In overviews of the current state of scholarship on Southern American English, both Guy Bailey and Michael Montgomery (this volume) encourage us to explore new modes of explanation for variability in the speech of particular southerners and among groups of southern speakers. Referring to work done by Bernstein (1993), Bailey points out that at most 27% of the phonological variability uncovered in his own large study of Texas speakers turned out to be accountable for with reference to the most commonly adduced social categories such as ethnicity, age, and gender. (Only 9% of the variability in one set of variables correlated with such social facts.) To understand the rest of the variability we must, Bailey urges, pay increased attention to new explanatory variables. Montgomery suggests what some of these variables might be, wondering about how southerners’ uses of the markers of southern speech might be related to “the identity and purposes of Southerners and Northerners.”

Several contributors to this volume explore, in one way or another, how the “identity and purposes” of southern speakers are connected with how they talk. Cukor-Avila shows how supplementing traditional sociolinguistic interviews with ethnographic techniques can lead to a deeper understanding of what it is about themselves and their relationships that people in a community use their linguistic resources to express. Davis uses ethnographic method, too, in exploring how adolescents understand what they do with language and how speech and setting are related. Johnson adduces cultural and psychological explanations for the persistence of lexical variation between town and country, when regional differences are disappearing. Preston examines the symbolic importance of southern speech, using various techniques to discover how people conceive of Southern ways of talking.

This essay is also about how “identity and purpose” help in understanding how southern linguistic resources are used in talk. Part of my aim is also to illustrate how the particularistic focus of discourse analysis in the philological tradition helps clarify reasons for variation that can be blurred in work done from a more holistic, social-deterministic perspective. I suggest that some familiar ways of explaining why utterances and texts take the shapes they do result in incomplete explanations, because they take only the social into account and not the individual. My text is a bit of discourse I have been studying for some time: part of the life story of an African-American woman in her late 50s.

It should be clear from the fact that I am talking here about a single text that what I am reporting on is neither a quantitative study nor a study, except in its implications, of variation among different speakers or groups of speakers. My approach to linguistic variation is based in the close-reading techniques of discourse
analysis, or "the linguistics of the particular" (Becker 1984, 1988). Discourse analysts sometimes attempt to explain particular utterances and texts solely in terms of the social categories that have proven useful in understanding large-scale patterns of variation—class, gender, region, and so on. When we do this, we are failing to take advantage of what is precisely the main benefit of our research methodology and the main way our methodology can contribute to dialectology and quantitative sociolinguistics. This is the usefulness of discourse analysis for uncovering the mechanisms of variation among individual speakers and texts. In ways quantitative modes of analysis cannot, careful searches for patterns in particular texts and their correlations with purposes can help us understand the actual reasons why a particular person talks a particular way on a particular occasion.

THE STORY AND ITS AUTHOR

Mattie Blair\(^2\) was born in Georgia; she spent her childhood there and her adulthood in Michigan, Indiana, and California. Blair told her story to me (a white woman then in my early 30s) several months before her death, from brain cancer, in 1985. She was then a patient in a church-sponsored convalescent home in Fort Wayne, Indiana. When the home's Activities Director asked what she would like to do with her time, Mrs. Blair said that she would like to tell her "story" and have someone write it down and publish it. She had led an interesting life, she said. Comparing her story to that of the author of the recently televised *Roots* series, she told me that what she had to tell was "as good as anything Alex Haley wrote about." I agreed to record Mrs. Blair's story. I listened to her talk about her life for ten or twelve hours during the summer of 1984, and I have been trying ever since to find ways to understand why she said what she did and why she said it the way she did.

It was clear to both Mrs. Blair and me that aspects of her history and her language had to do with her shaping by race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. She mentioned variations in skin color often in descriptions of people and made references to African-American ways of doing things. She was clearly aware of connections between language and ethnicity, too, stopping, for example, to explain African-American slang to me. She very often attributed troubles in her life to her being poor and female and, in her childhood, rural and southern. But it was also clear to both of us that Mrs. Blair's life, and her telling of it, were not generic. This was _her_ story, not the story of a type, and she wanted it treated as a particular biography, not as a representative case study. In treating it that way—looking for Mattie Blair's particular reasons for saying what she did—I respect her wishes. I also become able to illuminate aspects of the language of the story that I would miss if I thought of the text simply as an example of African-American women's narrative, or of southern speech, or of the speech of the generation of the 1920s, or some other combination of demographic facts like these.

