**Introduction to Greek Tragedy**

**Genre - Tragedy**

As was noted in the [discussion of the *Iliad*](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/netshots/homer.htm), the word "tragedy" refers primarily to tragic drama: a literary composition written to be performed by actors in which a central character called a tragic protagonist or hero suffers some serious misfortune which is not accidental and therefore meaningless, but is significant in that the misfortune is logically connected with the hero's actions. Tragedy stresses the vulnerability of human beings whose suffering is brought on by a combination of human and divine actions, but is generally undeserved with regard to its harshness. This genre, however, is not totally pessimistic in its outlook. Although many tragedies end in misery for the characters, there are also tragedies in which a satisfactory solution of the tragic situation is attained.

**Reading Tragedy**

Tragedy was a public genre from its earliest beginnings at Athens; that is, it was intended to be presented in a theater before an audience. Epic originally was also a public genre. [Homer](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossaryh.html#Homer) chanted the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument called a [*kithara*](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossaryk.html#kithara) before an audience. Epic continued to be recited by rhapsodes at festivals like the Panathenaia, but it gradually became more of a private genre to be read from a manuscript at one's leisure. This happened in part also to tragedy. In the fourth century Aristotle in his Poetics points out that it is possible to experience the effect of tragedy without public performance (i.e., by private reading). Tragedy was still being written and produced in the Athenian theater in Aristotle's day, but the plays of the three great tragedians ([Aeschylus](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossarya.html#Aeschylus), [Sophocles](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossarys.html#Sophocles) and [Euripides](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossarye.html#Euripides)) and no doubt of other playwrights were also being read privately. Reading, of course, is our primary means of access to ancient tragedy except for occasional modern productions, which help us to a certain degree to appreciate its theatricality, but for the most part provide quite a different theatrical experience from that offered by the ancient productions.

Private reading of tragedy deprives us of the visual and aural effects, which were important elements of this genre. Our word theater is derived from the Greek word *theatron*, which contains the stem of the verb *theasthai* 'to view as spectators'. *Drama* is a Greek word meaning 'action', related to the verb *dran* 'to do'. The author of a tragedy was not just a writer of a script. When his work was approved for presentation at the state religious festival in honor of the god [Dionysus](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossaryd.html#Dionysus) (the [City Dionysia](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossaryc.html#City Dionysia)), the state assigned him actors and a chorus. The author then had to perform the additional tasks of training the actors and chorus and of composing the music for the various songs of the actors and chorus and providing choreography for the chorus. Because we usually read tragedies rather than seeing theatrical productions of them and also because our reading is usually in translation, we miss the following elements which are additional aids to interpretation beyond the script of the play: scenery, inflection of actors' voices, actors' gestures and postures, costumes and masks, singing, dancing, sounds of the original language and its various poetic rhythms. These handicaps, however, are no reason to neglect tragedy. We still have the most essential element of drama, the words, the playwright's most important medium of communication. According to Aristotle, "the plot is the soul of tragedy" and the plot is communicated to the audience primarily by means of words. You should, however, keep in mind that words are not all there is to tragedy. Use your imagination as much as possible in order to compensate for those theatrical elements lost in reading tragedy.

**Tragic Festival**

The Athenian theater was not a business enterprise like our theater but was financed by the Athenian state as an integral part of an Athenian religious festival: the City Dionysia. Three tragic poets were chosen to present their plays by a magistrate called an archon who had charge of the City Dionysia. Each one of the tragedians presented a tetralogy (a group of four plays), three tragedies and a satyr play,1 on one morning of the festival. In the first half of the fifth century the three tragedies often formed a connected trilogy, which told a continuous story. One connected trilogy survives, The *Oresteia* of [Aeschylus](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossarya.html#Aeschylus), consisting of three plays: *Agamemnon*, *Libation* *Bearers* and *Eumenides*. This trilogy traces the story of the House of Atreus from [Agamemnon](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossarya.html#Agamemnon)'s murder by his wife after his return from Troy to the acquittal of his son, [Orestes](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossaryo.html#Orestes), who killed his mother in revenge. Three other surviving plays of Aeschylus belong to trilogies of which two plays have been lost. All the extant tragedies of [Sophocles](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossarys.html#Sophocles) and [Euripides](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossarye.html#Euripides) do not belong to connected trilogies, but are self-contained dramas. Although there is evidence that Sophocles wrote one connected trilogy, the normal practice of the second half of the fifth century was to write three unconnected tragedies.

