

Hamartia

Hamartia Definition

Hamartia is a personal error in a [protagonist](#)'s personality, which brings about his tragic downfall in a [tragedy](#). This defect in a hero's personality is also known as a "[tragic flaw](#)."

Aristotle used the word in his *Poetics*, where it is taken as a mistake or error in judgment. The term envelops wrongdoings, which may be accidental or deliberate. One of the classic hamartia examples is where a hero wants to achieve something but, while doing so, he commits an intentional or accidental error, and he ends up achieving exactly the opposite with disastrous results. Such a downfall is often marked by a reversal of fortune.

Hamartia and Hubris

A typical example of hamartia in tragedies is [hubris](#), which is excessive pride and ego in a hero's [character](#). This often ultimately brings about his tragic downfall. In Greek tragedies, the hubristic actions of a hero in a powerful position causes his shame and humiliation.

Examples of Hamartia in Literature

Example #1: *Oedipus* (By Sophocles)

Oedipus, a famous Greek tragedy, is a perfect example of hamartia, in which the primary character's downfall is caused by unintentional wrongdoings. His hubris leads him to defy the prophecy of gods, but he ends up doing what he feared the most.

In the story, the Oracle of Delphi told Oedipus that he would kill his father and marry his mother. To avoid this, he leaves the city of Corinth, and

heads towards Thebes. On his way, he killed an old man in a feud. Later, he married the queen of Thebes when he was made king of the city, after he saved the city from a deadly Sphinx. He committed all these sins in complete ignorance, but he deserved punishment because of his attempting to rebel against his fate. His reversal of fortune is caused by his actions, which are in a sense blasphemous.

Example #2: *Hamlet* (By William Shakespeare)

Prince Hamlet's tragic flaw, in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, determines his tragic downfall. Hamlet's hamartia is his indecisiveness. He cannot make up his mind about the dilemmas he confronts. He reveals his state of mind in the following lines from Act 3, Scene 1 of the play:

“To be, or not to be — that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep...”

Hamlet wants to kill his father's murderer, Claudius, but instead ruins his life by delaying action, as he looks for proof to justify the act. In the process, he spoils his relationship with his mother, and sends Ophelia into such a state of depression that she commits suicide. This indecision got almost everyone killed at the end of the play. He killed Claudius by assuming fake madness because of his indecisiveness in action so that he will not be asked for any justification.

Example #3: *Doctor Faustus* (By Christopher Marlowe)

Among the hamartia examples in literature, one of the best can be found in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. The tragic flaw of Faustus was his ambitious nature. Despite being a respected scholar, he sold his soul to Lucifer by signing a contract, with his blood, for achieving ultimate power and limitless pleasure in this world.

He learns the art of black magic and defies Christianity. We see a tragic [conflict](#) where Faustus thinks about repenting, but it is all too late. Finally, the devils takes his soul away to Hell and he suffers eternal damnation because of his over-ambition.

Example #4: *Frankenstein* (By Mary Shelley)

Victor, in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, is another character whose downfall is caused by a tragic error. His hubris, or extreme pride and arrogance, decides his fate in the [narrative](#). He strives to become an unparalleled scientist, and creates a monster that ultimately becomes the cause of his disaster.

Function of Hamartia

Hamartia imparts a sense of pity and fear in the [audience](#), or the readers. The audience identifies with the [tragic hero](#) as, like them, his character is a mixture of good and bad qualities. They feel pity for the reversal of fortune that he undergoes. Similarly, by witnessing a tragic hero suffer due to his own flaw, the audience or the readers may fear the same fate could befall them if they indulge in similar kinds of action.

Therefore, hamartia may be employed for a [moral](#) purpose, to encourage people to improve their characters by removing the flaws that can cause a tragedy in their lives.