The moment I started the tape recorder on our first visit, Mrs. Blair began her story: "Well as you know, my name is Mattie Margaret Blair, born December the
20th, 1926, in Chester, Georgia." She insisted, especially during the first of our eight meetings, that her story not be interrupted except for relevant reasons. She sometimes referred to the story as a book and gave thought to possible titles. On the basis of the ten or twelve hours of tape I made, I could not provide a complete chronology of Mrs. Blair's life, but I could piece together most of it. "Sonny" is from the second of our sessions. The text is transcribed in lines corresponding to breath groups (Chafe 1980, 1987); line spaces separate episodes, which I discuss below. In addition to conventional punctuation, ellipses (of one or more periods) represent short silences; colons represent lengthened syllables. Parentheses enclose parts that I and many other listeners have been unable to figure out. My back-channeling and nonverbal noises are in angled brackets.

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**SONNY**

Uh, he was an entertainer.
I met him at... uh ( ) out there, at Fontana,
and uh, his name was Sonny.
And him and Doc became good friends.

5 And uh... Sonny was... real nice.
He had a... new car, first car I ever rode in had a record player in it, a tape
or whatever.
<Um-hm>
And him and Doc was very good friends.

So he has... he eh, eh got, carried me someplace with him that day,
to the insurance company,
10 to take out insurance on his car.
And while he was in there,
eh the man was out,
and he tore <cough> a bunch of checks out of the back of the checkbook,
insurance checks.

15 Well you know those type of checks,
it's checks like you can write 'em any amount, like you have an accident.
<uh-huh>

So uh, he goes around cashing checks, buying me, uh,
'cause I've always I'monna be truthful with you,
always been a clothes freak.
20 I love pretty clothes, here I am blind.
And the first time he give me a piece of... a dress or something I bit it!
<Uh-huh>
You know, you know how you feel everything?, I don't know.
I said "Yeah, this is good material!"
And I used to be fond of Lili Ann suits.
25 But anyway, this Sonny cashed all of them checks,
and I found out about it,
that he had made about... seven eight hundred dollars, they—
I don't never known that, I always been kind of a dummy, 'cause I was brought up that way, old country old dumb country girl.
If I hadda been brought up hip like the little city girls, I'd have some sense.

30 But I was raised down there in them cotton fields, you know I ain't had no sense, anybody could use me.
So he goes to work and uh cash them checks that day, and he e- he showed me all this money.
And he carried me in the store, and all I got out of it was he said. to cash another check,
35 (I bought?) all them groceries see.
And (I just got?) "Get anything you want. Get anything you want." [mimics whispered voice]
And I was putting that stuff in the, in the uh . . . buggy, and he just wrote this check and give it to the woman and she'd give him back the change.

And then uh, . . . so he, I said "What are you . . . ooo?"
40 And he had wa- a'll that money.
And so he told me "Honey, you be doing that all today with me?"
And he said oh we'd buy, oh we would need to buy something, a little something, not too much, and people'd give him back money, and he'd give them a piece of paper.
<Uh-huh>
And so I said "Ohh my God." [disbelieving semiwhisper]
45 And he said "Yeah, you didn't know I was a paper-hanger, baby?"
I said "What-- who you hang paper for?"
I thought he meant hang paper on the walls!
<laughter>
I told you I wasn't nothing but a dumb-- old country-- ignorant Georgia girl.
<cough>

50 And he meant hang paper write checks.
And he said "Hey."
 Said he was gonna go with me, to this place, where he was gonna take me, he- he'd give me some money.
55 I said "Uuu uh-hn, no; uh-hn,"
I said "I ain't going no place with you."
And uh, he just caught me by the arm and pushed me and shoved me in the car, said "Oh yeah, you're going."
And they told me. he was smoking marijuana, he was you know he was a dope addict.

60 And I said "No: uh-un."
So he taken me to this here here here motel, and I crawled through the window and got out the window and run and went to the motel office.
And that's what saved me from him.

