

# Hamartia



## DEFINITION

What is hamartia? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Hamartia is a literary term that refers to a tragic flaw or error that leads to a character's downfall. In the novel [Frankenstein](#), Victor Frankenstein's arrogant conviction that he can usurp the roles of God and nature in creating life directly leads to ruinous consequences for him, making it an example of hamartia.

Some additional key details about hamartia:

- A character's tragic flaw isn't necessarily a morally reprehensible one. On the contrary, the flaw is sometimes an apparently positive quality, such as trusting others. This is part of what makes hamartia a complex concept, since it links both good *and* bad qualities to tragic outcomes.
- In the case of a tragic error, repercussions are typically disproportionately larger than the error itself. Because of this, some scholars argue that misfortune, or fate, is an important aspect of how hamartia plays a role in the unraveling of events.
- Hamartia derives from the Greek word meaning "to miss the mark" or "to err."

## Hamartia Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce hamartia: hah-mar-tee-ah

## Understanding Hamartia

The concept of hamartia first appears in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the earliest known work of dramatic theory, written in 335 BCE. Aristotle argued that a good tragedy is neither about the downfall of a great man nor the success of a villain, but about the demise of someone who is simply human—neither evil nor a model of virtue—and, in that regard, relatable to the audience. But to be human is to be flawed, Aristotle points out. Therefore, he argues, tragedies should tell the story of someone whose downfall is caused not by greed or vice, but "by some error or frailty." This, according to Aristotle, is hamartia.

Although hamartia can be found in many works that do not align with Aristotle's definition of tragedy, it's important to note that only works that have [tragic heroes](#) (or, protagonists whose actions lead to their own downfall) can be said to contain examples of hamartia. Especially in classical tragedies, [hubris](#) (or excessive self-confidence) is a common trait that exemplifies hamartia.

## Hamartia Can Take the Form of a Positive Quality

It's worth noting that the flaw or error that causes a character's downfall is typically not a morally condemnable one. Rather, it might be a fateful mistake as simple as leaving the window open, or even an apparently positive quality, such as loving too intensely. For instance, in the film *Moulin Rouge!*, the heroine Satine commits so fully to her dream of acting that this passion keeps her quiet about her tuberculosis, the disease which kills her. Artistic passion is usually a quality to admire, but here it steered her fate in a tragic direction.

## Is Hamartia a Tragic Flaw or a Tragic Error?

Even though the word is over two thousand years old, debate about the true meaning of hamartia is alive and well. The main disagreement between scholars today is over whether the term refers to a tragic flaw or a tragic error.

- **A tragic flaw** connotes a quality that is inherent to the character's personality, such as pride or impulsiveness.
- **A tragic error**, on the other hand, has nothing to do with a particular character's personality. Rather, it is a mistake that *anyone* could conceivably make, such as missing the bus or mishearing something.

Some scholars maintain that equating hamartia with "tragic error" is most faithful to Aristotle's original definition, and to the etymological root of the word, which means "missing the mark." Yet Aristotle's mention of "frailty" supports the opposing argument—that hamartia refers to some innate quality of the hero which leads to their demise.

This debate about the nature of hamartia is about as old as literature itself, so there's no easy answer to it. All you need to know is that there are these several slightly different definitions of hamartia, and some people adhere to one over the other.

## Hamartia is a *Tragic* Flaw, Not Just a Flaw

Hamartia is not just the major flaw of a protagonist. Rather, the term can only be used in the context of tragedies, or stories with [tragic heroes](#) (in which the protagonist incites his or her own downfall). Some characters may be deeply flawed, but do not have hamartia if their flaws don't ultimately lead to their downfall. In Bond films, for instance, secret agent James Bond runs around the world breaking rules, destroying things, killing people, and objectifying women. Oftentimes one of Bond's many flaws gets him into trouble, but he always wins in the end, so his flaws are not examples of hamartia.



## EXAMPLES

Examples of hamartia exist in all forms of narrative, from plays to novels to film. Further, it is found in stories from the time of the ancient Greeks to the most modern narratives.

### Hamartia Examples in Literature

Hamartia is used in tragic literature to propel the plot, deepen character, and make thought-provoking stories.

#### Hamartia in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*

In Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex*, written around 429 BCE, the protagonist Oedipus is an archetypal [tragic hero](#): a Greek king, Oedipus has unknowingly killed his father and married his mother, the discovery of which leads his mother/wife to commit suicide and Oedipus to blind himself.

Scholars are divided over what Oedipus' [tragic flaw](#) was.

- Some maintain that Oedipus' tragic flaw is [pride in his intellect](#), since he became King (and married his mother) by solving a riddle that no one else could solve.
- Others assert that Oedipus' fatal flaw is [rashness or anger](#), since he murdered the man who was his father over a small transgression upon encountering him at a crossroads.
- Some argue that his tragic flaw was [hubris](#)—or, his conviction that he could defy the gods and escape the fate that had been prophesied to him by an oracle.
- Still others argue that hamartia was in fact not any flaw in Oedipus' character, but the simple fact of his [ignorance](#) as to his real parents' identities. Note that this final argument identifies Oedipus's hamartia as being a tragic *error* rather than a tragic flaw, and therefore contrasts with the others in that it sees his hamartia as having no bearing on the moral standing of his character.

