

Literary Terms: Drama

Roots of Western Drama

While critics have debated for centuries exactly what Aristotle meant, most critics also agree that his *Poetics* provides one of the earliest and most influential theories of drama. Aristotle begins by defining drama as *mimesis*, an imitation of an action.

Most of Western Drama finds its roots in Greek drama. **Dramaturgy** is the art of writing and producing plays. In roughly 534 B.C., formal competitions among **playwrights** for coveted prizes began. These competitions continued to be staged for several centuries. According to tradition, these early dramatic performances consisted entirely of performances by groups of twelve- to fifteen-man choruses, until Thespis (from whose name we derive the word **thespian**), changed the nature of the form by stepping out of the **chorus** and taking a solo part. When Thespis stepped away from the chorus in the sixth century B.C., he created the **agon**, or dramatic confrontation, and began a new tradition that would one day produce the stage convention called the **soliloquy**, in which an actor alone on stage expresses aloud a character's thoughts, motivations, or state of mind. A similar convention is the **aside**, in which a character expresses to the audience his thoughts in a short speech inaudible to the other characters on stage.

But the origins of **tragedy** are likely rooted in earlier religious ceremonies. The word "tragedy" translates in Greek as "goat-song" or "song for the sacrificial goat," suggesting that tragedy may have developed out of rituals of sacrifice dedicated to Dionysus, an agricultural deity, the Greek god of wine and the symbol of regenerative power.

Drama and the Dionysia, religious celebrations dedicated to Dionysus, developed together in ancient Greece. The city of Athens, for example, produced four Dionysiac festivals each winter, and each celebration included drama contests among playwrights. At various times, the contests included competitions in four different genres:

dithyramb (a song sung by a chorus, originally in honor of Dionysus or Bacchus, usually wild in character);

tragedy;

satyr play (a witty and brief, frequently erotic piece of comic relief in which half-beast, half-man figures sporting giant phalluses cavorted about; satyr plays usually capped a day of tragedies);

and after 486 B.C., **comedy**.

Tragedy

Aristotle's 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."

Greek tragedies generally work from a formula in which the **protagonist** (literally, "the actor who plays the first part," a reference to the fact that this character is separate from the chorus) is

a character of both noble birth and noble character. Tragedies revealed protagonists at the mercy of *moira*, their fate, and the action of a tragedy resulted from a protagonist's struggle to understand *moira*, while also revealing his tragic flaw (*hamartia*), often **hubris**, or excessive pride. According to Aristotle, the great theorist and critic, the tragic protagonist's eventual perception of the truth, called *anagnorisis* ("recognition") was the most intense moment in the drama. Because tragedies were often based on myths and legends, the audience often knew more than the characters did, creating **dramatic irony**. Aristotle believed that tragedies in which the protagonist's moment of *anagnorisis* came at the same moment in which the tragic figure's fortunes reversed—a moment called *peripeteia*—provided the most fulfilling theatrical experience for the audience. According to Aristotle, plays should also be limited in three important ways, still called the **Aristotelian unities**:

Unity of Time: the action takes place in a single day

Unity of Place: the action unfolds in one place

Unity of Action: the plot concerns a single conflict or catastrophe.

For Aristotle, the purpose of tragedy was to produce **catharsis**—in this case, a cleansing or purification of the emotions of pity and terror through a vicarious experience—in the members of the audience. By experiencing human sympathy for the noble protagonist and fearing a fate for themselves similar to that of the protagonist, the members of the audience would experience catharsis at the end of the tragedy.

In Aristotle's estimation, *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles, was the perfect play because the protagonist's fortunes reverse at the precise moment at which he realizes who he is and what he has done.

Aristotle on why the "structure of incidents" (plot) is the most important element of tragedy: "For tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all."

Comedy

No complete Greek theories on comedy survive. Other commentators suggest that Aristotle wrote a treatise on comedy, but if he did, the work is lost. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle points out that comedy presents characters from the lower social orders, but we don't know much more about his comedic theory.

