

Aristotle's Ideas About Tragedy

Aristotle was one of the greatest philosophers of Ancient Greece. A philosopher looks for ideal forms, and tries to explain the nature of reality. The search for ideal forms led Aristotle to explore many subjects. His analysis of the ideal form of tragic plays became a guideline for later playwrights in Western civilization. For centuries, European playwrights like William Shakespeare tried to write plays that would match the ideals of Aristotle's model.

Drama was not invented by Aristotle. In fact, he used examples from the works of famous Greek playwrights such as Sophocles to illustrate his main ideas. The Greeks believed that tragedy was the highest form of drama, and Aristotle's ideas about tragedy were based on this belief.

Aristotle's Definition of Tragedy.

"A tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language;... in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions."

1. "the imitation of an action that is *serious* and also, as having *magnitude, complete in itself*;"

This means that a good tragedy deals with one issue that is very "serious." You can't have a tragedy about something trivial like breaking a fingernail. "Magnitude" here means great importance. The issue has to be serious and very, very important. That's why a lot of tragedies deal with someone's death. "Complete in itself" means that the play must stick to the one issue; otherwise, the audience will get lost in the plot.

2. "*in appropriate and pleasurable language*:"

Ancient Greek tragedy had a chorus whose role was to comment on the action of the play. The chorus sometimes sang their part. Aristotle said that the language should be easy to listen to. It should have rhythm and also good harmony for the lines that were sung.

3. "*in a dramatic rather than narrative form*;"

To narrate a story is simply to tell the story, like telling a friend what happened over the weekend. In a play, the story must be dramatized or acted out.

4. "*with incidents arousing pity and fear*,"

In a tragedy, the events or episodes in the play should lead the audience to feel very sorry for the main character--the tragic hero. The audience should also feel afraid for the hero as he moves toward a destructive end.

5. "*wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions*."

As the play moves along, the events should build up the emotions of pity and fear. A catharsis is a purging, or cleansing of the emotions--a release of tension. In a tragedy, this is often a moment of revelation when the tragic hero "falls flat on his face," and the audience can finally "explode."

Aristotle's Elements of Tragedy

Aristotle said that tragedy has six main elements:

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| 1. Plot; | 2. Character; | 3. Thought; |
| 4. Diction; | 5. Melody; | 6. Spectacle. |

These will be described from least important to most important.

The last four elements (Thought, Diction, Melody, and Spectacle) are the least important, but Aristotle felt they must be done well for the play to succeed.

Thought is the power of saying whatever *can be said* and *should be said* at each moment of the plot. Do the lines spoken by the actors make sense? Are they saying what *should be said* at each particular moment in the play?

Diction is the actual composition of the lines that are recited. Thought deals with *what* is said, and diction deals with *how* it is said. There are many ways to say something. A good playwright composes lines that say something extremely well. In a good play, some lines are so well constructed that the audience can leave the play quoting the lines exactly.

Melody and **Spectacle** are accessories. The Greeks sometimes used musical accompaniment. Aristotle said the music (melody) has to blend in with the play appropriately. Spectacle refers to the staging of the play. Again, as with melody, the spectacle should be appropriate to the theme of the play.

Character

Character is the second most important element of tragedy. Each character has an essential quality or nature that is revealed in the plot. The moral purpose of each character must be clear to the audience. The characters should have four main qualities.

- No matter who they are (hero or slave), the characters must be good in some way.
- The characters should act appropriately for their gender and station in life.
- The characters have to have believable personalities.
- Each character must act consistently throughout the play. In other words, nothing should be done or said that could be seen as "acting out of character."

Plot

Aristotle felt that the action of the play (its plot) was the *most important* of the six elements. He said, "All human happiness or misery takes the form of action....Character gives us qualities, but it is *in our actions*--what we do--that we are happy or miserable."

- There must be **Unity of Plot**. This has already been described in the definition which talks about "one complete action." Any events or episodes must be necessary to the main issue and must also be probable or believable.

