Tragedy
A Student Handbook

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INTRODUCTION

This book is an introduction to tragedy for students at advanced or undergraduate level. It provides an overview of key concepts and developments in tragedy, major dramatists in the genre of tragedy and their most significant plays. Critical perspectives on the genre, on individual writers and plays, are incorporated into the text, offering a sense of some of the major strands of thinking about tragedy over time.

Although the book is broadly chronological, some chapters giving an overview of a playwright or period (for example, Modern British tragedy and Arthur Miller) deal with plays in a different sequence considering the treatment of the tragic genre more holistically.

References within the text

The date given to both play extracts and critical quotations refers to the date of writing or first publication. The page reference is to the edition from which the quotation has been taken. Where there may be confusion, the reference gives both the original date of writing and the date of the edition from which the extract has been taken. For full details of the critical texts quoted from, including the edition used, see the bibliography on pages 248.

Editions of play texts used for quotations included in *Tragedy: A Student Handbook* are listed on pages 9-10.

Dates for Shakespeare's plays are taken from Andrew Gurr's *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*.

Terms and concepts emboldened in the text are glossed on pages 236 to 239.

Bold page numbers are used to cross reference to other sections of this publication.

The index

Page references in bold indicate a substantial discussion of the play, playwright or concept. Page numbers in italics refer to the glossary.

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INTRODUCING

TRAGEDY

WHAT IS TRAGEDY?

The word **tragedy** is in common usage in everyday life. In any one day you may hear it used in casual conversation, or in the media, to describe everything from a missed penalty in a football match to the death of a child, from the pain caused by man-made or natural disasters to a pop star's ill-advised haircut. While the light-hearted and exaggerated use of the term (missed penalties, break up of celebrity relationships) may have little to do with literary concepts of tragedy, descriptions of real life suffering as a tragedy reflect our need to make sense of, and dignify the unimaginable, unspeakable, inexplicable and unfair. These aspects of life are at the heart of tragic drama.

The critic Raymond Williams wrote that to restrict the term tragedy only to literature, as some literary critics have sought to do, is to deny to real events the understanding which tragic drama can confer on them. Throughout history one of the roles of tragedy has been to provide a means of understanding our real lives through fictional representation. Tragedy is not just an artistic exercise, but a way of dignifying and making sense of suffering. For this reason some people suggest tragedy is a genre unsuited to Christian societies in which human suffering is seen in the context of God and the afterlife.

> I have known tragedy in the life of a man driven back into silence, in an unregarded working life. In his ordinary and private death, I saw a terrifying loss of connection between men, and even between father and son: a loss of connection which was, however, a particular historical and social fact.
>
> *Raymond Williams 1979: 13*

How can art help us to cope with suffering? How can it make sense of pain and death, and of the sense of injustice that often accompanies these central human experiences? Why does seeing suffering represented on stage in a tragic drama produce a sense of enjoyment rather than merely add to our sense of pain or awareness of the suffering in the world?

The word tragedy itself was coined by the ancient Greeks who first chose to put these crucial questions about human suffering on the public stage almost 2500 years ago in democratic Athens, a non-Christian society. Translated literally the word means 'goat song' which may refer to the prize awarded to the playwright whose play took first prize in the annual competition.

Pleasure and pain

One of the paradoxical characteristics of tragic drama – and a defining difference between the literary and everyday concept of tragedy – is that at the same time

as feeling sorrow and pity for those whose suffering we see on stage, we also take pleasure in the representation of suffering. This pleasure comes partly from the delight we take in beautifully crafted works of art in general. It also comes from our response more specifically to the tragic nature of the play and what we feel we have gained from the experience: emotional solace, perhaps a greater political understanding of our world, or perhaps a sense of striving to understand something almost beyond words. Art itself survives death and goes on speaking to generations whose sufferings could not even be imagined by the people for whom a tragedy was originally written. In this sense the existence of tragedy as a literary concept seems to defeat suffering and even death:

> Tragedy is the art form created to confront the most difficult experiences we face: death, loss, injustice, thwarted passion, despair.