So, soon as I got back and could find Doc, I told Doc.
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65 So Doc got his gun,
and went looking for his rump.
And when Doc—uh uh everybody told Doc,
say eh "I seen him. Oh he— I seen him over there."
He went to every big tavern in in in in—San Bernardino.
70 Finally, we didn’t find him so we went on home.

So he was so ignorant,
he (goes to work?) and gets in his pretty car,
and come over there and knock on my door,
on 30th Street, and say "Hey, I know that that old— that man of yours was
looking for me."
75 And here Doc say “Yeah man, I sure was.”
I didn’t know he was look— listening, I thought he was in there watching
television.
But he gon always peel to see who at the door, don’t want nobody come in,
think it’s some man come looking for me.
And so Doc say “Yeah, man” say “I sure was looking for you.” [mimics high
whiny voice]
And he said “Well here I am, big man, what you want?”
80 And so Doc say he’s "Aww, man."
And next thing I know pumm.
Shot him right through the head,
right there in my doorway.
And I said “Oh my God” my kids went to running went to hollering went to
screaming,
85 I run and went to hollering, run across,
uh them old little stickers that (put?) in your feet,
and went to running went to run—
I told you about he hid in the church.
You know he hid in the church when he killed that boy.

90 So he went on to the penitentiary, and uh...
They had me accessory to the fact, but he pleaded guilty,
you know ‘cause I didn’t pull no trigger,
but you know they had to go through the whole procedure.

In what follows, I examine three aspects of the language of the “Sonny” story.
For each of the three, I ask “Why did Mattie Blair do this rather than doing
something else?” And each time I ask that question I provide two explanations, one
having to do with the general social determinants of variation and one having to do
with more individual, particular determinants. The three things I look at are

1) one element of the story’s syntax: Mrs. Blair’s use of negative concord and
the negative auxiliary ain’t,
2) one fact about the vocabulary in the story: her use of the verbs take and
carry, and
3) the overall structure of the story: how it is divided into parts and how the
parts fit together and flow into each other.
USES OF SOUTHERN SPEECH IN "SONNY"

Negative Concord and Ain't

Mattie Blair's speech is nonstandard in a number of ways. She uses verb forms such as he taken, he cash, and he give in the preterit; them as a demonstrative pronoun; the expression "him and Doc" instead of "Doc and he." She also employs negative concord, the repeated expression of negation throughout a negative clause. And she uses ain't to mean several things, among them the equivalent of did not, as, for example, in line 30: "But I was raised down there in them cotton fields, you know I ain't had no sense, anybody could use me."

Thinking about this fact from the social perspective, one explanation is clear: Blair uses double negation and ain't this way because she is relatively untrained in standard English; this has to do with social oppression related to being poor and African-American. This feature of Blair's speech could be used as an example of socially constrained variation.

But the social mode of explanation does not provide the whole picture. Thinking about Blair's nonstandard speech from the perspective of the individual provides an additional layer of understanding of her uses of ain't. The negation patterns which mark Mattie Blair's as nonstandard were part of her repertoire of linguistic resources, and she used socially marked, nonstandard forms variably as symbolic tools in the depiction of herself as a character in the story. Though negative concord is consistent throughout the story, and thus cannot be said to reflect the result of choice, Blair's use of ain't as an equivalent for did not in the first person singular is not consistent. Describing herself as an incompetent country girl, she used the lower-status form, "I ain't had no sense," in line 30. But describing herself as being in the right after the murder, she used a more standard form: in line 92, she said "you know 'cause I didn't pull no trigger" (instead of "I ain't pulled no trigger"). Blair's use of nonstandardness in the depiction of versions of herself results on one occasion in overreaching the mark, in the ungrammatical (that is, inconsistent with her own grammar), hyper-nonstandard form in line 28: "I don't never known that, I always been kind of a dummy."

Focusing on the individual speaker and the particular utterance here encourages us to think about creative use of resources rather than socially determined behavior and provides, in this case, a way of understanding inconsistency that makes more sense than most ways of understanding inconsistency (as performance error or free variation) in more holistically oriented sociolinguistics.

