

Tragic Hero



DEFINITION

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

A tragic hero is a type of character in a tragedy, and is usually the [protagonist](#). Tragic heroes typically have heroic traits that earn them the sympathy of the audience, but also have flaws or make mistakes that ultimately lead to their own downfall. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo is a tragic hero. His reckless passion in love, which makes him a compelling character, also leads directly to the tragedy of his death.

Some additional key details about tragic heroes:

- The idea of the tragic hero was first defined by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle based on his study of Greek drama.
- Despite the term "tragic hero," it's sometimes the case that tragic heroes are not really heroes at all in the typical sense—and in a few cases, [antagonists](#) may even be described as tragic heroes.

Tragic Hero Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce tragic hero: **tra-jik hee-roh**

The Evolution of the Tragic Hero

Tragic heroes are the key ingredient that make tragedies, well, tragic. That said, the idea of the characteristics that make a tragic hero have changed over time.

Aristotle and the Tragic Hero

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle was the first to define a "tragic hero." He believed that a good tragedy must evoke feelings of fear and pity in the audience, since he saw these two emotions as being fundamental to the experience of [catharsis](#) (the process of releasing strong or pent-up emotions through art). As Aristotle puts it, when the tragic hero meets his demise, "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves."

Aristotle strictly defined the characteristics that a tragic hero must have in order to evoke these feelings in an audience. According to Aristotle, a tragic hero must:

- **Be virtuous:** In Aristotle's time, this meant that the character should be a noble. It also meant that the character should be both capable and powerful (i.e. "heroic"), and also feel responsible to the rules of honor and morality that guided Greek culture. These traits make the hero attractive and compelling, and gain the audience's sympathy.

- **Be flawed:** While being heroic, the character must also have a tragic flaw (also called [hamartia](#)) or more generally be subject to human error, and the flaw must lead to the character's downfall. On the one hand, these flaws make the character "relatable," someone with whom the audience can identify. Just as important, the tragic flaw makes the tragedy more powerful because it means that the source of the tragedy is *internal* to the character, not merely some outside force. In the most successful tragedies, the tragic hero's flaw is not just a characteristic they have in addition to their heroic qualities, but one that emerges from their heroic qualities—for instance, a righteous quest for justice or truth that leads to terrible conclusions, or [hubris](#) (the arrogance that often accompanies greatness). In such cases, it is as if the character is fated to destruction by his or her own nature.
- **Suffer a reversal of fortune:** The character should suffer a terrible reversal of fortune, from good to bad. Such a reversal does not merely mean a loss of money or status. It means that the work should end with the character dead or in immense suffering, and to a degree that outweighs what it seems like the character deserved.

To sum up: Aristotle defined a tragic hero rather strictly as a man of noble birth with heroic qualities whose fortunes change due to a tragic flaw or mistake (often emerging from the character's own heroic qualities) that ultimately brings about the tragic hero's terrible, excessive downfall.

The Modern Tragic Hero

Over time, the definition of a tragic hero has relaxed considerably. It can now include

- **Characters of all genders and class backgrounds.** Tragic heroes no longer have to be only nobles, or only men.
- **Characters who don't fit the conventional definition of a hero.** This might mean that a tragic hero could be regular person who lacks typical heroic qualities, or perhaps even a villainous or semi-villainous person.

Nevertheless, the essence of a tragic hero in modern times maintains two key aspects from Aristotle's day:

- The tragic hero must have the sympathy of the audience.
- The tragic hero must, despite their best efforts or intentions, come to ruin because of some tragic flaw in their own character.

Tragic Hero, Antihero, and Byronic Hero

There are two terms that are often confused with tragic hero: antihero and Byronic hero.

- **Antihero:** An antihero is a protagonist who lacks many of the conventional qualities associated with heroes, such as courage, honesty, and integrity, but still has the audience's sympathy. An antihero may do the right thing for the wrong reason. Clint Eastwood's character in the western film, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, is fundamentally selfish. He digs up graves to look for gold and kills anyone who gets in his way, so he's definitely a bad guy. But as an antihero, he's not completely rotten: he also shows a little sympathy for dying soldiers in the bloody war going on around him, and at the end of the film he acts mercifully in choosing not to kill a man who previously tried to kill him. He does a few good things, but only as long as it suits him—so he's a classic antihero.
- **Byronic hero:** A Byronic hero is a variant of the antihero. Named after the characters in the poetry of Lord Byron, the Byronic hero is usually a man who is an intelligent, emotionally sensitive, introspective, and cynical character. While Byronic heroes tend to be very charismatic, they're deeply flawed individuals, who might do things that are generally thought of as socially unacceptable because they are at odds with mainstream society. A Byronic hero has his own set of beliefs and will not yield for anyone. While it might not be initially apparent, deep down, the Byronic hero is also quite selfish.

