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Tragic Flaw as a Weakness in Human Character

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Abstract

The concept of tragic flaw, or *hamartia*, occupies a central position in the study of classical and Shakespearean tragedy. Originating from Aristotle's *Poetics*, hamartia refers to an inherent error of judgment or weakness in an otherwise noble and virtuous hero, which ultimately leads to his downfall. This paper explores tragic flaw as a fundamental aspect of human character, emphasizing that the downfall of the tragic hero is not caused by vice or moral corruption but by human limitations such as pride, ambition, jealousy, or indecision. By examining Aristotle's theoretical framework alongside examples from Greek and Elizabethan tragedies—including *Oedipus Rex*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*—the study demonstrates how traits like hubris, over-ambition, and emotional excess function as catalysts for tragic catastrophe. The paper further argues that tragic flaws make heroes more relatable and evoke pity and fear, thereby fulfilling the Aristotelian purpose of tragedy through catharsis. Ultimately, tragic flaw reflects the universal vulnerability of human nature and reinforces tragedy as a moral and philosophical exploration of human error and consequence.

Keywords: Tragic flaw, Hamartia, Aristotle's Poetics, Tragic hero, Catharsis

Tragic flaw is a literary device that can be defined as a trait in a character leading to his downfall, and the character is often the hero of the literary piece. This trait could be the lack of self-knowledge, lack of judgment, and often it is hubris (pride).

The Greek word for Tragic flaw is hamaratia or hamartanein, which means "to err." It was Aristotle who introduced this term first in his book Poetics and his idea was that it is an "error of judgment" on the part of a hero that brings his downfall. A tragic flaw is also

called a "fatal flaw" in literature and films. This is taken as a defective trait in the character of the hero.

Hamartia, also called tragic flaw, (hamartia from Greek hamartanein, "to err"), inherent defect or shortcoming in the hero of a tragedy, who is in other respects a superior being favoured by fortune.

Aristotle introduced the term casually in the Poetics in describing the tragic hero as a man of noble rank and nature whose misfortune is not brought about by villainy but by some "error of judgment" (hamartia). This imperfection later came to be interpreted as a moral flaw, such as Othello's jealousy or Hamlet's indecisiveness or irresolution, although most great tragedies defy such a simple interpretation. Most importantly, the hero's suffering and its far-reaching reverberations are far out of proportion to his flaw. An element of cosmic collusion among the hero's flaw, chance, necessity, and other external forces is essential to bring about the tragic catastrophe.

Hubris

Hubris shows excessive pride, self confidence. The fact that a character dies as he ignores warnings.

(*Hubris is the characteristic of excessive confidence or ignorance that leads a person to think. He does no wrong that causes flaw in his character. Hubris is a negative characteristic or traits of a person.*)

Hamartia: Hamartia is Greek origin word arose from the verb 'Hamartanein' meaning 'to miss the mark' or 'to error;, literary meaning 'tragic flaw' or 'fault', 'failure' 'guilt', or 'sin'. The term was used by Aristotle in Poetics. It is most often found in literary criticism.

Hamartia is a tragic flaw, inherent defect, or short coming in the character of the hero.

Hamartia is a flaw in the character that brings about the downfall of the hero of the tragedy.

Hamartia is a tragic flaw, not just a flaw in the context of tragedy.

Hamartia in Tragedy is an error of judgment made as the result of ignorance or human weakness that results in downfall of the hero.

Aristotle says in Poetics, "Ideal tragic hero is one whose misfortune is caused not by vice and depravity, but some error (Hamartia).

According to Aristotle as defined in Poetics, "Fortune of hero is reversed as a result of weakness (or tragic flaw) in an otherwise noble nature." A Tragic error of judgment that results in Hero's downfall. Some traits that cause Hamartia are: arrogance, rebellion, greed, hypocrisy, aggressive ambition, vanity, lustful feelings, and vengefulneess. Hamartia comes from Greek word '*Hamartanein*' meaning inherent defeat or shortcoming in hero of a tragedy, who is in other respect a superior being favoured by fortune.

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Hamartia is a literary term that refers to a '*tragic flow*' or error that leads to a character's downfall that brings about character's downfall, or downfall of the hero of a tragedy.

Note: Character in Greek Tragedies had a '*Hamartia*' or fatal flow.

Hamaartia leads to a reverse of fortune. Macbeth's tragic flow or Hamartia is his ambition.

Romeo's flow is his repulsive nature.

Hamartia is a flaw in the character of a hero.

1.6.1.2.1. Examples of Hamartia in Literature

(a) Tragedies like **'***Othello (1603)'***-** jealousy, *'Macbeth (1606)*'- unchecked ambition and 'Hamlet (1609)' use '*Hamartia*'.

(b) Aristotle examines **'***Hamartia***'** in **'***Oedipus Rex (429 BCE)***'-**, a tragic play by Shakespeare. **Oedipus** unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother. Discovery of which leads his mother to commit suicide and Oedipus to blind himself. He becomes king and solves his mother by solving a riddle that no one could solve.

