



Included in this workshop:  
**READING 4** Evaluate how the structure and elements of drama change in the works of British dramatists across literary periods.

## Shakespearean Tragedy

Revenge, intrigue, murder, and insanity—these are just a few of the topics explored in William Shakespeare’s tragedies. Basing his works on the Greek and Roman traditions of drama, Shakespeare created some of the most enduring tragedies, which continue to enthrall audiences to this day.

### Renaissance Drama

During the Middle Ages, English drama focused mainly on religious themes, teaching moral lessons or retelling Bible stories to a populace that by and large could not read. With the Renaissance, however, came a rebirth of interest in the dramas of ancient Greece and Rome. First at England’s universities and then among graduates of those universities, plays imitating classical models became increasingly popular. These plays fell into two main categories: comedies and tragedies.



Shakespeare’s *King Lear*

In Renaissance England, **comedy** was broadly defined as a dramatic work with a happy ending; many comedies contained humor, but humor was not required. A **tragedy**, in contrast, was a work in which the main character, or **tragic hero**, came to an unhappy end. In addition to comedies and tragedies, Shakespeare wrote several plays classified as **histories**, which present stories about England’s earlier monarchs. Of all Shakespeare’s plays, however, his tragedies are the ones most often cited as his greatest.

### The Greek Origins of Tragedy

In Western civilization, both comedies and tragedies arose in ancient Greece, where they were performed as part of elaborate outdoor festivals. According to the famous ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, tragedy arouses pity and fear in the audience—pity for the hero and fear for all human beings, who are subject to character flaws and an unknown destiny. Seeing a tragedy unfold produces a **catharsis**, or cleansing, of these emotions in the audience.

In ancient Greek tragedies, the hero’s tragic flaw is often **hubris**—excessive pride that leads the tragic hero to challenge the gods. Angered by such hubris, the gods unleash their retribution, or **nemesis**, on the hero. Ancient Greek tragedies also make use of a **chorus**, a group of performers who stand outside the action and comment on the events and characters in the play, often hinting at the doom to come and stressing the fatalistic aspect of the hero’s downfall. By Shakespeare’s day, the chorus consisted of only one person—a kind of narrator—or was dispensed with entirely.

# Characteristics of Tragedy

The intention of tragedy is to exemplify the idea that human beings are doomed to suffer, fail, or die because of their own flaws, destiny, or fate. As part of this tradition, Shakespeare's tragedies share the following characteristics with the classic Greek tragedies.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF TRAGEDY

### THE TRAGIC HERO

- is the main character who comes to an unhappy or miserable end
- is generally a person of importance in society, such as a king or a queen
- ▶ • exhibits extraordinary abilities but also a **tragic flaw**, a fatal error in judgment or weakness of character, that leads directly to his or her downfall



### THE PLOT

- involves a **conflict** between the hero and a person or force, called the **antagonist**, which the hero must battle. Inevitably the conflict contributes to the hero's downfall.
- ▶ • is built upon a series of causally related events that lead to the **catastrophe**, or tragic resolution. This final stage of the plot usually involves the death of the hero.
- is resolved when the tragic hero meets his or her doom with courage and dignity, reaffirming the grandeur of the human spirit.



### THE THEME

- ▶ • is the central idea conveyed by the work and usually focuses on an aspect of fate, ambition, loss, defeat, death, loyalty, impulse, or desire. Tragedies, such as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (page 348), may contain several themes.



Shakespearean tragedy differs somewhat from classic Greek tragedy in that Shakespeare's works are not unrelentingly serious. For example, he often eased the intensity of the action by using the device of **comic relief**—a light, mildly humorous scene following a serious one.

In the following example from *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 3, lines 143–147, Macbeth is expressing his thoughts, unheard by Banquo, about the witches' prophecy that he will be king of Scotland.

**Macbeth.** [*Aside*] If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me  
Without my stir.

**Banquo.** New honors come upon him,  
Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mold  
But with the aid of use.

**Macbeth.** [*Aside*] Come what come may,  
Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.

### Close Read

In this short dialogue, what characteristics of a tragedy do you recognize?

