Outline of Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy

NOTES

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**Definition of Tragedy:**

*“Tragedy,* *then*, *is an* ***imitation of an action*** *that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, … in the form of action, not of narrative; with* ***incidents arousing pity and fear****, wherewith to accomplish its* ***katharsis*** *of such emotions.* . . .” - Aristotle

The treatise we call the Poetics was composed at least 50 years after the death of Sophocles. Aristotle was a great admirer of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, considering it the perfect tragedy, and not surprisingly, his analysis fits that play most perfectly.

***Tragedy is the “imitation of an action” (mimesis) according to “the law of probability or necessity.”***

Aristotle indicates that the medium of tragedy is drama, not narrative; tragedy “shows” rather than “tells.”

According to Aristotle, tragedy is higher and more philosophical than history because history simply relates what has happened while tragedy dramatizes what may happen, “what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity.”

Events that have happened (history) may be due to accident or coincidence; they may be particular to a specific situation and not be part of a clear cause-and-effect chain. (“the law of probability or necessity.”)

***Tragedy***, however, is rooted in the fundamental order of the universe; it ***creates a cause-and-effect chain that clearly reveals what may happen at any time or place BECAUSE THAT IS THE WAY THE WORLD OPERATES.***

**Tragedy** therefore ***arouses not only pity but also fear, because the audience can envision themselves within this cause-and-effect chain.***

**PLOT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT FEATURE OF TRAGEDY.**

***Aristotle defines plot as “the arrangement of the incidents”: i.e., NOT THE STORY ITSELF BUT THE WAY THE INCIDENTS ARE PRESENTED TO THE AUDIENCE, THE STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY.***

According to Aristotle, tragedies where the outcome depends on a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain of actions are superior to those that depend primarily on the character and personality of the protagonist.

The plot must be “a whole,” with a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning, called by modern critics **the INCENTIVE MOMENT, must start the cause-and-effect chain but not be dependent on anything outside the compass of the play.**

**THE CLIMAX** must be caused by earlier incidents and itself cause the incidents that follow it.

**THE END, OR RESOLUTION**, must be caused by the preceding events but not lead to other incidents outside the compass of the play. The end should therefore solve or resolve the problem created during the incentive moment.

Aristotle calls the cause-and-effect chain leading from the incentive moment to the climax the “tying up”, in modern terminology **THE COMPLICATION**.

He therefore terms the more rapid cause-and-effect chain from the climax to the resolution the “unravelling”, in modern terminology **THE DÉNOUEMENT**.

***The plot must be “complete,” having “unity of action.”***

By this Aristotle means that ***the plot must be structurally self-contained, with the incidents bound together by internal necessity***, each action leading inevitably to the next with no outside intervention.

**Playwrights should exclude coincidences from their plots**; if some coincidence is required, it should seem to have a fated connection to the events of the play. While the poet cannot change the myths that are the basis of his plots, he “ought to show invention of his own and skillfully handle the traditional materials” to create unity of action in his plot.

***The plot must be “of a certain magnitude,”*** both quantitatively (length, complexity) and qualitatively (“seriousness” and universal significance).

Aristotle argues that ***the more universal and significant the meaning of the play, the more the playwright can catch and hold the emotions of the audience, the better the play will be.***

Complex plots have both **“REVERSAL OF INTENTION”** ***(peripeteia)*** and **“RECOGNITION”** ***(anagnorisis)*** connected with the **CATASTROPHE**.

***Both REVERSAL and RECOGNITION turn upon SURPRISE.***

***REVERSAL OF INTENTION*** **occurs when a character produces an effect opposite to that which he intended to produce**.

***RECOGNITION*** **“is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined for good or bad fortune.”**

He argues that the best plots combine these two as part of their cause-and-effect chain (i.e., **reversal of intention leads directly to the recognition)**; this in turns creates the catastrophe, leading to the final “scene of suffering”

**CHARACTER** has the second place in importance in Aristotle’s theory of tragedy.

***The protagonist should be renowned and prosperous***, so his change of fortune can be from good to bad. This change “should come about as the result, not of vice, but of some great error or frailty in a character.”

***Such a plot is most likely to generate pity and fear in the audience***, for “pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.”

