

# Tragic Structure

Shakespearean tragedies  
represent conflicts which end  
in catastrophe.

# Tragic Structure

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graph TD; A[Tragic Structure] --> B[EXPOSITION]; A --> C[DEVELOPMENT: RISING ACTION]; A --> D[DEVELOPMENT: FALLING ACTION]; A --> E[RESOLUTION];
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**EXPOSITION**

**DEVELOPMENT:  
RISING ACTION**

**DEVELOPMENT:  
FALLING ACTION**

**RESOLUTION**

# EXPOSITION

**Sets forth or expounds the situation or state of affairs, out of which the conflict arises.**

**Exposition is the task of Act 1 and often part or most of Act 2.**

**Makes us aware of the general setting, people, their traits, problems, and conflicts or potential conflicts.**

**By the end of act 2 we know: the overriding problem, major conflict, major characters, the protagonist or tragic hero, and his tragic flaw.**

# DEVELOPMENT: RISING ACTION

**Growth and nature of the conflict forms the bulk - part of act 1, most of acts 2, 3, and 4, and part of act 5.**

**Unveils the developing complications arising from the conflicts as the problem intensifies.**

**Time and a sense of urgency become increasingly important as the speed of the action increases.**

**Sense of inevitability, tragic hero alienating allies, & is finally all alone with his back to the wall in act 5.**

## **DEVELOPMENT:** **FALLING ACTION**

**From act 2 onwards:  
tragic hero is powerful,  
advancing, then scattering the  
opposition until, late in the 4<sup>th</sup> act,  
when a reversal of the situation  
starts taking place.**

**Opposing forces begin to  
openly resist and to make plans  
for the removal of the  
tragic hero, and the hero's power  
is obviously declining  
as the opposition's  
power advances.**

# TRAGIC RESOLUTION

In the final acts:  
opposition  
reaches full  
strength and  
defeats/destroys  
the isolated,  
weakened hero.

Tragic Recognition:  
in the final scenes  
become aware  
again of the hero's  
greatness.

Hamlet is dead:  
we can see the  
justice, but the  
feeling of satisfaction  
at the death of a  
tyrant or killer  
is conspicuously  
lacking.

# THE TRAGIC HERO, IN GENERAL

Usually, there is only  
one tragic hero.

The so-called "Love Tragedies"  
are exceptions to the rule  
(such as in *Romeo & Juliet*).

Shakespeare's tragedies are usually stories  
of one person, the "hero,"  
or at most two, to include the "heroine."

*Hamlet* has a single star, so the tragic story  
is concerned primarily with one person.

## THE TRAGIC HERO AND THE TRAGIC "STORY", CONT.

The story also depicts the troubled part of the hero's life which precedes and leads up to his death.

It is essentially a tale of suffering and calamity, conducting the hero to death.

Shakespeare's tragic heroes are men of rank, and the calamities that befall them are unusual and exceptionally disastrous in themselves.

The hero falls unexpectedly from a high place, a place of glory, or honor, or joy, and as a consequence, we feel a kind of awe at the depths to which he is suddenly plunged.

Thus, the catastrophe will be of monumental proportions.  
A tale of a man slowly worn to death would not be tragic in the Shakespearean sense of the word.

Such exceptional suffering and calamity affects the hero, makes the whole scene a scene of woe, and triggers pity.

**ONLY  
GREAT MEN  
QUALIFY AS  
TRAGIC  
HEROES**

**Peasants  
*do not inspire  
pity and fear  
as great  
men do***

**A Shakespearean  
tragedy is a story  
of Exceptional  
Calamity leading  
to the death  
of a man of  
high estate!**

**We can extend the  
definition of  
Shakespearean  
tragedy to "a story of  
exceptional calamity,  
leading to the death of  
a man of high estate."**

**The hero's fate affects the  
welfare of a whole nation  
or empire; when he falls suddenly  
from that height, his fall produces a  
sense of contrast, the  
powerlessness of man,  
the omnipotence of Fate/Fortune,  
which no tale of private life  
could possibly rival.**

**The pangs  
of despised love  
and the anguish of  
remorse are  
the same in a  
peasant and  
a prince**

# TRAGEDY, HUMAN FLAWS, AND RESPONSIBILITY

The calamities of tragedy proceed mainly from the *actions* of men.

