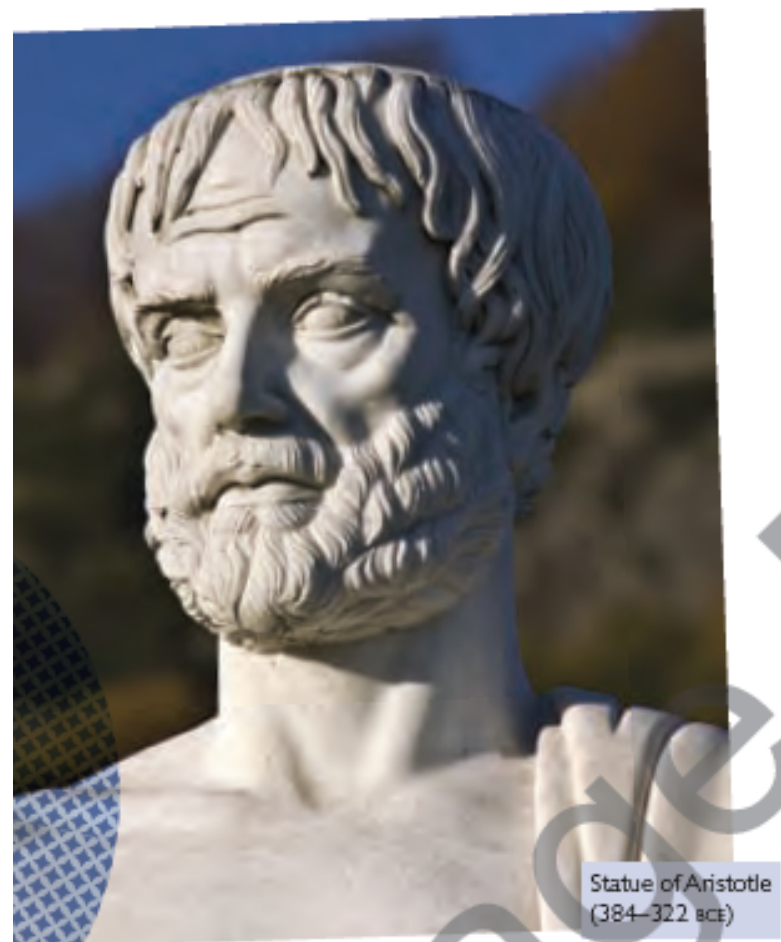


What is tragedy?

Almost 2000 years ago, Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, wrote in his book, *Poetics*, an outline of the elements of tragedy. Although Aristotle's definition related specifically to Greek tragedy, using as its model, Sophocles' tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare adopts Aristotle's definition of tragedy and makes it his own.



Statue of Aristotle
(384–322 BCE)

Aristotle's definition of tragedy

Aristotle identified these elements as essential for tragedy. The plot always included:

- a special turn in the action, more commonly known as the 'climax'
- a recognition of this turn of events
- a 'catharsis' for the audience (a release of pity and fear at the tragic outcome)
- the fall of a noble man caused not by vice or depravity but by 'hamartia', a frailty or error in his character, often referred to as the 'tragic flaw'.

Shakespearean tragedy

Shakespearean tragedy is the story of a hero, a person of noble or admirable character, whose suffering and calamity leads to his death. The hero contributes to this death because of his own tragic flaw. He is not destroyed by outside forces or chance, but by his own particular obsession or weakness. For example, Othello's fatal flaw is jealousy and pride; Hamlet's is thinking too much and not being able to act; King Lear's is pride and egotism.

Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 Whose definition of tragedy does Shakespeare base his tragic plays upon?
- 2 What are the four elements required for a tragedy?

Understanding

- 3 What is 'hamartia'?
- 4 How is the concept of a hero's tragic flaw used by Shakespeare in his plays?

Analysing

- 5 Consider the following extract in a newspaper report:

Family of four die in tragic car accident

A family of four tragically died on the Princes Highway north of Sydney yesterday. Authorities report that the car accident was due to brake failure ...

- a What is the definition of 'tragedy' as suggested in this extract?
- b How does this compare with Aristotle's definition of tragedy? Explain.
- c Write a modern definition of tragedy.

Creating

- 6 Imagine you are Shakespeare using the newspaper extract as a prompt. Write an extended scenario in which the car accident is due to the tragic flaw of the hero of your piece. Aim for about 500 words.