Jack explains that the christenings will no longer be necessary. Noting that Jack's present concerns are secular, the minister states that he will return to the church where Miss Prism is waiting to see him. Shocked at hearing the name "Prism," Lady Bracknell immediately calls for Prism and reveals her as the governess who lost Lady Bracknell's nephew 28 years earlier on a walk with the baby carriage. She demands to know where the baby is. Miss Prism explains that in a moment of distraction she placed the baby in her handbag and left him in Victoria Station, confusing him with her three-volume novel, which was placed in the baby carriage. After Jack asks for details, he quickly runs to his room and retrieves the handbag. Miss Prism identifies it, and Lady Bracknell reveals that Jack is Algernon's older brother, son of Ernest John Moncrieff, who died years ago in India. Jack now truly is Ernest, and Algernon/Cecily, Jack/Gwendolen, and Chasuble/Prism fall into each others' arms as Jack realizes the importance of being earnest.

The Importance of Being Earnest : Literary Analysis

Prepared by Atta Ur Rahman Jadoon 03335499069 147
At the 1895 opening of Oscar Wilde's most famous play, "The Importance of Being Earnest," the audience was liberally sprinkled with well-dressed young men wearing green carnations, Wilde's approved symbol for his gay followers. These patrons knew the play, an essay in appearances and secrets, was also written in code for gay men, starting with the title itself.

By common consent, then and after, "The Importance of Being Earnest" is Wilde's masterpiece. Its title is meant as a double-entendre. The protagonist, called Jack in the country and Ernest in town, is chasing a young lady who will only marry a man named Ernest because she desires the quality of being earnest above all others in her future husband. The play's second half revolves around attempts by not one but two characters to be christened officially with that same name as part of their frenzied skirt-chasing.

The boys in green carnations knew that "earnest" was also gay code for homosexual. If you were lunching at the Savoy Grill and wanted to nail someone's sexual identity, you quietly asked, "Is he earnest?" This converts a double-entendre to a triple one, and decoding the play further will open up delicious new meanings.

Two books enable us to do this decoding. Richard Ellmann's 1987 biography "Oscar Wilde" (Vintage paperback) is not only definitive; all Wilde studies coming after were based squarely on it. Another book approaches from a sleazier angle: Theo Aronson's "Prince Eddy and the Homosexual Underworld" (Barnes & Noble Books, 1994) chronicles the play culture of London's gay men of that time with its elaborate system of protected spaces and passwords. Chapter Eight of Karl Beckson's "London in the 1890s: A Cultural History" (Norton, 1992) adds still more detail. All of this was dramatized effectively in the 1997 film "Wilde."

Fortunately, Ernest can be seen, not simply read, in a definitive version that discreetly clarifies the play's text: Anthony Asquith's 1952 British film with Michael Redgrave, Edith Evans, and Margaret Rutherford, available on DVD. Here is decoding companion to that film.

The Albany: Asquith departs from the text by starting the story in Jack Worthing's apartment in The Albany, only then moving to his rakish friend Algernon's apartment. This is significant. The Albany was the best known and most prestigious set of bachelor apartments in London, close enough to Piccadilly Circus that management discreetly marketed their willingness to allow well-off male tenants to bring home male prostitutes acquired nearby—until, that is, Wilde's trial exposed vices that caused a panicked scramble to suppress such tolerance. In an early draft of the play, Miss Prism talks about one character who is "as bad as any young man who has chambers in the Albany, or indeed even in the vicinity of Piccadilly, can possibly be." Oscar's gay friend George Ives threw parties in apartment E4.

The silver cigarette case: Algernon has come to return Jack's silver cigarette case. This is how well-off gay men paid their male prostitutes to avoid prosecution; favorites even got their names engraved inside. The cases, of course, could be pawned for far more than the cash value of the services. But despite this precaution, the customer could still be blackmailed, and Wilde flirted with blackmailers regularly.

Bunbury: Whenever his Aunt Augusta required Algernon to perform some dull social service, Algie's imaginary friend Bunbury became ill or disconsolate in ways that required Algie's urgent attention. Bunbury, of course, was the English equivalent of bone-smuggling, and Algie certainly preferred bun-burying to dining with his aunt. Wilde also had a classmate by that name.
Cecily: the name of Jack Worthing's young ward, cloistered carefully in his country house, protected by her governess Miss Prism from the corrupting influence of guys like Algernon, who of course spends most of the play chasing her. Cecily is also gay slang for a kept boy, especially one kept away from the prying eyes of other gay men.

Watching Asquith's version we see that the theme of a double life is played out with all the key characters, just as it played out in Wilde's life right after the play opened. Wilde was bullied by his unstable boyfriend, Lord Alfred Douglas, to sue Douglas' father for libel. In the play, Victorian notions of wickedness are parodied as being trivial, but the vices revealed by Wilde in his court testimony were enough to ruin him. Another Wilde play, "An Ideal Husband," which also played to packed houses at the same time as "Earnest," is actually Wilde's essay on blackmail. Both plays closed after Wilde was arrested. His own double life, which everyone earnestly wished him to conceal, finally caught up with him. Hypocrisy had its revenge.

### The Importance of Being Earnest: Themes

#### Duty and Respectability:
- The aristocratic Victorians valued duty and respectability above all else. Earnestness — a determined and serious desire to do the correct thing — was at the top of the code of conduct. Appearance was everything, and style was much more important than substance. So, while a person could lead a secret life, carry on affairs within marriage or have children outside of wedlock, society would look the other way as long as the appearance of propriety was maintained. For this reason, Wilde questions whether the more important or serious issues of the day are overlooked in favor of trivial concerns about appearance. Gwendolen is the paragon of this value. Her marriage proposal must be performed correctly, and her brother even practices correct proposals. Gwendolen's aristocratic attitude is "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing." The trivial is important; the serious is overlooked.

The tea ceremony in Act II is a hilarious example of Wilde's contention that manners and appearance are everything. The guise of correctness is the framework for war. Both women, thinking they are engaged to the same person, wage a civilized "war" over the tea service while the servants silently watch. When Gwendolen requests no sugar, Cecily adds four lumps to her cup. Although she asks for bread and butter, Gwendolen is given a large slice of cake. Her true feelings come out only in an aside that Cecily supposedly cannot hear: "Detestable girl!" Gwendolen is also appalled to find that Cecily is living in Jack's country home, and she inquires about a chaperone. Wilde gives examples again and again of the aristocrat's concern for propriety, that everything is done properly no matter what those good manners might be camouflaging.

#### The Absence of Compassion:
- Two areas in which the Victorians showed little sympathy or compassion were illness and death. When Lady Bracknell hears that Bunbury died after his doctors told him he could not live, she feels he has — in dying — acted appropriately because he had the correct medical advice. "Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life." Lady Bracknell, like other aristocrats, is too busy worrying about her own life, the advantages of her daughter's marriage, and her nephew's errors in judgment to feel any compassion for others. Gwendolen, learning from her mother, is totally self-absorbed and definite about what she wants. She tells Cecily, "I never travel without my diary. One should have something sensational to read in the train." Wilde seems to be taking to task a social class that thinks only of itself, showing little compassion or sympathy for the trials of those less fortunate.
Religion: - Another serious subject — religion — is also a topic of satire. While concerns of the next world would be an appropriate topic for people of this world, it seems to be shoved aside in the Victorian era. Canon Chasuble is the symbol of religious thought, and Wilde uses him to show how little the Victorians concerned themselves with attitudes reflecting religious faith. Chasuble can rechristen, marry, bury, and encourage at a moment's notice with interchangeable sermons filled with meaningless platitudes. Even Lady Bracknell mentions that christenings are a waste of time and, especially, money. Chasuble's pious exterior betrays a racing pulse for Miss Prism: "Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips." Quickly correcting his error, the minister hides his hardly holy desires in the language of metaphor. Wilde's satire here is gentle and humorous, chiding a society for its self-importance.

Popular Culture: - The popular attitudes of the day about the French, literary criticism, and books are also subjects of Wilde's humor. Wilde wittily asserts that Victorians believe that nothing good comes from France, except for (in Wilde's mind) the occasional lesbian maid. Otherwise, France is a good place to kill off and request the burial of Ernest. As the good reverend says, "I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at the last." Literary criticism is for "people who haven't been at a University. They do it so well in the daily papers." Modern books are filled with truths that are never pure or simple, and scandalous books should be read but definitely in secret. Again Wilde criticizes the Victorians for believing that appearance is much more important than truth. He takes the opportunity to insert many examples of popular thought, revealing bias, social bigotry, thoughtlessness and blind assumptions.

Secret Lives: - Because Victorian norms were so repressive and suffocating, Wilde creates episodes in which his characters live secret lives or create false impressions to express who they really are. Jack and Algernon both create personas to be free. These other lives allow them to neglect their duties — in Algernon's case — or to leave their duties and pursue pleasure — in Jack's case. Very early in Act I, Wilde sets up these secret lives, and they follow through until the final act. When Jack and Algernon realize their marriages will end their pursuit of pleasure, they both admit rather earnestly, "You won't be able to run down to the country quite so often as you used to do, dear Algy," and "You won't be able to disappear to London quite so frequently as your wicked custom was." Marriage means the end of freedom, pleasure, wickedness, and the beginning of duty and doing what is expected. Of course, Jack and Algernon could continue to don their masks after they marry Gwendolen and Cecily, but they will have to be cautious and make sure society is looking the other way.

Passion and Morality: - Wilde's contention that a whole world exists separate from Victorian manners and appearances is demonstrated in the girlish musings of Cecily. When she hears that Jack's "wicked" brother Ernest is around, she is intensely desirous of meeting him. She says to Algernon, "I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time." The thought of meeting someone who lives outside the bounds of prudery and rules is exciting to naïve Cecily. Even using the name Ernest for his secret life is ironic because Algernon is not being dutiful — earnest — in living a secret life.

Various characters in the play allude to passion, sex and moral looseness. Chasuble and Prism's flirting and coded conversations about things sexual, Algernon stuffing his face to satisfy his hungers, the diaries (which are the acceptable venues for passion), and Miss Prism's three-volume novel are all examples of an inner life covered up by suffocating rules. Even Algernon's aesthetic life of posing as the dandy, dressing with studied care,
neglecting his bills, being unemployed, and pursuing pleasure instead of duty is an example of Victorians valuing trivialities. Once Algernon marries he will have suffocating rules and appearances to keep up. Wilde’s characters allude to another life beneath the surface of Victorian correctness. Much of the humor in this play draws a fine line between the outer life of appearances and the inner life of rebellion against the social code that says life must be lived earnestly.

Courtship and Marriage: - Oscar Wilde felt these Victorian values were perpetuated through courtship and marriage, both of which had their own rules and rituals. Marriage was a careful selection process. When Algernon explains that he plans to become engaged to Jack's ward, Cecily, Lady Bracknell decides, "I think some preliminary enquiry on my part would not be out of place." When Lady Bracknell pummels Jack with questions about parents, politics, fortune, addresses, expectations, family solicitors, and legal encumbrances, his answers must be proper and appropriate for a legal union between the two families to be approved. Fortune is especially important, and when Jack and Cecily's fortunes are both appropriate, the next problem is family background. Because Jack does not know his parents, Lady Bracknell suggests he find a parent — any with the right lineage will do — and find one quickly. Appearance, once again, is everything. Duty (not joy, love or passion) is important, further substantiating Algy's contention that marriage is a loveless duty: "A man who marries without knowing Bunbury [an excuse for pleasure] has a very tedious time of it." Marriage is presented as a legal contract between consenting families of similar fortunes; background, love, and happiness have little to do with it.

Perpetuating the Upper Class: - The strict Victorian class system, in which members of the same class marry each other, perpetuates the gulf between the upper, middle and lower classes. Snobbish, aristocratic attitudes further preserve the distance between these groups. Jack explains to Lady Bracknell that he has no politics. He considers himself a Liberal Unionist. Lady Bracknell finds his answer satisfactory because it means that he is a Tory, or a conservative. Jack's home in London is on the "unfashionable side" of Belgrave Square, so "that could easily be altered." When Jack inquires whether she means the "unfashionable" or the side of the street, Lady Bracknell explains, "Both, if necessary." The French Revolution is held up as an example of what happens when the lower class is taught to question its betters. Education is not for learning to think; it is for mindlessly following convention. Lady Bracknell approves of ignorance. In fact, she explains, "The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square." Thinking causes discontent, and discontent leads to social revolution. That simply will not do.