Shakespeare's tragic heroes *are responsible* for the catastrophe of their own falls.

*The Effect:* we regard the suffering and catastrophe as something which happens to and is caused by the hero.

The hero recognizes responsibility for the catastrophe which befalls him *too late* to prevent his death.

Human beings placed in situations - from their relationships, certain actions arise.

Actions cause other actions – Interconnected deeds leads to complications and inevitable catastrophe.

*The Center of the tragedy:* action issuing from character, of flawed perceptions, and of human frailty for which the hero is ultimately responsible.

**TRAGIC CONFLICT:  
*EXTERNAL***

**Only two people –  
the hero is one**

***Or two Parties or Groups,  
one of which the hero leads***

**Passions, tendencies, ideas, principles,  
and forces *animate* them**

# **TRAGIC CONFLICT: *INTERNAL***

**Shakespeare's tragic hero,  
though he pursues his  
fated way, is torn by an  
inward struggle**

**The conception of outer and inner  
struggle includes the action of  
"spiritual forces."**

# **THE ABNORMAL, THE SUPERNATURAL, FATE, FORTUNE & CHANCE**

**Shakespeare occasionally represents abnormal conditions of mind: insanity, somnambulism, hallucinations**

**Shakespeare also introduces the supernatural: ghosts and witches who have supernatural knowledge**

**Shakespeare, in most of the tragedies, allows "chance" in some form to influence some of the action**

**These are subordinate - dominant factors are the deeds of the character.**

***The Abnormal Conditions* of mind are never introduced as the origin of any deeds or any dramatic moment.**

**Insanity in the play is found in characters but is never the reason for their actions.**

**The theme of corruption can be developed through the idea of insanity:**

***'My wit's diseased'***

***'Put on an antic disposition'***

# ***Supernatural Elements***

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graph TD; A[Supernatural Elements] --- B[contributes to the action, but is always placed in the closest relation with character]; A --- C[cannot be explained away as an illusion in the mind of one of the characters]; A --- D[gives confirmation and distinct form to inward movements already present and influential]; D --- E[the disgust at Claudius and Gertrude's hasty marriage];
```

**contributes to the action, but is always placed in the closest relation with character**

**cannot be explained away as an illusion in the mind of one of the characters**

**gives confirmation and distinct form to inward movements already present and influential**

**the disgust at Claudius and Gertrude's hasty marriage**

Watch  
for “accidents”  
in character traits  
or behavior flaws which  
are not really accidents

*large* use of accident would  
weaken the sense of the causal  
connection of character, deed, catastrophe

Man may start a course of events  
but can neither calculate nor control it; a tragic  
fact. Shakespeare uses accidents to make us feel this.

***Operation of Chance Or Accident,  
Fortune, & Fate: a prominent fact of life.***

