Recognition and Redemption: Samson, Agamemnon, and Odysseus

The fall, recognition, and redemption of tragic characters in ancient literature portray the global concept of human fallacy. The diversion of attention from the spiritual path leads to a fall—this is the circumstance of all humankind. As with both Samson and the Nazarene covenant and Agamemnon and his daughter, these characters certainly recognize the consequences of their fall, but still never redeem themselves for their actions. However, Odysseus exemplifies the redemption of a tragic flaw in *The Odyssey*. While all tragic heroes recognize their fatal flaws, the end is not always harmony; to transcend the earthly identity and to form a higher element of spirituality, one must be redeemed.

The Nazarene covenant entitles a follower of Yahweh to hold favor in the eyes of the Lord, but it does not come without requisites. Yahweh holds His followers to a higher standard than those of the heathens. The covenant is a holy, binding contract between God and man that separates the Israelites from the gentiles. In Numbers 6:1-8, the Lord delivers the covenant of the Nazarenes to Moses for the people. A Nazarene must live a separated, holy life; thus, there are specific rules that Nazarenes must obey. A Nazarene should never drink or eat anything of the vine nor drink any alcohol. One also must not cut his or her hair or touch a dead body. All the days of one’s vow, one must be holy unto God. Numbers 6 also delineates in verses nine through twenty-one what a Nazarene must
sacrifice to Yahweh if one breaks the covenant: a male lamb, a female lamb, a shaven head, a basket of unleavened bread, and a ram. These are the specifications of the covenant of the Nazarene.

Samson is a Nazarene. Unfortunately, he does not see the importance of this covenant or the enduring consequences of his actions. He breaks the bond. In his lust and against his parents instructions, he pursues a Timnite woman, one of different faith. As he is on his way to meet her, he comes upon a roaring lion. Samson, with great strength and vitality, slays the lion with his bare hands. When he returns from his journey to get his wife, he sees a swarm of bees and honey in the carcass of the lion and goes to scoop the honey out of the lion’s ribs. The Nazarene covenant states that one must not touch a dead body under any circumstance—even those of family. Thus, this is the fall of Samson the Nazarene.

In disregarding Yahweh’s covenant, Samson must pay a price. He must sacrifice unto God a male lamb, a female lamb, his hair, a basket of unleavened bread, and a ram. In his folly, Samson does not obey the word of the Lord—an exhibition of hubris. But the Lord still must avenge Samson’s actions. Therefore, He takes the sacrifices in His own manner. Now, Samson and the Philistines, in whose land he lives, do not blend well. The disputes of the past lead to a fallout with Samson’s wife, whom has been given to his friend to wife. In anger, Samson ties 300 foxes together with firebrand and sets the fields of the Philistines aflame. When the Philistines learn of this, they set fire to his wife and his wife’s father in their house as punishment. These are the first two sacrifices—the male and female lambs. As blameless as lambs, they were sacrificed for Samson’s hubris. Even after that incident, Samson does not yet recognize his fatal flaw—pride. He falls
prey to yet another woman from the Philistines, Delilah. The lords of the Philistines come unto her and plead with her to uncover the secret of Samson’s strength in order to exploit it. After all, he had killed thousands of their people in a hubris-fueled rage. With three pleas from Delilah, he finally concedes to her ploy in Judges 16:17, “If I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man.” The Philistines immediately come upon him in the night and shave his head. Samson’s flaw blinds him spiritually and regretfully leads him to weakness and imprisonment from the Philistines. Thus, Yahweh takes the third sacrifice—a shaven head. The Philistines literally blind him and set him to work grinding flour at the prison. This represents the fourth sacrifice for Yahweh—a basket of unleavened bread. After all of Samson’s hardships, he has yet to recognize his hubris. As the Philistines are using Samson for sport in the grand house, he has a moment of recognition. He calls out to Yahweh for the final time in Judges 16:28, “O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.” The pillars topple and everyone in the house perishes—about three thousand in number—including Samson. This is the fifth and final sacrifice that Yahweh must take from Samson—himself, the ram. Although Samson ultimately recognizes his flaw, he still does not transcend this situation into a higher form of spirituality. His plea to Yahweh is purely egoism. He does not want that last ounce of strength to fully redeem himself in the eyes of the Lord, he merely wants it to avenge such an earthly quality as eyesight. He lacks the redemption necessary to acquire grace from Yahweh and to surpass the weak, human quality of his life.
Similarly, Agamemnon of Argos takes a mighty fall. Menelaos, his brother, has a striking wife, Helen. However, Paris of Troy steals Helen away from Menelaos, thus igniting the Trojan War. Before the war, Agamemnon angered the goddess Diana by killing a doe in her sacred grove. Therefore, she kept the winds away from their fleet to prevent them from arriving at Troy. When Agamemnon called upon the seer Calchas, he said the only way to arrive in Troy would be to sacrifice Iphigenia, Agamemnon’s daughter. At first, Agamemnon steadfastly refuses to let his daughter die. But under the pressure of Odysseus, he follows through with the devious plan. With both Clytaemnestra and Iphigenia believing that she is going away to marry Achilles, Clytaemnestra willingly lets her go with Odysseus. There is not a marriage laying in wait for Iphigenia, but rather a sacrificial ritual with her as the lamb. Agamemnon cannot see past his hubris and egoism. He sees nothing but winning the war, no matter the cost. This is the mighty fall of Agamemnon.

