

"A man doesn't become a hero until he can see the root of his own downfall."

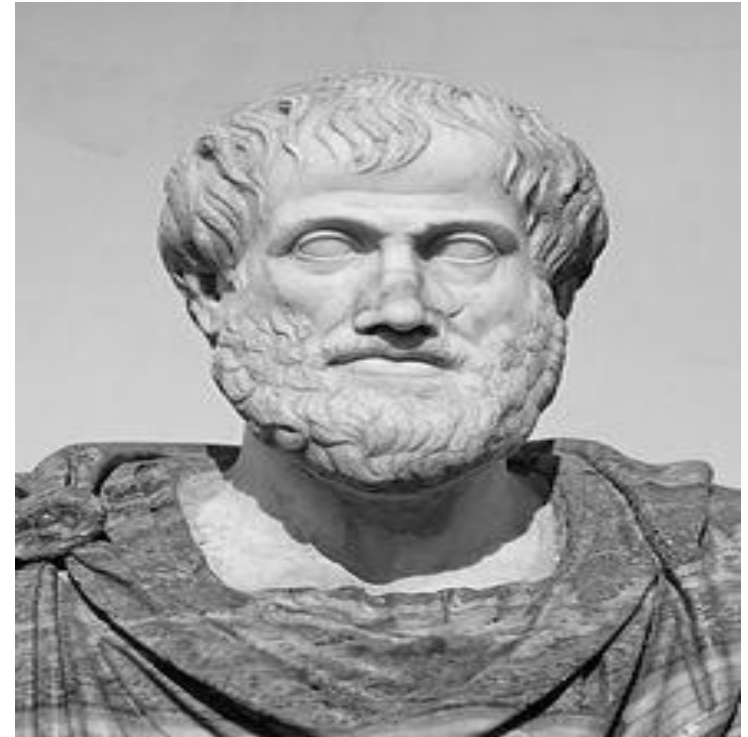
Aristotelian Tragedy

Abstract:

An exploration of how the conventions of ancient tragedy may have influenced Shakespeare's *Macbeth* including his choice to break with these conventions and the possible intended effect.

Aristotle

- Aristotle was an ancient Greek philosopher.
- He influenced almost all forms of knowledge!
- All aspects of Aristotle's philosophy continue to be the object of academic study.



Key vocabulary for today's lecture..

- **Suffering**
- **Tragic hero**
- **Anagnorisis:** the critical moment of discovery
- **Peripeteia:** a sudden turn of events or unexpected reversal
- **Denouement:** the final part of a narrative where the plot strands are drawn together and matters are resolved or explained.
- **Hamartia:** tragic flaw
- **Hubris:** excessive pride
- **Pathos:** an experience that evokes pity, sympathy or compassion
- **Divine Chain of Being:** a religious hierarchical structure with God at the top followed by King/Queen, aristocracy, peasants, animals, plants and minerals.
- **Catharsis:** relief of emotional tension
- **Nihilistic:** rejecting all religious and moral principles in the belief life is meaningless.

According to Aristotle, a tragedy must have...

- a change of fortune from good to bad (peripeteia) brought about because of the hero's error in judgment. There may be more than one peripeteia in a play.
- suffering that creates sympathy (pathos) in the audience leading to an emotional release (catharsis)
- a sudden realisation of the hero's situation (anagnorisis)

Renaissance tragedy:

- Closer to Aristotelian notion of the tragic flaw, but accepting of all flaws
- Additionally it tends to include subplots and comic relief.
- Also influences from Senecan tragedies from 4 BC (see below).
- Often include violent and bloody plots, resounding rhetorical speeches, the frequent use of ghosts ... and sometimes the five-act structure.