Jennifer Wallace 2007: 1

The scope of this book

Although tragedy as an art form has also developed in genres such as the novel and films, it has been predominantly a theatrical form, and that is the main focus of this book.

Art and literature dealing with the common experience of human suffering and recognised as tragic is found in cultures throughout the world. This book focuses on the Western tradition, tracing its origins from classical Greek tragedies through the Renaissance to the late 19th and early 20th-century European tragedies. It also considers modern Irish, American and British concepts of tragedy, and what the term has come to mean at the beginning of the 21st century.

CONCEPTS OF TRAGEDY

Tragedy has been important in Western art for two and a half thousand years. Theories about its nature have inevitably changed and developed over that time. There are, however, certain concepts which have remained more or less central to what we understand the term to mean. These concepts have their origin in *The Poetics* of the Greek philosopher **Aristotle** who wrote in about 330 BC. They can be summarised as follows:

1. The drama is usually centred upon one or more main character (**the protagonist**) who acts in a way which proves disastrous.

2. The scope of the play's action is limited in terms of plot (which should not be too complex). The time the action takes to elapse should also be limited, as should the location of the action (**the unities**).

3. There is a calamitous outcome (**the catastrophe**) which causes an emotional response in its audience.

TRAGEDY IN ANCIENT GREECE

In Greek the word **protagonist** meant the first of the three professional actors who played all the speaking roles in the drama. It has come to mean the individual whose suffering constitutes a central part of the tragedy. Sometimes he or she is known as the **tragic hero** (or heroine), but since these terms tend to carry with them the suggestion of virtue, and since not all **tragic protagonists** can uncontroversially be called virtuous, it makes sense to use the older Greek word.

The classical protagonist

When Aristotle wrote *The Poetics* he was thinking of the kind of central character to be found in the plays of **Sophocles** (**p.43**). The protagonist was a man who had a certain nobility about him, a man of high birth who was courageous and generous in character. The Greek word Aristotle used is **megalopsychia**, 'greatness of soul'. The protagonist could not be a man who was totally good, or else the audience would feel only disgust at the injustice of his destruction in the play's catastrophe. Neither could he be someone wicked, for then the audience would rejoice at his fall.

> There remains an error between these two extremes. This is the sort of man who is not conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall from misery is not due to vice and depravity, but rather to some error, a man who enjoys prosperity and a high reputation, like Oedipus or Thyestes and other famous members of families like theirs.
>
> *Aristotle c.330 BC: 48*

Hamartia – the fatal error of judgement

The protagonist is a character with whom the audience can identify, someone who makes a wrong decision for good reasons or with the best of intentions.

Aristotle called the protagonist's error of judgement **hamartia**. It is often the result of a condition called by the Greeks **hubris**, the excessive pride which brings down divine punishment upon the head of the protagonist. Conventional Greek religion in the classical period saw the gods as selfish and vengeful. They guarded their status jealously, and would punish any mortal whose sense of personal pride and self-importance seemed to them to exceed what was proper to humans. In a text that Greeks regarded as a guide to their culture's values, Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*, the goddess Hera explains to Zeus why she always takes action against any mortal who offends her – because that is what makes her a god:

> Even men will achieve their purposes for other men, though they are mortal and without the knowledge that we have. How then, when my claim is to be the greatest of the goddesses … how could I not weave trouble for the Trojans, when they have angered me?

Homer c.700 BC: 304

The story of Oedipus exemplifies the concept of hamartia. According to Greek myth, Oedipus is the man who, having been abandoned to die at birth, grows up to kill his father Laius, King of Thebes. He then take over both his crown and his widow, Jocasta – Oedipus's own mother.

