

Theory of Tragedy in the Poetics: 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; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its katharsis of such emotions. . . . Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody." He underscores these sentiments in Chapter XIII of another of his works, the Metaphysics, where he says that "the chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness." In short, the structure or organization of a work is an essential component in its aesthetic force. But let's simplify a bit, as Aristotle himself did. A great work of literature must be of the appropriate size (to avoid overtaxing the audience, he limited the diegetic length of the action to a single day) and have an orderly arrangement of parts or, to use his language, must have a beginning, middle, and end. It's really not hard to understand. We almost automatically recognize when a play or novel or film starts to drag; when this happens, we sense that something is wrong with the work, or that something is out of balance. To cite another example, we tend to know when a work's conclusion seems forced, or arbitrary, or simply silly. To summarize Aristotle's understanding of plot: 1. It should seem inevitable and natural 2. It should be properly proportioned – neither too long nor too short for its purpose 3. It should contain an appropriately designed beginning, middle, and end – 47 – This, however, is just the beginning of his analysis of plot. He also makes observations about specific moments and effects in every great plot, to which we shall turn in our next modules, on (1) recognition and reversal (anagnorisis and peripeteia), (2) tragic flaw and excess pride (hamartia and hubris), and (3) catharsis — three sets of terms that are among the most important in the history of literary criticism. Plot – Discussion One: Recognition (Anagnorisis) and Reversal (Peripeteia) As we have noted many times, Aristotle insists that the plot is the central element in tragedy, followed by the development of character. As he says, plot is "the heart and soul of tragedy." Aristotle calls the cause-and-effect chain leading from the incentive moment to the climax the "tying up" (desis), in modern terminology the complication. He therefore terms the more rapid cause-and-effect chain from the climax to the resolution the "unravelling" (lusis), in modern terminology the denouement. The tragic flaw is called hamartia. "true to life" (realistic) 4.1