Term	Meaning	Example Macbeth	Example AIC
Peripeteia	a change of fortune from good to bad (peripeteia) brought about because of the hero's error in judgment.	Macbeth's developing tyrannical nature and reliance/unquestioning on the second prophecies.	The Inspector appears to challenge the Birling family's complacency and lack of social responsibility.
Pathos	suffering that creates sympathy	Macduff's suffering. Lady Macbeth brutally manipulates her husband.	We want justice for Eva Smith.
Catharsis	an emotional release	Macbeth acknowledging the influence of the witches – links to Banquo's original fears. Arguably - None – regicide is beyond redemption! Isolates himself	Sheila accepts her role in Eva Smith's demise.
Anagnorisis	a sudden realisation of the hero's situation	After Macduff's reveal. Encounter with Macduff when Macbeth is suddenly aware of the witches' equivocation? Reaction to Lady Macbeth's suicide?	The younger Birlings accept responsibility and try to teach their parents.
Denouement	the final part of a narrative where the plot strands are drawn together and matters are resolved or explained.	Malcolm's speech - Order is restored as Macbeth is killed and Duncan's son Malcolm is proclaimed the rightful King of Scotland.	Unresolved as not all family members take responsibility however the moral is clear!

According to Aristotle, a tragic hero must...

- be morally good: ‘valiant cousin, worthy gentleman’
- have excessive pride (hubris): flattery from all angles inflates his ego!
- possess a flaw in their character (hamartia)
- Eventually the Aristotelian tragic hero dies a tragic death, having fallen from great heights and having made an irreversible mistake. The hero must courageously accept their death with honour.
- “I will not yield” – accepting death with honour?

Macbeth as Tragic Hero

- *Macbeth is clearly a tragic hero: at the outset of the play, he is a noble warrior whose loyalty is commended and rewarded by King Duncan.*
- *Macbeth's hamartia is his ambition and, together with his hubris – “**I must not yield to one of woman born**” – is his undoing.*
- *The peripeteia is the regicide as, from this moment forth, Macbeth knows he is damned: “**What's done is done,**” as his wife later reminds him.*
- *Macduff's suffering at the hands of Macbeth: “**All my pretty chickens, and their dam, at one fell swoop?**” arouses the audience's sympathy and his killing of Macbeth at the end of the play is a cathartic experience. The temptation of ambition robs Macbeth of the essence of his existence as a human being and leaves behind nothing but discontent and a worthless life. We pity him.*

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- In Act 5, on hearing the news of his wife's death, Macbeth proclaims: 'life is but a walking shadow...' in a bleak and nihilistic soliloquy.
- Is this Macbeth's **cathartic** moment where he suddenly understands the futility in his actions? He is never happy even when all prophecies are fulfilled. Or is his cathartic moment where he faces Macduff and finally sees through the witches' **equivocation**?
- Possible quotes to support this interpretation:
 - 'To be thus is nothing; but to be safely thus' (Act 3 Scene 1)
 - 'It is a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing' (Act 5 Scene 5) – does this evoke sympathy despite Macbeth's moral depravity?
 - 'be these juggling fiends no more believed' (Act 5 Scene 8)

Relevance of Aristotle in the exam

Starting with this extract, explore the character of Macbeth.

Macbeth seems to resemble Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero, beginning the play as a noble and successful warrior but easily convinced by the witches' equivocation due to his hubris. He immediately fantasises about regicide 'against the use of nature', revealing his hamartia although it is unclear whether this is his 'vaulting ambition' or his impressionability since he is so quick to believe the witches' prophecies.

Critics' Arguments: Harold Bloom

- 'Macbeth's dying is less of a release for us' –Bloom argues the audience do not want Macbeth to die. He retains their '**pathos**' because as humans we all have 'dark desires'. In this way, he holds our 'terrified sympathy'.
- Macbeth 'forfeits our admiration though not our entrapped sympathy'
- We despise their actions but over the course of the drama we have become so bound up in their fates that we feel their pain and almost don't want them to be caught.
- 'Macbeth is a **visionary tragedy**'.
- 'Of all of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists, Macbeth is the least free'.

Questions to consider

- How does Macbeth represent and contradict the idea of a tragic hero?
- To what extent is Macbeth an Aristotelian tragedy?
- To what extent does Priestley utilise ideas from classic tragedy?
- How could we use these ideas in the language structure question?