

Greek Origins of Shakespearean Tragedy

Tragoidia

- Literally means “goat song”
- Refers to ancient ritual sacrifice of a goat, associated with Dionysus, ancient Greek god of fields and vineyards
- Tragedy-writing contests became part of ceremonies
- Developed into Greek tragedy and much larger body of dramatic tragedy in Western literature after

Aristotle's Poetics

- the first and most significant critical document on the nature of tragedy
- appears to be a group of notes (possibly lecture notes)
- written after the great age of Greek tragedy; drew on that literature to formulate ideas

The Nature of Tragedy

- An imitation of an action “of high importance, complete and of some amplitude.”
- takes a dramatic form (as opposed to narrative)
- uses poetic language
- involves a tragic hero

The Tragic Hero

- A person of noble stature
- Neither villainous nor exceptionally virtuous
- Moves from happiness to misery through some frailty or error (*hamartia*)

Hamartia

- “tragic flaw” in the hero’s character
- may also refer to a mistake in judgment, emphasizing the question of moral judgment
- *hubris* (*hybris*)--the sin of excessive pride and self-confidence (much feared by the Greeks)

Hubris

- The emotion in the Greek tragic hero which leads him to ignore warnings from the gods or to transgress against their moral codes
- tragic pride
 - “. . . Think: all men make mistakes, / But a good man yields when he knows his course is wrong, / And repairs the evil. The only crime is pride.” (from *Antigone*, Tiresias to Creon)

Structure of Tragedy

- Introduction of the *hamartia*
- *Peripeteia*: a sudden reversal of the hero’s fortune from good to bad
- *Anagnorisis*: a disclosure of the true circumstances or recognition of the hero’s true self or nature
- *Catharsis*: the tragic action through pity and fear effects a “purgation of these emotions.”

Catharsis

- Audience members are able to drain themselves of repressed emotions vicariously through the tragic hero and the action of the play.
- “Catharsis appears to comprise a moment of recognition or intuition, prompted by the emotions of pity and fear.”

Greek Philosophy and Tragedy

- Man--the measure of all things
- Death
- the inevitable limit for all mankind
- important in tragedy but not always present
 - “awareness of death as a limit, tested by the most painful circumstances and intense emotions, was more important for the Greeks in tragedy than the actual life or death of the character at the end of the play.”
 - “Tragedy may or may not present actual death; what it absolutely requires is the conscious, unique, and authentic recognition of man’s mortality. Death itself may often be pathetic in that it is sad, but to be tragic, it must be a metaphor: in the hero’s downfall is focused the truth of the human condition.”

Question for Application and Analysis: How is Othello a tragic hero?

- Apply this information from to Othello’s character as we know it from the text of the play.
- Consider, especially, the question of *hamartia*.