

## Article N1 (Assignment 2A)

### *Drama and Tragedy*

Before the ancient Greeks ever staged their first play, they were already long in the habit of holding annual festivals to Dionysus, the god of fertility, and the god of wine. Even without too much concrete information about these festivals, we can imagine what a spectacle they would have been, with the entire town gathered for singing and dancing and storytelling, and other rites. The stories were in the form of dramatic poetry; they were about Dionysus and the other gods, and a few legendary heroes made famous by Homer and Hesiod. Pots of wine were filled and refilled; if you were a good citizen you showed up to pay homage to the god of fertility. At a certain point in the festival the ancient stories, or “dithyrambs,” were performed at centre stage in the amphitheatre to musical accompaniment. Somewhere around the sixth century B.C., an innovative poet named Thespis had the revolutionary idea that acting the story told in the dithyramb might be more interesting than simply reciting it. He put his idea to the test and became the western world’s first “thespian” (i.e., “actor”). Not much later, an even more innovative poet called Aeschylus (who wrote *The Oresteia*) added a second actor, and not long after that—in head-to-head competition with Aeschylus—Sophocles added a third. Greek theatre was born.

From this golden age of Aeschylus, Euripides, Aristophanes, Sophocles, and others, classical Greek theatre has drizzled down through the foggy ruins of time incredibly resonant works of literature that are still alive with meaning and relevance, even today. Almost twenty-five hundred years separate us from these comedies and tragedies that are so firmly situated in ancient Greece—they are some of the western world’s oldest literature—yet, amazingly, they still speak to us. The issues these writers grappled with, their insights into the human heart, still resonate with us today.

Discovering our modern selves peeking out from these ancient texts can be an exhilarating, heady experience—which goes to the heart of what literature is all about.

Ancient Greek theatre was a community event, a cultural happening. The festival plays were performed for the entire citizenry in huge amphitheatres carved into hillsides. These outdoor arenas seated thousands—as many as 15,000 people. The seats faced an “orchestra” or “dancing place” behind which actors played their scenes in front of a “skene”—the building behind the stage where actors exited and changed costumes. Gradually it became customary to paint the wall facing the audience to suggest a “set”—a particular setting or place where the scenes were taking place. Our modern stage is not a whole lot different from its ancient beginning. However, there are a few conventions in ancient Greek theatre that are no longer familiar. If you were to study a Greek play, they would bear explaining. Even if you are not studying ancient drama, it helps to understand these features, because they haven’t completely vanished from the modern theatre, although they may have metamorphosised.

First, each play had its “chorus,” or group of men, a dozen or so, who would observe the action from the orchestra, and between episodes would sing and dance their commentary on the action. Sometimes the chorus leader would even participate in the scenes by engaging the characters in dialogue. The chorus’ role was to model a response to the action unfolding on the stage. They represented public opinion, the public’s response to the events of the play. They might provide background information (exposition), or tell us what they think of the relative virtue of the characters—good or ill. They might try to offer advice, or admonish bad behaviour. Whatever their precise function, their poetic commentary following each episode must have been a crucial part of the entertainment, as they would sing and dance and chant rhythmic lines of poetry between scenes—their musical lines and poetic diction would heighten the language and the emotional intensity.

Another Greek convention was the “god in the machine” (*deus ex machina* in Latin). This was a device some playwrights used to resolve conflicts when they were too difficult for the characters to resolve. Literally a “god” was lowered onto the stage by a mechanical platform (imagine a window-washer’s unit), descending from the roof of the skene, rescuing the characters from themselves. It’s interesting to note that Sophocles—innovator that he indeed was—never made use of this device. He must have thought it too simplistic, too contrived. That’s the way we think of it today as well—an artificial device that provides an easy-out.

Structurally, Greek plays are somewhat different from modern drama with its one-act, three-act, or five-act structure, but we don’t have much trouble adjusting back to the prologue, episode, and exodus structure of ancient

drama. Things haven't changed as much as they might have in 2500 years. One thing that hasn't changed much at all is our ability to create and respond to tragedy, in life and in art. Tragedy is all about suffering, especially human suffering. Unfortunately, it's all around us, every day, when we open our eyes to see it. "Count no man happy till he dies" (Sophocles' famous last word in Oedipus). No one is safe; we're all vulnerable. And we can't always shield ourselves from that basic but terrifying truth, as much as we may want to. The reality of tragedy lies before us, seen or unseen. An elderly couple dies alone and unnoticed inside the stiflingly hot attic of a flooded house in a poor section of New Orleans. A firefighter rushes into chaos trying to rescue someone and is killed in the process. These events are bad enough, heart-wrenching enough. But what about the individual who rushes to someone's rescue, insisting on doing it alone, unwilling to risk anyone else's life—or feeling overconfident, maybe—and dies because he tried to make the rescue alone? Or the individual who waded through contaminated flood waters to save a stranded child, and five years later is diagnosed with cancer? A child dies of a disease, which feels tragic enough—but what if you learn she died of a curable disease, but her family didn't have the resources to get her the treatment?

