



DEFINING TRAGEDY 2021

CONTEXT: TRAGEDY

notes taken from Professor Claire Kinney, Brinda Charry and *various other sources*

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OUTLINE

For more than 2,400 years, writers and audiences in the West have been fascinated with watching reenactments of terrible human suffering and, in particular, the painful experience of someone whom we label a tragic protagonist.

ARISTOTLE'S POETICS AND TRAGEDY

The earliest discussion of tragedy is to be found in Aristotle's *Poetics* in the 4th century B.C.E.

1. Aristotle suggests that tragic drama will be written in elevated language (eg iambic pentameter/blank verse) and will deal with a self-contained action (everything happens within the play).
 2. Its plot will involve dramatic reversals and climactic recognition, or anagnorisis.
 - a. This is the character's realization of some truth about his or her identity or actions.
 3. It will evoke particular emotions (pity and fear) in its audience.
 - a. Pity came from connecting to the protagonist, feeling for his suffering and seeing it as undeserved and unjust.
 - b. One felt fear because tragedy reminded one of the vulnerability of all humans.
 4. Tragic protagonists are usually elevated by rank and/or ability over most other people and fall victim to hamartia: an "error in action" rather than pathological vice.
 5. Hamartia is often mistranslated as "tragic flaw"; this is reductive because the crisis of a tragic protagonist is the product of an extreme combination of internal and external forces.
 6. For Aristotle (Ancient Greece) tragedy involved a plot that narrated 'peripety' or the reversal of fortune of a great man due to an error of judgement.
 - a. So Macbeth and Faustus, both men of great potential, fall due to misjudgement provoked by ambition.
 7. Aristotle doesn't only speak of tragic content: his notion of catharsis (the purging of certain emotions evoked by the play) also focuses on the response it creates in an audience.
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MEDIEVAL NOTIONS OF TRAGEDY

Medieval notions of tragedy are often not applied to drama but to narratives in general.

1. Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* offers a definition of tragedy that primarily emphasises a fall from greatness to wretchedness.
 2. This medieval definition suggests a Christian moral: the reader is encouraged to scorn transient, earthly pleasures and glories.
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RENAISSANCE CONVENTIONS OF TRAGEDY





Renaissance conventions of tragedy are as follows:

1. More often than not, Renaissance tragedy centred around a single figure, that of the tragic protagonist, usually male.
 - a. The tragic hero was high born, a prince or nobleman.
 - b. His high station and outstanding personality meant that his fall was all the more poignant and dramatic.
 - i. However, and more interestingly perhaps, the hero was often a conflicted figure, caught between opposing social roles and identities.
 1. Romeo is caught between his loyalty to his family's self identity and his love for Juliet
 2. Macbeth is caught between his ambition and his political loyalty.
2. The convention of Renaissance tragedy did require that the plays end in the death of the usually high-born protagonist.
3. In his book *Defence of Poetry*, Sir Phillip Sidney suggests that tragedy is a didactic form, meaning it teaches morals and lays bare the corruption that rulers and statesmen may attempt to conceal.
4. Sidney argues that art, in mirroring nature, can move people to virtuous action with its stirring or admonitory examples.
5. Although Sidney's discussion of tragedy uses quasiAristotelian notions of the particular effects it can create, it also echoes the medieval notion that tragedy shows the fragility of earthly splendors.
6. Tragedies dealt with the theme of human suffering and tragic dramatists explored ways of expressing suffering that was often so extreme that it was beyond expression.
7. The structure of tragedies was the reverse of comedy.
 - a. As Thomas Heywood wrote (translating Donatus), 'Comedies begin in trouble and end in peace; tragedies begin in calms and end in tempest.'
 - i. However, the final vision of disorder and turbulence is detectable early in the plays – the feud in Verona bodes the tragedy to come in Romeo and Juliet (1591–95) and the dark atmosphere does not promise a happy ending for Macbeth.
8. The world of tragedy was a world of storms and hostile landscapes, evil spirits, witches, devils and ghosts.
9. It was also a world littered with human bodies, dead or maimed.
 - b. Skulls, severed tongues, hands, heads and gouged-out eyes were displayed on stage, reminding one of the frailty of the body and the vulnerability of all humans.
 - i. As Sidney wrote, tragedy exposed the truth of the human condition; it 'openeth the wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue, that maketh kings fear to be tyrants ... that ... teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded'.
10. Tragedy was characterized by conflict.
 - c. This conflict could be between individuals, between the individual and society, within the individual torn apart by contradictory impulses and desires or between opposing values, ideologies and interests within the social and political order.

AGREED UPON CHARACTERISTICS OF TRAGEDY

Tragedy is not simple to define and the definition is not always agreed upon. There has, however, been a certain critical consensus about what constitutes Shakespearean tragedy.





