

# DRAMA AND TRAGEDY



Before the ancient Greeks ever staged their first play, they were already long in the habit of holding annual festivals to Dionysus, the god of fertility, and the god of wine. Even without too much concrete information about these festivals, we can imagine what a spectacle they would have been, with the entire town gathered for singing and dancing and storytelling, and other rites. The stories were in the form of dramatic poetry; they were about Dionysus and the other gods, and a few legendary heroes made famous by Homer and Hesiod. Pots of wine were filled and refilled; if you were a good citizen you showed up to pay homage to the god of fertility. At a certain point in the festival the ancient stories, or “dithyrambs,” were performed at center stage in the amphitheater to musical accompaniment. Somewhere around the sixth century B.C., an innovative poet named Thespis had the revolutionary idea that acting the story told in the dithyramb might be more interesting than simply reciting it. He put his idea to the test and became the western world’s first “thespian” (i.e., “actor”). Not much later, an even more innovative poet called Aeschylus (who wrote *The Orestia*) added a second actor, and not long after that—in head to head competition with Aeschylus—Sophocles added a third.

Greek theater was born.

From this golden age of Aeschylus, Euripides, Aristophanes, Sophocles, and others, classical Greek theater has drizzled down through the foggy ruins of time incredibly resonant works of literature that are still alive with meaning and relevance, even today. Almost twenty-five hundred years separate us from these comedies and tragedies that are so firmly situated in ancient Greece—they are some of the western world’s oldest literature—yet, amazingly, they still speak to us. The issues these writers grappled with, their insights into the human heart, still resonate with us today. Discovering our modern selves peeking out from these ancient texts can be an exhilarating, heady experience—which goes to the heart of what literature is all about.

Ancient Greek theater was a community event, a cultural happening. The festival plays were performed for the *entire* citizenry in huge amphitheaters carved into hillsides. These outdoor arenas seated thousands—as many as 15,000 people. The seats faced an “orchestra” or “dancing place” behind which actors played their scenes in front of a “skene”—the building behind the stage where actors exited and changed costumes. Gradually it became customary to paint the wall facing the audience to suggest a “set”—a particular setting or place where the scenes were taking place. Our modern stage is not a whole lot different its ancient beginning.

However, there are a few conventions in ancient Greek theater that are no longer familiar. If you were to study a Greek play, they would bear explaining. Even if you are not studying ancient drama, it helps to understand these features, because they haven't completely vanished from the modern theater, although they may have metamorphosized.

First, each play had its "chorus," or group of men, a dozen or so, who would observe the action from the orchestra, and between episodes would sing and dance their commentary on the action. Sometimes the chorus leader would even participate in the scenes by engaging the characters in dialogue. The chorus' role was to model a response to the action unfolding on the stage. They represented public opinion, the public's response to the events of the play. They might provide background information (exposition), or tell us what they think of the relative virtue of the characters—good or ill. They might try to offer advice, or admonish bad behavior. Whatever their precise function, their poetic commentary following each episode must have been a crucial part of the entertainment, as they would sing and dance and chant rhythmic lines of poetry between scenes—their musical lines and poetic diction would heighten the language and the emotional intensity.

Another Greek convention was the "god in the machine" (*deus ex machina* in Latin). This was a device some playwrights used to resolve conflicts when they were too difficult for the characters to resolve. Literally a "god" was lowered onto the stage by a mechanical platform (imagine a window-washer's unit), descending from the roof of the skene, rescuing the characters from themselves. It's interesting to note that Sophocles—innovator that *he* indeed was—never made use of this device. He must have thought it too simplistic, too contrived. That's the way we think of it today as well—an artificial device that provides an easy-out.

Structurally, Greek plays are somewhat different from modern drama with its one-act, three-act, or five-act structure, but we don't have much trouble adjusting back to the prologue, episode, and exodus structure of ancient drama. Things haven't changed as much as they might have in 2500 years.

One thing that hasn't changed much at all is our ability to create and respond to **tragedy**, in life and in art.



Tragedy is all about suffering, especially human suffering. Unfortunately it's all around us, every day, when we open our eyes to see it. "Count no man happy till he dies" (Sophocles' famous last word in *Oedipus*). No one is safe; we're all vulnerable. And we can't always shield ourselves from that basic but terrifying truth, as much as we may want to. The reality of tragedy lies before us, seen or unseen. An elderly couple dies alone and unnoticed inside the stiflingly hot attic of a flooded house in a poor section of New Orleans. A firefighter rushes into chaos trying to rescue someone and is killed in the process. These events are bad enough, heart-wrenching enough. But what about the individual who rushes to someone's rescue, insisting on doing it alone, unwilling to risk anyone else's life—or feeling overconfident, maybe—and dies *because* he tried to make the rescue alone? Or the individual who waded through contaminated flood waters to save a stranded child, and five years later is diagnosed with cancer? A child dies of a disease, which feels tragic enough—but what if you learn she died of a curable disease, but her family didn't have the resources to get her the treatment?

There are ghosts we sometimes create ourselves, suffering we bring upon ourselves. This is the suffering that tragedy reveals to us by facing it head on. No avoidance. Why? Maybe Nietzsche said it best: “what doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.” The Greek tragedians understood that if a “hero” were to emerge, he (we would add, or she) would have to emerge amidst tragedy. Tragedy is a powerful catalyst for heroism, and equally a catalyst for revealing its opposite. The Greeks explored, in their tragedies, all the ways the human spirit could respond in the face of overwhelming suffering. How does the hero act and react? Does the hero face it head on, make an attempt to overcome it, or become crushed by it? In *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*, Michael Meyer says that “a literary tragedy presents courageous individuals who confront powerful forces within or outside themselves with a dignity that reveals the breadth and depth of the human spirit in the face of failure, defeat, and even death.” What’s at stake is usually more than an individual life—it’s the life of the state, the fate of the community that’s in danger.

