

For all students of english literature

Definition of Tragedy

In literary terms, tragedy is a form of drama in which there is a display of human suffering and often catharsis for the audience. Tragedy, as we know it in Western culture, has its foundation in ancient Greece about 2,500 years ago. It has evolved over the millennia and had an important role in many different cultures and eras, such as in the time of the Roman Republic, in Elizabethan England, and including up until the present day.

There is some dispute over the origins of the term “tragedy.” Generally it is understood that the word comes from the the Classical Greek word trag(o)-aoidiā, meaning “goat song.” There are a few different reasons posited for what role the goat played in the first iterations of tragedy. Some say that a goat was given as a prize to whomever sang the best tragic song in a competition, while others argue that a goat was sacrificed while choral dancing occurred. Yet one more possible etymological root is from the Greek word trygodia, meaning “ode of the grape harvest,” as these events may have occurred during that harvest.

Common Examples of Tragedy

We refer to many large and small events as tragedies in daily life, whether it’s losing a loved one or a catastrophic natural disaster such as an earthquake that leads to many deaths. However, the literary definition of tragedy generally demands that the downfall of the protagonist does not come chiefly from external forces, but instead from the character’s own errors and flaws.

Here are some examples of tragedy from everyday life (in order, perhaps, of least to most serious):

Losing out on a promotion due to making a fatal error
Breaking off a relationship through a misunderstanding and pride overshadowing the truth
A patient dying at a hospital because a doctor is too arrogant to admit he or she made a mistake



Significance of Tragedy in Literature

The definition of tragedy has also changed over time; Aristotle was the first to fully define it in his work Poetics. He wrote that tragedy must involve the reversal of fortunes of a powerful person from good to bad, due to the hamartia of the protagonist. He also wrote that tragedy must create a sense of fear and pity in the viewer, which can then lead to catharsis. More modern dramatists, such as Arthur Miller, have written that tragedy can also be written about the common person; in fact, the viewer may more easily relate to this type of tragedy and thus feel a greater sense of fear and pity.

Examples of Tragedy in Literature

Example #1

People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus. He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance, he rose to power, a man beyond all power. Who could behold his greatness without envy? Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him. Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day, count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.

(Oedipus Rex by Sophocles)

Oedipus the King is one of the few full surviving tragedies from ancient Greece. In true Greek fashion, this example of tragedy involves a powerful man—a king—who ignores the fates and casts a curse on himself. His downfall serves as a lesson to everyone else not to envy those in power.

Example #2

PRINCE: A glooming peace this morning with it brings.

The sun, for sorrow, will not show his head.

Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things.

Some shall be pardoned, and some punished.

For never was a story of more woe

Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

(Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare)

Shakespeare is one of the leading authors of tragic plays in all of English. His play Romeo and Juliet is perhaps the most famous tragedy of all time, exploring the doomed loved between, as he called them, “star-crossed lovers.” Romeo and Juliet go against their families’ mutual hatred to marry each other in secret, which ultimately leads to their downfalls

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