

This lecture was presented at the Pittsburgh ComiCon on April 22, 2006, by Christine Anderson. It addresses the idea that the Prequel Trilogy is a modern example of classic Greek Tragedy.

The Tragedy of *Star Wars*



The idea that the Original Trilogy of *Star Wars* is a modern example of the classic hero journey of mythology is one that has been long accepted and discussed. However, the Prequel Trilogy does not fit into that mythos. Instead, a far better fit would be to see the Prequel Trilogy as a modern telling of a Greek Tragedy, with its tragic hero doomed to fall through his own fatal flaws. This idea did not originate with me. At the 2005 DragonCon lecture on *Star Wars* mythology, another member of the audience suggested this possibility. George Lucas himself compared *Star Wars* to Greek Tragedy in an online interview. When examined, the elements of Greek Tragedy are clearly present in the story of the rise and fall of Anakin Skywalker.

For the purpose of this lecture, I will deal only with the movies themselves. Although the Expanded Universe certainly adds depth to the *Star Wars* saga, canon alone will be used to demonstrate the Prequels as a modern example of classical Greek Tragedy and Anakin Skywalker as a Tragic Hero. Finally, this lecture is intended only as an overview of this idea, rather than as an in-depth study.

Aristotle's *Poetics*

- ◆ Greek Philosopher (384 – 322 BCE)
- ◆ Wrote many books on wide range of subjects
- ◆ One of primary sources on elements of Tragedy

Before looking at Lucas's story, I want to mention the person from whom we have the majority of our knowledge of Greek tragedy, Aristotle. A Greek philosopher, who wrote many books on a wide range of subjects, his *Poetics* has become the primary source on the elements that exist in a Tragedy. It is from his writings that we establish the standards for what is considered a Greek Tragedy, most of which are found within the Prequel Trilogy.

It is an interesting side note that the original Greek tragedies were performed at a festival, at which playwrights would present a trilogy of stories, usually interrelated. Just as Lucas presents his stories in trilogy form.

Elements of Classic Greek Tragedy

- ◆ Plot, character and setting are all intertwined and related.
- ◆ Events occur within a short period of time
- ◆ Theme involves relationship between a person's fate and the person's free will
- ◆ The Tragic Hero

There are four main elements of a classic Greek Tragedy. First, the plot, character and setting are all intertwined and related. Second, events occur within a short period of time. Third, theme involves the relationship between a person's fate and the person's free will. Fourth, the protagonist of the story is a Tragic Hero.



As Obi-Wan Kenobi once observed, all are part of a symbiotic circle. In a Greek tragedy there are no sub-plots, all events concern a single plot. All characters are related. The setting is limited, with all action occurring in one place.

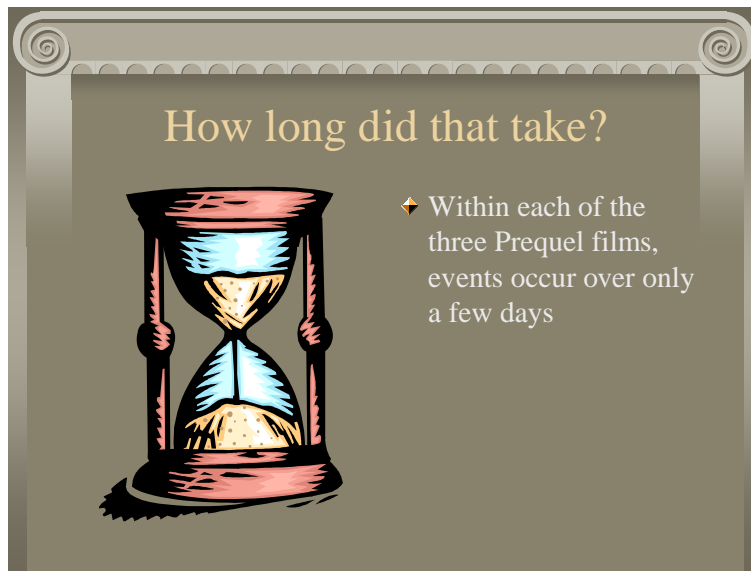
In the Prequel Trilogy, there is only one plot, the rise and fall of Anakin Skywalker. Everything that happens is connected in one way or another to this. In *The Phantom Menace*, the invasion of Naboo serves to lead the Jedi to young Anakin, introduce him to his future bride, and bring him to the attention of Palpatine. Setting in motion the events that will lead to his becoming one of the most powerful Jedi and introducing him to the two people who will have the most to do with his fall, Padmé and Palpatine.

