

What is a tragedy?

The term is broadly applied to literary, and especially to the dramatic representation of serious actions leading to a disastrous conclusion for the protagonist (the chief character). More detailed discussion on the genre of tragedy properly begins with Aristotle's classic analysis in the *Poetics* (4th century BC). Aristotle based his theory by reference to only examples available to him, the tragedies of Greek dramatists Such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. In the subsequent two thousand years and more, various new types of serious plots ending in a catastrophe have been developed- types that Aristotle had no way of foreseeing.

Aristotle defines tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself" in the medium of poetic language and in the manner of dramatic rather than of narrative presentation, involving "incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions.

Accordingly, Aristotle says that the **tragic hero** will evoke most effectively both our pity and terror if he is neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly bad but a mixture of both. Also, this tragic effect will be stronger if the hero is "better than we are" in the sense that he is of higher than ordinary moral worth. And the tragic downfall of the protagonist should come along because of his mistaken choice of action, to which he is led by his hamartia- his "error" or "mistake of judgment".

For instance, the tragic hero, like Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, moves us to pity, since he is not an evil man, his misfortune is greater than he deserves; but he moves us also to fear because we recognize similar possibilities of error in our own lesser and fallible selves.

Authors in the Middle Ages lacked direct knowledge either of classical tragedies or of Aristotle's poetics. Medieval tragedies are simply the story of a person of high status who, whether

deservedly or not, is brought from prosperity to wretchedness by an unpredictable turn of the wheel of fortune.

Elizabethan Tragedy

With the Elizabethan era came both the beginning and the acme of dramatic tragedy. The tragedies of the period owed much to the native religious dramas, the Miracle and Morality Plays, which had developed independently of classical influence, but with a crucial contribution from the Roman writer Seneca. Seneca's drama got to be widely known in England earlier than those of the Greek tragedians.

Seneca's tragedy was written to be recited rather than acted upon the stage. However, English playwrights took them to be performed on stage. They provided the model for an organized five-act play with a complex plot and an elaborately formal style of dialogue. *Gorboduc* (1562) by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton is considered to be the first English tragedy of the Elizabethan period. The Senecan tragedy led to the development of what came to be known as Revenge Tragedy or the Tragedy of blood.

Important Concepts/Events/Terms

Poetics: Aristotle's *Poetics* is the earliest surviving work of dramatic theory and the first extant philosophical treatise to focus on literary theory.

Hamartia: Also called **tragic flaw**, (hamartia from Greek *hamartanein*, "to err"), inherent defect or shortcoming in the hero of a tragedy, who is in other respects a superior being favoured by fortune.

The **Miracle play** had as its subject either a story from the bible, or else the life and martyrdom of a saint.

Morality plays were dramatized allegories of a representative Christian life in the plot form of a quest for salvation in which the crucial events are temptations, sinning and the climactic confrontation with death.

Revenge tragedy: This type of play derived from Seneca's favourite materials of murder, revenge, ghosts, mutilation and carnage. Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1586) established this popular form; its subject is murder and quest for vengeance.

Catharsis means the purification or purgation of the emotions (especially pity and fear) primarily through art. In criticism, Catharsis is a metaphor used by Aristotle in the *Poetics* to describe the effects of true tragedy on the spectator. The use is derived from the medical term *katharsis*, a Greek word which means "purgation" or "purification".