Class Conflict: - One might think aristocrats would see the error of their ways and try to be more virtuous in a moral sense. However, they see their attitudes as the virtuous high ground and believe that other classes should conform to aristocratic attitudes and see the error of their own ways. When Miss Prism seems to chide the lower classes for producing so many children for Chasuble to christen, she appears to see it as a question of thrift. "I have often spoken to the poorer classes on the subject [of christenings]. But they don't seem to know what thrift is." Chasuble speaks humorously of the penchant of the aristocracy to dabble in good causes that do not disrupt their own lives too much. He mentions a sermon he gave for the Society for the Prevention of Discontent Among the Upper Orders. To the Victorians, reform means keeping the current social and economic system in place by perpetuating upper-class virtues and economy.
Every page, every line of dialogue, every character, each symbol, and every stage direction in The Importance of Being Earnest is bent on supporting Wilde's contention that social change happens as a matter of thoughtfulness. Art can bring about such thoughtfulness. If the eccentric or unusual is to be replaced with correct behavior and thought, human sympathy and compassion suffer. If strict moral values leave no room for question, a society loses much of what is known as humanity.

Love and Marriage: Perspectives from Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde was a self-described antinomian (p. 1807), one for whom the regular rules for society didn't apply. The fact, therefore that he should have written The Importance of Being Earnest, is not at all surprising.

The Importance of Being Earnest is a cleverly woven satire in which many of the rules, morays, and hypocritical practices and ideas of Wilde's day were made a mockery. In an interview, Wilde was quoted as saying in reference to this play, "It has as its philosophy . . . that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality." (p. 1761)

True to his intentions, Wilde exercised great skill and little restraint in crafting a satire that poked fun at many of society's most sacred and untouchable institutions. Throughout the play, Wilde's characters' assault the hypocrisy of society with a series of biting commentaries. The plot of the play is built upon the desires of two young men to marry two young women who in turn desire to marry only men named Ernest.

As marriage is at the plot's core, it makes some sense that Wilde takes frequent and steady aim at this institution and the expectations and customs which have formed themselves around it. This is the case, even though marriage was sought after by these two young men in desperate and absurd ways. Among the views expressed by Wilde's characters is the idea that romance and happiness are hindered within the bonds of matrimony. Algernon, in his counsel to Jack regarding his desire to propose marriage to Algernon's cousin, had the following to say.

"ALGERNON  I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll try to forget the fact.

"JACK    I have no doubt about that, Dear Algy. The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted." (p. 1763)

In other words: As uncertainty is the basis for romance, once marriage is proposed, romance ends.

The idea that marriage is a source of stress and unhappiness is highlighted as well. In describing a visit to an acquaintance who was recently widowed, Lady Bracknell said,

" . . . I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger." In a later dialogue, Lady Bracknell said the following in regards to her late brother-in-law, " . . . He was eccentric, I admit. But
only in later years. And that was the result of the Indian climate, and marriage, and indigestion, and other things of that kind." (p. 1804)

Marriage, in this case, was placed on a par with respect to its effects upon the man's psyche to some relatively uncomfortable conditions.

According to Algernon, marriage would be tedious if the husband didn't have an imagined friend like his own Bunbury to whom he could pay frequent visits. As he put it, "... You don't seem to realize, that in married life three is company and two is none." (p. 1767)

A further point on which Wilde disparaged the institution of marriage has to do with the ways in which a spouse is chosen. The play's characters make their decisions on marital partners quickly and with little thought devoted to substantive issues related to their choice of spouses. In the case of Algernon and Cecily, Algernon, in the guise of Jack's younger brother Ernest, declared his love and proposed marriage after a single afternoon together. Following this however, Cecily informs him that in fact she had actually been engaged to him for nearly three months. Having heard so much about the brother Ernest her guardian Jack had invented as an excuse to visit town frequently, she became attracted to him. After a short period of imagined courtship, they became engaged. (pp. 1786 and 1787)

An additional point regarding the choice of suitors had to do with their names. For both Cecily and Gwendolen, it was vital that they marry someone of the name Ernest. Gwendolen saw it as her ideal to marry a man of the name Ernest. When she heard that her cousin had a friend by that name, she was instantly intrigued. She described the name Ernest as having a musical quality lacking in most names. She went so far as to pity any woman married to a man whose name was Jack as that name lacked vibration. She concluded that the only safe name was Ernest. (p. 1770) Cecily for her part had always had the fantasy of loving a man named Ernest. She felt that the name inspired confidence. (p. 1787) For both women, marriage to anyone with another name would have been inconceivable even though they freely professed great love for the men who had asked them for their hands.

A satire can be compared to a caricature in its ability to point up flaws and distinctive features by enlarging and expanding upon them to the point where they dominate the portrait and give it a distinctly comic dimension. The flaws inherent in 19th century society in general and its prevailing attitudes toward marriage specifically became, under Wilde's pen, a ready source for comic social commentary.

The Importance of Being Earnest as a farcical comedy

An Artificial, Farcical Comedy: - The Importance of Being Earnest belongs to a literary genre known as artificial comedy. This kind of play flourished during the Restoration in England and was subsequently revived by Congreve. This kind of comedy is entirely lacking in truth to nature, and it creates an artificial, imaginary, illusory world. The Importance of Being Earnest too is deficient in truth to nature. However, it is free from the indecency and obscenity which were a glaring feature of Restoration comedy. The Importance of Being Earnest is characterized by exaggeration and extravagance both in its plot and its dialogue. In fact, the keynote of this play is absurdity. The proper description of this play is to call it a farce.
An Artist in Sheer Nonsense: - One of the contemporary reviewers of this play expressed the view that by writing The Importance of Being Earnest Wilde "found himself as an artist in sheer nonsense". That reviewer called this play a farce "in which there is no discordant note of seriousness". “It is of nonsense all compact, and better nonsense our stage has. not seen,” he added. In this play Wilde shows himself as "an artificer of the ludicrous". There is no philosophy, no profundity, no underlying significance, no symbolism, and no theme even in this play. It is just talk, witty talk, and the chief interest of thee play lies in that witty talk.

A Trivial Comedy For Serious People: - Wilde described the play as a “trivial comedy”, and, he was right ; but he also described it as a trivial comedy “for serious people”, which is a paradox characteristic of Wilde. How can a trivial comedy appeal to serious people? Perhaps Wilde meant that even serious people would be moved to laughter by the comedy of this play. Or, perhaps, he meant that, though it was a trivial comedy,, it did convey certain ideas which might interest serious people.

The Farcical Situation of a Baby Found in a Hand-Bag: - The distinguishing feature of a farcical comedy, as already indicated above, is exaggeration to the point of absurdity. Now, most of the situations in The Importance of Being Earnest are absurd and they amuse us by their very absurdity. The central situation about which the play hinges is Jack’s having been found in a hand-bag in the cloak-room of a railway station in London. Jack is thus a foundling. (A foundling is a child who is found somewhere, having been abandoned or forsaken, most probably because it was -an illegitimate child and its mother wanted to get rid of it in the hope that somebody else would find it and bring it up out of sympathy or pass it on to an orphanage). The fact of’ being a foundling is not by itself absurd. What is absurd is that Miss Prism, the nurse, committed a blunder by putting the child in a hand-bag and the three-volume novel written by her in the perambulator instead of putting the manuscript in the hand-bag and letting the child remain in the perambulator. Now, it is impossible for us to believe that anybody, no matter how absentminded, can commit a blunder of that kind. That is not the only absurdity. We do not understand why, after having committed that blunder, Miss Prism did not go back to her employers to report the loss of the child and why she simply disappeared from the scene. There is nothing absurd about Mr. Thomas Cardew’s discovery of the foundling, but it is absurd that he should have named the child Worthing because he was having a first-class railway ticket for a sea-side resort called Worthing.

The Witty Remarks Made By Lady Bracknell: - The absurdity of the manner in which Jack was lost as an infant serves as the basis for a number of witty remarks by Lady Bracknell and also as the basis for her rejection of Jack as her would-be son-in-law. When, in the course of her interrogation of Jack, she is told that he does not know his parentage, she tells him that she can never allow her daughter “to marry into a cloak-room and form an alliance with a parcel”, which is one of her most witty remarks. When Jack asks her what he should do under the circumstances, her advice to him is to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, as soon as possible. When, towards the end of the play, Miss Prism gives an account of how she had lost the child, Jack jumps to the conclusion that he is the illegitimate son of Miss Prism herself and so he amuses us by offering to forgive his supposed mother for her act of folly in having been seduced and having given birth to an illegitimate child.

The Absurdity of Gwendolen’s Rapturous Reaction to the Name “Ernest”: - Another absurdity which could be found only in a farcical comedy is Gwendolen’s rapturous reaction to the name of Ernest. She tells Jack that it had always been her ideal to love
some one of the name of Earnest because there is something in this name that inspires absolute confidence. She adds that the moment her cousin Algernon first mentioned to, her the fact that he had a friend called Ernest, she knew that she was destined; to love the man having that name. She also makes the paradoxical statement that she was far from indifferent to Jack even before having met him. He always had an irresistible fascination for her, she says. She also makes it clear that she could not love a man with any other name. The name Jack, for instance, is not acceptable to her because this name is a notorious domesticity for John. Gwendolen pities any woman who is married to a man called John because such a woman would never enjoy the pleasure of a single moment’s solitude. The name Ernest, she says, is a divine name, with a music of its own. It is a name that produces vibrations. All Gwendolen’s comments on the name Ernest are absurd, but delightfully witty. No woman in her senses would talk in this way about a name, but this very talk constitutes one of the comic highlights of the play.

The Absurdity of Cecily’s Having Fallen in Love With Algernon: - Another absurdity in this farcical comedy is Cecily’s similar reaction to the name Ernest. Cecily too says that there is something in the name Ernest which seems to inspire absolute confidence, and she too pities any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest. She too says that it had always been a girlish dream of hers to love some one whose name was Ernest. We have already noted the absurdity of Gwendolen’s reaction to the name Ernest, and now a similar reaction of another girl to that name makes the situation doubly absurd. Not only that, the absurdity in Cecily’s case is further heightened by the account she gives to Jack of now she fell in love with him and got engaged to him in her imagination. She tells Jack that she had become engaged to him on the kith of February, about three months ago, and that the next day she had bought an engagement ring in his name and also a bangle with the true lover’s knot which she promised him in her imagination always to wear. The absurdity does not end here. Cecily has also been writing letters to her lover, and been replying to those letters on his behalf. She always wrote three times a week, and sometimes oftener. “Oh one occasion she broke off her engagement with him because of a quarrel, but she forgave him within the same week and got engaged to him again.

The Absurdity of the Proposed Christenings: - Yet another absurdity in the play is the decision of both Algernon and Jack to be rechristened in order to acquire the name of Ernest which has fascinated their beloveds. Both of them make appointments with Dr. Chasuble for the christening ceremonies which Dr. Chasuble readily agrees to perform. It is really surprising and incredible that two sensible, well-educated girls should be fascinated by a name, and that two sensible and well-educated men should think of changing their names to Ernest because of that fascination. But farcical situations are always incredible or at least improbable.

The Absurdity of Certain Remarks and Statements: - Then there are some remarks made by the various characters, in the play which are too preposterous to be believed, and these remarks too are part of the farce. For instance, Gwendolen makes the paradoxical and amusing remark that the simplicity of Jack’s character makes him exquisitely incomprehensible to her. (if a man’s character is simple, it should be perfectly comprehensible and not incomprehensible). Cecily makes the remark that the memory of a human being records the things that have never happened and could no; possibly have happened, which too is a paradoxical statement. Dr. Chasuble says that his sermon on the meaning of the manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful or distressing. Cecily’s keenness to enter in her diary the words that Algernon speaks in praise of her beauty is also absurd. Her saying that Dr. Chasuble is a great scholar who has never written a single book is also a remark of that kind. Algernon
makes the remark that half of the people who get into the Bankruptcy Court are called Algeron. Another remark of the same kind which Algernon makes is that, when he is in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles him.

