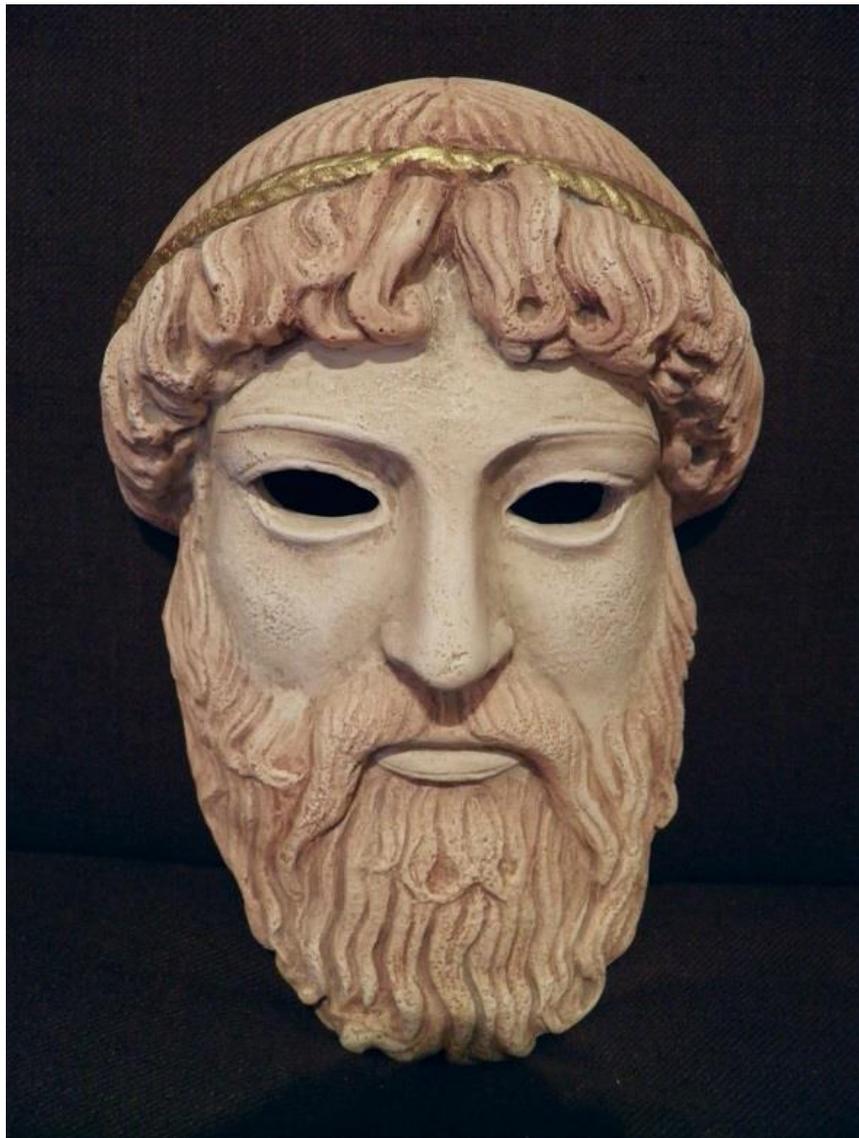


# **A Tragedy Booklet...**



**for the support of AQA's  
A-level Literature course - Paper 1**

# What is Tragedy?

*"Tragedy is more important than love. Out of all human events, it is tragedy alone that brings people out of their own petty desires and into awareness of other humans' suffering. Tragedy occurs in human lives so that we will learn to reach out and comfort others."*

**C. S. Lewis**

*"Tragedy is a precious word. We use it to confer dignity and value on violence, catastrophe, agony, and bereavement. 'Tragedy' claims that this death is exceptional. Yet these supposedly special fatalities are in our eyes every day, on the roads, in the skies, out there in foreign lands and right here at home, the latest bad news. Is the word bandied around so freely that it has lost all meaning? Do our conceptions of tragedy have any real connection with those of the ancient Greeks, with whom it originated two and half thousand years ago as the description of a particular kind of drama?"*

