

Aristotle's *Poetics*

Aristotle lived from 384 – 322 BCE in Athens and studied under Plato, attending his lectures for a period of twenty years. In his *Poetics* (written 350 BCE) he defined certain rules for tragedy.

Magnitude

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude.

Plot is more important than character

The plot, is the first principle, and [...] the soul of a tragedy; Character holds the second place.

Unity of place

In composing the *Odyssey* [Homer] did not include all the adventures of *Odyssey*.

Unity of time

Tragedy endeavors, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun.

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.

Unity of action

[...] the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed.

Fear or pity

Tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but of events inspiring fear or pity. [...] Pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.

Misfortune

The change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad.

The cause of misfortune

[Misfortune] should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty, in a character.

Characters are of exalted station

Tragedy is an imitation of persons who are above the common level.

Complication and denouement

Every tragedy falls into two parts - Complication and Unraveling or Denouement.

Diction

The perfection of style is to be clear without being mean. [...] the metaphorical, the ornamental, [...] will raise it above the commonplace and mean, while the use of proper words will make it perspicuous.