The Realistic Elements in the Play: - In spite of so many absurdities in this play, it must be admitted that there are a number of realistic, and credible situations and happenings in the play also. For instance, there is nothing, nonsensical or absurd or fantastic about Algernon’s invention of Bunbury and Jack’s invention of a younger brother called Ernest. We all seek excuses for some of our unusual or objectionable activities, and both Algernon and Jack have created two persons in order to cover up their escapades. Lady Bracknell’s reaction to Jack’s account of his origin is also perfectly believable. No society lady would agree to the marriage of her daughter with a man whose parentage is not known. Lady Bracknell’s reaction to the fact that Cecily has a large amount of money in her name is also perfectly believable, because a bride who can bring a rich dowry is always acceptable to people. There is nothing fantastic about the three love-affairs in the play also. It is perfectly natural for Jack to be in love with Gwendolen, for Algernon to fall in love with Cecily as soon as he sees her, and for Dr Chasuble to be attracted by Miss Prism and to marry her in order to relieve his loneliness even though the Primitive Church was opposed to matrimony. Nor is there anything absurd about Gwendolen’s flight from home to meet her lover at his country home. So many girls run away from their homes to join their lovers.

The Possible Appeal of This Play For Serious People: - It is quite possible that Wilde, apart from providing rich comic fare to his audiences, wanted also the serious people among them to derive some food for thought from his play. Wilde posed as a “trifler”, but he was a, trifler with a capacity for, thinking, and there is often a wonderful suggestiveness in his lightest banter and his wildest paradox. Several remarks in the play seem-to have a” serious point. For instance, the excessive consumption of wine by servants at parties at. Algernon’s flat is the kind of complaint which all bachelors will share. Again, Algernon voices a well established fact that, strictly speaking, romance ends when a proposal of marriage is accepted. Algernon is right also when he speaks of English society of the time suffering from the corruption which was depicted in French drama. That relatives are a pack of tedious people is another observation containing a large measure of truth. Another serious element in the play is the portrayal of Lady Bracknell as a snobbish woman with a mercenary outlook. This portrayal is a satirical attack on social snobbery, class-consciousness, and greed for money. The portrayal of Dr. Chasuble may also be taken in a serious light as a satirical picture of the .hypocrisy and shallowness of certain members of the clergy. Furthermore, the play also poses the problem as to how Jack should have been treated by society if he had really been an abandoned, illegitimate child. Gwendolen, no doubt, finds Jack’s origin to be exciting or stirring, but Lady Bracknell rejects him summarily, and it is Lady Bracknell, who is the true representative of fashionable society. Indeed, there is much food for thought in the play for serious people, and the author has made it very enjoyable too by his wit.

**The Importance of Being Earnest : A comedy of dialogue**

Abundant Use of Paradox, Epigram, and Comic Irony: - The Importance of Being Earnest is a comedy of dialogue, abounding in the use of paradox, epigram, and irony. All these three devices produce a comic effect in this play, even though it is possible for a dramatist to use these devices for a serious purpose also. There are a number of paradoxical statements, epigrammatic remarks, and ironical or sarcastic remarks, all of a
comic nature so” as to amuse us. When the play is presented on the stage, the audience would keep laughing most of the time because of the witty paradoxes and witty remarks of an ironical nature.

Paradoxical Statements Made By Algernon: - A paradoxical statement may mean something seemingly absurd yet true in fact; or it may mean a statement apparently at variance with or in opposition to established principles yet demonstrably true; or it may mean a statement expressing an idea which is contrary to received opinion. Almost every character in The Importance of Being Earnest makes paradoxical remarks which are witty. At the very outset, for instance, Algernon says that the lower orders of society should set a good example of moral responsibility for the upper classes. This is a paradoxical statement, because the accepted view is that the upper classes should set a good example for the lower classes to follow. Algernon soon afterwards, talking to Jack, makes the statement that more than half of modern culture depends on what people should not read. This is a paradoxical remark because, in actual fact, reading contributes to the development of culture. Another paradoxical statement made by Algernon is that the truth is rarely pure and never simple, the accepted view being that truth can be pure and -simple. Algernon here adds that modern literature would be a complete impossibility if truth were either pure or simple, and this is another paradox. Algernon also says that literary criticism should be left to people who have not been at a university, and this too is a paradoxical statement because in actual fact literary critics are people who have had the benefit of a university education. When Algernon demands from Jack an explanation of the inscription on his cigarette-case, Algernon speaks in a paradoxical manner, saying to Jack: “Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable,” whereas normally we would say: “Now produce your explanation, and pray make it probable or plausible.” When Algernon describes women’s flirtation with their own husbands as washing their clean linen in public, he is again making a paradoxical statement because the idiom is “to wash one’s dirty linen in public.” Another paradoxical statement made by Algernon is that in married life three is company and two is none, whereas the common saying is that two is company and three is none. Algernon again makes a paradoxical statement when he says that people who are not serious about their meals are very shallow-minded, because the accepted view is that people who are too particular about their meals must be shallow-minded and not in the habit of thinking. Algernon also says that he loves to hear his relations abused and that it is the only thing that makes him put up with them at all. This is a paradoxical statement because normally we do not want to hear our relatives abused. Another paradoxical remark from Algernon is as follows: “It is awfully hard work doing nothing.” How can idleness or doing nothing be regarded as awfully hard work? (This remark has also an epigrammatic quality). When Algernon says that he loves scrapes (or difficult situations) because they are the only things that are never serious be makes a paradoxical statement because scrapes or difficulties are certainly serious matters which give rise to feelings of anxiety in us. Another paradoxical statement made by Algernon is as follows: “Well, one must be serious about something, if one wants “to have any amusement in life.” How can seriousness about anything be a source of amusement? Yet another paradoxical statement made by him is the following: “When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. At the present moment I am eating muffins because I am unhappy.” The real fact is that when one is in trouble or is unhappy, one feels no desire to eat anything.

Paradoxical Remarks Made By Jack: - Jack also makes a number of paradoxical statements which are quite amusing. For instance, when he sees tea-cups and cucumber sandwiches on the table in Algernon’s flat, he says to Algernon: “Why all these cups?
Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young?" In the first place, cucumber sandwiches are no sign of reckless extravagance; and secondly it is only the young who are recklessly extravagant. Talking of modern culture, Jack says that it is not the sort of thing one should talk about in private. This is a paradoxical remark because there is no reason why modern culture or any other culture should not be talked about in private as well as in public. Jack makes another paradoxical statement when he says that the truth is not quite the sort of thing one should tell to a nice, sweet, and refined girl, because the normal view of the matter is that a nice and sweet girl should always be told the truth and should not be deceived. Talking of Cecily, Jack says that she is not a silly girl, that she has an excellent appetite and takes long walks, adding paradoxically that she pays no attention at all to all her studies. Yet another paradoxical statement made by Jack is that it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Why should it be something terrible for anybody to discover that he has been speaking the truth? After making this statement, Jack asks Gwendolen whether she can forgive him for having spoken nothing but the truth, and this question which he asks her is also paradoxical.

Gwendolen's Paradoxical Remarks: - A number of paradoxical and witty remarks come from Gwendolen also. When Algernon says that he cannot allow Gwendolen to have a private conversation with Jack, Gwendolen makes the following paradoxical remark to Algernon: "Algy, you always adopt a strictly immoral attitude towards life. You are not quite old enough to do that." Then she makes another paradoxical statement by saying: "The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out." (Respect is always shown to the elderly people and not to the young). Speaking to Jack, Gwendolen says: "The simplicity of your character makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me." (If a man has a simple character, he is fully comprehensible, and not incomprehensible as Gwendolen says). Another paradoxical remark made by Gwendolen is that the home is the proper sphere for a man, while the actual fact is that the home is the proper sphere for a woman. Gwendolen adds that when a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, and this too is a paradoxical remark. A very amusing paradoxical remark is made by Gwendolen when, on being asked by Jack to wait for him till he comes back, she says to him: "If you are not too long, I will wait here for you all my life." The two parts of this reply by Gwendolen contradict each other.

Cecily's Paradoxical Remarks: - Cecily makes her own contribution to the paradoxical and witty statements in this play. After her German lessons she becomes less attractive in her appearance, she says to her governess. Memory, says Cecily, usually records the things that have never happened, and could not possibly have happened. When Miss Prism tells Cecily that she had once written a novel, Cecily makes the following paradoxical remark: "I don't like novels that end happily. They depress me so much." (Why should novels with a happy ending depress anybody?) When Algernon, after saying that he would like to reform himself, tells Cecily that he is feeling hungry, Cecily makes the paradoxical statement that when one is going to lead an entirely new life one requires regular and wholesome meals. Yet another paradoxical remark that she makes is that it is always painful to part from people whom one has known for a very short time. Speaking of her engagement with Algernon, she says that it would hardly have been a really serious, engagement if it had not been broken off at least once. Cecily also makes the paradoxical remark that, whenever one has anything unpleasant to say, one should always be quite candid. (Actually, of course, when somebody has anything unpleasant to say, we expect him not to say it in a blunt or candid manner).

Lady Bracknell's Paradoxical Remarks: - Lady Bracknell, who has a very fertile and pungent wit, makes a number of paradoxical statements. Speaking of Lady Harbury who
has lost her husband, Lady Bracknell says that Lady Harbury is now an altered woman because she looks at least twenty years younger. (Normally, when a woman has become a widow, she looks older on account of her grief at her widowhood). Lady Bracknell, paradoxically enough, does not approve of anything that interferes with anybody’s natural ignorance. She feels happy to note that in England education produces no effect whatsoever. If education were to produce any effect, it would prove to be a serious danger to the upper classes. These are paradoxical remarks because the accepted view is that ignorance should be removed through education, and that education has a beneficial effect upon all classes. When Jack admits that he smokes, Lady Bracknell paradoxically says: “I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind.” (She regards smoking as an occupation). Another paradoxical remark made by Lady Bracknell is that a girl with a simple, unspoiled nature like Gwendolen is not expected to reside in the countryside. Her comments on the death of Mr. Bunbury are also of a paradoxical nature. Mr. Bunbury, she says, seems to have had great confidence in the opinion of his physicians. Lady Bracknell recommends, Algernon as a would-be husband for Cecily by making the paradoxical remark that Algernon has nothing but his debts to depend upon. When Lady Bracknell thinks that a heated argument is going on upstairs, she makes the following paradoxical statement: “I dislike arguments of any kind. They are always vulgar, and often convincing.” (Actually convincing arguments appeal to people, but Lady Bracknell finds convincing arguments to be unwelcome).

Witty Epigrams in the Play: - Witty epigrams are also contributed to the play by almost all the characters. An epigram is an interesting or amusing thought expressed in a few words. Or, an epigram may be defined as a short, pointed saying, ingenious in thought and clever in expression. Thus Algernon makes an epigrammatic remark when he says that the very essence of romance is uncertainty. He then makes another epigrammatic remark when he says that divorces are made in heaven, thus giving a twist to the well-known saying that marriages are made in heaven. Algernon also makes the epigrammatic remark that the only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her if she is pretty, and to someone else if she is not pretty. Jack gives us an epigram when he says: “When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people.” Again, Jack makes an epigrammatic remark by saying “It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn’t a dentist. It produces a false impression.” Cecily makes an epigrammatic remark when she says: “Of course, a man who is much talked about is always very attractive. One feels there must be something in him, after all.” Then we get a few epigrams from Miss Prism also. “Even these metallic problems have their melodramatic side,” she says with reference to the devaluation of the rupee. By persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation, says Miss Prism in an epigrammatic manner, adding in the same style: “Men should be more careful; this very celibacy leads weaker vessels astray.” Miss Prism gives us a number of epigrammatic statements in one of her speeches “Maturity can always be depended on. Ripeness can be trusted. Young women are green.”

