When one looks at the career of Lance Armstrong there is a great yet corrupt story to be told. When focusing on his post cancer years we can see a tale to rival that of the great stories through time. His rise from the cancer which nearly took his life, to cementing himself in history with his record seventh win of the Tour De France followed by his retirement as undoubtedly one of the greats of the sport, is an epic tale. His Career was unparalleled, unrivalled, supernatural and “Not normal”[[1]](#footnote-2), which is where the problems began to arise for Armstrong. As is the case with many sports stars doping allegations often follow success and for Armstrong this was no different. His fight back was long, brutal, expensive and ultimately unsuccessful. On January 20th 2013 in an interview with Oprah Winfrey Armstrong confessed to doping. This confession rocked the sport and cycling and increasingly world sport as a whole are still feeling the backlash. With the culmination of these events yet to come Armstrong is being threatened with prison time and has already lost US$75 million.[[2]](#footnote-3) When looking at the post cancer career as a whole certain parallels can begin to be drawn with that of a set of epic stories, in a very different shape, yet altogether similar, and from a very different time period. What I will be exploring in this essay is whether we can find these parallels to have substance behind them and to see whether Lance Armstrong is a “great and virtuous character in a dramatic tragedy who is destined for downfall” and if so find to what extent we can see Lance Armstrong as a Tragic Hero from Greek Tragedy.

As seen above in the definition there are certain characteristics to be filled when finding a tragic Hero. Immediately we must find the subject in question to be a great and virtuous character which in the case of Armstrong was easy. Not only did he achieve such great success but in doing so launched the Livestrong foundation which has today generated over US$500 million for cancer survivors.[[3]](#footnote-4) From this we can certainly draw the conclusion that Armstrong was a great and virtuous character. When we delve further into the definition we find the term “dramatic tragedy” which must be a part of any story willing to have a character given the status of tragic hero. In terms of cycling Le Tour De France is the pinnacle and with it comes the drama and passion that only a mix of cultures, nationalities, ego’s and the fittest sportsmen on the planet can bring. Armstrong commanded this race for seven straight years, a previously unseen feat and as a result the “dramatic tragedy” that this career and then his downfall from it create, surely make him deserving of this title. Finally whilst observing this definition we find ourselves with the character in question “destined for downfall” and this is another statement which can be seen as applicable to Armstrong. The first recorded time Armstrong doped was on 1995 where Steve Swart claims Armstrong began using drugs.[[4]](#footnote-5) This as a first offence instantly set Armstrong on the path to downfall and after a career fraught with drug scandals we see this downfall finally occur in the afore mentioned interview with Oprah Winfrey. Overall what can be seen upon initial evaluation is that Armstrong fits the description of a Tragic Hero yet what is not yet clear is how well he fits the Tragic Hero cycle. There are 6 elements to this cycle which will all be questioned in the following sections of the essay to come to the conclusion whether Armstrong, even though he fits the definition, is truly a tragic hero.

When looking to launch this enquiry I found the Aristotelian tragic hero to be a good starting point. His definition is what the tweaked versions all stem from and it is through him we can find the first points from which the Tragic cycle stems from. The key elements that Aristotle suggests are Hamartia, Peripeteia, Anagnorisis and Hubris. These are the four major parts of a tragic heroes cycle and to these I have added three more modern additions to the overall cycle, Noble stature, Nemesis and Catharsis, as through these I believe we can fully analyse Armstrong.