2. A good plot has *Peripety* or *Discovery*--sometimes both.

Peripety is the change from one state of things at the beginning of the play to the exact opposite state by the end of the play. This could be something like the change from being rich to being poor, or from being powerful to being powerless, or from being a ruler to being a beggar. The change that takes place in a tragedy should take the main character (and possibly other characters) from a state of happiness to a state of misery.

Discovery is a change from ignorance to knowledge. This often happens to the tragic hero who starts out "clueless" and slowly learns how he himself created the mess he ends up in at the end of the play.

3. Change by itself is not enough. The character involved in the change must have specific characteristics to arouse the tragic emotions of pity and fear. Therefore, Aristotle said that there are three forms of plot that should be avoided.

A. A totally good man must not pass from happiness to misery.

This will make the audience angry that bad things happened to him. They won't pity him so much as be angry *for* him.

B. A bad man must not pass from misery to happiness.

This won't appeal to the audience at all because they won't want to see evil rewarded.

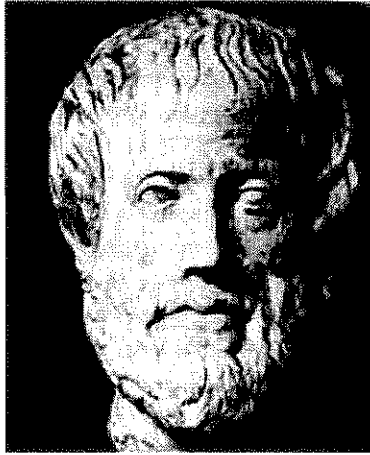
C. A bad man cannot pass from happiness to misery.

The audience won't feel sorry for him because they will believe he got what he deserved.

The true tragic hero cannot be too good or too bad, but he must end up in misery.

Aristotle concluded that the best tragedy centers on a basically good man who changes from happiness to misery because of *some great error*. For example, he might have a good quality, like pride, that gets out of hand.

4. The plot of a tragedy also involves some horrible or evil deed. The tragic hero either does it *consciously*, does it *out of ignorance*, or *mediates it* (makes it easy for the deed to happen). For the audience to be horrified by the evil deed, the evil has to be done to someone important to the tragic hero. If the hero kills his enemy, the deed won't seem so bad. On the other hand, if the hero kills someone he doesn't care about, the audience won't care much either. To make it *really horrible* for the audience, Aristotle suggested that the evil deed should be done to a *family member*.



Aristotle's ideas about tragedy were recorded in his book of literary theory titled *Poetics*. In it, he has a great deal to say about the structure, purpose, and intended effect of tragedy. His ideas have been adopted, disputed, expanded, and discussed for several centuries now.

The following is a summary of his basic ideas regarding the tragic hero:

1. The tragic hero is a character of noble stature and has greatness. This should be readily evident in the play. The character must occupy a "high" status position but must ALSO embody nobility and virtue as part of his/her innate character.
2. Though the tragic hero is pre-eminently great, he/she is not perfect. Otherwise, the rest of us--mere mortals--would be unable to identify with the tragic hero. We should see in him or her someone who is essentially like us, although perhaps elevated to a higher position in society.
3. The hero's downfall, therefore, is partially her/his own fault, the result of free choice, not of accident or villainy or some overriding, malignant fate. In fact, the tragedy is usually triggered by some error of judgment or some character flaw that contributes to the hero's lack of perfection noted above. This error of judgment or character flaw is known as *hamartia* and is usually translated as "tragic flaw" (although some scholars argue that this is a mistranslation). Often the character's *hamartia* involves *hubris* (which is defined as a sort of arrogant pride or over-confidence).
4. The hero's misfortune is not wholly deserved. The punishment exceeds the crime.

5. The fall is not pure loss. There is some increase in awareness, some gain in self-knowledge, some discovery on the part of the tragic hero..

6. Though it arouses solemn emotion, tragedy does not leave its audience in a state of depression. Aristotle argues that one function of tragedy is to arouse the "unhealthy" emotions of pity and fear and through a *catharsis* (which comes from watching the tragic hero's terrible fate) cleanse us of those emotions. It might be worth noting here that Greek drama was not considered "entertainment," pure and simple; it had a communal function--to contribute to the good health of the community. This is why dramatic performances were a part of religious festivals and community celebrations.

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