

## **Perverting The Concept Of Tragic Hero Through Aristotle's Theory**

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### **Abstract**

A tragic hero is a kind of personality in a tragedy, and is generally the protagonist. Tragic heroes characteristically have heroic qualities that earn them the commiseration of the audience, but also have faults or make blunders that ultimately lead to their own downfall. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo is a tragic hero. His inattentive passion in love, which makes him a compelling character, also leads directly to the tragedy of his death. Aristotle remains the furthestmost critic of the Greek antiquity. He remains the greatest investigative thinker of the ancient times. His slender volume entitled *Poetics* has exerted abiding authority on the later critics. In this volume he has primarily written on tragedy. After discussing the intent and fortitude of tragedy Aristotle verbalize about the tragic hero – the means by which the dramatist expresses both the aim and spirit of tragedy.

### **Introduction: The nature of the tragic hero**

For Aristotle the nature and characteristics of a tragic hero are determined by the function of tragedy. Since the hero is the prime agent of the tragic action he must be capable of evoking the emotions of pity and fear. Then, the tragic hero must be above the common run of average humanity. He must be an elevated and dignified person who is human enough to make his listeners participants in his sorrows and misfortunes. He should neither be a paragon of virtues nor the apostle of vices. Invulnerable otherwise, he must yet possess Achilles' heel. The tragic hero, for Aristotle, is

*“a person neither eminently virtuous or just, nor yet involved in crime by deliberate vice or villainy, but by some reason of human frailty.”*

That is to say, the tragic hero, while not a paragon of goodness, yet must at the same time be capable of indulging in some error either due to ignorance or indulging of affairs beyond his knowledge or to some human passion. To this Aristotle gave the name '*hamartia*.'

### **Greek Tragic Hero - A Non-Shakespearean Type**

The hero in a Greek tragedy acts wrongly through an unconscious error. This human frailty is derived from ignorance. The typical example, given in the *poetics*, is of Oedipus of Sophocles. This conception of the tragic hero is essentially non-Shakespearean, though it is a legitimate type in ancient Greece. This concept originated in the religion of the times. After Shakespeare this type of hero was resuscitated on the English stage. It is likely that this 'resuscitation was caused by the strange errors of the Beaumont and Fletcher romantic tragic-comedies which often introduced characters who acted after this Greek model, although not often towards tragic ends.

## **The qualities of a tragic hero**

According to Aristotle the tragic hero must be a person of eminence, raised above the common run in external dignity and station. His fall should be caused by some error of judgment or failing in his character. This enhances the effect of tragedy. And since the hero is placed at a distance from the spectators, the pressure of immediate reality is removed. The spectator is liberated from the specific cares of his own material existence and is transported into the world of art. Thus, the emotions of pity and fear, instead of providing the spectator a crushing apprehension of personal disaster leads him to an aesthetic enjoyment of the peculiar pleasure tragedy professes to provide.

## **The tragic flaw**

There can be no tragedy if there is no tragic flaw in the hero. When evil comes from without or arises out of fate, there can be no pity and fear. The essentially tragic thing is to be the victim of one's own acts. The catastrophe must hinge upon the deeds of the sufferer. Bacon asserted,

*“Where evil is derived from a man's own folly all striketh inwards and suffocath. So the poets in tragedy do make the most passionate lamentations and those that forerun final despair by accusing, questioning, and torturing of a man's self.”*

The death of such a tragic hero fills the spectators with fear and pity and provides them with a moral lesson.

## **The suffering not wholly undeserved**

That is why Aristotle maintains that the misery portrayed in a tragedy must not be wholly undeserved. The hero should be good but he should suffer misfortune due to some frailty of his own. The misfortunes of a faultless person would repel us. Aristotle seems to suggest that the rebound of his own act must bring the hero in a tragedy down. Dr. J.S. Smart has challenged Aristotle on this ground. He argues:

*“A very great part of Christian literature is filled with the stories of saints and martyrs who were destitute, afflicted and tormented and of whom the world was not worthy. Aristotle's theory is that such stories are merely unreadable, that they can cause no feeling but instinctive aversion. Yet they have been read, and the fact is a sufficient criticism of Aristotle.”*

In reality the existence of a religious tragedy has added a new dimension to Aristotle's concept of tragedy. Tragedy and religion are not irreconcilable. They have coexisted since the dawn of history, in spite of the basic objection that “goodness apt to be immobile and uncombative” and that “in refusing to strike back it brings the action to a standstill.” In this connection I.A. Richards observes:

*“The least touch of any theology which has a compensatory Heaven to offer the tragic hero is fatal to the tragic effect, as the sense of suffering is ultimately lost in the moral triumph of the individual.”*

All these objections, however, arise out of the failure to distinguish between two aspects of the tragic – the tragic sense and the tragic vision. Tragic vision belongs to the various schools of philosophy, like those of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, but tragic sense is common to both religion and tragedy. The

tragic sense confronts suffering as a mystery, and mystery is an element essential to all great tragedies. Moreover, the idea of suffering itself has to be changed with regard to a religious tragedy. This new idea of suffering is represented by Becket in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*:

*“We are not here to triumph by fighting by stratagem  
Not to fight with beasts as men. We have fought the beast  
And have conquered. We have only to conquer  
Now, by suffering.”*

## **Aristotle's theory still valid**

Despite all this Aristotle's theory of tragic hero is valid even today because most tragedies seem to support his conclusions. Auden said that *it was a rare genius that could represent the perfectly good man in literature*. On the other hand, a total villain cannot be a tragic hero. He cannot rouse in us “a certain tragic sympathy – a sense of loss and regret over the waste or misuse of gifts so splendid.” If he does so, he ceases to be a total villain. He may have grandeur, but he cannot touch our hearts, Iago possesses wickedness on a grand scale but he cannot rise to the status of a tragic hero. Macbeth's career is tragic; it rouses in us a sense of waste, as Iago's career does not. An Iago cannot awaken our sympathy because we cannot identify ourselves with him and without such identification sympathy is not possible. The tragic fear is that of pity and fear, not of either pity or fear, but of both combined. As such a thoroughly wicked person falls short of the retirements of a tragic hero.

## **The external circumstances and the tragic hero**

Aristotle's concept of tragic hero has undergone change on on score more. In many modern social tragedies the tragic flaw often exists more strongly in the society than in the hero who becomes a victim of external circumstances. Galsworthy's tragedies full in this category. Then, the rise of democracy has brought forward the common man as the subject for tragedies.

## **Conclusion**

In particular, tragic heroes put the tragedy in tragedies—it is the tragic hero's defeats that psychologically connect the audience or reader and raise their disappointment and trepidation. Writers as a result make use of catastrophic heroes for many of the similar reasons they write tragedies—to demonstrate a moral mystery with depth, emotion, and complication.

Above and beyond this, tragic heroes serve up many functions in the stories in which they appear. Their tragic defects make them more relevant to an audience, particularly as compared to a more conservative hero, who might appear too perfect to actually resemble real people or draw an emotional rejoinder from the audience. Aristotle believed that by watching a tragic hero's downfall, an audience would become wiser when making choices in their own lives. Furthermore, tragic heroes can illustrate moral vagueness, since an apparently advantageous trait (such as innocence or ambition) can suddenly become a character's furthestmost weakness, bringing about serious calamity or even fatality.

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