



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 been called "the tragic sense of life"; that is, the sense that human beings are inevitably doomed, through their own failures or errors or even the ironic action of their virtues, or 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 Sophocle'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 character 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. In the nineteenth century, for example, both Hegel and Nietzsche, in greatly differing ways, evolved definitions of *tragedy* for their philosophical stances. With some *tragedies*, such as that of *Antigone*, we can gain a good deal of insight from Hegel's notion that *tragedy* comes from the dynamic collision of equally justified causes which, at the end of the play, is resolved or "sublated" in Hegel's "eternal justice." In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard sought to refute Hegel's aesthetic of *tragedy*.

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, *mutatis mutandis*, as Hamlet was to Shakespeare's Londoners.

[References: R. P. Draper, ed., *Tragedy: Developments in Criticism* (1980); T. R. Henn, *The Harvest of Tragedy* (1956); Murray Krieger, *The Tragic Vision: Variations on a Theme in Literary Interpretation* (1968, rev. 1973); Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (1966, rev. 1979).]