

What features of a tragedy can we see in this image?



Tragedy

- Most of you will have studied Macbeth, so you should have some concept of what a tragedy is.
- Discuss: what features of a tragedy can you remember?
- Theory: at A-Level, you'll need to engage with some higher-level theory. This will inform your essays and allow you to make more sophisticated analyses.
- Read the A. C. Bradley Essay.
- What ingredients of a tragedy does Bradley outline?



3 The Shakespearean tragic hero

More than a century after its first publication, A. C. Bradley's Shakespearean Tragedy continues to be respected and frequently quoted. In this extract, Bradley considers Shakespearean tragedy in relation to definitions of the genre offered by the ancient Greek writer Aristotle and by medieval writers. He argues that Shakespearean tragedy necessarily centres on a character of high rank and exceptional qualities who undergoes a reversal of fortune that leads to his own death and to a more general calamity.

In approaching our subject it will be best, without attempting to shorten the path by referring to famous theories of the drama, to start directly from the facts, and to collect from them gradually an idea of Shakespearean Tragedy. And first, to begin from the outside, such a tragedy brings before us a considerable number of persons (many more than the persons in a Greek play, unless the members of the Chorus are reckoned among them); but it is **pre-eminently** the story of one person, the 'hero', or at most of two, the 'hero' and 'heroine'. Moreover, it is only in the lovetragedies, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, that the heroine is as much the centre of the action as the hero. The rest, including *Macbeth*, are single stars. So that, having noticed the peculiarity of those two dramas, we may henceforth, for the sake of **brevity**, ignore it, and may speak of the tragic story as being concerned primarily with one person.

The story, next, leads up to, and includes, the *death* of the hero. On the one hand (whatever may be true of tragedy elsewhere), no play at the end of which the hero remains alive is, in the full Shakespearean sense, a tragedy; and we no longer class *Troilus and Cressida* or *Cymbeline* as such, as did the editors of the Folio. On the other hand, the story depicts also the troubled part of the hero's life which precedes and leads up to his death; and an instantaneous death occurring by 'accident' in the midst of prosperity would not **suffice** for it. It is, in fact, essentially a tale of suffering and calamity conducting to death.

The suffering and calamity are, moreover, exceptional. They befall a conspicuous person. They are themselves of some striking kind. They are also, as a rule, unexpected, and contrasted with previous happiness or glory. A tale, for example, of a man slowly worn to death by disease, poverty, little cares, sordid vices, petty persecutions, however piteous or dreadful it might be, would not be tragic in the Shakespearean sense.

Such exceptional suffering and calamity, then, affecting the hero, and – we must now add – generally extending far and wide beyond him, so as to make the whole scene a scene of woe, are an essential ingredient in tragedy and a chief source of the tragic emotions, and especially of pity. But the proportions of this ingredient, and the direction taken by tragic pity, will naturally vary greatly. Pity, for example has a much larger part in *King Lear* than in *Macbeth*, and is directed in the one case chiefly to the hero, in the other chiefly to minor characters.

Let us now pause for a moment on the ideas we have so far reached. They would more than suffice to describe the whole tragic fact as it presented itself to the medieval mind. To the medieval mind a tragedy meant a narrative rather than a play... A total reverse of fortune, coming unawares upon a man who 'stood in high degree', happy and apparently secure – such was the tragic fact to the medieval mind. It appealed strongly to common human sympathy and pity; it startled also another feeling, that of fear. It frightened men and awed them. It made them feel that man is blind and helpless, the plaything of an inscrutable power, called by the name of Fortune or some other name – a power which appears to smile on him for a little, and then on a sudden strikes him down in his pride.

Shakespeare's idea of the tragic fact is larger than this idea and goes beyond it; but it includes it, and it is worth while to observe the identity of the two in a certain point which is often ignored. Tragedy with Shakespeare is concerned always with persons of 'high degree'; often with kings or princes; if not, with leaders in the state like Coriolanus, Brutus, Antony; at the least, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, with members of great houses, whose quarrels are of public moment. There is a decided difference here between *Othello* and our three other tragedies, but it is not a difference of kind. Othello himself is no mere private person; he is the General of the Republic. At the beginning we see him in the Council Chamber of the Senate. The consciousness of his high position never leaves him. At the end, when he is determined to live no longer, he is as anxious as Hamlet not to be misjudged by the great world, and his last speech begins,

*Soft you; a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service, and they know it.*

And this characteristic of Shakespeare's tragedies, though not the most vital, is neither external nor unimportant. The saying that every death-bed is the scene of the fifth act of a tragedy has its meaning, but it would not be true if the word 'tragedy' bore its dramatic sense. The pangs of despised love and the anguish of remorse, we say, are the same in a peasant and a prince; but, not to insist that they cannot be so when the prince is really a prince, the story of the prince, the triumvir, or the general, has a greatness and dignity of its own. His fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire; and when he falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man, and of the omnipotence – perhaps the caprice – of Fortune or Fate, which no tale of private life can possibly rival.

From A. C. Bradley, 'The Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy', 1991. (First published as 'Lecture 1: The Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy', 1904).

For A. C. Bradley, in 'The Shakespearean Tragic Hero', the 'ingredients' of a Shakespearean tragedy are:

1. The story of one person;
 2. The hero will suffer;
 3. The hero will die;
 4. Suffering will be contrasted with former happiness;
 5. The audience will feel pity;
 6. There will be a reversal of fortune (peripeteia);
 7. Fate will be significant;
 8. The hero will be of high degree;
 9. The tragedy of the hero will affect others.
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10. We could add 'hamartia' and 'anagnorisis' to this list of ingredients.
 11. We could also add a tragic villain, who opposes the hero.