According to the modern conception of a tragic hero, both an antihero and a Byronic hero could *also* be tragic heroes. But in order for a tragic hero to exist, he or she has to be part of a tragedy with a story that ends in death or ruin. Antiheroes and Byronic heroes can exist in all sorts of different genres, however, not just tragedies. An antihero in an action movie—for instance *Deadpool*, in the first *Deadpool* movie—is not a tragic hero because his story ends generally happily. But you could argue that *Macbeth* is a kind of antihero (or at least an initial hero who over time becomes an antihero), and he is very definitely also a tragic hero.



EXAMPLES

Tragic Heroes in Drama

The tragic hero originated in ancient Greek theater, and can still be seen in contemporary tragedies. Even though the definition has expanded since Aristotle first defined the archetype, the tragic hero's defining characteristics have remained—for example, eliciting sympathy from the audience, and bringing about their own downfall.

Oedipus as Tragic Hero in *Oedipus Rex*

The most common tragic flaw (or *hamartia*) for a tragic hero to have is *hubris*, or excessive pride and self-confidence. Sophocles' tragic play *Oedipus Rex* contains what is perhaps the most well-known example of Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero—and it's also a good example of *hubris*. The play centers around King Oedipus, who seeks

to rid the city he leads of a terrible plague. At the start of the play, Oedipus is told by a prophet that the only way to banish the plague is to punish the man who killed the previous king, Laius. But the same prophet also reports that Oedipus has murdered his own father and married his mother. Oedipus refuses to believe the second half of the prophecy—the part pertaining to him—but nonetheless sets out to find and punish Laius's murderer. Eventually, Oedipus discovers that Laius had been his father, and that he had, in fact, unwittingly killed him years earlier, and that the fateful event had led directly to him marrying his own mother. Consequently, Oedipus learns that he himself is the cause of the plague, and upon realizing all this he gouges his eyes out in misery (his wife/mother also kills herself).

Oedipus has all the important features of a classical tragic hero. Throughout the drama, he tries to do what is right and just, but because of his tragic flaw (*hubris*) he believes he can avoid the fate given to him by the prophet, and as a result he brings about his own downfall.

Willy Loman as Tragic Hero in *Death of a Salesman*

Arthur Miller wrote his play *Death of a Salesman* with the intent of creating a tragedy about a man who was not a noble or powerful man, but rather a regular working person, a salesman.

The protagonist of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman, desperately tries to provide for his family and maintain his pride. Willy has high expectations for himself and for his children. He wants the American Dream, which for him means financial prosperity, happiness, and good social standing. Yet as he ages he finds himself having to struggle to hold onto the traveling salesman job at the company to which he has devoted himself for decades. Meanwhile, the prospects for his sons, Biff and Happy, who seemed in high school to have held such promise, have similarly fizzled. Willy cannot let go of his idea of the American Dream nor his connected belief that he must as an American man be a good provider for his family. Ultimately, this leads him to see himself as more valuable dead than alive, and he commits suicide so his family can get the insurance money.

Willy is a modern tragic hero. He's a good person who means well, but he's also deeply flawed, and his obsession with a certain idea of success, as well as his determination to provide for his family, ultimately lead to his tragic death.

Tragic Heroes in Literature

Tragic heroes appear all over important literary works. With time, Aristotle's strict definition for what makes a tragic hero has changed, but the tragic hero's fundamental ability to elicit sympathy from an audience has remained.

Jay Gatsby as Tragic Hero in *The Great Gatsby*

The protagonist of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, is Jay Gatsby, a young and mysterious millionaire who longs to reunite with a woman whom he loved when he was a young man before leaving to fight in World War I. This woman, Daisy, is married, however, to a man

named Tom Buchanan from a wealthy old money family. Gatsby organizes his entire life around regaining Daisy: he makes himself rich (through dubious means), he rents a house directly across a bay from hers, he throws lavish parties in the hopes that she will come. The two finally meet again and do begin an affair, but the affair ends in disaster—with Gatsby taking responsibility for driving a car that Daisy was in fact driving when she accidentally hit and killed Tom's mistress (named Myrtle), Daisy abandoning Gatsby and returning to Tom, and Gatsby getting killed by Myrtle's husband.

Gatsby's downfall is his unrelenting pursuit of a certain ideal—the American Dream—and a specific woman who he thinks fits within this dream. His blind determination makes him unable to see both that Daisy doesn't fit the ideal and that the ideal itself is unachievable. As a result he endangers himself to protect someone who likely wouldn't do the same in return. Gatsby is not a conventional hero (it's strongly implied that he made his money through gambling and other underworld activities), but for the most part his intentions are noble: he seeks love and self-fulfillment, and he doesn't intend to hurt anyone. So, Gatsby would be a modernized version of Aristotle's tragic hero—he still elicits the audience's sympathy—even if he is a slightly more flawed version of the archetype.

