

Definition of Tragedy: “Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions. . . . Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, **Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody.**”



Tragedy is the “imitation of an action” (*mimesis*) according to “the law of probability or necessity.”

Aristotle indicates that the medium of tragedy is drama, not narrative; tragedy “shows” rather than “tells.” According to Aristotle, tragedy is higher and more philosophical than history because history simply relates what *has* happened while tragedy dramatizes what *may* happen, “what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity.” History thus deals with the particular, and tragedy with the universal. Events that have happened may be due to accident or coincidence; they may be particular to a specific situation and not be part of a clear cause-and-effect chain. Therefore they have

little relevance for others. Tragedy, however, is rooted in the fundamental order of the universe; it creates a cause-and-effect chain that clearly reveals what *may* happen at any time or place because that is the way the world operates. Tragedy therefore arouses not only pity but also fear, because the audience can envision themselves within this cause-and-effect chain



Plot is the “first principle,” the most important feature of tragedy. Aristotle defines plot as “the arrangement of the incidents”: i.e., not the story itself but the way the incidents are presented to the audience, the structure of the play. According to Aristotle, tragedies where the outcome depends on a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain of actions are superior to those that depend primarily on the character and personality of the protagonist. The plot must be “a whole,” with a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning, called by modern critics the **incentive moment**, must start the cause-and-effect chain but not be dependent on anything outside the compass of the play (i.e., its causes are downplayed but its effects are stressed). The middle, or **climax**, must be caused by earlier incidents and itself cause the incidents that follow it (i.e., its causes and effects

are stressed). The end, or **resolution**, must be caused by the preceding events but not lead to other incidents outside the compass of the play (i.e., its causes are stressed but its effects downplayed); the end should therefore solve or resolve the problem created during the incentive moment. Aristotle calls the cause-and-effect chain leading from the incentive moment to the climax the “tying up” (*desis*), in modern terminology the **complication**. He therefore terms the more rapid cause-and-effect chain from the climax to the resolution the “unravelling” (*lusis*), in modern terminology the **dénouement**.

1. The plot must be “complete,” having “unity of action.” By this Aristotle means that the plot must be structurally self-contained, with the incidents bound together by internal necessity, each action leading inevitably to the next with no outside intervention. According to Aristotle, the worst kinds of plots are “‘episodic,’ in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence”; the only thing that ties together the events in such a plot is the fact that they happen to the same person. Playwrights should exclude coincidences from their plots; if some coincidence is required, it should “have an air of design,” i.e., seem to have a fated connection to the events of the play.

Similarly, the poet should exclude the irrational or at least keep it “outside the scope of the tragedy,” i.e., reported rather than dramatized. While the poet cannot change the myths that are the basis of his plots, he “ought to show invention of his own and skillfully handle the traditional materials” to create unity of action in his plot. The plot must be “of a certain magnitude,” both quantitatively (length, complexity) and qualitatively (“seriousness” and universal significance). Aristotle argues that plots should not be too brief; the more incidents and themes that the playwright can bring together in an organic unity, the greater the artistic value and richness of the play. Also, the more universal and significant the meaning of the play, the more the playwright can catch and hold the emotions of the audience, the better the play will be.

2. The plot may be either simple or complex, although complex is better. Simple plots have only a “change of fortune” (*catastrophe*). Complex plots have both “reversal of intention” (*peripeteia*) and “recognition” (*anagnorisis*) connected with the catastrophe. Both *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* turn upon surprise. Aristotle explains that a *peripeteia* occurs when a character produces an effect opposite to that

which he intended to produce, while an *anagnorisis* “is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined for good or bad fortune.” He argues that the best plots combine these two as part of their cause-and-effect chain (i.e., the *peripeteia* leads directly to the *anagnorisis*); this in turn creates the *catastrophe*, leading to the final “scene of suffering.”



