Tragedy

Definition: **tragedy** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Form of drama in which a noble hero (the protagonist) meets a fate inherent in the drama's action. *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles is an early example, which was unmatched until the tragedies of Christopher Marlowe. Aristotle's *Poetics* systematized tragedy and introduced such ideas as *anagnorisis* (recognition) and *catharsis* (purging of pity). See also Aeschylus; Euripides; Greek Drama; Shakespeare, William

Summary Article: **tragedy**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

form of drama that depicts the suffering of a heroic individual who is often overcome by the very obstacles he is struggling to remove. The protagonist may be brought low by a character flaw or, as Hegel stated, caught in a "collision of equally justified ethical aims."

See also drama, Western; comedy.

**Ancient Tragedies**

The earliest tragedies were part of the Attic religious festivals held in honor of the god Dionysus (5th cent. B.C.). The ritual entailed the presentation of four successive plays (three tragedies, one comedy). Each was based on situations and characters drawn from myth, and the tragedies ended in catastrophe for the heroes and heroines. The most famous ancient tragedies are probably the *Oresteia* (a trilogy) of Aeschylus, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and Euripides' *Trojan Women*.

In his definitive analysis of tragedy in the *Poetics* (late 4th cent. B.C.), Aristotle points out its ritual function as catharsis: spectators are purged of their own emotions of pity and fear through their vicarious participation in the drama. The plays of the Roman tragedian Seneca—including *Hercules, Medea, Phaedra*, and *Agamemnon*—were established on certain conventions, notably violence, revenge, and the appearance of ghosts.

**Renaissance and Later Tragedy**

Roman works are significant not for their intrinsic grandeur but for their usefulness as models for such Renaissance dramas as Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (1587) and Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1594), often cited as the first revenge tragedy. These in turn served as models for the towering tragedies of the period, Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* (1588); Shakespeare's *Othello, Macbeth, Hamlet*, and *King Lear* (1600–1607); and John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* (1614). The tradition of the tragic hero was to continue for the next 300 years, reinforced not only by English dramatists but by such European playwrights as the Spaniards Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca; the Frenchmen Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine; and the Germans G. E. Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller.

**Moral, Domestic, and Political Tragedy**

Tragedy can also be a vision of life, one shared by most Western cultures and having its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. To reflect this wider sense of the human dilemma, where men feel compelled to confront evil, yet where evil prevails, a second dramatic tradition evolved. Its roots go back once again to religious drama, in this case the mystery and morality plays of medieval England, France, and Germany (see miracle play; morality play). Unlike classical drama, these plays, of which *Everyman* is the
best known, emphasize the accountability of ordinary people. Even plays about the divine Christ stress human suffering and sacrifice.

The tragic lot of the common man and woman thus found its way into the dramatic repertory of later ages. George Lillo's *London Merchant* (1731) is an early example of domestic tragedy, as Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death* (1835) is of political tragedy. Henrik Ibsen's *Doll's House* (1879) and *An Enemy of the People* (1882) are also superb examples of the domestic and the political tragedy, respectively.

**Twentieth-Century Tragedy**

The cataclysmic events of the 20th cent.—two world wars, the destructive use of atomic power, the disintegration of family and community life—have caused a radical diminution of the vision of life embodied by the earlier domestic and political tragedy. Its shrinkage is evident in such plays as Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* (1941), Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953).

Each of the latter works can be labeled tragedy, if rather loosely. The pattern first seen by Aristotle is still discernible. The protagonist is, as always, defeated by opposing forces—Freudian behavior patterns, wartime attrition, loss of identity, drugs, or alcohol, if not pride, ambition, and jealousy. And still felt is the mysterious cathartic exaltation at the end of a powerful theatrical experience. Despite quibbling about the exact meaning and application of the word *tragedy*, most critics would agree in saying that some of the works of such 20th-century dramatists as Anton Chekhov, August Strindberg, Luigi Pirandello, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Ugo Betti, Michel de Ghelderode, Sean O'Casey, Jean Anouilh, and Tennessee Williams may be classed as tragedy.

**Bibliography**

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