

CAMBRIDGE

Brighter Thinking



# ENGLISH LITERATURE B

A/AS Level for AQA

Student Book

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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.

## 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



### Set text focus

Aspects of Tragedy is one of the options in the Literary Genres components for A Level and AS Level. The set texts for this option are listed here.

At AS Level, if you choose the Aspects of Tragedy option for Papers 1 and 2 you must study one Shakespeare text, one other drama text, one poetry text and one prose text. At A Level, if you choose the Aspects of Tragedy option (Paper 1 only) you must study one Shakespeare text, one other drama text and one other text from any genre. One of these last texts must have been written before 1900.

#### A Level and AS Level

*Othello* by William Shakespeare

*King Lear* by William Shakespeare

*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy

'Lamia' by John Keats

'Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil', 'La Belle Dame Sans

Merci', and 'The Eve of Agnes' by John Keats

*Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller

*Richard II* by William Shakespeare

AQA English Literature B Poetry Anthology (Tragedy): Extracts from the Prologue of 'The Monk's Tale' and 'The Monk's Tale' by Geoffrey Chaucer; 'Jessie Cameron' by Christina Rossetti; Extract from *Paradise Lost* by John Milton; 'Tithonus' by Alfred, Lord Tennyson; 'The Convergence of the Twain' by Thomas Hardy; 'The Death of Cuchulain' by W.B. Yeats; 'Out, out...' by Robert Frost; 'Death in Leamington' by John Betjeman; 'Miss Gee' by W.H. Auden

#### AS Level only

*A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams

*The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro

Selected poems by Thomas Hardy: 'A Sunday Morning Tragedy', 'At An Inn', 'Tess's Lament', 'Under the Waterfall', 'Lament', 'Rain on a Grave', 'Your Last Drive', 'The Going', 'The Haunter', 'At Castle Boterel', 'A Trampwoman's Tragedy', 'The Frozen Greenhouse', 'The Forbidden Banns', 'The Mock Wife', 'The Flower's Tragedy', 'After a Journey', 'The Newcomer's Wife'

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**.



### Key terms

**fate:** the name given to a power that predetermines the course of events; also used to refer to the outcome of a predetermined course of events: you might refer, for example, to King Lear's 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 unclear, 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 performance today. They were performed in open-air amphitheatres, in front of vast audiences (the amphitheatre at Epidauros, 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 unruly.



### 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'.

#### Text 5A

'I am in blood  
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.'

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*,  
Act 3, Scene 4, lines 135-7



### 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.]



### Key terms

**satire:** a genre that aims to challenge and overturn established values

**tragic protagonist:** the most important character, usually a person of high status

**megalopsychia:** the 'greatness of soul' that the tragic protagonist should possess

**peripeteia:** the reversal of fortune experienced by the tragic protagonist

**hamartia:** the error of judgement committed by the protagonist that sets his or her reversal of fortune in motion

**hubris:** an excess of pride or self-confidence that often leads the protagonist to commit his or her hamartia

**anagnorisis:** the point at which the protagonist recognises what he or she has done wrong and gains a new insight into the truths of existence

**catharsis:** the purging of the emotions experienced by the audience when watching tragedy

## ACTIVITY 1

## Thinking about tragedy

You might have explored a tragic drama at some point in your prior studies. If so, think back to see whether you can identify the aspects of tragedy that Aristotle described.



Check your responses in the Ideas section on Cambridge Elevate

## Text 5B

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

*Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5, lines 19–28

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**.



## Key terms

**unity of plot:** a focus on one plot, with no sub-plot to complicate the action

**unity of place:** a single location in which all the action of the play takes place

**unity of time:** limiting the action of a play so that it takes place on a single day

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.



## Key terms

**fourth wall:** the imaginary barrier separating the events onstage from the audience



Watch tutorial video, Catharsis, on Cambridge Elevate



## Exploring the aspects of tragedy that give it lasting power

The lasting power of tragedy has been summed up by the critic Robert N. Watson: 'Even two thousand years before Shakespeare, drama portrayed human traits and situations that still seem very familiar: fascism and democracy struggling for political power, with recognizable kinds of schemers and idealists on both sides; married couples squabbling over money and the perpetual lure of infidelity; sibling rivalries and ... oedipal conflicts; losses that are still agonizing and (perhaps most remarkable) jokes that are still funny'. How many of these aspects can you identify in the tragedies you are studying?

## 5.2 Development of tragedy

## 5.2.1 Classical drama

Tragedy has its roots in the ritualised dramas of Ancient Greece. Very few of these ancient tragedies are still in existence, but there are three great dramatists whose work has survived: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Their plays date from the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, and focus on a number of common themes as shown in Figure 5A.