Character has the second place in importance. In a perfect tragedy, character will support plot, i.e., personal motivations will be intricately connected parts of the cause-and-effect chain of actions producing pity and fear in the audience. The protagonist should be renowned and prosperous, so his change of fortune can be from good to bad. This change “should come about as the result, not of vice, but of some great error or frailty in a character.” Such a plot is most likely to generate pity and fear in the audience, for “pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.” The term Aristotle uses here, *hamartia*, often translated “tragic flaw,” has been the subject of much debate. The meaning of the Greek word is closer to “mistake” than to “flaw,” and I believe it is best interpreted in the context of what Aristotle has to

say about plot and “the law or probability or necessity.” In the ideal tragedy, claims Aristotle, the protagonist will mistakenly bring about his own downfall—not because he is sinful or morally weak, but because he does not know enough. The role of the *hamartia* in tragedy comes not from its moral status but from the inevitability of its consequences. Hence the *peripeteia* is really one or more self-destructive actions taken in blindness, leading to results diametrically opposed to those that were intended (often termed **tragic irony**), and the *anagnorisis* is the gaining of the essential knowledge that was previously lacking. Characters in tragedy should have the following qualities:

1. “good or fine.” Aristotle relates this quality to moral purpose and says it is relative to class: “Even a woman may be good, and also a slave, though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless.”
2. “fitness of character” (true to type); e.g. valor is appropriate for a warrior but not for a woman.
3. “true to life” (realistic)
4. “consistency” (true to themselves). Once a character's personality and motivations are established, these should continue throughout the play.

5. “necessary or probable.” Characters must be logically constructed according to “the law of probability or necessity” that governs the actions of the play.
6. “true to life and yet more beautiful” (idealized, ennobled).



Thought is third in importance, and is found “where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated.” Aristotle says little about thought, and most of what he has to say is associated with how speeches should reveal character. However, we may assume that this category would also include what we call the **themes** of a play.



Diction is fourth, and is “the expression of the meaning in words” which are proper and appropriate to the plot, characters, and end of the tragedy. In this category, Aristotle discusses the stylistic elements of tragedy; he is particularly interested in metaphors: “But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor; . . . it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances.”



Song, or melody, is fifth, and is the musical element of the chorus. Aristotle argues that the Chorus should be fully integrated into the play like an actor; choral odes should not be “mere interludes,” but should contribute to the unity of the plot.



Spectacle is last, for it is least connected with literature; “the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.” Although Aristotle recognizes the emotional attraction of spectacle, he argues that superior poets rely on the inner structure of the play rather than spectacle to arouse pity and fear; those who rely heavily on spectacle “create a sense, not of the terrible, but only of the monstrous.”



The end of the tragedy is a *katharsis* (purgation, cleansing) of the tragic emotions of pity and fear. *Katharsis* is another Aristotelian term that has generated considerable debate. The word means “purging,” and Aristotle seems to be employing a medical metaphor—tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear in order to purge away their excess, to reduce these passions to a healthy, balanced

proportion. Aristotle also talks of the “pleasure” that is proper to tragedy, apparently meaning the aesthetic pleasure one gets from contemplating the pity and fear that are aroused through an intricately constructed work of art.

We might profitably compare this view of Aristotle with that expressed by Susanne Langer in our first reading (“Expressiveness in Art,” excerpt from *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures*, New York, Scribner, 1957):

A work of art presents feeling (in the broad sense I mentioned before, as everything that can be felt) for our contemplation, making it visible or audible or in some way perceivable through a symbol, not inferable from a symptom. Artistic form is congruent with the dynamic forms of our direct sensuous, mental, and emotional life; works of art . . . are images of feeling, that formulate it for our cognition. What is artistically good is whatever articulates and presents feeling for our understanding. (661-62)

~~ Aristotle's Tragic Hero ~~

It's helpful to know that Aristotle believed that art should be an "imitation" of life. It should hold a mirror up to life. It should be "truthful," or "true to

life." He went on to say this about tragedy, in the excerpt in the Bedford text.

He makes two points straight away:

- The finest tragedy is complex rather than simple
- Tragedy is a "representation of terrible and piteous events"

If a play is complex rather than simple, it will challenge its viewers in some way. Perhaps Aristotle felt that "simple" plays were a waste of time, or an insult to his intelligence. When he says that tragedy should represent terrible and piteous events, he has something specific in mind, which he explains elsewhere in the Poetics. Why is it not a waste of time to view a play? Because the play, through its arousal of pity and fear, leads its audience to an experience he called "catharsis," a healthy calling forth and then purging of emotion, that "good cry" that makes you stronger somehow.