The term Aristotle uses here, ***hamartia***, often translated “tragic flaw,” has been the subject of much debate. The meaning of the Greek word is closer to “mistake” than to “flaw.”

In the ideal tragedy, claims Aristotle, the protagonist will mistakenly bring about his own downfall—not because he is sinful or morally weak, but because he does not know enough.

***CHARACTERS IN TRAGEDY***

***SHOULD HAVE THE FOLLOWING QUALITIES:***

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…”

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.

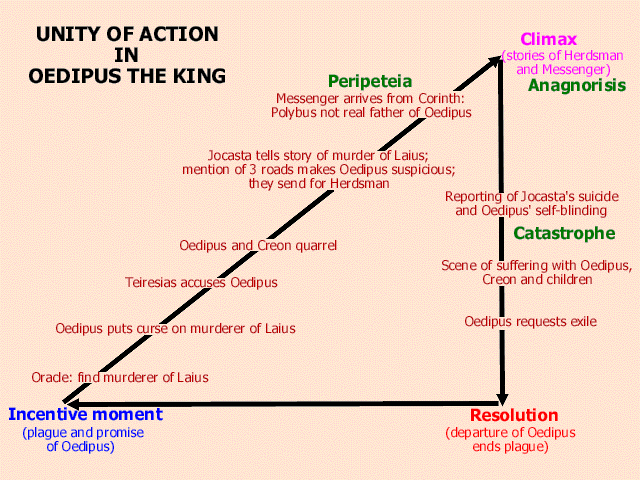
5. “NECESSARY OR PROBABLE.” Characters must be logically constructed according to “the law of probability or necessity” that governs the actions of the play.

6. “TRUE TO LIFE AND YET MORE BEAUTIFUL” (idealized, ennobled).

***The end of the tragedy is a* KATHARSIS** (purgation, cleansing) of the tragic emotions of pity and fear.

**Katharsis** means “purging,” and Aristotle seems to be employing a medical metaphor—tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear in order to purge away their excess, to reduce these passions to a healthy, balanced proportion.

**Aristotle also talks of** the “pleasure” that is proper to tragedy, apparently meaning ***the aesthetic pleasure one gets from contemplating the pity and fear that are aroused through an intricately constructed work of art..***



**UNITY OF ACTION in Oedipus Rex:** Each of the incidents in this play is part of a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain.

1. The plague in Thebes prompts Oedipus to send Creon to consult the oracle of Delphi.

2. The oracle’s reply that the murderer of Laius must be banished from Thebes prompts Oedipus pronounce a solemn curse on the murderer and to send for Teiresias.

3. Teriesias states that Oedipus is the murderer, but since the king knows himself to be innocent (or thinks he knows), he accuses Creon of plotting with Teiresias against him.

4. The quarrel of Oedipus and Creon brings Jocasta from the house; seeking to calm down her husband and prove that oracles cannot be trusted, she tells again of how Laius died.

5. When she mentions that he was killed “at a place where three roads meet,” Oedipus suddenly begins to suspect that he may indeed have killed the king without knowing who he was.

6. To settle the matter, they send for the Herdsman who is the only survivor of that attack.

7. Meanwhile a messenger arrives from Corinth to inform Oedipus that his supposed father, King Polybus of Corinth, has died. Oedipus rejoices that he did not kill his father as the oracle had prophesied but is still worried that he may marry his mother. But the Messenger, seeking to relieve him of this fear, innocently tells him that Polybus and Merope were not his real parents.

**\*\*\*The arrival of the Messenger is the only action in the play that is not directly caused by a previous action. \*\*\***

However, this is a perfect example of Aristotle's contention that ***if coincidences cannot be avoided, they should have “an air of design,”*** for this messenger seems brought by fate, since he is the missing link in Oedipus’ story, the very man who received Oedipus as a baby from the Herdsman.

8. When the Herdsman arrives and they tell their respective stories, the whole truth emerges.

**THIS IS THE CLIMAX, OR TURNING POINT, OF THE PLOT**—

9. The truth about Oedipus leads directly to the suicide of Jocasta and Oedipus’ self-blinding and request to be exiled.

10. The departure of Oedipus from Thebes will lift the plague, thus resolving the problem that started off the chain of events and concluding the plot.

