## Aristotelian Tragedy

Aristotle's *The Poetics* (4th century B.C.) carefully analyzed what makes tragedy such a powerful, aesthetic event. For Aristotle, the most important element of tragic drama was the unique experience of CATHARSIS, the arousing of the specific emotions of pity and fear so as to dispel or purge them in the spectator. This is tragedy defined by its emotional effect on the audience.

I. The ideal plot should contain the following characteristics:

A. One plot whose action extends over no more than a day or two and occurs in

no more than one city and its surrounding countryside. This is the unity of time,

place and action. The concentration of an action within a relatively small

location and time period produced a stronger emotional response, according

to Aristotle.

B A plot structured on principles which strengthen the emotions of "pity" and

"fear". These principles are

1. Reversal (or change of fortune)

a. Simple: character experiences a turn of fortune from happiness to

misery or vice versa

b. Complex: the hero, seeking happiness, brings about his own destruction.

(ironic reversal)

2. Discovery (or recognition)

a. of someone's identity or true nature (Lear's children, Gloucester's

children)

b. of one's own identity or true character (Cordelia, Edgar, Edmund, etc.)

c. of the nature of the gods and the universe (Lear's or Gloucester's belief

that the gods "kill us for their sport".)

3. The ideal climax, turning point, combines ironic reversal and discovery in a

single action.

II. The Tragic Hero's Characteristics

A. He or she must be of noble blood. This provides the story with dignity. (The

tragedy of commoners/peasants did not interest Aristotle). It also generates the

feeling in the audience that if tragedy can happen to the advantaged, it can happen

to anyone. This is an example of how tragedy produces "fear".

B. Initially, the hero must be neither better nor worse morally than most people.

This produces "fear" because the hero is imperfect like us, and we can identify

with him. It also produces "pity" because if the hero were perfect or totally good,

we would be outraged by his fate. If he were completely evil, we would feel like

he had gotten what he deserved.

C. The tragic hero meets his fate because of a "tragic flaw". The tragic flaw is not

a defect in character, but an error in judgment of the kind we all make. Since we

all make mistakes, this generates "fear" in that we recognize our own potential for

tragedy by committing the same errors. It also generates "pity" because we do not

blame the hero for his tragic fate.

Shakespeare's tragic heroes differ, to a degree, in respect to this last feature.

Shakespeare usually makes them more responsible for their fate, though the

mistake which causes their fall does happen because of poor judgment. (Lear's

banishment of Cordelia...)

III. Catharsis, or purgation

A. "Pity" is aroused for the hero as he meets his fate.

B. "Fear" is aroused since we may meet a similar fate as the hero.

C. These two emotions are dispelled eventually. We sympathize with the hero

and his tragic circumstances, but we are not overcome with pity or fear for him.

We learn a lesson from the story, our pity and fear disappear, and that is

a cathartic experience.