**It is therefore inherent in Shakespearean tragedy that the tragic hero or protagonist is responsible through his own behavior or action, for the exceptional nature of the catastrophe itself. So a tragedy is . . .**

***A story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man of high estate, AND***

***a story of human actions, producing exceptional calamity in the death of such a man.***

**The action of the  
Protagonist /  
Tragic Hero is  
most often  
motivated by:**

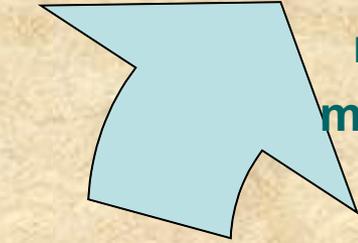
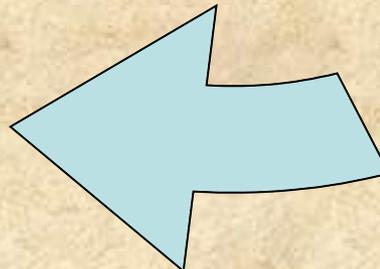
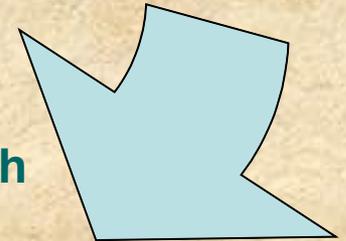
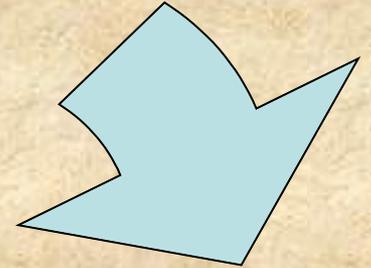
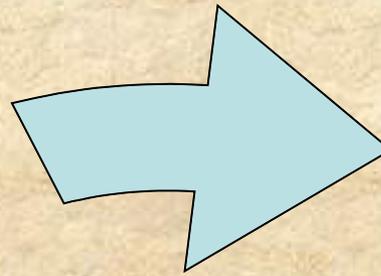
**External  
And  
Internal  
conflicts**

**Which  
lead  
to  
complica-  
tions**

**from which  
further  
conflicts  
arise**

**in a kind of  
snowballing  
effect**

**Driving  
the action  
toward a  
Tragic  
resolution**



- In Hamlet, we have the hero, Hamlet, and the opposed to the representatives of Claudius, and Polonius.
- In this case, the great majority of the *Dramatis Personae* falls without difficulty into two antagonistic groups, and the conflict between these groups ends with the defeat of the hero.

- ***External conflict will be there, but there is more to it than that.***
- **The type of tragedy in which an *undivided soul* is opposed to a hostile force is *not the Shakespearean type.***
- **But, we must also be aware of the *internal conflicts* the hero tries to deal with, while hostile forces begin to surround him, and eventually overwhelm him.**

- **Whatever forces act in the human spirit, whether good or evil, whether personal passion or impersonal principle; doubts, desires, scruples, ideas--whatever can animate, shake, possess, and drive a man's soul--these are the "spiritual forces" generating the internal turmoil for the hero.**

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- **It is a combination of the pressures of the external and internal struggles or conflicts that make Shakespearean tragedy.**
- **All of this leads us to once again expand our definition of the tragic hero/protagonist.**

# COMMON QUALITIES OF THE TRAGIC HERO/PROTAGONIST

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graph TD; A[COMMON QUALITIES OF THE TRAGIC HERO/PROTAGONIST] --- B[A fundamental trait: tragic heroes are exceptional beings]; A --- C[contribute to their own destruction by acts because of a flaw in their character or by tragic error]; A --- D[the audience must desire the defeat or destruction of the tragic hero, but this in itself does not constitute tragic feeling];
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**A fundamental trait: tragic heroes are exceptional beings**

**contribute to their own destruction by acts because of a flaw in their character or by tragic error**

**the audience must desire the defeat or destruction of the tragic hero, but this in itself does not constitute tragic feeling**

**THEY ARE**  
**EXCEPTIONAL**  
**BEINGS**

**Being of high  
estate is not  
everything**

**His nature is also  
exceptional and  
raises him above  
the average level  
of humanity**

**Tragic heroes are  
made of the stuff  
found in ourselves  
and within the  
persons who  
surround him**

- But, by an *intensification* of the life which they share with others, they are raised above them; and the greatest are raised so far that, if we fully realize all that is implied in their words and actions, we become conscious that in real life we have scarcely known anyone resembling them.
