

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.

## 1. Topics Treated in the Poetics, Modes of Imitation, and Their differences

The topics which Aristotle will treat in this work:

### Poetry

Its species and their respective capacities

The structure of plot required for a good poem

The number and nature of the constituent parts of a poem

Modes of Imitation:

- Epic Poetry
- Tragedy
- Comedy
- Dithyrambic poetry (usually a short poem in an inspired wild irregular strain; a statement or writing in an exalted or enthusiastic vein)
- Flute-playing
- Lyre-playing

Differences in these modes of imitation:

- By a difference of kind in their means
- By differences in their objects
- By differences in the manner of imitation

## 1I. Means of Imitation

Some arts employ color, form, the voice as the means of imitation.

In the above mentioned group of arts (epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry, flute and lyre playing) the means of imitation, used separately or in various combinations, are the following:

- Rhythm
- Language
- Harmony

Flute and lyre playing: harmony and rhythm

Dancing: rhythm alone (even by the rhythms of his attitudes represents character and what people do and suffer)

Prose or verse: Language

Dithyrambic and nomic poetry, tragedy and comedy: rhythm, melody, and verse, either employed together, or brought it separately.

## 2 II. Objects of Imitation

The objects represented are actions of agents who are necessarily either good men or bad men, these being the two basic distinctions in humanity since vice and virtue divide the whole of humankind.

The agent of action represented falls into one of three possible categories:

- Above our own level of goodness (comedy).
- Beneath our own level of goodness (tragedy).
- Equal to our own level of goodness.

## 3 III. Manner of Imitation

Given both the same means and the same kind of object for imitation, one may either:

- Speak at one moment in narrative and at another in an assumed character (as Homer does).
- Remain the same throughout without any such change
- Represent the whole story dramatically as though they were actually doing the things described.

Aristotle goes on to present the claims of those who allegedly invented certain of these art forms:

Dorians: Tragedy and Comedy  
 Megarians: Comedy  
 Sicilian Megarians: Comedy  
 Peloponnesian Dorians: Tragedy

## 4. The Origin of Poetry: Two Causes Rooted in Human Nature

Cause #1: Imitation is natural to man from childhood, he being the most imitative creature in the world, and learns from the very first by imitation.

Cause #2: It is natural for all to delight in works of imitation, a fact seen in experience, even if what is imitated is painful to see (lower animals, dead bodies, etc.).

Why do we delight in realistic imitation? Learning something is the human beings greatest pleasure, and learning occurs by means of imitation. Hence, imitation, which brings the delight of learning, is natural to man.

In light of this natural impulse to imitate, man created poetry out of their improvisations.

Poetry itself was quickly divided into two kinds according to the differences in character in the individual poets:

Type #1: The graver poet represented noble actions and noble personages.

Type #2: The meaner sort the ignoble actions and ignoble people. These used invectives against one another giving rise to an iambic metre and to their "iambic" or invectives.

Homer is unique in that he produced not only iambic poetry of invective, but also comedy which focuses on the ridiculous.

The genre of tragedy:

It began with improvisations and dithyrambic poetry. Its form grew little by little in the following ways:

1. The number of actors first increased to two by Aeschylus, who cut the chorus, and made the dialogue or speaking part the leading part in the play.
2. A third actor and scenery were due to Sophocles.
3. Tragedy acquired its magnitude by discarding short stories and ludicrous diction and assumed a tone of dignity and its meter change from trochaic to iambic (the most speakable of metres as in conversation).
4. The plurality of episodes or acts.

## 5. The Genre of Comedy:

Definition:

An imitation of men worse than the average; worse not in regard to every possible fault, but worse as regards one particular kind, the RIDICULOUS, which is a specie of the UGLY. The ridiculous is a mistake or deformity

not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for example, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain.

Development:

Its successive stages are for the most part unknown.

At a late point a chorus of comedians was granted by the archon (ruler) whereas before they were just volunteers.

It is unknown who had the ideas of masks, prologues, a plurality of actors, etc.

The invented fable or plot was originated in Sicily

Crates was the first to drop the Comedy of invective and frame stories of a general and non personal nature, that is, plots or fables.

**Epic poetry** (from *epos* = word, speech, poem; epic poetry = a long narrative poem in elevated style recounting the deeds of a legendary or historical hero, as in the Iliad and Odyssey) and its similarities and differences from tragedy

All the parts of an epic are included in Tragedy; but those of tragedy are not all to be found in the epic.

