The Tragedy According to Aristotle

The tragedy, according to Aristotle, had to have various conditions in order to accomplish its purpose. According to Aristotle, the purpose of the tragedy was to purge the polis (the people) of its death urge, called Thanatos. Thanatos is a series of self-destructive urges we all feel, and must act out unless we can have them purged from us. The purpose of tragedy is to give us a vicarious release of these urges. Vicarious means that we don’t play out the impulses ourselves, but we watch someone on stage play them out and through that, we get to experience the entire scenario through the main character, the tragic hero of the play.

In order to have this experience of release, called catharsis, a tragedy must contain several elements:

1. We must sympathize with the tragic hero.

This means that we must like the tragic hero, yet we must like them in a particular way. We must look up to them a little, they must be morally good, but not so good that we don’t like them or are jealous of them. They must be morally attractive. Only this quality will allow the audience to properly identify with the tragic hero. This identification makes it possible for catharsis to occur.

1. The hero must have a tragic flaw.

This is what make a hero a tragic hero. The tragic flaw must be a quality that is bad enough to make it believable that it could cause the hero’s tragic end, yet not so bad that it compromises our sympathy for the main character. Negotiating the tension between this need to create a believable tragic flaw and yet sustain the audience’s sympathy is the true difficulty and art of any great tragedy. It is the characteristic that defines a successful or unsuccessful tragedy.

1. The hero must suffer a tragic end.

Many have said that American audiences like a tragedy with a happy ending. This would disqualify a work from being a tragedy according to Aristotle. The hero must suffer a tragic end because that is the key experience for the catharsis. We must be “carried away” by our identification with the tragic hero, “carried away” along with them in the full expression of their tragic flaw so that when we experience the tragic end, our sympathy makes it possible for us to feel as though we have suffered the tragic end as well. Only this experience completes the catharsis so that we are purged of this tragic flaw, having not only witness, but to some degree experienced the full range of what it feels like and where it leads. Only through this can we reflect upon the tragic flaw within ourselves and don’t have to make the same mistakes.

1. Fate must participate in the hero’s fall.

If the hero were the sole cause of his tragic end, then it would compromise our ability to sympathize with the hero. Therefore, their tragic end must be partially due to their own tragic flaw, as well as some outside force, usually fate, that makes the entire scenario feel “unfair.” This sense of “unfairness” completes our experience of catharsis and allows us to enter into the sense of having fallen with the tragic hero.