**Adrian Poole** *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction* (2005)

## **Aspects of tragedy (AQA's Introduction to the exam theme)**

At the core of all the set texts is a tragic hero or heroine who is flawed in some way, who suffers and causes suffering to others and in all texts there is an interplay between what might be seen as villains and victims. Some tragic features will be more in evidence in some texts than in others and students will need to understand how particular aspects of the tragic genre are used and how they work in the four chosen texts. The absence of an 'aspect' can be as significant as its presence. There can be no exhaustive list of the 'aspects' of tragedy but areas that can usefully be explored include:

- the type of the tragic text itself, whether it is classical and about public figures, like Lear, or domestic and about representations of ordinary people, like Tess
- the settings for the tragedy, both places and times
- the journey towards death of the protagonists, their flaws, pride and folly, their blindness and insight, their discovery and learning, their being a mix of good and evil
- the role of the tragic villain or opponent, who directly affects the fortune of the hero, who engages in a contest of power and is partly responsible for the hero's demise
- the presence of fate, how the hero's end is inevitable
- how the behaviour of the hero affects the world around him, creating chaos and affecting the lives of others
- the significance of violence and revenge, humour and moments of happiness
- the structural pattern of the text as it moves through complication to catastrophe, from order to disorder, through climax to resolution, from the prosperity and happiness of the hero to the tragic end
- the use of plots and sub-plots
- the way that language is used to heighten the tragedy
- ultimately how the tragedy affects the audience, acting as a commentary on the real world, moving the audience through pity and fear to an understanding of the human condition.



## How does Tragedy fit into the A-level?

### **AQA AS Literature B**

Paper 1A: **Aspects of tragedy** (50 marks/50% of AS level)

Study of one Shakespeare play and one further drama text

- written exam: 1 hour 30 minutes (*closed book*)

Question types -

Section A: one passage-based question on a Shakespeare text (25 marks)

Section B: one essay question on a drama set text (25 marks)

Paper 2A: **Aspects of tragedy** (50 marks/50% of AS level)

Study of one prose text and one poetry text

- written exam: 1 hour 30 minutes (*open book*)

Question types –

Section A: one essay question on poetry set text (25 marks)

Section B: one essay question on prose set text (25 marks)

*These papers are then amalgamated and re-sat at the end of Y13 with the following changes -*

### **AQA A-level Literature B (Full A-level)**

Paper 1A: **Literary genres - Aspects of tragedy** (75 marks/40% of A-level)

Study of three texts: one Shakespeare text; a second drama text and one further text, of which one must be written *pre-1900*

- written exam: 2 hours 30 minutes (*closed book*)

Question types -

Section A: one passage-based question on set Shakespeare text (25 marks)

Section B: one essay question on set Shakespeare text (25 marks)

Section C: one essay question linking two texts (25 marks)

## *A Brief History of Tragedy*

Tragedy began in ancient Greece and the first great tragedies were staged as part of a huge festival known as the Dionysia. Thousands of Greek citizens – Greek men, that is, for no women were allowed – would gather in the vast amphitheatre to watch a trilogy of tragic plays, such as Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. This dramatic festival possibly grew out of earlier fertility festivals where plays would be performed, and a goat would be ritually sacrificed to the god of wine, fertility, and crops: Dionysus. The idea was that the sacrificial goat would rid the city-state of its sins, much like the later Judeo-Christian concept of the *scapegoat*. Tragedy, then, was designed to have a sort of purging effect upon the community – this is even encoded within the word *tragedy* itself, which probably comes from the Greek for 'goat song'.

Going to the theatre in ancient Greece was, socially speaking, closer to attending a football match than a modern-day theatre. Because audiences were so vast, actors wore masks which symbolised their particular character, so even those sitting towards the back of the amphitheatre could tell who was who. In Roman times certain character types wore certain colours for the same reason. In Latin, the word for such a "mask" was *persona*, which is to this day why we talk about "adopting a persona" when we, metaphorically, put on a mask. This is also the reason why the list of characters in a play is known as the *Dramatis Personae*.

However, tragedy is, perhaps surprisingly, not the earliest of all literary genres. Nor is comedy: instead, a third genre of drama, known as the *satyr play*, is thought to be from where comedy and tragedy developed. Satyr plays were bawdy satires which featured actors sporting large strap-on penises – the phallus being a popular symbol of fertility and virility, linked with Dionysus. Only one satyr play survives in its entirety: written by the great tragedian Euripides, *Cyclops* centres on the incident from the story of Odysseus when the Greek hero found himself a prisoner in the cave of Polyphemus, the Cyclops.