Irony in the Play: - There is plenty of irony in this play, and it is comic irony of course. The essence of comic irony is mockery or deception of one kind or another, and its force derives from the pleasure in contrasting “appearances” with “reality”. There are various types of comic irony. The simplest and the most commonly used is verbal irony which occurs when the speaker says the opposite of what he means and yet conveys his real meaning so as to produce an amusing effect. In this case the proper signification of the words constitutes the appearance; and the destined meaning is the reality. Irony also means a kind of ridicule which exposes the errors or faults of others by seeming to approve or defend them. Irony means, too, pretending ignorance with the intention of
irritating or perplexing somebody in agreement or dispute. Jack’s remade to Lady Bracknell: “How extremely kind of you,” when Lady Bracknell says that she is satisfied with certain particulars about Cecily, is ironical. So is Lady Bracknell’s remark: “A life crowded with incident,” when Jack tells her about the certificates which he has got regarding Cecily’s birth, baptism, etc. There is irony in Algernon’s pointing out to his servant that in a bachelor’s house the servants invariably drink costly wines. (In this case Algernon knows the reason but pretends ignorance). There is irony in Cecily’s remark to Miss Prism: “You know German and geology, and things of that kind influence a man very much.” (Here Cecily is ridiculing Miss Prism’s self-conceit about her knowledge of German and geology). Comic irony also exists in a clash between one aspect and another of some double situation, the whole of which is understood by the reader and some of the characters, while other characters are ignorant of it. An obvious example is Algernon’s coming to Jack’s country house under the assumed name of Ernest and pretending to be Jack’s younger brother. Here the reader, as well as Algernon and Jack, knows the reality, but Cecily and the others do not.

The Importance of Being Earnest as a social satire

The Targets of Satire in This Play: - A satire is a humorous or witty exposure of human failings; weaknesses, follies, absurdities, and pretensions. The Importance of Being Earnest is truly a satire, and a very witty and amusing one. The principal target of satire in this play is the English upper class of the time, although we have a couple of satirical portraits of persons belonging to certain different orders of society, namely those of a clergyman and a governess. The author in this play ridicules certain typical representatives of the English aristocracy of the time, and he equally ridicules certain other persons as well.

The Satirical Portrayal of Algernon: - Let us take the case of Algernon first. He is a typical representative of the English upper class of the time, and he has been portrayed in a satirical manner. His shallowness, irresponsibility, extravagance, and vanity have been exposed in such a manner as to make us laugh at this specimen of the aristocracy. If the servants in his house drink his champagne, he treats the matter light-heartedly. He throws expensive parties, even though he admits that he is short of money. He tells Jack that he would like to get a prize for restoring his cigarette-case to him because he is particularly hard up at this time. In fact, he is in a state of indebtedness. As Lady Bracknell points out, “he has nothing but his debts to depend upon.” Another trait of his character which is satirically treated is his gluttony. As Jack points out, this man is always hungry and is always eating whether it be cucumber sandwiches or muffins. He wants Jack to invite him to dinner at an expensive restaurant. One would think that eating is his mainobby. Algernon is a fashionable man, and is always over-dressed. This too is something to make us laugh, because aristocratic young men attach too much importance to their clothes. As Lady Bracknell points out, Algernon “is nothing but he looks every thing”. According to Jack. Algernon has a ridiculous vanity. This is clear from the fact that Algernon claims to be always “immensely over-educated”. His vanity is seen also in his claim that he plays on the piano with wonderful expression, sentiment being his forte. One of his absurdities is that he expects the lower orders of society to set a good example of moral responsibility to the upper classes. His view that relatives are “a tedious pack of people” again shows his vanity and his egoism. He actually loves to hear his relatives abused. One aspect of his shallowness is that at every party he would like to flirt with some woman. Nor does his Bunburying do him any credit. In short, the whole portrayal of Algernon is satirical, his only commendable and admirable quality being his brilliant wit.
The Satirical Portrayal of Jack: - Then there is Jack. He too is a representative of the upper class. But he is a much better specimen because there is much in him that we approve. He is a responsible-minded guardian, and he is a serious type of young man in whose talk, according to Miss Prism, “there is no room for triviality and idle merriment”. But he goes to the other extreme. While Algernon is too light-hearted, Jack is too serious-minded. His very solemnity is made to look ridiculous. Cecily says that her Uncle Jack sometimes looks so serious as to give the impression that he is unwell. Algernon says that Jack is “the most earnest-looking man” he has ever known. Jack’s over-seriousness has sharply been contrasted with Algernon’s gaiety. Jack’s over-seriousness is also to be found in his refusal to go either to the theatre, or to the club, or to the Empire. When asked by Algernon what they should do, Jack’s reply is: “Nothing”. Nor is his over-seriousness the only ridiculous aspect of his character. He thinks Gwendolen to be a very intellectual kind of girl, while we know her to be absolutely shallow. He admires Cecily not only because she has an excellent appetite and takes long walks but also because she pays no attention at all to her studies. He does not believe in telling the truth to a nice, sweet, refined girl. He does not know whether a severe chill is hereditary or not. Thus the portrayal of Jack too is satirical in intention and in effect.

The Satirical Portrayal of Gwendolen: - There are three women representatives of the upper class, and each has been portrayed in a satirical manner. There is Gwendolen whose superficiality and ignorance are extremely amusing. For instance, she cannot understand how anybody of any importance can exist in the countryside. Nor did she have any idea that there were flowers growing in the countryside. Though fond of living in the town, she hates crowds. She is proud of the fact that she has never seen a spade. When she makes a railway journey, she likes to carry her diary with her because she wants to read something sensational. But her most amusing absurdity is her enthusiastic reaction to the name of Ernest. She thinks Ernest to be a divine name which has a music of its own and which produces vibrations. It was always her cherished ideal to love someone of the name of Ernest, she says. In order to marry the man with whom she has fallen in love, chiefly on the basis of his name, she runs away from home thus showing no regard at all for the decencies of family life. It is clear, then, that the author is laughing at this aristocratic young girl and, of course, he makes us laugh at her too. In her case too it could be said that her talent for witty conversation is her only redeeming quality.

The Satirical Elements in the Portrayal of Cecily: - Cecily is another representative of the upper class and though a better specimen than Gwendolen, she amuses us by her failings and absurdities. She is not at all interested in German grammar, political economy, or geography, all of which she regards as “horrid”. She keeps a diary in which she records every minor detail of her life, calling its contents “the wonderful secrets of life”. Though she does have charm, and a good deal of it, she yet shows a ridiculous side to her personality. Like Gwendolen, she too goes into raptures over the name Ernest. It had always been a girlish dream of hers to love someone of the name of Ernest, she says. Her account of how she had fallen in love with Ernest is even more absurd than her enthusiastic reaction to the name. She fell in love with him without even having seen or met him; she got engaged to him in her imagination; she even bought herself an engagement ring on his behalf; and once she broke off the engagement. Her absurdity appears further in her wanting to put down in her diary every word that her lover has to say in praise of her.

The Satirical Portrayal of Lady Bracknell: - The portrayal of Lady Bracknell is perhaps the most satirical of all. In this case the author simply gloats over his task of exposing the foibles and absurdities of the upper-class ladies of his time. Nor is there any doubt about
the enormous success that the author has made of his job. Lady Bracknell claims to have a taste for music, but she would like her nephew to make the selection of the numbers to be played at her party. In other words, her taste in music is simply a pretence. But this is only a minor, foible in her. Her principal absurdities are her snobbery, her class-consciousness, her mercenary outlook on life, her suspicious nature, and her domineering temperament. The manner in which she cross-examines Jack to determine his suitability as her son-in-law shows both her suspicious nature and her domineering temperament. Both these traits appear again in the questions which she subsequently asks in order to determine suitability of Cecily as a wife for Algernon. This second cross-examination shows also the importance of money in her eyes because, as soon as she learns that Cecily will bring a rich dowry, she begins to see, in Cecily certain qualities which she had not observed before. But even then she speaks to Cecily and about Cecily in a patronizing, tone, and adopts a superior attitude towards her. Perhaps her greatest absurdity appears in her claim that, although she herself did not have any fortune, she did not allow that circumstance to stand in the way of her marrying Lord Bracknell. Her domineering nature appears also in the manner in which she exercises rigid control over her daughter and her own husband, and this aspect her life is also ridiculed by the author. The portrayals of Lady Bracknell and the two younger specimens of the aristocracy are thus very successful in exposing the failings and absurdities of the society ladies of the time.

The Satirical Portrayal of Dr. Chasuble: - Another satirical portrait in the play is that of Dr. Chasuble. This portrait is a satire on clergymen. A clergyman is expected to inspire respect, but Dr. Chasuble excites our mirth. Dr. Chasuble is ridiculed for his pompous manner of speaking, his hypocrisy, his lack of real scholarship, and his materialistic attitude to life. As for his pompous manner of speaking, one example will serve the purpose. On seeing Jack in mourning clothes, Dr. Chasuble says to him: "Dear Mr. Worthing, I trust this garb of woe does not betoken some terrible calamity?" His lack of any real learning is evident from Cecily's remark that he is one of the most learned men because he has not written a single book. It is absurd on his part to claim that a particular sermon of his can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful or distressing. Another absurdity in his talk occurs when he makes a classical allusion drawn from the pagan authors. He is a Christian priest, but he quotes pagan authors. His hypocrisy appears in the fact that in theory he is opposed to matrimony but that actually he has been flirting with Miss Prism precisely with the object of marrying her. He is a clergyman without any really spiritual quality. He feels very disappointed when Algernon and Jack give up their intention to be baptised after having obtained his view that there can be no technical objection to the baptism of grown-up people.

The Satirical Portrayal of Miss Prism: - Miss Prism amuses us by her literary pretensions. She once wrote a three-volume novel which she deposited in the perambulator while she put the baby under her charge in a hand-bag which she placed in a railway cloak-room. Nothing could be more absurd than this behaviour which is supposed to have resulted from her absent-mindedness. In addition to her literary pretensions, she also has moral pretensions which she shows in her dislike of the wicked younger brother of Jack Worthing and in her feeling of joy at the reported death of that wicked fellow. As a man sows, so shall he reap, she remarks on this occasion, with an air of moral superiority. The portrayal of Miss Prism is also satirical.

**The Importance of Being Earnest:** A comic treatment of the theme of love and marriage
Three Successful Love-Affairs: - There are three love-affairs in the Importance of Being Earnest. Jack Worthing is in love with Gwendolen Fairfax; Algernon is in love with Cecily Cardew; and Dr. Chasuble is drawn towards Miss Prism who is the governess in Jack’s household. There is no serious obstacle in the way of the fulfilment of any of the love-affairs, and the desire of each of the characters is fulfilled by the time the play ends.

Jack’s Intention to Propose Marriage to Gwendolen: - We learn about Jack’s love for Gwendolen in the very opening Act. Jack is on a visit to Algernon whom he informs that he has come to town expressly to propose marriage to Gwendolen. Algernon’s comment on Jack’s intention is that there is nothing romantic in proposing marriage though it is very romantic to be in love. The excitement comes to an end with the acceptance of a proposal of marriage, says Algernon. He also says that, if ever he gets married, he will try to forget the fact, to which Jack replies that the Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are short. Algernon remarks that divorces are made in heaven.

Gwendolen’s Prompt Acceptance (if Jack’s Proposal of Marriage): - Lady Bracknell comes to Algernon’s flat for tea in the company of her daughter Gwendolen. As already arranged between Algernon and Jack, Algernon takes Lady Bracknell away into another room in order to enable Jack to have a few moments alone with Gwendolen and to make his proposal of marriage. Jack expresses his love for Gwendolen in a halting, hesitant manner, but Gwendolen gives him a favourable reply promptly and in unambiguous terms. She tells him that it has been her ideal to love someone of the name of Ernest because there” is something in that name which inspires absolute confidence. (She knows Jack under his assumed name of Ernest). She tells Jack that he has always had an irresistible fascination for her. When Jack asks her if she would not have loved him in case his name had been different, she says that this question involves a metaphysical speculation and has no reference to the actual facts of real life. When Jack says that the name Ernest does not suit him at all, Gwendolen replies that it suits him perfectly, that it is a divine name with a music of its own, and that it produces vibrations. Jack asks her what she thinks of the name Jack, and Gwendolen says that this name has no music in it, that it does not thrill her,” and that it produces absolutely no vibration. The name Jack, she says, is a “notorious domesticity” for John, and a woman married to a man having this name would never have the pleasure” of a single moment’s solitude. The only real safe name is Ernest, says Gwendolen. Jack then decides to be christened in order to acquire the name of Ernest. When Jack says that they must get married at once, Gwendolen replies that he has mentioned marriage without having formally proposed to her whereupon Jack makes a formal proposal which Gwendolen immediately accepts, saying that his eyes are wonderfully blue and expressing the hope that he will always look at her in the same loving manner in which he is looking at her now.