- a) The tragic plot structure can be seen as a means to criticize the values of the society in which the protagonist(s) live, similar to Sidney's idea that tragedy lays bare the corruption of the rules and statesmen or the valourising of violence we see in *Macbeth*, for example.
- b) The experiences of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists—or the consequences of choices they have made—estrangle them from ordinary existence.
- c) The fall of the tragic protagonist is likely to have reverberations within a whole community.
- d) Tragic protagonists generally draw from their suffering a kind of insight that allows them to find some universalising and higher significance in their experience.
 - a. This often speaks to our own attempts to come to terms with the existence of human evil. It is sometimes questionable whether complete understanding is achieved by the characters who participate in a play's tragic action; such understanding may need to be retrospectively constructed by the work's audience.
 - b. Tragedy's particular eminence as a literary genre stems from the value traditionally granted to works of art that attempt to extract some kind of meaning out of human suffering.
- e) It is sometimes questionable whether complete understanding is achieved by the characters who participate in a play's tragic action; such understanding may need to be retrospectively constructed by the work's audience.

COMMON THEMES OF (SHAKESPEAREAN) TRAGEDY

Certain themes and problems regularly recur in the mature tragedies.

- a) These works explore tensions between the will and desires of the individual and the constraints emanating from his or her society— the relationship between public and private life.
- b) Shakespearean tragedies frequently anatomise (dissect/break down) the workings of power (political power, emotional power, the power of language and the imagination, the power of theater itself).
- c) The major characters often question the workings of the metaphysical forces (abstract concepts such as being, knowing, identity, time, and space) that ostensibly shape their cosmos.
- d) Shakespearean tragedies are generally family matters and, therefore, much concerned with divided loyalties.
- e) Shakespearean tragedies focus intensely on profound human dilemmas.
- f) Shakespearean tragedies raise questions about agency: about who does or does not get to act and to reflect upon their actions in the imaginative space of these plays.
 - a. Tragedies raised the difficult question of why bad things happen, often to good people.
 - i. Some Renaissance tragedies indicated that human fortune is determined by God or fate or some force bigger than oneself. So the lovers are 'star-crossed' (Prologue, 6) in *Romeo and Juliet* and one could argue that *Macbeth's* fall is predetermined by the Witches.
- g) But Renaissance tragedies have been read as being essentially human-centred.
 - a. Critics such as A.C. Bradley see suffering in these plays as self-authored – humans fell because of a personality flaw or an error of judgement.
 - b. However, 'materialist readings' of Renaissance tragedy reject readings of the plays as commentaries on human nature. Instead, they locate the tragedies of the period in the social structures and ideology of the time.
 - i. Value systems were conflicting and incompatible.
 - 1. So even as ambition and individualism were celebrated, tragic heroes like *Macbeth* or *Faustus* are also punished for being ambitious.





- a. Renaissance tragedy, according to these critics, shed light on a flawed social order rather than on flawed individuals.
- h) They also explore the borderline between action and transgression and invite us to ponder the moments at which characters overstep a moral or social or cultural boundary because of the difficulty of enacting choice in a corrupt world.
 - a. The struggle between individual autonomy and the limits placed on it was a common theme in Renaissance drama and tragic protagonists came into being through this struggle and were finally destroyed in spite of, or because of, their will to assert themselves.
- i) Death was a reminder of mortality and it erased differences between high and low, victim and villain, revenger and wrongdoer.
- j) Another defining characteristic of the tragic hero was that he died with dignity and courage or by asserting himself in the very face of death.
 - a. Many tragic heroes also staged the moment of death with long speeches, theatrical suicides and transformed dying into a performance of self-assertion.

POINTS TO BEAR IN MIND WHEN READING SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES

There are certain points a reader of these plays should bear in mind.

- a) Shakespeare's language is challenging and complex, but he does not write in Old English. In order to deal with his astonishing vocabulary and often compressed syntax, it is important to read the plays in a good edition with detailed notes and glosses.
- b) Readers should not be put off by the fact that these plays are largely written in blank verse: poetic language can render complex experience in a way that appeals both to the intellect and to the emotions.
- c) One can also speculate that the aesthetics of literary tragedy, its pleasing form and structure, control and shape the human experience of suffering, helps us, readers/spectators, make sense of and perhaps even transcend pain.
 - a. This is possibly the reason why Sir Phillip Sidney called tragedy a 'didactic form' because it is hard for us to not learn lessons from the protagonists' suffering.
 - i. This ability to derive learning from the sadness of the plays helps us to derive pleasure and satisfaction from events that would simply depress or devastate in real life.

MALE RIVALRY AND STRUGGLES

The plays often picked different kinds of manhood against each other.

- In the city comedies, *The Roaring Girl* and Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613), the preying young 'gallants' were smart young city gentlemen who are pitted against the solid middle-class citizens;
 - in *Romeo and Juliet* the lovelorn Romeo is contrasted to the other men of Verona who are aggressive and belligerent.
 - In many of the tragedies of the period, the men struggle to live up to the standards of masculinity or carried them to the extreme and so destroy themselves and others,
 - as in the case of *Tamburlaine* or *Macbeth*.





- Most plays had a man at the centre of the action and manhood was often portrayed as a complicated affair –
 - insecure,
 - fragile,
 - extreme,
 - but also admirable.
 - The complexities of masculinity informed the characterisation of the Renaissance tragic hero.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Go through the points in this document and turn them into questions; ask if they relate to the text you are studying.

Bibliography

Th Charry, B. (2017). *The Arden guide to Renaissance drama*. Arden Shakespeare, Bloomsbury.

