

# The Classical Definition of Tragedy — Aristotle

In the fourth century B.C., Aristotle, in his work, the Poetics, gave Western civilization a definition of tragedy which has greatly influenced writers of tragedy and the form of tragedy for over 24 centuries. The following are essential facets of Aristotle's definition.

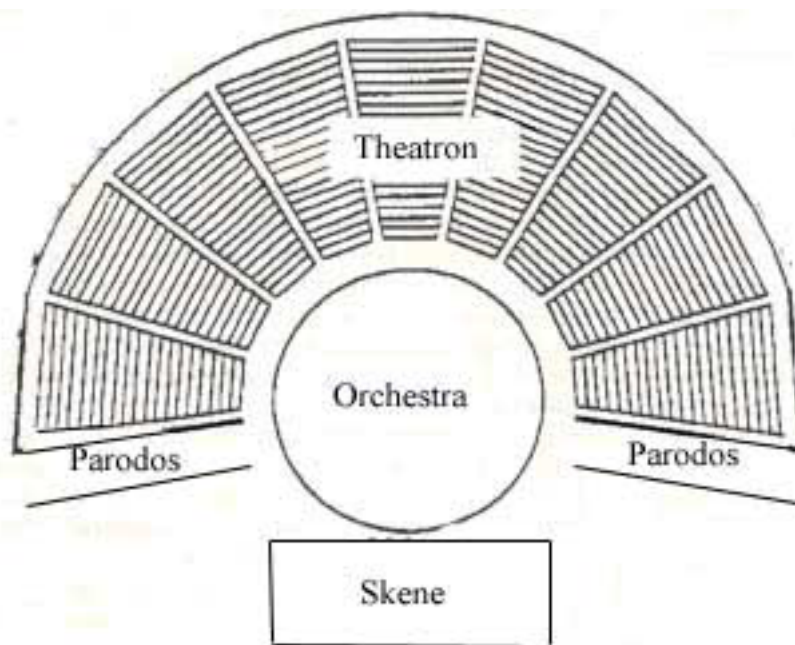
Aristotle begins his analysis of tragedy with this famous definition:

Tragedy, then, is 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 for these emotions.

Collectively throughout the Poetics, Aristotle divides his analysis into six basic parts: plot-making, character delineation, thought and language, speech, song, and spectacle. Aristotle confined most of his analysis to play-making, mentioning the final three merely as components of the whole. Therefore, to understand Aristotle's definition of tragedy more clearly, consider the following facets of his analysis:

1. The writer of tragedy imitates a serious and complete action, of a certain magnitude, represented by what characters on stage say and do.
2. "Action" or \_\_\_\_\_ is the motivation from which deeds emanate, or the rational purpose of the play.
3. The element of pathos (\_\_\_\_\_) is essential to the whole.
4. Plot is the arrangement of carefully selected, carefully sequenced, tragic incidents to represent one complete action.
5. The plot consists of parts or types of incidents in the beginning, middle, and end of the play.
  - Quantitative Parts:  
Prologos...Parados...Episodes...Choric odes...Exodos
  - Organic Parts:
    - a. Reversal of the situation: A change by which the situation turns around toward its opposite
    - b. Recognition: a change from ignorance to knowledge
    - c. Pathos (aka, the scene of suffering): a moment of passion which may be aroused by spectacular means, or may also result from the inner structures of the play
6. Plots may vary in kind:
  - Complex versus simple plot: Complex plots include reversal and recognition; simple plots do not have these elements.
  - Ethically motivated vs. pathetically motivated: Which moves the action? Ethical issues or emotion?
7. The story must seem probable.
8. The plot is divided into two main parts.
  - The complication: The part of the play which extends from the Prologos to the turning point (reversal)
  - \* The unraveling (denouement): The part of the play from the turning point to the end of the play.
9. A play can be unified only if it represents one action, and the best plays are unified by a single plot and a single catastrophe.

10. The central action of the play springs from character and thought, manifesting in the dialogue (in other words, a tragedy is a play).
11. The chorus most directly represents the action for the purpose of the play. [The challenge for the modern audience is to determine who the chorus is, what role(s) the chorus takes on at any given point in the play.]
12. Characters should be carefully delineated to contrast sharply with one another, should be full of life individually, should vary ethically, should be probably, consistent, and should reflect the central action of the play in the development of character.
13. The tragic hero should possess the following traits:
  - Be a ruler or leader
  - Possess a nature that is basically good
  - Face a misfortune ( e.g. catastrophe) brought about by a personal error or frailty. This is traditionally referred to as “the tragic flaw.” The Greeks called this \_\_\_\_\_.For the Greeks, the #1 tragic flaw was \_\_\_\_\_.
14. The language of the tragedy should be elevated and in verse (which in fifth century B.C. was reminiscent of what we call blank verse today—aka, unrhymed poetry in iambic pentameter) and should reflect the rhetorical strategies of persuasion primarily represented in the Episodes and Choric Odes.
15. The special quality of man's pleasure in tragedy comes from the purgation of the passions of fear and pity felt by the audience as they watch the fate of the tragic hero unfold, recognizing in it the universal human lot. It is from this identification that the universal tragic themes emerge.



Parts of a Greek Theater