Similarity: both are imitations of serious subjects in a grand kind of verse.

Differences: (1) Epic poetry is in one kind of verse and in narrative form; (2) In its length Epic poetry has no fixed limit of time, whereas tragedy is more limited (to "a single circuit of the sun"); (3) in their constituents, some being common to both, and others peculiar to tragedy.

## 6. Definition of Tragedy

The imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories (rhythm and harmony), each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work (verse and song); in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.

## 6I. Elements in a Tragedy

Of the elements cited below, two arise from the means of imitation (melody and diction), one from the manner (spectacle) and three from the objects of imitation (thought, character, fable?).

- Spectacle: stage appearance of the actors, some part of the whole (?)
- Melody and diction: melody = what is too completely understood to require explanation; diction = the composition of the verses

- Thought: shown in all they say when proving a particular point, or it may be enunciating a general truth.
- Character: what makes us ascribe moral qualities to the agents.
- Fable or Plot: the combination of the incidents or things done in the story.

## 6II. The Parts of Tragedy in the Order of Importance

#1: **Plot**: the combination of incidents of the story. Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery which takes the form of action. The end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, and in our actions reside happiness or misery. Actors in a play do not act to portray characters, but include characters for the sake of action. **WHAT IS REALLY IMPORTANT IS THE IMITATION OF HAPPINESS OR MISERY PER SE.** It is the action in a tragedy, its fable or plot that is the end and purpose of tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing. Tragedy is possible without character, diction, thought, but not without plot. Hence,

The first essential, the life and soul of tragedy is the plot, an imitation of action, and its mainly for the sake of action that it imitates the personal agents or characters.

#2: **Character**: that which reveals the moral purpose of agents, that is the sort of thing they seek or avoid, where that is not obvious.

#3: **Thought**: the power of saying whatever can be said, or what is appropriate to the occasion (the arts of politics and rhetoric). Thought is shown in all they say when proving or disproving some particular point, or enunciating some universal proposition.

#4: **Diction**: the expression of their thoughts in words

#5: **Melody**: the greatest pleasurable accessories of tragedy.

#6: **Spectacle**: though an attraction, is the least artistic of all the parts, and has least to do with the art of poetry.

## 7. The Proper Construction of the Fable or Plot

The magnitude (size, length) of a tragedy expressed in two characteristics:

1. As a whole of some magnitude, it has a beginning, middle, and an end.

**Beginning:** it is not after anything else, and has something else after it.

**Middle:** that which by nature is after one thing and before another.

**End:** that which is naturally after something else, as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it.

A well constructed plot cannot begin or end just anywhere, but must be as described above; this too is necessary for the sake of beauty, for the beautiful, and every whole made up of parts, must present a certain order in its arrangement of its parts. They must be of a certain acceptable size as well.

2. The plot of a tragedy must be of some length, not too small, and not too large, but of a length to be taken in by memory.

Beauty is a matter of size and order, and therefore is impossible if its too small (and becomes indistinct) or too large (1000 miles long) and its unity and wholeness is lost to the viewer. As a beautiful whole made up of parts must be of some size, but a size to be taken in by the eye, so a story or plot must be of some length, but of a length to be taken in by memory. Here is Aristotle's general rule regarding the magnitude or size of a tragedy:

A length which allows the hero passing a series of probable or necessary stages from misfortune to happiness, or from happiness to misfortune.

## 8. The Unity of Plot

### **What unity of plot is not:**

It is not simply the action of one man to which an infinity of things may fall, some of which it is impossible to reduce to unity; likewise there are many actions of one man which cannot be made to form one action.

### **What unity of plot is:**

With Homer's Iliad and Odyssey as an example, the unity of plot involves the following. Just as in the other imitative arts one imitation is always of one thing, so in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole. For that which makes no perceptible difference by its presence or absence is no real part of the whole.

## 9. The Distinction Between Historian and Poet

The function of the poet is to describe not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, that is, what is possible as being probable or necessary.

