THE ART OF TRAGEDY

Daniel Barnes

In this essay, I want to provide an introduction to Aristotle's theory of the Greek Tragedy, which he outlines in his book, the *Poetics*. Many philosophers since Aristotle, including Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin, have analysed tragic art and developed their own theories of how it works and what it is for. What makes Aristotle's theory interesting is that it is as relevant to art today as it was in Ancient Greece because it explains the features of not just tragic art, but of the films and stories that we enjoy today. I will explain the features that Aristotle says make a good tragic play and give examples of them from popular culture. The examples I give will be from tragedy, but also from romance, crime and fantasy to demonstrate how he has outlined, not just the features of Greek Tragedy, but also the internal workings of the drama that we enjoy today. The contemporary relevance of Aristotle's theory is in the fact that the features he outlines are basic features of great stories, which I think is best illustrated by applying Aristotle's analysis to popular Hollywood movies.

One of the strange things about tragedy, as an art-form, is what philosophers have called the paradox of tragedy: this is the fact that tragedies, like Sophocles' *Theban Plays* or *Romeo and Juliet*, are stories about great human suffering and catastrophe, to which audiences respond with emotions such as fear, pity and sadness, which raises the questions of why we intentionally seek out these works and why we enjoy them. After all, if an event in our lives makes us feel incredibly miserable, we go to great lengths to avoid that kind of thing in the future. But in the case of art, whether it is sad songs or tragic love stories that make us

doi:10.1017/S1477175611000017 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2011
Think 28, Vol. 10 (Summer 2011)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000017 Published online by Cambridge University Press

feel negative emotions, we actually want to have these experiences and even pay money for them. I think that once we take a careful look at Aristotle's features of tragic art, we can see why we willingly create this paradox of tragedy.

The foremost thing, for Aristotle, is the plot: it must be a story that the audience can thoroughly engage with because it moves and interests them by representing people in a world they can relate to. A successful film or play or novel will tell a story that the audience can understand as something that might happen to them as individuals. This does not mean the story has to be realistic – it could be fantasy or science fiction – but it means that the main themes have to be ones which ordinary people can relate to. For example, *The Wizard of Oz* is a fantastical story involving wicked witches, magical lands, talking lions and men made of tin, but it is about the importance of family and learning to be content with what one has, which are things we all understand and sometimes we too need to learn the very same lessons Dorothy did.

The plays Aristotle was concerned with are the great Greek Tragedies, such as *The Theban Plays*, which are about the life of Oedipus and his relationships with his family and his struggles as King of Thebes. The Greek audience of the time related to these stories because of their tales of wild love affairs, jealousy, power struggles and dreams of wealth, which are all the kinds of those people had to deal with in their daily lives. These sorts of things are timeless, but Aristotle's point in highlighting their importance in the tragedy was that when these themes are present, under certain other conditions, the drama has the power to move people and to be very successful. In 1959, for example, MGM remade *Ben-Hur*, which tells the story of a Jewish prince struggling to survive under Roman occupation, whose refusal to denounce opponents of the Roman Empire brings an end to a lifelong friendship and leads to his imprisonment and estrangement from his family. This story struck a chord with mid-twentieth century

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000017 Published online by Cambridge University Press

America because of its analogy with McCarthyism, and it moves people everywhere with its human story of love and suffering. *Ben-Hur* was a great success because it – like *The Theban Plays* – tells a story that people are instantly able to relate to, which Aristotle rightly points out is crucial, since a story about things that do not concern its audience will fail to provoke an appropriate emotional response from them and therefore will be an unsuccessful artwork.

However, Aristotle does not say that an interesting story alone can make great drama, for even a story that interests its audience can fail to entertain if it does not have certain other features. The structure of the plot, in the sense that the story must have a beginning, a middle and an end, is also important. The second thing is that, as Aristotle puts it, tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete and whole, meaning that we only need to watch to play to understand it. In the tragedy, there is – or should be – no essential background knowledge, for the play tells us all we need to know. If, for instance, we had to know the whole history of the Montague and Capulet families in order to understand *Romeo and Juliet*, then it would not matter how relevant to our own lives the story may seem because without a whole body of background knowledge we would not be able to understand the story and therefore would not have the emotional response that Shakespeare intended us to. We see this principle in Hollywood films all the time, such as how we do not need to know anything about the history of the Titanic disaster to enjoy and relate to the unfolding romance between Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslett in *Titanic*.

