



The Concept of Tragedy

“The unwilling acceptance of heroic imperfection”

Definition of Tragedy

A story that presents courageous individuals who confront powerful forces within or outside themselves with a dignity that reveals the breadth and depth of the human spirit in the face of failure, defeat, and even death. Tragedies recount an individual’s downfall; they usually being high and end low.

The Classical Definition of Tragedy

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.), in his *Poetics* defined *tragedy* on the basis of the plays contemporary to him. His definition has generated countless variations, qualifications, and interpretations, but we still derive our literary understanding of this term from him.

From *The Poetics* of Aristotle:

“Tragedy is an imitation of life, of events terrible and pitiful. The effect of tragedy is greatest when the events come on us by surprise, and is heightened when they follow as cause and effect. The elements of the plot which lead to vivid tragedy are reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*), a change by which the action veers around to its opposite (*irony*); recognition (*anagnorisis*) a change from ignorance to knowledge; and the tragic incident, such as a death on stage. The character in the tragedy should be a man of noble means whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty (*tragic flaw, hamartia*). The downfall of a virtuous man merely shocks us; the downfall of a villain does not inspire pity or fear. Pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune; fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. The aroused and released pity and fear leads to a cleansing or purifying of the spirit (*catharsis*) and a clearer understanding of tragic example of the weaknesses and strengths of man.”

Understanding the Tragic Genre: The Tragic Hero

The protagonist of a Greek tragedy is someone regarded as extraordinary rather than typical: a great man or woman brought from happiness to agony. The character’s stature is important because it makes his or her fall all the more terrifying. The protagonist also carries mythic significance for the audience. Oedipus, for example, is not only a human being but also a legendary figure from a distant, revered past. We must remember that much has occurred before the play begins.

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In addition, Greek tragedy tends to be public rather than private. The fate of the community—the state—is often linked with that of the protagonist, as when Thebes suffers a plague as a result of Oedipus’s mistaken actions.

The protagonist of classical Greek tragedies (and of those of Shakespeare) are often rulers of noble birth who represent the monarchical values of their period, but in modern tragedies the protagonists are more likely to reflect democratic values that make it possible for anyone to be a suitable subject (e.g. Willy Loman, Jay Gatsby). What is finally important is not so much the protagonist’s social

stature as the greatness of character that steadfastly confronts suffering, whether it comes from supernatural, social, or psychological forces. Although Greek tragic heroes were aristocrats, the nobility of their characters was more significant than their inherited titles and privileges.

The protagonist's eminence and determination to complete some task or goal make him or her admirable in Greek tragedy, but that does not free the protagonist from what Aristotle describe as "some error or frailty" that brings about his or her misfortune. The term Aristotle used for his weakness is **hamartia**. This word has frequently been interpreted to mean that the protagonist's fall is the result of an internal **tragic flaw**, such as an excess of pride, ambition, passion, or some other character trait that leads directly to disaster.

Sometimes, however, misfortunes are not the result of a character flaw but of misunderstood events that overtake and thwart the protagonist's best intentions. Thus, virtue can lead to tragedy, too. *Hamartia* has also been interpreted to mean "wrong act"—a mistake based not on a personal failure but on circumstances outside the protagonist's personality and control. Many readers find that a combination of these two interpretations sheds the most light on the causes of the tragic protagonist's fall. Both internal and external forces can lead to downfall because the protagonist's personality may determine crucial judgements that result in mistaken actions.

However the idea of tragic flaw is understood, it is best not to use it as a means of reducing the qualities of a complex character to an adjective or two. While we might be tempted to label Oedipus as being guilty of "overweening pride" (the Greek term for which is **hubris**), the protagonists of tragedies require more careful consideration than a simplistic label can provide.

Whatever the causes of the tragic protagonist's downfall, he or she accepts responsibility for it. Hence, even in his or her encounter with failure (and often death) the tragic protagonist displays greatness of character. Perhaps it is the witnessing of his greatness, which seems both to accept and to transcend human limitations, that makes audiences feel relief rather than hopelessness at the end of a tragedy. Aristotle described this response as **catharsis**, or purgation of the emotions of "pity and fear." We are faced with the protagonist's misfortune, which often seems out of

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proportion to his or her actions, and so we are likely to feel compassionate pity. Simultaneously, we may experience fear because the failure of the protagonist, who is so great in stature and power, is a frightening reminding of our own vulnerabilities. Ultimately, however, both these negative emotions are purged because the tragic protagonist's suffering is an affirmation of human values—even if they are no always triumphant—rather than a despairing denial of them.

Nevertheless, tragedies are disturbing. Instead of coming away with the reassurance of a happy ending, we must take solace in the insight produced by the hero's suffering. And just as our expectations are changed, so are the protagonist's. Aristotle described the moment in the plot when this change occurs as a **reversal** (*peripeteia*), the point when the hero's fortunes turn in an unexpected direction. He more specifically defined this term as an action performed by a character that has the opposite of its intended effect. In *Oedipus*, this moment



Oedipus defeats the Sphinx

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occurs when the messenger attempts to relieve Oedipus's anxieties about his relationship to his father and mother. Instead, the messenger reveals previously unknown information that eventually results in a **recognition**



***Oedipus:
Blind and Broken***

(**anagnorisis**); Oedipus discovers the terrible truth that he has killed his father and married his mother.