The distinction between historian and poet is not the the former's **prose**, and the latter's **verse**, but that the historian describes the thing that has been, and the poet a kind of thing that might be. Poetry is more philosophic and of graver import than history, since poetry's statements are universals, rather than singulars (particulars). A universal statement has to do with what such a kind of man will probably or necessarily do or say, which is the aim of poetry; a singular statement has to do with with what someone (Alcibiades) did or had done to him.

The poet must be more the poet of his stories or plots than his verses inasmuch as he is a poet by virtue of the imitative element in his work, and it is actions that he imitates. If he takes his subject from history, he is still a poet, for events in history may very well be in the probable and possible order of things, and in respect of such things he is their poet.

**Episodic** action and plots are the worst, and a plot is episodic when there is neither probability or necessity in the sequence of its episodes.

**Tragedy** is an imitation of a complete (not episodic) action and also of events arousing pity and fear. Such events have the greatest impact when *unexpected*, and at the same time in consequence of another action or event (rather than by chance). But even matters of chance may seem marvelous if there is an appearance of design in them.

## 10. Simple and Complex Plots

Since actions are either simple or complex, so also are plots.

**Simple plots:** The action proceeding in the way defined as one continuous whole, when the change in the hero's fortunes takes place without Peripety (= a sudden or unexpected reversal of circumstances or situation, esp. in a literary work) or Discovery.

**Complex plots:** when the change in the hero's fortunes takes place with Peripety or Discovery.

## 11. The Definitions of Peripety, Discovery and Suffering

Peripety:



The change from one state of things within the play to its opposite, in the probable or necessary sequence of events.

Discovery:

A change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, in the personages marked for good or evil fortune. The finest form of discovery is one attended or accompanied by Peripetias. This combination of Discovery and Peripety will arouse either pity or fear, actions of that nature being what Tragedy is assumed to represent; and its will serve to bring about the happy or unhappy ending.

Suffering:

An action of a destructive or painful nature, such as murders on the stage, woundings, etc.

12. The Parts of Tragedy From the Point of View of Quantity (or the separate sections into which it is divided)

Prologue: All that precedes the Parode of the chorus

Episode: all that comes in between the two whole choral songs

Exode: All that follows after the last choral song

Choral Portion:

Parode: the whole first statement of the chorus

Stasimon: a song of the chorus without anapaests (a metrical foot consisting of two short syllables followed by one long syllable or of two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable) or trochees (a metrical foot consisting of one long syllable followed by one short syllable, or of one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed syllable).

Songs from the Stage:

Commoie: a lamentation sung by chorus and actor in concert.

13. What is the Poet to Aim At and What is the Poet to Avoid in Constructing His Tragedies?

What is the Poet to Aim At?

The plot must be complex, not simple. It must imitate actions arousing pity and fear.

What is the Poet to Avoid?

1. A good man must not be seen passing from happiness to misery.

This is not fear inspiring or piteous, but simply odious to us.

2. A bad man must not be seen passing from misery to happiness.

This is the most untragic that can be; it has none of the elements of tragedy; it does not appeal to human feeling in us, or to our pity, or to our fears.

3. An extremely bad man must not be seen falling from happiness into misery.

This plot may arouse human feeling, but neither fear nor pity. Pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that like one of ourselves.

4. The intermediate kind of personage:

A man not pre-eminently virtuous or just, whose misfortune is brought upon him not by vice or depravity, but by some error of judgment.

The Perfect Plot:

1. Must have a single and not a double issue.
2. The change in the hero's fortunes must be not from misery to happiness, but from happiness to misery.
- 3 The cause of the shift must lie not in any depravity, but is some great error on the hero's part as the agent or sufferer of some deed of horror.

#### 14. How The Tragic Fear and Pity May Be Aroused

By spectacle:

This method is less artistic and requires extraneous aid. Those who make use of spectacle put before us that which is monstrous and not productive of fear. They are wholly out of touch with tragedy.

By the very structure and incidents of the play:

This is the better way by the better poet. The plot should be so framed that even without seeing it take place, the plot should arouse fear and pity and horror at the incidents.

Tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear, and these must be produced by a work of imitation. What kind of events in the plot cause these kinds of tragic pleasures?

