



The moor Othello's (Chiwetel Ejiofor) tragic flaw is his jealousy which eventually causes him to strangle his wife, Desdemona (Kelly Reilly).

Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy

In his book *Poetics*, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle described the origins and characteristics of the dramatic genres tragedy and comedy. His theory of drama was highly influential in Elizabethan England. Although Shakespeare deviated from the conventional forms, he was very conscious of the genre and often included it directly in the titles of his plays, e.g. *The Tragedy of Othello*, and *The Comedy of Errors*.

According to Aristotle, tragedy is a genre that deals with cause and effect and investigates the results of the characters' actions. The main character in a tragedy has a **tragic flaw**; there is something "wrong with him" that leads to his tragic end. Aristotle calls the tragic flaw **hamartia**. Usually there is also some sort of **chaotic element** involved in the character's downfall. The chaotic element may be events that cannot be controlled by the character – bad luck, bad weather, etc. It is, however, very important that hamartia is present; the main character has to be able to blame himself. (Achilles' hamartia, for instance, was the weakness in his heel, and Hamlet's hamartia is his weakness in taking action.)

The main character's hamartia leads to **peripety** – a reversal of fortune in which everything goes wrong for him. This is usually accompanied by **anagnorisis** – a realisation in the main character when he learns something important about himself and/or his identity.

Anagnorisis is very important for the audience to be able to feel pity for the main character. Without it, the story may be sad, but not really tragic. An important point in a tragedy, according to Aristotle, is the effect it has on the audience. Watching the hero's fall and seeing him realise that only he is to blame allows us to experience sympathy for the tragic hero and feel what Aristotle calls **catharsis**.

Catharsis is when we (the audience) feel with the character and live out/relieve our emotional tension. Catharsis is a kind of mental purification that is brought about when we watch something tragic. If you consider the effect crying may have, you will understand what catharsis is. Through catharsis, we realise that our own problems are easily overcome compared to the ones we see on stage, and it feels good afterwards to have lived out our emotions while having "a good cry".

If we continue the example with Anakin Skywalker and apply Aristotle's theory to it, we may come up with this interpretation: Anakin Skywalker is guided by his **HAMARTIA** (his pride and lust for power). He is surrounded by **CHAOTIC ELEMENTS** such as the death of his mother over which he has no control. These chaotic elements contribute to pushing him further towards becoming Darth Vader, an embodiment of pure evil. In the final duel against his son, Luke Skywalker, Vader's luck turns, and he experiences his **PERIPETY** when Luke wounds him and the Emperor tries to persuade Luke to take Vader's place at his right-hand side. This wound, as well as the Emperor's torturing of Luke, leads to Vader's **ANAGNORISIS**, his realisation that family is more important than power. He kills the Emperor, but is mortally wounded himself. We, the audience, experience **CATHARSIS** when Vader asks his son to remove his helmet so he can "look on [him] with [his] own eyes" and realises that he was wrong to believe himself free of emotion and purely evil.

When reading and analysing *Romeo and Juliet*, keep the plot structure model and Aristotle's theory at the back of your mind. You may also use them when you watch your next weepy film. They will apply very broadly to the genre, and they may give you an idea of what the dramatist is aiming for.

What Shakespeare Added to the Tragic Genre

Unlike Shakespearean comedies, which end in marriage, tragedies always end in death, and the stage is often strewn with corpses. The tragedies of ancient Greece which led to Aristotle's theories (p. 49) were bloody, too, but they always kept the blood off-stage. You never actually saw the blood, but the characters talked about it. Shakespeare changed this in his plays by adding violent **stage fights** and **special effects** such as blood bags. Perhaps the explicit violence was a result of the fact that the Elizabethan theatre had to compete with other forms of bloody entertainment such as bear baiting and public executions.

When it comes to plots, William Shakespeare was not really a very

original playwright. He never came up with a single completely original story. All his plays were based on other stories; some were inspired by British or ancient history, others by fictional stories and/or mythology. This is also the case with *Romeo and Juliet*, which is based on the Greek myth of *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

Often the audience would be familiar with the original stories. What Shakespeare did, though, that was entirely new at the time was to add various intriguing elements to these stories. One of these elements was the surprise ending, so although the audience might know the story all too well, they did not know what Shakespeare would do to it, what kind of twists and turns he would pull out of his sleeve.

Shakespeare did not care much for historical accuracy, and he took great liberties with the material in order to create an intriguing and compelling story. One of the other elements that Shakespeare is said to have added to the genre and to the possibly familiar story is psychological depth. As opposed to the relatively flat and interchangeable characters in the comedies, the tragedies feature **round and complex characters**. As a matter of fact, the protagonists in Shakespeare's tragedies are highly individualised. This was, as you will remember, in tune with Renaissance philosophy in which Man was the centre of the universe and regarded as something unique. The fact that the characters in the tragedies are individuals rather than stereotypes emphasises the tragic tone. As critics have pointed out, the deaths at the end of a Shakespearean tragedy are tragic because unique and therefore irreplaceable lives are lost forever.

When King Lear loses his daughter Cordelia, he says:
"Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little...thou'lt come again, never, never, never, never, never."



There is blood galore
in *Macbeth* here
played by Simon
Keenlyside.

Finally, Shakespeare opposed Aristotle's theories with regards to the tragic hero's innocence or guilt. Aristotle believed that the misfortune suffered by the protagonist had to be undeserved. The tragic hero had to be innocent to make the story tragic. Shakespeare did not agree with this and in the course of his career, his tragic heroes became increasingly villainous and guilty. (Note that *Romeo and Juliet* is an early play.)

Some of the protagonists, or tragic heroes, in Shakespeare's plays were downright criminals. Aristotle did not think that we could sympathise with such villains. Shakespeare believed we could, and in that way he paved the way for a lot of modern drama in which we sympathise with the main character although he is selfish, morally reprehensible or downright unsympathetic. Like these modern dramatists, Shakespeare might have succeeded because he remained aware that he could not turn the audience against the tragic hero by making the disaster his fault alone. Other factors, such as other characters or fate, were at play, too.

Humour in Tragedies

In spite of the fact that most people enjoy a good tragedy, Shakespeare actually provided some relief from the seriousness and suffering by blurring the genres. Just as his comedies include elements of tragedy, the tragedies have humorous parts, too. The fact that Shakespeare and other Elizabethan playwrights mixed the genres made a 16th century writer complain that they "thrust in clowns by head and shoulders to play a part in majestic matters" so that "all their plays be neither right tragedies nor right comedies". It did not seem to bother Shakespeare's audience, though. The comic elements were often quite lewd and on the verge of slapstick. However, it is not only interesting to study what types of humour Shakespeare uses, but also how the humour is incorporated in the tragedy. Finally we might consider what role it plays. Often it occurs in the midst of darkness, but we may ask ourselves if it is merely comic relief, a means of making the heavy mood lighter, or something more complex.

A famous example of Shakespeare using humour in a tragedy is the porter scene in *Macbeth*. Right after a thrilling sequence where the king has been killed by the main character, who has consequently experienced feelings of guilt and fear of being caught red-handed, a drunk porter enters the stage. Not only does Shakespeare employ humour in the middle of this tension, he even appeals to the lowest common denominator as the porter incorporates really dirty puns into his speech.
