

Tragedy

Tragedy Definition

Tragedy is a type of [drama](#) that presents a serious subject matter about human suffering and corresponding terrible events in a dignified manner.

Greek Tragedy

The term is Greek in origin, dating back to the 5th century BC, when it was assigned by the Greeks to a specific form of plays performed at festivals in Greece. The local governments supported such plays, and the mood surrounding the presentation of these plays was that of a religious ceremony, as the entire [community](#), along with the grand priest, attended the performances.

The subject matter of Greek tragedies was derived chiefly from Homer's *Iliad*, and *Odyssey*, which included misfortunes of heroes of history and religious mythology. The three prominent Greek dramatists were Aeschylus (525–456 BC), Sophocles (496–406 BC), and Euripides (480–406 BC).

Aristotle's Definition of Tragedy

Aristotle defines Tragedy in his famous work *Poetics* as:

“Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete (composed of an introduction, a middle part and an ending), and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions.”

From the above definition, we can understand the objective of the Greek tragedies, which is the “...purification of such emotions,” also called

“[catharsis](#).” Catharsis is a release of emotional tension, after an overwhelming experience, that restores or refreshes the spirit.

English Tragedy

Shaped on the models of Seneca, the first English tragedy appeared in 1561, written by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville. The play chose the story of a British king and his sufferings at the hand of his two disobedient sons as a subject matter. The importance of the play lies in the fact that it transformed the [style](#) of English drama, from morality and mystery plays, to the writing of tragedies in the Elizabethan era.

Tragedy Examples

Below is the list of prominent English tragedy writers and their famous works:

A. Christopher Marlowe

Marlowe was the first English dramatist worthy of the tradition of Greek tragedy. The characters of his tragedies are the great men of history, who became victims of their own fate.

Tamburlaine
Doctor Faustus
The Jew of Malta
Edward III

B. William Shakespeare

Shakespeare, the most popular of all playwrights, knew the Greek tragedy style well and he used several Greek themes but modified them to his own purpose. He intentionally violates the unity of action and mixes tragic actions with comical. Examples of tragedy written by Shakespeare include:

Hamlet
Othello
King Lear
Macbeth
Antony and Cleopatra

C. John Webster

Webster was a Jacobean dramatist who modeled his tragedies on the Shakespearean model. Among his famous works are the following tragedy examples:

Titus Andronicus
The White Devil
The Duchess of Malfi

D. Henrik Ibsen

He is known as “the father of [realism](#)”. He was the creator of some of the well-known tragedies also called “problem plays”. His famous works are:

A Doll’s House
Hedda Gabler
The Wild Duck
Emperor and Galilean

E. Arthur Miller

He is a famous American playwright and essayist. His famous works are:

All My Sons
Death of a Salesman
The Crucible
A View from the Bridge
The misfits

The Difference Between Greek and English Tragedies

We notice the following differences between the tragedies by the Greek playwrights, and those written by English playwrights:

Device	Greek Tragedies	English Tragedies
Theme /Plot	Focused on a single theme and plot	Have several story lines developing at the same time into plots and sub-plots
Character Origins	“great” characters were mortals who	Heroes come from all walks of life

Subject Matter	Serious, treated in a dignified manner	Mixed tragic with comic (Modern playwrights argue that such depiction is nearer to life as our life is a mixture of good and bad fortunes.)
Purpose/Objective	Religious teaching	Instructive of a religious or ethical issue, though their primary objective is to entertain.