

## **The Definition of Tragedy**

Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy: Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.

Following his definition, Aristotle begins to introduce the six constitutive components of a tragedy. The first in the discussion is spectacle, which includes the costuming of the actors, the scenery, and all other aspects that contribute to the visual experience of the play.

Next come song and diction. Song obviously refers to the vocal compositions incorporated into the performance, and diction refers to the metrical composition of the spoken lines.

Aristotle moves on to elements relating to the humans represented in tragedy, thought and character. Character includes all qualities we associate with individuals represented in the play; the meaning of thought is more elusive, but it seems to indicate the processes of reasoning that lead characters to behave as they do.

The final component is plot, which Aristotle defines as "the arrangement of the incidents"

**These six elements can be organized**, as Aristotle shows, under the major categories of medium, object, and mode:

**Medium    object    mode**

**Diction    plot    spectacle**

**Song    character**

**Thought**

### **The Elements of Tragedy**

Aristotle presents these components in order of importance, expanding a little on the significance of each to the tragedy as a whole.

### **Objects**

#### **Plot**

Emphasizing that tragedy is first and foremost the representation of actions, and not of characters, Aristotle makes the remark that many contemporary tragedies do not succeed in their characterizations, but are

still tragedies. The tragic effect comes from the plot, and especially from the peripeteia—the reversal of the situation in which the characters find themselves— as well as from scenes of recognition.

### **Character**

**Character** is second in importance after plot; tragedies depict characters as they relate to the action which is the main object of representation. Characters represent their moral qualities through the speeches assigned to them by the dramatist.

### **Thought**

**Thought**, comprises both the rational processes through which characters come to decisions, as represented in the drama, as well as the values put forward in the form of maxims and proverbs.

### **Media**

### **Diction**

Diction has already been defined as the metrical composition of the play, the way language is used to convey the representation.

## **Song**

Music is described as an embellishment of language. The lines assigned to the chorus in a tragedy are usually conveyed in song accompanied by rhythmical movement.

## **Mode**

## **Spectacle**

Aristotle lists spectacle last in order of importance, pointing out that the power of tragedy is not fully dependent upon its performance (we can read a tragedy and still appreciate its message), and that the art of the spectacle really belongs to the set designer and not to the poet.