

TOPICS FOR FIRST PAPER

Papers are due on Lecture #10 and should consist of five to six typed pages (figure 320 words/page). PLEASE BE SURE TO NUMBER THE PAGES. It will help me in writing my comments.

Some of the suggested topics below have a number of questions appended to them. You are not required to answer all of them. Indeed, you are not required to answer *any* of them. The questions and topics are meant only to be suggestive. If, after reading them, you wish to modify them or invent a topic of your own, you may do so, but the subject of paper should be one (or more) of the texts read and discussed so far this term and should deal with issues centrally relevant to both the text and to the matter of our discussions in class.

Please remember that you are writing an essay, not a book-report. A literary essay addresses itself to readers who have read the book and who do *not* require a rehearsal of its contents. What an essay does supply is some reminder of the contents in the context of an argument about those contents; the reminder is offered in the course of explaining how one should understand or interpret those contents. Any good, short, coherent essay will be arguing something. It will help you to write the essay if you have in mind some point that you are trying to make. Such a point should not be self-evident; you should be able to state an opposing point (the one that you are denying) which is not so obviously silly that no one would be able to argue for it. For example, it is very hard to argue that Oedipus is the tragic protagonist of *Oedipus the King* because it is nearly impossible to think of reasons supporting the claim that Creon, Jocasta, or Tiresias is the tragic protagonist.

1. The tragic hero *stands for* something—not in the sense of merely symbolizing or illustrating certain values (or a paramount value) but in the sense that he is or she is prepared to *stand up* for something—the sense in which President Bush, presumably, wants to associate the office with certain values (or a paramount value). In this sense, the tragic hero takes on a certain role in the drama. However, in tragic drama it is also the case that the tragic figure, by virtue of occupying the position of protagonist, is harmed in some way radically damaging—either the life of the character is taken or the character's conception of himself or herself is overturned. (Thus, in the *Hippolytus* the nurse has more lines than either Phaedra or Theseus and finally leaves the stage desolated, but she does not qualify as a tragic protagonist.) Identify the value(s) represented by one figure whom you take to be a tragic protagonist and the connection of the value(s) with any aspect of the tragic action of the play.

2. The come-uppance of the tragic protagonist is sometimes referred to an "immolation"—a term deriving from the ancient Greek practice of sprinkling barley on an animal to be sacrificed. (It isn't good to be immolated.) Creon learns the meaning of what he has done from a prophet immediately before he experiences his immolation; Hippolytus learns the meaning of what he has done from a goddess after he experiences immolation; Oedipus learns the meaning of what he has done by dint of his investigations and he immolates himself. Discuss the way in which the disclosure of meaning is related to the values espoused by the tragic figure in any one of these cases. Discuss whether the fact that the tragic figure is immolated relates to the values that he or she embodies? Is the tragic figure admirable because he stands for these values? Does the tragic figure deserve what happens to him?

3. The long, opening song-and-dance with which the chorus enters in the *Agamemnon* gives us a good deal of history, describes a problem or dilemma that confronted Agamemnon and how he faced up to it, and then says something about the history of Zeus and the relation of human life to suffering. The

dilemma has to do with choosing one of two evils when both are abhorrent. What was the choice about? Did Agamemnon make the right choice? If, in a sense, he chose the lesser evil, can his punishment at the hands of Clytemnestra be justified? How successfully does the trilogy resolve the consequences of Agamemnon's dilemma and make meaningful the spectacle of human suffering?

4. What is the significance of the split vote in the trial of Orestes? What is the significance, if any, that the deciding vote is given to Athena, a warrior and "manly" goddess, who resembles Clytemnestra in some ways (rather than a deferential female like Ismene)? How do you understand the final reconciliation of the trilogy? What do the Furies stand for? Is it the same as what they say that they stand for? How would the play end if Apollo had his way and the Furies were simply stripped of any power to harm? What significance (if any) do you see in the fact that the Furies's power to harm goes together with the power to bless (underground, they will be patron goddesses of fruitful harvest)?

5. At least three of the ancient plays that we read have been concerned with lining up an antagonism between male and female that correlates in some way with an antagonism between religious or ethical viewpoints. Discuss any in this connection.