Even in their day, some of the great tragedians of the classical era took heat for being “too depressing” (especially Euripides). But there must be some deep-seated value to this so-called depressing stuff if we keep producing it. As long as there are humans alive to observe it, tragedy won’t go away, and neither, it seems, will our desire to represent it artistically, meaningfully, truthfully. Some of the most psychologically incisive literature in existence is in the form of tragedy. Whether it’s ancient Greek tragedy, Shakespearean tragedy, or modern day tragedy, the message is essentially the same: humans suffer terribly, pitifully, but there’s so much *wisdom* to be gained from that suffering that to ignore it or cover it under a rug (or put a falsely happy face on it, ala Hollywood) would be to blind ourselves to the great human strengths it engenders. To remove the tragedy would be to remove what is most noble about us, what is most resilient and inspiring. Tragedy doesn’t depress or paralyze us—it does the opposite. It *moves* us, sometimes to tears. We cry, not merely from sadness or depression, but from an intensity of understanding. In that cry, in those tears, we become sharply, acutely aware of our feelings. Through this story we’ve been following, which seemed to be about someone else, we’ve strangely come to know ourselves. What value there is in that self-knowledge no one can say. I can only think it’s priceless. And when we cry together, we become more acutely aware of one another’s feelings as well. There’s some kind of superglue running in those tears. They unite us, attach us to one another, make us realize we care about the same things, share the same values, belong to the same community.

Some 2500 hundred years later, the best source for understanding the nature of tragedy is still Aristotle.

Aristotle taught that art should be an “imitation” of life. It should hold a mirror up to life. It should be “truthful,” or “true to life.” Tragedy is a fact of life, so any work of art, to be of any use, must confront it. In a brief excerpt in your textbook (“On Tragic Character,” pp. 1092-93) Aristotle explains his concept of tragedy, making two general points straight away:

- The finest tragedy is complex rather than simple
- Tragedy is a “representation of terrible and piteous events”

If a play is complex rather than simple, it will mentally and emotionally challenge its viewers in some way. Perhaps Aristotle felt that simplistic or obvious plays were a waste of time, or an insult to his intelligence. When he says that tragedy should represent terrible and piteous events, he is referring to ideas he develops elsewhere in the *Poetics*. A play that shows “terrible and piteous events,” arousing an audience’s pity and fear, is not a waste of time because these emotions lead to “catharsis,” a healthy calling forth and then purging of emotion, that “good cry” that doesn’t kill you but glues you together and makes you stronger somehow.

Next, Aristotle indicates the kind of hero who should serve as the main character, but first he tells us the kind of character who does *not* qualify for service as a “tragic hero.” For tragedy, the hero can’t be:

- A good man falling from happiness to misfortune (this will only inspire revulsion, not pity or fear)
- An evil man rising from ill fortune to prosperity (that won't inspire sympathy, so it can't arouse pity or fear)
- A wicked man falling from prosperity into misfortune (that might inspire sympathy, but not pity or fear, because (1) pity can't be felt for a person whose misfortune is deserved, and (2) if we don't identify with the character's wickedness, we won't be afraid of his fate falling on us).

The appropriate tragic hero, then, is the character who sits between these extremes. He's not "preeminent in virtue and justice," but on the other hand, he isn't guilty of "vice or depravity," just some "mistake." He is a good but not perfect person who is of some social importance (holding a "highly renowned and prosperous place"). He could be a king, like Oedipus (Sophocles' *Oedipus* was Aristotle's idea of *the* quintessential tragedy).

The best tragic plot, he concludes, moves this hero (a person of some importance who is good but flawed) from prosperity to misfortune, occasioned not by any innate depravity or badness of character, but by some great mistake he makes (the "tragic flaw").

In an editorial aside, Aristotle puts in a good word for the poet/dramatist Euripides, who has apparently drawn much criticism for writing too many unhappy endings. But Aristotle insists that this is how it should be. He praises Euripides (whose most famous play is *Medea*), calling him the "most tragic of the poets," and insists that tragedy is superior to comedy.

Aristotle spends some time elaborating what he considers the essential qualities of the tragic hero. He explains that "with regard to the characters there are four things to aim at":

- **Goodness.** They should reveal through speech and action what their moral choices are, and a "good character will be one whose choices are good." Any "class of person" may be portrayed as "good"—even women and slaves, though on the whole women are "inferior" and slaves are "utterly base."
- **Appropriateness.** Men can be domineering or "manly" (what does he really mean here, I wonder?), but for a woman to appear formidable would be inappropriate.
- **Lifelikeness.** This is just a shade different from "appropriate." To be "lifelike," the hero ought to be "realistic"—"believably human"—not superhuman or "larger than life." The tragic hero should not be godlike, or akin to the mythical heroes of legend, but just like real human beings.
- **Consistency.** Once a character is established as having certain traits, these shouldn't suddenly change.

Aristotle also advised that, in constructing the plot, characters should say and do only what seems probable and reasonable given the events of the play. The outcome of the action should arise naturally from the plot itself and not be contrived by any exterior devices like the popular "deus ex machina" (referred to above). If the god magically appears to deliver justice and put things right, the human tragedy is lost.

Now we are going to speed ahead to the middle of the twentieth century (1947) to see how Arthur Miller adapts this concept of tragedy for modern purposes in *Death of a Salesman*.