What features of a tragedy can we see in this image?



Keats



- One of the poets we'll study is Keats.
- Check out his tragic life.



- Born 1795.
- 1803 – went to school. Smart enough for Eton but his family was unable to afford this.
- 1803 – His dad die (Keats was 8)
- 1810 – His mum dies (tuberculosis)
- 1815 – begins to train as a doctor, though he really just want to be a Romantic poet.
- 1817 – quits doctoring to focus on his poetry.
- 1817 – meets Isabella Jones (first love)
- 1818 – meets Fanny Brawne (first true love)
- 1818 – youngest brother dies (TB)
- 1819 – works on some amazing poetry
- 1820 – sees his work published.
- Died 1821 (aged 25, again of tuberculosis)

La Belle Dame Sans Merci

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

I see a lily on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever-dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful, a fairy's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She looked at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A faery's song.



She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna-dew,
And sure in language strange she said—
'I love thee true'.

She took me to her Elfin grot,
And there she wept and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild, wild eyes
With kisses four.

And there she lullèd me asleep,
And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!—
The latest dream I ever dreamt
On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried—'La Belle Dame sans Merci
Hath thee in thrall!'

I saw their starved lips in the gloam,
With horrid warning gapèd wide,
And I awoke and found me here,
On the cold hill's side.

And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'



- Interpretation 1:
 - The 'belle dame' is the personification of love.
 - Find me the sexy bits!
- Interpretation 2:
 - The 'belle dame' is the personification of death.
 - Find me any references to death.



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'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'

- To what extent is this poem a tragedy in the Bradleyan sense?
- Refer to both the poem and the critical essay in your response.
- 500 words.



Does Keats' poem conform to these features of a tragedy?

1. The story of one person;
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Summer Task

- To what extent is Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' a tragedy in the Bradleyan sense?
- Refer to both the poem and the critical essay in your response.
- Approx. 500 words.
- A starting point, should you want it...
- Though Bradley's definition of a tragedy focuses on a 'Shakespearean tragic heroes', Keats' poem La Belle Dame Sans Merci shares many of the same conventions. The 'knight at arms', for example is clearly driven towards his death by a tragic villain, La Belle, who lures the knight into a faery land before abandoning him to his ambiguous death at the end of the poem.
- A. C. Bradley claims that a tragedy will be "essentially a tale of suffering and calamity conducting to death" and we can see this in 'La Belle Dame' when...

Additional Summer Tasks

- You could also make a start on any of the texts if you want to make your life a lot easier. Get to know your texts early.
- Start thinking about what you'd like to do your coursework on – what kind of literature might you want to write on? If you're not well read (I wasn't at your age!) then ask around for recommendations.

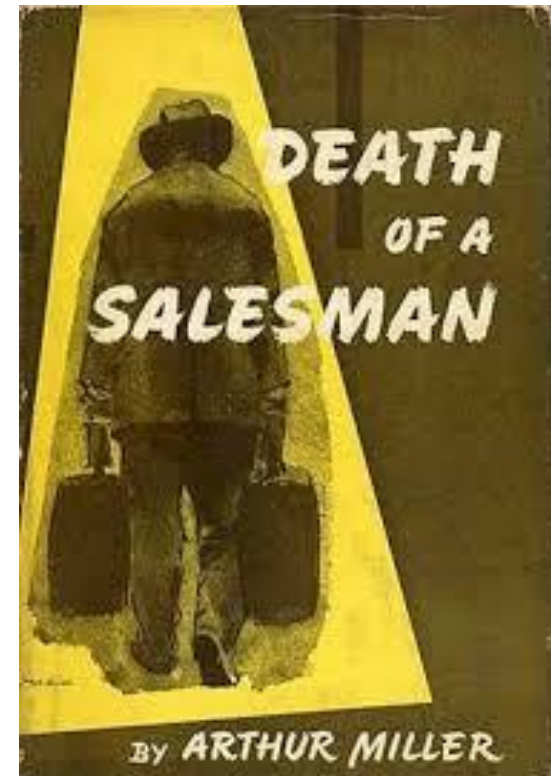
Paper 1

Aspects of Tragedy

King Lear



Death of Salesman



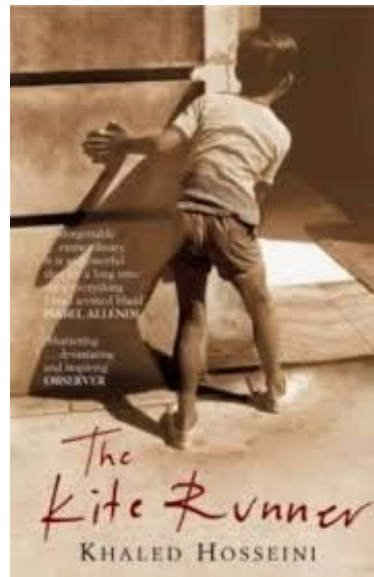
Keats



Paper 2

Texts and Genres: Political Writing

The Kite Runner

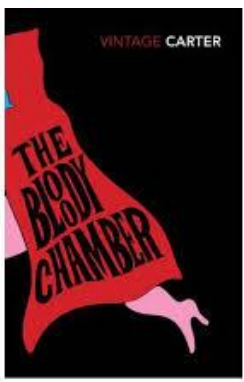


The Handmaid's Tale



William Blake





Theory and Independence

Coursework = 20% of A level

This provides the opportunity for you to pursue your own area of interest and develop independent learning skills in the areas of:

Feminist theory

Marxist theory

Post-colonial theory

Narrative theory

Literary value and the Canon

Students produce 2 essays of between 1250 - 1500 words.

One must be a poetry text and the other must be prose - you're expected to choose your own literary text.