## Shakespeare's Conventions of Drama

The printed text of Shakespeare's plays, such as *Macbeth*, is like that of any drama. The play is divided into **acts**, which are divided into **scenes**, often marking a change in setting. The **dialogue** spoken by the characters is labeled to show who is speaking, and **stage directions**, written in italics and in parentheses, specify the setting (time and place) and how the characters should behave and speak. In addition, Shakespeare typically used the following literary devices in his dramas.

### BLANK VERSE

Like many plays written before the 20th century, *Macbeth* is a **verse drama**, a play in which the dialogue consists almost entirely of poetry with a fixed pattern of rhythm, or meter. Many English verse dramas are written in **blank verse**, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, a meter in which the normal line contains five stressed syllables, each preceded by an unstressed syllable.

So foul and fair a day I have not seen.

### SOLILOQUY AND ASIDE

Playwrights rely on certain conventions to give the audience more information about the characters. Two such conventions are the soliloquy and the aside.

- A **soliloquy** is a speech that a character makes while alone on stage, to reveal his or her thoughts to the audience.
- An **aside** is a remark that a character makes in an undertone to the audience or another character but that others on stage are not supposed to hear. A stage direction clarifies that a remark is an aside; unless otherwise specified, the aside is to the audience. Here is an example from *Macbeth*.

**Macbeth.** [*Aside*] Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor!  
The greatest is behind.—[*To Ross and Angus*] Thanks for your pains.  
[*Aside to Banquo*] Do you not hope your children shall be kings . . . ?

### DRAMATIC IRONY

**Irony** is based on a contrast between appearance or expectation and reality. In **dramatic irony**, what appears true to one or more characters in a play is seen to be false by the audience, which has a more complete picture of the action. In Act One of *Macbeth*, dramatic irony can be found in Duncan's words to Lady Macbeth upon his arrival at the Macbeths' castle.

Conduct me to mine host. We love him highly  
And shall continue our graces toward him.

Duncan is sure of Macbeth's loyalty and says that he will continue to honor Macbeth with marks of his favor. However, the audience knows that Macbeth is planning to murder Duncan to increase his own power. The audience recognizes the irony of Duncan's trusting remarks.

## FORESHADOWING

**Foreshadowing** is a writer's use of hints or clues to suggest what events will occur later in a work. In Act One, Scene 1, the witches' dialogue opens the play with clues as to what is to come.

**First Witch.** When shall we three meet again?

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

**Second Witch.** When the hurly-burly's done,  
When the battle's lost and won.

**Third Witch.** That will be ere the set of sun.

**First Witch.** Where the place?

**Second Witch.** Upon the heath.

**Third Witch.** There to meet with Macbeth.

## Shakespearean Language

The English language in which Shakespeare wrote was quite different from today's. As you read a Shakespearean play, pay attention to the following.

### SHAKESPEAREAN LANGUAGE

#### GRAMMATICAL FORMS

In Shakespeare's day, people still commonly used the pronouns *thou, thee, thy, thine*, and *thyself* in place of forms of *you*. Verb forms that are now outdated were also in use—*art* for *are* and *cometh* for *comes*, for example.

#### UNUSUAL WORD ORDER

Shakespeare often puts verbs before subjects, objects before verbs, and other sentence parts in positions that now seem unusual. For instance, Lady Macbeth says, "O, never shall sun that morrow see!" instead of "O, that morrow shall never see the sun!"

#### UNFAMILIAR VOCABULARY

Shakespeare's vocabulary included many words no longer in use (like *seeling*, meaning "blinding") or words with meanings different from their meanings today (like *choppy* meaning "chapped"). Shakespeare also coined new words, some of which (like *assassination*) have become a permanent part of the language.

### STRATEGIES FOR READING DRAMA

1. Look over the opening cast of characters to familiarize yourself with the characters, their titles, and their relationships.
2. Study the plot summary and stage directions at the beginning of each scene. Try to develop a mental picture of the setting.
3. Pay attention to labels indicating who is speaking and to stage directions.
4. To get a better sense of what the dialogue might sound like, try reading some of it aloud.

### Close Read

What do these lines of the witches' dialogue suggest about the conflict that will occur in the play? What might be the result, or **resolution**, of the conflict?