
Hamartia in Shakespearean Tragedies

Dr. Deen Dayal

Asst. Prof. of English, LSSSS Govt. P.G. College Mant, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, India

Article Received: 27/07/2025

Article Accepted: 28/08/2025

Published Online: 31/08/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.08.572

Abstract

Hamartia, a term of Greek origin meaning “to miss the mark,” occupies a central place in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and classical literary criticism. It refers to the error of judgment or tragic flaw that leads to the downfall of an otherwise noble and virtuous hero. Rather than arising from moral depravity, hamartia stems from human weakness such as pride, ambition, jealousy, or poor judgment. This concept is fundamental to understanding the structure and emotional impact of tragedy, particularly the reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) and the arousal of pity and fear. Classical Greek tragedy, exemplified by Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, illustrates hamartia through ignorance and fate, while Shakespearean tragedies reinterpret the concept through complex psychological flaws. Characters such as Othello, Macbeth, King Lear, Hamlet, and Romeo embody hamartia in forms ranging from blind trust and unchecked ambition to excessive pride and impulsive passion. Through these examples, hamartia emerges not merely as a personal defect but as a dramatic mechanism that reveals the vulnerability of human greatness and reinforces the tragic vision of life.

Keywords: Hamartia; Tragic Flaw; Aristotle’s *Poetics*; Greek Tragedy; Shakespearean Tragedy

Hamartia

Hamartia is a Greek origin meaning ‘fault’, ‘failure’ or ‘guilt’. The term was used in Aristotle’s *Poetics* with reference to Greek Tragedy. It arises from Greek verb ‘hamartanein’ meaning ‘to miss the mark’ or ‘to err’. It was used by Aristotle to describe the error of judgment that causes tragic hero’s downfall. The term was coined by Aristotle as a tool of literary criticism to describe dramatic work like *Oedipus Rex*. Hamartia refers to character’s downfall due to his excessive pride, greed, jealously.

Hamartia is a 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 shortcoming in the character of the hero.

“I am a man
More sinned against, than sinning”
(*King Lear*, Act 3, Scene 2)

Hamartia is a flaw in the character that brings about the downfall of the hero of the tragedy. Hamartia (Tragic Flaw) in *Othello* is seen as his blind trust in Iago. Iago thinks:

“The Moor is of free and open nature,
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
As asses are.”
(*Othello*, Act I, Scene III)

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 the 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 vengefulness.

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.

Extreme pride and anger lead to the tragic fall of King Lear. He calls himself a ‘dragon’: “Peace, Kent! Come not between the dragon and his wrath...
Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her,”
(*King Lear*, Act I, Scene I)

Hamartia is a literary term that refers to a ‘tragic flaw’ or error that leads to a character’s downfall or the downfall of the hero of a tragedy. King Lear’s later self-realization during the storm is reflected in:

“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!”

(*King Lear*, Act 3, Scene 2)

Note: Characters in Greek tragedies had a ‘Hamartia’ or fatal flaw.

Hamartia leads to a reversal of fortune. Macbeth’s tragic flaw or Hamartia is his ambition.

In *King Lear*, Hamartia (Tragic Flaw) is his excessive pride, arrogance, and poor judgment. His flawed judgment is caused by his love for flattery and power as seen in the lines:

“I have divided

Kingship and power, and love and service.

Take thou my daughter, I shall give thee power,

With right to all the revenue.”

(*King Lear*, Act I, Scene I)

Romeo’s flaw is his impulsive nature.

Hamartia is a flaw in the character of a hero.

Examples of Hamartia in Literature

(a) Tragedies like *Othello* (1603) – jealousy, *Macbeth* (1606) – unchecked ambition, and *Hamlet* (1609) use Hamartia. Othello’s final speech shows his tragic flaw. He loves Desdemona too much and trusts the wrong person, Iago, leading to his own downfall:

“I have done the state some service, and they know’t.

No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,

Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,

Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak

Of one that loved not wisely, but too well.”

(*Othello*, Act V, Scene II)

(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 this leads his mother to commit suicide and Oedipus to blind himself. He becomes king 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 the true nature of his friends

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