Tragedy is typically filled with ironies because there are so many moments in the plot when what seems to be turns out radically different what actually is. Because of this, a particular form of irony called **dramatic irony** is also known as **tragic irony**. In dramatic irony, the meaning of a character's words or actions is understood by the audience but not by the character. Audience of Greek tragedy shared with the playwrights a knowledge of the stories on which many tragic plots were based. Consequently, they frequently were aware of what was going to happen before the characters were. When Oedipus declares that he will seek out the person responsible for the plague that ravishes his city, the audience already knows that the person Oedipus pursues is himself.

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Traits of the Tragic Hero

- Part of high-class/prominent position
- Experiences a fall
- Faces struggle beyond his control
- Excites pity and fear from audience (does possess goodness)—*catharsis*
- Reversal of fortune
- Struggles with internal conflict
- Struggles with external conflict
- Pain (or death) results from struggle
- Tragedy due to an inherent flaw—*hamartia*
- Tragedy involves a moral dilemma which must be resolved
- Hero might have admirable virtues, but also possesses weaknesses
- Tragic hero's judgment and emotions are not perfect
- It is the *tragic flaw* that unites them with the rest of humanity

Tragedy and *Oedipus the King*

As we said earlier, two forces seem equally powerful in classical tragedy: the tragic hero's tragic flaw (or *hamartia*) and fate. In *Oedipus*, the hero seems to be more a pawn of Fate. Although Oedipus does everything in his power to prevent the fatal prophesy from coming to pass, it is in the very act of trying to avoid destiny that the prophesy is fulfilled

Oedipus the King is widely recognized as the greatest of the surviving Greek tragedies. The play has absorbed readers for centuries because Oedipus's character—his intelligence, confidence, rashness, and suffering—represents powers and limitations that are both exhilarating and chastening.

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Although no reader or viewer is likely to identify with Oedipus's extreme circumstances, anyone can appreciate his heroic efforts to find the truth about himself. In that sense, he is one of us—at our best.

Tragedy and Us

Everyday, we are confronted with tragedy; a child is killed in a car accident, a natural disaster claims many innocent lives. But in viewing ourselves as an ongoing tragedy, we learn much about our own frailties and potential possibilities.

In his essay, "Tragedy and the Common Man" Arthur Miller writes an answer for tragedy in the modern period. Here are a few points from the essay.

1. Tragic feeling is evoked whenever we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life to attain one thing—his sense of personal dignity.
2. The underlying struggle is that of the individual's attempt to gain his "rightful" position in society.
3. Tragedy is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly.

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4. The tragic flaw need be nothing more than the inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity. Only those who are willing to accept their lot without retaliation are flawless.
5. All of this can relate to us.
6. Rank/nobility is not important. The quality in tragedy that affects the reader is the underlying fear of being displaced—the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world. It is the common man who knows this fear best.
7. Tragedy is not pessimistic—the enlightenment of tragedy consists of the discovery of moral law. It demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity.
8. The possibility of victory must be in tragedy. It is a balance between what is possible and what is impossible. Through these stories of tragedy lies the belief of the perfectibility of humanity—the heart and spirit of the average man.

Assignment: Group Essay

In groups of three or four, consider your assigned quotation and, collectively, pool together ideas to form an opinion. Your response should be 2-4 pages in length (500-1000 words), properly formatted, and carefully argued.

- Be prepared to present these ideas to the class.
 - Be sure to define any unfamiliar terms or concepts.
 - Be sure to include specific references to support your position.
1. “Oedipus’ fall from the place of highest honour to that of an outcast demonstrates the uncertainty of human destiny and a central theme in the play.” Discuss with appropriate references to the play.
 2. “The majority of the play concentrates on Oedipus as the ruler of Thebes, but the resolution shows him as a man and a father. Intense pathos is created by this change and the audience may feel for Oedipus the outcast as it never could for Oedipus the self-righteous ruler in the opening scenes.” Discuss with appropriate references to the play.
 3. “A major theme in the play is man’s limitation in controlling his fate. Implied is that man must submit to fate and that in struggling to avoid it, he only becomes more entangled. There is obviously an unknowable outside force at work.” Discuss with appropriate references to the play.
 4. “Oedipus as a scapegoat is a visible theme in the play. The city of Thebes will be saved if one guilty man can be found and punished. Oedipus, in a sense, takes the sins of the city upon himself, and in his punishment, lies the salvation of others.” Discuss with appropriate references to the play.
 5. In *Oedipus the King*, “the audience is put into the position of the gods, and is able to see the struggles, hopes, and fears of the characters against a backdrop of truth—past, present, and future.” Discuss with appropriate references to the play.
 6. Discuss the ancient philosophy of the golden mean, “Nothing in excess.” In what manner does this play illustrate the wisdom of this aphorism? Discuss with appropriate references to the play.