When we find any Tragic Hero from Greek tragedy they arrive with a noble stature within the story. In the case of Armstrong we find a humble upbringing not necessarily the noble stature we are accustomed to with the Tragic Hero status. Armstrong was brought up by a single mother in Plano, Texas and it is here he learnt his trade. We see Armstrong rise through both swimming, then triathlon to cycling where, at the age of 21 he won the World Road Race Championships.[[5]](#footnote-6) This, alongside a strong year all round propelled him into the spotlight and he was slowly establishing himself amongst the nobility of the Sport. By October 1996 he was ranked seventh in the world and then he was diagnosed with testicular cancer. Throughout his treatment Armstrong was determined to come back and in 1999 he did just that and won Le Tour De France. The following seven years established him as the best cyclist in the world and he was considered one of the greatest of all time.[[6]](#footnote-7) With all of this to consider we must recognise the fact Armstrong was seen as the Nobility of the sport and with this how he fits into the bracket of holding “noble stature” which is the first characteristic necessary to be deemed a Tragic Hero. However what must be recognised is that a *palamares* was not the only criteria which needed to be met to achieve noble status within the sport of cycling. Armstrong was not your average cyclist. Most cyclists within the European *peloton* were from reasonably middle or upper class backgrounds and the cyclists often reflected this with their etiquette within the race. Armstrong rose from the Texan suburbia and within this we find a very different mind-set and personality to the typical cyclist. There is a famous incident which Armstrong attests to in his autobiography when Moreno Argentin, who was a famous cyclist and a member of the sports ‘nobility’ mistook Armstrong for another American rider. For most young riders this would be an insult and it would be left at that however Armstrong responded in turn by retaliating to Argentin “Fuck you Chiapucci”[[7]](#footnote-8). By doing this Armstrong had insulted Argentin by mistaking him as one of his teammates purposely and in doing so broken the etiquette of the *peloton.* What this incident represents is the difference Armstrong held to the typical cyclist and within this we find a potential barrier to him achieving the nobility status we must find for him to be deserving of the title of Tragic Hero. Whilst this incident was one of many that Armstrong had pre-cancer we do see a very different cyclist emerge after the illness and as a result we could suggest he matured into being one of the sports nobility through his illness and is so far meeting the criteria necessary to be labelled a Tragic Hero, as we begin to progress through the cycle.

The next stage within the Tragic cycle is a characters Hamartia which is a fatal flaw leading to the downfall of a tragic hero. When we look for this error within Armstrong we meet a point of great interest. In trying to explain Armstrong’s exceptional behaviour throughout his career, the term narcissist is often floated around. In a blog by the psychologist Joseph Burgo, a specialist in Narcissism, we see Armstrong likened to one and this is only one of many examples of this comparison which I found in my research[[8]](#footnote-9). Certainly the “aggressive narcism” which Burgo attributes to Armstrong in another article could begin to show where his Hamartia developed through his career[[9]](#footnote-10). When we look at Armstrong's interview with Oprah he indirectly alludes to his Hamartia by labelling his “ruthless desire to win at all costs” his “flaw”[[10]](#footnote-11). Armstrong’s egotistical nature and his need to fulfil theses desires could be seen as a key element in his downfall, and as a result an element of his Hamartia. Dan Levy mentions this when he claims Armstrong’s comeback, which ultimately was a statement from him that he was still there, and as a result an ego orientated move, was a “moment of hubris” which in terms of the tragic cycle can be labelled Hamartia[[11]](#footnote-12). From this I could take the idea that Armstrong's Hamartia was purely from his ego, as a lot of my early research seemed to suggest. However whilst analysing Armstrong’s nature and his narcissistic traits I began to question this view. Armstrong himself created this idea of a narcissist by alluding to the qualities of one in his interview with Oprah and the mass media have picked up on this and since blown it far out of proportion. Due to the fact Armstrong is a suspected narcissist, him claiming the responsibility for his downfall, made me begin to question this theory, as potentially this could be one last victory for Armstrong, to fuel the unrelenting desire for victory which we have attributed to be a factor within Armstrong’s downfall. In my eyes his Hamartia lies within another key aspect of his career which Armstrong, could through suggesting narcissism, be trying to escape, drugs.

