

## Greek Tragedy

The origins of “tragedy” can be found in Greece in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. These plays often contained a “Chorus”, which was a group of actors who described and commented upon the main action of a play with song, dance and narration.

The 3 most notable playwrights of the time were:

**Aeschylus:** Much of his work focuses on war and conflict, such as ‘*The Persians*’. This play opens with a Persian defeat and ends with The Gods wreaking their revenge on an individual who angered them.

**Sophocles:** His most famous play is probably ‘*Oedipus Rex*’, which revolves around the central character killing his father and marrying his mother. When he realises what he has done, the play ends with him gouging out his own eyes.

**Euripides:** Uniquely, Euripides was the mouthpiece for unrepresented members of society and wrote about those who were somehow “trapped” by society.

For example, one of his heroines, Medea says:  
*‘Sooner would I stand  
Three times to face their battles, shield in hand,  
Than bear one child!’*



## Faustus by Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593)

Set in Germany and written by Christopher Marlowe, “*The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*” is based on German stories around the character Faustus and was published in 1604. Foreshadowing is used by the opening Chorus, who liken Faustus to Icarus (Greek mythology) who flew too close to the sun. Faustus is highly intelligent and scholarly and has ambition beyond his own human state. He summons the devil and Mephistophilis appears as a representative of Lucifer and tries to dissuade Faustus from abjuring God:

*O Faustus, leave these frivolous demands  
Which strikes a terror to my fainting soul!*

Faustus writes a contract in his own blood in which he agrees to have 24 more years on Earth with Mephistophilis to serve him and the power of magic but after that he will hand his soul to Lucifer. He has “sold his soul to the devil”.

**Task:** Can you make connections between Doctor Faustus and any of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes?



## Tracking Tragedy through Shakespeare (1564- 1616)

Shakespeare’s tragedies can be characterised by these features:

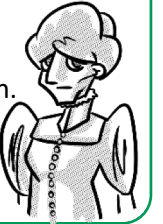
1. a struggle between good and evil (this can include within a character)
2. hamartia (a character flaw in the tragic hero)
3. the tragic waste of the ‘good’ being destroyed along with the ‘bad’ at the end of the play
4. external conflict, through plot
5. internal conflict, through the tragic hero struggling with their fatal flaw
6. catharsis
7. supernatural elements
8. lack of justice
9. an incident of “comic relief”.

**Task:** Can you provide examples for each of these?



## Ibsen (1828- 1906)

Henrik Ibsen wrote “*Hedda Gabler*”; “*Ghosts*” and “*A Doll’s House*”, all of which are tragedies. Ibsen is often referred to as “the father of realism” and as such, his modern tragedies are centred around *realistic* and relatable settings. Ibsen’s subject matter meant that he upset many audiences throughout Europe as he questioned traditional roles and the status quo. His “tragic heroine” Hedda Gabler is often referred to as the Female Hamlet. Likewise, Nora, the protagonist from “*A Doll’s House*”, realises that her tragic flaw was seeking acceptance through a male dominated society, rather than defining her own self-worth.



## Miller (1915- 2005)

Arthur Miller, wrote “*Death of a Salesman*”; “*The Crucible*” and “*All My Sons*”, all of which are tragedies. In 1949, US playwright Arthur Miller wrote “*Tragedy and the Common Man*”, an essay in which he explored and justified the model of having an “ordinary character” as the central character of a tragic play. This was a shift in the genre, since many tragic heroes prior to this had been exceptional people such as royalty or those with high status. He wrote his essay in response to hostile reviews which his play “*Death of a Salesman*” had received. Miller’s decision to take an ordinary salesman as his central figure was viewed by some as inappropriate for the subject of tragedy.



# KS3 Spine Tragedy

<b>Tragedies</b>	Tragic plays normally focus on misfortunes surrounding a hero, usually the protagonist, and often a flawed one. Tragedies typically include serious subject matter or themes, and sometimes end in the downfall or death of one or more characters.
<b>Greek Tragedy</b>	Ancient Greek tragedies typically feature a protagonist of high rank who makes an error of judgement (flawed). Other important features include gods, mythology, conflict and suffering.
<b>Roman Tragedy</b>	Those Roman tragedies that have survived are mainly adaptations of Greek tragedies. Roman philosopher Seneca wrote some plays which are considered revenge tragedies, adopted by Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights.
<b>Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy</b>	Elizabethan tragedies, of which William Shakespeare was just one writer, often include a high status protagonist who is flawed, and ultimately dies at the end. Jacobean tragedies are characterised as being revenge tragedies.
<b>Revenge Tragedy</b>	Revenge tragedies are characterised by one character seeking revenge upon another character. Examples of revenge tragedies include William Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i> and John Webster's <i>The Duchess of Malfi</i> .
<b>Domestic Tragedy</b>	Rather than focusing on high rank and status, these works portrayed the common man in a domestic setting as the tragic hero (as opposed to a character of nobility in an extravagant setting). A good examples is Henrik Ibsen's <i>A Doll's House</i> . Aristotle had argued that tragedy should concern only powerful individuals with great minds because their catastrophic downfall would be more emotionally powerful to the audience.



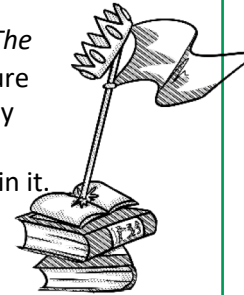
### The Tragic Hero vs The Machiavellian Villain

Aristotle identified 5 characteristics of a Tragic Hero:

1. flaw or error of judgement (hamartia)
2. a reversal of fortune (peripeteia) brought about because of the error in judgement
3. the discovery or recognition that the reversal was brought about by the hero's own actions (anagnorisis)
4. excessive Pride (hubris)
5. The character's fate must be greater than deserved.

Named after Niccolo **Machiavelli's (1469- 1527)** book *The Prince*, written in the early 1500s, many tragedies feature a Machiavellian Villain. These characters are defined by having a deep desire for power and using deceit and manipulation to achieve what they want and to maintain it.

**Action Point: Can you think of a tragic hero and give examples of how they exhibit these 5 traits?**



**Task: Can you list some Machiavellian Villains?**

### Shakespearian Tragic Characters

**Romeo** from *Romeo and Juliet*: his impulsiveness, evidenced by his pursuit and secret marriage to Juliet, his sworn enemy's daughter.

**Hamlet** from *Hamlet*: opposite to Romeo, it is Hamlet's indecisiveness which leads to his and others' deaths

**Macbeth** from *Macbeth*: his ambition and desire to keep hold of power regardless of the cost result in catastrophic consequences

**Othello** from *Othello*: He allows himself to be manipulated by Iago who plays on Othello's self centred nature.

**King Lear** from *King Lear*: His own ego and desire to be loved beyond compare by his three daughters leads him to lose everything and everyone.

**Task: Can you prioritise THE most tragic character?**



### Key words

**Anagnorisis** a protagonist's realisation of their own nature/destiny

**Catharsis** the release of powerful, healing emotions that make tragedy so moving

**Conflict (External and Internal)** the battle within a character or between a character and wider society

**Empathy** being able to understand how someone else, including a character, would feel

**Hamartia** a flaw which leads to an ultimate outcome

**Hubris** excessive pride

**Machiavellian** treacherous and opportunistic

**Pathos** pity

**Peripeteia** a sudden change in fortune and circumstance

**Tragic hero** as defined by Aristotle, a character bringing about their own destruction or "fall from grace"

**Task: Can you provide examples for each of the above key words?**



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