

ADVANCED PLACEMENT WORLD LITERATURE

NORTHROP FRYE'S THEORY OF ARCHETYPES

AUTUMN: TRAGEDY

Introduction

In tragedy the focus is on individuals: the tragedy is in the hero's isolation, not the villain's betrayal, in fact the villain is often part of the hero. The story begins with a hero who has comparatively free will and moves him or her into a world of causation. This world of causation is dependent on a belief in natural law or fate, although it does not necessarily attempt to answer questions about why these events happen so much as shows the effects of them.

Plot

The basic revenge tragedy is at the heart of most tragedies although they can be considerably more complex:

- Initial act: this act provokes revenge and commonly comes from or is transmitted through another world stretching the conception of nature and law beyond the visible world; it is not uncommon for this act to occur before the start of the story
- Counterbalancing movement: an attempt is made to set the set things right
- Resolution: in balancing out the first act, destruction is often spread beyond the individual hero

At some point in the tragedy the audience must be able to see two possible futures for the tragic hero: the one he could have had in which his path is more or less happy and peaceful and the inevitable one. The hero cannot see both.

Characters

Tragic heroes reside at the top of the wheel of fortune, somewhere between heaven and earth, between a paradisaal freedom and a world of bondage. They are inevitable conductors of power: instruments as well as victims of destruction.

Eiron

- Withdrawing figure: decrees action
- Soothsayer or prophet (counterpart to tricky slave): foresees the inevitable or at least more than the hero does
- Villain of Elizabethan drama (counterpart to vice): self-starting principle of malevolence, projection of author's will

Alazon

- Hero (an impostor in the sense of being self-deceived by or dizzy with hybris): often begins as a semi-divine character, tragedy separates his divine pretence from his human actuality
- Suppliant: often female, who presents picture of helplessness and destitution, which incites pathos; pity and terror are invoked by separation from the group
- Messenger: focuses mood, usually announces catastrophe in Greek tragedy

The suppliant and messenger are structural counterparts to the bomolochoi, or buffoons in comedy, although they do not possess the comic traits often associated with buffoonery.

- Plain dealer (counterpart to the *Agroikos* or rustic in comedy): friend of the hero or other outspoken critic of tragic action; represent social norm from which the hero is gradually isolated; sometimes called a chorus character because serves the same role as the chorus in Greek tragedy

Traits

Time works to bring the inevitable causality and the catastrophic conclusion to the tragic process. This conclusion makes love and the social structure irreconcilable and contending forces; tragedy is concerned with breaking up the family and opposing it to the rest of society.

Two reductive and useful but insufficient theories of tragedy:

- Tragedy exhibits omnipotence of external fate. This is insufficient because fate often becomes external only after the tragic process begins; the hero begins with free will.
- An act that is primarily a violation of moral law, whether human or divine, sets the tragic process in motion. This is insufficient because there are innocent sufferers in tragedy.

Tragedy lies somewhere between these two ideas. It is helpful to consider this caveat: if the hero could not stand the story would be ironic, but if he hero could not fall it would be romantic. The tragic hero must seem to be able to stand, but does not.

Phases of Tragedy

1. Complete innocence: The hero who is dignified because of her innocence and courage is toppled; the hero is often a female in this phase
2. Youthful innocence of inexperience: The heroes and heroines are often young people first encountering the realities of adulthood; frequently a central character will survive so that the action closes with an adjustment to mature experience
3. Completion of an ideal: The success or completion of hero's achievement is essential despite his tragic end, and a sense of serenity or peace often exists after his death because of his final accomplishment; these tragedies are commonly a sequel to a previous tragic event
4. Individual's faults: The hero moves from innocence to experience with his fall occurring as a result of *hybris* and *hamartia*
5. Natural law: Natural law becomes prominent in these stories, overshadowing the hero and allowing the audience to look down on the action; this phase includes any of the existential and fatalistic tragedies that deal more with metaphysical and theological questions rather than social or moral ones
6. World of shock and horror: These stories possess a strong element of demonic ritual in public punishments and depict a hero in such deep agony or humiliation that they cannot achieve a heroic pose; cannibalism, mutilation, and torture are frequently present in this phase