The third thing that governs the structure of the plot is that the play must have a certain 'magnitude'. Philosophers, such as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, have often wondered what beauty is, concluding that one condition for a thing's being beautiful is that it is of a certain magnitude or size and that its various parts must fit together in a certain way. By 'magnitude', Aristotle means that the whole story of the play can be viewed all at once, as the unity of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000017 Published online by Cambridge University Press

an action, since he, like those after him, thinks that a thing cannot be beautiful if it is too large because we cannot take it all in at once and so lose a sense of the whole. So, in the play, the whole story must be recounted within the work's duration, so the audience is not left wanting for further explanation. That we know how Oedipus dies and why Creon denies him funeral rights is essential to the plays, and is explained by Sophocles within the story of *The Theban Plays*, and we need not know anything other than what the plays tell us.

Magnitude is important because it explains why we enjoy certain works of art and not others. Think, for example, about the great crime novels of Agatha Christie, where a murder occurs and Poirot is called to investigate: during his investigations he tells us everything we need to about the victim, the circumstances, the motives and murderer, at the end of which we have enjoyed the story precisely because it presents the unity of an entire action. However, it is worth mentioning that sometimes the absence of this magnitude is also a cause for our praising a work. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* lacks this magnitude because throughout the novel a lot of questions are raised about what happens to the various characters, such as how the main character dies. But this unsolved mystery is why we find the novel so compelling and why it continues to excite readers today. In the *Poetics* Aristotle is concerned with Tragedy, which, as a genre, must have all the features he talks about and we can see many of these features in other kinds of art, such as the crime story, but it is important to remember that Aristotle is not telling us that *all* great works of art must have all these features, for the absence of (some of) them might be what makes a work great in another genre. One of the things I want to demonstrate in this essay, however, is that all of Aristotle's features are present in the standard genre of Hollywood movies, even if they are not tragedies in his sense.

Related to the magnitude of the plot, Aristotle fourthly emphasises the importance of the unity of the plot, which

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000017 Published online by Cambridge University Press

gives us the unity of an action. Homer does not tell us the entire life story of Odysseus, he just selects a part of a story to tell in its entirety, so the audience can go away feeling like they know the whole story of something that happened to a character. We do not know much about Dorothy's life before she went to Oz, nor do we know anything about what happened when she returned, but the story does tell us everything about the time Dorothy Gale discovered the Land of Oz, which is exactly the kind of the unity of the plot Aristotle thinks the great Tragedies should have.

Fifthly, Aristotle notes how the poets of his time, although writing plays about familiar legends, are licensed to embellish the particulars by playing with the ideas of necessity (what must happen) and possibility (what could happen). The historian tells about what did happen, whereas the poet gets to tell about what might have, could have and must have happened. Oedipus becomes King of Thebes, not because he was shrewd and calculated in an attempt to do so, but because he realised the impossible by answering the unanswerable riddle. In the Tragedies, characters do what they can do in order to realise their goals and sometimes they do what they must do.

According to Aristotle, the Tragedy depends upon a number of distinct ways in which the pace of the plot is changed in order to move the story on to its conclusion. One of these is Reversal of the Situation, where the story changes to the opposite direction and also the Recognition, where someone discovers something they did not previously know or when love or hate is produced between two people. In the Theban Tragedy, Reversal of the Situation and Recognition occur simultaneously when the messenger fails to cheer up Oedipus by accidentally revealing who he is. Reversal of the Situation and Recognition are present in some form in great stories, for it is such a change of pace and action that renders the story both varied and compelling. Don Quixote has a moment of Recognition when he sees through the barber's and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000017 Published online by Cambridge University Press

priest's disguises as they cart him off home at the end of Part I, and so too there is a dramatic Reversal of the Situation when he is made sane again at the end of Part II. And when Oliver Twist goes from rags to riches at the end of the novel, Dickens precedes this Reversal of the Situation with Bill Sykes' Recognition that Nancy stands in the way of his controlling Oliver, thus setting Oliver free from Fagan.

Aristotle also notes the importance of the Scene of Suffering as an intricate part of the story because it is what makes us feel for the characters and take an interest in their plight by investing emotionally in the story. When we witness the suffering of a character we care about, we are drawn into the story and compelled to reach the end, always hoping that it will turn out well. The Tragedy must also involve a process of Complication and Unravelling, whereby the first half of the play weaves a mystery or difficulty which the second half then goes on to solve. Tragedy is designed to elicit responses of fear and pity for the characters in the audience, so the Scene of Suffering is essential to achieving this effect, and it is also designed to bring about a resolution to a difficult state of affairs, which usually ends in the protagonist's death, which is the result of Complication and Unravelling.