Lady Bracknell’s Objection to Jack’s Proposal of Marriage: - Then comes the obstacle in the way of the marriage of Jack and Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell cross-examines Jack in order to determine his suitability as her would-be son-in-law. In reply to her questions, he tells her that he does not smoke, that his age is twenty-nine, that he knows nothing, that his income is between, seven and eight thousand pounds a year, that he has a country house with some land attached to it, and so on. Lady Bracknell feels quite satisfied with all these particulars but when Jack tells her, in reply to another question, that he does not know his parentage and that he was found as an infant by Mr. Thomas Cardew, a man of a very charitable and benevolent nature, who brought him up and gave him the name of Worthing, Lady Bracknell feels outraged and tells him that she cannot allow her daughter to marry a man who was found as an infant in a hand-bag
lying in a railway cloak-room. She cannot allow her only daughter “to marry into a cloak room and form an alliance with a parcel” says Lady Bracknell. The interrogation by Lady Bracknell has been quite an ordeal for Jack who tells Algernon that Lady Bracknell is perfectly unbearable and that she is really a Gorgon, “a monster without being a myth”.

The Love-Affair Between Algernon and Cecily: - The love-affair between Algernon and Cecily begins in Act II. Algernon’s curiosity about Cecily having been aroused by the inscription on Jack’s cigarette-case, Algernon visits Jack’s country residence in the disguise of Jack’s younger brother, Ernest (who is an imaginary person invented by Jack as an excuse for paying his frequent visits to London). Algernon falls in love with Cecily at first sight and, when he praises her beauty, she tells him that she had fallen in love with him without even having met or seen him. He tells her that he thinks her to be the visible personification of absolute perfection, and that he loves her wildly, passionately, devotedly, and hopelessly. He then asks her if she will marry him, and she replies that she will certainly marry him because she has been engaged to him for the last three months. Algernon is surprised to hear this. But Cecily explains that she fell in love with him at the very time when her Uncle Jack first told her that he had a younger brother by the name of Ernest who was very wicked and bad. She had even bought herself an engagement ring on his behalf and she had also obtained a bangle with the true lover’s knot as a gift from him. Not only that, she had been writing letters to him regularly and had herself been replying to them on his behalf. Once she had broken off the engagement because he had offended her, but she had forgiven him within the same week, and the engagement had been restored. She then praises his hair for curling naturally, and she admires his name, saying that it had always been a girlish dream of hers to love some one having, the name of Ernest because there was something in that name which inspired absolute confidence. Algernon asks her whether she could not have loved him if his name had been different, and Cecily replies that if he had a different name, such as Algernon, she might have admired his character but she could not have given him her undivided attention. On learning that the name Ernest has a great deal to do with Cecily’s love for him, Algernon too decides to undergo a christening ceremony in order to acquire the name of Ernest which has a great charm for both Gwendolen and Cecily. It is part of the absurdity of this play that two well-educated and aristocratic girls are fascinated by the name Ernest and that they fall in love with two men who are supposed to have this name.

A Misunderstanding Between the Two Girls: - A misunderstanding arises when Gwendolen comes on a visit to Jack’s country residence. Both Gwendolen and Cecily think that the same man, by the name of Ernest, has proposed marriage to them. They exchange some sarcastic remarks because of this misunderstanding. The misunderstanding is, however, cleared up and the two women become allies on discovering that neither of their lovers has the name of Ernest. Jack admits that he has no brother at all, while Algernon also admits that he is not Ernest but Algernon. These confessions by the two men annoy the girls and they behave as if they were feeling greatly offended with their lovers for having pretended to have a name which they actually did not have. However, they admire their lovers’ spirit of self-sacrifice in so far as they are ready to undergo the ceremony of being christened once again at this age in order to acquire the name of Ernest. In view of this readiness on the part of the two men to undergo the christening ceremony, the girls no longer attach any importance to the name. However, a new hitch arises, and it is in Act III that this hitch is dealt with learning that her nephew Algernon is interested in marrying Cecily, she inquires about
various particulars of the girl and feels quite satisfied as to her suitability as her
nephew’s wife when she is told that Cecily has a large amount of money in her name.
Lady Bracknell gives her approval to the proposed marriage of Algernon and Cecily, but
she still does not approve of her daughter Gwendolen marrying Jack, her objection being
that his parentage is unknown and that he is therefore not acceptable to her as a son-in-
law.

Jack’s Objection: - Jack, who is Cecily’s legal guardian, now refuses to allow Cecily to
get married to Algernon. When Lady Bracknell asks him why he does not allow this
marriage, he says that the solution to the problem lies in Lady Bracknell’s own hands. He
will allow his ward Cecily to marry Algernon, if Lady Bracknell allows her daughter
Gwendolen to marry him (Jack).

A Discovery: - Lady Bracknell still cannot allow her daughter to marry a man whose
parentage is unknown. But this difficulty is removed when, as a result of Lady Bracknell’s
interrogation of Miss Prism, it is found that Jack is the son of Lady Bracknell’s own late
sister and the elder brother of Algernon. In view of this discovery, Lady Bracknell can
have no objection to the marriage of her daughter Gwendolen to Jack.

The Love-Affair Between Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble: - The third love-affair which also
achieves its fulfilment is the one between Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble. We meet both
these persons in Act II and it becomes clear as soon as they are introduced to us that
they are emotionally interested in each other. Cecily has perceived the attraction
between the Rector and her governess, and that is why she suggests that Miss Prism
should go for a walk with Dr. Chasuble. Miss Prism suggests to Dr. Chasuble that, in view
of his loneliness, he should get married. She can understand a “misanthrope”, but not a
“womanthrope”, she says. Dr. Chasuble replies that the Primitive Church was distinctly
opposed to matrimony, but Miss Prism says that, by persistently remaining unmarried, a
man converts himself into a permanent public temptation. The flirtation between Dr.
Chasuble and Miss Prism leads to a happy result. When Gwendolen and Cecily accept
their respective lovers whole-heartedly, Dr. Chasuble embraces Miss Prism and says
enthusiastically : “At last” ! Thus the play ends with the fulfilment of the three love-
affairs.

The Importance of Being Earnest : Use of wit

A Dearth of Action in Wilde’s Plays: - There is very little action in the plays of Oscar
Wilde. Wilde’s own mother once complained to him about the dearth of action in his
plays and urged him to put more action in them. However, action was not the strong
point of Wilde as a playwright. All his famous plays, of which there are only four, are
comedies of dialogue, and The Importance of Being Earnest is no exception. The notion
in this play is quite inadequate and the entire appeal of the play lies in the brilliance of
its dialogue.

Action in Act I: - Hardly anything happens in the entire play. In terms of action, The
Importance of Being Earnest is a flimsy play.” In Act I, for instance, the only action
consists in the following developments Jack Worthing’s visit to Algernon’s flat ; the
arrival of Lady Bracknell and her daughter Gwendolen for tea at the same place ; Jack’s
proposal of marriage to Gwendolen and her immediate acceptance of it Jack’s inward
decision to change his name to Ernest; Lady Bracknell’s rejection of Jack as possible son-
in-law after her interrogation of him and his confession that he does not know his
parentage. Besides these incidents, we are also informed that while Algernon has
invented an ailing friend by the name o Bunbury to serve as an excuse for his frequently
leaving the town to escape from its social activities, Jack has invented a younger brother by the name of Ernest in order to serve as an excuse for his leaving his country home in order to pay frequent visits to London.

Action in Act II: - In Act II the action consists in the following situations Cecily’s finding an excuse for Miss Prism to go for a walk with Dr. Chasuble; Algernon’s arrival at the Manor House in disguise in order to get acquainted with Cecily, Jack’s return home in mourning clothes; Gwendolen’s unexpected arrival at Jack’s country home and the misunderstanding that takes place between her and Cecily; Algernon’s decision and the arrangements made by both Jack and Algernon for their christening by Dr. Chasuble; and Algernon’s refusal to leave Jack’s house.

Action in Act III: - In Act III, the action consists in Lady Bracknell’s arrival at the Manor House; Lady Bracknell’s approval of Cecily’s marriage to Algernon but her continued disapproval of Gwendolen’s marriage to Jack; Jack’s objection to Cecily’s marriage to Algernon; Lady Bracknell’s interrogation of Miss Prism and the resolution of the main complication of the play.

The Wit and Humour in the Remarks of All the Characters: - Thus there is very little of what is called “plot” in this play and yet it is a play which holds the attention and the interest of the audience and the readers throughout. It is the humour and the wit of the dialogue which lends to the play its main interest. Each of the characters gives evidence of a brilliant wit in whatever be or she says. As all the characters are well-educated (even the governess Miss Prism has written a three-volume novel), the humour and the wit in the speeches of each is not of the unconscious variety. In other words, each character is conscious of his or her wit. But it must be kept in mind that none of the characters gives any sign of being aware that he or she is speaking in a witty manner. Another point to note is that the wit is not laboured but spontaneous and effortless. Witty remarks, statements, and comments flow from the lips of the various characters naturally. In fact, it is impossible for us, on a closer view, to believe that all the characters can possess such a fertile wit; but in the theatre, or even in the study, we hardly stop to question the talent for making witty remarks of which every character provides ample evidence. And, in any case, we know that we are reading what is known as an artificial comedy, and so it does not matter whether the possession of this gift of wit by so many characters is something convincing or not.

The Display of Wit By Algernon and Jack: - The comic and witty quality of the play becomes apparent to us in the very opening dialogue which takes place between Algernon and his servant Lane. Even the servant amuses us by his remark that bachelors keep superior wines in their homes and that in married households the wine is rarely of a first-rate brand. Lane’s remark about marriage leads Algernon to make a paradoxical statement which also amuses us. Algernon says that the lower orders of society should set a good example by showing a sense of moral responsibility so that the upper classes can learn something from them. This dialogue is followed by a much longer dialogue between Algernon and Jack, and in the course of this dialogue we come across a large number of witty remarks to which both these characters make a contribution, though Algernon shows himself to be more witty than his friend. Algernon indulges in a lot of bantering talk in connection with the inscription on Jack’s cigarette-case. One of the witty remarks that Algernon makes here is that girls never marry the men they flirt with. Jack makes a witty remark when he says that some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall, and that it is a matter which an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. Algernon makes another paradoxical and witty remark when he says that literary criticism should be left to people who have never been at a university. He makes yet another witty
remark by saying that the number of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous: Another witty remark comes from Algernon when he gives a twist to a well-known saying and modifies it by saying that in married life three is a company and two is none. Another paradoxical remark from Algernon is that people who are not-serious about meals are shallow-minded.

The Display of Wit By Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen: - Then Lady Bracknell and her daughter Gwendolen arrive, and we have some real fireworks. On being told by Jack that she is perfect, Gwendolen replies that she would not like to be perfect because perfection would leave no room for developments and because she intends to develop in many directions. Lady Bracknell makes a very witty remark when she says that Mr. Bunbury should make up his mind whether he is going to live or to die and that his shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. She also says that she does not approve of the modern sympathy with invalids, which is a paradoxical remark because generally one is expected to be sympathetic towards the sick and the ailing. Gwendolen’s reaction to the name Ernest is highly amusing to us. It is indeed very funny that a highly sophisticated girl should find in the name Ernest something that inspires absolute confidence. It has always been her ideal, she says, to love some one of the name of Ernest. Lady Bracknell makes a very witty remark when, on seeing Jack kneeling, before Gwendolen, she says to him “Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture; it is most indecorous.” A witty remark which is also paradoxical is made by Lady Bracknell when she says that she does not approve of anything that interferes with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate, exotic fruit which should not be touched but should be allowed to remain intact. She thinks it fortunate that education in England produces no effect whatsoever on the people because, if it were to produce any effect, it would prove to be a serious danger to the upper classes. One, of Lady Bracknell’s Wittiest remarks is that to be born or bred in a handbag shows a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life reminding her of the worst excesses of “the French Revolution. This remark is amusing because of the extreme exaggeration implied in the comparison of a child’s being found in a hand-bag with the worst excesses of the French Revolution. But, perhaps, the most hilarious remark that Lady Bracknell makes is that she and her husband cannot allow their “only daughter to marry into a cloakroom and form an alliance with a parcel.”

