

Shakespearean Tragedy

What Is a Shakespearean Tragedy?

A Shakespearean tragedy is a play penned by Shakespeare himself, or a play written in the style of Shakespeare by a different author. Shakespearean tragedy has got its own specific features, which distinguish it from other kinds of tragedies. It must be kept in mind that Shakespeare is mostly indebted to Aristotle's theory of tragedy in his works. The elements of a Shakespearean tragedy are discussed below.

Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy

A tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language; in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions."

— Aristotle

The 9 Elements of Shakespearean Tragedy at a Glance:

All Shakespearean tragedies include these elements in some shape or form.

Elements	Explanation
Tragic Hero	A main character cursed by fate and possessed of a tragic flaw.
A Struggle Between Good and Evil	This struggle can take place as part of the plot or exist within the main character.
Hamartia	The fatal character flaw of the tragic hero.
Tragic Waste	The good being destroyed along with the bad at the resolution of the play. Often played out with the unnecessary loss of life, especially of "good guy" characters.
External Conflict	This can be a problem facing the hero as a result of the plot or a "bad guy" character.
Internal Conflict	The struggle the hero engages in with his/her fatal flaw.
Catharsis	The release of the audience's emotions through empathy with the characters.
Supernatural Elements	Magic, witchcraft, ghosts, etc.
Lack of Poetic Justice	Things end poorly for everyone, including the "good guys."
Comic Relief	One or more humorous characters who participate in scenes intended to lighten the mood.

What Is a Tragedy?

The word tragedy was derived from the Greek word *tragoidia*, which means ‘*the song of the goat.*’ It is called "the song of the goat" because in ancient Greece the theater performers used to wear goatskin costumes to represent satyrs.

Today in theater and literature a tragedy is a work that has an unhappy ending. The ending must include the main character's downfall.

Tragedy is a serious play or drama typically dealing with the problems of a central character, leading to an unhappy or disastrous ending brought on, as in ancient drama, by fate and a tragic flaw in this character, or, in modern drama, usually by moral weakness, psychological maladjustment, or social pressures.”

— Webster Dictionary

How Is a Shakespearean Tragedy Different From a Regular Tragedy?

A Shakespearean tragedy is a specific type of tragedy (a written work with a sad ending where the hero either dies or ends up mentally, emotionally, or spiritually devastated beyond recovery) that also includes all of the additional elements discussed in this article.

Examples of the Elements in Macbeth

The Elements of a Shakespearean Tragedy

Below we are going to take a more in-depth look at each of the elements of Shakespearean tragedy, as well as explore a few examples.

1. The Tragic Hero

A tragic hero is one of the most significant elements of a Shakespearean tragedy. This type of tragedy is essentially a one-man show. It is a story about one, or sometimes two, characters. The hero may be either male or female and he or she must suffer because of some flaw of character, because of inevitable fate, or both. The hero must be *the most* tragic personality in the play. According to Andrew Cecil Bradley, a noted 20th century Shakespeare scholar, a Shakespearean tragedy “*is essentially a tale of suffering and calamity conducting to death.*” (Usually the hero has to face death in the end.)

An important feature of the tragic hero is that he or she is a towering personality in his/her state/kingdom/country. This person hails from the elite stratum of society and holds a high position, often one of royalty. Tragic heroes are kings, princes, or military generals, who are very important to their subjects. Take Hamlet, prince of Denmark; he is intellectual, highly educated, sociable, charming, and of a philosophic bent. The hero is such an important person that his/her death gives rise to full-scale turmoil, disturbance, and chaos throughout the land. When Hamlet takes revenge

for the death of his father, he is not only killing his uncle but inviting his own death at the hands of Laertes. And as a direct result of his death, the army of Fortinbras enters Denmark to take control.

Characteristics of a Tragic Hero

2. Good vs. Evil

Shakespearean tragedies play out the struggle between good and evil. Most of them deal with the supremacy of evil and suppression of good. According to Edward Dowden, a 19th century noted poet and literary critic, *“Tragedy as conceived by Shakespeare is concerned with the ruin or restoration of the soul and of the life of man. In other words, its subject is the struggle of Good and Evil in the world.”* Evil is presented in Shakespearean tragedies in a way that suggests its existence is an indispensable and ever-enduring thing. For example, in *Hamlet*, the reader is given the impression that something rotten will definitely happen to Denmark (foreshadowing). Though the reader gets an inkling, typically the common people of the play are unaware of the impending evil.

In *Julius Caesar*, the mob is unaware of the struggle between good and evil within King Caesar. They are also ignorant of the furtive and sneaky motives of Cassius. Goodness never beats evil in the tragedies of Shakespeare. Evil conquers goodness. The reason for this is that the evil element is always disguised, while goodness is open and freely visible to all. The main character (the most pious and honest person in the tragedy) is assigned the task of defeating the supreme evil because of his goodness. As a result, he suffers terribly and ultimately fails due to his fatal flaw. This tragic sentiment is perfectly illustrated by Hamlet in the following lines:

O cursed spite,

That ever I was born to set it right."