***This plot is also a perfect example of THE EXCLUSION OF THE IRRATIONAL and the skillful handling of traditional elements of the myth on which the play is based.***

Sophocles does not dramatize any of the admittedly irrational parts of the myth:

1. Why did Laius and Jocasta not kill the baby outright?

2. If Oedipus was afraid of marrying his mother, why did he marry a woman old enough to be his mother?

Instead, he constructs the play as an investigation of the past. **The sense of inevitability and fate in this play stems from the fact that all the irrational things have already been done; they are unalterable.** Once Oedipus begins to investigate the murder of Laius, the whole truth about the past is bound to emerge.

**COMPLEX PLOT:** The ***peripeteia*** of the play is the Messenger's ***reversal of intention***: in seeking to help Oedipus by telling him that Polybus and Merope were not his real parents, he instead creates the opposite effect, providing the crucial piece of information that will reveal that Oedipus has indeed killed his father and married his mother.

This is directly connected to the ***anagnorisis***, for the Messenger and Herdsman piece together the whole story of Oedipus, enabling him to **“recognize”** his true identity, to gain the essential knowledge he has lacked.

In a sense, ***each of Oedipus’ actions can be considered a reversal of intention***, and each gives him a little more knowledge of the dreadful truth that will lead to his downfall.

**ROLE OF THE HAMARTIA or Tragic “Flaw”:** The play offers a perfect illustration of the nature of the hamartia as **“mistake”** or error rather than flaw.

***Oedipus directly causes his own downfall not because he is evil, or proud, or weak, but simply because he does not know who he is***.

1. If he really wanted to avoid the oracle, leaving Corinth was a mistake.

2. Killing an unknown older aristocrat was a mistake.

3. Marrying an older queen was a mistake.

Seeking to uncover the past, cursing the murderer of Laius, sending for the Herdsman—each of the actions that he pursued so vigorously and for such good reasons led to his doom.

***Oedipus is not morally guilty, but he is radically ignorant, and Sophocles does not present him as a unique case but rather as a paradigm of the human condition, as “a man like ourselves.”***

**PATTERNS OF IMAGERY:** The metaphoric patterns of this play support the plot.

The major patterns of imagery are:

1. Sickness and pollution

2. The ship of state

3. Blindness vs. sight

4. Light vs. darkness

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Notes

ARTHUR MILLER

ON ***Death of A Salesman***

TRAGEDY AND THE COMMON MAN

In this age few tragedies are written. It has often been held that the lack is due to a ***paucity*** of heroes among us, or else that modern man has had the blood drawn out of his organs of belief by the skepticism of science, and the heroic attack on life cannot feed on an attitude of reserve and ***circumspection***. For one reason or another, we are often held to be below tragedy—or tragedy above us. ***The inevitable conclusion is***, of course, ***that*** ***the tragic mode is archaic***, fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly, and where this admission is not made in so many words it is most often implied.

***I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were.*** On the face of it this ought to be obvious in light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis upon classic formulations, such as the Oedipus and Orestes complexes, for instances, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations.

More simply, when the question of tragedy in art is not at issue, we never hesitate to attribute to the well placed and the exalted the very same mental processes as the lowly. And finally, if the ***exaltation*** of tragic action were truly a property of the high-bred character alone, it is inconceivable that the mass of mankind should cherish tragedy above all other forms, let alone be capable of understanding it.

As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me***, I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity.*** From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his “rightful” position in society.

Sometimes he is one who has been displaced from it, sometimes one who seeks to attain it for the first time, but ***the fateful wound*** from which the inevitable events spiral ***is the wound of indignity***, and its dominant force is ***indignation***. Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself.

In the sense of having been initiated by the hero himself, the tale always reveals what has been called his “tragic flaw,” a failing that is not peculiar to grand or elevated characters. Nor is it necessarily a weakness. ***The flaw, or crack in the character, is really nothing—and need be nothing—but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status.*** Only the passive, only those who accept their lot without active retaliation, are “flawless.” Most of us are in that category.