Armstrong was undoubtedly an exceptional sportsmen. At age sixteen he turned professional in Triathlon, yet the success we attribute to him throughout his later career appears in part to be attributed to the use of performance enhancing drugs. Armstrong was great, yet ironically, one of the components of his success would also be his downfall as ultimately, the doping was what ended his career. However if we are to view this with a greek perspective we must recognise their view on Armstrong’s actions. Certainly from the greek perspective ‘doping’ was not necessarily a bad thing. Achilles famously dined on nectar and ambrosia, in Homers Iliad, before battle which can certainly be seen as similar to Armstrong's actions[[12]](#footnote-13). In this case Armstrong doping would not necessarily have been seen in the same way and we must be careful not to put an Anachronistic perspective upon our investigation. Even so, when looking at the career of Armstrong, within the context of the influential factors upon his downfall, I have drawn the conclusion that Armstrong certainly had a Hamartia. Whether this came in the form of his narcissistic traits or persistent drug abuse, we can still see Hamartia, in a form, affect him. Building from this Armstrong is so far following the path of a tragic hero and as such to this point can be viewed as one.

Peripeteia is a sudden reversal in fortune,[[13]](#footnote-14) and on the 10th of October 2012 it is fair to say this happened to Lance Armstrong. On this day the United States Anti Doping Agency released its evidence against him and his whole career fell to pieces.[[14]](#footnote-15) In one day he claims to have lost US$75 million in advertising revenue from this report being published[[15]](#footnote-16). This report being made publicly available followed his choice to stop fighting the charges in the august of the year and the impacts from this were profound and have still not been fully seen. Financially Armstrong faces ruin, with a potential US$100 million court case which would destroy the wealth which he had built up through his career. These impacts alone could be seen as his peripeteia yet Armstrong experienced even more. He has had to have counselling to deal with the fallout from his drug confession and the strain he claims to have felt upon him and his family is huge[[16]](#footnote-17). This psychological pressure is constant as the world continues to shun Armstrong and experts doubt any damage will be undone. Within his own country Armstrong is a sort of Pariah which is a huge reversal of fortune from the former state he used to command as Armstrong was undoubtedly royalty. Tyler Hamilton recollects phone conversations with the President[[17]](#footnote-18) and Armstrong boasted of dinners with the likes of Donald Trump. This elite circle however were as quick to accept him after his initial success, as they were to reject him following his downfall. From this we can certainly see how Armstrong felt a diverse and complete experience of Peripeteia following the USADA case was broken. However what is clear is that this downfall stemmed from his choice to stop fighting the case on august the 23rd of that year. Perhaps from this we can lead on to the next key element of the tragic cycle, the anagnorisis.

During his interview with Oprah Armstrong identified where he thought his “fate was sealed”. From this we could draw a self-diagnosed anagnorisis, for Armstrong, immediately from the interview. Armstrong recalls when George Hincapie was forced to testify against him, for anti-doping authorities, being the moment he felt he was doomed to failure. From this we actually see a strong fit from Armstrong to the tragic hero cycle, as he recognises that there was a definite moment of Anagnorisis which was the eventual cause of his downfall. Alternatively we could look at the moment Armstrong arrived to the conclusion that the money involved with his defence was too much. Armstrong identified this…… . If we look to follow the tragic cycle this could also be seen as a moment of Anagnorisis. However, on many occasions, Armstrong can be quoted as not giving up. Within his very nature as a successful professional sportsmen we can see this element of his character, and in identifying this we find a complication when trying to apply Armstrong to the tragic hero model. When we look at this in detail we could find Armstrong not to have this moment of Anagnorisis, due to the fact he simply does not give up fighting the Tragic downfall he is currently experiencing. Even now, in 2016 he is still involved in lawsuits and appealing against his ban from competitive sport. This could be seen as a way in which Armstrong falls outside of the Tragic hero model. Overall we do see a moment of anagnorisis, which we see as typical for a Tragic hero, yet Armstrong, untypical of a tragic hero does not appear to give up, as one would expect to see in greek tragedy. Even so Armstrong does appear to still befitting of the title Tragic hero.

