

Aristotelian Criticism



Background

- Aristotle was a Greek philosopher, the student of Plato, and teacher of Alexander the Great, who lived between 384-322 BCE.
- Sophocles lived 497-406 BCE
- *The Poetics* was probably completed around 330 BCE, preserved in the form of a student's lecture notes
- *The Poetics* is a response to Plato, who argued that poetry is representation of mere appearances and is thus misleading and morally suspect. Aristotle argued that poetry (which includes drama) is **mimesis**, or mimicry. He believed that humans had a desire to recreate what they see in the world.



Aristotle's Definition of Tragedy

Aristotle defined tragedy as

"an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions"

The Eight Characteristics of Tragedy

1. The representation of human action.
2. The actions represented have serious consequences, and the characters represented are of elevated social status.
3. The mode of imitation in a tragedy is drama as opposed to narrative.
4. The language in which a tragedy is composed employs **tropes** and other heightened or unusual uses of speech and a mixture of different poetic meters.
 - a. a trope is a departure from ordinary language, including metaphors, similes, repetition, etc.
5. The plot is a complete, coherent whole, lasting long enough to represent adequately the reversal of the hero's fortune, known as the **peripeteia**. The peripeteia should be contrary to the audience's expectations, but will nonetheless appear as a necessary outcome.
 - a. Aristotle described it like this: "a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity."
6. **Hamartia** is the protagonist's tragic flaw, one that precipitates his/her fall from a position of good fortune to bad fortune.
7. **Anagnorisis**, which means "recognition" in Greek, is the recognition by the tragic hero of some truth about his or her identity or actions that accompanies the reversal of the situation in the plot.
8. The tragedy arouses pity and fear in the viewer and brings about **catharsis**.
 - a. Catharsis is a purging of the emotions of pity and fear we feel when watching a tragedy, but more than "teaching us a lesson."
 - b. The exact meaning of **catharsis** is still debated today, but one of the most useful definitions come from Hans-Georg Gadamer in Truth and Method:

What is experienced in such an excess of tragic suffering is something truly common. The spectator recognizes himself [or herself] and his [or her] finiteness in the face of the power of fate. What happens to the great ones of the earth has exemplary significance. . . .To see that "this is how it is" is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he [or she], like everyone else, lives. (132)

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The Characteristics of a Tragic Hero

- The hero of the play cannot 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)
- Instead, he should be:
 - Good
 - Appropriate
 - Lifelike
 - Consistent
- The best tragic plot moves the hero from prosperity to misfortune, because of a tragic mistake or tragic flaw.

The Unities

- **Unity of Time:** Tragedies should not represent actions lasting longer than one day
- **Unity of Place:** Tragedies should be limited to one geographic location.
- **Unity of Action:** A tragedy should be limited to a single set of incidents which are related as cause and effect, "having a beginning, a middle, and an end."