

# Tragic Hero

## Definition of Tragic Hero

The term hero is derived from a Greek word that means a person who faces adversity, or demonstrates courage, in the face of danger. However, sometimes he faces downfall as well. When a hero confronts downfall, he is recognized as a tragic hero or [protagonist](#). Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, characterizes these plays or stories, in which the main [character](#) is a tragic hero, as tragedies. Here, the hero confronts his downfall whether due to fate, or by his own mistake, or any other social reason.

Aristotle defines a tragic hero as “a person who must evoke a sense of pity and fear in the [audience](#). He is considered a man of misfortune that comes to him through error of judgment.” A tragic hero’s downfall evokes feelings of pity and fear among the audience.

## Characteristics of a Tragic Hero

Here we have basic characteristics of a tragic hero, as explained by Aristotle:

[Hamartia](#) – a [tragic flaw](#) that causes the downfall of a hero.

[Hubris](#) – excessive pride and disrespect for the natural order of things.

[Peripeteia](#) – The reversal of fate that the hero experiences.

[Anagnorisis](#) – a moment in time when hero makes an important discovery in the story.

[Nemesis](#) – a punishment that the protagonist cannot avoid, usually occurring as a result of his hubris.

[Catharsis](#) – feelings of pity and fear felt by the audience, for the inevitable downfall of the protagonist.

## Examples of Tragic Hero in Literature

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Example #1: Oedipus, *Oedipus Rex* (By Sophocles)

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Aristotle has used his character Oedipus as a perfect example of a tragic hero, as he has *hubris* such that he is blind to the truth. He refuses to listen to wise men, such as Tiresias, who predicts that Oedipus has killed his father, Laius. He is tragic because he struggles against the forces of his fate, and pitiable due to his weakness, which arouses fear in the audience. Thus, Oedipus is an ideal example of the tragic hero, as he caused his own downfall, falling from his own estate and facing undeserved punishment.

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#### **Example #2: Prince Hamlet, *Hamlet* (by William Shakespeare)**

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Hamlet is the prince of Denmark, a man of high social status and noble by birth. He is almost driven to madness by his father's tortured ghost, who convinces him that Claudius is responsible for his father's death, and that he has committed treachery. Hamlet then makes a plan to take revenge on his father's killer, but he is blinded by his hamartia, neglecting his relations with other loved ones – Ophelia and his mother Gertrude. Hamlet's hamartia is his constant contemplation and brooding, which causes him to delay, which ultimately results in his destruction. By the end, Hamlet also falls in a bloodbath, touching the hearts of the audience by highlighting the most primal fear, death.

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#### **Example #3: Romeo, *Romeo and Juliet* (by William Shakespeare)**

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Romeo is also a very good example of a tragic hero. He is a man of high social standing, who falls in love easily with a girl whose family holds animosity towards his own family. Romeo's tragic flaw is start believing on his fate immediately. Juliet acts like a dead person, and Romeo thinks her actually dead. Therefore, he kills himself. When she wakes up and sees him dead, she also kills herself. Thus, it is not only fate, but also his actions and choices that bring his downfall and death.

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#### **Example #4: Davy Jones, *Pirates of the Caribbean* (by Irene Trimble)**

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Davy Jones is a modern example of a typical tragic hero. He is basically a sea captain, who falls in love with the sea goddess, Calypso. However,

grows into a mixture of a humanoid and octopus, and leads his savage crew on raids in the entire sea on his ship, the Flying Dutchman. At first, he was not bad, but his beloved breaks his heart that turns him into bad man. Eventually, Will Sparrow kills him. Jones' hamartia is that he is a broken-hearted hero, who suffers at the hands of his beloved, Calypso.

### **Function of Tragic Hero**

The purpose of a tragic hero is to evoke sad emotions, such as pity and fear, which makes the audience experience catharsis, relieving them of their pent up emotions. The tragic flaw of the hero leads to his demise or downfall that in turn brings tragic end. This gives wisdom to the audience to avoid such things in their everyday lives. The sufferings and fall of a hero, arousing feelings of pity and fear through catharsis, purges the audiences of those emotions, to transform them into good human beings and good citizens.