In this unit, you will:

- Find out about the literary genre of tragedy
- Explore how the authors of literary texts use different aspects of tragedy in their works
- Develop your ability to write about tragedy.

Set text focus: Tragedy

5.1 Introduction to tragedy

What does the word ‘tragedy’ mean to you? Nowadays, this term is used in a wide range of different circumstances. Take a look at any newspaper, and you’ll see it being applied to a variety of situations, from unexpected deaths and environmental disasters to a missed goal at a penalty shootout and a politician’s taste in clothes. As a student of literature, however, you need to learn that ‘tragedy’ has a much more specific set of meanings. These will give a shape to your study of tragedy and provide you with a lens through which to view the texts you study as part of this unit. However, they will not necessarily be present to the same degree in every text. Writers subvert literary genres as well as follow them, and you might find that the texts you are studying challenge, overturn or even omit different aspects of tragedy. Part of your study of these texts will involve considering why their authors treat the genre in the way they do, and what effects they achieve.

Tragedy has its roots in the ritualised dramas of Ancient Greece. It developed as a way of exploring the relationship between humans and the gods, the limits of human power and the workings of fate.

Exploring the Fates in mythology

In Greek mythology, the Fates were three goddesses who were able to decide what people’s destiny would be. Each had a different role in this process. Clotho, the spinner, created the thread of life; Lachesis, the measurer, decided how long the thread would be; and Atropos cut the thread off with her shears at the end.

Later dramatists have used the genre to ask questions about their own societies and concerns, and have been accompanied by poets and novelists, who have used other literary forms to explore ideas related to tragedy: error, guilt, suffering and death. Today, tragedy is just as powerful, and just as relevant, as it was in the newly democratic society of Athens in the 5th century BCE.

Exploring ritual madness and shedding identity

Dionysus was the god of wine, festivity, agriculture and fertility. He is often associated with ritual madness, and with the shedding of one’s normal identity.

5.1.1 The earliest forms of tragedy

The original meaning of ‘tragedy’ was the rather bizarre-sounding ‘goat song’. This term’s precise meaning is uncertain, but what is known is that it has its origins in the dramas that were performed at a number of annual festivals in Ancient Greece, particularly the festival of Dionysus, which took place in the spring. These dramas were very different to theatrical performances today. They were performed in open-air amphitheatres, in front of vast audiences (the amphitheatre at Epidaurus, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, can seat up to 14,000 people). Attendance was part of the duty of a citizen: the theatre was not mere entertainment, but a place where important issues could be raised and
discussed.

‘Goat song’, then, might refer to the goatskin trousers worn by the actors playing the satyrs – creatures that were human from the waist up and goat from the waist down, often depicted as lustful and unly.

### Exploring satire

The satyr play gave rise to another literary genre, the satire. Satire is a subversive genre that aims to challenge and overturn established values.

#### 5.1.2 Classical aspects of tragedy

The most important name in the history of tragedy is that of the Greek writer Aristotle, who lived in the 4th century BCE. Aristotle was a philosopher, not a dramatist, but his work *Poetics*, written in about 335 BCE, is one of the most important texts ever written about the genre of tragedy. In it, Aristotle described the characteristics of the tragic dramas he had seen performed. The aspects he described have become a staple of the way that later dramatists and critics have thought about tragedy.

- Central to Aristotle's description of tragedy was the role of the tragic protagonist. This was a man of high status (such as a king) who also possessed what Aristotle termed megalopsychia or 'greatness of soul'.
- The action of the tragedy focuses on the tragic protagonist's downfall from this initial high status. Aristotle's term for this reversal of fortune was peripeteia.

- This downfall was not the result of accident or chance: it was brought about by an error of judgement committed by the protagonist. This error of judgement, which Aristotle termed hamartia, was often the result of hubris or excessive pride. It set in motion a chain of events that led to the protagonist's inevitable death.
- Crucially, at some point before his death, the protagonist experiences a period of anagnorisis in which he recognises what he has done wrong. This results in an increase of self-knowledge and a new understanding of the truths of existence, especially of the relationship between humans and the gods.
- The effect on the audience is a purging of the emotions, drawing out feelings of fear and pity and bringing about a new sense of clarity. Aristotle termed this process catharsis.