One of the most celebrated tragedies of ancient Greece was *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles' play about the Theban king who unwittingly killed his father and married his mother. This story gave Sigmund Freud, father of psychoanalysis, the idea for his 'Oedipus complex', where every male child harbours an unconscious desire to do what Oedipus did. The child has to repress this, but is often only partly successful (Hamlet, for instance, doesn't fully manage it, according to Freud's reading of Shakespeare's play).

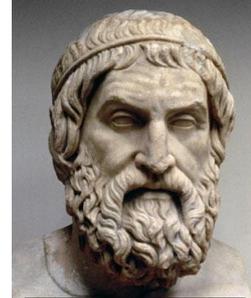
In terms of genre, tragedy requires a *tragic hero* (and usually it is a man): one who is usually tempted to perform a deed (frequently, though not always, a murder), after which the hero's fortunes eventually suffer a *decline*, ending with his death (or her death, as in the case of *Antigone* – though whether Antigone is Sophocles' tragic 'hero' remains a moot point). When viewed this way, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is not really the tragedy of Julius Caesar at all: he is merely the character who is killed by the real tragic hero of the play, Brutus. It would be like calling *Macbeth* after its main victim: *Duncan*. Brutus is the one who is tempted to perform a murder (of Caesar), after which his fortunes suffer a *catastrophe* (or 'downturn'), eventually ending in his death near the end of the play.

More recently, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen created the definitive tragic heroine in his 1890 play *Hedda Gabler*. Hedda has been called 'the female Hamlet' because, like Hamlet, she is uncomfortable with femininity, both in herself and others (she dislikes the feminine qualities of her husband, such as his fondness for slippers and his clucking aunts), and, like Hamlet, she is 'haunted' by the 'ghost' of her father (whose presence looms large in the play, and whose portrait hangs in the living room throughout).

# Great Tragedies Across the Ages

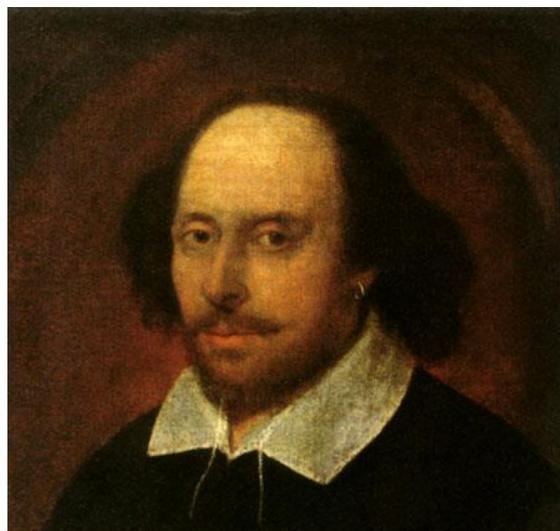


*Antigone* Sophocles (vase design, c.360BC)



Sophocles  
497?-405?BC

**William Shakespeare**  
1564-1616



*Othello* (1602)



*Macbeth* (1605)

## Famous Tragic Theorists

### Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy

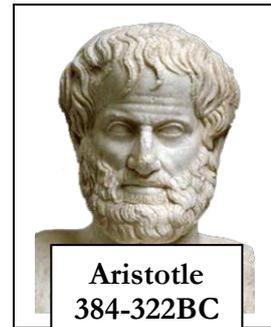
Aristotle was a Greek philosopher whose theory of Tragedy is discussed in his book *The Poetics*. The **Six Parts of Tragedy** in order of importance are:

plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle.

The best plots display *mimesis* (imitation of the real) and must be plausible. It is also best if they have unities of form in terms of time, place and action.

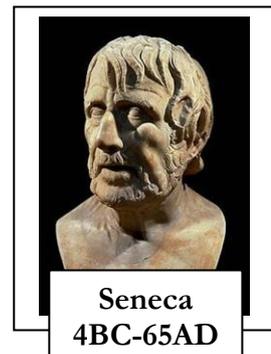
Characters should be high in society for their “fall” to be significant enough; this fall is caused by their own *hamartia* (weakness or fatal-flaw, or accident), and may be due to an act of *hubris* (over-reaching one’s social/spiritual position).