Many of these early plays draw on a much older set of myths, often relating to the Trojan and Theban wars. These myths are, however, used to dramatise contemporary concerns about the nature of citizenship, duty and freedom. These were important concerns for the people of Athens, which had

become a democracy in the 5th century BCE. The critic Simon Goldhill sees the theatre as playing an important role in the proceedings of democracy: 'The Greeks ... had a word for it: *es meson*, which means 'put into the public domain to be contested'. Democracy prides itself on its openness to questioning. Tragedy is the institution which stages this openness in the most startling fashion.'

Figure 5A



As an example, let's look at one famous classical Greek tragedy, *Antigone*.

## ACTIVITY 2

*Antigone*

*Antigone* was written in about 441 BCE by the dramatist Sophocles. It is set against the backdrop of the Theban wars. Read the summary of *Antigone* in Text 5C.

The tragedies of Ancient Rome were heavily influenced by their Greek predecessors

**Text 5C**

The play opens with the news of the deaths of two brothers, Polynices and Eteocles. Polynices attempted to seize the city of Thebes from Eteocles, its ruler. In the battle that followed, both brothers were killed. Thebes' new ruler, Creon, has declared that because of his treachery, Polynices cannot be given a proper burial: instead, his body must be left as carrion for wild animals. In saying this, Creon is defying religious custom and setting himself up in opposition to the gods.

Polynices' sister, Antigone, defies Creon and buries her brother. When Creon finds out, he orders Antigone's arrest. Antigone states that she chose to disobey him because her loyalty to her brother and to the gods is greater than her loyalty to Creon. Creon, who is trying to unify Thebes after the crisis it has experienced, refuses to pardon Antigone and sentences her to be walled up alive.

Creon's son Haemon, who is engaged to Antigone, pleads for her release, but to no avail. The elders of Thebes are also on Antigone's side. Creon only relents when the blind prophet Tiresias warns him that he has provoked the anger of the gods. However, it is too late: Antigone has killed herself in prison. Haemon, who found her, stabs himself, and Creon's wife Euridyce also commits suicide.

The tragedy of *Antigone* raises a number of issues.

- 1 Who is the tragic protagonist of this play? Is it Antigone, or could it be Creon?
- 2 From the summary in Text 5C, can you identify what the tragic protagonists' hamartia might be?
- 3 In what ways does *Antigone* explore the relationship between the gods, the state and the individual?



Check your responses in the Ideas section on Cambridge Elevate

The tragedies of Ancient Rome were heavily influenced by their Greek predecessors. Nevertheless, theatre did not hold the same importance for the Ancient Romans as it did for the Greeks: to a Roman, the theatre was principally a form of entertainment. As a result, tragedy became dominated by visual display rather than playing the sophisticated philosophical role that it had occupied in Ancient Greece. The main tragic dramatist of Ancient Rome was Seneca, who worked in the 1st century CE. His tragedies were just

as influential as their Greek counterparts, but for very different reasons.

Senecan tragedy is characterised by its focus on bloodshed and horror. It is set in a nightmarish world in which evil has the power to destroy good, and contains graphic descriptions of horrific scenes. In his tragedy *Thyestes*, for example, Thyestes' young sons are murdered by their uncle, Atreus, who roasts their bodies and feeds them to their father. Often, Seneca's tragedies present humans as trapped in a world in which they cannot escape their fates: all they can do is wait for events to unfold.

Seneca's tragedies had an enormous influence on tragedy in the Renaissance period. Aspects of Senecan drama can be seen in the revenge tragedies of dramatists such as John Webster, Thomas Kyd and Thomas Middleton. It can also be seen in a number of Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare's most gruesome tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, owes an obvious debt to the violence of Seneca, with its shocking scenes of murder, mutilation and cannibalism. (During the 2014 Globe Theatre production of *Titus Andronicus*, a number of audience members fainted.) The revenge-plot of *Hamlet* also has Senecan origins.

**5.2.2 Tragedy in medieval literature**

After its initial flourishing in classical Greece and Rome, tragic drama received little attention during the medieval period. The rise of Christianity meant that plays featuring non-Christian belief systems (such as the Greek and Roman gods of classical tragedy) were frowned upon. In England, the dramas of the medieval period tended to be small in scale, often performed in the streets rather than in the great theatres of Ancient Greece and Rome. Many of these plays were comic in nature and heavily influenced by Christian mythology. One extremely popular form of drama during this period was the **mystery play**. These plays dramatised Bible stories such as the Creation, the Flood, the Nativity and the Crucifixion.



