

Bridging Work: A-Level English Literature

A Streetcar Named Desire



Task One: exploring conflict

What is your definition of CONFLICT?

Write down a list of the different types of conflict that there could be.

Task Two: Studying Drama

How is dramatic literature – i.e. plays – different from other forms of literature?

Write a list of things that you would typically expect to find in plays, e.g. stage directions.

Task Three: explore the following information sources about the genre of 'tragedy'.

What is tragedy?

You can watch this video to discover some of the origins of classical tragedy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSr6mP-zxUc>



Classical Tragedy

Tragedy has been important in Western art for two and a half thousand years. Theories about its nature have inevitably changed and developed over that time. There are, however, certain concepts which have remained more or less central to what we understand the term to mean. These concepts have their origin in *The Poetics* of the Greek philosopher Aristotle who wrote in about 330 BC. They can be summarised as follows:

1. The drama is usually centred upon one or more main character (the protagonist) who acts in a way which proves disastrous.
2. The scope of the play's action is limited in terms of plot (which should not be too complex). The time the action takes to elapse should also be limited, as should the location of the action (the unities).
3. There is a calamitous outcome (the catastrophe) which causes an emotional response in its audience.

Tragedy in Ancient Greece

In Greek, the word 'protagonist' meant the first of the three professional actors who played all the speaking roles in the drama. It has come to mean the individual whose suffering constitutes a central part of the tragedy. Sometimes he or she is known as the tragic hero (or heroine), but since these terms tend to carry with them the suggestion of virtue, and since not all tragic protagonists can uncontroversially be called virtuous, it makes sense to use the older Greek word.

The classical protagonist

When Aristotle wrote *The Poetics* he was thinking of the kind of central character to be found in the plays of Sophocles. The protagonist was a man who had a certain nobility about him, a man of high birth who was courageous and generous in character. The Greek word Aristotle used is *megalopsychia*, 'greatness of soul'. The protagonist could not be a man who was totally good, or else the audience would feel only disgust at the injustice of his destruction in the play's catastrophe. Neither could he be someone wicked, for then the audience would rejoice at his fall.

There remains an error between these two extremes. This is the sort of man who is not conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall from misery is not due to vice and depravity, but rather to some error, a man who enjoys prosperity and a high reputation, like Oedipus or Thyestes and other famous members of families like theirs.

INTRODUCING TRAGEDY – CONCEPTS OF TRAGEDY:

Hamartia – the fatal error of judgement

The protagonist is a character with whom the audience can identify, someone who makes a wrong decision for good reasons or with the best of intentions.

Aristotle called the protagonist's error of judgement 'hamartia'. It is often the result of a condition called by the Greeks 'hubris', the excessive pride which brings down divine punishment upon the head of the protagonist. Conventional Greek religion in the classical period saw the gods as selfish and vengeful. They guarded their status jealously, and would punish any mortal whose sense of personal pride and self-importance seemed to them to exceed what was proper to humans.

The story of Oedipus exemplifies the concept of hamartia. According to Greek myth, Oedipus is the man who, having been abandoned to die at birth, grows up to kill his father Laius, King of Thebes. He doesn't know that his father is King of Thebes, or his father, however, when he kills him. He then takes over both his crown and marries the king's widow, Jocasta – Oedipus's own mother. At the beginning of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus is at the height of his powers: he has slain the Sphinx, the monster which terrorised the people of Thebes, and is attempting to find out the cause of the plague afflicting his city. Oedipus eventually discovers (after unwittingly fathering children with his own mother!) that Apollo has sent the plague because Thebes still harbours the man who killed the previous king, Laius. In trying to save the city from the plague, he uncovers the truth: that *he* is the man who killed the king, his own father, and therefore is also married to his mother. When the truth is revealed, Jocasta commits suicide and Oedipus blinds himself. His unwitting error of judgement and the terrible punishment he suffers demonstrate both the power of the gods and man's lack of power over his life and destiny.

Hubris and anagnorisis

The protagonist in classical tragedy commits hubris by choosing to defy the claims of the gods. In Sophocles' play *Antigone*, Creon, King of Thebes commits hubris when he refuses to bury the body of Antigone's brother Polynices, who was killed fighting against his city. Following the suicides of his wife and son, Creon comes to realise that he has made a mistake in defying the gods of the underworld. He recognises he has committed hubris, and so reaches a state of anagnorisis – recognition of his tragic error of judgement.

How does modern tragedy differ from traditional tragedy?

The tragedy of the common man: Tragedy in the 20th Century

In the 20th century, the tragic protagonist came to be the 'Everyman' – that is any man or woman. Partly this was a political assertion of the rights of the individual, particularly for American dramatists.

It is time, I think, that we who are without kings took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time – the heart and spirit of the average man.

Arthur Miller: 'Tragedy and the Common Man', New York Times, 1949.

But the tragic protagonist in contemporary drama does not quite seem to be anybody. A residue of Romanticism insists that the tragic protagonist must be someone who is prepared to devote themselves to some idea or notion, which may range from a political or economic belief to the simple need for utter personal integrity in a world which demands compromises. In the case of the former, the political and economic belief may be wrong, and this is the source of the tragedy. In the case of Arthur Miller's Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, it is Loman's dedication to American capitalism that leads to his destruction: he fails to see that men themselves become products with market value, and that once he can no longer behave convincingly as a salesman he too will be discarded as unsaleable stock.

Alternatively, the dramatist can present the protagonist as fundamentally good, but doomed in attempting to be virtuous in a world where selfishness is what society values. One such example is Isobel, the protagonist of David Hare's *The Secret Rapture*.

In both cases, however, there is a refusal of the protagonist to surrender: rather than compromise their sense of who they are, they choose death or destruction. While we, the audience, may recognise the futility of this uncompromising and fatal view of life, the plays encourage us also to admire the man or woman who takes to its logical extreme the right to assert an individual belief in the face of an uncomprehending or unsympathetic society.

The commonest of men may take on [...] stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest, the battle to secure his rightful place in the world.

Arthur Miller: 'Tragedy and the Common Man', New York Times, 1949

It could be argued of classical and early modern tragedy that the nobility of the protagonist increases the tragic impact, since their fall, as a ruler or aristocrat, greatly affects the society around them. But

in modern tragedy the protagonist's very ordinariness may also make him or her able to stand for a wider class of people, and their political views: women, the working class, and other racial groups who have struggled for emancipation during the 20th century. Marlene and her sister Joyce in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* come to stand for the different political and personal choices faced by women in Britain in the 1980s.

The 20th-century protagonist is devoted to the fulfilment of his or her own personal ideal or the following of his or her own beliefs. The cost of that fulfilment upon themselves and society is often at the heart of the tragedy.

Task Four: Make notes on the conventions of classic tragedy vs. 20th century tragedy, using the information provided above to help you.

Task Five: An Introduction to 'A Streetcar Named Desire'

In 1939, Williams wrote to his agent, Audrey Wood:

"I have an idea for a new long play – rather, a character – in New Orleans [...] As you have observed, I have only one major theme for all my work which is the destructive impact of society on the sensitive, non-conformist individual. In this case it will be an extraordinarily gifted young woman artist who is forced into prostitution and finally the end described in the story."

Although there were changes and developments made to Williams' story along the way, this was the seed of Williams' inspiration for his play 'A Streetcar Named Desire'.

Watch this video for a further introduction to A Streetcar Named Desire:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IUD7pXgfTw>