The best resolutions involve *peripeteia* (the reversal of the main character’s position) and *anagnorisis* (their recognition of their fate). This should all lead to a *catharsis* (a moral purification) for the audience and the characters, and is often caused by *nemesis* (the goddess of vengeance) acting on behalf of nature/society/the gods to restore balance to the universe where the tragedy has occurred.



### Seneca's Theory of Tragedy

Seneca followed the structure of Tragedy as defined by Aristotle; and the example as written by Sophocles and Euripides. His plays were written for recital and reading in private rather than for performance, this was due to Emperor Nero’s banning anything critical being said in public about Rome and its Empire.



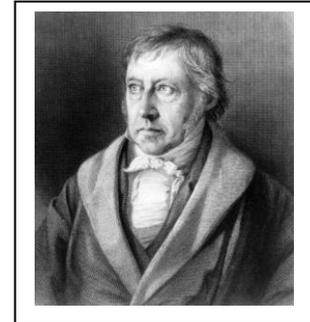
Seneca left no writings specifically about Tragedy, so our understanding of his thought comes from his use of its tropes in his plays. His works are a mixture of *monologue* and *stichomythia*; the first often to narrate and retell, the second to argue out ideas. The monologues narrate action using vivid description (*enargeia*), but they also explore the human conscience through comprehension (*katalepsis*) of events and their effects.

The plays often encounter mythology, have ghosts seeking vengeance and denouements requiring a mass death (just like *Hamlet*). He uses stichomythia to present symmetrical conflict which is then “pursued ruthlessly to its end” (EF Watling, 1960). During this conflict his use of *sententiae* (philosophical statements) to end scenes with a moral message (taken from Euripides) is a device to create “a dramatic realisation of human psychology, behaviour, and experience” (AJ Boyle, 1998). He then follows Aristotle’s convention of *anagnorisis*, called *agnoscere* in Latin.

His protagonists encounter the concept of *monstra* in many guises: as a divine omen or portent; as an abomination, monstrous and abnormal; as an awful deed or object of dread; and also as a form of warning and admonition of human failings. He is also keen for us to remember that the play is created via *personata felicitas* (superficial dramatic characters), and even though he also calls life a “mime” (*hic humanae vitae mimus*) his most famous aphorism *erratum humanum est* (“to err is human”) is a bleak expression of the tragic mode: that we are all doomed to failure due to our inherent imperfection.

## Hegel's Theory of Tragedy

GWF Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* discusses character, ethical action, and guilt partly by way of an analysis of Sophocles' *Antigone*. He analyses the *world-historical individual* who shapes history often beyond their conscious intentions; such figures emerge ahead of their time, come into conflict with their ages, and prepare a new world.



Georg Hegel  
1770-1831

For Hegel *tragedy is the conflict of two substantive positions*, each of which is justified, yet each of which is wrong to the extent that it fails either to recognise the validity of the other position or to grant it its moment of truth; the conflict can be resolved only with the fall of the *hero*.

The original essence of tragedy consists then in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has justification; while on the other hand, each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by negating and damaging the equally justified power of the other. Consequently, in its moral life, and because of it, each is just as much involved in *guilt*. Hegelian tragedy is the inevitable consequence of the absolute realising itself in history. In the course of history, one-sided positions emerge that contain within themselves their own limitations. These positions give rise to conflicts, which are resolved in each case by the *transcendence* (or death) of the particular, such that history progresses *dialectically*, through contradiction and negativity, toward an ever more comprehensive and rational goal.

Because the tragic hero acts both for and against the good, their nature is as paradoxical as the situation in which they find themselves: both great and flawed—indeed, their very greatness is their flaw, since greatness comes at the price of excluding what the situation demands. Hegel offers the paradoxical formulation: “*It is the honour of these great characters to be culpable.*”

*Suffering* for Hegel is not quite the undeserved suffering that for Aristotle elicits pity. Hegel reinterprets *pity* as sympathy not merely with the suffering hero as sufferer but with the hero as one who, despite their fall, is nonetheless in a sense justified. Thus, Hegelian tragedy has an emotional element: we are torn between the values and destiny of each position. In modern tragedy, we see greater internal development of character as well as the elevation of more particular concerns; modern causality diminishes the extent to which one single person can affect the world around them; complexity and the *contingency of circumstances* play a greater role in the tragedy.

