

# Tragedy

King Lear: AP English Literature

# Tragedy according to Aristotle's *Poetics*



- “The soul of tragedy is the plot.”
- Concerns the fall of a courageous individual who confronts powerful forces (both within and without) and suffers with dignity.
- This tragic figure must be high-born, important, and have admirable traits.
- The fall must be caused in part by hamartia (a mistake, frailty, or character flaw in the protagonist), not by an extreme in vice or depravity.



- If the character flaw is pride/superabundance of self-confidence, it is called hubris.
- The tragedy evokes in the audience the emotions of pity and terror, resulting in a catharsis of these emotions. (Catharsis is the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions.)

# Watch for:

- A warning: all tragic heroes are warned in one way or another, by foreshadowing events or another character.
- A movement from happiness to misery





- Simple plots have only a “change of fortune” (*catastrophe*). Complex plots have both “reversal of intention” (*peripeteia*) and “recognition” (*anagnorisis*) connected with the catastrophe.
- The recognition is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate in response.

- *Lear* is often staged with a minimalist set and very few props; interestingly, Aristotle rated “spectacle” last in his list of important elements of tragedy (after plot, character, thought, diction, and song).



Fig. 1

- “The production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.”

# Shakespearean Tragedy, according to A.C. Bradley

- Shakespeare's heroes fall suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust.
- The hero's fall produces a sense of contrast of the powerlessness of mankind and of the omnipotence--perhaps the caprice--of Fortune, Fate, or chance.



The tragic ending of King Lear is so striking because it does not seem inevitable; rather, it seems preventable.

In fact, it seems expressly designed to fall suddenly like a bolt from a sky cleared by the vanished storm.





# Allusion: The Book of Job

- OT story; can be read as another tragic drama. According to biblical scholars, the Book of Job is the oldest book in the Bible.
- Uses the same poetic devices we see throughout Lear: dramatic dialogue, grandiose sound patterns, extended metaphor, irony, and sarcasm.
- Both protagonists are stripped of respect, material possessions, but not the power of speech.

- Nutshell: Job has a large family, wealth, happiness, etc. God is sure of Job's love and commitment while Satan wants to take away everything he has, to see if he will still stay faithful to God. *"But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face"* (Job 1: 9-11).

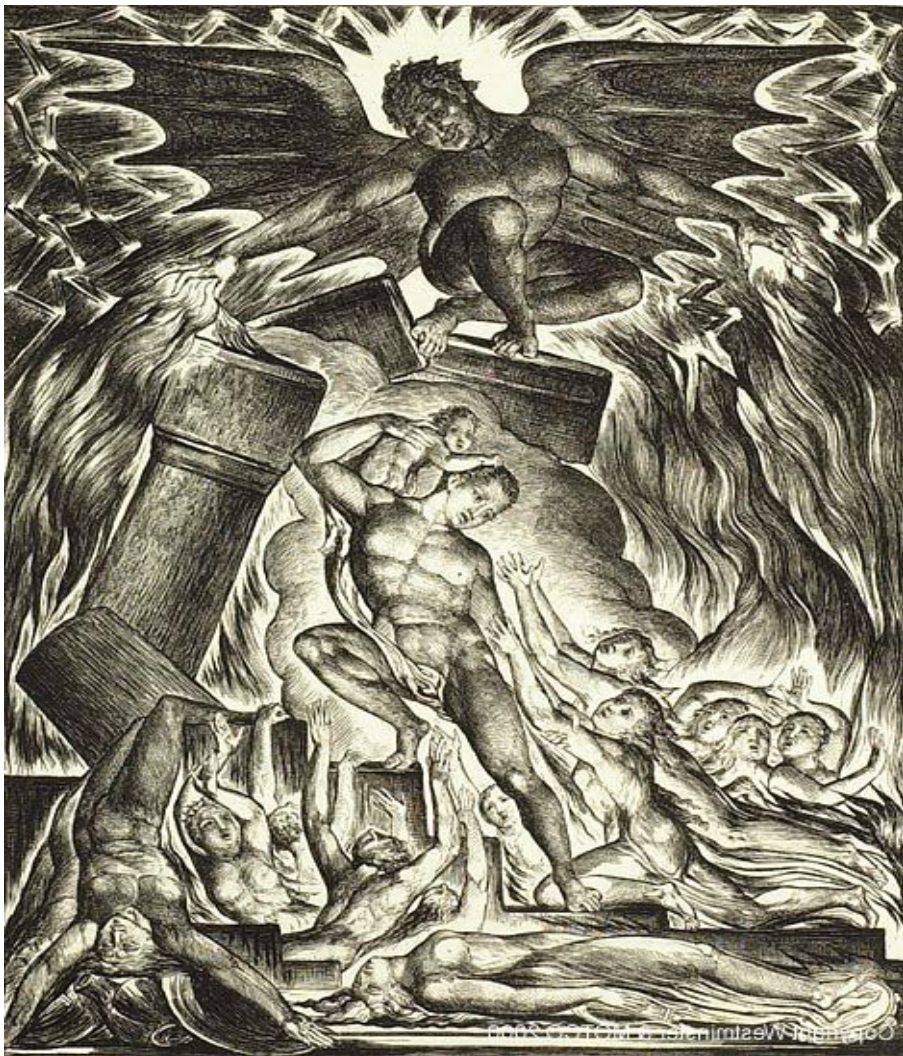


Fig. 4 William Blake's "The Destruction of Job's Sons" 1825

- Middle section of both stories: Job and Lear face poverty, neglect, and illness → encounter cosmic nothingness and a loss of self-control.
- End of both stories: protagonist experiences a divine or quasi-divine encounter with the one whose presence he most longs for: Job, with an angry God who causes him both regret and comfort, Lear with an angelic daughter who is merciful and nurturing.

- Job is restored to the privileged position he had at the outset and dies at a peaceful and prosperous old age.
- The Lear plot diverges from Job's in the last scene, when the Lear is plunged back into agony and he dies experiencing an ambiguous final vision.

# Sources

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Fig. 1 <http://iuintlst.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/kinglear-1.jpg>

Fig. 2 <http://www.lib-art.com/imgpaintingthumb/5/9/t21795-lear-grasping-a-sword-blake-william.jpg>

Fig. 3 [http://www.poemhunter.com/i/p/26/3026\\_b\\_3920.jpg](http://www.poemhunter.com/i/p/26/3026_b_3920.jpg)

Fig. 4 <http://www.motco.com/images/90103005-main.jpg>

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