- They have a fatal gift that carries with it a touch of greatness (fierce determination, fixed ideas); and when nobility of mind, or genius, or immense force are joined to it, we realize 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.

# THEY WILL HAVE A TRAGIC FLAW

**that often takes the  
form of obsession**

**this tragic trait, which is also  
his greatness, is fatal to him**

**To meet these circumstances,  
something is required which a  
smaller man might have given,  
but which the hero cannot give**

# THEY WILL HAVE A TRAGIC FLAW

He errs, by action or omission;  
and his error, joining with other  
causes, brings on his ruin

*This fatal imperfection or error  
is of differing kinds and degrees*

At one extreme stands the excess (like Romeo),  
which scarcely diminishes our regard for him,  
and at the other extreme is murderous ambition

# THEY WILL HAVE A TRAGIC FLAW

In most cases, the tragic error involves no conscious breach of right; in some (like Brutus), it is accompanied by a full conviction of right

**Only Richard III and Macbeth do what they themselves know to be villainous**

**Why are we affected by such villains?**

- **Shakespeare gives Richard a power and audacity which excite astonishment and a courage which extorts admiration.**
- **He gives to Macbeth a similar, though less extra-ordinary greatness, and adds to it a conscience so terrifying in its warnings and so maddening in its reproaches that the spectacle of inward torment compels a horrified sympathy and awe which balance at the least, the desire for the hero's ruin.**

- **Shakespeare's tragic heroes need not be "good," though they generally are good—**
- **Shakespeare's tragic heroes project that man is not small or contemptible, no matter how rotten he can be—**
- **Shakespeare's tragic heroes illustrate the center of the tragic impression: the sense of waste—**
- **Shakespeare's tragic heroes live for what seems to be a type of the mystery of the whole world.**



**What a great  
man the tragic  
hero could have  
been – *should*  
have been!**

**CONNECTED TO  
THE GREATNESS  
IS A SENSE  
OF WASTE:**

**a profound  
sense of  
sadness and  
mystery**

**pity and fear  
are stirred by  
the tragic story**

- **We seem to have before us a type of the mystery of the whole world, the tragic fact that extends far beyond the limits of tragedy.**
- **Everywhere, from the crushed rocks beneath our feet to the soul of man, we see power, intelligence, life, and glory which astound us and seem to call for admiration.**
- **And everywhere, we see men perishing, devouring one another, and destroying themselves, often with dreadful pain, as though they came into being for no other end.**

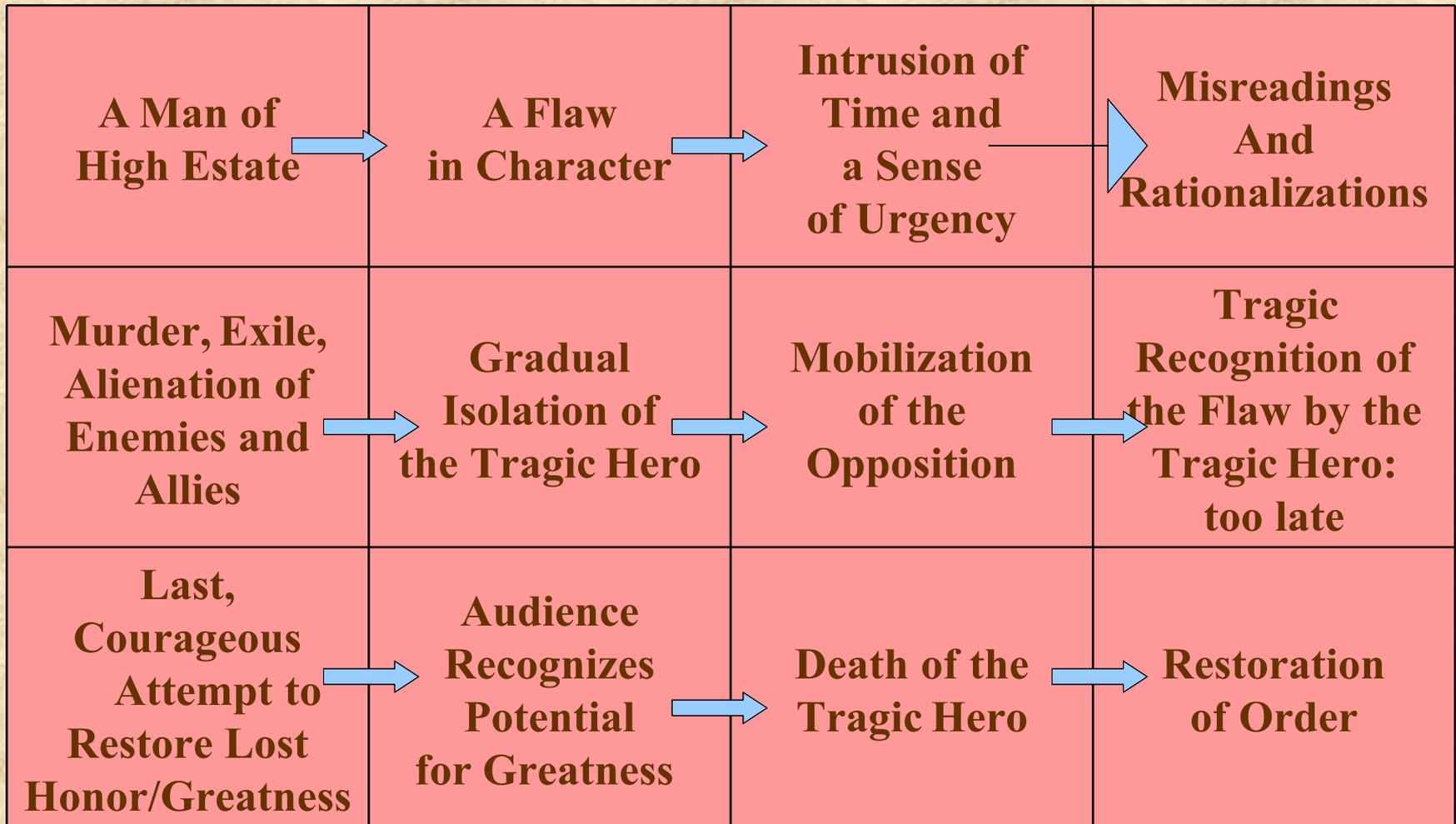
# MYSTERY OF THE WHOLE WORLD IN TRAGEDY?

**because the greatness of soul,  
which Tragedy shows as oppressed,  
conflicting, and destroyed is  
the highest existence in our minds**

**Tragedy forces the mystery upon us, and it makes  
us realize the worth of what is wasted, and that  
such waste of potential greatness, nobility  
of soul is truly the tragedy of human existence**

**Out of all of this,  
a tragic pattern emerges.**

