

Some Thoughts About Tragedy (Both Literary and Mundane):

"We participate in tragedy. At comedy we only look."
--Aldous Huxley

"I've never thought of my characters as being sad. On the contrary, they are full of life. They didn't choose tragedy. Tragedy chose them."
--Juliette Binoche

"I have spent more than half a lifetime trying to express the tragic moment."
--Marcel Marceau

Many people do not see the point to tragedy. Much of American pop culture tends to embrace the comic vision of art, finding tragedy depressing or disturbing. However, in the 5th century B.C.E., the classical Greek writers thought that facing tragedy was a healthy and necessary antidote to human foolishness. It taught humans to know themselves in a way comedy could not. The Greek philosopher Plato, quoting Socrates, admonished his listeners, "Know thyself." Part of that is how we might react in a tragic situation similar to what the protagonist faces.

"Tragedy is more important than love. Out of all human events, it is tragedy alone that brings people out of their own petty desires and into awareness of other humans' suffering. Tragedy occurs in human lives so that we will learn to reach out and comfort others"
--C. S. Lewis

Likewise, the Romantic poets and later Victorian viewers valued tragedy as an emotional exercise helping viewers learn compassion. Watching people suffer on stage could help the audience sympathize with another's pain. The rise of the sentimental novel in the late 1700s and early 1800s reveals a cultural interest in this process, and Romantic poets like Shelley, Byron, and Keats went into ecstasies over Shakespeare. Their poetic works are perhaps a distant cousin to the great tragic dramas of earlier years.

"If a single person dies in front of you, it is a tragedy. If a million people die on the other side of the earth, it is a statistic."
--Josef Stalin

So what exactly counts as a literary tragedy? What does not? Comedians jokingly refer to tragedy as "the plays in which everybody dies." But the genre is more complex than that. Many plays, movies, and stories contain death, violence, and unhappy endings. Though depressing, these traits do not make a tragedy *per se*.

The classical definition comes from Aristotle:

"Tragedy is the 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 . . . through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."
--Aristotle, *The Poetics*.

The word *catharsis* (translated above as "purgation") implies that tragedy purges, removes, or unclogs negative emotions such as pity and fear that build up within the human spirit. Thus, watching a tragedy might be a sort of psychological Drano. However, the word *catharsis* can also be translated as "purification," implying that somehow tragedy purifies pity and fear, turns them into something healthy or good. *Catharsis* can also mean "distillation," the sense that purifying something involves concentrating it into a more potent form. Somehow tragedy takes all these negative emotions people feel and intensifies them. Depending upon how you translate that single word, the purpose and definition of tragedy varies greatly.

"Only a great mind that is overthrown yields tragedy."
--Jacques Barzun.

*"Destiny has two ways of crushing us -- by refusing our wishes and by fulfilling them."
--Henri Frederic Amiel.*

The first component of tragedy is the tragic hero. In traditional Greek drama, the hero must be somebody of great social importance--a prince or ruler or hero far removed from the everyday Joe-on-the-street. The tragic hero had to be someone basically likeable; he had to have traits that the audience admired. Often, it is this same admirable trait that causes the hero's downfall. For example, we admire Macbeth initially for his ambitious, go-get-'em attitude. His up-and-at-'em philosophy takes Macbeth to glorious heights in the military. However, the same trait causes his ethical and political self-destruction when he plots to kill his liege lord. In the same way, we may admire the passion in Romeo and Juliet's young romance, but that same inability to live apart results in their messy double-suicide. We admire Brutus for his patriotic concern for Rome, but it is that same love of country that leads him into betraying his best friend. At some point, the hero falls from glory. His own *hubris*, his own desire to reach beyond what is possible, ensures such a fall.

*"Fate is nothing but the deeds committed in a prior state of existence."
--Ralph Waldo Emerson.*

Tragedy also involves a weird mixture of personal choice and fate. To be a tragedy, the hero must have personal choice and agency. If a teenager is shot at random in a drive-by shooting, his death does not count as a literary tragedy because the victim did nothing to bring such misfortune upon himself. He had no choice in the matter. Such a death can only be fashioned into tragedy if the subject makes some kind of personal or moral decision. The decision (always made out of free will) then results in a chain of unstoppable and unforeseen negative events. That sudden shift from upward glory to tragic decline is called the *peripeteia*. After the *peripeteia*, the hero confronts social forces so huge and irresistible the tragedy seems like the hand of fate. Thus King Lear cries out, "As flies to wanton school-boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport." However, his suffering results as much from his faulty judgment as it does from some fixed destiny.

*"There are no tragedies, just facts not recognized in time."
--William D. Montapert.*

Another important component of tragedy is *anagnorisis*. For the tragedy to meet the bill, the hero must realize his mistake and its horrible results. If a character never understands what occurred and why, the result may be brute suffering, but that does not constitute tragedy in the literary sense. Part of the pain a tragic hero must face is his own realization of personal culpability and error. However, that new insight always comes too late for him to change the coming disaster. By the time Macbeth realizes his approaching downfall, he has become a hollow shell of humanity, devoid of former ethics, and he cannot wash the blood from his hands. By the time Brutus realizes the ultimate results of Caesar's assassination, Julius' adopted heir has already claimed the imperial scepter and roused the mob against the assassins. *Anagnorisis* refers to the moment of tragic recognition, in which the truth, especially a universal or transcendent Truth-with-a-capital-T, reveals itself to the hero.

*"What makes a tragedy so tragic is not that the noble individual falls into ruin, but that his fall causes so much suffering in others."
--Charmezel Dudt.*

Finally, tragedy spirals out behind the hero himself. Not only does he suffer, his choice inflicts misery upon other innocent people, and he knows it. The error may be King Lear's, but Cordelia is the one hanged. Romeo and Juliet made the choice, but Tibalt and Mercutio also die. Tragedy is when a noble individual's poor choice destroys that admirable individual and also causes suffering, pain, and death to others he holds dear. The interest lies in how the hero reacts to this knowledge. How does he respond to the no-win situation resulting from his earlier choices? Macbeth responds with nearly psychotic fatalism. Othello with grieving tears. Hamlet with long overdue action. What can the reader or viewer learn from such varied responses?