See 6.2.2 for more on comedy in the medieval period

This does not mean that tragedy was completely absent from the medieval period. Many writers told stories that explored the consequences of error, combining aspects of Christian belief with aspects

of tragedy. One important genre of the medieval period was that of the **de casibus story**. This stemmed from the work of the Italian poet Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75), who wrote a series of narratives based on the calamities and disasters that befell various great men as a result of their folly and sinfulness. Boccaccio's stories acted as **cautionary tales**, offering a warning of the catastrophes that might happen if people acted unwisely. They influenced the work of the English writers Geoffrey Chaucer and John Lydgate.



**Set text focus: 'The Monk's Tale' and Prologue**

Geoffrey Chaucer began to write *The Canterbury Tales* around 1387. Rather than writing in the French spoken at the English court, he chose to write in vernacular English that could be enjoyed by ordinary English people. His satire of the aristocracy and clergy permeates the whole of *The Canterbury Tales*, which was written at a time of peasant rebellion, when the traditional estates of nobility, Church and peasantry were breaking down. Indeed, 'The Monk's Tale' tells of famous noble characters who were brought down and that wealth and position in this world are pure illusion. The extract from the Prologue to 'The Monk's Tale' offers a definition of the genre of tragedy; the extract from the Tale itself describes the fall of Lucifer and Adam's expulsion from Eden.

Although not an exhaustive list, the following aspects of tragedy could be explored in relation to 'The Monk's Tale':

- the poem as a classical tragedy about public figures (see 5.2.4, *King Lear*)
- classical aspects of tragedy (see 5.1.2)
- the heroes' fatal flaws (see Activity 6; 5.3.1; 5.3.6)
- aspects of good and evil (see Activity 5)
- the roles of fate, inevitability and free will (see Activity 4; 5.3.4; 5.3.5)
- the structural pattern of the extract (see 5.2.7)
- the way language is used to heighten tragic experiences (see 5.2.4, *Dr Faustus*)
- the effects on the audience/reader (see 5.1.2; 5.3.8).

The poem could be read from the perspective of:

- value and the canon (see 5.4.5, Critical lens; 9.3)
- narrative theory (see 5.3.8, Critical lens; 9.4).

**ACTIVITY 3**

**The Monk's (cautionary) Tale**

Geoffrey Chaucer's poem *The Monk's Tale* recounts the tragic endings of a range of historical and mythological characters, from Lucifer and Adam to Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. If you are studying *The Monk's Tale*, you will need to make notes on what Adam and Samson do and what happens to them. Use the table to structure your notes.

| Character | Actions | Consequences | Key quotations |
|-----------|---------|--------------|----------------|
|           |         |              |                |

The cautionary tale implies that humans are at least partly to blame for their own downfall. One key medieval image, however, suggests otherwise. This is the image of the **wheel of fortune**, often represented by the female figure Fortuna. In medieval philosophy, all humans – from beggars to kings – are subject to the turning of the wheel of fortune. Sometimes, you are at the top of the wheel: sometimes, you are at the bottom. Crucially, there is nothing you can do to speed up or slow down the wheel of fortune. Its movement is inevitable.



**Key terms**

- mystery play:** a play, usually part of a longer sequence, that dramatises stories from the Bible and was performed during religious festivals
- de casibus story:** a story that used tales of the disasters that befell great men as examples of how to behave
- cautionary tale:** a story that contains a warning, showing the consequences of some kind of error
- wheel of fortune:** a medieval image of a wheel that represented good and bad luck and the inevitability of change. If you are at the top of the wheel, you are experiencing a period of good luck: if you are at the bottom, you are experiencing bad luck. The wheel's turning is inevitable and cannot be halted.

## ACTIVITY 4

**The wheel of fortune**

Research the medieval wheel of fortune, or *rota fortuna*. Shakespeare's plays contain many references to the wheel of fortune.

- Which characters welcome and accept fortune? Which characters reject or challenge her?
- What observations can you make about the depiction of fortune as a woman? (Think, in particular, about the way she is described as a lover, a goddess, a 'false housewife' and a whore.)
- Is the idea of the wheel of fortune - whose inevitable turning will both favour everyone and bring everyone low - incompatible with the idea that tragedy stems from individual actions?



### Exploring Shakespeare's use of fortune

**Hamlet:** In his famous soliloquy, Hamlet refers to 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. He also calls fortune a 'strumpet'. The First Player asks the gods to 'break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel'.

