

Greek Theory of Tragedy: Aristotle's Poetics

The classic discussion of Greek tragedy is Aristotle's *Poetics*. He defines tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious and also as having magnitude, complete in itself." He continues, "Tragedy is a form of drama exciting the emotions of pity and fear. Its action should be single and complete, presenting a reversal of fortune, involving persons renowned and of superior attainments, and it should be written in poetry embellished with every kind of artistic expression." The writer presents "incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to interpret its catharsis of such of such emotions" (by *catharsis*, Aristotle means a purging or sweeping away of the pity and fear aroused by the tragic action).

The basic difference Aristotle draws between tragedy and other genres, such as comedy and the epic, is the "tragic pleasure of pity and fear" the audience feel watching a tragedy. In order for the tragic hero to arouse these feelings in the audience, he cannot be either all good or all evil but must be someone the audience can identify with; however, if he is superior in some way(s), the tragic pleasure is intensified. His disastrous end results from a mistaken action, which in turn arises from a tragic flaw or from a tragic error in judgment. Often the tragic flaw is *hubris*, an excessive pride that causes the hero to ignore a divine warning or to break a moral law. It has been suggested that because the tragic hero's suffering is greater than his offense, the audience feels pity; because the audience members perceive that they could behave similarly, they feel pity.

Elizabethan and Shakespearean Tragedy

A distinctly English form of tragedy begins with the Elizabethans. The translation of Seneca and the reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* were major influences. Many critics and playwrights, such as Ben Jonson, insisted on observing the classical unities of action, time and place (the action should be one whole and take place in one day and in one place). However, it was romantic tragedy, which Shakespeare wrote in *Richard II*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*, which prevailed. Romantic tragedy disregarded the unities (as in the use of subplots), mixed tragedy and comedy, and emphasized action, spectacle, and--increasingly--sensation. Shakespeare violated the unities in these ways and also in mixing poetry and prose and using the device of a play-within-a-play, as in *Hamlet*. The Elizabethans and their Jacobean successors acted on stage the violence that the Greek dramatists reported. The Elizabethan and later the Jacobean playwright had a diverse audience to please, ranging from Queen Elizabeth and King James I and their courtiers to the lowest classes.

Christopher Marlowe's tragedies showed the resources of the English language with his magnificent blank verse, as in the *Tragedy of Dr. Faustus*, and the powerful effects that could be achieved by focusing on a towering protagonist, as in *Tamburlaine*. In Elizabethan tragedy, the individual leads to violence and conflict. A distinctly non-Aristotelian form of tragedy developed during this period was the tragicomedy. In a tragicomedy, the action and subject matter seem to require a tragic ending, but it is avoided by a reversal which leads to a happy ending; sometimes the tragicomedy alternates serious and comic actions throughout the play. Because it blends tragedy and comedy, the tragicomedy is sometimes referred to as a "mixed" kind.

The Problem Play or Drama of Ideas

The problem play or play of ideas usually has a tragic ending. The driving force behind the play is the exploration of some social problem, like alcoholism or prostitution; the characters are used as examples of the general problem. Frequently the playwright views the problem and its solution in a way that defies or rejects the conventional view; not surprisingly, some problem plays have aroused anger and controversy in audiences and critics. Henrik Ibsen, who helped to revive tragedy from its artistic decline in the nineteenth century, wrote problem plays. *A Doll's House*, for example, shows the exploitation and denigration of middle

class women by society and in marriage. The tragedy frequently springs from the individual's conflict with the laws, values, traditions, and representatives of society.

Tragedy: An Overview

Tragedy usually focuses on figures of stature whose fall implicates others--a family, an entire group, or even a whole society--and typically the tragic protagonist becomes isolated from his or her society (Phedre's "outcast and fugitive from all" would suit Lear and Hamlet as well).

In tragedy, life goes on; in comedy, life goes onward and upward. In the tragic vision, the possibility of a happy ending is unrealized, although it is sometimes suggested, as when Lear is briefly reconciled to Cordelia. When tragedy pauses to look at comedy, it views such a happy ending as an aborted or by-passed possibility. At best, it acknowledges "what might have been" as an ironic way of magnifying "tragic waste." Tragedy tends to exclude comedy. In the tragic vision, something or someone dies or lapses into a winter of discontent.

The "Tragic Vision"

In tragedy, there seems to be a mix of seven interrelated elements that help to establish what we may call the "Tragic Vision":

- The conclusion is catastrophic.
- The catastrophic conclusion will seem inevitable.
- It occurs, ultimately, because of the human limitations of the protagonist.
- The protagonist suffers terribly.
- The protagonist's suffering often seems disproportionate to his or her culpability.
- Yet the suffering is usually redemptive, bringing out the noblest of human capacities for learning.
- The suffering is also redemptive in bringing out the capacity for accepting moral responsibility.