6. Compare the dilemma of Agamemnon with the sacrifice of Isaac in any way that you wish. Here is the Biblical text (from *Genesis*, chapter 22):

[1] After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." [2] He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Mori'ah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." [3] So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; and he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. [4] On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off. [5] Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you." [6] And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. [7] And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" [8] Abraham said, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. [9] When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. [10] Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. [11] But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." [12] He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." [13] And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. [14] So Abraham called the name of that place The LORD will provide; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

7. Comment in some fashion—agreeing or disagreeing and drawing implications from the position you adopt—on the following statement: "The chorus is not essential to Sophocles's dramas. Of course, given the convention that there *must* be a chorus, Sophocles had to give it things to do and say, but one could reconceive the story slightly so as to tell the same tale essentially, while at the same time writing the chorus out of the action. (And, indeed, modern versions of these plays have done so.)"

8. Creon and Antigone articulate different views of the authority that they invoke to justify their positions. One of these concerns allegiance (*philein*=loyalty), another human nature, a third the nature of the gods. What is Creon's view of these things? What is Antigone's? Does the outcome of the play reinforce one of these views or the other, or does it suggest that both parties to the quarrel are wrong?

9. What is Creon's position at the outset of the play? What ideals does he stand for or come to stand for

during the course of the play? What is Antigone's position at the outset of the play? Granted that the ritual burial of kin is a sacred obligation, but only a ritual (it need only be a token sprinkling, which is all that Antigone can supply), why is it so important to her? Is Ismene (caught-in-the-middle Ismene) an ethical weakling, a mere fence-sitter, or does she represent a reasonable position? Is it ever a good idea to say about someone that they are either a part of the solution or a part of the problem?

10. Argue for one of the following four views: (a) *Antigone* is a play without a hero (or heroine). (b) *Antigone* is a play where one sort of right collides with another. It has two central characters, two tragic figures. (c) Creon is the tragic center of the play. (d) Antigone is the tragic center of the play. (N.B. In your answers, offer arguments but make no mention whatsoever of "how the dictionary defines tragic heroes" or "how Aristotle defines tragic heroes".)

11. "It is certain that while Sophocles did not pretend that Apollo is just in any human sense, he nevertheless held that the god is entitled to our worship." Defend or attack this notion in the light of the text of *Oedipus the King*.

12. Ditto for the following: "Oedipus deserves his fate, insofar as he is headstrong, quick to judge, filled with *hubris* or overweening pride." Debate the two sides of the issue involved here

13. "*Oedipus the King* is not a drama of fate, although unavoidable (therefore 'fated') events lie in the background of the play—the past of the action that we witness. Granted, the past that overwhelms Oedipus is odd from our point of view, but in a sense, the past is always 'fated' (a word derived from the Latin "fatum" which means "a done deed"), and we are all liable to Oedipus's fate insofar as we are all liable to discovering that something we did has taken on dreadful qualities in the light of events subsequent to our doing it. In this connection, we can say that the action of *Oedipus the King* is not the spectacle of a man who becomes a puppet in the hands of the gods (or at least Apollo) but rather the spectacle of a man freely choosing, from the highest motives, a series of actions which lead to his ruin." Present arguments on one or even both sides of this issue.

14. Here's another aspect of the previous question: Admittedly, what we witness in the play is someone freely choosing to know the truth about himself whatever it may turn out to be. (This is the point of the speech in which Oedipus calls himself "the child of chance"—*Tuche* in the original Greek). At the same time, we have to be mindful that what happened, happened because Apollo intervened in the past and gave Oedipus a prophecy that he wasn't asking for—a "self-fulfilling prophecy" because it drove him straight to disaster. (Imagine the gods knowing who will win the World Series--nothing wrong with that, so long as they keep their mouths shut, because arguably what happens will still depend on everyone striving to do their best. But suppose that they tell the teams who will win and who will lose. Surely, that will have an effect on the action.) In this connection, compare the "fatalism" of *Oedipus the King* with the "fatalism" of Jesus's prophecy to Peter that he will deny Jesus three times before sunrise.

15. Compare *Antigone* and *Hippolytus* from the standpoint of difficulties in identifying the tragic hero (or heroine).

16. The Nurse in *Hippolytus*: "People ought not to work out their lives too precisely. Why, they cannot even make a roof with rafters that would stand precise measuring!" The Nurse represents a type of character whose viewpoint, if correct, would make tragedy impossible. Comment in the light of any play read this session.

17. Comment on the often observed fact that if you took the prologue out of the *Hippolytus* (and substituted some few lines between the characters to replace the appearance of Artemis at the end), the drama would still be completely intelligible.