More Witty Remarks By Algernon and Jack: - After Lady Bracknell has rejected Jack as a possible son-in-law and has then left, Jack makes a witty remark when he calls her a Gorgon, and adds that she is a “monster without being a myth”. Jack makes another witty remark when, on being asked by Algernon if he has told Gwendolen the truth about his being Ernest in town and Jack in the country, Jack says that truth is not quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, and refined girl like Gwendolen. To this, Algernon replies wittily that the only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her if she is pretty and to make love to some other woman if the first one is unattractive. There is something comic in the very invention of an ailing friend by the name of Bunbury and a younger brother by the name Ernest. Referring to the invention of Bunbury, Algernon says that, if he had not invented this friend with extraordinarily bad health, he would not have been able to escape from his dinner-engagement with Lady Bracknell. Towards the end of Act I we again meet Lane who, on being told that he is a perfect pessimist, replies that he does his best to give satisfaction to his master, implying paradoxically that his pessimism should be a cause of satisfaction to his employer. Act I ends with Jack telling Algernon that the latter always talks nonsense and with Algernon replying that everybody talks nonsense and nothing but nonsense. Thus the whole of Act I is replete with witty paradoxes, sarmas, ironical remarks, and amusing statements which have an epigrammatic quality.
Witty Remarks of Miss Prism, Cecily, and Gwendolen: - The wit shows no signs of dwindling in Act II. In the beginning of this Act, we find Miss Prism telling Cecily that she is not in favour of the modern mania for turning bad people into good people at a moment’s notice, which is certainly an amusing remark. Cecily makes an amusing remark when she says that memory records the things that have never happened and could not possibly have happened. This remark is also a paradox. Another paradoxical and witty remark is made by Cecily when she says that she does not like novels that end happily because such novels depress her much. Miss Prism makes a witty remark when, talking to Dr. Chasuble, she says that by remaining unmarried a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation. We are greatly amused also when Dr. Chasuble claims that his sermon on the meaning of the manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful or distressing. He has preached this sermon at harvest celebrations, christenings, confirmations, on days of humiliation and festivals days. Of course, Dr. Chasuble does not say this in order to amuse anybody; in fact, he is quite serious about what he is saying; but he produces a comic effect, and the humour here is unconscious. Miss Prism amuses us when she says that the news of the sudden return of Jack’s younger brother who was supposed to have died is peculiarly distressing. Several other remarks made by Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism are also very amusing. Cecily makes a paradoxical and amusing remark when she says that it is always painful to part from people whom one has known for a brief space of time but that the absence of old friends can be endured without much difficulty. Cecily’s whole account of how she had fallen in love with Algernon (who has come in the disguise of Jack’s younger brother Ernest) and how she had become engaged to him is also extremely amusing and would make an audience roar with laughter. She also amuses us when she says that she would like to put down in her diary whatever words her lover has to speak to her in order to express his sentiments about her. Algernon makes a very witty remark when he says that half of the chaps who get into the Bankruptcy Court are all called Algernon. Gwendolen makes a sarcastic remark to Cecily when, after Cecily has mentioned a spade, Gwendolen says: “I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.” Act II closes with Algernon again indulging in banter at the cost of Jack, and Jack ultimately groaning and sinking into a chair while Algernon continues to eat muffins.

Witty Dialogue in Act III: - Nor is Act III deficient in wit. Lady Bracknell, for instance, says that hesitation of any kind is a sign of mental decay in the young and of physical weakness in the old. Speaking to Cecily, Lady Bracknell says that an experienced French maid would certainly bring about a lot of improvement in Cecily’s hair and her way of dressing. She gives the example of Lady Lancing whom her own husband could not recognize after she had undergone the treatment by a French maid for three months. Jack here intervenes to say that after six months nobody could recognize that lady, which also is a witty remark. Lady Bracknell amuses us greatly when she says that she does not approve of mercenary marriages, giving her own example and pointing out that when she married Lord Bracknell she had no fortune of any kind. It is extremely amusing for us to hear Lady Bracknell say that she never allowed her lack of dowry to stand in the way of her marriage to Lord Bracknell. Another witty remark made by Lady Bracknell is that thirty-five is an attractive age for a woman to get married. London society, she adds, is full of women of the very highest birth who have remained thirty-five for years. When Lady Bracknell refuses to give her consent to her daughter’s marriage to Jack, Jack wittily says: “Then a passionate celibacy is all that any one of us can look forward to.” Gwendolen makes a paradoxical and witty remark when, on being asked by Jack to wait for him, she says “If you are not too long, I will wait here for you all my life.”
In short, although some of the situations in the play are certainly funny, it is the dialogue which keeps us laughing most of the time.

“The Importance of Being Earnest-A perfect work of art.”

Closely-Knit Plot: - At the very outset it must be pointed out that the appeal of The Importance of Being Earnest lies chiefly in its, dialogue which is distinguished by an abundance of wit and humour. There is undoubtedly little action in the play but whatever of it there is has been developed in a perfectly logical manner. Once we recognize that absurdity is the keynote of the play, we shall find no fault with the way the plot develops. The plot is certainly flimsy but it is closely-knit and skilfully constructed. For various reasons, this play is superior to the other plays written by Wilde, but one reason for its superiority is its excellent craftsmanship.

The Love-Affair of Jack and Gwendolen in Act I: - There are two major love-affairs, and one minor love-affair in The Importance of Being Earnest. Act I initiates one of the two major love-affairs, namely that of Jack and Gwendolen. Jack has been visiting London under the assumed name of Ernest and it is by this name that he is known to Gwendolen. When the play opens, Jack is on another of his visits to London, and this time he proposes marriage to Gwendolen who readily accepts the proposal. Gwendolen’s mother, Lady Bracknell, however rejects Jack as a possible son-in-law after cross-examining him and being told that Jack’s parentage is unknown.

Algernon’s Bunburying: - A hint of the second major love-affair is dropped to us when Algernon, in response to his persistent questioning of Jack, learns that Jack has a ward by the name of Cecily, a very pretty girl of eighteen years of age, who is living with him at his country home under the charge of a governess by the name of Miss Prism. Algernon becomes very inquisitive about Cecily and expresses to Jack his desire to see her, but Jack replies that he will take very good care to see that Algernon does not meet Cecily who is excessively pretty and only eighteen. However, Algernon takes down Jack’s country address when Jack tells it to Gwendolen, and Algernon overhears it. Algernon’s taking down Jack’s country address is an indication that he will find an opportunity to meet Cecily. Our feeling in this respect is confirmed when Algernon tells his servant to pack his luggage because he will be leaving London for the countryside on the following day. He calls this visit to the country as part of his “Bunburying”.

The Mutual Interest of Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble in Each Other: - In Act II it is the love-affair between Algernon and Cecily which is initiated and which develops, but the other major love-affair, as also the minor love-affair (the one between Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble, the Rector), also develop simultaneously. In the beginning of Act II we are introduced to Cecily, Miss Prism, and Dr. Chasuble. Cecily has perceived Miss Prism’s emotional interest in Dr. Chasuble and the Rector’s emotional interest in Miss Prism. The mutual interest of Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble in each other is confirmed by their taking a walk together, and Miss Prism’s suggesting to the Rector that he should get married in order to relieve his loneliness.

Cecily’s Engagement to Jack: - Algernon now appears at Jack’s country house and introduces himself to Cecily as Jack’s younger brother by the name of Ernest who is supposed to be a rather wicked fellow and who therefore often gets into difficulties. But just then Jack returns home from his visit to London and, not knowing that Algernon is already there under the assumed name of Ernest, says that his younger brother has
died. This situation is very funny, indeed. On being told that his younger brother by the name of Ernest is in the house, and very much alive, Jack feels very annoyed with Algernon and would like Algernon to go away but Algernon who has already fallen in love with Cecily has no intention to leave. Finding an opportunity to be alone with Cecily, Algernon proposes marriage to her, and she promptly responds to the proposal, saying that she has already been engaged to him for the last three months because she had fallen in love with him as soon as her guardian had mentioned him to her.

The Deception Practised By the Two Men: - The two major love-affairs are now brought into a close relationship with each other when Gwendolen unexpectedly arrives at Jack’s country house in order to meet the man whom she knows under the name of Ernest. There is a misunderstanding in the minds of both Cecily and Gwendolen because they think that it is the same man called Ernest who has proposed marriage to both of them. The misunderstanding is, however, soon cleared, but both the girls feel annoyed with their respective lovers for having deceived them with regard to the name Ernest.

The Solution of the Mystery of Jack’s Parentage: - In Act III the difficulty that had arisen in connection with the name Ernest is removed when the two girls decide to forgive their lovers. But another complication now arises. Lady Bracknell too arrives at Jack’s country house, having come to know that her daughter Gwendolen had fled from London in order to meet her lover Jack. Lady Bracknell has no objection to her nephew Algernon marrying Cecily, but she persists in her objection to Jack as her would-be son-in-law and does not agree to Gwendolen’s marrying Jack. At this, Jack declares that, as Cecily’s guardian, he will not agree to Cecily’s marrying Algernon unless Lady Bracknell first agrees to her daughter Gwendolen’s marrying Jack. Lady Bracknell, however, is in no mood to give her consent to Gwendolen’s marriage to Jack. Just then Dr. Chasuble appears and happens to mention the name of Miss Prism. The mention of Miss Prism startles Lady Bracknell, and she demands that Miss Prism be summoned to her presence. On being questioned by Lady Bracknell, Miss Prism gives an account of how she had, twenty-eight years ago, committed the blunder of putting a baby in a hand-bag which she had deposited in a railway cloak-room instead of putting the baby in the perambulator. This baby was no other than Jack. The mystery of Jack’s parentage is thus solved, and it is found that Jack is Lady Bracknell’s own nephew and the elder brother of Algernon. Lady Bracknell now can have no objection to her daughter’s marrying Jack.

The Interweaving of the Plots: - The interweaving between the two main love-affairs is thus perfect. Algernon could not marry Cecily unless Lady Bracknell permitted Gwendolen to marry Jack; and Lady Bracknell permits Gwendolen’s marriage to Jack only when it is discovered that Jack is Lady Bracknell’s own nephew. The subsidiary love-affair, the one between Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism, is also brought into a close relationship with the two major love-affairs because Miss Prism, who is Cecily’s governess, was at one time serving as a nurse in Lady Bracknell’s household and was looking after Lady Bracknell’s nephew, Jack or Ernest. Not only that, it is Dr. Chasuble who comes and mentions the name of Miss Prism which arouses Lady Bracknell’s curiosity and makes her summon Miss Prism to her presence. Wilde’s craftsmanship is thus evident in the inter-connection and inter-dependence of the two main plots, and the close connection of the subsidiary plot with the two main plots.

The Parallelisms in the Play: - An important aspect of the construction of this play is the use of parallelism. Jack has invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that he might be able to go to London as often as he likes in order to meet Gwendolen and also for a change to relieve the monotony of his life at his country residence. In the same way Algernon has invented a valuable permanent invalid called
Bunbury in order that he might be able to go down into the country whenever he pleases in order to escape from the social whirl of London and especially from the boring dinner-parties of his aunt, Lady Bracknell. This is one example of parallelism. Another example is to be found in the reaction of Gwendolen and Cecily to the name “Ernest”. Both girls become almost rapturous over this name. Both find that this name is one which inspires absolute confidence. It had been Gwendolen’s ideal to marry someone by the name Ernest, and it had been the girlish dream of Cecily to do the same. Yet another example of parallelism is that both Gwendolen and Cecily maintain diaries, though for different reasons. Gwendolen keeps her diary with her on her railway journeys in order to be able to read something sensational, while Cecily records in her dairy what she calls “the wonderful secrets” of her life as well as the words of praise of her beauty spoken by her admirer Algernon. Yet another example of parallelism is the readiness of both Jack and Algernon to acquire the name of Ernest and to undergo the ceremony of christening or rechristening in order to do so, even though it is eventually found unnecessary for either of them to undergo that ceremony.