Javert as Tragic Hero in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*

Javert is a police detective, obsessed with law and order, and [Les Misérables](#)' primary antagonist. The novel contains various subplots but for the most part follows a character named Jean Valjean, a good and moral person who cannot escape his past as an ex-convict. (He originally goes to prison for stealing a loaf of bread to help feed his sister's seven children.) After Valjean escapes from prison, he changes his name and ends up leading a moral and prosperous life, becoming well-known for the ways in which he helps the poor.

Javert, known for his absolute respect for authority and the law, spends many years trying to find the escaped convict and return him to prison. After Javert's lifelong pursuit leads him to Valjean, though, Valjean ends up saving Javert's life. Javert, in turn, finds himself unable to arrest the man who showed him such mercy, but also cannot give up his devotion to justice and the law. In despair, he commits suicide. In other words: Javert's strength and righteous morality lead him to his destruction.

While Javert fits the model of a tragic hero in many ways, he's an unconventional tragic hero because he's an [antagonist](#) rather than the protagonist of the novel (Valjean is the protagonist). One might then argue that Javert is a "tragic figure" or "tragic character" rather than a "tragic hero" because he's not actually the "hero" of the novel at all. He's a useful example, though, because he shows just how flexible the idea of a "tragic hero" can be, and how writers play with those ideas to create new sorts of characters.

Additional Examples of Tragic Heroes

- **Macbeth:** In Shakespeare's [Macbeth](#), the main character Macbeth allows his (and his wife's) ambition to push him to murder his king

in order to fulfill a prophecy and become king himself. Macbeth commits his murder early in the play, and from then on his actions become bloodier and bloodier, and he becomes more a villain than a hero. Nonetheless, he ends in death, with his wife also dead, and fully realizing the emptiness of his life. Macbeth is a tragic hero, but the play is interesting in that his fatal flaw or mistake occurs relatively early in the play, and the rest of the play shows his decline into tragedy even as he initially seems to get what he seeks (the throne).

- **Michael Corleone:** The main character of the *Godfather* films, Michael Corleone can be said to experience a tragic arc over the course of the three *Godfather* movies. Ambition and family loyalty push him to take over his mafia family when he had originally been molded by his father to instead "go clean." Michael's devotion to his family then leads him to murder his enemies, kills his betraying brother, and indirectly leads to the deaths of essentially all of his loved ones. He dies, [alone, thinking of his lost loves](#), a tragic antihero.
- **Okonkwo:** In Chinua Achebe's [Things Fall Apart](#), Okonkwo is a man of great strength and will, and these heroic traits make him powerful and wealthy in his tribe. But his devotion to always appearing strong and powerful also lead him to alienate his son, break tribal tradition in a way that leads to his exile from the tribe, and to directly confront white missionaries in a way that ultimately leads him to commit suicide. Okonkwo's devotion to strength and power leads to his own destruction.
- **Anakin Skywalker:** The three prequel *Star Wars* movies (episodes I, II, and III) can be seen as an attempt to frame Anakin Skywalker into a tragic hero. Anakin is both powerful in the force and a prophesied "chosen one," but his ambition and desire for order and control lead him to abandon and kill fellow Jedi, inadvertently kill his own wife, and to join the dark side of the force and become a kind of enforcer for the Emperor. Anakin, as Darth Vader, is [alone and full of such shame and self-hatred](#) that he can see no other option but to continue on his path of evil. This makes him a tragic hero. Having said all that, some would argue that the first three *Star Wars* movies aren't well written or well acted enough to truly make Anakin a tragic hero (does Anakin really ever have the audience's sympathy given his bratty whininess?), but it's clear that he was *meant* to be a tragic hero.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Above all, tragic heroes put the tragedy in tragedies—it is the tragic hero's downfall that emotionally engages the audience or reader and invokes their pity and fear. Writers therefore use tragic heroes for many of the same reasons they write tragedies—to illustrate a moral conundrum with depth, emotion, and complexity.

Besides this, tragic heroes serve many functions in the stories in which they appear. Their tragic flaws make them more relatable to an audience, especially as compared to a more conventional hero, who

might appear too perfect to actually resemble real people or draw an emotional response from the audience. Aristotle believed that by watching a tragic hero's downfall, an audience would become wiser when making choices in their own lives. Furthermore, tragic heroes can illustrate moral ambiguity, since a seemingly desirable trait (such as innocence or ambition) can suddenly become a character's greatest weakness, bringing about grave misfortune or even death.

- A one-minute, animated [explanation](#) of the tragic hero.
- [Is Macbeth a Tragic Hero?](#) This video explains what a tragic hero is, using *Macbeth* as an example .

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page for Tragic Hero](#): A helpful overview that mostly focuses on the history of term.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Tragic Hero](#): A brief and basic definition.
- [Tragic Heroes on YouTube](#):