When we look at Armstrong we could attribute the beginning of his downfall to a number of entities, yet if we were to pinpoint one figure to find ultimately responsible, we would find ourselves with Travis Tygart, who is widely regarded to be Armstrong’s nemesis.[[18]](#footnote-19) Tygart is the chief executive of the United States Anti Doping Agency (USADA) and is widely regarded as a key element in the downfall of Armstrong. The unrelenting nature of the investigation which Tygart took to Armstrong can certainly be seen as a major element in the downfall which was experienced by Armstrong as a result of this overall crisis. When we look at this we can find Armstrong to be fitting of the title Tragic Hero in this way.

When we look at a greek tragedy, we must take from it our Catharsis, we must purge our emotions. When looking at the Tragedy of Armstrong, this is something we can identify. To do this instead of looking at oneself, it is useful to look to the sport of cycling as a whole, as we can see the legacy of Armstrong take effect. In recent years, drug testing has not only become more frequent but also more effective and as a result altogether more successful. From this we can take that the sport is “purging” itself of Armstrong and what it was he represented and that Armstrong fits to the tragic hero cycle in this way.

From working through the Tragic cycle and comparing Armstrong to it, we can find a strong correlation between the cycle and his career. Beginning with the Noble stature that Armstrong carved for himself within the sport we see the first similarity, then with his Hamartia where his tragic flaw lies. Then again we see a similarity when we look at Armstrong’s peripeteia and the anagnorisis which befell him after this we find a further comparison. Finally through exploring Armstrong’s nemesis and the catharsis we take from his story it can be concluded that Armstrong theoretically meets the Tragic cycle model and can be seen to be deserving of the of a Tragic hero from greek tragedy. This is however only a theoretical conclusion so to correctly establish whether Armstrong is befitting of the term Tragic Hero, it would be beneficial to compare his life, career and personality to that of archetypal Tragic Heroes from greek tragedy and see whether similarities or differences can be found between them. An obvious place to start would be Oedipus who is widely regarded as the Archetypal Tragic Hero which we can pull from Greek tragedy.

When we look at Oedipus, we see a King who is concerned and cares for his people, which return his favours with love and trust for him. However he also has a quick temper and an inability to think and act correctly in key situations. To compare him to Armstrong is actually in this regard quite simple, for the Texan has a number of similarities which can be drawn to Oedipus.

Initially we can find a comparison in the way Armstrong and Oedipus both offered care and concern for people. Armstrong was the spearhead behind the Live-strong charity and made various appearances at Cancer support events. In this case we see the noble and positive nature of Armstrong’s character and can begin to draw a comparison between him and Oedipus. Moving onto the next element of Oedipus’s character we find the love and trust which, those he helped, had for him. When we look to Armstrong we can find this love and trust met and surpassed. Adoration existed for Armstrong across the world, from cyclists to cancer survivors, there was universal support for him. He was a hero, worldwide for millions and in this regard we see the platform he had risen to, like that which Oedipus held. This is another way which we can see Armstrong link to Oedipus. Overall we can see the positive qualities of Oedipus echoed in Armstrong, yet the links between them grow even stronger when we look at the negative aspects of each character. The quick temper trait which can be identified in Oedipus is one that is directly seen on multiple occasions in Armstrong’s career. The notoriously temperamental Texan is in this regard very similar to Oedipus. As we can find this to be a key element in the overall Tragic fall that both Armstrong and Oedipus experience, we can see the increasing synonymity between the two. Through this and the afore mentioned points we can draw a comparison between Armstrong and Oedipus and the way in which they match as people. Overall the two appear to be equally strong matches to the Tragic cycle, and due to the nature of Oedipus being seen as “the ideal Tragic hero”, we see a progressively stronger case for Armstrong to be seen as a tragic hero, begin to establish.

