

# ‘Hamartia’: A Note

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While defining the tragic hero in *Poetics* Aristotle notes that the reversal of the hero’s fortune “from happiness to misery” should be brought about by certain “error” or “flaw” on his part rather than by any innate vice as such. The Greek term used by Aristotle to designate this tragic flaw is “hamartia” which has always been a moot point of debate among translators and critics. Ingram Bywater translates this term as “error of judgement” in his edition of *Poetics*. S.H. Butcher in his study argues against Bywater’s interpretation, and states that “hamartia” is any kind of error or flaw, and not only “error of judgement”. However, both of these two views are valid, since it is primarily an error of judgement that leads the protagonist commit some error in the more general sense of the term. Despite its semantic ambivalence, the term “hamartia” introduces the notion of some flaw on part of the hero for which he is responsible, and which has crucial and decisive impact on determining his suffering and catastrophe.

Along with “hamartia” Aristotle uses another closely related term “hubris” – that refers to some defect, ignorance or depravity of the protagonist resisting his awareness of the divine laws and forebodings. Though Aristotle says that the hero’s downfall is not caused by any depravity or innate vice, almost paradoxically, it is “hubris” that necessitates the hero’s committing the fatal error or “hamartia”. For instance, in the play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles the downfall of the protagonist occurs because of his ignorance of the Delphic Oracle and his subsequent inadvertent transgression of both divine and societal rules by killing his father Laius and marrying his mother Jocasta. By his sinful “hamartia” Oedipus invites the “nemesis” or divine vengeance that comes in the form of a plague, and after his “anagnorisis” of this sin Oedipus suffers both psychic and corporal mortification as long as he lives.

In the tragedies composed during the Renaissance in England, however, “hamartia” has not been presented as necessarily an unconscious error. Whereas such classical playwrights as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides present the protagonists of their plays as helpless victims of predestined adversities, the Renaissance dramatists with their humanistic worldview present the heroes of their tragedies as responsible for the errors they commit. The “hamartia” in this latter case consists in the heroes’ conscious transgression of the established moral and social codes. Such Renaissance tragic heroes as Edward II, Doctor Faustus and Macbeth deliberately violate the moral and social laws with full ethical responsibility and awareness of the consequences. However, the tragedies of King Lear and Othello mostly comply with the Aristotelian norms, since the “hamartia” consists in their ignorance of the actual facts, and not in any deliberate violation of rules.

The Aristotelian concept of “hamartia” is an integral part of his theory of tragedy, and it is an essential element in all classical tragedies. This concept is a very crucial one to understand the genre and the philosophical perspective of tragedy. With the change in ethical and aesthetic paradigms in successive stages of history, the older notion of “hamartia” also has undergone certain modifications. Even in the modern era when the generic distinction between tragedy and comedy is questioned and the known parameters of tragedy are problematized, the concept of “hamartia” has not lost its relevance. The flexibility and adaptability of the notion of “hamartia” render it relevant and feasible in different contexts, and sustain it throughout the ages.

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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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