(c) '*Hamartia*' in Shakespeare's Tragic Hero

Romeo and Juliet (1597): adolescent passion, impatience

Hamlet : fear of direct confrontation

King Lear : excessive pride

Julius Caesar: quest for power, excessive pride

Brutus: poor judgment

Cressida: Unfaithfulness

Timon: Inability to recognize true nature of his friends

Types of Flaws are as followed:

(i) Hubris: Hubris shows excessive pride, self confidence. The fact that a character dies as he ignores warnings.
(*Hubris is the characteristic of excessive confidence or ignorance that leads a person to think. He does no wrong that causes flaw in his character. Hubris is a negative characteristic or traits of a person*.)

(ii) Over Ambition: Over Ambition example can be seen in Dr. Faustus by Christopher Marlowe. He rejects Divinity for Magic, discards theology and traditional learning for necromancy as he craves power beyond human limits. He thinks to control Life and Death. He asks Mephistopheles if he can go beyond nature as to make the moon fall. He has insane desire for unlimited power. Scene 4 quotes, "If I had as many souls as there be stars….". He pursuits of earthly pleasures like Seven Deadly Sins, burying his spiritual unrest in debauchery.

(iii) Jealousy: Othello by Shakespeare is the best example of Jealousy. Iago is jealous as Othello promotes Cassio and suspects illegal relation with his wife Emilia. Roderigo, Othello, Iago, and Bianca are the characters experience jealousy. "O,

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beware, my lord, of jealousy; It is the green- eyed monster which doth mock The meat it feeds on" (Act3, Scene 3).

(iv) **Hamartia:** Hamartia is Greek origin word arose from the verb 'Hamartanein' meaning 'to miss the mark' or 'to error;, literary meaning 'tragic flaw' or 'fault', 'failure' 'guilt', or 'sin'. The term was used by Aristotle in Poetics. It is most often found in literary criticism.

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Hamaartia leads to a reverse of fortune. Macbeth's tragic flow or Hamartia is his ambition.

Romeo's flow is his repulsive nature.

(i) Hamartia is a flaw in the character of a hero.

In Macbeth by William Shakespeare Tragic flaw is his vaulting or unchecked ambition, a desire for power that overrides his moral. Macbeth says,

"I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other" (Act 1, Scene 3)

Aristotle and the Tragic Hero

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle was the first to define tragedy and a "tragic hero." According to Aristotle "Tragedy," is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, several kinds being found in separate parts of the play, in the form of action not of narrative through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." He believed that a good

tragedy must evoke feelings of fear and pity in the audience, since he saw these two emotions as being fundamental to the experience of catharsis (the process of releasing strong or pent-up emotions through art). As Aristotle puts it, when the tragic hero meets his demise, "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves."

A tragic hero is a type of character in a tragedy, and is usually the protagonist. Tragic heroes typically have heroic traits that earn them the sympathy of the audience, but also have flaws or make mistakes that ultimately lead to their own downfall. Aristotle strictly defined the characteristics that a tragic hero must have in order to evoke these feelings in an audience.

According to Aristotle, a tragic hero must:

Be virtuous: In Aristotle's time, this meant that the character should be a noble. It also meant that the character should be both capable and powerful (i.e. "heroic"), and also feel responsible to the rules of honor and morality that guided Greek culture. These traits make the hero attractive and compelling, and gain the audience's sympathy.

Be flawed: While being heroic, the character must also have a tragic flaw (also called hamartia) or more generally be subject to human error, and the flaw must lead to the character's downfall. On the one hand, these flaws make the character "relatable," someone with whom the audience can identify. Just as important, the tragic flaw makes the tragedy more powerful because it means that the source of the tragedy is internal to the character, not merely some outside force. In the most successful tragedies, the tragic hero's flaw is not just a characteristic they have in addition to their heroic qualities, but one that emerges from their heroic qualities—for instance, a righteous quest for justice or truth that leads to terrible conclusions, or hubris (the arrogance that often accompanies greatness). In such cases, it is as if the character is fated to destruction by his or her own nature.

Suffer a reversal of fortune: The character should suffer a terrible reversal of fortune, from good to bad. Such a reversal does not merely mean a loss of money or status. It means that the work should end with the character dead or in immense suffering, and to a degree that outweighs what it seems like the character deserved.

To sum up: Aristotle defined a tragic hero rather strictly as a man of noble birth with heroic qualities whose fortunes change due to a tragic flaw or mistake (often emerging from the character's own heroic qualities) that ultimately brings about the tragic hero's terrible, excessive downfall.

In Greek tragedy the nature of the hero’s flaw is even more elusive. Often the tragic deeds are committed unwittingly, as when Oedipus unknowingly kills his father and marries his own mother. If the deeds are committed knowingly, they are not committed by choice: Orestes is under obligation to Apollo to avenge his father’s murder by killing his mother. Also, an apparent weakness is often only an excess of virtue, such as an extreme probity or zeal for perfection. It has been suggested in such cases, since the tragic hero is never passive

but struggles to resolve his tragic difficulty with an obsessive dedication, that he is guilty of hubris—i.e., presumption of being godlike and attempting to overstep his human limitations. Tragic heroes' tragic flaws make them more relatable to an audience, especially as compared to a more conventional hero, who might appear too perfect to actually resemble real people or draw an emotional response from the audience. Aristotle believed that by watching a tragic hero's downfall, an audience would become wiser when making choices in their own lives. Furthermore, tragic heroes can illustrate moral ambiguity, since a seemingly desirable trait (such as innocence or ambition) can suddenly become a character's greatest weakness, bringing about grave misfortune or even death.

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