**King Lear:** Kent, imprisoned in the stocks, bids fortune 'good night', and asks her to 'smile once more, turn thy wheel!' King Lear describes himself as being 'bound upon a wheel of fire', while Gloucester's scheming son Edmund, just before the battle that will cost him his life, states that 'The wheel is come full circle'.

**Macbeth:** The Sergeant who describes Macbeth's victory over the Thane of Cawdor describes fortune as 'like a rebel's whore'. Later, the lord who describes the turmoil that follows the death of Duncan refers to 'the malevolence of Fortune'.

**Coriolanus:** The general Lartius calls upon 'the fair goddess, Fortune' to 'fall deep in love' with his fellow soldier Caius Marcius.

**Antony and Cleopatra:** As her lover Mark Antony lies dying, Cleopatra begs Mark Antony to let her speak so loud that it will break Fortune's wheel (see Text 5D).

## Text 5D

let me speak, and let me rail so high,  
That the false housewife Fortune break her wheel,  
Provoked by my offence.

*Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 4, Scene 15, lines 52–4

Another way in which tragedy was explored in medieval literature was through the **morality play**. As the name suggests, the morality play presented its audience with religious and ethical problems, dramatising the choices made by humans in their journey through life. Significantly, the morality play belonged to a world that was firmly Christian. It had a number of key features.

- It focused on a struggle between good and evil.
- It was allegorical rather than naturalistic: characters were not individuals, but representations of ideas or values (such as Virtue, Slander and Perseverance).
- The main character represented humanity. In *The Castle of Perseverance* (c.1405), this character is called Mankind; in *Everyman* (c.1510), it is called Everyman.
- It often had a character or characters who fulfilled the role of chorus.
- The main character had to negotiate his or her way through life, facing various trials and being tempted by sin.
- Eventually, the main character renounces temptation, is pardoned by God and assured of salvation in heaven.

After the complexity of classical drama, morality plays can seem highly simplistic. It can also be difficult to see how they can be linked to the genre of tragedy. Nevertheless, one of their most important functions was to remind audiences that their actions could end in eternal damnation. Mankind, in *The Castle of Perseverance*, is accompanied by good and bad angels who stand on either side of him. Look at his comments in Text 5E.



### Key terms

**morality play:** a genre of medieval and early Tudor theatrical entertainment in which the characters represent abstract qualities or concepts, such as humanity, virtues: good and evil, vices, or death

## Text 5E

Two such has every man alive  
To rule him and his wits five.  
When man does evil, one would him **shrive**,  
The other draws him to ill.

Anon, *The Castle of Perseverance*



### Glossary

**to shrive:** to gain forgiveness for one's sins, usually as a result of the Christian sacrament of confession. It is most commonly found today in the form of Shrove Tuesday, the day before the first day of Lent.

While they invariably ended happily, with the main character rejecting sin and achieving redemption, the possibility of hell has to be present in order for the drama to have its force.

## ACTIVITY 5

**Moral aspects**

There are aspects of the morality play in many later tragedies. As you read the tragedies you are studying, look for examples of:

- good and bad angels
- protagonists reflecting on the moral choices they must make
- characters acting as advisors or confidantes to the protagonist as he or she makes these choices
- images of hell and damnation.

### 5.2.3 The first English tragedies

Towards the end of the medieval period, dramatists began to turn their attention to individuals, rather than character-types. One of the earliest English tragedies is *Gorboduc* by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, which was first performed in 1561. It tells the story of a king who ignores the advice of the wise and divides his kingdom between his sons. His decision leads to war, bloodshed and death. *Gorboduc*, and other early tragedies such as *Cambises*, are seen today as relatively simplistic, unsophisticated plays. In just a few decades, however, they would be eclipsed by the tragic dramas of

the major Renaissance dramatists, who would take aspects of both classical and medieval tragedy and fuse them into plays that offered a richer and more fully developed vision of the relationship between humans and the gods.

### 5.2.4 Tragedy in Renaissance drama

The word Renaissance means 'rebirth'. It denotes a period of intellectual and cultural transformation that began in Italy in the 14th century and spread to the rest of Europe. The Renaissance saw a renewal of interest in the classics of Greek and Roman literature. It is also associated with the development of humanism - an interest in the abilities of the human mind and a new sense of what it was to be a thinking, learning, reflecting individual.



### Exploring the development of tragedy

Look back at sections 5.1 and 5.2.1. What scope do the tragedies of Ancient Greece and Rome offer to explore the human mind? Can you think of ways in which Renaissance dramatists might have built on the work of their classical predecessors?

One key aspect of the Renaissance, then, was the potential of the individual self. It was also a time of discovery, invention and exploration in many areas of life.

- Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press.
- Nicolaus Copernicus developed the theory that the earth revolves around the sun.
- Dissection and examination led to the growth of knowledge about the human body.
- Artists developed linear perspective, thus allowing the world to be represented in more accurate ways.
- The invention of the telescope enabled Galileo Galilei to observe the movements of the stars.
- The newly developed mariner's astrolabe allowed sailors to navigate the oceans more easily.
- Leonardo da Vinci produced designs for a number of inventions, including dams, bridges, parachutes, steam cannons, hydraulic pumps and musical instruments.

Nevertheless, humans were constantly encountering barriers, being brought up short by the restrictions of technology, the weather, social and political factors, their own minds - and, of course, by the

greatest limiting factor of all, that of mortality. The critic Robert N. Watson sees English Renaissance tragedy as a reflection of the conflict that results from this combination of aspiration and limitation: 'A remarkable number of the memorable heroes are destroyed by ... this confrontation between the desiring personal imagination and the relentless machinery of power, whether social, natural, or divine.'

For Watson, the tragic protagonist's ambitions might well be flawed, but they still represent an important part of what it is to be human.

### ACTIVITY 6

#### Human struggles

Think about the tragedies you are studying. What kinds of aspirations do their protagonists embody? What limitations do they come up against? To what extent are they destroyed by the confrontation that Watson describes?

You could keep a record of quotations, like Watson's, that make statements about aspects of tragedy.

A complete survey of Renaissance tragedy is beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless, a detailed summary of three particular tragedies – *Dr Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe (1588), *King Lear* by William Shakespeare (1605) and *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster (1614) – will help to highlight some of the major themes and debates that shaped tragic drama at this key period of its history.

#### *Dr Faustus*

In many ways, Dr Faustus can be seen as an embodiment of the intellectual daring of the Renaissance. Faustus, whose story is based on a German legend, is a scholar whose thirst for knowledge is so strong that it ultimately condemns him to hell. He conjures up a devil, Mephistopheles, and makes a pact with him: Mephistopheles will do Faustus' bidding for 24 years and, at the end of this time, he will receive Faustus' soul. Rather than using this time to accomplish something of worth, Faustus fritters it away. He plays tricks on people (including the Pope and a horse dealer), and has sex with a demon that he believes to be Helen of Troy. Eventually, Mephistopheles arrives to claim Faustus' soul.



### Exploring the life and work of Christopher Marlowe

Christopher Marlowe, the author of *Dr Faustus*, was born in 1564, the same year as William Shakespeare. He was a playwright, poet and translator, and was suspected of being a spy and a heretic (a supporter of beliefs that challenged orthodox religion). He was killed in a fight in a tavern in Deptford, London, in May 1593.

One famous study of Marlowe and his works is Harry Levin's book *The Overreacher*, whose title refers to the towering ambitions of Marlowe's tragic protagonists. Some critics argue that this title could equally apply to Marlowe himself.

Faustus was described by the literary critic William Hazlitt as 'a personification of the pride of will and eagerness of curiosity'. It is easy to identify his hamartia – his decision to make his pact with Mephistopheles – and, from then on, his peripeteia is clear, a simple matter of the passage of the 24 years until his death. While Faustus claims not to believe in hell, and refuses the chance to repent, he faces his death in a state of torment that can be seen as his moment of anagnorisis. And while he often appears comic – his antics are undoubtedly foolish – his language as he confronts his death has a grandeur that draws out the pity and fear necessary for the process of catharsis (see the quote in Text 5F).

#### Text 5F

FAUSTUS Ah, Faustus,  
Now hast thou but one bare hour to live,  
And then thou must be damn'd perpetually!  
Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,  
That time may cease, and midnight never come;  
Fair Nature's eye, rise, rise again, and make  
Perpetual day; or let this hour be but  
A year, a month, a week, a natural day,  
That Faustus may repent and save his soul!  
**O lente, lente currite, noctis equi!**  
The stars move still, time runs, the clock will  
strike,  
The devil will come, and Faustus must be  
damn'd.

Christopher Marlowe, *Dr Faustus*



### Glossary

**O lente, lente currite, noctis equi!**: Run slowly, slowly, horses of the night!

Nevertheless, some critics have argued that Faustus' damnation is predestined, rather than the result of his own choice. The doctrine of predestination was the subject of widespread debate at the time *Dr Faustus* was written. It was based on the teachings of John Calvin, who believed that God had chosen some people to be saved and others to be condemned to hell. The individual, therefore, has no control over his or her spiritual fate. Debates about predestination are closely linked to the topic of free will.