Take and Carry

Mattie Blair chose among two verbs, take and carry, where some speakers of English would have only one choice, take. In the Sonny story, carry seems to signify willing accompaniment: Sonny "carries" her to places she wants to go, as in line 8, "So he has... he eh, eh got, carried me someplace with him that day," and in line 33, "And he carried me in the store" to pick out clothes and groceries. Take, on the other hand, appears when Mattie does not want to accompany Sonny. Sonny "takes" her to the motel, as in line 52,
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51 Said he was gonna go with me,
52 to this place, where he was gonna take me,
53 he- he’d give me some money.

or in line 61, “So he taken me to this here here here motel.”

Why did Mattie Blair use take and carry in these ways, and what did she mean by doing so? The obvious social explanation has to do with regional variation. Carry can mean, for speakers of southern varieties, something close to what take means: “to escort, accompany; to take, bring,” according to the Dictionary of American Regional English (Cassidy 1985:550). Her knowledge of southern possibilities provided Blair with a way of creating meaning that someone who was not a southerner would have to create another way.

But the contrast Blair set up with her uses of carry and take between willing accompaniment and forced accompaniment is not one suggested by the DARE entry on carry. Blair had two choices available because she spoke a Southern variety, but what the two verbs mean in this story is a result of their juxtaposition in this story, which is tinged with but not solely a result of their meaning in the abstract. This is one approach to thinking about Blair’s choices of take and carry from the perspective of the individual, and it results in our being reminded that the meanings of words a person chooses are not dictated by the variety he or she is speaking when choosing them. The variety provides resources, but the use of those resources is an individual matter.

We might also think about the meanings of take and carry in this story from the perspective of another individual, the original audience to the story. Except in listening to children and to people whose ways of speaking are very different from ours, we do not often hear true linguistic novelty: familiar forms being used for the very first time to express unfamiliar meanings, or brand-new forms or meanings. This is because most of the things we hear are not new and because our theories of language, both folk and scholarly, do not provide us with ways of incorporating newness. But I did notice something new when I listened to this story for the first time, in May 1984: it was the first time I had ever heard anybody use carry to mean anything like take. (At that time I was completely unfamiliar with Southern and African-American ways of talking, having lived only in nonindustrial university towns in the Northeast and Midwest.) So my decisions about the meanings of take and carry in the story and the contrast between them was the result of regional variation only in a negative way. To me, what Blair was doing sounded idiosyncratic, a creative choice made by her, entirely individual.

Discourse Structure

The plot of Mattie Blair’s story is the plot of tragedy. The story involves slowly but inexorably rising tension leading to a climax made inevitable by a tragic flaw in the protagonist’s character: “ignorance,” as Mrs. Blair would have called it, by which she meant not just lack of knowledge of certain facts, but an almost willful naiveté, an inability to deal quickly or smartly with the world. The structure of the story reflects its plot. The outcome of Mrs. Blair’s story seems inevitable. There are no clues about the ending before it happens and thus no reason to think about alternatives to it, so there seem at first to have been no options. Blair’s long,
relatively complex verbal lines, the relatively unpredictable criteria for scene-setting that force her hearer simply to follow rather than anticipate, her consistent use of the result-toned transition marker so, and her unevaluated, emotionless summaries throughout all contribute to the tragic effect of her story.

In the first scene, Mattie and Sonny go to the insurance company (lines 8–16). Mrs. Blair announces the beginning of the scene with so. “So he has...he how, he got, carried me someplace with him that day, to the insurance company, t-o to take out insurance on his car.” So is a discourse marker (Schiffrin 1987) that is often used for the purpose of showing when a new “paragraph” of spoken discourse starts. So is consistently enough used as a boundary-marker in discourse to be defined that way in at least one desk dictionary (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary 1983). However, so has a dual effect; it is also a marker of result. Connecting two clauses with so is thus ambiguous. To say, as Mrs. Blair does, “so he carried me someplace with him that day” suggests that Mattie’s going off with Sonny is the inevitable result of knowing him, or of his being Doc’s friend. Mrs. Blair’s story continues to present new events as being connected to previous ones in this quasi-causal way, and the effect is to suggest that the events of the story flowed inexorably out of one another.

In the next episode, Sonny “goes around cashing checks” (lines 18–38). Like the first, this episode begins with so.

So uh, he goes around cashing checks, buying me, uh, ‘cause I’ve always I’m gonna be truthful with you, always been a clothes freak.