1The satyr play is so called because of its chorus which consists of satyrs, grotesque woodland spirits having human form with a horse's ears and tail. Only one satyr play survives, the Cyclops of Euripides, which parodies the story of [Odysseus](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossaryo.html#Odysseus) and Polyphemus in the *Odyssey*.

The tragic poets competed with one another and their efforts were ranked by a panel of judges. Aeschylus won thirteen first place victories, Sophocles, twenty four, and Euripides, five. Euripides's relatively small number of victories is due more to his unpopularity among the Athenians because of certain radical themes in his plays than any lack of ability as a tragedian.

**Theater**

The theater of Dionysus was, like all ancient Greek theaters, an open-air auditorium and, due to the lack of adequate artificial lighting, performances took place during the day. Scenes set at night had to be identified as such by the actors or the chorus; the audience, upon receiving these verbal cues, had to use its imagination. In general, the action of tragedy was well served by presentation in an open-air theater since interior scenes, which are common in our typically indoor theaters, are all but non-existent in tragedy. The action of a tragedy normally takes place in front of palaces, temples and other outdoor settings. This seemed natural to the ancient audience because Greek public affairs, whether civic or religious, were conducted out of doors as was much of Greek private life due to the relatively mild climate of the Aegean area.

The theater of Dionysus in the earliest days of tragedy (late sixth - early fifth century) must have consisted of only the most basic elements. All that was required was a circular dancing area for the chorus (orchestra) at the base of a gently sloping hill, on which spectators could sit and watch the performance (for drawing of theater click on the following: [theater](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/image?arch=1990.38.0109)). On the other side of the orchestra facing the spectators there probably stood a tent in which the actors could change their costumes (one actor would play more than one part). This is suggested by the word [*skene*](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossarys.html#skene) which means 'tent', and was used to refer to a wooden wall having doors and painted to represent a palace, temple or whatever setting was required. The wall, which eventually became a full-fledged stage building, probably acquired this name because it replaced the original tent. The construction of the wooden skene (cf. our theatrical terms "scene" and "scenery") and of a formal seating area consisting of wooden benches on the slope, which had been hollowed out, probably took place some time toward the middle of the fifth century. This was no doubt the form of the theater in which the later plays of Aeschylus and those of Sophocles and Euripides were presented. The actors positioned themselves either in the orchestra with the chorus or on the steps leading to the doors of the skene. The theater of Dionysus as it survives today with the remains of an elaborate stone skene, paved orchestra and marble seats was built in the last third of the fourth century BC This stone theater had a capacity of approximately fifteen thousand spectators; the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in the earlier wooden theater were viewed by audiences of comparable numbers.

Two mechanical devices which were part of the ancient Greek theater deserve mention. One device is the [*ekkyklema*](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossarye.html#ekkyklema) 'a wheeled-out thing', a platform on wheels rolled out through one of the doors of the skene, on which a tableau was displayed representing the result of an action indoors (e.g., a murder) and therefore was unseen by the audience. The other device is called a [*mechane*](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossarym.html#mechane) 'theatrical machine', a crane to which a cable with a harness for an actor was attached. This device allowed an actor portraying a god or goddess to arrive on scene in the most realistic way possible, from the sky. The *mechane* deposited the actor on top of the *skene* so that he as a deity could address the human characters from an appropriately higher level. This device was not exclusively limited to use by divine characters, but was employed whenever the plot required any character to fly. On the other hand, not every god arrived on scene by means of this machine. The Latin phrase *deus ex machina,* 'the god from the machine', is often used to refer to the appearance of gods by means of the mechane in tragedy. This phrase is also employed in a pejorative sense in modern literary criticism to refer to an improbable character or event introduced by an author to resolve a difficult situation. This secondary meaning of deus ex machina developed from the practice of inferior ancient dramatists who introduced a god at the end of a play in order to untangle a badly snarled plot.

