Tragedy Summary

Tragedy (from the Greek: τραγῳδία, *tragōidia*) is a form of drama based on human suffering and, mainly, the terrible or sorrowful events that befall a main character. Traditionally, the intention of tragedy is to invoke an accompanying catharsis, or a "pain [that] awakens pleasure", for the audience. While many cultures have developed forms that provoke this paradoxical response, the term *tragedy* often refers to a specific tradition of drama that has played a unique and important role historically in the self-definition of Western civilization. That tradition has been multiple and discontinuous, yet the term has often been used to invoke a powerful effect of cultural identity and historical continuity—"the Greeks and the Elizabethans, in one cultural form; Hellenes and Christians, in a common activity," as Raymond Williams puts it.

From its origins in the theatre of ancient Greece 2500 years ago, from which there survives only a fraction of the work of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, as well as many fragments from other poets; through its singular articulations in the works of Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Jean Racine, and Friedrich Schiller to the more recent naturalistic tragedy of Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg; Samuel Beckett's modernist meditations on death, loss and suffering; Müller's postmodernist reworkings of the tragic canon, tragedy has remained an important site of cultural experimentation, negotiation, struggle, and change. A long line of philosophers—which includes Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Voltaire, Hume, Diderot, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, B enjamin, Camus, Lacan, and Deleuze—have analysed, speculated upon, and criticised the genre.

In the wake of Aristotle's *Poetics* (335 BCE), tragedy has been used to make genre distinctions, whether at the scale of poetry in general (where the tragic divides against epic and lyric) or at the scale of the drama (where tragedy is opposed to comedy). In the modern era, tragedy has also been defined against drama, melodrama, the tragicomic, and epic theatre. Drama, in the narrow sense, cuts across the traditional division between comedy and tragedy in an anti- or a-generic deterritorialisation from the mid-19th century onwards. Both Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal define their epic theatre projects (non-Aristotelian drama and Theatre of the Oppressed, respectively) against models of tragedy. Taxidou, however, reads epic theatre as an incorporation of tragic functions and its treatments of mourning and speculation.

The word "tragedy" appears to have been used to describe different phenomena at different times. It derives from Classical Greek τραγῳδία, contracted from *trag(o)-aoidiā* = "goat song", which comes from *tragos* = "he-goat" and *aeidein* = "to sing" (*cf.* "ode"). Scholars suspect this may be traced to a time when a goat was either the prize in a competition of choral dancing or was what a chorus danced around prior to the animal's ritual sacrifice. In another view on the etymology, Athenaeus of Naucratis (2nd–3rd century CE) says that the original form of the word was *trygodia* from *trygos* (grape harvest) and *ode* (song), because those events were first introduced during grape harvest.

Writing in 335 BCE (long after the Golden Age of 5th-century Athenian tragedy), Aristotle provides the earliest-surviving explanation for the origin of the dramatic art form in his *Poetics*, in which he argues that tragedy developed from the improvisations of the leader of choral dithyrambs (hymns sung and danced in praise of Dionysos, the god of wine and fertility):[17]

Anyway, arising from an improvisatory beginning (both tragedy and comedy—tragedy from the leaders of the dithyramb, and comedy from the leaders of the phallic processions

which even now continue as a custom in many of our cities), [tragedy] grew little by little, as [the poets] developed whatever [new part] of it had appeared; and, passing through many changes, tragedy came to a halt, since it had attained its own nature.

— *Poetics IV, 1449a 10–15*

In the same work, Aristotle attempts to provide a scholastic definition of what tragedy is:

Tragedy is, then, an enactment of a deed that is important and complete, and of [a certain] magnitude, by means of language enriched [with ornaments], each used separately in the different parts [of the play]: it is enacted, not [merely] recited, and through pity and fear it effects relief (catharsis) to such [and similar] emotions.

— *Poetics, VI 1449b 2–3*

There is some dissent to the dithyrambic origins of tragedy, mostly based on the differences between the shapes of their choruses and styles of dancing. A common descent from pre-Hellenic fertility and burial rites has been suggested. Friedrich Nietzsche discussed the origins of Greek tragedy in his early book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Here, he suggests the name originates in the use of a chorus of goat-like satyrs in the original dithyrambs from which the tragic genre developed.

Scott Scullion writes:

There is abundant evidence for tragoidia understood as "song for the prize goat". The best-known evidence is Horace, Ars poetica 220-24 ("he who with a tragic song competed for a mere goat"); the earliest is the Parian Marble, a chronicle inscribed about 264/63 BCE, which records, under a date between 538 and 528 BCE: "Thespis is the poet ... first produced ... and as prize was established the billy goat" (FrGHist 239A, epoch 43); the clearest is Eustathius

1769.45: "They called those competing tragedians, clearly because of the song over the billy goat"

Athenian tragedy—the oldest surviving form of tragedy—is a type of dance-drama that formed an important part of the theatrical culture of the city-state. Having emerged sometime during the 6th century BCE, it flowered during the 5th century BCE (from the end of which it began to spread throughout the Greek world), and continued to be popular until the beginning of the Hellenistic period. No tragedies from the 6th century and only 32 of the more than a thousand that were performed in the 5th century have survived. We have complete texts extant by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

Athenian tragedies were performed in late March/early April at an annual state religious festival in honor of Dionysus. The presentations took the form of a contest between three playwrights, who presented their works on three successive days. Each playwright offered a tetralogy consisting of three tragedies and a concluding comic piece called a satyr play. The four plays sometimes featured linked stories. Only one complete trilogy of tragedies has survived, the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. The Greek theatre was in the open air, on the side of a hill, and performances of a trilogy and satyr play probably lasted most of the day. Performances were apparently open to all citizens, including women, but evidence is scant. The theatre of Dionysus at Athens probably held around 12,000 people.

All of the choral parts were sung (to the accompaniment of an *aulos*) and some of the actors' answers to the chorus were sung as well. The play as a whole was composed in various verse metres. All actors were male and wore masks. A Greek chorus danced as well as sang, though no one knows exactly what sorts of steps the chorus performed as it sang. Choral songs in tragedy are often divided into three sections: strophe ("turning, circling"), antistrophe ("counter-turning, counter-circling") and epode ("after-song").

Many ancient Greek tragedians employed the *ekkyklêma* as a theatrical device, which was a platform hidden behind the scene that could be rolled out to display the aftermath of some event which had happened out of sight of the audience. This event was frequently a brutal murder of some sort, an act of violence which could not be effectively portrayed visually, but an action of which the other characters must see the effects for it to have meaning and emotional resonance. A prime example of the use of the *ekkyklêma* is after the murder of Agamemnon in the first play of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, when the king's butchered body is wheeled out in a grand display for all to see. Variations on the *ekkyklêma* are used in tragedies and other forms to this day, as writers still find it a useful and often powerful device for showing the consequences of extreme human actions. Another such device was a crane, the mechane, which served to hoist a god or goddess on stage when they were supposed to arrive flying. This device gave origin to the phrase "deus ex machina" ("god out of a machine"), that is, the surprise intervention of an unforeseen external factor that changes the outcome of an event.