

Aritotle's definition of tragedy:

“Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, [...]; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions.”

(Aristotle, Poetics, Book V)



Tragedy is drama – not narrative; it *shows* rather than *tells*.

Tragedy deals with the fundamental *order of the universe*; it creates a *cause-and-effect chain* that clearly reveals what may happen at any time.

Tragedy arouses not only *pity* but also *fear*, because the audience can envision themselves within this cause-and-effect chain.

The plot must be “a whole,” with a beginning, middle, and end. The *beginning* must start the cause-and-effect chain, but not be dependent on anything outside the compass of the play.

The middle, or *climax*, must be caused by earlier incidents and itself cause the incidents that follow it.

The end, or *resolution*, must be caused by the preceding events but not lead to other incidents outside the compass of the play.

The plot must be “*of a certain magnitude*,” because the more universal and significant the meaning of the play, the more the playwright can catch and hold the emotions of the audience.

Important terms:

The main character in a tragedy has a *tragic flaw*, there is something “wrong with him”, that leads to his tragic end. The tragic flaw is called **hamartia**. Usually there is also some sort of **chaotic element** involved in the character's downfall; the chaotic element may be events that can not be controlled by the character – bad luck, bad weather etc. It is, however, very important that hamartia is in place; the main character *has to* be able to blame himself.

(Achilles' hamartia, for instance, was the weakness in his heel.)

The main character's hamartia leads to **peripeteia** – a reversal of fortune in which everything goes wrong for him.

The peripeteia is usually accompanied by **anagnorisis** – a realization in the main character when he learns something important about himself and/or his identity. Anagnorisis is very important for the audience to be able to feel pity with the main character. Without anagnorisis, the story may be sad but not really tragic.

(Oedipus: “Oh no! I just killed my father and bedded my mother!?!?!?”)

Hamartia leads to peripeteia and anagnorisis and the audience then experiences **catharsis**. Catharsis is when we (the audience) feel with the character and live out/relieve our emotional tension.

Catharsis is a positive experience that is brought about when we watch something tragic. Through catharsis, we experience that our own problems are easily overcome compared to the ones we see on stage.