3. Hamartia (SIN or ERROR)

Hamartia is the Greek word for “sin” or “error”, which derives from the verb *hamatanein*, meaning “to err” or “to miss the mark”. In other words, hamartia refers to the hero's tragic flaw. It is another absolutely critical element of a Shakespearean tragedy. Every hero falls due to some flaw in his or her character. Here I will once again reference A. C. Bradley, who asserts, *“The calamities and catastrophe follow inevitably from the deeds of men and the main source of these deeds is character.”* As a result of the fatal flaw, the hero falls from a high position, which usually leads to his/her unavoidable death.

A good example of hamartia can be seen in *Hamlet* when Hamlet's faltering judgment and failure to act lead him to his untimely death. He suffers from procrastination. He finds a number of opportunities to kill his uncle, but he fails because of his indecisive and procrastinating nature. Every time, he delays taking action. In one case he finds an opportunity to kill Claudius while Claudius is praying. Still, Hamlet forgoes the excellent opportunity to achieve his goal with the excuse that he doesn't want to kill a man while he is praying. He wants to kill Claudius when he is in the act of committing a sin. It is this perfectionism, failure to act, and uncertainty about the correct path that ultimately result in Hamlet's death and lead Denmark into chaos.

Hamartia, also called tragic flaw, (hamartia from Greek hamartanein, "to err"), inherent defect or shortcoming in the hero of a tragedy, who is in other respects a superior being favoured by fortune."

— Encyclopedia Britannica

4. Tragic Waste

In Shakespearean tragedies, the hero usually dies along with his opponent. The death of a hero is not an ordinary death; it encompasses the loss of an exceptionally intellectual, honest, intelligent, noble, and virtuous person. In a tragedy, when good is destroyed along with evil, the loss is known as a "tragic waste." Shakespearean tragedy always includes a tragic waste of goodness. Hamlet is a perfect example of tragic waste. Even though Hamlet succeeds in uprooting the evil from Denmark, he does so at the cost of his death. In this case, the good (Hamlet) gets destroyed along with evil (Claudius). Neither of them wins. Instead, they fail together.

5. Conflict

Conflict is another imperative element of a Shakespearean tragedy. There are two types of conflicts:

External Conflict

External conflict plays a vital role in the tragedies of Shakespeare. External conflict causes internal conflict in the mind of the tragic hero. Every tragic hero in a Shakespearean play is confronted with external conflicts that must be addressed. Hamlet, for example, is confronted with external conflict in the shape of his uncle, Claudius. He has to take revenge, but as a result of his uncle's craftiness and effective security, Hamlet isn't able to translate his ideas into action. This external conflict gives rise to internal conflict, which hinders Hamlet from taking any action.

Internal Conflict

Internal conflict is one of the most essential elements in a Shakespearean tragedy. It refers to the confusion in the mind of the hero. Internal conflict is responsible for the hero's fall, along with fate or destiny. The tragic hero always faces a critical dilemma. Often, he cannot make a decision, which results in his ultimate failure. Again, Hamlet is a perfect example. He is usually a doer, but over the course of the play, his indecision and frequent philosophical hang-ups create a barrier to action. Internal conflict is what causes Hamlet to spare the life of Claudius while he is praying.

6. Catharsis

Catharsis is a remarkable feature of a Shakespearean tragedy. It refers to the cleansing of the audience's pent-up emotions. In other words, Shakespearean tragedies help the audience to feel and release emotions through the aid of tragedy. When we watch a tragedy, we identify with the characters and take their losses personally. A Shakespearean tragedy gives us an opportunity to feel pity for a certain character and fear for another, almost as if we are playing the roles ourselves. The hero's hardships compel us to empathize with him. The villain's cruel deeds cause us to feel wrath

toward him. Tears flow freely when a hero like Hamlet dies. At the same time we feel both sorry for Hamlet and happy that Claudius has received his proper punishment.

7. Supernatural Elements

Supernatural elements are another key aspect of a Shakespearean tragedy. They play an important role in creating an atmosphere of awe, wonder, and sometimes fear. Supernatural elements are typically used to advance the story and drive the plot. The ghost Hamlet sees plays an important role in stirring up internal conflict. It is the ghost who tells Hamlet his father was killed by his uncle Claudius and assigns him the duty of taking revenge. Similarly, the witches in *Macbeth* play a significant role in the plot. These witches are responsible for motivating Macbeth to resort to murder in order to ascend the throne of Scotland.

8. Absence of Poetic Justice

Poetic Justice means good is rewarded and evil is punished; it refers to a situation in which everything comes to a fitting and just end. There is no poetic justice in the tragedies of Shakespeare; rather, these plays contain only partial justice. Shakespeare understood that poetic justice rarely occurs outside of fiction. Good deeds often go without reward and immoral people are often free to enjoy life to its fullest. “*Do good and have good*” was considered an outdated ethos in the time of Shakespeare, which is why we don’t find any poetic justice in his tragedies. Good is crushed along with evil. Hamlet dies along with Claudius.

9. Comic Relief

Comic relief is our final key element. Shakespeare did not follow the example of his classical predecessors when writing tragedies. Greek and Roman writers did not use comic relief. But Shakespeare wanted to relieve the tension for the reader and lighten up the mood here and there. A few examples of comic relief scenes include the grave digger scene in *Hamlet*, the drunken port scene in *Macbeth*, the fool is smarter than the king dialogue in *King Lear*, and the Polonius in the wings speech in *Hamlet*. We also have the following scene in *Romeo and Juliet*.

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