

Introduction to Shakespearean Tragedy

Definition: Tragic drama is fundamentally serious, involving the downfall of a heroic figure. The themes are lofty: passion (*Romeo and Juliet*), revenge (*Hamlet*), ambition (*Macbeth*) and jealousy (*Othello*).

Unique Elements of Tragedy:

The Tragic Hero: An articulate, social authority, someone who is “important” within his society (NOTE: “his” is deliberate); this hero has at least one weakness or fault – a tragic flaw – which during the course of the drama grows until it overcomes his virtues and leads to his downfall and the destruction of his world.

Chorus: Borrowed from Greek tragedy in which dancers/singers appear at intervals within the play to comment on the action – express objective judgement on the proceedings.

Common Elements that Appear in Shakespearean Tragedy

1. Contrast

- one idea/character or object is thrown into opposition with another for sake of emphasis or clarity
- use of contrast heightens distinctions of character and increases interest by placing opposites side by side (e.g. comic scene just before a tragic scene)
- character foils (those who provide contrast, usually to the protagonist) are used extensively by Shakespeare

2. Fate

- intervention of some force over which humans have not control
- may complicate the plot but does not bring about the downfall of the hero (he ultimately chooses it for himself by his actions)
- pathos/sympathy may be felt by the audience for those hurt by fate

3. **The Supernatural**

- Shakespeare knew the appeal of ghosts, witches, premonitions, prophecies and other supernatural events for his audience
- thus he included them

4. **Pathetic Fallacy**

- since the hero's actions affect the entire Chain of Being, all of Nature appears to react through unnatural happenings in animal behaviour or weather

5. **Nemesis (compared to Poetic Justice)**

- Nemesis is the Greek goddess of vengeance, the personification of righteous indignation; she pursues those who have displeased the gods
- by Shakespeare's time, the term became associated with any agent of fate or bringer of just retribution

6. **Catharsis**

- a term to describe the intended impact of tragedy on the audience; the reason we are drawn, again and again, to watch tragedy despite its essential sadness
- by experiencing the events which arouse pity and terror, we achieve a purging (*catharsis*) of these emotions
- detached pity and involved terror that leaves the spectator with "calm of mind, all passion spent"

7. **Suspense**

- uncertainty in an incident, situation, or behaviour
- keeps the audience anxious concerning the outcome of the protagonist's conflict
- two types: that which provokes intellectual curiosity and that which provokes emotional curiosity
- Shakespeare uses conflict, precarious situations, apparently unsolvable problems, foreshadowing and delay to develop suspense

8. Soliloquy

- speech made by character when he/she is alone on the stage (only audience is privy to the speech)

Purposes include:

- revealing mood of speaker and reasons for it
- revealing character
- revealing character's opinion of someone else in the play
- revealing motives of speaker
- creating suspense
- preparing audience for subsequent developments
- explaining matters that would ordinarily require another scene
- reviewing past events and indicating speaker's attitudes
- reinforcing theme

9. Aside

- comments intended only for the audience (or occasionally for one other character on stage)
- made in the presence of other characters on stage, but the audience is aware that these other characters cannot hear the asides
- must be short, or would interfere with the course of the play

Purposes include:

- to indicate character to person speaking
- to draw attention to significance of what has been said or done
- to explain plot development
- to create humour by introducing a witty comment
- to create suspense by foreshadowing
- to remind audience of the presence of speaker, while he/she remains in the background

10. Dramatic Irony

- this situation occurs when the audience is aware of the conditions that are unknown to the character on stage or when some of the characters are ignorant of what really is on the speaker's mind

11. Humour

- humour may take many forms
- Shakespeare was fascinated by word play; therefore, puns are common in his plays
- may create humour through presenting the completely unexpected

12. The Spectacular

- audiences enjoy scene which presents unusual sights
- furious action, elaborate costumes, or stage props create the spectacular, thus Shakespeare frequently employs fight scenes, crowd scenes, banquets, dancing parties and royal courts