

Tragic Hero

What is a 'tragic hero'?

He or she is a character in a work of fiction who acts in a particular way or makes a mistake which eventually leads to their downfall and death.

The idea of the tragic hero was first defined by Ancient Greeks such as Aristotle. In the Renaissance age (when Shakespeare was writing) the definition became slightly changed.

Ancient Greek definition:

An Aristotelian tragic hero has four characteristics:

1. They must be of noble birth;
2. Hamartia, which means flaw or error;
3. A reversal of fortune brought about because of their flaw or mistake;
4. Recognition that the reversal of fortune was brought about because of their own actions.

A renaissance view:

In this case the tragic hero has a flaw rather than Hamartia. This means that they have a characteristic which in other situations might be considered desirable but because of outside forces it proves the hero's downfall.

An Ancient Greek Tragic Hero:

The infant Achilles is dipped in the River Styx by his mother, Thetis, who holds on to him by his heel. The water makes the child infallible where the waters touch him but of course this means that his heel is not immersed and it is his weakness or his flaw: his Achilles Heel. Achilles can do nothing about his weakness – it is insurmountable – so although he recognises what it is that brings about his downfall he can do nothing about it.

A Shakespearean Tragic Hero:

Macbeth is a great warrior who is much lauded by his King. He is noble, brave, fearless and ambitious. Under many circumstances these qualities would be desirable and up until the beginning of the play they have served Macbeth well, however once he meets the witches his overriding ambition proves to be his downfall. The witches trick Macbeth and because he is consumed by his desire to be King he fails to see that the witches are controlling and manipulating his behaviour.