

Tikrit University
College of Education for Humanities
English Department

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Drama

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Aristotle and Drama

Aristotle: A Greek philosopher (384–322 BCE), student of Plato, teacher of Alexander the Great. His work covered philosophy, science, ethics, politics—and of course, poetics, which is key for drama. Aristotle’s *Poetics* is the earliest surviving work of dramatic theory. It focuses mainly on tragedy, though it touches on epic poetry and storytelling. Aristotle analyzed what makes drama effective, moving, and meaningful.

Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy

“Tragedy 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 (to achieve catharsis in the audience) effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.”

Key Concepts in Drama According to Aristotle

a-Mimesis /məˈmɛsɪs/ or /mɪˈmɛsɪs/ (Imitation)

1-Drama is an imitation of life, not just copying it.

2-Tragedy represents human actions in a way that elicits emotions and offers insight into reality.

b-Catharsis

1-Watching tragedy purges or cleanses emotions of pity and fear.

2-Drama allows audiences to experience strong feelings safely and reflect on human nature.

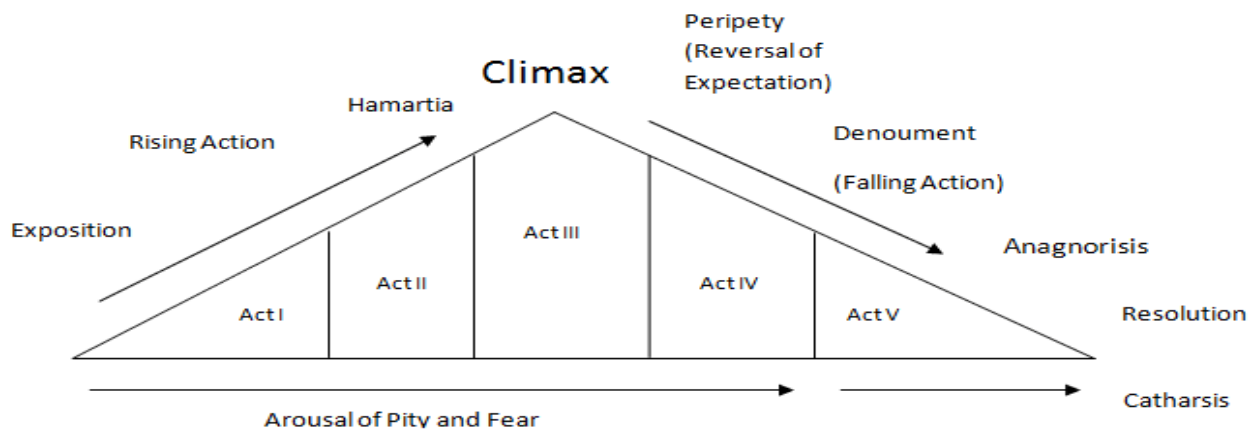
c-The Six Elements of Tragedy

Aristotle identified six elements, ranked by importance:

1. **Plot:** the arrangement of events; most important element. How events unfold (must have beginning, middle, end).
2. **Character:** the people who act in the story; must be consistent and believable.
3. **Thought:** the ideas, themes, and arguments expressed.
4. **Diction:** language, dialogue, and style.
5. **Song:** musical aspects of drama. In Greek theatre, chorus and music enhance emotion.
6. **Spectacle:** visual elements, costumes, scenery; least important to the art itself.

Plot in Tragedy: The Most Important Component

The final sequence of plot is a conscious choice of the playwright to establish a logical line of action. A plot is complete in itself, with a beginning, middle and end. Aristotle talks about the five points in drama: Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action and Resolution. In this context, he mentions some very interesting terms such as hamartia, hubris, peripety, denouement, anagnorisis and finally catharsis.



Conventional Structure of Drama

d-The Ideal Tragic Hero

- 1-Usually noble or high-born, but with a tragic flaw (hamartia).
- 2-Tragic hero's error leads to reversal of fortune (peripeteia) and recognition (anagnorisis).
- 3-Example: Hamlet in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Aristotle's Model of Tragedy

1-Tragic Hero

Noble, virtuous, high-born with a tragic flaw (hamartia)

2-Error

a-Hamartia

The hero makes a mistake or misjudgment that leads to downfall.

b-Hubris

It refers to tragic flaw (mostly pride), inherent in the central character.

3-Reversal of Fortune (Peripety)

Hero's situation changes from good to bad due to the flaw

4-Recognition (Anagnorisis)

Hero realizes the truth about their flaw or circumstances

5-Catastrophe / Suffering

Tragic consequences occur, evoking pity and fear

6-Catharsis

Audience experiences emotional cleansing (pity & fear), leaving a sense of moral or emotional insight.

Hamartia vs Hubris

In drama, **hamartia** refers to the error of judgement on the part of the hero which leads to his eventual downfall. It is different from **hubris**, which refers to tragic flaw (mostly pride), inherent in the central character. **Hubris** is a more integral part of character while **hamartia** is simply a mistake in judgement. **Hamartia** is more redeemable and forgivable for it is connected to human action and not human nature, unlike **Hubris**. For example Macbeth's downfall is not so much because of **hubris** (over ambitious nature) than because of his error of judgement concerning the prophecies. While Greek tragic heroes exhibited **hubris**, the renaissance heroes were more prone to hamartia.

Peripety and Anagnorisis

In tragedy, the tragic hero is presented with a choice and he acts upon it with certain expectation of gain (material or emotional). However, he soon finds out that his expectations are not fulfilled but rather reversed. **This reversal of expectation is called Peripety.** For instance, Macbeth had slain Duncan in the belief that being a king was his best chance of being happy and content. However, he realized after the murder that he could be neither happy nor content.

Anagnorisis means (knowledge of spiritual mysteries.). Confronted with peripety, the hero begins to introspect and reach a point of awareness where he realizes his error. This acquisition of self-knowledge is better known as “anagnorisis”

Macbeth in Act 5, Scene 5 said:

“I pull in resolution, and begin
To doubt the equivocation of the fiend
That lies like truth: 'Fear not, till Birnam wood
Do come to Dunsinane:' and now a wood
Comes toward Dunsinane. Arm, arm, and out!
If this which he avouches does appear,
There is nor flying hence nor tarrying here.
I gin to be aweary of the sun,
And wish the estate o' the world were now undone.”

Both Peripety and Anagnorisis are deeply personal elements. They are not just external factual components of plot but something that defines the character portrayal of the hero. A hero can never be a true tragic hero if his reversal of expectation is not followed by an anagnorisis or realization of his error.

Hamlet's words to Laertes towards the end of the play is another example of anagnorisis:
Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet.
If Hamlet from himself be taken away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,

Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it, then? His madness. If't be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.
Sir, in this audience,
Let my disclaiming from a purpos'd evil
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts
That I have shot my arrow o'er the house
And hurt my brother.

Confronted by tragedy, common man often questions, “Why me?”. The hero’s question “Where did I go wrong?” A hero accepts his responsibility and his error of judgement. Tragedy is not about fatal endings. It is about how the basically good man fails to exercise the right choice and then redeems himself through an epiphanic realization.