

Module 8: Drama – *Romeo and Juliet*

Topic 4 Content: The Tragic Hero

Introduction

The Tragic Hero

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Aristotle, a famous Greek philosopher, first came up with the idea of a tragic hero. A **tragic hero** is a character in a literary work who has the potential for greatness but is doomed to fail. William Shakespeare composed numerous tragedies, and among his most famous tragic heroes are King Lear, Othello, and Macbeth. In this interactivity, use the **NEXT** button or the numbered tabs to explore the three defining characteristics of a tragic hero while examining the character Hamlet from another of Shakespeare's famous plays called *The Tragedy of Hamlet*.



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Prestigious Status

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A tragic hero is often a king, nobleman, military leader, god, or some other character of high status in society. Other characters look up to the hero because he or she represents the ideals of society and is still in good standing. However, because of the hero's tragic flaw, many characters often suffer the consequences of the hero's mistakes.

Hamlet is a tragic hero because he holds the prestigious status of being a prince of Denmark. His father is King Hamlet of Denmark, and his mother is Queen Gertrude. His uncle is Claudius, who later assumes the throne.

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Tragic Flaw

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The hero of a tragedy always has a fundamental tragic flaw. A moral or personal weakness, the tragic flaw gradually becomes the sole occupying focus of the protagonist, ultimately leading to the hero's downfall. Some examples of tragic flaws include jealousy, pride, wrath, cowardice, and ambition.

After his father dies, Hamlet's mother marries his uncle, Claudius. The ghost of Hamlet's father tells him that he was murdered by Claudius and beseeches Hamlet to avenge his death. Hamlet agrees and becomes obsessed with revenge. However, his tragic flaw is indecisiveness. Although Hamlet has several opportunities to kill Claudius and avenge his father's death, he repeatedly hesitates, questions his decisions, and procrastinates throughout the play.

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Miserable Downfall

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Miserable Downfall



A tragic hero is responsible for his or her own downfall. Even though other forces such as evil, misfortune, or other characters may have an influence on the hero, the downfall comes ultimately from the choices that the hero makes. The tragic hero usually dies by the end of the play as part of his or her downfall.

Hamlet does eventually kill Claudius, but it is too little too late. Because of his inaction toward his traitorous uncle, Hamlet in the process loses his mother, his lover Ophelia, and many others of the Danish royal court. All of these deaths could have been prevented if it were not for Hamlet's tragic flaw. Just like all the tragic heroes of Shakespeare's plays, Hamlet also dies as part of his downfall.

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