These features are also seen in genres of story other than Tragedy, such as the moment in *1984* when Winston Smith has his decaying teeth pulled out by O'Brien, where this Scene of Suffering endears us to the protagonist further so that we fully support his desperate bid for freedom. Complication and Unravelling, too, is a basic mode of storytelling with which we are familiar, which is spectacularly demonstrated in *The Merchant of Venice* where a series of difficulties, the loan and the debt, pile up until eventually the plot unravels in the issue of repayment of the debt. This method of pacing the drama is an effective means of ensuring that the audience's attention is gripped at every stage of the story. It was particularly important in the Tragedy, for Aristotle, because the tragic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000017 Published online by Cambridge University Press

plays of his time told stories that people related to and sympathised with, so in the Tragedy they could see their own lives' complications and unravellings on the stage before them.

Finally, Aristotle lists four things the poet should aim at in respect of character: goodness, propriety, trueness to life, and consistency. In order for the story to move us we must believe the characters could exist, we must be able to relate to them, care for them, and think that in every situation we would have acted as they did. To the ancient Greeks, the characters of Oedipus and Antigone would have been perfectly plausible members of the Theban court, which is why Sophocles' accounts of their misfortunes moved people so. Consider a parallel in modern cinema: Humphrey Bogart's character in *Casablanca* is perfectly ordinary and true to life and he is consistent insofar as when Ingrid Bergman appears he does exactly what you'd expect a man like that to do. And in *Gone with the Wind*, Clark Gable's character is the image of manly valour and overall moral goodness. These classic films feature characters that display Aristotle's key features. Specifically, the Tragedies required these character traits because, again, the plays were directed to an audience whose own tragic affairs were similar, if not in the way they actually unfold, but in the kinds of emotions and circumstances they bring about.

Aristotle did write a similar treatment of Comedy, but it has long since been lost, but we can assume that his theory of the Comedy is very different from that of Tragedy. Aristotle thought that all of these features were necessary to make a Tragedy, for if one were to write a Comedy one would not require, for example, characters who were true to life or morally virtuous. Once we have a unified picture of what Aristotle thought made a great Tragic play, we can begin to answer what I called the paradox of tragedy. We have continued to enjoy tragic art, from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Titanic*, because Aristotle's features of plot and character enable us to relate to the story on an emotional or personal

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000017 Published online by Cambridge University Press

level and because the drama is structured in such a way as to be aesthetically compelling or absorbing. Aristotle's *Poetics*, then, deepens our understanding of our fascination with tragic art.

However, what I have tried to also show is that whilst all of these features are required for Tragedy, as Aristotle outlines it, they are – as individual elements of stories – commonly found in the films and novels from genres other than Tragedy that we enjoy today. I have highlighted this to try to give a clear sense of what Aristotle is talking about in respect of Tragedy, but also to try to convey the generality of his theory. One of the interesting things about Aristotle's theory of Tragedy is that it provides the model on which Hollywood continues to make films today. Ever since the invention of film, Hollywood has produced highly successful movies by following the format that Aristotle outlines for Greek Tragedies, without necessarily always producing tragic stories because these features are features of great stories in general. *The Wizard of Oz* is a prime example of a story that generations of people can enjoy because it involves the standard elements of a unity of action, a reversal of situation, scenes of suffering, realistic character traits and a process of complication and unravelling.

To demonstrate how pervasive and successful this formula is, I want to finally offer an example from modern cinema, where the formula of the *Poetics* is employed to great effect in a film which is not a Tragedy in Aristotle's sense, but where all the elements are deployed in the way he advises. Consider Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise.* The plot of displays unity by being the story of a single action, namely of Thelma's act of shooting a rapist, from which the whole drama follows. Here we have a story that the audience can engage with because it is – although not necessarily true – entirely possible. Any woman could honestly envisage a situation where she murders a man who rapes her best friend before her very eyes. First and foremost, then, the story of *Thelma and Louise* is one which is immediately accessible to the audience.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000017 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Secondly, the entire story unfolds within the duration of the film, since everything we need to know about Thelma and about Louise is revealed to us in the course of the story. We learn about their misfortunes with domineering men, their unhappy homelives, their previous actions and their consequences, and about how they feel towards each other as the action unfolds. We, as the audience, find the story beautiful simply because the film has the right magnitude insofar as we can learn all we need to see in one two-hour sitting, and anything that is not revealed therein is not essential knowledge. The unity of the plot, therefore, relies on the fact that we are not told about what happened to Thelma when she was at school, or about how Louise acted on her third birthday, but only about what happened to them both when they went away together one weekend.