Agamemnon makes one colossal mistake, just like Samson. These mistakes, though, are not absent of repercussions. After years at war in Troy, Agamemnon comes home expecting an affectionate welcome for his conquered guest Cassandra. She is another representation of the sheer foolishness of Agamemnon. He leaves a grieving wife home alone for ten years, comes back with a concubine to please himself, and expects his wife to accept everything without question. This further proves Agamemnon’s egoism and hubris. Like Samson, he thought he could not falter in any aspect of his life. This deep-rooted pride presents many problems, Clytaemnestra being the foremost. Agamemnon unwisely falls into Clytaemnestra’s trap when he steps into his long abandoned home. She forthwith murders him. The
fitting recompense for Iphigenia’s sacrifice becomes his ultimate plummet. Likewise, Samson fell into the trap of Delilah and consequently lost his superior strength to the Philistines. Both of their punishments are death, the definitive sentence for hubris.

Agamemnon’s moment of recognition comes not in his life, but in his death. In Book 11 of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus sees Agamemnon in Hades. He tells Odysseus, “Indulge a woman never and never tell her all you know.” Agamemnon has recognizes the fall and the consequences but neglects redemption. Firstly, it is too late to be redeemed in death. Secondly, his “revelation” is barely recognition at all. Instead of identifying his hubris, he finds blame in his untrustworthy wife. While he does see the consequent, he does not see the antecedent. Agamemnon is doomed to perpetually be a prideful, unwise man.

These literary persons also compare to Odysseus. On his wayward journey, Odysseus finds himself in a sea of koros on the island of Calypso. Only thanks to the war in heaven and Pallas Athena, Odysseus leaves the decadent island in pursuit of his family he has left behind. Prior to his stay with Calypso, Odysseus exhibits hubris as well. He blinds Polyphemos’ eye, but in search of vainglory, he reveals his identity to the Cyclops. To leave for war and to return only after twenty years also demonstrates his hubris. Despite these shortcomings, Odysseus finds the recognition he needs. His journey leads him to the underworld. There he talks to many people—Achilles, Agamemnon, Tiresias, and, most importantly, his mother Anticleia. Odysseus did not know that his mother had died. He had heard otherwise, actually. But to see and talk to his now deceased mother lifts the hazy veil of hubris
from Odysseus’ mind and leaves a clear-headed analysis. Anticleia shows him the pain he caused and helps him understand the transcending spirit of familial love. He left for war, but he also left a grieving family. Telemachos was fighting the suitors for control of the house. Penelope was scrambling to fend off the wretched suitors. His mother and father were sick from missing him. Only when he sees the effects of his actions through his mother does he realize that he was mistaken. Unlike the spiritual journey of Samson and Agamemnon, Odysseus does not stop at recognition of consequences. He rids himself of excessive pride—the glory of war and the spearing the boar—and becomes a beggar. He pursues redemption, but as Tiresias tells him, he cannot have redemption without bloodshed. Odysseus redeems himself when he comes home; he kills the suitors and reclaims the order of his family. His redemption is the restoration of familial love.

These models serve as cornerstones for the predicament of humankind. As fleshly and sinful beings, each human encounters the fall. Sin permeates the very thought of our existence because of the original sin. However, the fall is only part of being human. If one goes further than wrongdoings by recognizing the consequences of one’s actions, then he or she can transform his or her life. Human fallacy is inevitable, but recognizing the fallacy itself is a step toward transcendence. To err is human, to recognize is proper, but to redeem is divine. Recognition does not always end in harmony; redemption is the indispensable component of spiritual transcendence. Tragic heroes often recognize their fatal flaw and the consequences thereof, but to truly experience harmony within oneself and with the world, one must transcend the boundaries of humanity into a nobler state of mind.