The events of *Attack of the Clones* plant the seeds of his fall, the temptation of a relationship with Padmé, the first Dark action in the slaughter of the Tusken, his growing friendship with Palpatine and the start of his alienation from the Jedi, as seen in his occasional conflicts with and defiance of Obi-Wan. The clones discovered in this film will become the very troops Anakin will one day lead against the Jedi.

In *Revenge of the Sith*, we see Anakin's fall from grace. He will betray his comrades the Jedi, destroy the democratic Republic, and contribute to the death of his wife. By the end of *Sith*, Anakin will have lost everything that once had meaning for him, completing the tragic tale of his fall from hero to villain. Even the beginnings of the Rebel Alliance, part of the deleted scenes of the film, concern Anakin. For it will be through their involvement in the Rebel Alliance that Anakin meets his children, which will eventually lead to his redemption.

As was mentioned, in a Greek Tragedy all characters are related. This does not refer to biological relations, but an interconnectedness – although many of the characters in the Prequel Trilogy do have family ties, through blood, marriage and adoption. There are far less than six degrees of separation in the *Star Wars* Universe. Even characters who do not know each other directly in the Prequels have an impact on each other's lives. For example, Chewbacca and Anakin never meet in the Prequels. However, the Wookiee assists in the survival of Yoda, who will later train Anakin's son. It is Chewbacca, along with Han Solo, who assists Anakin's son and Anakin's former master in the rescue of Anakin's daughter. It's a very small galaxy.

Finally, the setting, which in a Greek Tragedy is limited, with the action occurring in one place. The action in *Star Wars* occurs on several different planets, but considering the story is set in a galactic Republic, there are only a few planets on which the main action occurs: Tatooine, Coruscant, Naboo, Geonosis, Kamino, and Mustafar. Of these, two are primary locations that occur in all three of the Prequels: Tatooine and Coruscant. One must ask, is Tatooine really the furthest point from the bright center of the galaxy, when so much of critical importance occurs there?



Another element of a Greek Tragedy is the events of the story occur within a short period of time. Judging the passage of time in the *Star Wars* Universe has always been a challenge. No calendar or specific measure of time is mentioned. There are no convenient “Star Dates,” if you will pardon the reference, in which we are informed when events occur. On what day of the week do Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan arrive to negotiate with the Trade Federation? What time did Anakin arrive at Obi-Wan’s briefing, other than late? Even a natural measure of sunrise to sunset is unreliable since the action moves from planet to planet. We know that several years pass between individual films in the Prequels only by passing references made by the characters and observing that certain characters have gotten older. Anakin is no longer a child, Obi-Wan now has gray at his temples.

Nevertheless, within the films, the audience gets the sense that events are moving quickly. There is no sense that a long period of time has passed within each film. How long did Padmé and Anakin stay hidden on Naboo? They arrive, picnic, have dinner, Anakin dreams, and they depart. No doubt these events occurred over several days, but within the film it feels as if they occur in close sequence. In the question and answer column of a recent *Star Wars Insider* magazine, a reader asked how much time did the events of *Revenge of the Sith* take? The response was there were only nine days between the supposed rescue of Palapatine from the Seperatists and the death of Padmé in childbirth. Events move quickly within each of the Prequel films.

Its demanded by de gods.

◆ Fate VS Free Will

◆ Oedipus

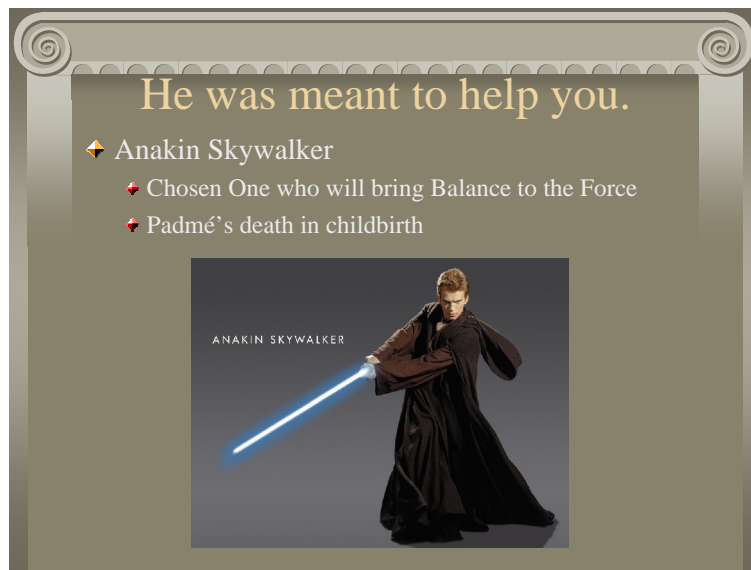
- ◆ Prophecy – kill his father and marry his mother
- ◆ Both birth parents and Oedipus attempt to circumvent prophecy, but their actions cause it to happen



The third element is the question of free will versus fate. Do the actions of the characters cause their futures to occur or were their fates predetermined? Is it demanded by de gods, as Jar Jar said? Do they choose the paths they walk or are the very actions they take fated to lead to a destiny decided long before they were born? Can one change one's destiny or will the very attempt to do so cause the destiny to happen?

