

What is so tragic about tragedy?

Read and consider two concise and modern statements on tragedy and comedy.

Statement 1:

Tragedy (zenith of humanity)

- Drama that celebrates courage and dignity as the hero faces inevitable doom (usually relates the fall of a person of high status as a result of the protagonist's tragic flaw);
- Begins in chaos and ends with the restoration of order through death.

Comedy (nadir of humanity)

- Drama that humorously examines human weakness and fault;
- Begins in chaos and social disorder and progresses to end with the restoration of order through marriage(s).

Statement 2:

Undoubtedly the most influential book of literary criticism ever written, Aristotle's *Poetics* is the first written attempt to theorize the complex experience of Greek tragedy. Using as his chief example the plays of his contemporary, Sophocles, and particularly Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, Aristotle talks about the enormous suffering and violent action (both physical and mental) that take place in any tragedy and identifies the chief emotions associated with these plays as pity and fear. His main task in the *Poetics*, however, is to describe the structure of the tragic plot:

- a) the plot must include a hero(ine) who has distinguished him/herself as "great" in some significant way;
- b) the hero commits some sort of violation, which Aristotle calls *hamartia*;
- c) there is a notable reversal or plot twist as a result of that violation, which Aristotle refers to as *peripeteia*;
- d) the hero suddenly recognizes his/her own responsibility for that sudden change of fortune, called *anagnorosis*;
- e) the tragedy ends with a purging of the emotional catastrophe (for both the characters and the audience), often the death of the hero at his/her own hands; Aristotle calls this *catharsis*.

Discussion Directions. Consider how at least two of the following readings inform our current understanding of the tragic aesthetic. Be sure to cite specific and compelling textual evidence. Be ready to present your findings to the entire class.

Aristotle from *The Poetics* (335 BCE)

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete (composed of an introduction, a middle part and an ending), and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions.

William Hegel from *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807)

The heroes of ancient classical tragedy encounter situations in which, if they firmly decide in favor of the one ethical pathos that alone suits their finished character, they must necessarily come into conflict with the equally [*gleichberechtigt*] justified ethical power that confronts them. Modern characters, on the other hand, stand in a wealth of more accidental circumstances, within which one could act this way or that, so that the conflict which is, though occasioned by external preconditions, still essentially grounded in the character. The new individuals, in their passions, obey their own nature... simply because they are what they are. Greek heroes also act in accordance with individuality, but in ancient tragedy such individuality is necessarily... a self-contained ethical pathos... In modern tragedy, however, the character in its peculiarity decides in accordance with subjective desires... such that congruity of character with outward ethical aim no longer constitutes an essential basis of tragic beauty.

Frederick Nietzsche from *Twilight of the Idols* (1888)

The psychology of the orgiastic as an overflowing feeling of life and strength, where even pain still has the effect of a stimulus, gave me the key to the concept of tragic feeling, which had been misunderstood both by Aristotle and even more by modern pessimists. Tragedy is so far from being a proof of the pessimism (in Schopenhauer's sense) of the Greeks that it may, on the contrary, be considered a decisive rebuttal and counterexample. Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and most painful episodes, the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustible vitality even as it witnesses the destruction of its greatest heroes — that is what I called Dionysian, that is what I guessed to be the bridge to the psychology of the tragic poet. Not in order to be liberated from terror and pity, not in order to purge oneself of a dangerous affect by its vehement discharge — which is how Aristotle understood tragedy — but in order to celebrate oneself the eternal joy of becoming, beyond all terror and pity — that tragic joy included even joy in destruction.

Northrop Frye from *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957)

Tragic heroes are so much the highest points in their human landscape that they seem the inevitable conductors of the power about them, great trees more likely to be struck by lightning than a clump of grass. Conductors may of course be instruments as well as victims of the divisive lightning.