But there are among us today, as there always have been, those who act against the scheme of things that degrades them, and in the process of action everything we have accepted out of fear or insensitivity or ignorance is shaken before us and examined, and from this total onslaught by an individual against the seemingly stable cosmos surrounding us—***from this total examination of the “unchangeable” environment—comes the terror and the fear that is classically associated with tragedy.***

More important, ***from this total questioning of what has previously been unquestioned, we learn. And such a process is not beyond the common man***. In revolutions around the world, these past thirty years, he has demonstrated again and again this inner dynamic of all tragedy.

Insistence upon the rank of the tragic hero, or the so-called nobility of his character, is really but a clinging to the outward forms of tragedy. If rank or nobility of character were indispensable, then it would follow that the problems of those with rank were the particular problems of tragedy. But surely the right of one monarch to capture the domain from another no longer raises our passions, nor are our concepts of justice what they were to the mind of an Elizabethan king.

The quality in such plays that does shake us, however, derives from the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world. Among us today this is as strong, and perhaps stronger, than it ever was. In fact, it is the common man who knows this fear best.

Now, ***if it is true that tragedy is the consequence of a man’s total compulsion to evaluate himself, justly, his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment.*** And this is precisely the morality of tragedy and its lesson. The discovery of the moral law, which is what the enlightenment of tragedy consists of, is not the discovery of some abstract or metaphysical quantity.

The tragic right is a condition of life, a condition in which the human personality is able to flower and realize itself. The wrong is the condition, which suppresses man, prevents the flowing out of his love and creative instinct. ***Tragedy enlightens—and it must, in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man’s freedom.*** The thrust for freedom is the quality in tragedy, which exalts. The revolutionary questioning of the stable environment is what terrifies. In no way is the common man debarred from such thoughts or such action.

Seen in this light, our lack of tragedy may be partially accounted for by the turn which modern literature has taken toward the purely psychiatric view of life, or the purely sociological. If all our miseries, our indignities, are born and bred within our minds, then all action, let alone the heroic action, is obviously impossible.

And if society alone is responsible for the cramping of our lives, then the protagonist must needs be so pure and faultless as to force us to deny his validity as a character. From neither of these views can tragedy derive, simply because neither represents a balanced concept of life. Above all else, tragedy requires the finest appreciation by the writer of cause and effect.

No tragedy can therefore come about when its author fears to question absolutely everything, when he regards any institution, habit or custom as being either everlasting, immutable or inevitable. In the tragic view the need of man to wholly realize himself as the only fixed star, and whatever it is that hedges his nature and lowers it is ripe for attack and examination. Which is not to say that tragedy must preach revolution.

The Greeks could probe the very heavenly origin of their ways and return to confirm the rightness of laws. And Job could face God in anger, demanding his right and end in submission. But for a moment everything is in suspension, nothing is accepted, and in this stretching and tearing apart of the cosmos, in the very action of so doing, the character gains “size,” the tragic structure which is spuriously attached to the royal or the highborn in our minds. The commonest of men may take on that stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest, the battle to secure his rightful place in his world.

***There is a misconception of tragedy*** with which I have been struck in review after review, and in many conversations with writers and readers alike. ***It is the idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism.***

Even the dictionary says nothing more about the word than it means a story with a sad or unhappy ending. This impression is so firmly fixed that I almost hesitate to claim that ***in truth tragedy implies more optimism in its author than does comedy, and that its final result ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker’s brightest opinions of the human animal.***

For, it is true that in essence the tragic hero is intent upon claiming his whole due as a personality and if this struggle must be total and without reservation, then it automatically demonstrates the indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity.

***The possibility of victory must be there in tragedy.*** Where pathos rules, where pathos is finally derived, a character has fought a battle he could not possibly have won. The pathetic is achieved when the protagonist is, by virtue of his witlessness, his insensitivity or the very air he gives off, incapable of grappling with a much superior force.

***Pathos truly is the mode of the pessimist. But tragedy requires a nicer balance between what is possible and what is impossible.*** And it is curious, although edifying, that the plays we revere, century after century, are the tragedies. In them, and in them alone, lies the belief—optimistic, if you will, in the perfectibility of man.

It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can lead in our time—the heart and spirit of the average man.