One of best known Greek Tragedies is *Oedipus Rex*. When Oedipus is born it is prophesized that he will kill his father and marry his mother. To prevent such a horrible thing from happening, he is left as an infant on a hillside to die of exposure. He is found and raised to adulthood ignorant of his true parentage. As an adult, he is told by the Oracle the same prophecy, that he will kill his father and marry his mother. To prevent this, he leaves the couple he believes are his parents and travels to a distant land. There he kills a man and marries the man's widow. These two turn out to be his biological parents, fulfilling the prophecy. All attempts to circumvent the prophecy resulted in its happening.

Is Anakin likewise destined to fall or do his own actions lead him to his end? There are two main prophecies that influence the life of Anakin. The prophecy of the Chosen One and Anakin's dream of Padmé's death.



The first is that of him being the Chosen One, who will bring balance to the Force. Belief in this is what motivates Qui-Gon, and later Obi-Wan, to defy the Council and train Anakin as a Jedi. It is perhaps knowledge of this status that leads him to such arrogance and overconfidence in his own abilities. In the most literal sense, this prophecy was fulfilled, in large part through Anakin's actions. By the end of *Revenge of the Sith*, there are equal numbers of representatives of both the Light and the Dark Sides of the Force. Two Sith and two Jedi.

Was this Anakin's destiny? Were all of his actions leading to this, despite his intentions? The prophecy itself is vague and the Jedi themselves seem to have debated its meaning.

The second prophecy was Anakin's dream of Padmé's death in childbirth. This is a much easier comparison with Oedipus's situation. Anakin's actions to prevent the prophecy from occurring, like Oedipus, instead result in the very thing he wanted to avoid. His quest for enough power to keep Padmé from dying led him into a devil's bargain with Palpatine, trading the lives of the Jedi for the life of his beloved wife. It is in horror of what he has done, however, that causes Padmé to reject Anakin. That rejection will lead to Anakin's attacking Padmé and eventually, Padmé's death in childbirth.

Was it fate or free will that determined Anakin's destiny? Within a Greek Tragedy, this question is a common theme.

Tragic Hero

“Neither a paragon of virtue and justice nor undergoes the change to misfortune through any real badness or wickedness but because of some mistake.”

- ◆ Position
- ◆ Tragic Flaw (Hamartia)
- ◆ Reversal
- ◆ Recognition

The final element is that of the tragic hero. In *Poetics*, Aristotle described the Tragic Hero as “neither a paragon of virtue and justice nor undergoes the change to misfortune through any real badness or wickedness but because of some mistake.”

This is an excellent description of Anakin. His journey to the Dark side is paved with good intentions. He is not a perfect person, he is quick tempered, short sighted, and his judgment could be considered flawed, but he is not truly evil. He did not take joy in the slaughter of the Jedi nor in the death of the Separatists leaders. Rather he does what he feels is necessary for greater good. To establish a less corrupt government, to save Padmé’s life.

There are four basic traits of a Tragic Hero in a Greek Tragedy: Position, Tragic Flaw (Hamartia), Reversal, and Recognition. All of which can be seen in Anakin.

Position

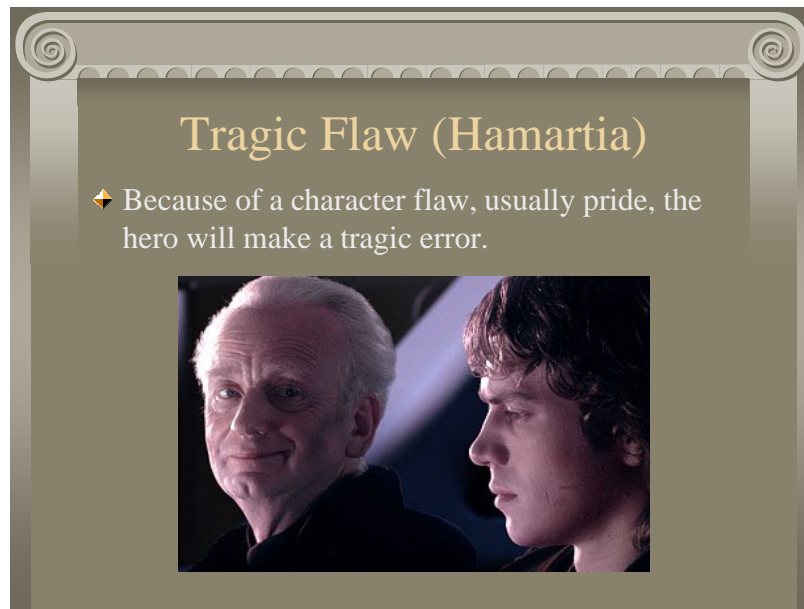
- ◆ A good person, in a high ranking position in society. Respected by others, with much to lose.
- ◆ He acts out of good intentions.



