

Tragedy

(Simplified from *A Glossary of Literary Terms*)

Almost every serious discussion of *tragedy* begins with Aristotle's book, the *Poetics*, written in the 4th century BC. Aristotle based his ideas only on the tragedies he knew: plays by three Greek writers: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Even though tragedy has changed enormously since then, Aristotle's core ideas are still the essential starting point for understanding the form.

Aristotle's definition

Aristotle said tragedy imitates (represents) a serious, complete action, and it creates two specific emotions in the audience: pity and fear. This combination leads to something Aristotle called *catharsis*: a Greek word meaning something like "purging" or "cleansing." Here's the puzzle Aristotle was trying to solve: why does watching terrible, sad events on stage often leave an audience feeling relieved, even uplifted, rather than simply depressed? Catharsis is his attempt to explain this strange but very real effect.

The tragic hero

Aristotle argued that the ideal tragic hero should be neither completely good nor completely bad. Why does this matter? Think about it from the audience's point of view: If the hero were completely evil, we wouldn't feel much pity when bad things happen to them, we might even think they deserve it. If the hero were completely perfect and good, their downfall would feel simply unfair and upsetting, without giving us the deeper, more complex response tragedy aims for.

So the ideal hero should be a mixture of both, and ideally, of higher-than-average moral character, so that we feel their fall is genuinely tragic (worse than they deserve), rather than simply deserved punishment.

The hero's downfall usually comes from *hamartia*, a Greek word meaning an error or mistake in judgment. You'll often see this loosely translated as "*tragic flaw*," but that translation can be a little misleading, it's not necessarily a fixed personality defect, but often a specific mistaken choice the character makes. One especially common form of hamartia is *hubris*: excessive pride or overconfidence, which leads a character to ignore warnings, defy the gods, or break an important moral law.

The structure of a tragic plot

Aristotle describes the ideal tragic plot as moving through:

I. Complication: the buildup of tension and conflict

- II. Anagnorisis: a moment of discovery, where the hero learns some crucial truth they didn't know before
- III. Peripeteia: a sudden reversal of fortune, flipping the hero from happiness into disaster

A classic example: Sophocles's play *Oedipus the King* is the example Aristotle almost certainly had in mind, and it's still the clearest illustration of these ideas. Oedipus is searching for the murderer of the previous king, a murderer whose crime has brought a terrible plague on the city of Thebes. As the play unfolds, Oedipus discovers, to his horror, that he himself is the murderer he has been hunting, and that the man he killed years earlier, without knowing who he was, was his own father. This discovery (anagnorisis) triggers his reversal of fortune (peripeteia), from confident king to a broken, self-blinded exile. We feel pity because his suffering seems far worse than what an essentially decent man deserves. We feel fear because we recognize that similar terrible mistakes, made without full knowledge, could happen to any of us.

How tragedy changed across history

In the Middle Ages, writers had no direct knowledge of Aristotle or Greek tragedy. "Tragedy" simply meant a story of someone falling from high status into misery, caused by the unpredictable turning of "Fortune's wheel", bad luck, essentially, rather than a personal moral mistake.

In Elizabethan England (Shakespeare's time), tragedy was heavily influenced by the ancient Roman writer Seneca, whose plays were full of murder, ghosts, and revenge. This influence led to a hugely popular genre called revenge tragedy, full of onstage violence, designed to thrill audiences. Thomas Kyd's play *The Spanish Tragedy* (1586) established this style, and it eventually led to one of the greatest tragedies ever written: *Hamlet*. Shakespeare often broke Aristotle's rules. For example, in *Macbeth*, the hero doesn't fall because of an innocent mistake, he knowingly chooses to do evil, murdering his way to power. Because of this, *Macbeth* deviates from Aristotle's model of an essentially good person undone by a single error. Shakespeare's tragedies also frequently include comic relief: funny scenes or characters mixed into an otherwise serious, tragic play, something Aristotle's strict theory doesn't really account for.

In the 1700s, writers began creating domestic or bourgeois tragedy, focused on ordinary, middle-class people rather than kings and nobles. This was a big shift from the earlier assumption that tragic heroes needed to be people of high social rank.

In modern times, tragedy has kept evolving. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is a famous modern tragedy about *Willy Loman*, an ordinary, struggling salesman destroyed by the false promises of a materialistic, commercial society.

Instead of the classic Aristotelian combination of "pity and fear," many readers feel something closer to compassion and sad recognition watching Willy's downfall, showing how the emotional effect of tragedy has shifted as the genre has evolved to reflect modern life.