Deceptions in the Play: - The construction of the play rests also on a series of secrets and the disclosure of those secrets. Deception and deceit are the basis of most comedies, and The Importance of Being Earnest is no exception. Not only do Algernon and Jack deceive their beloveds with a false name, but Lady Bracknell also proves to be a tricky woman because it is by bribing Gwendolen’s maid-servant that she finds out where Gwendolen has gone. Miss Prism too is guilty of deception, because she has been hiding for nearly thirty years the secret of her misdeed in having placed the baby in a hand-bag. The wealth of the late Mr. Thomas Cardew is a secret which remains a mystery till the end. Nor is little Cecily above deceit, though of a petty kind, as when she tells Gwendolen that her engagement is to be announced in the local newspaper. Even the life of Lane, the servant, is not above suspicion.

The Interest of the Dialogue: - It is also noteworthy that every dramatic element in this play has been subordinated to dialogue. There are no doubt a number of comic situations such as Algernon’s continuing to eat muffins despite Jack’s protests, Jack’s return home in mourning clothes and his announcing the death of his supposed younger brother, the two girls thinking that they are engaged to the same person, Dr. Chasuble’s preparations for the two christening ceremonies, and so on. But it is the dialogue which is of supreme importance in this play. In connection with the dialogue it is necessary to point out that it is a judicious mixture of long and short speeches. There are many speeches consisting of no more than two to four lines, and there are a number of speeches consisting of as many as eight to twelve lines. Such a judicious mixture is also an important aspect of the construction of the play.

The Importance of Being Earnest - Satirical Comedy of Manners

"No woman should ever be quite accurate about her age. It looks so calculating."

"The play, though extremely funny, was essentially hateful", observed George Bernard Shaw (My Memories of Oscar Wilde), and a possible reason for his aversion is its farcical nature. The Importance of Being Earnest is ostensibly a farce, that poor cousin of true comedy which may have had its provenance in Aristophanes and the subsequent Roman comedy, but which never found a secure play in the respectable comic genre. The farce is notorious for its lack of plausible plot, its mechanical actions, and its puppet-like characterization and finally its general lack of intensity. It is only Oscar Wilde and Pinero
who, among the English playwrights made a serious attempt at farce, being able to rehabilitate this sub-genre to a considerable degree. Indeed, in his so-called farcical play like Lady Windermere’s Fan, A woman of No Importance, and The Importance of Being Earnest, Wilde is able to create a new kind of comedy which straddles the midpoint between farce and comedy, possessing the sheer playfulness of the one and the intellectual alacrity of the other, the mechanical plot of the one and the imaginative utopian land of the other, the flat characterization of the one and the grave satiric thrust of the other. The Importance of Being Earnest is therefore a farce, rather than a farcical comedy sui generis.

The primary feature of a farce is its improbability plot consisting of number of parallel or symmetric actions. The foremost of such action in The Importance of Being Earnest is, of course the device of such ‘Bunburyism’. Jack, the country squire invents a fictitious wicked brother by the name of Earnest, living in the city, in order to escape from the routine-bound monotonous. Life in the country-side; similarly, Algernon, The city-gentleman creates an invalid friend by the name of Bunbury in the country-side in order to escape from the responsibilities of his city-lifer. Jack falls in love Gwendolyn in the city under the name of Earnest, whereas Algernon falls in love with Jack’s ward Cecily in the country under the same assumed name of Earnest. So a strangely parallel situation is created in which both the lovers assume the same name Earnest, and the both beloved think that they are in love with a man with the name Earnest. As in farce, a serious of vaudeville actions follow the two ladies call each other sister until they realize that they are both in love with Earnest, whereupon they turn into bitter enemies. Both the lovers try to be re-christened as Earnest, and both realize to their chagrin that the beloved have discovered their actual identities, chasms reigns supreme.

The presence of undimensional characters, characters noteworthy for their static, unchanging quality, is another significant feature of farce. The Importance of Being Earnest is no exception. Its bevy of character including Algernon, Gwendolyn and Cecily and Mir Prism, Lane and Merriman, are all characterized by an idea fixe, a fixed idea which does not change throughout their lives. The sole ambition of Gwendolyn’s life is to fall in love with a person by the name of Earnest since it is a ‘divine name’ has ‘music’ of its own and produces ‘vibrations’. Similarly Cecily’s be-all and end all in life is to fall in love with a wicked person because that would provide her with adventure and romance, Therefore she feels extremely aggrieved when she suspects Algernon of actually being a good character. Indeed, she accuses him of hypocrisy, so that ultimately Algernon averse he has been ‘very bad’ in his own small way.

In spite of his marionette characterization and improbable plot, The Importance of Being Earnest reveals the genuine quality of high comedy in its creation of truly romantic word in which everything is parable, somewhat like, Puck-led world of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. The play has indeed the nature of a fantasy where seriousness to be abandoned for flamboyant frivolity, all anxieties for the sake of food, Algernon does when his beloved Cecily abandons him. An air of innocence pervades the whole play and the tale since desires for the innocent eyes of a child looking at the multi-hued world where everything is probable and nothing improbable. It is as if were a day dream where neither truth non lie, neither good nor evil has any impact.

The Importance of Being Earnest may have been castigated for its frivolous wit, but often times these flippant witticisms take on the note of genuine wisdom - a quality germane to true comedy. When Algernon declares that the emergence of romance is uncertainty, he is hinting the very unconventional psychological reality about man being in love with only that which he does not normally achieve or attain, for at the least he
does not feel very secure about . In contrast to the usual adage that "marriages are made in heaven ", he declares that" divorced are made in heaven ", implying thereby many marriages in those days, born out of societal convenience and aristocratic status, actually make marriages a bondage, a slavery. Such suggests of wisdom abound in the play.

Satiric vision, it is said, is the most important aspect of high comedy. Although the casual reader or audience may not be able to perceive the satire beneath the fickleness, The perceptive would realize that concealed within the triviality and fantasy is seriousness and satire as John Hankins pointed out in " Wilde as a dramatist, paradoxical as it may sound in the case of so merry and lighthearted play, The Importance of Being Earnest is artistically the most serious work that Wilde produced for the theatre." Through the irresponsible statement of the aristocratic classes, it is the aristocrat themselves. Who are being attacked? Their speeches reveal their inner emptiness and the follies of the decadent society of the late 19th century. At the same time, somewhat like Shaw himself the dramatist heaps scorn on such hallowed institutions as marriage, birth, baptism, romance, love and perhaps human life itself.

Wilde himself might have called this play "a trivial comedy for serious people ", but this playful comment conceals the greater truth that the play is a revelation of the triviality of seriousness. It is of such a profound if iconoclastic truth, the force attends the status of comedy.

**Irony in The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde**

The play The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde is full of irony. Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, the protagonists in the play, get themselves into a complicated situation called Bunburyism (as Algernon refers to it). They pretend to be someone that they are not to escape their daily lives. They lie to the women they admire and eventually the truth is unveiled.

The irony comes into play when the truth starts to unravel and Jack finds out what really happened to him as a child and why he does not know his parents. After some coincidental events, all the main characters end up in the same room. When Lady Bracknell hears Ms. Prism’s (the woman Jack hired as his niece’s governess) name she immediately asks to see her. She continues to say that Ms. Prism had wandered off with a baby years ago and asks what came about of that. Ms. Prism continues the dialog to explain how she misplaced a baby that was in her bag at a train station. Jack, thinking he might have been that very baby, retrieves the bag he was found in as an infant in which Ms. Prism identifies by some distinguishing marks to have been her own. Jack realized the woman that had been teaching his niece was his mother. But then Lady Bracknell explained that she was not but Lady Bracknell’s poor sister Mrs. Moncrieff was.

The irony continues to explain how Jack and Algernon were biological brothers. They were pretending to be earlier to play out their game of Bunburyism. Jack had told everybody he had a brother in which was he used as his justification to leave his home in the country and visit his "brother" in the city. Algernon pretends to be Jack brother "Earnest" in order to win over Jack beautiful "niece" Cecily.

Jack- "Algy’s elder brother! Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother! Cecily- how could you have ever doubted that I had a brother." (pg. 305)
Jack’s reaction shows evidence of his happiness of his new found brother. The same man that played his brother in their mind games with friends and family.

But the irony does not stop there. Jack told Gwendolyn, the woman he loved, that his name was Earnest. He lived the life of his "brother" Earnest in the city that happened to include her. But in the country, Algernon pretended to be Earnest to the woman he had admired. Both women were attracted to the name Earnest and were extremely disappointed that they were not named it. But as it turned out their father’s name was Earnest. Because Jack was the eldest brother he finds out that his father had given him his name. So after all the lies and cover-ups, Jack’s real name is Earnest.

This play is full of irony. It is written remarkably comical and almost absurdly. Wilde did a superior job at writing this play with an amusing story line filled with humor and satire. A man who made up a lie to find out that it was not really a fabrication, it was reality. We cannot get any more ironical than that.
Satire in The Importance of Being Earnest

The importance of being earnest by Oscar Wilde uses satire to ridicule the cultural norms of marriage love and mind-set which were very rigid during the Victorian Age. Because it uses satire to ridicule these institutions, it shows the deviance from the social order by making ridiculous the ideas of standards, morals and manners. By trying to correct the flaws of the characters in this play, this piece also serves as a great form of criticism. "The play really owes something to the restoration comic tradition."

Wilde was a master at the art of turning the English language around to fit his sarcastic themes and in this play he accomplished that to a high level. The title of this piece is even a play-on-word "Earnest" which can mean two different things. It can mean the obvious and be the actual characters name, but it also can mean a sense of seriousness and he then conveys that seriousness into reality for the characters. The two main characters in the play, Jack and Algernon, made every effort to be "Ernest" and "Earnest" in the play. They start their relationship based on the lies in the hope of marrying the girls that they love. There is irony in the play when they both call themselves "Earnest", a name that suggests honesty and sincerity, yet they both create stories to escape something or the other. Jack creates a brother called "Ernest" in the city that he uses as a 'scape goat' to leave his prim and proper, respectable country life, whereas Algernon creates a friend by the name of "Bunbury" to escape his aunt's high class society parties. He shows his lack of interest in such social events when he tells Jack,

"She will place me next to Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner table. That is not very pleasant. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public." (Wilde, 533)

The Importance of Being Earnest focuses on two main couples, Jack and Gwendolen and Algernon and Cecily. Both Gwendolen and Cecily yearn to have a husband called "Ernest." They both place emphasis on such a trivial matter as a name. When Jack attempts to tell Gwendolen that his name is really "Jack" and not "Ernest" she replies saying, "Jack"... No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed." (Wilde,537) The only really safe name is Ernest." Wilde deliberately uses farce in the play to exaggerate the mind frame of the upper class. It is seen here that Gwendolen loves Jack, but she places greater importance on silly, superficial and trivial matters such as a name, something a person has no control over. Similarly, Cecily also dreams of loving someone called "Ernest." She clearly states to Algernon, "There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest."(Wilde,556).

Again, Wilde is satirizing the institution of marriage, as it is not based on love, but on more vain superficial criteria. Although in this case there is exaggeration used to satirize the vanity of the aristocrats, Wilde still brings across the point that both Gwendolen and Cecily may have refused to marry the 'men of their dreams' if their names weren't 'Ernest.'

In Act Three of the play when Cecily asks Algy if he would wait until she was thirty-five years to be married (Wilde,570), even though Algy says yes, Cecily bluntly tells him she cannot. ".I couldn't wait all the time. I hate waiting even five minutes for anybody. It makes me rather cross."(Wilde,570) One would think that after dreaming so much of the man she claims to love, waiting to be married will be a small favour to ask. In fact, Wilde
uses another couple, Miss Prism and Mr. Chasuble as a foil to show the contrast between a relationship built on love and one built on other materialistic, shallow values. Miss Prism seems to be the only woman who doesn't have an ulterior motive in the play when comes to marriage and love. Even Algernon seems to have ulterior motives. He has never met Cecily before, yet when he sees her, he instantly falls in love with her.