The emotional impact of tragedy is what gives the drama its power. In *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), the literary critic A.C. Bradley said that when watching tragedy 'we realise the full power and reach of the soul, and the conflict in which it engages acquires that magnitude which stirs not only sympathy and pity, but admiration, terror, and awe'.

### Exploring the 'fatal flaw'

A.C. Bradley's work has been very influential. One of Bradley's central concepts was that of the fatal flaw, a fault within the tragic protagonist's personality that set in motion the chain of events that would lead to his or her downfall. (The fatal flaw is sometimes confused with Aristotle's concept of hamartia.)

Aspects of classical tragedy can also be detected in more recent plays. In Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons* (1947) the actions of the tragic protagonist, the businessman Joe Keller, bring about the deaths of 21 young pilots whose planes have been fitted with faulty engine parts supplied by Keller's company. Keller could have prevented the parts from being sold, but was more concerned with safeguarding the material wealth of his family. Towards the end of the play, he recognises that the pilots who died were 'all my sons' – an acknowledgement of the responsibility that we bear to the wider society as well as to our own families.

Two other Aristotelian concepts may be relevant to your study of tragedy.

#### The unities

In *Poetics*, Aristotle stated that the action of tragic drama was intensified if it had a single focus, occurred in one location and took place between the hours of sunrise and sunset on one day. These have come to be termed the unities of plot, place and time.

Many dramatists have violated these unities. Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear* (1605) has a main plot (concerning Lear and his daughters) and a sub-plot (concerning Gloucester and his sons). In *Othello* (1604) the action begins in Venice and then moves to Cyprus. Nevertheless, some dramatists adhere to the unities: In *All My Sons*, the action takes place in the Keller family's back garden, starting in the early morning of a Sunday in August and ending in the evening of the same day.

#### The chorus

In Ancient Greek tragedy, the chorus was a group of people who appeared onstage between the main episodes of the tragedy to narrate and interpret certain aspects of the plot. The chorus sometimes represented groups of citizens, and offered a voice of 'common sense', able to comment on the action but not to intervene. One key feature of the chorus is its breaking of the fourth wall, the imaginary boundary between the audience and the events onstage.

Again, modern dramatists have adapted this idea for their own purposes, using different characters to perform the role of the chorus. The lawyer Alfieri, for example, acts as a chorus in Arthur Miller's play *A View from the Bridge* (1955), while in Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* (2004), this function is performed by the students in Hector's class.
Bridging Unit Tasks

1. Read Thomas Hardy's “A Sunday Morning Tragedy”. As you read, pay attention to the effects of the regular rhyme scheme and metre. In what way do they contribute to the sense of inevitability that is part of tragedy?
2. Complete the following table -

Now think about whether the poem contains the different aspects of classical tragedy shown in the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of tragedy</th>
<th>Evidence in the poem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tragic protagonist</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hamartia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripetela</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anagnorisis</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3. Write an essay on the following question –

To what extent do you agree that Hardy’s “A Sunday Morning Tragedy” can be categorised as a classical tragedy?

**A Sunday Morning Tragedy by Thomas Hardy (circa 186-)**

I bore a daughter flower-fair,
In Pydel Vale, alas for me;
I joyed to mother one so rare,
But dead and gone I now would be.

Men looked and loved her as she grew,
And she was won, alas for me;
She told me nothing, but I knew,
And saw that sorrow was to be.

I knew that one had made her thrall,
A thrall to him, alas for me;
And then, at last, she told me all,
And wondered what her end would be.

She owned that she had loved too well,
Had loved too well, unhappy she,
And bore a secret time would tell,
Though in her shroud she'd sooner be.

I plodded to her sweetheart's door
In Pydel Vale, alas for me:
I pleaded with him, pleaded sore,
To save her from her misery.

He frowned, and swore he could not wed,
Seven times he swore it could not be;
"Poverty's worse than shame," he said,
Till all my hope went out of me.

"I've packed my traps to sail the main" -
Roughly he spake, alas did he -
"Wessex beholds me not again,
'Tis worse than any jail would be!"
There was a shepherd whom I knew,
A subtle man, alas for me:
I sought him all the pastures through,
Though better I had ceased to be.

I traced him by his lantern light,
And gave him hint, alas for me,
Of how she found her in the plight
That is so scorned in Christendie.

"Is there an herb . . . ?" I asked. "Or none?"
Yes, thus I asked him desperately.
"--There is," he said; "a certain one . . . "
Would he had sworn that none knew he!

