Greek Theory of Tragedy: Aristotle's *Poetics*

The classic discussion of Greek tragedy is Aristotle's *Poetics*. He defines tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious and also as having magnitude, complete in itself." He continues, "Tragedy is a form of drama exciting the emotions of pity and fear. Its action should be single and complete, presenting a reversal of fortune, involving persons renowned and of superior attainments, and it should be written in poetry embellished with every kind of artistic expression." The writer presents "incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to interpret its catharsis of such of such emotions" (by catharsis, Aristotle means a purging or sweeping away of the pity and fear aroused by the tragic action).

The basic difference Aristotle draws between tragedy and other genres, such as comedy and the epic, is the "tragic pleasure of pity and fear" the audience feel watching a tragedy. In order for the tragic hero to arouse these feelings in the audience, he cannot be either all good or all evil but must be someone the audience can identify with; however, if he is superior in some way(s), the tragic pleasure is intensified. His disastrous end results from a mistaken action, which in turn arises from a tragic flaw or from a tragic error in judgment. Often the tragic flaw is *hubris*, an excessive pride that causes the hero to ignore a divine warning or to break a moral law. It has been suggested that because the tragic hero's suffering is greater than his offense, the audience feels pity; because the audience members perceive that they could behave similarly, they feel pity.

**Medieval Tragedy and The Wheel of Fortune**

The medieval tragedy is a prose or poetic narrative, not a drama. Tragedy was perceived as a reversal of fortune, a fall from a high position. This view of tragedy derives from the Medieval concept of fortune, which was personified as Dame Fortune, a blindfolded woman who turned a wheel at whim; men were stationed at various places on the wheel—the top of the wheel represented the best fortune, being under the wheel the worst fortune. However, the wheel could turn suddenly and the man on top could suddenly be under the wheel, without warning.

**Elizabethan and Shakespearean Tragedy**

A distinctly English form of tragedy begins with the Elizabethans. The translation of Seneca and the reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* were major influences. Many critics and playwrights, such as Ben Jonson, insisted on observing the classical unities of action, time and place (the action should be one whole and take place in one day and in one place). However, it was romantic tragedy, which Shakespeare wrote in *Richard II*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*, which prevailed. Romantic tragedy disregarded the unities (as in the use of subplots), mixed tragedy and comedy, and emphasized action, spectacle, and—increasingly—sensation. Shakespeare violated the unities in these ways and also in mixing poetry and prose and using the device of a play-within-a-play, as in *Hamlet*. The Elizabethans and their Jacobean successors acted on stage the violence that the Greek dramatists reported. The Elizabethan and later the Jacobean playwright had a diverse audience to please, ranging from Queen Elizabeth and King James I and their courtiers to the lowest classes.

Christopher Marlowe's tragedies showed the resources of the English language with his magnificent blank verse, as in the *Tragedy of Dr. Faustus*, and the powerful effects that could be achieved by focusing on a towering protagonist, as in *Tamburlaine*. In Elizabethan tragedy, the individual's choices lead to violence and conflict. A distinctly non-Aristotelian form of tragedy developed during this period was the tragicomedy. In a tragicomedy, the action and subject matter seem to require a tragic ending, but it is avoided by a reversal which leads to a happy ending; sometimes the tragicomedy alternates serious and comic actions throughout the play. Because it blends tragedy and comedy, the tragicomedy is sometimes referred to as a "mixed" kind.
The Six Classical Principles of Aristotelian Tragedy

In the classical Aristotelian Tragedy, there are six principles that must be followed:

1) The tragic hero must be of royal or noble blood. The character must also be considered great in his or her environment.

Example: Such characters include King Lear, from Shakespeare's play King Lear, who is the ruler of Britain. Such characters can also be found in other tragedies, such as Oedipus in Sophocles' works. These characters are looked up to by some group of people below them in social status, such as the subservient followers of Oedipus' kingdom who find him to be a hero for freeing the land from a curse prior to the play.

2) The tragic hero must be imperfect; otherwise, none of the readers or viewers would be able to relate to the character. In order to relate to the tragic hero, he or she must be similar to the average person in essence.

Example: In Oedipus Rex, Oedipus is a king who seeks the best for his kingdom. The citizens of Thebes are dying from a plague, and Oedipus feels sympathy as any other person would. He also feels that there must be justice in his land, a value held in much esteem by Greeks of the time. Though he is a king and considered to be somewhat of a savior, his rage and readiness to punish work against him alongside his hubris, which are his clear imperfections.

3) In King Lear's case, nearly every character he is close to dies as a result of his decision to banish his own daughter Cordelia for not telling him she loves him the most. He is filled with so much hubris that he becomes livid over the fact that she will not tell him she loves him in order to gain a portion of the kingdom, and though Cordelia is his favorite daughter, he lashes out at her harshly, and in the end pays the ultimate price of losing her and everything he has, including his own life.

4) The punishment the tragic hero receives is usually much harsher than they deserve. This causes pity and fear, which are important factors of Aristotelian tragedy.

Example: In Oedipus Rex, Oedipus gouges his own eyes out in order to permanently blind himself for the sins he commits. As soon as he realizes that he is his father's murderer, which causes the plague in his kingdom, and that he marries his own mother, he punishes himself as he had promised by banishing himself and adds a harsher aspect than he deserves by blinding himself.

5) The tragic hero's loss leads him or her to some sort of gain in awareness, self-knowledge, or learning.

Example: In the final act of King Lear, King Lear carries his favorite daughter, Cordelia, in his arms as she dies, and he realizes that he was unfair to treat her and everyone the way he had. He realizes his inability to live without hearing her say she loved him caused all of the trouble he goes through, he loses his sanity and dies, which is all a result of his hubris and anger.

6) A function of tragedy is to stimulate the feelings of pity and fear so that watching the tragedy unfold cleanses viewers of these "unhealthy" emotions. It is not meant to leave the audience in a state of depression, but to help purge them of solemn emotions.

Example: By the end of Oedipus Rex, the chorus chants a lesson about how Oedipus' actions, especially his hubris, lead to his downfall, a lesson the audience takes away as they are "purged."