• The Catastrophic Conclusion

In tragedy, unlike comedy, the denouement tends to be catastrophic; it is perceived as the concluding phase of a downward movement. In comedy, the change of fortune is upward; the happy ending prevails (more desirable than true, says Northrop Frye in the *Anatomy of Criticism*), as obstacles are dispelled and the hero and/or heroine are happily incorporated into society or form the nucleus of a new and better society. In tragedy, there is the unhappy ending--the hero's or heroine's fall from fortune and consequent isolation from society, often ending in death.

• The Sense of Inevitability

To the audience of a tragedy, the catastrophe will seem, finally, to be inevitable. Although tragedy can not simply be identified with uncontrollable disasters, such as an incurable disease or an earthquake, still there is the feeling that the protagonist is inevitably caught by operating forces which are beyond his control (sometimes like destiny, visible only in their effects). Whether grounded in fate or nemesis, accident or chance, or in a causal sequence set going through some action or decision initiated by the tragic protagonist himself or herself, the operating forces assume the function of a distant and impersonal power.

• Human Limitation, Suffering, and Disproportion

Ultimately, perhaps, all the instances that we find in tragedy of powerlessness, of undeniable human limitations, derive from the tragic perception of human existence itself, which seems, at least in part, to be terrifyingly vulnerable, precarious, and problematic. And it is precisely because of these human limitations

that suffering also becomes basic to the tragic vision. Tragedy typically presents situations that emphasize vulnerability, situations in which both physical and spiritual security and comforts are undermined, and in which the characters are pressed to the utmost limits--overwhelming odds, impossible choices, demonic forces within or without (or both). Against the tragic protagonist are the powers that be, whether human or divine, governed by fate or chance, fortune or accident, necessity or circumstance, or any combination of these. The more elevated, the more apparently secure and privileged the character's initial situation, the greater is our sense of the fall, of the radical change of fortune undergone, and the greater our sense of his or her suffering. Tragedy testifies to suffering as an enduring, often inexplicable force in human life.

In the suffering of the protagonists, there is frequently, something disproportionate. Even to the extent that there is some human cause, the eventual consequences may seem too severe. In Lear's case, we may or may not agree that he is "more sinned against than sinning," but Cordelia certainly is. This inequity is particularly profound for some of those who surround the protagonists, those who seem to bear (at worst) minor guilt, the so-called "tragic victims."

• **The Learning Process and Acceptance of Moral Responsibility**

Despite the inevitable catastrophe, the human limitation, the disproportionate suffering, the tragic vision also implies that suffering can call forth human potentialities, can clarify human capacities, and that often there is a learning process that the direct experience of suffering engenders--Lear and Phedre are transformed by it. Gloucester may think that we are to the gods as flies to wanton boys--"they kill us for their sport"--but such a conception of brutal slaughter is alien to the tragic vision. Indeed, tragedy provides a complex view of human heroism, a riddle mixed of glory and jest, nobility and irony. The madness that is wiser than sanity, the blind who see more truly than the physically sighted, are recurring metaphors for the paradox of tragedy, which shows us human situations of pitiful and fearful proportions, but also of extraordinary achievement.

For tragedy presents not only human weakness and precarious security and liability to suffering, but also its nobility and greatness. Tragedies do not occur to puppets. While the "tragic victim" is one of the recurring character types of tragedy (Cordelia, Ophelia, Desdemona, Andromaque, Hippolytus, and even, perhaps, Richard II and Phedre), tragic protagonists more frequently have an active role, one which exposes not only their errors of judgment, their flaws, their own conscious or unwitting contribution to the tragic situation, but which also suggests their enormous potentialities to endure or survive or transcend suffering, to learn what "naked wretches" feel, and to attain a complex view of moral responsibility.

The terrifying difficulty of accepting moral responsibility is an issue in Hamlet as well as in Sophocles' *Antigone* or *Oedipus Tyrannus*. It is an issue in all tragedy, even when the moral status of the protagonist(s) is not admirable. Whatever Aristotle's *hamartia* is, it is not necessarily moral culpability, although it may be, as the case of Macbeth illustrates. Tragic vision insists upon man's responsibility for his actions. This is the essential element of the vision that permits us to deny access to its precincts to puppets, who, by definition, have neither free will nor ultimate responsibility for their existence. Tragedy acknowledges the occasional disproportion between human acts and their consequences, but imposes or accepts responsibility nevertheless. In this way, pain and fear are spiritualized as suffering, and, as Richard Sewall suggests in *The Vision of Tragedy*, the conflict of man and his "destiny" is elevated to ultimate magnitude.

One of the conventions discerned and analyzed by Aristotle was that the change of fortune, *peripety* or reversal, experienced by the tragic hero, should be accompanied by *anagnorisis* or *cognitio*, "discovery" or "recognition." The conditions and the degree of this discovery vary considerably. It may even be relatively absent from the protagonist's awareness, as we have noted. But it is almost always central to the audience's responses. In the school of suffering we are all students, witnessing, like Lear, essential, "unaccommodated" man, and we become caught up in an extended discovery, not only of human limitation, but also of human potentiality.