

Tikrit University

College of Education for Humanities

English Department



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Drama

(Tragedy, Comedy and Tragi-Comedy: Part 1)

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Tragedy, Comedy and Tragi-Comedy

Aristotle defines **tragedy** as "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 of these emotions".

This definition crystallizes much of Aristotle's arguments throughout the *Poetics*:

- a tragedy is first and foremost the representation of human action;
- the actions represented have serious, often dire consequences and the characters represented are of elevated social status;
- the plot is a complete, coherent whole, lasting long enough to represent adequately the reversal of the hero's fortune;
- the language in which a tragedy is composed employs *tropes and other heightened or unusual uses of speech and a mixture of different poetic meters;
- the mode of imitation in a tragedy is drama as opposed to narrative;
- the tragedy arouses pity and fear in the viewer and brings about *catharsis.

***Trope**

A **trope** is any departure from "ordinary" language in a literary text. "Trope" means "turn"; the term implies a turning away from conventional uses of words. Tropes include metaphors, similes, repetitions, and other figures of speech.

*Catharsis

Aristotle describes **catharsis** as the purging of the emotions of pity and fear that are aroused in the viewer of a tragedy. Debate continues about what Aristotle actually means by catharsis, but the concept is linked to the positive social function of tragedy.

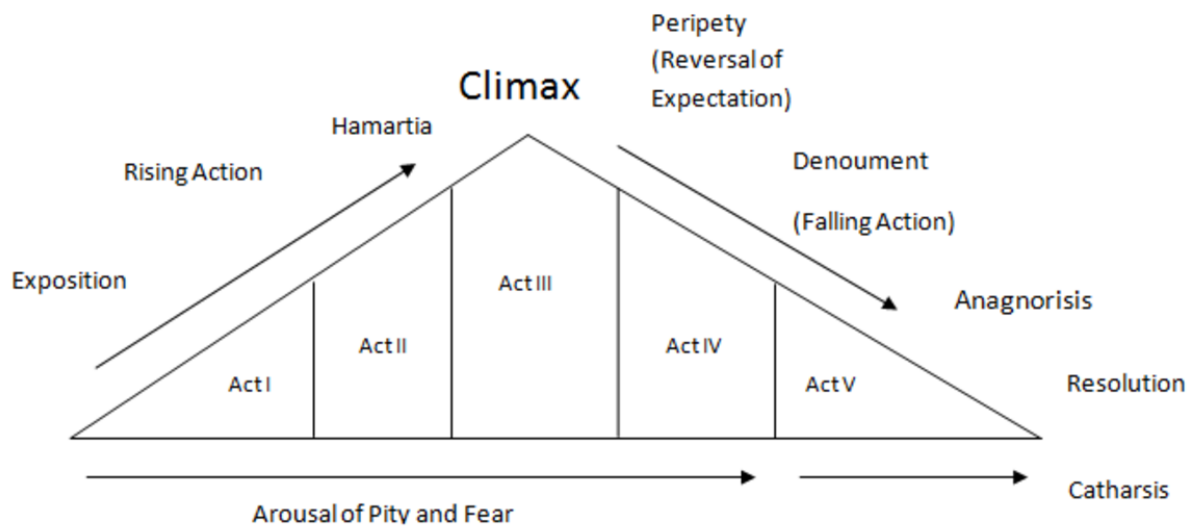
Catharsis is the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions. It is the purification or purgation of the emotions (especially pity and fear) primarily through art. In criticism, catharsis is a metaphor used by Aristotle in the Poetics to describe the effects of true tragedy on the spectator. Drama does generate emotions of pity and terror. However, with the final resolution, the pity and fear aroused in the hearts of the audience is purged out as they reach a restive psychological stage. True tragedy does not leave the audience with a feeling of anxiety or agitation, but with a sense of contentment, and emotional relief. Catharsis refers to this purgation, or release of pent-up emotions. Tragedy does not make a sad man sadder or an angry man angrier. It tends to channelize these negative energies towards an emotional stability. Therefore, true tragedies do not lead to unhealthy accumulation of negative feelings, but rather a sublimation of these feelings

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.

A comprehensive diagram to map different terms used by Aristotle in "Poetics"



Conventional Structure of Drama

***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”.

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 heroes’ 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.