See 5.3.4 and 5.3.5 for more on free will

#### *King Lear*

*King Lear* is one of Shakespeare's four major tragedies. It is often seen as being unbearably bleak. The eighteenth-century critic Samuel Johnson was so appalled by its ending that he could hardly bring himself to read it a second time, and for over a century the play was performed only in a heavily rewritten form.

Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, in their introduction to the Folger Shakespeare Library edition of *King Lear*, highlight the play's bleakness: 'It is a play that relentlessly challenges its readers and ... audiences with the magnitude, intensity, and sheer duration of the pain that it represents.'

Watching *King Lear* is certainly an uncomfortable experience. Lear curses and disowns his daughters, children plot against their parents and the elderly Duke of Gloucester has his eyes torn out in a scene of horrific viciousness. However, it also exemplifies the ways in which Renaissance tragedy combined aspects of classical drama with detailed psychological exploration.

*King Lear* is the oldest and the most distinguished of Shakespeare's tragic heroes: unlike Macbeth, who attains power during the play, Lear is coming to the end of his powers. At the beginning of the play, Lear has decided to abdicate and divide his kingdom between his three daughters, who must offer him a public declaration of their love in order to determine

which portion of the kingdom they will receive. Goneril and Regan make eloquent speeches telling Lear of their apparent love for him, but their younger sister, Cordelia, refuses to take part. The enraged Lear banishes her from his kingdom.

Lear plans to divide his time alternately between Goneril and Regan's homes, but his increasingly irascible temper leads them to lose patience with him. They refuse to give him and his entourage a place to stay, and he curses them for their lack of respect. Meanwhile, the country descends into chaos.

The third act of the play sees the homeless Lear wandering on a heath as a violent storm breaks. He rages at the elements and at the gods above, but in his madness he gains a new insight into the injustices that took place during his reign – and into his own shortcomings.

Towards the end of the play, Lear is reunited briefly with Cordelia, but she is then killed. The play's emotional climax occurs when Lear carries the dead Cordelia on stage, desperately searching for signs of life – and then dies himself (see Text 5G).

#### Text 5G

LEAR: No, no, no life?  
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,  
And thou no breath at all?  
*King Lear*, Act 5, Scene 3, lines 279–81,  
Cambridge School Shakespeare

It is easy to find in *King Lear* the aspects of tragedy described by Aristotle. The hamartia, or error of judgement, takes place in the very first scene, with Lear's division of his kingdom, the staging of the 'love-trial', and his subsequent exiling of Cordelia. This whole process is driven by hubris – Lear's conviction that his daughters will not fail to express their love for him. From this point onwards, Lear's downfall, or peripeteia, is all too apparent, as he alienates Goneril and Regan and descends into madness. The most powerful aspect of *King Lear*, however, is the detailed depiction of Lear's anagnorisis – his recognition of the truth of his own situation, including the pain he has caused and his place within the universe. Such is the intensity of Lear's experience on the heath that the audience is utterly absorbed: the play cannot fail to bring about catharsis.





## 12.1 Enrichment activities

### 12.1.1 Exploring tragic protagonists

In Unit 5, sections 5.1.2 and 5.3.1, you considered the nature of the tragic protagonist, from the genre's origins in ancient Greece. You learned that tragic protagonists are flawed in some way, and that their errors lead to great suffering, for themselves and others. You also learned that aspects of the tragic genre have been used by different authors in different ways, often reflecting the contexts in which they write.

#### ACTIVITY 1

##### Tragic protagonists in literature and popular culture

- Make a list of characters in literature and popular culture - television, film and computer games - who could be seen as tragic protagonists. (You could think, for instance, of Sirius Black and Severus Snape in the *Harry Potter* series, Anakin Skywalker in the *Star Wars* films, Harvey Dent in *The Dark Knight*, Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos*, Walter White in *Breaking Bad* and Dexter Morgan in *Dexter*). Using what you know about aspects of tragedy, make brief notes on why each of these characters could be considered as a tragic protagonist.
- The critic Raphael Falco has said that tragic protagonists possess a 'charismatic authority'. Is this true of the tragic protagonists you have identified? Explain your answer.
- Why do you think audiences are drawn to tragic protagonists?

- Can you think of any real people - politicians, sportspeople, musicians, celebrities - whose lives embody aspects of tragedy?

### 12.1.2 Tragedy on stage and screen

Tragedy began as a dramatic genre, and two of your set texts are plays. In Unit 3, you learned that different productions of plays are, in effect, different interpretations of the plays, emphasising particular themes and depicting characters in a variety of ways. Watching performances of your set plays is an excellent way of exploring the variety of ways in which they can be interpreted.