Aristotle, next, indicates the kind of hero who should serve as the main character, but first, he tells us the kind of hero who does not qualify for service as a "main character," or "tragic hero." He tells us that, for tragedy, we can't have-

- A good man falling from happiness to misfortune (this will only inspire revulsion, not pity or fear)
- An evil man rising from ill fortune to prosperity (that won't inspire sympathy, so it can't arouse pity or fear)
- A wicked man falling from prosperity into misfortune (that might inspire sympathy, but not pity or fear, because (1) pity can't be felt for a person whose misfortune is deserved, and (2) if we don't identify with the character's wickedness, we won't be afraid of his fate falling on us).

The appropriate tragic hero, then, is the character who sits between these extremes. He's not "preeminent in virtue and justice," but on the other hand, he isn't guilty of "vice or depravity," just some "mistake." He is a person of some importance, from a "highly renowned and prosperous place," a king, like Oedipus.

The best tragic plot, he concludes, moves the hero from prosperity to misfortune, occasioned not by depravity, but by some great mistake he makes.

In an editorial aside, Aristotle puts in a good word for the poet/dramatist Euripides, who has apparently taken some heat from his critics for writing too many unhappy endings. But Aristotle insists that this is how

it should be. He praises Euripides (his most famous play is Medea), calling him the "most tragic of the poets," and insists that tragedy is superior to comedy.

Aristotle spends some time elaborating what he considers the essential qualities of the tragic hero. He explains that "with regard to the characters there are four things to aim at":

- Goodness. They should reveal through speech and action what their moral choices are, and a "good character will be one whose choices are good." Any "class of person" may be portrayed as "good"- even women and slaves, though on the whole women are "inferior" and slaves are "utterly base."
- Appropriateness. Men can be domineering or "manly" (what does he really mean here, I wonder?), but for a woman to appear formidable would be inappropriate.
- Lifelike. He never explains this one. What do you think he means? How is "lifelike" slightly different from "appropriate" and "good"? I think he might mean "believable" or "true to life." Maybe he means the tragic hero should not be godlike, not like the mythical heroes of legend, but like real human beings.

- Consistency. Once a character is established as having certain traits, these shouldn't suddenly change.

Oedipus, as a character, meets Aristotle's requirements very well:

- Goodness: He has compassion; he seeks the truth; he wants to be a savior to the people-BUT he's not entirely good (that would be repulsive, remember). He also is very self-interested, not entirely altruistic. He wants to find the killer, not just to fulfill the oracle (he's already shown a history of ignoring those), but because the killer may come after him next!
- Appropriateness: Oedipus shows the appropriate stateliness and intelligence you would expect from the ruler of a great city.
- Lifelike: Oedipus is obviously human. He has human strengths and weaknesses. There's nothing supernatural about him.
- Consistency: Oedipus' character traits, revealed throughout the play, remain consistent. He's a truth-seeker, a riddle solver; he's questing after self-knowledge; he wants to be a savior; he's also very proud, a little arrogant, and he has a real temper.

CONCERNING PLOT

In constructing the plot, characters should say and do only what seems probable and reasonable given the events of the play. The outcome of the action should arise naturally from the plot itself and not be contrived by any exterior devices like "from the machine" (Aristotle is referring a plot device known as "deus ex machina"-a big contraption that many dramatists of the time resorted to. It was a big platform that held the character of a god who would come and fix everything when humans had entangled themselves so badly they couldn't extract themselves without help). The god in the machine would deliver justice and put things right.

ONE FINAL NOTE...

Aristotle reminds us that tragedy is an imitation of persons who are "better than the average." Therefore, the tragic hero should appear, like he would in a portrait by the best portrait-painter, like himself, but handsomer. In developing his character, any little flaws should be rubbed away. A little airbrushing never hurt anyone's public appeal....

ARISTOTLE AND OEDIPUS

What a coincidence that Oedipus happens to fit each and every description that Aristotle offers. Is it a coincidence? Not at all. In fact, this play served as

Aristotle's model for what constitutes great tragedy. His theory is retrofitted to incorporate every aspect of Sophocles' play. The artist went there intuitively; the critic followed.