# Williams' Theory of Tragedy

*"Society cannot be said to exist until the literature, like all other activities which are part of what we understand by society, has been written."*



**Raymond Williams**  
1921-1988

Raymond Williams was a Welsh Marxist literary critic. In his *Modern Tragedy* (1966) he attempted to formulate a theory of tragedy based on historical, sociological and materialist foundations. He saw tragedy as part of everyday of life, not just as a metaphysical occurrence; it was both literary and actual simultaneously. Therefore, Williams said that tragedy could be historically overcome by the action of man struggling to transform intolerable conditions (Marxism's *social revolution*).

Williams' theory of tragedy is based on the dualism of the individual and society. Tragedy is not the conflict between an individual and the forces that destroy him "*but a series of experiences and conventions and institutions.*" It is contingent and materialistic; its universality is in its being of society and not part of an external supranatural system (ie. decided by *the gods*).

When comparing modern with historical tragedy Williams was concerned that Greek tragedy focused too much on the individual and their status, making tragedy an experience of a privileged elite. Tragedy from Medieval times then became too caught up in religious exposition and moral arguments rather than detailing lived experiences. He felt that in modern times society's place in tragedy had to be central; an individual's tragedy most likely came out of their relation to society and had to be experienced within it. He felt that tragedy was natural; an issue of observation and record "*shaped by the essential structure of feeling*". His objective was then to find out the nature of the values behind this: "*the dramatization of a particular and grievous disorder and its resolution*".

Williams wanted to broaden the definition of tragedy, but also to wrest it away from assumptions of the impossibility of change, the ineradicability of evil, the inevitability of suffering. He sought to analyse "*the structure of tragedy in our own culture*", challenging the apotheosis of death as an absolute in a world without God or immortality; he felt tragedy arose from man's struggle against other men and not against inanimate things, institutions or social forms and concepts:

*The tragic action, in the deepest sense, is not the confirmation of disorder, but its experience, its comprehension and its resolution. In our own time, this action is general, and its common name is revolution... We have to recognize this suffering in a close and immediate experience, and ... follow the whole action: not only the crisis, but the energy released by it, the spirit learned in it. (This mention of "spirit" follows Hegel's concept of *geist*.)*

Williams criticised the contemporary ideology of tragedy for being metaphysical and ahistorical. "*The liberal tragedy*" of Ibsen and Miller presents a false view of relationships, society and the human condition. In '*liberal tragedy*' the individual fights for his own in a necessary and tragic struggle; this "*private tragedy*", in which the whole attention is directed towards the family and its disintegration, is seen as the tragic theme. What Williams investigated in the plays of Chekov, Brecht, and Camus, was the '*structure of feeling*' they embodied. He saw how the works of these writers were structurally related to the whole system of society through the consciousness of the writers and their complex network of inter-relationships. This fusion of '*structure*' and '*feeling*' epitomizes Williams' approach to '*interconnectedness*'. He argued against Aristotle's synchronic implications of tragedy in favour of a *diachronic perspective* concerned with history and change.

## Other Styles of Tragedy

### Shakespearean Tragedy

Shakespearean Tragedy is based on the previous structures as delineated by Aristotle and Seneca. This was partly due to the English Grammar School system making students read and translate classical texts as a way of instilling knowledge and rhetorical style. Innovations came via Medieval mystery plays – partly a move towards a clearly Christian ethic, and partly a move towards incorporating comedy in order to highlight the tragedy further. This was described by Samuel Johnson as “[an] interchange of seriousness and merriment, by which the mind is softened at one time, exhilarated at another”. This fusion of styles also allowed a development of character psychology, so that the writers of Shakespeare’s time focused more fully on “action, agency and responsibility” (Burrow, 2013). Tragedies of social aspiration and moral transgression crossed hierarchical boundaries as set by Aristotle, ultimately leading to a new sub-genre: the domestic tragedy (see below).

