Outline of Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy
in the
POETICS

Definition of Tragedy: “Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its katharsis of such emotions. . . . Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody.”

The treatise we call the Poetics was composed at least 50 years after the death of Sophocles. Aristotle was a great admirer of Sophocles’ Oedipus the King, considering it the perfect tragedy, and not surprisingly, his analysis fits that play most perfectly. I shall therefore use this play to illustrate the following major parts of Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy as a literary genre.

Tragedy is the “imitation of an action” (mimesis) according to “the law of probability or necessity.” Aristotle indicates that the medium of tragedy is drama, not narrative; tragedy “shows” rather than “tells.” According to Aristotle, tragedy is higher and more philosophical than history because history simply relates what has happened while tragedy dramatizes what may happen, “what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity.” History thus deals with the particular, and tragedy with the universal. Events that have happened may be due to accident or coincidence; they may be particular to a specific situation and not be part of a clear cause-and-effect chain. Therefore they have little relevance for others. Tragedy, however, is rooted in the fundamental order of the universe; it creates a cause-and-effect chain that clearly reveals what may happen at any time or place because that is the way the world operates. Tragedy therefore arouses not only pity but also fear, because the audience can envision themselves within this cause-and-effect chain.

Plot is the “first principle,” the most important feature of tragedy. Aristotle defines plot as “the arrangement of the incidents”: i.e., not the story itself but the way the incidents are presented to the audience, the structure of the play. According to Aristotle, tragedies where the outcome depends on a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain of actions are superior to those that depend primarily on the character and personality of the protagonist. Plots that meet this criterion will have the following qualities:

The plot must be “a whole,” with a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning, called by modern critics the incentive moment, must start the cause-and-effect chain but not be dependent on anything outside the compass of the play (i.e., its causes are downplayed but its effects are stressed). The middle, or climax, must be caused by earlier incidents and itself cause the incidents that follow it (i.e., its causes and effects are stressed). The end, or resolution, must be caused by the preceding events but not lead to other incidents outside the compass of the play (i.e., its causes are stressed but its effects downplayed); the end should therefore solve or resolve the problem created during the incentive moment. Aristotle calls the cause-and-effect chain leading from the incentive moment to the climax the “tying up” (desis), in modern terminology the complication. He therefore terms the more rapid cause-and-effect chain from the climax to the resolution the “unravelling” (lusis), in modern terminology the dénouement.

1. The plot must be “complete,” having “unity of action.” By this Aristotle means that the plot must be structurally self-contained, with the incidents bound together by internal necessity, each action leading inevitably to the next with no outside intervention, no deus ex machina. According to Aristotle, the worst kinds of plots are “episodic,” in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence; the only thing that ties together the events in such a plot is the fact that they happen to the same person. Playwrights should exclude coincidences from their plots; if some coincidence is required, it should “have an air of design,”
i.e., seem to have a fated connection to the events of the play. Similarly, the poet should exclude
the irrational or at least keep it “outside the scope of the tragedy,” i.e., reported rather than
dramatized. While the poet cannot change the myths that are the basis of his plots, he “ought to
show invention of his own and skillfully handle the traditional materials” to create unity of action
in his plot. Application to Oedipus the King.

2. The plot must be “of a certain magnitude,” both quantitatively (length, complexity) and
qualitatively (“seriousness” and universal significance). Aristotle argues that plots should not be
too brief; the more incidents and themes that the playwright can bring together in an organic unity,
the greater the artistic value and richness of the play. Also, the more universal and significant
the meaning of the play, the more the playwright can catch and hold the emotions of the audience, the
better the play will be.

3. The plot may be either simple or complex, although complex is better. Simple plots have only a
“change of fortune” (catastrophe). Complex plots have both “reversal of intention” (peripeteia)
and “recognition” (anagnorisis) connected with the catastrophe. Both peripeteia and anagnorisis
turn upon surprise. Aristotle explains that a peripeteia occurs when a character produces an effect
opposite to that which he intended to produce, while an anagnorisis “is a change from ignorance
to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined for good or bad fortune.” He
argues that the best plots combine these two as part of their cause-and-effect chain (i.e., the
peripeteia leads directly to the anagnorisis); this in turns creates the catastrophe, leading to the
final “scene of suffering”. Application to Oedipus the King.

Character has the second place in importance. In a perfect tragedy, character will support plot, i.e.,
personal motivations will be intricately connected parts of the cause-and-effect chain of actions producing
pity and fear in the audience. The protagonist should be renowned and prosperous, so his change of fortune
can be from good to bad. This change “should come about as the result, not of vice, but of some great error
or frailty in a character.” Such a plot is most likely to generate pity and fear in the audience, for “pity is
aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.” The term Aristotle uses
here, hamartia, often translated “tragic flaw,” has been the subject of much debate. The meaning of the
Greek word is closer to “mistake” than to “flaw,” and I believe it is best interpreted in the context of what
Aristotle has to say about plot and “the law or probability or necessity.” In the ideal tragedy, claims
Aristotle, the protagonist will mistakenly bring about his own downfall—not because he is sinful or
morally weak, but because he does not know enough. The role of the hamartia in tragedy comes not from
its moral status but from the inevitability of its consequences. Hence the peripeteia is really one or more
self-destructive actions taken in blindness, leading to results diametrically opposed to those that were
intended (often termed tragic irony), and the anagnorisis is the gaining of the essential knowledge that was
previously lacking. Application to Oedipus the King.

Characters in tragedy should have the following qualities:

1. “good or fine.” Aristotle relates this quality to moral purpose and says it is relative to class: “Even
a woman may be good, and also a slave, though the woman may be said to be an inferior being,
and the slave quite worthless.”

2. “fitness of character” (true to type); e.g. valor is appropriate for a warrior but not for a woman.

3. “true to life” (realistic)

4. “consistency” (true to themselves). Once a character's personality and motivations are established,
these should continue throughout the play.

5. “necessary or probable.” Characters must be logically constructed according to “the law of
probability or necessity” that governs the actions of the play.
6. “true to life and yet more beautiful” (idealized, ennobled).

Thought is third in importance, and is found “where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated.” Aristotle says little about thought, and most of what he has to say is associated with how speeches should reveal character. However, we may assume that this category would also include what we call the themes of a play.

Diction is fourth, and is “the expression of the meaning in words” which are proper and appropriate to the plot, characters, and end of the tragedy. In this category, Aristotle discusses the stylistic elements of tragedy; he is particularly interested in metaphors: “But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor; . . . it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances.” (Application to Oedipus the King.

Song, or melody, is fifth, and is the musical element of the chorus. Aristotle argues that the Chorus should be fully integrated into the play like an actor; choral odes should not be “mere interludes,” but should contribute to the unity of the plot.

Spectacle is last, for it is least connected with literature; “the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.” Although Aristotle recognizes the emotional attraction of spectacle, he argues that superior poets rely on the inner structure of the play rather than spectacle to arouse pity and fear; those who rely heavily on spectacle “create a sense, not of the terrible, but only of the monstrous.”

The end of the tragedy is a katharsis (purgation, cleansing) of the tragic emotions of pity and fear. Katharsis is another Aristotelian term that has generated considerable debate. The word means “purging,” and Aristotle seems to be employing a medical metaphor—tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear in order to purge away their excess, to reduce these passions to a healthy, balanced proportion. Aristotle also talks of the “pleasure” that is proper to tragedy, apparently meaning the aesthetic pleasure one gets from contemplating the pity and fear that are aroused through an intricately constructed work of art.