18. Here are some elements of a plot: Take a stiff-necked, righteous, powerful sort of male and get him to

be threatened or menaced by a figure who represents something he thinks is awful, abominable, utterly condemnable, and moreover linked to the feminine side of things; have the feminine figure possessed by arguably destructive emotions and contrast this with another feminine figure who is cautious, mindful of the limitations of his or her position and urges some form of compromise between principles. Have I described the materials of *Antigone* or of *Hippolytus*?

19. Compare the open interventions of the gods in the *Oresteia* and *Hippolytus*. How does the use of gods in the action relate differently, in the two cases, to other differences--e.g., to the depiction of conflict, the treatment of human agents, the underlying "message" or view of life expressed by the dramas? Alternatively, compare either of these two plays with one of the plays by Sophocles, in which the gods have retreated to the background.

20. Outline the course of Plato's *Crito* as a dramatic action. How well does the narrative mode suit the presentation of a philosophical position? *Crito* offers reasons why Socrates should accept his offer to aid his escape. What are these reasons? How good are they? Socrates doesn't answer them directly but offers three propositions which *Crito* is asked to consider. The implication drawn at the end of the dialogue is that if *Crito* accepts them his original reasons will be discredited. Analyze the course of the argument in the *Crito* and offer a view of the validity of this implication.

21. Consider Socrates, in the *Apology*, as a tragic hero. Like Oedipus, he insists upon bringing the truth to light, despite warnings (or threats) to desist; like Creon, his object is the good of the city; like Antigone, he goes to his death for his beliefs. He has, moreover, a due sense of the impossibility of continued life without standing firmly upon an acknowledgment (or a refusal to disavow) his deeds. However, unlike tragic heroes (even Antigone, but more obviously Creon, Oedipus, Pentheus) he is not *overwhelmed* by his deeds. Comment.

22. Compare Antigone's defense of the "unwritten laws" or "traditions" that nobody made and that have always existed with Socrates's appeal to the Laws of Athens. What view would Socrates take of the play *Antigone*? Would he approve of it? Whom would he side with: Creon, Antigone, Ismene? None of the foregoing?

23. It is often said that the tragic experience presumes that the world—perhaps the human world, perhaps the environment of the human world, which includes both natural and supernatural elements—is not disposed to justice. Comment in the light of any play or in relation to the figure of Socrates.

24. Outline the essential argument of Aristotle's *Poetics*. What are the major points that Aristotle is concerned to make? How are they part of a single view of the nature of tragic drama (as opposed to a list of observations or good ideas?) Without knowing anything about the consensus of opinion at the time, does it strike you that Aristotle's view was probably unique, challenging, surprising, (and, if so, in what respect) or does it seem to be expressing a view that his audience or readership would be likely to accept as a good summary of a more or less acceptable case?

25. Discuss the adequacy or inadequacy (or both) of Aristotle's view of tragedy to any play or plays read so far this term.

26. Aristotle makes the action of the play primary and the character of the protagonists secondary. Tragedy, he insists, is the imitation of an action and not of character; the character is there for the sake of the action (the plot) and not the other way about. You can, he says, have action without character--the agent doing the action may possess no more characterization than is absolutely requisite for his or her role, as Pylades in the *Coephoroi* has no more character than is required by his function, which is (when asked) to remind Orestes that he had better kill his mother than incur the enmity of the gods--but you can't have character without action, or if you do, you aren't writing tragedy. (The argument for this point is in ch. 6 of the *Poetics*. At the same time, he seems to discuss the character of the tragic actor at length in ch. 13, perhaps the most famous passage in the text. Is there any contradiction here?)

27. In ch 13 Aristotle famously identifies the source of the tragic action as *hamartia*, which has been variously translated as "vice", "tragic flaw", "misstep" or "error", and could mean simply "not knowing what one is doing." The instances given by Aristotle of *hamartia* are Oedipus and Thyestes, whose story was alluded to in Cassandra's visionary agony in the *Agamemnon*—he was tricked by his brother into eating his children. But translators have wanted to give some distinctly moral coloring to the notion of *hamartia*, in order to clinch the point that what overwhelms the tragic character is something that he or she more or less deserves to experience. An extensive survey of translations is no help here, because the Greek in the surrounding passages do not overtly clear up the point. Discuss *hamartia* in connection with any play read so far this term.