#### ACTIVITY 2

##### Tragedy in performance

If possible, go to a stage production of one of your set plays. Alternatively, find clips from stage productions and film adaptations of your set plays on YouTube. Drawing on what you know about aspects of tragedy, think about questions a-c.

- How are the tragic protagonist and other key characters portrayed?
- In what ways do staging, lighting and sound contribute to the effect of the tragedy?
- Focus on two or three key points within the action of the tragedy (for example, hamartia, peripeteia, anagnorisis) and consider the different ways in which these are depicted.

### 12.1.3 Two different views of Shakespeare's tragedies

One of the most famous books about Shakespeare's tragedies is *Shakespearean Tragedy*, written by A.C. Bradley in 1904. Bradley described tragedy as a struggle between eternal forces, a 'painful mystery'. He wrote about Shakespeare's tragedies as if they were psychological studies of real people. A very different view of Shakespeare's tragedies is advanced by the critic Fintan O'Toole in his book *Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life* (2002). O'Toole argues that Bradley's interpretation of Shakespeare – with its focus on character and morality – said more about the context in which Bradley was writing than it did about the Elizabethan theatre.

#### ACTIVITY 3

##### Comparing Bradley and O'Toole

Read the introductory chapters of Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* and O'Toole's *Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life*. Then read the chapters in each book that focus on the major Shakespearean tragedy you are studying.

- What observations can you make about the different approaches taken by Bradley and O'Toole?
- What does each critic say about the protagonist of the Shakespearean tragedy you are studying?
- Whose approach do you think is more convincing? Explain your answer.

### 12.1.4 Tragic bystanders

We often tend to think of tragedy in terms of protagonists and antagonists – and the victims who suffer as a result of the protagonist's errors. Sections 5.3.2 and 5.3.3 explored three other types of character often found in tragedies – Machiavels, malcontents and fools. What about the bystanders – the characters who witness the action of the tragedy and often try to support and protect the tragic protagonist? In what ways are they affected by the actions of the protagonist, and the consequences that follow?

#### ACTIVITY 4

##### Creative rewriting: the witnesses of tragedy

Choose a 'bystander' character from one of the texts you are studying. For instance, you could think about:

- Kent in *King Lear*
- Lodovico in *Othello*
- Jordan Baker in *The Great Gatsby*
- Wagner in *Dr Faustus*
- Charley in *Death of a Salesman*
- Liza-Lu in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

Write a monologue from the point of view of this character, to be spoken after the action has concluded. What would your chosen character say about what has happened?

### 12.1.5 Nietzsche on tragedy

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche saw tragedy as the product of a struggle between two opposing forces, which he termed the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The Apollonian was characterised by balance, order and reason, while the Dionysian was characterised by disorder, revelry and an abandonment of oneself to instinct and desire. Nietzsche saw Ancient Greek tragedy as breaking through the calmness of the Apollonian and giving access to the turmoil of the Dionysian. He claimed that tragedy offered its audiences an intense emotional experience that contrasted with the mundane routines of everyday life.

#### ACTIVITY 5

##### Exploring Nietzsche

Listen to the Philosophy Bites podcast by Aaron Ridley on 'Nietzsche on Art and Truth'.

What connections can you make between Nietzsche's view of tragedy and the texts you have studied?



Listen to the Philosophy Bites podcast by Aaron Ridley on 'Nietzsche on Art and Truth' on Cambridge Elevate

## 12.2 Wider reading

### 12.2.1 Key texts on tragedy

There are many texts about tragedy that you could use to develop your understanding further. These include:

- Bradley, A. C. (1904) *Shakespearean Tragedy* (reissued by Penguin Classics) – Perhaps the most famous study of Shakespeare's major tragedies, although one that has been criticised for writing about characters as psychological case studies rather than dramatic constructs.
- McEvoy, S., with Coult, T. and Sandford, C. (2009) *Tragedy: A Student Handbook* (English and Media Centre) – Wide-ranging, readable and hugely informative: an excellent starting point for your further reading.
- O'Toole, F. (2002) *Shakespeare is Hard, But So is Life: A Radical Guide to Shakespearean Tragedy* (Granta) – A provocative exploration of Shakespeare's major tragedies that challenges Bradley's interpretation.
- Poole, A. (2005) *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford) – As its subtitle indicates, this is an accessible overview of the genre of tragedy.
- Wallace, J. (2007) *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (Cambridge) – A wide-ranging exploration of tragedy that looks at tragedy in the novel, in the visual arts and on film as well as at tragic drama.