Sonny’s check-cashing is presented three times in this segment:

So uh, he goes around cashing checks (line 17)
But anyway, this Sonny cashed all of them checks (line 25)
So he goes to work and uh cash them checks that day (line 31)

In between, Mrs. Blair talks about her character in the story, about how Mattie had “always been a clothes freak” and why she didn’t understand sooner what Sonny was up to: “I always been kind of a dummy, ‘cause I was brought up that way.” After the third mention of the only real action in this section, she tells how the scam worked. The structure of the narration perfectly fits the developing understanding of the Mattie character, first unhinging accepting pretty clothes, then wondering why Sonny has so much money but still not citified or hip enough to know why, then finally catching on. At the end of the segment, Mrs. Blair summarizes: “And he just wrote this check and give it to the woman and she’d give him back the change.”

In the third part of the story (lines 39–63), Mattie realizes what is happening and finds out exactly what her role is to be. This scene portrays a new state of knowledge. It is signaled by the summary before it, and by then—here not indicating a temporal shift, but rather a rhetorical one—and, again, so: “And then uh, . . . so he, I said ‘What are you . . . ooo?”’ The aside in this segment about the
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“dumb old country ignorant Georgia girl” echoes the one in the previous scene. As she did in the preceding scene, Mrs. Blair ends this one with a summation: “And that’s what saved me from him.”

The next scene starts, as have previous scenes, with so. A new character comes into play here, namely Doc, and the temporal framework changes, the change marked with a subordinate modifying clause. “So, soon as I got back and could find Doc, I told Doc.” A summary marks the end of the scene—“Finally, we didn’t find him so we went on home,” and character and point of view shift into the next, the initial he (“So he was so ignorant”) now having to be taken as referring to Sonny rather than Doc. The new scene, beginning at line 71, is marked at the beginning (not surprisingly) with so. As have others, this scene ends with a summation, “he killed that boy.” Not having been foreshadowed in any way, this event comes as a surprise. Sonny’s “ignorance” leads him blindly into trouble, as Mattie’s ignorance did her. The final segment of the story presents its aftermath, in a flat, reportorial way:

So he went on to the penitentiary, and uh . . .
They had me accessory to the fact, but he pleaded guilty,
you know ’cause I didn’t pull no trigger,
but you know they had to go through the whole procedure . . .

Unlike many of the spontaneous storytellers sociolinguists have studied, Mrs. Blair provides no moral for her story. She ends the story without commenting on its significance in any way. Instead, she simply mentions the final result, “so he went on to the penitentiary,” and the part of it that was most relevant to her: “they had me accessory to the fact.” She goes on, in subsequent talk, to a different episode of her life involving a different man and a different place.

The way Mrs. Blair’s story is structured contrasts sharply with the way many white Americans organize narratives of personal experience, as sets of temporal episodes (often there are three such episodes), each building on the one before, so that hearers can anticipate possible outcomes before the end. This way of structuring a story is strongly reminiscent of the structure of many less spontaneous and more consciously performed genres of talk. American jokes, for example, very often have this structure, as do many Euro-American folk tales: there are three main characters, or something happens three times. In all these cases, and others, the third episode provides the resolution or completes the pattern.

Why is Mrs. Blair’s story structured as it is? A social answer might refer to ethnicity. With the exception of some work by Elter-Lewis (1991a, 1991b, 1993), there is little published work about African-American women’s discourse style in narrative. It has been suggested, though, that factual recountings of personal experience (i.e., recounts meant to be taken as factual) may occupy a different place in the set of things African-Americans do with talk than in the set of things white Americans do. Work by Kochman (1981) suggests that personal information of the sort Mattie Blair was giving me is less freely or comfortably given by Blacks than by Whites. Heath (1983) contrasts the factual norms by which working-class white southerners evaluate personal anecdotes—such stories have to tell the truth
and have clear morals involving lessons the teller learned—with the requirement among working-class African-American southerners that stories be entertaining above all, a requirement that may give rise to overtly fictional versions of personal experience. McLeod-Porter (1991) shows that one reason adolescent African-American boys are, as a group, often evaluated as nonfluent, immature writers is that the narrative writing tasks used as diagnostics violate cultural constraints on divulging personal information.

