

A glass display case containing a dark leather briefcase and a light-colored fedora hat. The briefcase is on the left and the hat is on the right. The text is centered in the middle of the case.

Classical Greek Tragedy

A Primer for Arthur Miller's
Death of a Salesman

Defining Tragedy

"Tragedy, then, is a process of **imitating** an **action which has serious implications**, is **complete**, and possesses magnitude; by means of **language which has been made sensuously attractive**, with each of its varieties found separately in the parts; **enacted** by the persons themselves and not presented through narrative; through a course of pity and fear completing the **purification** (catharsis, sometimes translated "purgation") of such emotions."

From *Poetics* of Aristotle [384-322 BC]

Unpacking the Definition of Tragedy

- a) "**imitation**" (mimesis): Contrary to Plato, Aristotle asserts that the artist does not just copy the shifting appearances of the world, but rather imitates or represents Reality itself, and gives form and meaning to that Reality. In so doing, the artist gives shape to the universal, not the accidental. Poetry, Aristotle says, is "a more philosophical and serious business than history; for poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars."
- b) "**an action with serious implications**": serious in the sense that it best raises and purifies pity and fear; serious in a moral, psychological, and social sense.
- c) "**complete and possesses magnitude**": not just a series of episodes, but a whole with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The idea of imitation is important here; the artist does not just slavishly copy everything related to an action, but selects (represents) only those aspects which give form to universal truths.

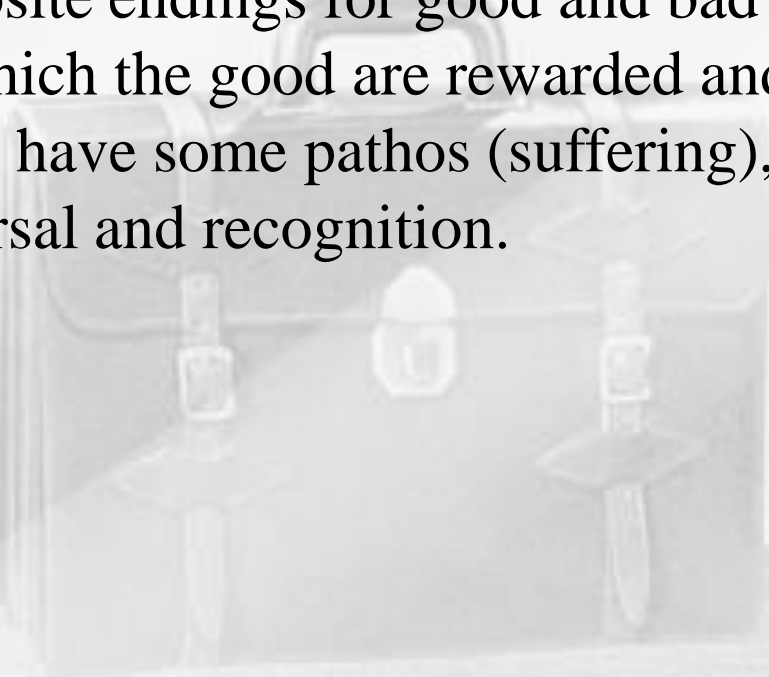
d) "**language sensuously attractive...in the parts**": language must be appropriate for each part of the play: choruses are in a different meter and rhythm and more melodious than spoken parts.

e) tragedy (as opposed to epic) relies on an **enactment** (dramatic performance), not on "narrative" (the author telling a story).

f) "**purification**" (catharsis): tragedy first raises (it does not create) the emotions of pity and fear, then purifies or purges them. Whether Aristotle means to say that this purification takes place only within the action of the play, or whether he thinks that the audience also undergoes a cathartic experience, is still hotly debated. One scholar, Gerald Else, says that tragedy purifies "whatever is 'filthy' or 'polluted' in the pathos, the tragic act" (98). Others say that the play arouses emotions of pity and fear in the spectator and then purifies them (reduces them to beneficent order and proportion) or purges them (expels them from his/her emotional system).

Elements of Tragedy: Plot

Aristotle distinguished six elements of tragedy: "plot, characters, verbal expression, thought, visual adornment, and song-composition." Of these, PLOT is the most important. The best tragic plot is single and complex, rather than double ("with opposite endings for good and bad"--a characteristic of comedy in which the good are rewarded and the wicked punished). All plots have some pathos (suffering), but a complex plot includes reversal and recognition.



Every tragic plot contains the following:

a) "reversal" (peripeteia): occurs when a situation seems to be developing in one direction, then suddenly "reverses" to another. For example, when Oedipus first hears of the death of Polybus (his supposed father), the news at first seems good, but then is revealed to be disastrous.

b) "recognition" (anagnorisis or "knowing again" or "knowing back" or "knowing throughout"): a change from ignorance to awareness of a bond of love or hate. For example, Oedipus kills his father in ignorance and then learns of his true relationship to the King of Thebes.

Recognition scenes in tragedy are of some horrible event or secret, while those in comedy usually reunite long-lost relatives or friends. A plot with tragic reversals and recognitions best arouses pity and fear.

c) "suffering" (pathos): Also translated

Archetypical Tragic Hero

Noble Stature: since tragedy involves the "fall" of a tragic hero, one theory is that one must have a lofty position to fall from, or else there is no tragedy (just pathos). Another explanation of this characteristic is that tragedies involving people of stature affect the lives of others. In the case of a king, the tragedy would not only involve the individual and his family, it would also involve the whole society.

Tragic Flaw (*Hamartia*): the tragic hero must "fall" due to some flaw in his own personality. The most common tragic flaw is *hubris* (excessive pride). One who tries to attain too much possesses *hubris*.

Free Choice: while there is often a discussion of the role of fate in the downfall of a tragic hero, there must be an element of choice in order for there to be a true tragedy. The tragic hero falls because he chooses one course of action over another.

The Punishment Exceeds the Crime: the audience must not be left feeling that the tragic hero got what he deserved. Part of what makes the action "tragic" is to witness the injustice of what has occurred to the tragic hero.

Hero has Increased Awareness: it is crucial that the tragic hero come to some sort of an understanding of what went wrong or of what was really going on before he comes to his end.

Produces Catharsis in Audience: catharsis is a feeling of "emotional purgation" that an audience feels after witnessing the plight of a tragic hero: we feel emotionally drained, but exultant.

For More Reading, Consult...

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. Gerald F. Else. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1967.

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