

## **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. [Click here for excerpts from Aristotle's \*Poetics\*.](#)

## **Medieval Tragedy and The Wheel of Fortune**

The medieval tragedy is a prose or poetic narrative, not a drama. Tragedy was perceived as a reversal of fortune, a fall from a high position. This view of tragedy derives from the Medieval concept of fortune, which was personified as Dame Fortune, a blindfolded woman who turned a wheel at whim; men were stationed at various places on the wheel--the top of the wheel represented the best fortune, being under the wheel the worst fortune. However, the wheel could turn suddenly and the man on top could suddenly be under the wheel, without warning.

## **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.

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