

# The Aristotelian Definition of Tragedy: A Note

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The term 'tragedy' etymologically refers to a sort of 'goat song' accompanied by certain ritualistic performances in the honour of the pagan deity Dionysus in the ancient Greek culture, and it flourished as a form of dramatic art during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Aristotle in his literary treatise *Poetics* formulated a theory of the genre of tragedy on basis of the examples that were familiar to him, especially, the plays of such Greek tragedians as Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles. In his definition of tragedy Aristotle very astutely mentions the traits that he deems essential for a tragic play, and also explains the features which he relates to the notion of tragedy.

Aristotle in the sixth section of *Poetics* defines tragedy as, according to the English translation by Ingram Bywater, "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories...; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions".

As the definition makes it clear, Aristotle prioritizes the greatness or "magnitude" of the tragic action, its seriousness and completeness, its linguistic exuberance, the performativity of the plot, and the purgative emotional impact of the play. Quite categorically, Aristotle's definition points out what tragedy represents, what form it employs, what manner it is communicated in, and what its function is. Aristotle himself cites the example of the tragedy of Oedipus in support of his definition. The Sophoclean plays *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus* dramatize a considerably "serious" action of patricide and incest, and this action does have gravity and "magnitude"; the course of the tragic action which recounts the familial history of Oedipus from his very birth to his catastrophe has a cyclic pattern and it is "complete in itself"; the plays are rhetorically embellished; the plot develops not through individual or choric narration, but through a dramatic action; and the spectacle of Oedipus's suffering arouses the emotions of pity and fear in the minds of the audience, and simultaneously purges the excess of these feelings and brings an emotional equilibrium.

This definition of tragedy features the particular traits that Aristotle found in the compositions of the eminent Greek playwrights, and these traits got properly theorized and standardized by Aristotle so effectively that generations of dramatists sought to observe them in their plays. Even though the plays of such Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists as Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare violate the Aristotelian doctrine of the Unities, these plays on the whole accord with Aristotle's definition of tragedy, and maintain the basic tenets of the six formative elements of tragedy mentioned by Aristotle, namely, plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle.

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## ➤ References:

- 1) *Poetics* translated by Ingram Bywater (Oxford, 1909),
  - 2) *The Theory of Drama* by Allardyce Nicoll (Methuen, 1974),
  - 3) *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* by J.A. Cuddon (Penguin, 1982),
  - 4) *Tragedy* by F.L. Lucas (Oxford, 1928), and
  - 5) *Tragedy (The Critical Idiom)* by Clifford Leech (Routledge, 2002).
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