Thirdly, although Thelma didn't have to shoot the man to bring an end to Louise's ordeal, it is probable that she might have. That is, things could have happened in another way, but the rule of possibility dictates that the action can happen in whatever way the poet deems possible, if it is going to make the story more compelling. And just as Oedipus necessarily had to die in order for the story of Antigone to take place, Thelma and Louise necessarily had to evade capture for the strength of their friendship to be affirmed and to create the film's sense of justice and friendship. Here Aristotle's basic ideas of possibility and necessity in plot are realised in a story that relies for its force and vivacity on the audience believing (a) that it is possible that things could have happened as they did, and (b) that it is necessary that Thelma and Louise must have acted as they did in order for the purpose of the film to be achieved.

Fourthly, the film begins with a Reversal of the Situation, which is the catalyst for everything else. One moment the rapist is the criminal and Louise is the victim, and then it suddenly switches round to Thelma (and Louise by co-operation) being the criminals and the rapist being the victim. A significant Recognition is that had by Harvey Keitel's cop character, who realises that whilst a murder

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000017 Published online by Cambridge University Press

has been committed it was in self-defence, and therefore tries to convince the fugitives that he can get them a fair trial. And the rape scene itself, when Brad Pitt steals their money and Thelma's story about what happened in Las Vegas are all Scenes of Suffering that secure our emotional involvement with the characters. Moreover, the act of the shooting and the decision to flee from the law are the story's Complication, which continues as they dodge detection, until, that is, the Unravelling taking place as the involvement of Louise's husband fails to alleviate the situation.

Fifthly, and finally, are the features of the characters. Both Thelma and Louise are good people insofar as they are decent people who haven't led immensely privileged lives and have always tried to make an honest living. They are certainly not bad people; indeed, they display the kinds of morals we all have – a sense of justice, loyalty and a desire to do the right thing. Aristotle particularly highlights how characters in the Tragedy act, not out of malice or repellent moral fibre, but out of error and frailty. This is why we are able to relate to Thelma and Louise: they make ordinary mistakes, not because they are bad, but because they make ill-considered decisions, sometimes for the wrong sorts of reasons, but this kind of human error and inability to get things right is something we are all prone to. These errors and frailties are also the core of the story, the things that drive it forwards. Just as Oedipus' bad fortune arises out of his error of sleeping with his mother, and his frailty to face up to this, Thelma's error is committing murder and the bad fortune arises out of the pair's frailty in confessing to their crime.

Thelma and Louise are certainly consistent, in that every time they act they do exactly what we predict they would do, given what we have learned about them in the film. When Brad Pitt steals Louise's money, we are not surprised by this event because we have already ascertained that she is so bored with her married life that she would try to seduce a shifty stranger without considering the consequences. Furthermore, we expect them to exact revenge

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000017 Published online by Cambridge University Press

upon him when the opportunity arises. This consistency of character is essential to our being able to relate our own situations to the characters and their plight.

The result, for the audience, of *Thelma and Louise* is much the same as it was for the audiences of the Greek Tragedies, which is itself a result of the drama having the specific features it does. One the one hand, we learn about the unity of an action and its consequences so that, through empathy with the characters, we can reflect on our own lives, with the result that we perhaps learn something about how to conduct our affairs and how to treat other people. The idea is that the drama forms part of our moral and emotional education, so that the plight of Oedipus taught the Greeks about compassion and the abuse of power, and the plight of Thelma and Louise teaches us about the power and importance of friendship, even to the detriment of the law. On the other hand, we have an exhilarating experience of a great work of art that is structured in such a way that plot and character engage our minds, absorb us in the story so that we derive a distinct kind of aesthetic pleasure from the experience of something that, in real life, would be a horrific sequence of events.

The great films and novels of our day tend to follow the structure Aristotle outlines precisely because the Tragic model achieves exactly these two effects. Next time you read a book that enthrals you or watch a film that moves you, it is worth thinking about how it has parallels with Aristotle's *Poetics*, and you will probably recognise at least some of these features in it. I have tried to explain Aristotle's theory of Tragedy in this way in order to show how it continues to be relevant to art today and how it explains the paradox of tragedy.

Daniel Barnes is a philosophy researcher and art critic based in London. http://danielbarnes.wordpress.com. daniel.j.barnes@gmx.com

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000017 Published online by Cambridge University Press