There are ghosts we sometimes create ourselves, suffering we bring upon ourselves. This is the suffering that tragedy reveals to us by facing it head on. No avoidance. Why? Maybe Nietzsche said it best: "what doesn't kill us makes us stronger." The Greek tragedians understood that if a "hero" were to emerge, he (we would add, or she) would have to emerge amidst tragedy. Tragedy is a powerful catalyst for heroism, and equally a catalyst for revealing its opposite. The Greeks explored, in their tragedies, all the ways the human spirit could respond in the face of overwhelming suffering. How does the hero act and react? Does the hero face it head on, make an attempt to overcome it, or become crushed by it? In *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*, Michael Meyer says that "a literary tragedy presents courageous individuals who confront powerful forces within or outside themselves with a dignity that reveals the breadth and depth of the human spirit in the face of failure, defeat, and even death." What's at stake is usually more than an individual life—it's the life of the state, the fate of the community that's in danger. Even in their day, some of the great tragedians of the classical era took heat for being "too depressing" (especially Euripides). But there must be some deep-seated value to this so-called depressing stuff if we keep producing it. As long as there are humans alive to observe it, tragedy won't go away, and neither, it seems, will us desire to represent it artistically, meaningfully, truthfully. Some of the most psychologically incisive literature in existence is in the form of tragedy. Whether it's ancient Greek tragedy, Shakespearean tragedy, or modern-day tragedy, the message is essentially the same: humans suffer terribly, pitifully, but there's so much wisdom to be gained from that suffering that to ignore it or cover it under a rug (or put a falsely happy face on it) would be to blind ourselves to the great human strengths it engenders. To remove the tragedy would be to remove what is most noble about us, what is most resilient and inspiring. Tragedy doesn't depress or paralyze us—it does the opposite. It moves us, sometimes to tears. We cry, not merely from sadness or depression, but from an intensity of understanding. In that cry, in those tears, we become sharply, acutely aware of our feelings. Through this story we've been following, which seemed to be about someone else, we've strangely come to know ourselves. What value there is in that self-knowledge no one can say. I can only think it's priceless. And when we cry together, we become more acutely aware of one another's feelings as well. There's some kind of superglue running in those tears. They unite us, attach us to one another, make us realize we care about the same things, share the same values, belong to the same community.

Some 2500 hundred years later, the best source for understanding the nature of tragedy is still Aristotle. Aristotle taught that art should be an "imitation" of life. It should hold a mirror up to life. It should be "truthful," or "true to life." Tragedy is a fact of life, so any work of art, to be of any use, must confront it. Aristotle explains his concept of tragedy, making two general points straight away:

- The finest tragedy is complex rather than simple
- Tragedy is a "representation of terrible and piteous events"

If a play is complex rather than simple, it will mentally and emotionally challenge its viewers in some way. Perhaps Aristotle felt that simplistic or obvious plays were a waste of time, or an insult to his intelligence. When he says that tragedy should represent terrible and piteous events, he is referring to ideas he develops elsewhere in the *Poetics*. A play that shows "terrible and piteous events," arousing an audience's pity and fear, is not a waste of time because

these emotions lead to “catharsis,” a healthy calling forth and then purging of emotion, that “good cry” that doesn’t kill you but glues you together and makes you stronger somehow.

Next, Aristotle indicates the kind of hero who should serve as the main character, but first he tells us the kind of character who does not qualify for service as a “tragic hero.” For tragedy, the hero can’t be:

- A good man falling from happiness to misfortune (this will only inspire revulsion, not pity or fear)
- An evil man rising from ill fortune to prosperity (that won’t inspire sympathy, so it can’t arouse pity or fear)
- A wicked man falling from prosperity into misfortune (that might inspire sympathy, but not pity or fear, because (1) pity can’t be felt for a person whose misfortune is deserved, and (2) if we don’t identify with the character’s wickedness, we won’t be afraid of his fate falling on us).

The appropriate tragic hero, then, is the character who sits between these extremes. He’s not “pre-eminent in virtue and justice,” but on the other hand, he isn’t guilty of “vice or depravity,” just some “mistake”, or hamartia. He is a good but not perfect person who is of some social importance (holding a “highly renowned and prosperous place”). He could be a king, like Oedipus (Sophocles’ Oedipus was Aristotle’s idea of the quintessential tragedy). The best tragic plot, he concludes, moves this hero (a person of some importance who is good but flawed) from prosperity to misfortune, occasioned not by any innate depravity or badness of character, but by some great mistake he makes (the “tragic flaw”).