Often they are focused on an opposition (a *dialectic*, in Hegel’s terms) between the “*subjective-individual*” of the tragic protagonist and the “*objective-worldly*” of the society around them. Their sustained historical impact is because of how the audience sees itself reflected in the drama: “What Shakespeare’s drama offers are not simply existential truths about human life. Rather, his plays stage for us our own finitude, our own historicity.” (Kottman, 2013)

### Domestic Tragedy

Domestic Tragedy is drama in which the tragic protagonists are ordinary middle-class or lower-class individuals, in contrast to classical and Neoclassical tragedy, in which the protagonists are of kingly or aristocratic rank and their downfall is an affair of state as well as a personal matter.

The earliest known examples of domestic tragedy are anonymous late Elizabethan dramas such as *Arden of Faversham* (c.1591), and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (c.1606), in which a father destroys his family. Domestic tragedy found its mature expression in the plays of Henrik Ibsen toward the end of the 19th century. In earlier domestic dramas by other playwrights the protagonists were sometimes villains and at other times merely pathetic, but the bourgeois heroes of Ibsen’s works, such as *The Master Builder* (1892), are endowed with some of the isolated grandeur of the heroes of classical tragedy.

A tragedy on a humbler social level than that of the middle class, *Woyzeck* by Georg Büchner (1836), is about a poor soldier and former serf, is so reduced in status he finds employment as a doctor’s guinea pig. Yet the work has a shattering tragic impact and bears out the precept stated by another German tragic dramatist of the 19th century, Friedrich Hebbel: “*One need only be a man, after all, to have a destiny.*” *Woyzeck* was well in advance of its time; lower class tragedy did not come to the fore until the turn of the 20th century with such works as Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Rose Bernd* (1903) and later plays such as Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949).

## Modern Tragedy

Modern tragedy redefines the genre, with ordinary protagonists, realistic timelines and settings, and multiple plots. Pauline Kael, in reviewing Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*, notes that a tragic hero "must have greater aspirations, ambitions ... what does Eddie Carbone [the Miller tragic hero] want? He wants his wife's niece." The modern tragedy is thus redefined: smaller men with smaller dreams act through impulse, rather than hubris. The unities are ignored -- Miller's work spans weeks, with subplots -- although the characters' ends are still tragic. Modern tragedy therefore adds irony to Aristotle's mix, reducing once-heroic tragic figures to the size of ordinary humanity.

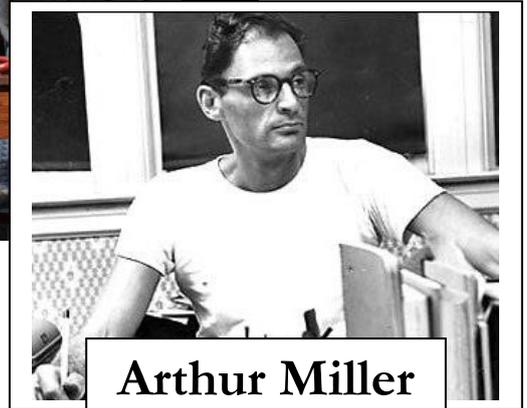
Miller himself in his essay *Tragedy and the Common Man* (1949) says "I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were...if the exaltation of tragic action were truly a property of the high-bred character alone, it is inconceivable that the mass of mankind should cherish tragedy above all other forms, let alone be capable of understanding it."

He argues that "Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly [and] his destruction in the attempt posits a wrong or an evil in his environment. And this is precisely the morality of tragedy and its lesson."

And finally that "tragedy requires a nicer balance between what is possible and what is impossible. And it is curious, although edifying, that the plays we revere, century after century, are the tragedies. In them, and in them alone, lies the belief--optimistic, if you will, in the perfectibility of man. It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possible lead in our time--the heart and spirit of the average man."



*Death of a Salesman* (1949)



**Arthur Miller**  
1915 -2005

## *Further Reflections On Tragedy*

“Tragedy can exist only so long as we recognise, accept and affirm the irresolvable contradiction between our hopes and how the world is. Once we believe that suffering is not inevitable, tragedy dies: we begin to demand justice from our gods, and life is justified not as an aesthetic phenomenon but rather because justice is finally done.”