### 12.2.2 Further useful resources

In addition to the books listed in 12.2.1, there are a number of web-based resources that will enrich and extend your study of tragedy. Four of the most useful are as follows.

- BBC Radio 4: *In Our Time*  
Each episode of Melvyn Bragg's wide-ranging discussion series features a particular topic discussed by three experts. All past episodes (over 600 of them) are available online via the programme's homepage. There are episodes on Elizabethan Revenge, *King Lear* and Marlowe, as well as on the genre of tragedy.
- Oxford Podcasts: *Approaching Shakespeare*, with Emma Smith  
Emma Smith's contributions to the Oxford Podcasts series are both accessible and informative. The *Approaching Shakespeare* series,

which draws on Smith's own research, includes lectures on *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Richard II*, as well as other Shakespearean tragedies.

- Royal Shakespeare Company: Online Resources  
The RSC's Online Resources include images from past productions that enable you to compare aspects of characterisation and staging. Education packs are also available for many plays.
- Shakespeare's Globe: Adopt an Actor  
The Globe Theatre website's Adopt an Actor resource contains blog entries and reflections from many of the Globe's actors on the process of bringing Shakespeare's characters to life.

## 12.3 Sean McEvoy on modern approaches to tragedy

Sean McEvoy teaches literature in Brighton and Cambridge, and writes books and articles on the theatre. He is currently writing *Tragedy: The Basics*, to be published in 2016. Here he introduces some theories of tragedy from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Aristotle's ideas about tragedy don't take into account the fact that the world changes and that we live in changing societies. Shakespeare's England, for example, was in transition between the mediaeval and the modern world. Othello is an outsider in Venice who talks and behaves like a feudal warrior, or a hero out of knightly romance – as he says, these are the qualities that make Desdemona love him. But Venice is a very modern place, and its individualism, self-interest and ruthlessness are nowhere better embodied than in the figure of Iago. The German philosopher Hegel (1770–1831) locates tragedy where people are caught between two historical forces pulling in different directions. No matter how heroic or pitiable an individual might be, there is no escape because their world-view is out of joint with historical change – a force which Hegel thought was ultimately progressive. For him there is something positive in tragedy.

It's also possible to think of the heroine of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) in a similar way. The dominant moral values of an 'unnatural' Victorian Christianity in the novel cannot be reconciled with Tess, who appears to be the embodiment of an ancient pagan morality rooted in nature. She is arrested in the pre-Christian 'temple' of Stonehenge, where she feels 'at home' as a 'heathen'. Tess's tragedy is that she is a 'pure woman' in tune with

the ancient demands of nature who lives in a time where to have a child out of marriage, even after rape, entails total social rejection. Yet Hardy's novel not only looks forward to, but actually helped to bring about a time when women would be relatively free from the tyranny of Victorian sexual morality. Tess might be seen as an early tragic victim in the larger movement for female emancipation in the coming twentieth century.

Tragedy can also expose the contradictions and injustices of ideas which are otherwise utterly dominant. In Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), the salesman Willy Loman has inevitably ended up selling himself, as Raymond Williams wrote in 1979, and has become an economic commodity to be discarded like any other: 'he brings down tragedy on himself, not by opposing the lie, but by living it'. In living the false dream of American capitalism Willy unwittingly shows to at least one of his sons that the dreams of some are built on the nightmares of many.

But perhaps tragedy need not teach anything. *King Lear* (1606) depicts a whole society in meltdown, a world in which both feudal values (as represented by Kent, Albany and Lear) and modern individualism (Edmund, Cornwall, Goneril, Regan) do not so much conflict as

both fail utterly. In 1964 Jan Kott wrote that the play showed life to be absurd, bleak and grotesque, devoid of hope, likening *King Lear* to Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957). The German philosopher Nietzsche (1844–1900) had suggested that tragedy can offer a kind of thrill in contemplating death and destruction (and by implication our own), as if the shaping of suffering into art is what validates why we enjoy watching tragedy. Another German, the dramatist Brecht (1898–1956), condemned tragedy as a kind of smokescreen put up by those whose wealth and power depends on the suffering they cause, making it appear mysterious by calling it 'tragedy'. But British tragedy still refuses to find the world as irremediable. Edward Bond's reworking of Shakespeare in *Lear* (1971) shows how revolutions against tyranny produce tyranny, but endorses the continued resistance of the powerless. Even the bleakest of Bond's successors, Sarah Kane (1971–99), suggests the saving power of love in her work.

## 12.4 Video interview



Watch Dan Rebellato, Professor of Drama and Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London, talk about tragedy on Cambridge Elevate

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