Definition of Tragedy


**Tragedy** - a term with many meanings and applications. In drama it refers to a particular kind of play, the definition of which was established by Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In narrative, particularly in the Middle Ages, it refers to a body of work recounting the fall of persons of high degree. It concerns in general the effort to exemplify what has called “the tragic sense of life” that is, the sense that human beings are inevitably doomed, through the nature of fate, destiny, or the human condition to suffer, fail, and die, and that the measure of a person’s life is to be taken by how he or she faces that inevitable failure. The tragic impulse celebrates courage and dignity in the face of defeat and attempts to portray the grandeur of the human spirit.

In drama, a *tragedy* recounts a causally related series of events in the life of a person of significance, culminating in an unhappy *catastrophe*, the whole treated with dignity and seriousness. According to Aristotle, who gave in the *Poetics* a normative definition of *tragedy*, illustrated by the Greek plays, with Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* as the best example, the purpose of a *tragedy* is to arouse pity and fear and thus to produce in the audience a *catharsis* of these emotions. Given this purpose, Aristotle says that fear and pity may be aroused by *spectacle* or by the structure of the play. The latter method is, he insists, the better; hence *plot* is “the soul of a tragedy.” Such a plot involves a *protagonist* who is better than ordinary people, and this person must be brought from happiness to misery. The question of what constitutes significance for the hero is answered in each age by its concept of significance. In a period of monarchy, Shakespeare’s protagonists were rulers; in other ages they have been and will be other kinds of persons. In an egalitarian nation, a tragic hero can be the archetypal common citizen—a worker, a police officer, a gangster, a New England farmer, a slave. But to qualify as a tragic protagonist, the hero or heroine must be a person of high characters and must face his or her destiny with courage and nobility of spirit. *Classical tragedy* and *romantic tragedy* both emphasize the significance of a choice made by the protagonist but dictated by the protagonist’s *hamartia*. To insist, however, that *tragedy* be confined to this particular view of the universe is to limit it in unacceptable ways...

…with the emergence of Ibsen in the late nineteenth century came the concept of middle-class *tragedy* growing out of social problems and issues. In the twentieth century, middle-class and laboring-class characters are often portrayed as the victims of social, hereditary, and environmental forces. When they receive their fate with a self-pitying whimper, they can hardly be said to have tragic dimensions. But when as happens in much modern serious drama, they face their destiny, however evil and unmerited, with courage and dignity, they are probably as truly tragic as Hamlet was to Shakespeare’s Londoners.