#### Hamartia in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

In the classic novel *Frankenstein*, the protagonist Dr. Victor Frankenstein succeeds in engineering a new form of intelligent life, usurping the role of God and nature. Dr. Frankenstein's own creation rebels against him, however, after Frankenstein fails in his role as creator by rejecting and abandoning the monster. Hamartia in *Frankenstein* can be interpreted in a few related ways:

- Victor's [hubris](#) at believing himself capable of a godlike act.
- Victor's [overwhelming ambition](#) and urge to make revolutionary contributions to science, which can be considered positive qualities, but ultimately doom him to be a victim of that same ambition.
- Victor's [failure to take responsibility](#) for the monster he created—in other words, his rejection of his own "child."

#### Hamartia in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

In *The Great Gatsby*, the self-made millionaire Jay Gatsby's misguided priorities and dreams drive him toward a violent death. When Gatsby chooses to protect the love of his life, Daisy, after she kills a woman one night in a hit-and-run, it is his devotion to Daisy which leads directly to his own death at the hands of the woman's husband. It can be argued that Gatsby's hamartia consists of several qualities, all of which play a role in guiding Gatsby to his tragic end. Here are some:

- Gatsby's [obsession with wealth and status](#) pushes him to a reckless life of glamor and consumption, rather than a life of substance. His lifestyle of excess is arguably what led him, that fateful night, to be a passenger in a Rolls Royce with a drunk driver at the wheel.
- His [blind love](#) for Daisy—a love that is sincere yet misguided—drives him to try to protect her from the consequences she actually deserves.
- Gatsby exhibits [hubris](#), in believing that he can recapture the past (his love affair with Daisy), which drives the plot of the novel and leads him to his doom.

#### Hamartia Examples in Film

As in literature, hamartia frequently appears in film, working to complicate characters and drive plots.

#### Hamartia in *Moulin Rouge!*

In the 2001 musical *Moulin Rouge!*, several elements lead to the film's tragic ending: the heroine's tragic flaw, a villain, and fate. The film tells the story of a cabaret performer, Satine, whose talent and ambition to succeed as an actress are so all-consuming that she neglects to seek treatment for the illness that eventually kills her: tuberculosis. So the tragic flaw that blinds her and leads to her death is the very thing that made her a great performer: her [intense drive](#), her [desire for fame](#), and her [passion for performance](#).

#### Hamartia in *Beautiful*

In the 2010 Mexican-Spanish film *Beautiful*, the protagonist Uxbal is a layered hero, sympathetic despite some ugly behavior. Uxbal is a criminal; he arranges work in a sweatshop for a large group of undocumented Chinese immigrants. The workers sleep on the floor of a cold warehouse, so the good-hearted Uxbal decides to buy them gas heaters, opting for cheap ones since he has little money. When the heaters malfunction and cause a gas leak, most of the workers die overnight. The fatalities are discovered by the police, leading to a raid on Uxbal's operation and the deportation of one of his vendors, Ekweme. Ekweme's deportation leaves his wife and child destitute, obligating Uxbal to provide for them.

It could be argued that the tragic error was Uxbal's [ignorance](#) about the malfunctioning gas heaters, or that his [frugality](#) when buying the heaters is what leads to the lethal gas leak. It might also be interpreted that it was Uxbal's [concern for others](#), despite his moral

failures, that brought about the tragic turn, in which case the "flaw" is in fact a positive quality. In any case, the repercussions are disproportionately larger than the flaw or error.



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

In literature, drama, and film, hamartia is what creates tragic heroes. Further, it can lead to a critical discovery on the hero's part, and works to create complicated and relatable characters.

### Hamartia Puts the "Tragic" in Tragic Hero

Hamartia is the ingredient that makes tragic heroes tragic. When defining tragedy in *Poetics*, Aristotle claimed that tragedy involves a reversal of fortune—specifically, misfortune brought about not by external causes, but by the [protagonist's](#) own flaw or error. The protagonists in such texts are [tragic heroes](#), and hamartia is the flaw or error that sets into motion the actions or plot developments that ultimately lead to the hero's demise. Without hamartia, Oedipus might not have rashly murdered his father or unknowingly married his mother (and Western literature would be missing one of its most influential texts).

### Hamartia Can Lead to a Major Discovery by the Hero

Hamartia can bring about an important discovery for the story's hero. In tragedies, the term for this type of discovery is anagnorisis, or the shift from ignorance to knowledge. Typically, the revelation is about the hero's true nature or identity, the identity of other characters, or the unsavory reality of the hero's situation. A famous example of anagnorisis is Oedipus' discovery, via a messenger, of the truth about his father and mother, which compels Oedipus to blind himself.

### Hamartia Works to Develop Complex and Sympathetic Characters

As Aristotle argued, people who are either too good or too wicked seldom make compelling or relatable characters. Not only does

hamartia help complicate characters and make them more sympathetic, it also discourages easy judgement of characters, since it's difficult for a reader to condemn someone to whom they relate. This is especially true of cases where hamartia has some positive aspects, such as Victor Frankenstein's hunger for knowledge and scientific achievement.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [Encyclopedia Britannic entry on Hamartia](#): An excellent, concise description of the term, peppered with examples.
- [Wikipedia Page on Hamartia](#): This page has useful discussion of scholars' disagreements on how to pin down the definition of hamartia.
- [UPenn Classic page on Hamartia in Oedipus Rex](#): An examination of Oedipus as a [tragic hero](#), including the role of hamartia in the Greek tragedy.
- [Aristotle's Poetics](#): If you want to go straight to the source, Aristotle's *Poetics* and his discussion of heroes' "error or frailty" can be read on Project Gutenberg.

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### Chicago Manual

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