

Paradox and Tragedy in Dennis Lehane's *Shutter Island* and Seneca's *Oedipus Rex*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The stratagem of employing paradoxical scenario in any form of artistic expression has been a timeless creative scheme. A very famous example of paradox may be seen within Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, with the titular character's pursuit of truth and goodwill leading to his own tragic downfall. Similarly, tragic expression has been at the centre of humans' outlet for cathartic release. Thus, both paradox and tragedy tend to emerge in different ways in works of literature. The present study is focussed on recognizing and exploring the traces of commonalities of paradox and tragic elements between *Oedipus Rex* and *Shutter*

Island(2003),by the renowned crime and mystery novelist, Dennis Lehane by considering the heroes in both narratives and the situations that their character attributes incite. The authors in both cases assign character attributes of a traditional tragic hero which constantly inform their actions, thereby creating an inevitable journey of personal downfall. The moments of anagnorisis are imbued with intense guilt and grief as both the protagonists realize that they themselves are the cause for their problems.

Keywords: Paradox; Archetypes; Oedipus; Tragic-hero; Tragic-flaw; Guilt.

“Every heart would follow Oedipus and accompany his exile with profound sympathy”

- Francis P. Donnelly

Dennis Lehane is a renowned author of a number of successive lucrative crime and mystery novels and films that have created a sensation among both the public and the critical eye within the past three decades. The sensation generated by such novels featuring crime and a mystery-centred plot is not a new phenomenon. Moreover, there is a sense of an archetypal foundation in Lehane’s execution of the twist-ending and characterization in his 2003 psychological mystery novel, *Shutter Island*. Within this perspective, the following discourse attempts to trace and highlight the presence of an archetypal configuration of Seneca’s *Oedipus Rex* and its tragic hero, Oedipus in Lehane’s *Shutter Island*.

Lehane was born in August 4, 1965 and brought up in the neighbourhood of Dorchester in the city of Boston, America which has influenced certain elements within quite a few of his novels. His personal experiences have fuelled and inspired the tonality, setting characterization, dialogues and certain other aspects as presented in his crime-mystery novels. (Butler 2010) Besides his riveting plots and twist-endings, Lehane is able to bring forth exceptionally alive and endearing characters.

Lehane began his writing career with a series of mystery novels featuring the protagonists Patrick Kenzie and Angela Gennaro appearing in the 1990s. *A drink before the War* (1994), the first novel in the series won the Shamus Award under the category of “Best First P.I. Novel”. Many of his novels, including four of Kenzie and Gennaro series and his standalone novels, *Mystic River* (2001) and *Shutter Island* (2003) have been adapted into films that have been commercially and critically successful. Lehane is acclaimed particularly for the masterful execution of red-herring schemes and twist-endings in his mystery novels. Furthermore, his writing prowess has branched into screen-writing for both films and television.

Lehane’s *Shutter Island* is a mind-bending mystery thriller and suspense novel. Its twist-ending and narrative is psychologically and emotionally affective, causing the readers to revel in the paradox effecting its protagonist. While the tone and narrative of the novel is reminiscent of the mystery and hardboiled era of the 1940s, it also pays “an homage to gothic, but also an homage to B movies and pulp [fiction]”, as Lehane himself declares in his 2006 interview with Dave for *Powell's Books*.

The beginning of the narrative aims to establish that Teddy Daniels is the protagonist and a “hero-figure” with all the necessary and archetypal character attributes customary for such a depiction; while Chuck Aule is the loyal comrade and confidante or the “side-kick” who constantly praises his astute skills and provides comic relief. The two are assigned a case on “Shutter Island” remotely situated at sea. Their aim is to find Rachel Solando, an escaped patient from the Ashecliffe asylum for the criminally insane located on the island. Initially, the protagonists suspect both Dr Cawley, the head psychiatrist and Dr Lester Sheehan, another psychiatrist who is away on leave. However, as the story progresses Teddy Daniels reveals that he has an ulterior motive in visiting the island, which is to find and kill “Andrew Laeddis”, a violent madman and the murderer of his wife. On progressing further,

both also have reason to believe that the asylum is carrying out illegal and inhuman experiments on the patients there under the guise of treatment. Yet, as the narrative reaches its moment of climax, the entire scenario as presented by the protagonist collapses or rather upends as it is revealed that Teddy Daniels is in truth, Andrew Laeddis, the former being his alter-ego; while Chuck Aule is the illusive Dr Sheehan. Andrew Laeddis had been a patient at the asylum for the past two years for killing his own wife out of grief as she drowned their three children for, she herself was mentally ill. Thus, the moment of anagnorisis is quite catastrophic for both the protagonist and the readers.

Sophocles, the great tragedian of ancient Greece delivered around 120 plays, of which only seven have survived. All of his works hold great merit in literature and other fields. Yet, his three Theban plays and particularly, *Oedipus Rex* stands at the highest pedestal, having influenced not only schools of literature but, also psychology, sociology, philosophy, and many other disciplines. The tragedy and its hero, Oedipus has been the muse in the works of a number of philosophers, critics and theorists from around the world throughout history, the most famous being Aristotle himself and his *Poetics*.

