

Shakespearean Tragedy The Elements of a Tragedy

Before we dive into Shakespeare and *King Lear*, it's important to realize that our dear friend William was working with a specific structure to his plays. All of the tragedies you will study follow the pattern with few minor deviations. By understanding this structure, we can accurately predict outcomes and analyze the piece more accurately.

Element 1 - The Tragic Hero

Usually there is only one tragic hero

Examples

Macbeth

Hamlet

Exceptions- The Love Tragedies

Only Great Men are Tragic Heroes

Peasants (merely because they are human beings) do not inspire pity and fear as great men do. For example- The pangs of despised love and the anguish of remorse are the same in a peasant as in a prince. However, a peasant's emotional distress will not affect the welfare of a nation or empire. So when a great man falls suddenly from the heights of earthly greatness, his fall produces a sense of contrast.

Common Qualities of the Tragic Hero

1. Tragic heroes are exceptional beings. They are from a high estate, but the tragic hero's nature generally raises him in some respect much higher than the average level of humanity. The tragic hero carries a touch of greatness (fierce determination, fixed ideas, which stirs not only sympathy and pity, but also admiration, terror, and awe.
2. Tragic heroes contribute to their own destruction by acts in which the reader sees a flaw in their character. The flaw often takes the form of obsession.
3. The difficulty is that the audience must desire the defeat/destruction of the tragic hero, but this in itself does not constitute tragic feeling.
4. Shakespeare's tragic heroes need not to be "good," though they generally are.
5. Shakespeare's tragic heroes project that man is not small or contemptible, no matter how rotten he can be.

Example-

6. Shakespeare's tragic heroes illustrate the center of the tragic impression: the sense of waste. There is a profound sense of sadness and mystery which is due to this impression of waste.

Example-

7. Shakespeare's tragic heroes live for what seems to be a type of the mystery of the whole world. Shakespeare tries to show the reader the tragedy that is all around and the waste that it creates.

Element 2 - The Tragic Flaw

Hamartia (Greek)- In a tragedy, the quality within the Tragic Hero or heroine which leads to his or her downfall.

Examples- Macbeth's obsession with power, Othello's jealousy
Hamlet's indecisiveness

However, most great tragedies defy such simple explanations.

The flaw often takes the form of obsession.

Element 3 - The Tragic "Story"

Plot

1. The tragic story leads up to, and includes, the death of the hero.
2. The suffering and calamities that befalls the hero are unusual and exceptionally disastrous.

Explanation of the Calamity-

The suffering befalls to a conspicuous person.

The suffering is itself of a striking kind.

The suffering, as a rule, is unexpected.

The suffering, as a rule, contrasts with previous happiness and/or glory.

Tragedy, Human Flaws, and Responsibility

1. The calamities of a tragedy do not simply happen, nor are they sent.
2. The calamities of tragedy proceed mainly from actions, and those, the action of men.
3. Shakespeare's tragic heroes are responsible for the calamity of their falls. The center of the tragedy, therefore, lies in the action issuing from the character, of flawed perceptions, and human frailty for which the hero is ultimately responsible. The hero recognizes his own responsibility for the calamity too late to prevent his own death.

Element 4 - The Abnormal, The Supernatural, Fate/Fortune/Chance

Shakespeare occasionally represents abnormal conditions of mind: insanity, hallucinations etc. The abnormal conditions of the mind are never introduced as the origin of any deeds of any dramatic moment.

Shakespeare also introduces the supernatural: ghosts and witches who have supernatural knowledge. The supernatural elements cannot be explained away as an illusion in the mind of one of the characters. It does contribute to the action, but it is always placed in the closest relation with the character. It gives a confirmation and a distinct form to inward movements already present and exerting an influence: to the half-formed thought or the memory of guilt or suspicion.

3. Shakespeare, in most tragedies, allows “chance” in some form to influence some of the action. Finally, chance is a prominent feature in life. That men may start a course of events but can neither calculate nor control it, is a tragic fact. However, any large use of chance would weaken the sense of the casual connection of character, deed, and calamity.

Element 5 -Tragic Conflicts

The action of the protagonist/tragic hero is most often motivated by external and internal conflicts, which lead to complications from which further conflicts arise- all in a kind of snowballing effect, driving the action toward a tragic resolution.