The first of the four traits is position. Tragic Hero is a good person, in a high-ranking position in society. He is respected by others, with much to lose. He acts out of good intentions.

The first part of the Prequel Trilogy shows how Anakin rose from his humble beginnings as a slave to become a respected Jedi. He is mentored by the Supreme Chancellor of the Republic and apprenticed to one of the most respected Knights of the Jedi Order, who becomes his best friend. Although wary of him, the Jedi Council acknowledges his skill. By the start of *Revenge of the Sith*, Anakin has become a hero throughout the Republic for his bravery during the Clone Wars. Although a secret, he has a beautiful wife who is expecting their first child.

As mentioned earlier, much of what Anakin does is motivated by good intentions. He sees that there is corruption in the government and he wants to support the establishment of a more stable government. He wants to protect the life of his wife. Unfortunately, his good intentions lead to bad decisions, which will cost him all that he holds dear.



Part of the reason for the Tragic Hero's fall, according to Aristotle, was *Hamartia*. This is commonly translated as fatal flaw or character flaw. However, a closer translation would be "missing the mark." Because of his shortcomings, the Tragic Hero is unable to reach the goals he has set himself.

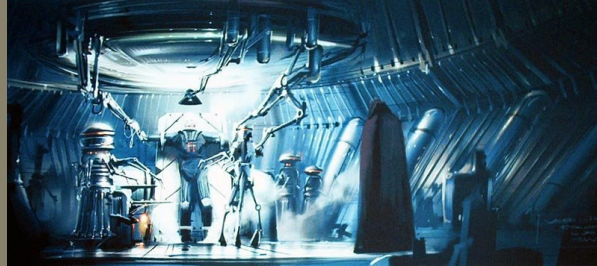
The most common flaw is that of pride. The Tragic Hero believes that his abilities are enough to defy the will of the gods as revealed through prophecy and to overcome any obstacles between himself and his goal. Anakin certainly has the flaw of pride. He often speaks arrogantly of his power, declaring that he will one day be so powerful as to prevent people from dying and how much more powerful he is than other Jedi, even his own teacher, Obi-Wan.

I would propose, however, that Anakin's main flaw, the one that contributes most to his downfall, is not his pride, but his fear of being alone. Anakin has a deep need for relationships with others. His first act of Dark violence is to slaughter the Tusken raiders in response to their murder of his mother. He violates the directive of his mission in order to rescue Obi-Wan. The rules of non-attachment are broken so he can marry Padmé. The Jedi are betrayed and murdered so that Anakin can gain the power to prevent Padmé from dying in childbirth.

Whether pride or fear of being alone, Anakin's fatal flaw will lead him to actions that will destroy all that is important to him and bring down the Jedi and the Republic.

Reversal

- ◆ The hero's life of happiness is destroyed. All that remains is suffering and misery.



The third aspect of the Tragic Hero is Reversal. The hero's life of happiness is destroyed. All that remains is suffering and misery.

Anakin's wife dies because of his actions. Anakin believes his unborn child has died with Padmé. The man Anakin once considered like a father to him, Obi-Wan Kenobi, is now his enemy. Anakin himself is now crippled, maimed, and kept alive only through an oppressive life-support suit. He is alone, except for Palpatine, who rules over an Empire more corrupt and oppressive than the Republic ever was.

Recognition

- ◆ Although it occurs too late to prevent disaster, the hero realizes how he has caused his own downfall.



Finally, the last aspect of the Tragic Hero is Recognition. Although it occurs too late to prevent disaster, the hero realizes how he has caused his own downfall.

After the horrified scream of denial upon learning he has killed Padmé, this aspect is found primarily in the body language of Anakin, now Vader. Standing isolated on the bridge of a star destroyer, encased in the life support system that now imprison him, he crosses his arms across his chest, his head bowed. An image of regret, the hero who now knows he has fallen to a tragedy of his own making.

Sources

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