**Friedrich Nietzsche** *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)

“As a rule, the hero, though he pursue his fated way, is, at least at some point in the action, and sometimes at many, torn by an inward struggle; and it is frequently at such points that Shakespeare shows his most extraordinary power.” (p18)

Shakespeare’s tragic heroes are also “exceptional beings” who have “a total incapacity, in certain circumstances, of resisting the force [in their psyche]; a fatal tendency to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion, or habit of mind”. (pp19-20)

“This greatness of the tragic hero...is connected [to] what I venture to describe as the centre of the tragic impression...the impression of waste.” (p23)

**AC Bradley** *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1905)

“Othello radiates a world of romantic, heroic and picturesque adventures.” (p118)

Shakespeare gives war “almost the condition of nobility” due to its “positive spiritual value, like love”. War is often therefore associated with a Shakespearean hero: “Therefore Othello, with reference to the Shakespearian universe, becomes automatically a symbol of faith in human values of love, of war, of romance in a wide and sweeping sense”. (p121)

Othello is “the high-priest of human endeavour, robed in the vestments of romance, whom we watch serving in the temple of war at the altar of love’s divinity. Desdemona is his divinity. She is, at the same time, warmly human. There is a certain domestic femininity about her”. (p122)

“*Othello* is eminently a domestic tragedy.” (p123)

**G Wilson Knight** *The Wheel of Fire* (1949)

Northrop Frye distinguishes “high” and “low mimetic tragedy”, the low being more “sensationalist” and “domestic”. The creation of “pathos”, whilst having a tendency towards “self-pity” in high tragedy, is “strongly individualised” in low tragedy. It is important because “the root idea of pathos is the exclusion of an individual on our own level from a social group to which he is trying to belong. Hence the central tradition of sophisticated pathos is the study of the isolated mind.” (p39)

“Tragedy is intelligible because its catastrophe is plausibly related to its situation.” (p41)

“The tragic hero is very great as compared with us, but there is something else, something on the side of him opposite the audience, compared to which he is small. This something else may be

called God, gods, fate, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance, or any combination of these, but whatever it is the tragic hero is our mediator with it.

The tragic hero is typically on top of the wheel of fortune, halfway between human society on the ground and the something greater in the sky.” (p207)

**Northrop Frye** *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957)

“Tragedy is a paradoxical art because to succeed it must really upset us while exhibiting, but not as mere consolation, some orderly and comprehensive vista of evil and catastrophe. Death threatens the ego’s dream of eternal life and happiness and power. Tragedy, like religion, must break the ego, destroying the illusory whole of the unified self.” (p104)

“Tragedy must cause us distress: its subject matter is contingency and death, the profound difference between suffering and death, the connection of truth and justice with the apprehension of death, the elevation of morality to the religious level. That someone must die in a tragedy is not a mere convention like that which decrees deaths in detective stories. In tragedy the compulsory nature of death is an image of its place in life.” (p117)

**Iris Murdoch** *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992)

“Ethical substance, as Hegel puts it, is restored in the downfall of the individual which disturbs its repose. Having been riven into tragic opposition, Geist now recovers its self-identity and rolls serenely on its way. The fulfilment we reap from tragic art is the deep satisfaction of bearing witness to this transcendence.” (pp42-43)

“Tragedy is thus an instrument for regulating social feelings...Tragedy, one might argue, is a blending of beauty and sublimity: it trades in the ordinary social relations of love and politics, but sees these as opening on to an otherness which they cannot entirely master.” (pp153-54)

“Tragedy has some of the melancholic joy of the sublime...we strive to measure up to some unfathomable Law or Reason, but inevitably fail. The sublime thus has an oedipal structure. But if our finitude is thus thrown into harsh relief, so by contrast is the august infinity which we crave; and in the very act of striving and failing to attain it, we act out a freedom in which we can hear a dim echo of the sublime power itself. In falling short of the Law or the Absolute, we acknowledge our affinity with it, recognising that our only true dwelling place is within its own eternal homelessness. In a similar way, the hero for classical tragic thought reveals an unfathomable value in the very act of plummeting from the heights to which he climbs, so that the experience is spiced with both pain and pleasure.” (pp176-77)

**Terry Eagleton** *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2003)

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**NB -** These are not exhaustive readings. Find out the source texts or other sources in books, magazines, journals and online. Use JStor. Above all, engage with the ideas and the material. It is all vital to your understanding of the texts and the whole of your AS-level and Paper 1 exams. It is also represented by two of the Assessment Objectives: **AO3** (context) and **AO5** (criticism).