# THE TRAGIC PATTERN



# In summary

- **First of all, in Shakespearean tragedy, we will be dealing with a man of high estate: a king, a prince, a general, etc.**
- **Normally, we will hear about him from others before he makes an entrance in the play.**
- **Often, this is where we are given the first impression of the greatness of the tragic hero through the eyes of others.**

- **Within the first two acts or so, we will become aware of a driving force within the hero that is almost, if not entirely, obsessive in nature.**
- **We will also witness the nature of the inner torment he goes through as he follows his obsession.**
- **We see both Macbeth's potential for greatness and his obsessive ambition.**

- **As the inner and outer conflicts the hero faces as he pursues his course intensify, we see time becoming more and more important.**
- **A sense of urgency develops with the plot and the conflict that not only creates tension, but also creates the effect of a kind of steam-rolling inevitability regarding the hero's fall that he has put into motion himself.**
- **The pace and urgency generally pick up significantly in the third act.**
- **Contributing to, and furthering the obsession and the control of the tragic flaw are misreadings, supernatural suggestion, and accident or chance.**

- **Things happen a split second too late: the hero operates on what he believes to be the case rather than what he actually knows to be the case.**
- **Soon they are one and the same thing to him.**
- **As the flaw and the misreadings continue, new conflicts and complications arise which bring about the death or gradual alienation of all forms of support for the hero**
- **By the end, the hero must face the opposing forces and the responsibility for his actions alone.**

- **What we see during this process of alienation and isolation is suffering, sleeplessness, rage, confusion, hallucination, and violence as the internal conflicts intensify to an almost unbearable pitch.**
- **At some point in the play, the opposing forces will begin to mobilize against the hero to bring the tragedy to its conclusion.**

- **Often the hero is confronted by an enemy in the fifth act who has good reason to seek his death (Laertes in *Hamlet*).**
- **At about this point in the play, the hero will realize the error (often a misreading of people/events) that is bringing about his fall.**
- **Knowing that he alone is to blame, he alone has erred, and accepting it is absolutely necessary in Shakespearean tragedy, and is called Tragic Recognition.**

- **Tragic recognition inevitably takes place when there is no chance/time to correct the error: it is too late.**
- **Once recognition occurs, death speedily follows.**
- **Usually, the hero will provide us with a particularly moving display of courage or at least nobility of heart.**

- **With this kind of display, we are left with the feeling that indeed Hamlet was a murderer who should have been punished, accompanied by a kind of melancholy recognition on our parts that he also had greatness in him: nobility, strength, courage.**
- **If only those qualities could have been re-directed--if only he hadn't made those mistakes.**
- **And we can say it is right that he's gone -- but what a waste.**