

Anagnorisis

Definition of Anagnorisis

Anagnorisis is a moment in a plot or story, specifically a [tragedy](#), wherein the main [character](#) either recognizes or identifies his/her true nature, recognizes the other character's true identity, discovers the true nature of his situation, or that of the others – leading to the [resolution](#) of the story.

Aristotle discussed anagnorisis in his *Poetics* in detail. He defines it as “a change [that] occurs from ignorance to knowledge, creating love or hate between the individuals doomed by the poet for bad or good fortune.” Simply, it is a startling discovery, which brings a change from ignorance to knowledge.

For instance, in William Shakespeare's “The Winter's Tale,” a recognition scene occurs in the final act, which reveals that Perdita is the daughter of the king, and not a shepherdess – the reason that she is suitable for a royal lover.

Examples of Anagnorisis in Literature

Example #1: *Oedipus Rex* (by Sophocles)

In “Oedipus Rex,” anagnorisis occurs when a messenger comes and reveals to King Oedipus his true birth. Oedipus then recognizes his queen, Jocasta, as his real mother, and the man whom he has killed at crossroads as his real father, as well as himself as an unnatural sinner, who has caused the disaster in the city of Thebes. Oedipus' recognition is artistically satisfying, as peripeteia (reversal of fortune) accompanies it. Here peripeteia is a reversal of fortune from good to bad, moving to a tragic [catastrophe](#).

Example #2: *The Choephoroi* (by Aeschylus)

Another famous example of anagnorisis is found in Aeschylus' Greek "The Choephoroi." It happens when Electra identifies Orestes, her brother, who returns after exile at Agamemnon on their father's grave, whom their mother, Clytemnestra has murdered. Electra recognizes Orestes as her brother by finding three evidences: a lock of hair belonging to Orestes on their father's grave, his footprints near the grave, and a weaving piece that she has embroidered for him. She finds that hair and footprints are similar to hers. Electra's awareness of her brother's presence gives her support to avenge the murder of their father.

Example #3: *Macbeth* (by William Shakespeare)

One such moment in "Macbeth" occurs in the final scene when Macbeth, on the battlefield, encounters vengeful Macduff, who declares that he is not "of woman born," but instead "untimely ripped" from the womb of his mother – which is now called a C-Section. This is the moment when Macbeth learns that the prophecy of witches is about to come true, and that Macduff would kill him. Though Macbeth realizes that he is destined, he continues to fight with Macduff, who eventually kills him.

Example #4: *Othello* (by William Shakespeare)

There is another example in another play "Othello." Othello believes only what others tell him, especially those who come to see him first. He believes in the story of deceit of Iago, though it is based on words and a handkerchief, yet he does not trust Desdemona, his wife. The moment of recognition occurs when he realizes that he has wrongly killed his beloved wife. Therefore, he kills himself too.

Example #5: *Cherry Orchard* (by Anton Chekhov)

Still another example occurs in Act-III of *Cherry Orchard*, by Anthon Chekhov. During a party, Lyubov Andreyevna makes a critical realization that her cherry orchard, the place she has grown up, having created beautiful childhood memories, is bought by Lopakhin. Anagnorisis occurs exactly when Lopakhin enters and proudly declares, "It is sold ... I bought it ... I bought it! ... The cherrv orchard is mine now. Mine! ... I've bought the

estate where my father and grandfather were slaves, where they weren't even allowed into the kitchen."

Lyubov starts weeping, and Varya leaves the party angrily. This is the anagnorisis of both Lyubov and Lopakhin. Lyubov discovers who has finally bought her Orchard, and Lopakhin realizes that he eventually has bought the estate where his ancestors worked as slaves.

Function of Anagnorisis

The use of this literary device is very common in plays and novels. It is a very important part of the plot in a tragedy, in which the [protagonist](#) recognizes his [tragic flaw](#). This happens at the [climax](#), leading to his eventual downfall. The end of anagnorisis leads to [catharsis](#) in the readers. The ideal moment for this device to happen is the moment of peripeteia, a reversal of fortune, where the protagonist realizes some important insight or fact, human nature, his own situation, or a truth about himself. It, in fact, unravels all the major complexities of the plot.