But there is also a more particular, individual answer to the question, “Why does this story have the structure it does?” It has to do with the most basic reason for personal narrative, namely, the creation and expression of a unique self. When people transform personal experience into stories, they create meaning on three levels. In the first place, people tell stories to create and share knowledge about the world. Second, people tell stories to evoke and create interpersonal relationships; stories shape, and are shaped by, the interactions in which they occur, and stories reflect and mold the social relationships they tell about, too.

A third sort of meaning in stories is personal. Stories express people’s individuality, “acting yourself” is speaking yourself, telling your own stories. People perform their identities as they act and talk (Goffman 1959), calling attention to who they are as they call attention to the ways they choose for creating meaning and coherence in their stories. This involves showing that one is a person at all, that is, an autonomous member of the species with a temporally continuous history (Hallowell 1955). Creating a human self in discourse is the most basic reason for narrative; this is what accounts for what Harold Rosen has called the “autobiographical impulse” (Rosen 1988). Children differentiate themselves from others when they notice that different things happen to them than to others, that they can, in other words, have different life stories than anyone else (Bruner 1986). When there are temporal holes in people’s life histories, people can lose their sanity, and sanity can sometimes be regained, in therapy, by constructing a new, complete life narrative (Schafer 1981). Speaking oneself also involves showing what kind of person one is, both explicitly and implicitly. Speakers create selves in narrative via choices of theme (you are the history you create) and via choices of language (you are how you talk). Stories are always covert performances of self, and sometimes they are overt ones.

This function of narration sheds light on the most basic facts about Mrs. Blair’s life story. The themes of her narratives, their structures, and their sounds and syntax are all relevant to the self she is creating in her discourse. Mrs. Blair’s story is an explicit attempt to create a meaningful life—part of her “book.” This is serious business, and the story has the serious structure of tragedy, a structure that allows for reflection and revision and in which the meaning emerges slowly. This illuminates, for example, the digressions about the young “country” Mattie, which are syntactically more complex than the rest of the story and uttered in longer breath groups. In creating her life, Blair drew on the linguistic resources available to her. But she also, as we have seen in connection with each aspect of the story we have examined, used available resources to create new ones.

Different speakers tell different stories about themselves, and they tell them differently. More generally, language is variable from individual to individual. This

NOTES

1. I am of this essay 1996.

2. The text. Mattie is part of it.

3. Not all creative, is work for th without lots brings extra.

4. The story by Aristotle.

5. See P
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is a familiar fact; we would be astonished, in fact, to hear two different people speak exactly the same way. Discourse analysts sometimes try to account for facts about the particular texts they examine purely with reference to demographic categories that have helped account for variation among groups of speakers. But such explanations leave out part of the process. People talk differently because they are creating different selves in discourse. To do this, they use the resources available to them, reshaping the "prior texts" (Becker 1994) provided by things they have heard, read, and said before. These resources vary, depending on people's language, dialect, gender, and so on, but we need to remind ourselves that an utterance does not take the shape it does because its teller is black, poor, or female; or because her audience is captive; or because she is uninhibited. The influence of society, situation, and psychology on language is indirect: the role of social, rhetorical, and psychological differences is that they provide differential resources for talk. Social, psychological, and rhetorical facts are mediated by the individual, who selects and combines linguistic resources available in his or her environment to create a voice, a voice with which not just to refer to the world or relate to others, but a voice with which to be human.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Judith Mattson Bean and A. L. Becker for helpful critiques of a draft of this essay. I have expanded upon the discussion in this essay in chapter 2 of Johnstone 1996.

2. The name has been partly changed, in case Mrs. "Blair's" family might object to its use. Mattie herself very much wanted her story identified with her name, so I have kept that part of it.

3. Not being able to tell the conventional from the idiosyncratic, the mundane from the creative, is both an advantage and a disadvantage for the linguistic outsider. It means extra work for the fieldworker—I would never have been able to talk about Mrs. Blair's story without lots of research into African-American language and ways of speaking—but it also brings extra opportunities to notice differences and wonder about them.

4. The specific tragic genre I have in mind here is Greek tragedy of the sort described by Aristotle in the Poetics. It is a kind of tragedy that crucially involves predestination and fatal god-given character flaws.