

GREEK DRAMA (CLASSICAL THEATRE)



What is drama?

- Drama comes from a Greek word meaning “action”
- In classical theatre, there are two types of drama:
 - Comedy: a representation of laughable people that involves some kind of blunder or ugliness which does not cause pain or disaster
 - Tragedy: Where violent action leads to serious misfortune for the main characters

Aristotle

- A Greek philosopher whose definition of Tragedy and Comedy is still used today as the foundation of what it means to be “tragic” or “comic”
- Comes from his manuscript titled “*Poetics*” (“*Ars Poetica*”)

TRAGIC PLOT

- Tragedy must have a complete plot “of a certain magnitude”—meaning it is serious in subject and tells a complete story that represents some larger truth.
- In a tragedy, plot is most important. The characters take backstage. The plot is single and complex, meaning there is only one outcome.
- In comedies, the plot is “double” meaning the good are rewarded and the bad punished.

PARTS OF TRAGIC PLOT

- Reversal (peripeteia): A situation seems to be developing in one direction then suddenly reverses to another (everything looks great, but then turns out to be bad)
- Recognition (anagnorisis): A change from ignorance to awareness, often of some horrible event or secret
- Suffering (pathos): A destructive or painful act
- Catastrophe: the action at the end of a tragedy that initiates the denouement and leads to catharsis.

Katharsis

- Katharsis (Catharsis) is a cleansing/purging of emotions.
- At the end of the play, the viewer should feel a catharsis of the emotions of pity and fear
- Whether Aristotle means to say that this purification takes place only within the action of the play, or whether he thinks that the audience undergoes a cathartic experience, is still hotly debated.

Character: The Tragic Hero

- “a [great] man who is neither a paragon of virtue and justice nor undergoes the change to misfortune through any real badness or wickedness but because of some mistake.” -Aristotle
- A powerful man experiences a downfall or reversal of fortune through no real fault of his own. He is a victim of blindness (**hamartia**).
- Usually has **a tragic flaw**: some personal weakness. The Gods often play a part as well.
- This means that the tragedy comes through **choice of action**. There is no tragedy without **free will**.

Character

- It isn't necessary for the main character to die at the end of a tragedy (though in Shakespeare they usually do.)
- the protagonist will mistakenly bring about his own downfall—not because he is sinful or morally weak, but because **he does not know enough**.
- Remember that the characters are less important than the plot.
- Characters in a tragedy should generate **pity** from the audience.

Traits of Tragic Characters

1. “good or fine.” Aristotle relates this quality to moral purpose and says it is relative to class: “Even a woman may be good, and also a slave, though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless.”
2. “fitness of character” (true to type); e.g. valor is appropriate for a warrior but not for a woman.
3. “true to life” (realistic)
4. “consistency” (true to themselves). Once a character's personality and motivations are established, these should continue throughout the play.
5. “necessary or probable.” Characters must be logically constructed according to “the law of probability or necessity” that governs the actions of the play.

Language

“...in a language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament.”

- In a tragedy, the author’s use of appropriate language, meter and rhythm is important.
- It changes in each part of the play as well, to reflect the mood and action.
- Aristotle saw great importance in the use of metaphors

Performance vs. Story

- A tragedy relies more on the dramatic performance of emotions than the narrative
- Author is looking to enact human truths and emotions—the story behind that isn't as important.
- Narrative is just a vehicle through which truths are revealed

The Three Unities

- The most famous of the Aristotelian rules were those relating to the so-called unities:
 - of time
 - place
 - and action

UNITY OF TIME

- The unity of time limits the supposed action to the duration, roughly, of a single day

“Tragedy tries as far as possible, to live within a single revolution of the sun, or only slightly to exceed it...”

UNITY OF ACTION

- limits it to a single set of incidents which are related as cause and effect, "having a beginning, a middle, and an end."
 - **Action must be long enough to permit an orderly development of action to a catastrophe.**
 - **“Too short an action cannot be regarded as proper and beautiful, for its different parts will not be clearly visible, as in the case of a very small living creature.”**

UNITY OF PLACE

- unity of place limits it to one general locality
- Aristotle assumed that the observance of the unity of place would be the practice of good playwrights, since the chorus was present during the whole performance, and it would indeed be awkward always to devise an excuse for moving fifteen persons about from place to place.