Furthermore, his negative views on marriage in the opening scene, where he refers to it as 'demoralising,' seem to suddenly change when he meets Cecily. It can be inferred that Algernon's bankruptcy influences his attraction to Cecily. Both Jack and Algernon are determined to get themselves christened in order to hold on to Gwendolen and Cecily. That also shows some level of vanity in the men as they are not even slightly perturbed that the women place so much emphasis on their names. These couples seem to be wearing masks as they all appear one way, but seem to have some ulterior motives behind their actions. Gwendolen and Cecily both appear as ladies when they first meet, calling each other sisters, "My first impressions of people are never wrong." Yet when they believe that they're engaged to the same "Ernest," there is immediate coldness between them. Gwendolen satirically says to Cecily, "I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different." (Wilde,559) This is called 'dissembling' as the characters aren't literally wearing masks, but metaphorically they are all pretending to be someone they aren't. There is the division between truth and identity and it shows that sometimes certain laws in society force people to lead double lives.

Lady Bracknell is the driving force behind the plot of The Importance of Being Earnest. She represents women of the Victorian upper class society and believes that those of high class should be the ones in power. She has very little opinion of those with no title, or money and views the upper class society as being a 'closed club.' In other words, most people don't deserve to be in it unless they were born into it. She appears as a guardian of society in that she forcefully dictates who should marry who in the play. In the first scene, Gwendolen is unable to defend herself from wanting to marry Jack when he proposes to her. Lady Bracknell firmly steps in saying, "Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged to some one, I, or your father, will inform you." Lady Bracknell is portrayed as a forceful character who leaves no room for opposition. Even though Gwendolen wants to oppose her, she hasn't the strength to do so. Wilde uses Lady Bracknell to show a typical aristocrat who bends no rules of the upper class society.

One example where he shows how values are inverted and emphasis is placed on more trivial matters is the scene where Lady Bracknell meets with Jack to discuss Gwendolen. In this scene we see that in stead of asking Jack if he loves Gwendolen (which would seem to be the most important question); Lady Bracknell focuses on the materialistic side of it. She questions Jack about his money, land, house and the area in which he lives. She makes it clear that it's important for Jack to have a house in the town because Gwendolen cannot live in a country house. It is also seen here that Lady Bracknell treats the trivial things seriously, even though she's supposed to be an upholder of the values of society. However, little attention is paid to moral values. In stead, Lady Bracknell is displeased with the side of which Jack's town house is located- the unfashionable side. She thinks that everyone's interest will be similar to hers and subtly tells him, "The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However that could easily be altered."

The entire way in which Lady Bracknell meets with Jack is as though she is of a superior
being than him. She takes down his answers to her questions in a notepad, as though it's an interview rather than a personal meeting with her daughter's love. The setting of the meeting reflects how Lady Bracknell views marriage. It's more like interviewing someone for the job of being Gwendolen's husband rather than getting to know the man her daughter is interested in. Upon the shock that Jack was found and he doesn't know who his real parents are, Lady Bracknell immediately dismisses him, especially when she finds out that he was found in a handbag.

The farce continues when she tells Jack, I would strongly advise you, Mr. Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over.

This is an extremely impossible request of Lady Bracknell, as it is obvious that Jack has no knowledge about his real parents. Although he knows that he desperately wants to marry Gwendolen, he doesn't hide his amazement upon Lady Bracknell's request, "Well I don't see how I could possibly manage to do that. I can produce the hand-bag at any moment." This simply highlights how trivial the important things are to Lady Bracknell and how important the trivial things are to her. This is a major point Oscar Wilde focuses on in this comedy of manners - values are totally reversed.

Another example of Lady Bracknell's ignorance of the non-aristocrats is seen where she is ready to turn a blind eye to Cecily, when she hears that Algernon is engaged to her. She immediately judges Cecily based on the fact that Jack is her guardian. However, her views instantly change when Jack tells her that Cecily has a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in funds, "A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her." Once again emphasis is placed on a person's wealth rather than their personality, sincerity, or compassion for the other.

Marriage is viewed as an economic factor, whereby people marry for wealth or to conserve wealth in their families, especially Lady Bracknell who represents the guardian of an upper class society. She is however a hypocrite and uses social morals to her convenience. For example, she refuses to let Jack marry Gwendolen because of his social background, yet she tries to justify a broke Algernon marrying the wealthy Cecily. Her social hypocrisy is highlighted when she also confesses that she was not rich when she married her husband. "Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that. When I married to Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind." She furthermore thinks that her status gives her the right to approve of the marriage between Cecily and Algernon without asking Jack what he thinks. Eventually, both sides come to an agreement and Jack's name turns out to really be Ernest and he's really Lady Bracknell's nephew. Wilde gives the typical happy ending where everyone lives happily ever after and the stern mask that Lady Bracknell wears slowly turns into a smile.

In conclusion, The Importance of Being Earnest strongly focuses on those of the upper class society and the vanity of the aristocrats who place emphasis on trivial matters concerning marriage. Both Algernon and Jack assume the identity of "Ernest" yet ironically, they both are beginning their marital lives based on deception and lies. Lady Bracknell represents the archetypal aristocrat who forces the concept of a marriage based on wealth or status rather than love. Through farce and exaggeration, Wilde satirically reveals the foolish and trivial matters that the upper class society looks upon as being important. As said earlier, a satiric piece usually has a didactic side to it. In this case, Lady Bracknell learns that the same person she was criticising is actually her own flesh and blood.
The Importance of Being Earnest: Comedy of Manners

A comedy of manners is a descriptive term applied to a play whose comedy comes from social habits of a specified society. The play normally bases on the dominant members of the society. The social habits involve the manners and the morals practiced in the specified society. The play normally features the conduct and social status of the upper classes in a given society and how they interact with the lower classes. In most cases, the lower classes interact with the upper classes by taking roles as servants, trade people and other responsibilities as such. Therefore, I think this play can only act in a hierarchical society with a population of different classes and social status.

The importance of being earnest is referred to as a comedy of manners because it ironically describes the conduct of the Victorian upper class. The play describes their behavior in a hypocritical manner. The play seems to be making fun of them. The upper class individuals are described as money minded, superficial as well as artificial. The play uses satirical language to turn their values upside down and make us laugh considering the way they judge things by appearance. A language that is funny and witty has also been used to describe the upper class of the Victorian society. The main themes that the play bases on are love, identity, marriage as well as money. Wilde who is the author of the play had an intention of exposing the norms and values of the upper class individuals of the Victorian society and to prove them as shame. The fact is that besides the society stressing on values like respectability, decency and seriousness, its practices are totally different from these values. In order for any marriage to take place, the involved parties must be certified in terms of wealth as well as family background. From the play, we find that lady Bracknell rejected the marriage between Gewendolin and Jack simply because Jack was foundling. During her conversation with Jack, the lady gave priority to the family background without considering the education and other abilities that Jack had. She even did not consider the love that existed between Jack and Gewendolin. When she notices that Cecily's account has a lot of money, she predicts that the cash must have come from her boyfriend Algernon and stands ready to support their marriage. Therefore, it is the beauty of the boyfriend's name that makes him qualify as a candidate for marriage other than his qualities and abilities. Both Cecily and Gewendolin are ready to marry their boyfriends only because of their name "earnest" as opposed to what they feel for them. They seem to be driven by the notion that has long existed in their society which requires them to be married by men from capable and financially stable backgrounds. To them, wealth is a key requirement for marriage. "The play describes them as people who find everything in the name and love for name" (Wilde 84).

On the other hand, the men prefer to be associated with the name earnest but they seem to lack seriousness. The play bases on this to mock the upper class society that only values the surfaces and the appearances but not what is contained inside. They believe that everything that glitters is gold. This is very hypocritical. Considering the dialogue used in the play, we find it to be very witty and funny. If you consider the surface conversation between the characters, you will find it to be very beautiful and sweet but the inside is very hollow. The level to which the author has used paradox and irony in description of the conduct and behavior of the Victorian upper class society really tells us a lot about the pretensions and the artificiality of this kind of class. "Therefore, The Importance of Being Earnest is a comedy of manners because it employs light hearted language to evoke laughter at the false values of the Victorian upper society" (Wilde 97). This demonstrates a great level of discrimination against class and social status and this is one of the reasons why the play can only act in a hierarchical society with a population of different classes and social status.
Considering world historical contexts of this play to show continuities and changes over time, the importance of earnest is a comedy of manners that is derived much less in a specified history. There are several historical contexts that support the above underlined thesis of this play. The play views several historical contemporary events that demonstrate a troubled hierarchical society that has similar characters just like the ones portrayed in the play itself.

Considering some of the mentioned topics in the play, we can relate them to some of the world political issues that have been incorporated into history and still prevails today. One of them is the issue of Ireland home rule. In the year 1886, it was noted that William Gladstone came up with a great controversy where by he led the British Liberal party while under the frame work of the British Empire to back up support for the self rule form of governance. Since this home rule bill was contentious, the House of Lords later suppressed it by refusing to vote for its approval and enactment. This historical context happened only some few years before the play was released. Of course the main reason why the House of Lords failed to pass the bill was because the bill was meant to bring freedom to the less privileged members of the society. Being the upper class of this society, the House of Lords intentionally had to suppress the bill so that the lower class members remain servants to them. This was to cut any interaction as well as freedom links that might crop up. This type of behaviors is same as that of some characters in the play like lady Bracknell. She believes that ladies from the Victorian upper society are only supposed to be married by earnest men but not any other man. She does everything possible to make sure that there is no interaction between the upper and lower classes of the Victorian society just like the House of Lords did in Ireland when a home rule was to be enacted.

Considering a historical event like US civil rights movements, you will find that the political policies that were enacted discriminated against the blacks. In this context, the whites considered themselves as the upper class part of the American society. They treated the blacks as the lower class members of the same society. The whites enhanced laws on racial segregation which gave them freedom to publicly discriminate the blacks. Considering the transit system, the blacks were forced to occupy the back seats while the whites occupy the front seats. The blacks were denied some of their rights including leadership and voting. Therefore, the upper class did not allow any form of association with the lower class. They wanted the blacks to play a role as their servants. This is the same thing that was happening in the play. The upper class society did not encourage any marriage relationship with people whose background was not same as theirs. They abolished any links that could associate them with the lower class individuals. This historical context also proves that this play can only act in a hierarchical society where there is a division between the upper and the lower class. The play will make fun of their behavior since satire is the only tool to fight a loosing battle ("Historical Background" 1).

The main reason why the characters in the play get so upset with politics is because it tends to destruct the comfort and the hierarchical lifestyle that they are used to in the society. They see politics as a threat that can bring revolution and continuity change just like the French revolution that continuously hanged over the British society. When lady Bracknell hears of the sudden death of imaginary Bunbury who died in the explosion, she says that she was not aware that he was a victim of revolutionary outrage. She says that this was a fair punishment for him for being involved in the social legislation. This demonstrates the fear of social unrest that the upper class Victorian society had following any sign of revolution and social legislation that might see the rights of the poor respected.
Lastly, as the 19th century was coming to an end, England was one of the countries that witnessed cultural and artistic change considering the values that were in place during the reign of Queen Victoria. There was wide touting of values like self help and respectability during the boom times of 1860s and 1870s. When the farming practices underwent a change, the whole society was affected and very few people could help themselves. The farmers suffered a lot after the wheat fields had been converted to cattle pastures. As the farmers were struggling, the upper class society members who were industrialists enjoyed a lot by gaining lots of profits from their factories and employing the lower class individuals at cheap wages. These factory owners and some businessmen formed links to come up as middle class. As they did this, they raised their social status by settling in the country side just to imitate the aristocracy. They did this so that their social status can be recognized and bring some form of hierarchy within the society just like the Victorian society in the play ("Historical Context" 1). Indeed this play can only act in a hierarchical society with a population of different classes and social status.

Atta Ur Rahman Jadoon