In book XII of his *Poetics*, Aristotle uses *Oedipus Rex* to demonstrate his definitions for a perfect tragic-play particularly, with the concepts of catharsis, hamartia, peripeteia, anagnorisis, etc. In her article “Oedipus Rex as the Ideal Tragic Hero of Aristotle”, Marjorie Barstow states “If we give ourselves up to a full sympathy with the hero, there is no question that the Oedipus Rex fulfils the function of a tragedy, and arouses fear and pity in the highest degree.” (2)

However, certain character attributes of Oedipus himself are present in Teddy Daniels. Moreover, there is an archetypal presence of certain elements of *Oedipus Rex* in *Shutter Island* and thus, parallels may be observed between the tragic elements within the plot of both narratives and the heroes, Oedipus and Teddy Daniels. Moreover, the film

adaptation of *Shutter Island* is perhaps comparable to *Oedipus Rex* to a greater extent in this respect. For instance, on closer inspection there is a thespian and dream-like quality to Scorsese's film in its depiction of Lehane's story. Lehane, himself describes the presentation of the events in the film in his 2010 interview with Don Aucoin for *The Boston Globe* being "not in a world of naturalism". He, further adds "We are in a different pitch. You see that right away in the first frame, when they're on the boat. Everything is a little artificial, in the best sense. What he's announcing in the first minutes is "You are watching a movie.""

In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus's intelligence and acuity is constantly praised and made evident throughout the narrative, especially through his conquest of the Sphinx. Yet, his investigation towards the prophecy has several flaws as contended by Marjorie Barstow in her paper "Oedipus Rex as the Ideal Tragic Hero of Aristotle": "[He] displayed in them none of the wisdom with which Aristotle endows his happy man. A thoughtful person, one who acted in accordance with true reason, and not merely with generous impulse, might have put two and two together" (3). Here, it may be contended that Oedipus's flaws go unnoticed. The issue to be stressed here, is that readers and audiences become accomplices to the flaws present in the heroes and the mistakes that they commit in due course which leads to their tragic ends. Barstow recognises the difference between a sensible hero and a tragic hero – that a "wise man preserves a just balance among his natural impulses, and firmly and consistently directs his will and emotions toward the supreme end which reason approves" (2). As opposed to these character attributes, a tragic hero "fails to attain happiness, and fails in such a way that his career excites, not blame, but fear and pity in the highest degree" (2).

It may further be observed, that in *Shutter Island* as well a similar scenario transpires. Chuck Aule's constant admiration of Teddy Daniels' intellect and skills is in a way projected and transformed onto the readers' perception towards the protagonist and strengthens the image of the hero-figure. The list of faults within Teddy Daniels' observations and

investigations becoming progressively more bizarre and conspiratorial must become evident to a possibly objective or uninfluenceable reader. Yet, with the grounding of a strong hero-figure as established through Teddy Daniels' past endeavours as a war hero, United States Marshal and as a man seeking vengeance and justice for his wife, coupled with Chuck Aule's constant glorification causes his faults and misjudgements to pass unnoticed among readers. This aspect is made apparent in both the cases of Teddy Daniels alias Andrew Laeddis and Oedipus.

The resultant situation in both *Shutter Island* and *Oedipus Rex*, instigated through the tragic-hero traits discussed previously, there arises a state of paradox and inevitability. Oedipus constantly yearns to know the extent of fulfilment of the prophecy, that he shall kill his own father and marry his own mother. In his constant endeavours to avoid fulfilling each fragment of the prophecy leads him to ultimately fulfil it one by one. Therefore, there are two constitutive character traits in Oedipus causing the paradox in the narrative, which also represents his tragic flaw of sorts. First, is Oedipus' initial curiosity regarding his birth borne out of the rumours spreading in his kingdom, that he is not king Polybus's biological son but, was adopted as a baby. Thus, as Barstow observes, Oedipus is "too energetic to remain in the ignorance which might have been his safety, he eagerly hastened to the sacred oracle at Delphi to learn the truth" (3). On learning the contents of the prophecy, he leaves Corinth and kills his own father, Laius on the path to Thebes, thereby fulfilling first part of the prophecy. Secondly, Oedipus' doubts and pursuit of truth regarding the identity of the person who killed Laius leads to a horrifying discovery and his ultimate doom.

In *Shutter Island*, a similar course of inevitability plays out as Teddy Daniels determinedly sets out to find and exact revenge on the killer of his wife – Andrew Laeddis, who is, in fact, his own alter-ego. Just as Oedipus pursues the identity of Laius' killer and declares punishment for the same, Teddy Daniels searches for Andrew Laeddis yearns to kill

him. This, thus, results in a paradoxical discovery in both cases – that Oedipus is the killer of his father and responsible for his own catastrophe and Teddy Daniels is the killer of his wife and responsible for his psychosis and death. The audiences and readers positively shudder at the tragic anticipation and feelings of fear and pity in both cases.

The two narratives and the heroes may be likened with one another in terms of guilt as well. Lehane has said that the “other thing between me and Scorsese is the obsession with guilt” (Aucoin). In *Oedipus Rex*, after the discovery of the truth, Oedipus gauges his own eyes out in shame and despair. In fact, it is his deep-seated feelings of doubt, fear and guilt that he may have killed his own father on the road, subconsciously fuels his desire to pursue the truth of the prophecy, which ultimately leads to his downfall. Similarly, Teddy Daniels chooses death as opposed to life and treatment, as being alive and sane would constantly remind him of his tragedy and loss; as insinuated in his famous lines at the end of *Shutter Island* “Which would be worse, to live as a monster or to die as a good man” (Lehane 2003).

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