

## What is Greek Tragedy?

Greek tragedy is a very vast but strict category, which is detailed in the structure, character type, speech, thought, display and song. Through the ages, it has been varied and rules have been broken, however there still remains the basic format. Generally a tragedy is defined as a literary composition written and performed by actors, in which there is a tragic theme, often involving a heroic struggle and the downfall of the main character. It is generally a form of action rather than narrative, which brings out emotions of pity and fear among the audience. The great writers of Greek Tragedy included Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides.

The protagonist of a Greek Tragedy is a character of nobility, who has a higher social status in the society he is situated in. At the beginning the character should be content and prosperous and by the end, he will be ruined and thrown into misery. In the play of Oedipus Rex, Thebes goes from a city of prosperity to a city of disease. This represents the fall of Oedipus. The change over is not caused by bad habits or immoral conduct but because of the tragic flaw in the character.

The hero should be ultimately good and have a strong character. He or she must be realistic and be self-contained. Characters should be constructed according to Aristotle's theory of 'the law of probability and necessity'.

He or she may doubt the existence of more powerful beings like the Gods and have some sort of arrogance, which is seen as comparing oneself to the Gods, which is a considerable Greek sin. They will also display ignorance, which will be the characters downfall. Overall in a tragedy, the character has only the second place of importance. The character should support the plot he or she is weaved into.

Another important factor of Greek Tragedy is the chorus. A Greek Tragedy is usually interspersed with songs sung or words spoken by the actors and the chorus. There can also be dancing among the Chorus. During Sophocles era, a tragic play had a chorus, which consisted of about fifteen men who were arranged in a rectangular form. As more tragedies were created, the chorus held less importance. They engaged in dialogue with the characters, retelling parts of the story and at times, giving wisdom and moral comments to the main characters.

They are included to contribute to the harmony of the plot.

The antagonist plays a small part in a Greek Tragedy, as it the protagonist's flaw that causes his or hers downfall. In Oedipus Rex, the antagonist is Creon who is a contrasting character to Oedipus. Creon is more business-like and authoritative than Oedipus. Creon is also the only character who could be threatening to Oedipus's throne.

The structure of a tragedy is the most important aspects that make up a tragedy. Aristotle says that 'the plot is the soul of tragedy'.

The audience or reader will already have knowledge of the hero or heroines fate. So a tragedy usually dramatizes what will happen. It bases itself upon the order of the universe and how this order cannot be broken.

A Greek Tragedy's favourite medium is drama, in which a tragedy 'shows' rather than 'tells' the story.

It must have a beginning, which clearly reveals what may happen at any time or place. There should be a middle, which is the climax and must be the result of earlier actions and the resolution, which must be the end of all incidents. The end should be completely resolved and complete and the plot must be consistent. It must have everything that it needs to resolve itself and the hero must accept his fate. It should also not lead to any other event outside the scope of the play.

In the end of Oedipus Rex, Jocasta has committed suicide, Creon takes Oedipus's role as King, Oedipus is publicly embarrassed and he has poked out his eyes and lost his children. This is one of the results of a Greek Tragedy, however it has a logical result and in the end, Oedipus has accepted his fate.

Other characteristics of the structure are how the scenes of dialogue intersperse with the chorus's songs or speeches. A lot of Greek tragedy plays begin with an opening scene of monologue, which acts as a prologue. A structure of a typical tragedy consists of a:

- Prologue
- Entrance song
- First episode
- First chorus speech/song
- Second episode
- Second chorus speech/song
- Third episode
- Third chorus speech/song
- Fourth episode
- Fourth chorus speech/song
- Exodos – final scene of dialogue

The writer must also not change the legend he is using to write from. However, he must use his creativity and skill to create a work that is his alone. The use of dramatic irony is common in Greek Tragedies as well. The following example is taken from Oedipus Rex.

'Their plight concerns me now, more than me life'.