At the beginning of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* Oedipus is at the height of his powers: he has slain the Sphinx, the monster which terrorised the people of Thebes, and is attempting to find out the cause of the plague afflicting his city:

> Now we pray to you. You cannot equal the gods,
>
> Your children know that, bending at your altar.
>
> But we do rate you first of men,
>
> Both in the common crises of our lives
>
> And face-to-face encounters with the gods…

Chorus to Oedipus, Sophocles: Oedipus Rex 429? BC: 161

Oedipus discovers that Apollo has sent the plague because Thebes still harbours the man who killed the previous king, Laius. In trying to save the city from the plague, he uncovers the truth: that he is the man who killed the king, his own father, and therefore is also married to his mother. Jocasta commits suicide and Oedipus blinds himself. His unwitting error of judgement and the terrible punishment he suffers demonstrate both the power of the gods and man's lack of power over his life and destiny.

Hubris and anagnorisis

The protagonist in classical tragedy commits **hubris** by choosing to defy the claims of the gods. In Sophocles' play *Antigone*, Creon, King of Thebes commits hubris when he refuses to bury the body of Antigone's brother Polynices, who was killed fighting against his city. Following the suicides of his wife and son, Creon comes to realise that he has made a mistake in defying the gods of the underworld. He recognises he has committed hubris, and so reaches a state of **anagnorisis** – recognition of his tragic error of judgement:

> The mighty words of the proud are paid in full
>
> with mighty blows of fate, and at long last
>
> those blows will teach us wisdom

The final words of the Chorus, Sophocles: Antigone 441? BC: 128

TRAGEDY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Tragedie is to sey a certayn storie,
As olde bookes maken us memorie,
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
And is yfallen out of heigh degree
Into mysterie, and endeth wrechedly.

(Tragedy is a type of story found in ancient books in which is preserved the glory of one who had high status but fell into a terrible state and ended his days wretchedly.)

Chaucer: The Monk's Tale late 14th century

Tragedy in a Christian age?

In the Middle Ages ideas about tragedy became rather simplified. Some people argue that tragedy is not possible in Christian societies: if it is believed God's providence will ensure that ultimately the wicked are punished and the good rewarded, there is no urgent need for art to make sense of human suffering and those men who seek earthly power are deluded. At the end of *The Monk's Tale* (c.1400), Geoffrey Chaucer suggests tragedy is nothing more than the inevitable turning of the Wheel of Fortune:

> But that Fortune alwey wole assaille
>
> With unwar strook the regnes that hath been proude;
>
> For whan man trusteth hire, than wole she faille,
>
> And covere her brighte face with a cloude.

(Fortune will always assault with an unexpected blow the kings who have been proud; whenever a man trusts her, then will she let him down, covering her bright face with a cloud.)

Chaucer: The Monk's Tale late 14th century

Tragedy during this period shrunk in scope to a moral message about how the turning of the Wheel of Fortune will bring about the fall of kings and princes who put their faith in earthly power rather than God.

TRAGEDY IN THE RENAISSANCE

A royal protagonist

By the Renaissance this was still the basis of the view of a theorist such as Sir Philip Sidney, but there was also a new, more sceptical and more political slant. Sidney, writing in around 1581 was sure that tragedy

> teacheth the uncertainty of the world, and upon how weak foundations guilden roofs are builded.
>
> *Sir Philip Sidney c.1581: 45*

That is, tragedy also showed tyrants that their crimes would be revealed and punished by God.

It was the dramatists, however, who decided that kings and princes were not the only candidates for the role of protagonist. Although Shakespeare's tragedies typically concern noble figures such as *Hamlet* (**p.87**) and *Othello* (**p.94**), Shylock the Jewish moneylender in *The Merchant of Venice* can certainly also be seen as a tragic figure. Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* was a scholar (**p.67**), and Tamburlaine originally a shepherd. John Webster's tragic protagonists in *The Duchess of Malfi* (**p.132**) and *The White Devil* are women, albeit aristocrats. Early modern English tragedy looked beyond the protagonist – the noble individual – showing not only a wider interest in society, but also questioning whether the universe is ruled by divine justice, a radical, even dangerous perspective at the time. In *King Lear* (**p.103**), the play's ending notoriously defies any notion that God has rewarded the just. The innocent Cordelia cannot be rescued in time and is hanged; the most senior surviving nobleman, Albany, proposes a division of the kingdom, the very policy which began the descent of the kingdom into chaos; the king's most loyal retainer, Kent, declines the offer of the crown for an obscure but ominous reason, hinting at his intention to commit suicide; and there is no clear resolution about what will happen next as the survivors stand on a stage littered with noble corpses.

