ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF TRAGEDY

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

Aristotle was the most famous student of the philosopher Plato, though he famously rejected many of his teacher's ideas. (For example, Plato thought that that most poetry and theater was bad—Aristotle disagreed!). His work is, in comparison to Plato's, much less "literary" and more "academic" (which is why we aren't spending as much time on it in this class). However, he's been hugely influential to later Western thought. In fact, outside of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures), its hard to think of any body of work that has made as big of an impact on subsequent Western thought, especially when it came to academic or scientific work. For a long time (from the fall of Rome until the Scientific Revolution), Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars would refer to Aristotle as simply "**The Philosopher,"** and academic research (for almost 2,000 years!) was largely dedicated to reconciling Aristotelian science and logic with their respective religious beliefs. Some highlights of Aristotle's career:

1. He formulated the first system of formal **logic,** which wouldn't fully be replaced until the 1800s (and is still regularly taught in logic classes). He wrote the first recognizably academic books on **physics, biology,** and **political science** in which rival theories are carefully laid out and evaluated**.** (Before Aristotle, we mostly have poems and dialogues. You can thank him for the modern "textbook" ☺).
2. His histories of previous philosophy and science are, in many cases, the only clues we have to how early science proceeded.
3. He taught **Alexander the Great,** who'd go on to conquer much of the ancient "Western" world. When Alexander died, Aristotle had to flee Athens (people there weren't super happy about being conquered…).
4. He founded the **Lyceum,** which was something like an early "university."
5. He wrote the first book of literary criticism or analysis, about the function of tragedy (he wrote one about comedy too, which we've lost). His theory of tragedy guided later Roman, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim understandings of fiction more generally, and is still commonly taught in classes on literature.

In this lecture, we'll be looking at Aristotle's theory of Tragedy using the example of Euripides' *Medea* (Aristotle once claimed that Euripides was the "most tragic" of all the playwrights, and generally liked his work).

ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY

Aristotle lays out his theory in the book *Poetics,* which was likely a set of lecture notes. We'll be looking at some of his key claims, and saying a bit about what they might mean.

1. *"Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished . . .; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."*
    a. Aristotle holds that tragedy (as opposed to comedy) has to do with "big" events—life, death, war, etc. The characters are supposed to be serious, we shouldn't think that they are "silly" or "beneath" us.
    b. Tragedy must invoke both **pity** (we must feel *bad* for the character) and **fear** (the character's actions must put them in genuine moral or physical danger, in a way the audience can relate to).
    c. Aristotle holds that the *goal* of tragedy is to allow us to experience fear and pity *through* the character's experiences, and thus "purge" these emotions. So, for Aristotle, enjoying a violent play (or movie, or video game) might be expected to make people *less* violent, at least in the short run. This was opposed to his teacher Plato's view, who held that negative events/emotions should basically never be portrayed in art (Plato didn't care much for either epic poetry or theater, so far as we can tell).
    d. Plato would not like Medea—it might encourage people to murder their children! Aristotle, on the other hand, might argue that Medea provides a good way to "purge" our emotions. We feel *pity* for Medea's situations and are given the chance to imagine what it would be wreck vengeance our enemies, and feel *fear* as to the costs of such an action. When we leave the theater, we no longer have the urge to do this to our enemies.
2. *"Tragedy must have six parts, which parts determine its quality--namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song. . . . The Plot is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy; Character holds the second place. . . . Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids. . . . Thought, on the other hand, is found when something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated."*
    a. Aristotle lays out series of six elements by which we can evaluate how good/effective a tragedy is. He argus that the **plot** (what happens) is the most important, with **character** (and their motivations second). In a tragedy, it is imperative that the strengths and weaknesses of the tragic characters *cause* the bad events that happen to them. Tragedy is NOT melodrama, where bad things simply happen, and we feel bad about them. The other elements of tragedy (such as the music, word choice, costumes, etc.) all must support this.

b. Medea's rage and desire for revenge directly cause the tragic outcome—the murder of her children. Medea realizes that this Is the cost, and pays it anyway.

3. *"Plots are either Simple or Complex . . . An action is Simple when the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of Intention and without Recognition. A Complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such Reversal, or by Recognition, or both. . . . It makes all the difference whether any given event is a case of propter hoc or post hoc…Reversal of Intention is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probablity or necessity. . . . Recognition, as the name implies, is a change from ignorance to knowledge."*
    a. In a simple plot, one event leads incrementally to the next, and things build steadily until the end. In a complex plot, things *reverse* or *change course* unexpectedly. (However, the changes must make sense!).
    b. In Medea, her desire for vengeance against Jason leads her to harm *herself* in pretty much the worst way imaginable. This is quite the reversal!
4. *"A perfect tragedy should be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should moreover imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a wholly virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense, nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor again should the downfall of an utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ouselves. . . . There remains, then, the character between these two extremes, that of a man who is not eminently good or just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty [hamarteia, often translated as "tragic flaw"]. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous."*
    a. For Aristotle, a good tragedy hinges on the main character. We do NOT want a main character who is purely good or purely evil, since they can't really invoke pity or fear in the right way (since we don't identify with such characters in the right way). Instead, tragedy must center on an imperfect character (one like us!) who has genuinely good qualities, but who also has flaws that will cause their downfall. The audience can then identify with these flaws, and feel genuine pity and fear: they think "That could be me!".
    b. The play *Medea* begins against a background where Medea and Jason are heroes—they retrieved the Golden Fleece! They defeated dragons! They seemed to be on their way to happily-ever-after. However, Jason's desire for status, and Medea's desire for revenge lead to destruction.
5. *"What are the circumstances which strike us as terrible or pitiful? Actions capable of this effect must happen between persons who are either friends or enemies or are indifferent to one another. If an enemy kills an enemy, there is nothing to excite pity either in the act or in the intention--except so far as suffering in itself is pitiful. So again with indifferent persons. But when the tragic incident occurs between those who are near and dear to one another--if, for example, a brother kills a brother, a son his father, a mother her son, or any other deed of the kind is done--these are the situations to be looked for by the poet."*
    a. For Aristotle, true pity can be invoked ONLY when the bad event in question is done by a character (because of their flaw!) to someone they love. Merely having bad things happen is not enough (otherwise, action movies would be tragedies). Again, it's crucially important that the audience see *themselves* in the character who causes the bad thing to happen.
    b. To the extent that Medea's problems—abandonment and betrayal by loved ones—are universal, her rage and desire for revenge are understandable. We should (according to Aristotle) feel genuine pity for what this ends up doing to her, and fear lest we end up the same. (So, Medea is a lesson in why we shouldn't simply give in to our rage).

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Choose a tragic film, and analyze it according to Aristotle's theory of tragedy.
2. Imagine that Medea *didn't* kill her children, and instead killed Jason. Would the play still count as a tragedy? Would it be better? Worse? Why?
3. Aristotle's account of tragedy was hugely influential in the way future authors (Roman, Christian, Muslim, Jewish) would think about the *purpose* of fiction more generally, and led to MANY stories about powerful people (kings, queens, etc.) coming to bad ends because of their "tragic flaw." People were supposed to "learn lessons" by consuming such fiction. What do you think about this view of art?