

## English 12

### Aristotle and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

#### What is a tragic hero?

The tragic hero is a man of noble stature. He is not an ordinary man, but a man with outstanding quality and greatness about him. His own destruction is for a greater cause or principle.

#### Common characteristics of a tragic hero According to Aristotle:

- # Usually of noble birth
- # **Hamartia** - a.k.a. the tragic flaw that eventually leads to his downfall.
- # **Peripeteia** - a reversal of fortune brought about by the hero's tragic flaw
- # His actions result in an increase of self-awareness and self-knowledge
- # The audience must feel pity and fear for this character.

**Aristotle: "A man cannot become a hero until he can see the root of his own downfall."**

It should be noted that the hero's downfall is his own fault as a result of his own free choice, but his misfortune is not wholly deserved. Usually his death is seen as a waste of human potential. His death usually is not a pure loss, because it results in greater knowledge and awareness.

#### Hamlet as a tragic hero

Aristotle wrote down these characteristics of a tragic hero for classical Greek tragedy plays. However, Shakespeare plays are often noted for their excellent portrayals of tragic heroes.

Here's an example of a principal Shakespeare character who is regarded as a tragic hero. Hamlet's fatal flaw, as seen by Aristotle, would be his failure to act immediately to kill Claudius. Unlike classical tragic heroes, however, Hamlet is well aware of his fatal flaw from the beginning - he constantly questions himself on why he continues to delay the fulfillment of his duty. His continuous awareness and doubt delays him from acting. (This is slightly different from the Aristotelian classical tragedies such as *Oedipus Rex* where Oedipus is **not** aware of his flaw until the very end.)

Hamlet finally acts to kill Claudius only after realizing that he is poisoned. But by procrastinating, his tragic flaw, everyone whom he ridicules and targets also dies along the way, such as Laertes, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz; and Guildenstern.

#### **Other common traits**

- His downfall is usually due to excessive pride (**hubris**)
- He is doomed from the start, he bears no responsibility for possessing his flaw, but bears responsibility for his actions.
- He has discovered fate by **his own actions**, and not by things happening to him

- He is usually a king, a leader of men - his fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or number of people. Peasants do not inspire pity and fear as great men do. The sudden fall from greatness to nothing provides a sense of contrast.
- The suffering of the hero must not be senseless: it must have meaning!
- The hero of classical tragedies is almost all male: one rare exception is Cleopatra, from *Antony and Cleopatra*

### The strange, the supernatural and chance

Shakespeare occasionally represents abnormal conditions of mind: insanity, somnambulism, hallucinations - e.g. King Lear's insanity

Shakespeare also introduces the supernatural: ghosts and witches who have supernatural knowledge - e.g. the ghost of Hamlet's father who tells his son to avenge his death

Shakespeare, in most of the tragedies, allows "chance" in some form to influence some of the action - e.g. in *Romeo and Juliet*, if Juliet didn't wake up a minute sooner they both could have avoided death

### Modern-day tragic heroes?

In the Modernist era (late 19th and early 20th century), a new kind of tragic hero was created out of a result of this "classical" definition. The modern hero, it seems, does not necessarily have to be of a high estate - but rather an "ordinary person". The story may not result in an epiphany of awareness or even come to a resolution of catharsis. He or she may not even die! The new tragic hero is also known as the "anti-hero".

Two examples of the modern-day tragic hero, or the anti-hero>

Jay Gatsby from *The Great Gatsby* and Willy Loman from *Death of a Salesman*

Who is a **MODERN DAY** tragic hero?

In a typed response, identify and describe a modern day hero based on the qualities outlined by Aristotle.