ALBANY	Friends of my soul, you twain [*To Kent and Edgar*]
	Rule in this realm, and the gored state sustain.
KENT	I have a journey, sir, shortly to go:
	My master calls me, and I must not say no.
EDGAR	The weight of this sad time we must obey:
	Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
	The oldest hath borne most: we that are young
	Shall never see so much nor live so long.

Exeunt with a dead march

5.3.340-47

THE ROMANTICS

Tragedy delights by affording a shadow of the pleasure which exists in pain.

Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Defence of Poetry 1821

Reinterpreting the Shakespearean protagonist

After the great days of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre tragedy in England, fell under the influence of neo-classical ideas (p.62). By the end of the 18th century it was German thinkers such as Goethe who were most significant. A key idea in the Romantic movement, of which Goethe was an important part, was that the world of the imagination offered a liberating vision against the constraints of society, with its hierarchies of power and organised religion.

The tragic protagonist in the Romantic period was a sensitive individual striving for self-expression in a world which did not recognise the validity of personal feeling and vision. Sensibility, not royal blood, was what made an individual a potentially tragic protagonist. In England, Romanticism expressed its tragic vision in critical and theatrical interpretations of Shakespeare. Hamlet, according to the poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was a man who gave too much weight to the life of the imagination and could not engage successfully with the real world. The tragedy of the Romantic protagonist lay in the failure of the world to fulfil the emotional and creative vision of the sensitive individual. Some fulfilment could happen in the private act of reading, inside the world of the imagination. Indeed, Charles Lamb suggested that Shakespeare ought only to be read since the plays lived best in the imagination, not on stage where they were constrained by the practicalities of performance. For the Romantics:

> man could free himself only by rejecting or escaping from society, and by seeing his own deepest activities, in love, in art, in nature as essentially asocial and even anti-social.
>
> *Raymond Williams 1979: 73*

In continental Europe Romantic works such as Goethe's *Faust* (completed 1832) and Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867) are almost unstageable in their entirety, but feature heroes striving mightily for emotional and spiritual fulfilment. The protagonists of Chekhov and Ibsen are often sensitive 'Romantic' individuals: in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890; p.149) Hedda is a woman raging against the world which traps her. However, by the end of the 19th century, the Romantic instinct had become something obscure and, in her case, merely self-destructive as she kills herself:

> Hedda longs for beauty, for some different kind of perspective upon her world. 'It's a release to know that in spite of everything the unpremeditated act of courage is still possible. Something with at least a spark of instinctive beauty' (Act 3) … But her motivation ultimately remains opaque, both to those around her and to her audience.
>
> *Jennifer Wallace 2007: 68-9*

20TH-CENTURY INTERPRETATIONS

The tragic flaw

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the Romantic focus upon the uniqueness of the character of the individual protagonist, combined with the beginnings of the study of psychology, encouraged close scrutiny of the character of the protagonist as a means of understanding the nature of tragedy. A further factor was the contemporary belief in the ability of 'great men' to transform history on their own, an idea found in writers such as Thomas Carlyle.

A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) proposed the idea of the **tragic flaw** in the psychological make-up of the protagonist. (This is not to be confused with Aristotle's notion of **hamartia**, which is a matter of action, not character.)

