Aristotle: *Poetics*  
Sophocles 496-406 B.C.  
Aristotle 384-322 B.C.

In his work *Poetics*, Aristotle set down his concept of what constituted ideal Greek tragedy.

1. “Poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.”

2. A tragedy has unity—especially unity of plot [the only one he insisted upon]; i.e., there is a coherent and complete story. The “life and soul” of tragedy is plot (the arrangement of the incidents). Characters are second to plot. Tragedy is “an imitation of an action—or a series of actions.” Life consists of action. [Character determines action.]

3. Events must appear to be unexpected and yet as a part of a sequence. A sense of the inevitable must be present.

4. A tragedy has magnitude; that is, its scale and elevation raise it above the ordinary run of things human. The protagonist is better than most men; greater position in society; nobler; awesome in stature, integrity, bravery, and morals.

5. The function of tragedy is the purgation of pity and fear; that is, we feel pity and fear as we watch the hero. This purification of the emotions through art is called catharsis.

6. A tragedy must involve a change of fortune—a reversal (irony)—for a character who is neither completely good nor completely bad.

7. Misfortune comes from some error of judgment, not from bad luck or depravity in character.

8. Self-recognition or self-discovery results because of knowledge bringing about a change from ignorance.

9. The central figure should prove himself adequate to the disaster he suffers in order to illustrate the final and most important sequence in the tragic pattern: Man's ability to perceive fully his proper place and role in the order of things.
ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF TRAGEDY

1. Worship of the god Dionysus, youngest of the gods of the Greek pantheon, whose cult began to spread in Greece about 700 B.C. He was the god of the vine and of the reproductive forces in life. He was thought to liberate believers from personal trouble, and to be himself a suffering god, undergoing death and resurrection. Hence the cycle of lament and rejoicing in the worship of Dionysus, combining sorrow and despair with exaltation, enthusiasm, and ecstasy.

2. Dithyramb, choral lyric in honor of Dionysus, sung and danced around the altar of Dionysus in a circular dancing-place (orchestra). It was performed by a chorus of 50 men dressed in skins of goats (the sacred animal of the god), hence the term *tragoedia* (“goat-song”).

3. Thespis of Attica (ca. 550-500 B.C. —“Father of the Drama”). He created the first actor (*hypokrites*—literally “answerer”), who performed between the dances of the chorus, taking several roles, and conversing at times with the leader of the chorus. Thus was drama (literally “action”) introduced.

4. Gradually myths not connected with Dionysus were employed. Hence, the chorus of goats or satyrs became inappropriate and was replaced by one suitable to the events portrayed in each play.

5. Over a period of several hundred years, a second and then a third actor were added while the size of the chorus stabilized by 15.

6. The part assigned to the chorus, always an integral part of a classical Greek play, gradually diminished while the dialogue became increasingly more important. Tragedy thus contained a myth from epic sources and choral odes alternating with dialogue.

By 5th century B.C. tragedy consisted of the following:

- Prologue (first act - setting, characters)
- Parados (entrance of chorus)
- Epicles (other acts or scenes, alternating with choral songs)
- Stasima (choral odes or songs)
- Exodos (action after the last stasimon - going out of chorus)

Functions of the chorus

1. It serves to provide an interlude indicating the passage of time.
2. It expresses public opinion.
3. It occasionally explains things or fills in information.
4. It sets the mood and comments on the significance of the action.

The chorus in Greek drama sang its sentiments when no actor was on the stage. The strophe was sung when the chorus moved from right to left; the antistrophe, when the chorus returned from left to right. By Sophocles’ day, the chorus numbered 15, including choragos (leader). The chorus’ function was to chant the odes, and in the person of the choragos, to participate in the action.

CATHARSIS: a highly intellectual and emotional release in tragedy - the result of certain awareness:

1. the hero’s responsibility for his own catastrophe because of a tragic flaw (usually hubris (pride) or some error in judgment)
2. the restoration of order as a consequence of the catastrophe
3. a sense of horror and pity at the destruction of the hero and the innocent in their wake
4. the dignity of man
5. the relentlessness of fate
GREEK TRAGEDY

Greek tragedy constitutes the basis for the drama of the western world. The roots of the drama form extend a considerable distance further back in time, but the full flowering of the drama is an exclusive contribution of the Greeks to world literature.

What is Greek tragedy and where did it come from? Originally, the “plays” were a series of hymns and prayers led by a priest and a large chorus, and the people attended them as people today attend church services. As time passed, they became enactments of significant events in the lives of past leaders and legendary heroes but still maintained the religious aura of earlier drama.

The Greeks revered a number of gods whom they considered to be omnipotent. These gods were believed to appear and act like human beings quite often; yet, to the Greek mind, the gods could, and often did, govern the destinies of men according to the Greek concept of FATE (Moira). The earlier plays focused on the roles played by fate and the gods in the lives of the characters.

This concern with the relationship between mankind and the powers beyond man’s mortal world is an integral part of Greek tragedy and indicates drama’s basis in religion. According to the Greek tragic view of life, mankind is subject to the wills and whims of fate and the gods, and it is man’s lot to suffer during his mortal life. They did not disregard man’s free will or the ability of each man to think about, weigh, and select any course of action he wants to take. The problem of life for the Greeks lay in the contradictory presence of the inescapable wills and whims of FATE and the gods with man’s own free will. How can the two be reconciled? How can he avoid suffering? He cannot, and therein lies the seed of tragedy.

The Greeks say man’s continuing endeavor to avoid bringing death and destruction down on himself is a pattern of life—a tragic pattern—because fate and divine will can never be diverted or overcome even by the greatest of men. All human beings try to direct and control their lives by exercising their power to reason. Such reasoning power is the pride of humanity, and yet is the weakness of humanity when ill-used. To the Greeks, this capacity for reason had the potential for both great glory and great misfortune because of man’s principal failing: PRIDE (hubris).

Naturally, pride follows great achievement. Therefore, the Greeks dramatized the deeds of great figures of legend and history.

This chart illustrates the pattern typically followed by a character in a Greek tragedy. As we read and discuss the plays, take these characters through the pattern, explaining each step and providing examples: CREÔN, ANTIGONE, OEDIPUS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Fate vs. Man’s free will</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Man’s efforts to direct his life</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>He uses reasoning power.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Achievement leads to PRIDE (man’s failing).</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Suffering</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Perception of man’s place and potential on earth. (Catharsis)</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Meaning of life [Complacency]</td>
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The Greek Stage

The first part of the Dionysian theatre to exist was the orchestra. The circular "dancing place" was all that was needed when only the chorus performed and spectators stood or sat on a hillside to view the performance. With the evolution of the drama, the playing space evolved also. The plan of the Theatre at Epidaurus indicates the dominant features of the Greek theatre of the fifth century B.C.

The orchestra was the circular playing area for the chorus. In the center of the orchestra was a thymele, or altar, representing the worship of Dionysus.

The skene was a scene building used for the actors' entrances, exits and a place for costume change. The front of the skene may also have been used as a background for the action.

The proscenium was a raised platform behind the orchestra and in front of the skene. This long narrow area was where the major characters performed.

The parados were passageways between the stage and seating areas; they were used both by the chorus and audience for access to the theatre.

The theatron was the name for the spectator seating area. Estimates for the seating capacity of the larger theatrons range from seventeen thousand to twenty thousand.