However, what must be considered in this enquiry is the nature of Armstrong’s actions in the society relative to Greek Tragedy. This lies in the difference in perception that we have, to that which the Greeks would have held if they were looking upon and judging his career. If we were to focus upon doping, we would certainly find a very different opinion from ours, to be held by the Ancient Greeks. In the World Anti Doping Agencies history of doping it is identified that “Ancient Greek athletes are known to have used special diets and stimulating potions to fortify themselves”. This doping was neither rejected nor shunned in the Greek society, which is a stark difference between theirs and ours. Armstrong's downfall was part of a growing tide of drug abuse in sports being discovered and actually prosecuted. It could be suggested that Armstrong’s popularity played a huge role in this, as the world began to realise the extent of the problem. Due to the frame of mind that modern day society has for Armstrong and other substance abusers it is therefore hard to fully apply Armstrong to an Ancient Greek idea. Furthermore, the concept of fairness in sport is one alien to the ancient Greeks, as one who is clever enough to gain an advantage over an opponent, deserves a victory if it comes to them. This can be seen in the afore mentioned tale of Achilles, as he gained his advantage through doping and performance enhancing armour from Hephaestus. Therefore, we can see a further disparity in the mindset of modern day society and Ancient Greek, in relation to the story of Armstrong, In this regard we must be careful in comparing Armstrong to a Tragic Hero, without recognising the potential aspects of Armstrong’s story which lie outside the Tragic Hero construct of Greek Tragedy and as a result make it more difficult to apply his story to the Greek model.

Even when we look at Armstrong fitting into the Tragic cycle we can find irregularities within his story and that of the Greek Tragic heroes. Helene Foley, an expert on Greek Tragedy at Columbia University identifies that Greek Heroes do not appear to experience the Tragic fall as a result of lying or cheating.[[19]](#footnote-20) This adds another complication to Armstrong’s case as a Tragic hero. Certainly if this is an element of a traditional Greek Tragic hero, it makes it difficult to see Armstrong as perfect for this model. Foley goes further than this and suggests that we look at the Tragic hero incorrectly, and that we observe a Tragic hero model that has undergone “Christianisation”. This is seen through the interpretation that “sin” is the tragic flaw, which in Greek Tragedy was not the case. As a result of this we could conclude that our view of Armstrong as a Tragic Hero is an altogether anachronistic view. Due to the nature of Armstrong’s Hamartia being one of sin, we could begin to further question this idea that he is a Tragic hero, or that we are observing the modern Tragic Hero that Foley suggests has been influenced and changed by Christianity, particularly Catholicism. In this regard Armstrong cannot be seen as a Tragic hero at all. If we are to draw upon the modern perception of Armstrong’s career, then his career is one seen as wholly undeserving of hero status and as a result we could therefore find him altogether to be undeserving of the title “Tragic hero”. This is due to the fact Armstrong was a cheat and can actually not be seen as deserving of hero status. As has been seen explored, Armstrong can have the term “tragic” applied to his career, as he clearly did follow the tragic element of the cycle, but when we look at the previously identified noble stature, we could find Armstrong to not actually fit that. When competing in Sport, the Greeks were often part of a religious festival for a god. With the Olympic games, we see it in honour of Zeus [[20]](#footnote-21)and the Pythian games to Apollo[[21]](#footnote-22). In this respect, although performance enhancement was legal, there was still a code of honour that Athletes upheld, which when applied to Armstrong is another aspect of his character which we could perceive to be missing, when we try to apply him to the Tragic model. Armstrong ruined the careers, and lives of many people on his way to the domination of cycling. Famously, we have Betsy Andreu, Frankie Andreu and Emma O’Reilly, were three people who spoke out about Armstrong, and Frankie Andreu states that “he’s ruined a lot of peoples lives”[[22]](#footnote-23) . This quality of Armstrong is certainly not one which we can apply to Tragic Heroes, sportspeople or anyone of the noble stature which we see in Ancient Greece that was necessary to be seen as a Tragic hero. In this regard I can find increasing difficulty to apply Armstrong to the original concept of the Tragic cycle, as he appears to be more and more applicable to the changing Tragic cycle, as it is adapted for modern perspective.

