

Characteristics of a Shakespearean Tragedy

Adapted from works of Prof. Keith Ramon

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<http://kilby.sac.on.ca/faculty/KRAMON/English/Grade%2010%20Files/Macbeth%20Files/Characteristics%20of%20a%20Shakespearean%20tragedy.htm>

The following fourteen points are a summation of a typical Shakespearean tragedy.

- 1.) Tragedy is concerned primarily with one person – The tragic hero.
- 2.) The story is essentially one of exceptional suffering and calamity leading to the death of the hero. The suffering and calamity are, as a rule, unexpected and contrasted with previous happiness and glory.
- 3.) The tragedy involves a person of high estate. Therefore, his or her fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire.
- 4.) The hero undergoes a sudden reversal of fortune.
- 5.) This reversal excites and arouses the emotions of pity and fear within the audience. The reversal may frighten and awe, making viewers or readers of the play feel that man is blind and helpless. The audience will regard the tragic hero as an individual who is up against an overwhelming power that may treat him well for a short period of time, but will eventually strike him down in his pride.
- 6.) The tragic fate of the hero is often triggered by a tragic flaw in the hero's character. The hero contributes in some way, shape, or form to the disaster in which he perishes.
- 7.) Shakespeare often introduces abnormal conditions of the mind (such as insanity, somnambulism, or hallucinations).
- 8.) Supernatural elements are often introduced as well.
- 9.) Much of the plot seems to hinge on "chance" or "accident".
- 10.) Besides the outward conflict between individuals or groups of individuals, there is also an inner conflict(s) and torment(s) within the soul of the tragic hero.
- 11.) The tragic hero need not be an overwhelmingly "good" person, however, it is necessary that he/she should contain so much greatness that in his/her fall the audience may be vividly conscious of the individual's potential for further success, but also the temptation of human nature. Therefore, a Shakespearean tragedy is never depressing because the audience can understand where the hero went wrong.
- 12.) The central impression of the tragedy is one of waste.
- 13.) The tragic world is one of action. Action is created when thoughts turn into reality. Unfortunately for the tragic hero, their plans do not materialize as they may have hoped and their actions ultimately lead to their own destruction.
- 14.) The ultimate power in the tragic world is a moral order; more specifically, the struggle between good and evil.

- a) The main source of the problems which produces all the death and suffering is evil in the fullest sense.
- b) This evil violently disturbs the moral order of the world.
- c) Evil is seen as something negative, barren, weakening, destructive, a principle of death. It isolates, disunites, and annihilates. Only while some vestiges of good remain in the hero, can he/she still exist. When the evil masters the good in the hero, it destroys him/her and those around them.
- d) This evil is eventually destroyed and the moral order of the world is re-established.

The cycle of a tragedy is as follows:

Good.....Evil.....Chaos.....Death.....Re-assertion of Good

Vocabulary Log:

Term	Page #	Meaning