> What we do feel strongly, as tragedy advances to its close, is that calamities and catastrophe follow inevitably from the deeds of men, and that the main source of these deeds is character.
>
> *A.C. Bradley 1904: 29*

Bradley drew on the ideas of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) who argued that political and social progress is made by the synthesis of opposing and conflicting forces. The character of the protagonist embodies just such a conflict: greatness in conflict with evil. According to this view, the protagonist is noble (not necessarily 'good'), but possesses a flaw which means that their downfall is inevitable. External factors are significant, but nothing like as significant as a conflicted individual moral psychology which brings about the opposite of what the character intends. According to Bradley, Hamlet's moral nature (**p.87**) is fragile, and the shock of his mother's re-marriage causes him to subside into melancholy. Othello's flaw is jealousy (**p.94**). When his lieutenant Iago falsely informs him that his wife Desdemona is having an affair:

> such jealousy as Othello's converts human nature into chaos, and liberates the beast in man.
>
> *A.C. Bradley 1904: 169*

Othello murders his wife and commits suicide. Bradley's view of Othello's character is also inflected by the 'scientific' racism propounded by many in the era in which he wrote.

TRAGEDY FOR THE 20TH CENTURY AND BEYOND

The tragedy of the common man

In the 20th century the protagonist came to be any man or woman. Partly this was a political assertion of the rights of the individual, particularly for American dramatists.

> 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 possibly lead in our time – the heart and spirit of the average man.

> *Arthur Miller: 'Tragedy and the Common Man', New York Times 1949*

But the tragic protagonist in contemporary drama does not quite seem to be anybody. A residue of Romanticism insists that the tragic protagonist must be someone who is prepared to devote themselves to some idea or notion, which may range from a political or economic belief to the simple need for utter personal integrity in a world which demands compromises. In the case of the former, the political and economic belief may be wrong, and this is the source of the tragedy. In the case of Arthur Miller's Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (p.215), it is Loman's dedication to American capitalism that leads to his destruction: he fails to see that men themselves become products with market value, and that once he can no longer behave convincingly as a salesman he too will be discarded as unsaleable stock.

Alternatively the dramatist can present the protagonist as fundamentally good, but doomed in attempting to be virtuous in a world where selfishness is what society values. One such example is Isobel, the protagonist of David Hare's *The Secret Rapture* (p.225).

In both cases, however, there is a refusal of the protagonist to surrender: rather than compromise their sense of who they are, they choose death or destruction. While we, the audience, may recognise the futility of this uncompromising and fatal view of life, the plays encourage us also to admire the man (or woman) who takes to its logical extreme the right to assert an individual belief in the face of an uncomprehending or unsympathetic society.

> The commonest of men may take on … stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest, the battle to secure his rightful place in the world.

> *Arthur Miller: 'Tragedy and the Common Man', New York Times 1949*

It could be argued of classical and early modern tragedy that the nobility of the protagonist increases the tragic impact, since their fall, as a ruler or aristocrat,

greatly affects the society around them. But in modern tragedy the protagonist's very ordinariness may also make him or her able to stand for a wider class of people, and their political views: women, the working class, and other racial groups who have struggled for emancipation during the 20th century. Marlene and her sister Joyce in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982; **p.227**) come to stand for the different political and personal choices faced by women in Britain in the 1980s. Donal Davoren, the protagonist of Sean O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923; **p.169**), dramatises the self-mythologising of Irish nationalism. Davoren, an impecunious poet, is happy to be seen as an IRA gunman in order to impress a young woman in his tenement house, but his deception leads to the shooting of the impressionable Minnie Powell by the British army. This gives Davoren's romantic self-promotion a bitterly ironic edge:

> To the people the end of life is the life created for them; to the poet the end of life is the life that he creates for himself; life has a stifling grip upon the people's throat – it is the poet's musician.

Sean O'Casey 1923: 107

The 20th-century protagonist is devoted to the fulfilment of his or her own personal ideal or the following of his or her own beliefs. The cost of that fulfilment upon themselves and society is often at the heart of the tragedy.