In an editorial aside, Aristotle puts in a good word for the poet/dramatist Euripides, who has apparently drawn much criticism for writing too many unhappy endings. But Aristotle insists that this is how it should be. He praises Euripides (whose most famous play is Medea), calling him the “most tragic of the poets,” and insists that tragedy is superior to comedy. Aristotle spends some time elaborating what he considers the essential qualities of the tragic hero. He explains that “with regard to the characters there are four things to aim at”:

- Goodness. They should reveal through speech and action what their moral choices are, and a “good character will be one whose choices are good.” Any “class of person” may be portrayed as “good”—even women and slaves, though on the whole women are “inferior” and slaves are “utterly base.”
- Appropriateness. Men can be domineering or “manly” (what does he really mean here, I wonder?), but for a woman to appear formidable would be inappropriate.
- Lifelikeness. This is just a shade different from “appropriate.” To be “lifelike,” the hero ought to be “realistic”—“believably human”—not superhuman or “larger than life.” The tragic hero should not be godlike, or akin to the mythical heroes of legend, but just like real human beings.
- Consistency. Once a character is established as having certain traits, these shouldn’t suddenly change.

Aristotle also advised that, in constructing the plot, characters should say and do only what seems probable and reasonable given the events of the play. The outcome of the action should arise naturally from the plot itself and not be contrived by any exterior devices like the popular “deus ex machina” (referred to above). If the god magically appears to deliver justice and put things right, the human tragedy is lost.

Stacy Tartar, 2004

**Task1:** According to this article, explain, in your own words, two of the positive effects that tragedy has on the audience.

**Task 2:** Record the qualities of the tragic hero identified by Aristotle.

**Task 3:** Explain what is meant by '*catharsis*'.

**Task4:** Heroes, villains and victims are conventions of tragedy. You have already identified some of the qualities of the archetypal tragic hero, including the 'tragic flaw' in character that leads to the mistake (what Aristotle calls hamartia), which precipitates their downfall. The downfall of the tragic hero or, protagonist, is aided by the manipulations of the tragic villain or antagonist. The victim suffers as a result of the actions of others.

**Draw on your knowledge of Shakespeare's tragedies or / and read short synopses of 3 plays (e.g. King Lear, Othello, Macbeth, Hamlet ...) and try to identify the hero, villain and victim in each.**

Play	<i>King Lear</i>	<i>Othello</i>	<i>Macbeth</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>
Hero				
Villain				
Victim				

## Article N2 (Assignment 2B)

### *Reading Hamlet Through the Lens of Ideas about Dramatic Tragedy.*

Before we can understand, and therefore enjoy, Shakespeare's tragedies, there is a thick undergrowth to be cleared away: all that stuff about Tragic Heroes, Tragic Flaws, Fear and Pity, Character, and so on. Almost every school textbook on one of Shakespeare's tragedies starts out by showing that there is a thing called Tragedy which was defined by a man called Aristotle two and a half thousand years ago and that the play in question, Hamlet, King Lear, or whatever, conforms to this definition. The assumption seems to be that if for some reason the play did not do what Aristotle said a tragedy should do, then it would somehow cease to be any good and we wouldn't want to read it or see it. By a happy coincidence, the textbooks always find that there is no difficulty in showing that Shakespeare's plays were in fact written to Aristotle's formula, that they are therefore the real thing, and that it is okay to go ahead and study them.

The need for Hamlet or Macbeth or Othello or King Lear to be licensed by a Greek who died hundreds of years before the birth of Christ has very little to do with ancient Greece and still less to do with Elizabethan England. But it does have a lot to do with Victorian Britain, and with the critics and teachers of nineteenth-century England who laid down many of the categories through which most of us still encounter Shakespeare for the first time. Shakespeare himself may or may not have been aware of Aristotle's book *The Poetics*, from which Italian and French scholars in the 16th and 17th centuries derived the rules of what a tragedy is supposed to be. While Aristotle was merely trying to describe what he thought the best writers of tragedy in his own time were doing, the courtly writers of the Renaissance turned these descriptions into a formula. In France, the formula became a prescription. In the England of Shakespeare's time it was largely ignored. We know very little about Shakespeare's life and very little about what he read, other than what he used for his plays. But even if he was familiar with the so-called Aristotelian rules, he felt free to ignore them. The strongest of these rules was the idea of the unities of time, place and action – the notion that tragedies should happen in a single day, in a single place and through a single story. Shakespeare plays can take up to 16 years to unfold, hop all over the place and usually involve more than one plot.

The only evidence of Shakespeare's attitude to Aristotle that we have from his plays is that he didn't know very much about him [...] The most important of Aristotle's ideas about tragedy, 'catharsis' (the purging of the emotions), is never mentioned by Shakespeare and is referred to only once by any Elizabethan writer, and then only to mock it. Even the word 'tragedy' itself is something that was forced on to Shakespeare's plays long after they were written. The Stationers' Register, which recorded the titles of his plays in Shakespeare's own time, lists Hamlet as a 'revenge', King Lear as a 'history', Antony and Cleopatra as a 'book called Antony and Cleopatra'. Othello is listed as a tragedy, but then so are Richard II and Richard III, which we now call 'history plays'.

When the plays were printed during Shakespeare's lifetime, their categorisation as tragedies is even more dubious. Hamlet is a 'tragical history', King Lear is a 'true chronicle history'. Whatever else he was doing, Shakespeare was not sitting down to write something which was called 'tragedy' and which followed prescribed rules.

*O'Toole, F. (2002). Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life. Granta Books*