

Name: _____ Class: _____

On Tragedy

By Aristotle
c. 335 BCE

Aristotle (385 B.C.–322 B.C.) was an ancient Greek philosopher and scientist. A student of Plato and the teacher of Alexander the Great, Aristotle authored many influential works regarding the physical sciences, philosophy, literature, and politics. In this chapter from Poetics, Aristotle seeks to define “tragedy” as it relates to literature and human emotion. As you read, take notes on the different elements of what Aristotle considers to be an ideal tragedy and construct a working definition.

Chapter 13

- [1] As the sequel to what has already been said, we must proceed to consider what the poet should aim at, and what he should avoid, in constructing his plots; and by what means¹ the specific effect of Tragedy will be produced.

A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited² misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. There remains, then, the character between these two extremes — that of a man who is not eminently³ good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice⁴ or depravity,⁵ but by some error of judgement or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous — a personage like Oedipus,⁶ Thyestes,⁷ or other illustrious men of such families.



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1. action or system by which a result is brought about; a method
2. undeserved or undeserving
3. **Eminent (adjective):** famous, respected, and successful
4. **Vice (noun):** bad or immoral behavior or habits
5. an evil or immoral act; a state of moral corruption

A well-constructed plot should, therefore, be single in its issue, rather than double as some maintain. The change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad. It should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty, in a character either such as we have described, or better rather than worse. The practice of the stage bears out our view. At first the poets recounted any legend that came in their way. Now, the best tragedies are founded on the story of a few houses — on the fortunes of Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus,⁸ and those others who have done or suffered something terrible. A tragedy, then, to be perfect according to the rules of art, should be of this construction. Hence they are in error who censure Euripides just because he follows this principle in his plays, many of which end unhappily. It is, as we have said, the right ending. The best proof is that on the stage and in dramatic competition, such plays, if well worked out, are the most tragic in effect; and Euripides,⁹ faulty though he may be in the general management of his subject, yet is felt to be the most tragic of the poets.

In the second rank comes the kind of tragedy which some place first. Like the *Odyssey*, it has a double thread of plot, and also an opposite catastrophe¹⁰ for the good and for the bad. It is accounted the best because of the weakness of the spectators; for the poet is guided in what he writes by the wishes of his audience. The pleasure, however, thence derived is not the true tragic pleasure. It is proper rather to Comedy, where those who, in the piece, are the deadliest enemies — like Orestes and Aegisthus — quit the stage as friends at the close, and no one slays or is slain.

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6. Oedipus was a mythical Greek king. A tragic hero in mythology, Oedipus accidentally fulfilled the prophecy, despite his efforts not to, that he would end up killing his father and marrying his mother, thereby bringing disaster to his city and family. When the truth was discovered, his wife-mother hanged herself, and Oedipus gouged out his own eyes.
 7. Thyestes was son of the King of Olympia in Greek mythology. Thyestes and his brother, Atreus, were exiled by their father for having murdered their half-brother, Chrysippus, in their desire for the throne of Olympia.
 8. various tragic heroes of Greek mythology
 9. Euripides (c. 480-406 BC) was a writer of tragedy from Athens. Euripides is identified with theatrical innovations that have profoundly influenced drama down to modern times, especially in the representation of traditional, mythical heroes as ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. This new approach led him to pioneer developments that later writers adapted to comedy, some of which are characteristic of romance. Yet he also became, as Aristotle says, "the most tragic of poets," focusing on the inner lives and motives of his characters in a way previously unknown.
 10. This is a term used in drama to describe the ending or resolution of a narrative plot. It is used most frequently when referring to ancient or classical tragedies.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Summarize at least 3 elements of an ideal tragedy, as described by Aristotle.

2. How does paragraph 1 contribute to the development of ideas in the article/passage?
- A. It captures the reader’s attention by making the topic of the text seem relatable to the experience of the reader.
 - B. It summarizes the central idea of the text: that poets should avoid constructing complicated plot lines when crafting a work of tragedy.
 - C. It introduces the purpose of the subsequent paragraphs: to advise writers on the components of an ideal tragedy.
 - D. It summarizes central ideas relating to how poets construct plot as described in earlier parts of the book (not included in this excerpt).
3. PART A: What does the word “spectacle” most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 2?
- A. Tragic hardship or misfortune
 - B. Success as the result of deceit or foul play
 - C. A boring or mundane story
 - D. A dramatic scene often involving scandal
4. PART B: Which phrase from the paragraph best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. “change of fortune”
 - B. “prosperity to adversity”
 - C. “moves neither pity nor fear”
 - D. “merely shocks us”

5. Some literacy critics have defined tragedy as “the downfall of a hero.” Would Aristotle agree? How might he revise this definition?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Why do you think tragedy is a popular genre? Is tragedy entertaining? What benefit do people derive from watching the downfall of a tragic hero?
2. What is the significance of pity and fear in tragedy?
3. How does what Aristotle calls our “moral sense” play into the concept of tragedy?
4. Aristotle says that the tragic hero must be similar to the audience in order to evoke fear. How do we see ourselves in literary characters?