When looking to actually find a conclusion, Armstrong, as a character, can certainly be seen to hold a number of similarities with the Tragic Hero model, which we see in Aristotle’s Poetics and hold similarities with the archetypal character from Greek Tragedy. However, we do also see some aspects of Armstrong’s case to be a Tragic hero, as insufficient for him to achieve that title. Particularly the elements of Armstrong that appear to be applicable to the modern interpretation of the Tragic cycle, but not the Ancient Greek one. As has been explored in this essay Armstrong holds many characteristics and traits of a Tragic hero. The core elements of the Tragic cycle; Hamartia, Peripeteia, Anagnorisis, Nemesis and Catharsis, can all be seen as met, at least partly, by Armstrong through his career. What is also apparent is the easily applicable nature of Armstrong to the character and traits of Oedipus who is a prime example of a Tragic hero from Ancient Greece. In reference to those two points, we must recognise how Armstrong’s career appears to be synonymous with the Greek Tragic hero, yet therein lies the problem. The idea of a Greek Tragic hero, in society today, appears to be an incorrect one. Since the initial conception of the Tragic hero there has been all manner of influences upon the idea, particularly religious influence from Christianity, which is identified to have added sin to the Tragic cycle. As a result of this, dependent upon perspective, different conclusions as to whether Armstrong accurately fits the Tragic cycle, can be reached. However, in this case, I am looking to the ancient Greeks, and to explore how they would view Armstrong’s career, and its similarities, or differences to, the Tragic cycle. Therefore, when considering the potentially anachronistic nature of suggesting Armstrong does fit the Ancient Greek Tragic Cycle, I can reach the judgement that he does not. To suggest he did, would be inaccurate, due to the fact that even though he fits elements of the cycle, his overall success is attributed to and reliant upon his sin of cheating and lying. Due to this being an entirely Christian introduction to the Tragic cycle it is therefore inexact to apply Armstrong to the original Ancient Greek Tragic Hero, as overall, he does not adhere to the requirements of the role.

1. Tyler Hamilton [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-athletes/olympians/lance-armstrong-net-worth/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. http://www.livestrong.org/who-we-are/our-strength/financial-information/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. David Walsh LA confidential [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. http://www.biography.com/people/lance-armstrong-9188901#international-cycling-star [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. http://lovingthebike.com/pro-cycling/greatest-cyclists-of-all-time [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The Yellow Jersey Companion To The Tour De France, page 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/shame/201210/lance-armstrong-the-hero-narcissist> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/how-aggressive-narcissism-explains-lance-armstrong/272568/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxkULBtpF3s> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1309680-lance-armstrong-let-pride-and-hubris-not-doping-ruin-his-legacy> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Iliad, Homer [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/peripeteia> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. [http://www.biography.com/people/lance-armstrong-9188901#battling-testicular-cancer](http://www.biography.com/people/lance-armstrong-9188901%2523battling-testicular-cancer) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. <http://www.cyclingweekly.co.uk/news/latest-news/lance-armstrong-i-cant-afford-to-lose-100-million-in-legal-case-176336> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. <http://velonews.competitor.com/2015/06/news/armstrong-i-risk-ruin-in-landis-lawsuit_373424> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Tyler Hamilton, The Secret Race [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/othersports/athletics/10445296/Travis-Tygart-Lance-Armstrongs-nemesis-aims-to-crack-down-on-Jamaica-doping-problem.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. http://www.npr.org/2013/01/17/169621321/lance-armstrong-tragic-hero-not-exactly [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. http://www.penn.museum/sites/olympics/olympicorigins.shtml [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. https://www.coastal.edu/ashes2art/delphi2/misc-essays/pythian\_games.html [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/othersports/cycling/lancearmstrong/9804679/Armstrong-team-mate-Lance-ruined-peoples-lives-if-they-accused-him-of-doping.html [↑](#footnote-ref-23)