The two greatest Greek comic writers were Aristophanes and Menander. Aristophanes was a master of what is called *Old Comedy*, in which individuals could be attacked personally through ribald, coarse *buffoonery* (low jesting and ridicule) and *farce* (behavior whose sole object is to incite laughter, including ludicrous mockery). The *New Comedy* of Menander targeted social manners and attacked vices, such as vanity, or portrayed the foibles of a social class, usually the middle class. Menander established the formula in which parents or guardians

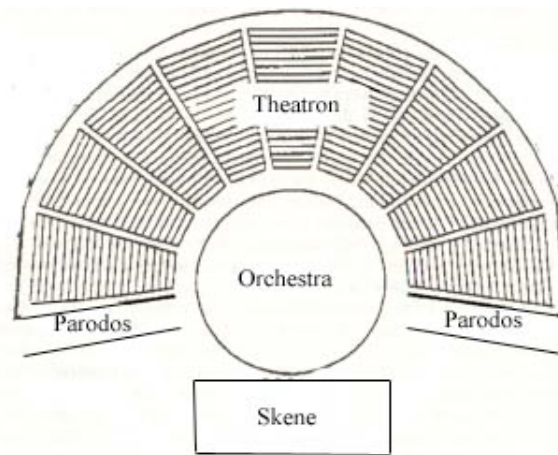
struggle unsuccessfully to prevent their children, who are often aided by a sharp-tongued servant, from marrying.

By the heyday of Elizabethan drama, the standard formula of the comedy presented multiple protagonists, usually of both genders and nubile, who must overcome obstacles (like disapproving parents, mistaken identities, deceptions, or other sorts of misunderstandings) in order for the play to end in a wedding, or sometimes, the birth of a child. The antagonists in a comedy tend to serve less as individuals and more as representatives of human vice or folly.

On some occasions, a comedic scene may occur in an otherwise serious play, such as a tragedy. While these scenes of *comic relief* may appear to alleviate the tension building in the play, in many examples these moments enhance the thematic significance of the story, actually increasing the dramatic stress while providing laughter. For example, Hamlet's jokes with the gravediggers are funny, but they're also haunting reminders about the specter of death that hovers over the entire play.

In both comedies and tragedies, plot may move in this pattern: order → chaos → order restored.

The Greek Stage



Parts of a Greek Theater

image from <http://academic.reed.edu/humanities/110tech/Theater.html> - Theaters

At the center of the Greek stage was an area called the **orchestra**, (from the Greek word meaning “dancing place”) where the chorus sang its songs. The **theatron** (literally, “viewing-place”) is where the spectators sat. The **theatron** was usually part of a hillside overlooking the orchestra, and often wrapped around three sides of the orchestra. The **parodoi** (literally, “passageways”) are the paths by which the chorus and some actors (such as those representing messengers or people returning from abroad) made their entrances and exits. The audience also used them to enter and exit the theater before and after the performance. Later stages included a **skene**, an oblong building at the back edge of the orchestra, which served as a place for the actors and a background for the action. The term **proskenion** was used to describe a raised stage between the orchestra and **skene**. Actors wore masks to distinguish the different characters they were playing, and the chorus would move in carefully choreographed patterns as it sang its parts, usually commentaries upon the action or characters. The most exciting theatrical device employed by

Greek playwrights was the *mekane* (“machine”), a boom that allowed actors playing gods to be lowered to and raised from the stage. For example, at the end of *Medea* by Euripides, the *mekane* lifted Medea to the roof of the *skene* and into her dragon chariot so she might escape the conflict below. We retain the literary term *deus ex machina*, literally “god from the machine,” to describe any moment, usually unsatisfying, in which characters are rescued from conflict at the last moment by luck or improbable accidents. A more modern example of *deus ex machina* occurs at the end of Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum.”



The Theater of Dionysus, Athens

image from <http://academic.reed.edu/humanities/110tech/graphics/thdionysus2.JPG>

Terms:

agon
 anagnorisis
 Aristotelian unities
 aside
 buffoonery
 catharsis
 chorus
 comedy
 comic relief

deus ex machina
 dithyramb
 dramaturgy
 farce
 hamartia
 mekane
 mimesis
 moira
 New Comedy
 Old Comedy

orchestra
 peripeteia
 playwright
 proskenion
 protagonist
 satyr play
 skene
 soliloquy
 thespian
 tragedy