External Conflict

1. Usually, there are two persons, of whom the hero is one,

Example-

2. Two Parties or Groups, one of which the hero leads

Example-

3. The passions, tendencies, ideas, principles, forces, which animate these persons or groups

Internal Conflict

1. Shakespeare’s tragic hero, though he pursues his fated way, is, at some point, torn by an inward struggle.

2. A comparison of the earlier and later tragedies show this struggle is most emphasized in the later tragedies.

3. The conception of outer and inner struggle includes the action of “spiritual forces.”

The “spiritual forces” generating the internal turmoil for the hero is the combination of the pressures of the external and internal struggles or conflicts.

Element 6 - The Tragic Pattern-

1. A man of high estate- A king, a prince, a general

2. A flaw of character- Within the first two acts, the reader will become aware of the Tragic Hero’s obsession.

3. Intrusion of time and a sense of urgency- As the inner and outer conflicts intensify, the reader sees the Tragic Hero’s actions snowball to his final demise. (Act 3)

4. Misreadings and Rationalizations- The occurrence of the third element will increase the Tragic Hero's urgency. The Tragic Hero operates on what he believes to be the case rather than what he actually knows to be the case.
5. Murder, exile, alienation of enemies and allies- Brought on by new conflicts
6. Gradual Isolation of the Tragic Hero- Brought on by new conflicts, which forces the Tragic Hero to face the responsibility for his actions alone.
7. Mobilization of the opposition- The stage will occur when the opposing forces mobilize against the Tragic Hero to bring the tragedy to his conclusion. Often times, the Tragic Hero is confronted by an enemy in the fifth act who has a good reason for seeking his death.
8. Tragic recognition of the Flaw by the Tragic Hero: too late- At the point of number 7, the Tragic Hero realizes his error. The Tragic Hero must accept responsibility for what has happened.
9. Last courageous attempt to restore lost
10. Audience recognizes potential for greatness- This occurs when the Tragic Hero shows the audience the nobility of his heart, and the audience recognizes his loss as a waste.
11. Death of the Tragic Hero
12. Restoration of order

Element 7 - Tragic Structure in the Plays

As a Shakespearean tragedy represents a conflict which ends in calamity, any such tragedy can be divided into four parts.

1. Exposition- The exposition is the task of the first and second act. Here the reader learns about the general setting, the persons, the character traits, problems of the play, the major conflict, and the tragic hero's flaw.
2. Development/Rising Actions- This comprises the second, third, and fourth acts with parts of the first and fifth. Time and urgency becomes important and the action increases. Eventually, the tragic hero will end up alone.
3. Development/Falling Action- In act four, opposing forces begin to openly resist and make plans for the removal of the tragic hero, and the tragic hero's power is declining as the opposition's power advances.
4. Resolution- In the final act, the opposition reaches its full strength and defeats/destroys the isolated, weakened hero. This is where Tragic Recognition takes place, the reader becomes aware of the greatness of the man just loss, and order is restored.

Vocabulary

1. Agon- The struggle or conflict at the center of the tragic action.
2. Anagnorisis- A revelation or moment of understanding whereby the Tragic Hero comes to understand something concerning the meaning of his fate.

3. Catharsis- The sudden emotional breakdown that constitutes overwhelming feelings of great pity, sorrow, laughter or any extreme change in emotion that results in the renewal, restoration and revitalization for living.
4. Hubris- Exaggerated self pride or self-confidence or arrogance, often resulting in fatal retribution.
5. Nemesis- The fate, experienced as punishment, which befalls the Tragic Hero as the consequence of his or her actions.
6. Pharmakos- The sacrificial victim-substitute or scapegoat, who is made responsible for the ills plaguing the community represented, and who is killed in order to effect a purge or cure of those ills.
7. Proairesis- The freedom of choice at the end; the degree to which the Tragic Hero is free to choose.
8. Stochastic Order- Indications of the future within the moment, anticipatory or prophetic elements.
9. Discovery- The change from ignorance to knowledge in the central character.
10. Foreshadowing- The author uses subtle hints about the plot developments to come later in the story.
11. Foil- A secondary character that is either one who is opposite to the main character (the Tragic Hero) or nearly the same as the main character. The purpose of the foil character is to emphasize the traits of the main character by contrast. This contrast will highlight various facets of the main character's personality.

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