**Actors**

The actors in tragedy were hired and paid by the state and assigned to the tragic poets probably by lot. By the middle of the fifth century three actors were required for the performance of a tragedy. In descending order of importance of the roles they assumed they were called the *protagonist*2 'first actor', (a term also applied in modern literary criticism to the central character of a play), *deuteragonist* 'second actor' and *tritagonist* 'third actor'. The protagonist took the role of the most important character in the play while the other two actors played the lesser roles. Since most plays have more than two or three characters (although never more than three speaking actors in the same scene), all three actors played multiple roles.

2In modern literary criticism, the term *protagonist* refers to the central *character* of the play, not the actor.

Since women were not allowed to take part in dramatic productions, male actors had to play female roles. The playing of multiple roles, both male and female, was made possible by the use of masks, which prevented the audience from identifying the face of any actor with one specific character in the play and helped eliminate the physical incongruity of men impersonating women. The masks with subtle variations also helped the audience identify the sex, age, and social rank of the characters. The fact that the chorus remained in the orchestra throughout the play and sang and danced choral songs between the episodes allowed the actors to exit after an episode in order to change mask and costume and assume a new role in the next episode without any illusion-destroying interruption in the play.

The main duty of an actor was, of course, to speak the dialogue assigned to his characters. This, however, was not the only responsibility of the actor. He occasionally had to sing songs solo or with the chorus or with other actors (e.g., a song of lament called a [*kommos*](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossaryk.html#kommos)). The combination of acting and singing ability must have been as rare in the ancient world as it is today.

**Chorus**

For the modern reader the chorus is one of the more foreign elements of tragedy. The chorus is not one of the conventions of modern tragedy. We associate the chorus with such musical forms as opera, musical comedy and oratorio. But tragedy was not just straight drama. It was interspersed with songs sung both by actors and chorus and also with dancing by the chorus. The modern parallel for tragedy is actually opera (along with its descendant, musical comedy), which is a dramatic form containing song and dance.

The chorus, unlike the actors, were non-professionals who had a talent for singing and dancing and were trained by the poet in preparation for the performance. The standard number of members of a chorus was twelve throughout most of Aeschylus's career, but was raised to fifteen by Sophocles. The chorus, like the actors, wore costumes and masks.

The first function of a tragic chorus was to chant an entrance song called a [*parodos*](http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/glossary/glossaryp.html#parodos) as they marched into the orchestra. The entrance song took its name from the two ramps (*[parodoi](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/image?arch=1990.38.0111" \t "popup)*) on either side of the orchestra which the chorus used as it made its way into the orchestra. Once the chorus had taken its position in the orchestra, its duties were twofold. It engaged in dialogue with characters through its leader, the Coryphaeus, who alone spoke the lines of dialogue assigned to the chorus. The tragic chorus's most important function was to sing and dance choral songs called stasima (singular = stasimon). The modern reader of Greek Tragedy, whether in English or even in the original Greek, finds it very difficult to appreciate the effect of these choral songs which are devoid of their music and dance.

**Structure**

Tragedy has a characteristic structure in which scenes of dialogue alternate with choral songs. This arrangement allows the chorus to comment in its song in a general way on what has been said and/or done in the preceding scene. Most tragedies begin with an opening scene of expository dialogue or monologue called a prologue.

After the prologue the chorus marches into the orchestra chanting the *parodos*. Then follows a scene of dialogue called an episode, which in turn is followed by the first stasimon. The alternation of episode and stasimon continues until the last stasimon, after which there is a final scene of dialogue called an *exodos* 'exit' scene'. The *exodos* is in general a scene of dialogue, but, as in the case of episodes, sometimes songs are included, especially in the form of a *kommos*.

Here is the structure of a typical tragedy (some tragedies have one more or one less episode and stasimon)3:

* Prologue
* Parodos
* First Episode
* First Stasimon
* Second Episode
* Second Stasimon
* Third Episode
* Third Stasimon
* Fourth Episode
* Fourth Stasimon
* Exodos

3Some tragedies have one more or less episode and stasimon.