

# The Poetics: an essay on tragedies

by Aristotle

(adapted and modernized for the non-philosophy major by Devin Ozdogu)

**All tragedies are imitations of real life.** They intend to create stories that mimic human interactions in a serious, complete manner. Aristotle calls this **mimesis** (the Greek root that provides us with the words “imitation” and “mimicry”).

The story of a tragedy is drama instead of narrative. In other words, tragedy “shows” rather than “tells”. Instead of listening to reasons not to behave a certain way, the audience is shown what will happen if we do. The author communicates a warning message to his audience, if you misbehave like the tragic hero, then you too will suffer the same fate.

According to Aristotle, tragedy is more sophisticated than histories because histories simply relate what has happened while tragedy dramatizes what may happen. For instance, when we read the history of Martin Luther King Jr. we learn the events that led up to his assassination. Facts are memorized, perspectives are analyzed. However, we only learned what happened to Martin Luther King Jr. We don't necessarily learn how exactly his story is similar to our own.

Yet, when we read a tragedy such as “Waiting”, we are supposed to see pieces of ourselves in the characters. We are supposed to think back to when we have made the same mistakes or thought the same way as the main character. We are forced to consider what could happen to us. Sure, history teaches us how to act as a society. But tragedy is better at touching us on a more individual level.

Thus, history deals with the particulars of people, time, and location while tragedies tackle the universal condition of human nature. Events in history may be the results of accidents or coincidence, and as such it's difficult to learn personal truths from life's randomness. But tragedies create a clear cause-and-effect chain that revolves completely around the

characters and the choices they make. Tragedies therefore aim to encourage the audience to envision themselves in these same cause-and-effect chains.

**Plot is the most important feature of tragedy.** Aristotle defines plot as “the arrangement of the incidents.” He is most concerned with the structure of the plot, not just its outcome. According to Aristotle, tragedies where the outcome depends on a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain of actions are superior to stories that rely on coincidence or chance.

Aristotle outlines how each part of the plot must fit a coherent structure to form a tragedy. In his argument, he writes about each part of the dramatic structure: inciting incident, rising actions, climax, falling actions, and dénouement/catastrophe.

The *inciting incident* of the play must start the cause-and-effect chain and must not be dependent on any coincidences. In fact, the entire plot must be complete and structurally self-contained. Each action must lead to the next without any outside intervention or random interference. Similarly, the author should not include events that are not natural or outside the realm of rational human behavior. The characters must choose to create the complication or conflict (what Aristotle calls the *desis*). The *rising actions* that lead to the *climax* must be caused directly from the character’s choices. The end, or *resolution (lusis)*, must be caused by the preceding events and should solve or resolve the problem created during the inciting incident.

The plot itself must be of a certain, serious magnitude. It must have serious consequences for the players involved. A tragedy cannot influence the audience if its consequences are meaningless or forgettable. Aristotle argues that plots should not be too brief; more incidents and themes create greater richness and value.

The plot may be either simple or complex. Although, a complex plot is better. Simple plots have only a “change of fortune” (Aristotle uses the term, **peripeteia**). Complex plots have both this reversal of fortune and a moment of recognition (called **anagnorisis**) that

is connect to the catastrophe. The *anagnorsis* is a change from ignorance to knowledge where the character realizes some great truth about himself or herself. Aristotle argues that the best plots have the *peripeteia* leading directly to the *anagnorsis* (which in turn creates the catastrophe).

In addition, the more the audience can relate to the story of the characters, the more the story will be able to hold the emotions of the audiences. The stronger the connection between the audience and the characters the better the play will be.

**Character has the second place in importance.** In a perfect tragedy, the character will support plot because their personal motivations will drive the cause-and-effect chain of actions. The tragic hero should be renowned and prosperous. The more important the character, the greater the fall from fortune can be (this is why most tragedies feature royalty as their tragic hero). If the character is of no importance, then the audience will not care much if he suffers or not. The *peripeteia* that the hero suffers should be the direct result of some great error or flaw in the character (what Aristotle calls **hamartia**).

The meaning of the Greek word *hamartia*, however, more closely means “mistake” than “flaw.” The role of *hamartia* in tragedy is not necessarily to point out that the character has poor morals or great sins. Instead *hamartia* highlights how little he knows about himself. Hence, the *peripeteia* is really a set of self-destructive actions that are performed in blindness. The actions of the tragic hero lead to results that are ironically the opposite of the character’s intentions (often termed “**tragic irony**”). The *anagnorsis* is when the character realizes how his actions were actually harming him instead of helping him.

The most critical moment in a tragedy is when the character reveals something about himself, when he achieves *anagnorsis* and achieves a greater understanding of himself. This is moment of self-discovery is supposed to be mimicked by the audience. The irony is that the whole purpose of the play is for the audience to make some realization about themselves by watching the tragic hero realize something about himself.

**It is crucial that the audience be able to recognize themselves in the main character.** It is the moment when an audience member might look at the tragic hero and say "Ah, that is he; ah, that is me." When the audience member can identify part of himself in the hero and can feel pity for the suffering that the hero has gone through. We pity those we can connect to. Then, the audience feels fear because they themselves might suffer the same fate. Through this process of experiencing pity and fear, Aristotle hypothesizes that the audience will be able to cleanse themselves of the same flaws as the characters. This moment of identification and subsequent emotions is called **catharsis**. In essence, the audience members should learn as much about themselves as the tragic hero learns about himself.

Thus, the whole point of a tragedy is instructive in nature. Aristotle's entire theory of tragedy intends to teach the audience about themselves by showing the dangers of not knowing themselves.