

**Poetic justice** is a [literary device](#) in which ultimately [virtue](#) is [rewarded](#) and viciousness is [punished](#). In modern literature<sup>[1]</sup> it is often accompanied by an [ironic](#) twist of fate related to the character's own action.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Origin of the term

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English drama critic [Thomas Rymer](#) coined the phrase in *The Tragedies of the Last Age Consider'd* (1678) to describe how a work should inspire proper [moral](#) behaviour in its audience by illustrating the triumph of good over evil. The demand for poetic justice is consistent in Classical authorities and shows up in [Horace](#), [Plutarch](#), and [Quintillian](#), so Rymer's phrasing is a reflection of a commonplace. [Philip Sidney](#), in *Defense of Poetry*, argued that poetic justice was, in fact, the reason that fiction should be allowed in a civilized nation.

## History of the notion

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Notably, poetic justice does not merely require that vice be punished and virtue rewarded, but also that logic triumph. If, for example, a character is dominated by greed for most of a romance or drama; he cannot become generous. The action of a play, poem, or fiction must obey the rules of logic as well as morality. During the late 17th century, critics pursuing a [neo-classical](#) standard would criticize [William Shakespeare](#) in favor of [Ben Jonson](#) precisely on the grounds that Shakespeare's characters change during the course of the play<sup>[3]</sup>. When [Restoration comedy](#), in particular, flouted poetic justice by rewarding libertines and punishing dull-witted moralists, there was a backlash in favor of drama, in particular, of more strict moral correspondence.

## See also

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- [Contrappasso](#)
- [Karma](#)
- [Unintended consequences](#)

## References

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1. "Poetic Justice - Examples of Poetic Justice in Literature" . 19 December 2018.

2. Manuela Gertz (July 2010). *Poetic Justice in William Faulkner's Absalom Absalom* . GRIN Verlag. p. 4-. ISBN 978-3-640-66116-9.  
Retrieved 20 May 2013.

3. (See [Shakespeare's reputation](#) for more on the Shakespeare/Jonson dichotomy.)

## External links

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