1. The parties involved must be either friends, enemies or indifferent to each other.
  - a. Enemy on enemy: nothing here moves to pity either in doing it, or in meditating upon it, except so far as the actual pain of the sufferer is concerned.
  - b. The indifferent to each other: nothing here moves to pity either in doing it, or in meditating upon it, except so far as the actual pain of the sufferer is concerned.
  - c. When parties involved know each other as in family: brother on brother; son on father; mother on son; son on mother. These are the situations the poet should seek after.
2. How these stories of tragedy where parties are friends or family should be treated.
  - a. The deed of horror may be done by the doer knowingly and consciously.
  - b. The deed of horror may be done in ignorance of his relationship, and discover it afterwards.
  - c. The deed of horror may be meditated upon to do some deadly injury to another, in ignorance of the relationship, only to make the discover of who it was just in time to draw back. This is the best of all situations.
  - d. The worst situation is when the person is with full knowledge and on the point of doing the deed leaves it undone; it is odious and untragic.
  - e. The better situation is for the deed to be done in ignorance and the relationship discovered afterwards and the discovery will serve to astound us.

## 15. Four Rules for the Characters in Tragedies

Rule #1: They shall be good, and have an element of character insofar as what the personage says or does reveals a certain moral purpose. Such point of goodness is possible in every character, even in women (which are inferior) and slaves (which are worthless). Like a portrait painter, always make them a little better than they are.

Rule #2: They shall be appropriate. A man must be manly, but not a woman who should not be manly or clever.

Rule #3: To make them like the reality.

Rule #4: To make them consistent and the same throughout, even if they are inconsistent; make them consistently inconsistent.

In the characters, always endeavor after the necessary or the probable so that when a character does something, this action is the necessary or probable outcome of his character.

## 23. Epic Poetry's Commonalities With Tragedy

I. Epic poetry in the construction of its stories should be like drama: based on a **single action or unity of action**; complete and whole in itself, with beginning, middle, end; to be able to produce its own proper pleasure with all the organic unity of a living creature; is different from history; Homer is superior to the rest.

## 24II. The similarities and differences between Epic poetry and tragedy

The similarities:

Epic poetry must divide into the same species as tragedy: simple or complex; story of character or suffering; its parts must be the same (minus song and spectacle), requiring peripeties, discoveries, scenes of suffering; thought and diction must be good in their way.

The differences:

In its length:

The beginning and end of the work must be taken in one view. New epics must thus be shorter than old ones, and about as long as tragedies offered for one hearing. Whereas in tragedy, only one scene can be going on at one time, in epic poetry, the author can describe several actions simultaneously, and these can increase

the body of the poem, gives it grandeur, variety of interest, and room for episodes of different kinds.

In its metre:

The heroic metre is assigned to it from experience, other metres being incongruent. The heroic is the gravest and weightiest sort of metre; an epic of medly metres is inappropriate. Again Homer is superiour to all others.

Finally, the marvellous is certainly required in tragedy, but the epic affords more opportunity for the improbable, which is the chief factor in the marvellous, because the agents in epic poetry are not visibly before one.

## 25. Criticisms of an Epic or Tragedy and Reponses to Them

Facts about the poet's craft and its possible errors:

The poet as any imitator must represent things in one of three ways, (1) as they were or are, (2) as they are said or thought to be or have been, (3) as they ought to be. All this is done in language with an admixture of strange words and metaphors, and modified forms of words which is permitted in poetry. And there is a difference in poetry from politics or any other art. Two possibilities of error exist:

1. If a poet failed to describe a thing because of a lack of power of expression, then his art itself is at fault.
2. If he meant to describe it in an incorrect way for poetic purposes, the error is not in the essentials of poetic art.

The following are criticisms of the poetic art itself with responses:

Objection #1: Impossible:

Impossibilities in descriptions are permitted if they serve the end of poetry itself, if they make that or some other portion of the work more astounding.

Objection #2: Improbable:

If the poet's description is shown to be not true to fact, then it must be shown to be in accordance with opinion (as with the existence of the gods).

Ojection #3: Corrupting:

One should consider not only the intrinsic quality of the actual word or deed, but also the person who says or does it, the person to whom it is

said or done, the time, means, and motive of the agent involved, whether he does it to attain a greater good or avoid a lesser evil.

Objection #4: Contradictory:

See whether he the poet means the same thing is the same relation in the same sense before he is accused of contradiction.

Objection #5: Against technical correctness:

There is no apology for improbability of plot or depravity of character, when they are not necessary and no use is made of them.

26. Whether Epic Poetry or Tragedy is the Higher Form of Imitation.