"To-morrow I will walk your way,"
He hinted low, alas for me. -
Fieldwards I gazed throughout next day;
Now fields I never more would see!

The sunset-shine, as curfew strook,
As curfew strook beyond the lea,
Lit his white smock and gleaming crook,
While slowly he drew near to me.

He pulled from underneath his smock
The herb I sought, my curse to be -
"At times I use it in my flock,"
He said, and hope waxed strong in me.

"'Tis meant to balk ill-motherings" -
(Ill-motherings! Why should they be?) -
"If not, would God have sent such things?"
So spoke the shepherd unto me.

That night I watched the poppling brew,
With bended back and hand on knee:
I stirred it till the dawnlight grew,
And the wind whiffled wailfully.

"This scandal shall be slain," said I,
"That lours upon her innocency:
I'll give all whispering tongues the lie;" -
But worse than whispers was to be.

"Here's physic for untimely fruit,"
I said to her, alas for me,
Early that morn in fond salute;
And in my grave I now would be.

Next Sunday came, with sweet church chimes
In Pydel Vale, alas for me:
I went into her room betimes;
No more may such a Sunday be!
"Mother, instead of rescue nigh,
She faintly breathed, alas for me,
"I feel as I were like to die,
And underground soon, soon should be."

From church that noon the people walked
In twos and threes, alas for me,
Showed their new raiment--smiled and talked,
Though sackcloth-clad I longed to be.

Came to my door her lover’s friends,
And cheerly cried, alas for me,
"Right glad are we he makes amends,
For never a sweeter bride can be."

My mouth dried, as ’twere scorched within,
Dried at their words, alas for me:
More and more neighbours crowded in,
(O why should mothers ever be!)

"Ha-ha! Such well-kept news!" laughed they,
Yes--so they laughed, alas for me.
"Whose banns were called in church to-day?" -
Christ, how I wished my soul could flee!

"Where is she? O the stealthy miss,
Still bantered they, alas for me,
"To keep a wedding close as this . . ."
Ay, Fortune worked thus wantonly!

"But you are pale--you did not know?"
They archly asked, alas for me,
I stammered, "Yes--some days-ago,"
While coffined clay I wished to be.

"'Twas done to please her, we surmise?"
(They spoke quite lightly in their glee)
"Done by him as a fond surprise?"
I thought their words would madden me.

Her lover entered. "Where's my bird? -
My bird--my flower--my picotee?
First time of asking, soon the third!"
Ah, in my grave I well may be.

To me he whispered: "Since your call--"
So spoke he then, alas for me -
"I've felt for her, and righted all."
- I think of it to agony.

"She's faint to-day--tired--nothing more--"
Thus did I lie, alas for me . . .
I called her at her chamber door
As one who scarce had strength to be.
No voice replied. I went within -
O women! scourged the worst are we . . .
I shrieked. The others hastened in
And saw the stroke there dealt on me.

There she lay--silent, breathless, dead,
Stone dead she lay--wronged, sinless she! -
Ghost-white the cheeks once rosy-red:
Death had took her. Death took not me.

I kissed her colding face and hair,
I kissed her corpse--the bride to be! -
My punishment I cannot bear,
But pray God NOT to pity me.

January 1904.
Levels explained:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Requirements</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 (need to re-do)</td>
<td>Some vague points in relation to the task and some ideas about task, text(s) or genre. The writing is likely to be unclear and incorrect; if it is accurate the content will be irrelevant.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>AO1 - Sensibly ordered ideas in a relevant argument in relation to the task. Some use of literary critical concepts and terminology which are mainly appropriate; straightforward and clear expression. AO2 – Straightforward understanding of authorial methods in relation to the task. Relevant engagement with how meanings are shaped by the methods used. AO3 - Some links made to context of Hardy’s poem. AO4 – Some links made to the genre of Classical Tragedy. AO5 – Some presentation of argument, considering at least one side of the question.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>AO1 – Logical, thorough and coherent argument in relation to the task. Appropriate use of a range of literary critical concepts and terminology; precise expression. AO2 – Thorough understanding of authorial methods in relation to the task. Thorough engagement with how meanings are shaped by the methods used. AO3 - Clear links made to context of Hardy’s poem. AO4 – Clear links made to the genre of Classical Tragedy. AO5 – Clear presentation of argument, considering both sides of the question.</td>
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