

# According To Aristotle, What Should Cause The Tragic Hero's Failure?

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Understanding the roots of a tragic hero's downfall has been a central concern of literary theory and philosophy for centuries. Aristotle, one of the most influential thinkers in Western literature and drama, provided a nuanced explanation for what causes the tragic hero's failure. His insights, primarily articulated in his seminal work *Poetics*, continue to shape how we interpret tragedy, heroism, and human flaw. This article explores Aristotle's conception of the tragic hero's failure, examining the qualities and circumstances that lead to downfall, and highlighting the importance of *hamartia*, *peripeteia*, and *anagnorisis* in the tragic structure.

## Aristotle's Definition of the Tragic Hero

Before delving into the causes of failure, it is essential to understand Aristotle's concept of the tragic hero. According to Aristotle, a tragic hero is a noble character with a high status who possesses a tragic flaw that leads to their downfall. This downfall is not due to pure vice or depravity but often results from a combination of inherent human imperfection and external circumstances.

Aristotle emphasizes that the tragic hero's tragedy should evoke pity and fear in the audience, ultimately leading to a *catharsis*—a purging of these emotions. The hero's fall must be proportionate to their virtues and flaws, making their tragedy both believable and meaningful.

# Key Elements Leading to the Hero's Failure

Aristotle identifies several interconnected elements that contribute to the tragic hero's failure. These include hamartia, peripeteia, and anagnorisis. Understanding these concepts is crucial to grasping what causes the hero's downfall.

## Hamartia: The Tragic Flaw

The term hamartia is often translated as “tragic flaw” or “error in judgment.” It is the characteristic or mistake that causes the hero's downfall. Aristotle clarifies that hamartia is not necessarily a moral failing like vice or evil but can be a misjudgment or lack of insight.

Characteristics of Hamartia include:

- Inherent human imperfection—no one is perfect, and even the noblest can make mistakes.
- Often linked to hubris (excessive pride), which leads the hero to overstep boundaries or challenge the gods.
- A decision or action taken in ignorance or misjudgment.

Examples:

- Oedipus's tragic mistake in unknowingly killing his father and marrying his mother.
- Achilles's wrath and stubbornness leading to unnecessary suffering.

Implication: The hamartia causes the hero to make choices that set the tragic chain of events in

motion.

## **Peripeteia: Reversal of Fortune**

Peripeteia refers to the sudden reversal of circumstances, often as a direct result of the hero's hamartia. This shift from fortune to misfortune is central to tragedy.

Features of peripeteia:

- An unexpected change that transforms the hero's situation.
- It often appears as a consequence of the hero's own actions or decisions.
- It heightens the emotional impact on the audience.

Example: In *Oedipus Rex*, the discovery of Oedipus's true identity and the revelation of his crimes constitute peripeteia—a reversal of his hopes and aspirations.

Implication: The peripeteia underscores the tragic nature of the hero's failure, illustrating how their own flaws contribute to their downfall.

## **Anagnorisis: Recognition or Critical Discovery**

Anagnorisis is the moment of critical recognition—when the hero realizes their mistake or the truth about their situation. This insight often occurs after the peripeteia and is a pivotal point in the tragedy.

Characteristics of anagnorisis:

- The hero's awakening to their error or reality.
- It intensifies the emotional effect, often leading to suffering or remorse.
- It can sometimes motivate the hero's ultimate downfall or redemption.

Example: Oedipus's realization of his true parentage and his role in his suffering exemplifies anagnorisis.

Implication: The recognition accentuates the tragic flaw's destructive power, making the hero's failure poignant and unavoidable.

## **What Causes the Tragic Hero's Failure According to Aristotle?**

Combining these elements, Aristotle suggests that the tragic hero's failure arises primarily from a hamartia—a mistake or flaw rooted in human imperfection—that results in peripeteia and is recognized through anagnorisis. However, Aristotle's analysis also emphasizes the complexity of these causes and the importance of context.

### **The Role of Moral and Personal Flaws**

While hamartia can be a moral failing, Aristotle stresses that it often stems from a character's inherent qualities—such as pride, hubris, or impulsiveness—that lead to poor judgment.

Common traits associated with tragic failure:

- Hubris: Excessive pride or disrespect for the gods or moral order.
- Impulsiveness: Acting without proper thought, leading to unintended consequences.
- Stubbornness: Refusing to heed advice or warnings, resulting in disaster.
- Overconfidence: Believing oneself invulnerable, which blinds one to danger.

Implication: These traits are deeply embedded in the hero's personality, making their downfall a consequence of their own character.

## External Factors and Fate

Although Aristotle emphasizes personal flaws, he acknowledges that external factors—such as the will of the gods, fate, or societal circumstances—can also contribute to the hero's failure.

Examples include:

- Prophecies that set the tragic events into motion, as in the case of Oedipus.
- External conflicts or misunderstandings that escalate beyond the hero's control.

Implication: The interplay between internal flaws and external circumstances complicates the cause of failure, making tragedy a reflection of human vulnerability.

## The Intersection of Choice and Circumstance

Aristotle's view suggests that tragedy results from a combination of the hero's choices, inherent flaws, and external forces. The hero's hamartia often involves a tragic mistake—an error in judgment—that they make voluntarily but with limited knowledge.

Key points:

- The hero is neither entirely innocent nor wholly culpable.
- Their downfall is an inevitable consequence of their character and circumstances.
- The tragedy is meaningful because it reflects universal human vulnerability.

# Conclusion: The Cause of the Tragic Hero's Failure

According to Aristotle, the primary cause of a tragic hero's failure is hamartia, a tragic flaw or error in judgment rooted in human imperfection. This flaw leads to peripeteia, a reversal of fortune, which is often recognized in anagnorisis. The tragic downfall is thus a consequence of the hero's own actions or character traits, compounded by external circumstances beyond full control.

Aristotle's nuanced understanding underscores that tragedy is not merely about vice or punishment but about human limitations and the complexity of moral choices. The tragic hero's failure serves as a mirror to human vulnerability, evoking pity and fear, and ultimately providing catharsis—a vital emotional and moral cleansing for the audience.

In essence, Aristotle teaches us that tragic failure is woven into the fabric of human nature itself, making tragedy both an artistic form and a reflection of life's inherent imperfections. Recognizing this helps us appreciate the profound moral and philosophical insights embedded in classic tragedy, emphasizing that our flaws and choices shape our destiny as much as external forces do.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**According to Aristotle, what is the main cause of a tragic hero's failure?**

Aristotle believes that a tragic hero's failure is primarily caused by a tragic flaw or hamartia, such as hubris or excessive pride, which leads to their downfall.

**How does Aristotle define the role of fate versus the tragic flaw in a hero's failure?**

Aristotle posits that while fate may influence events, it is the hero's own tragic flaw that actively causes

their downfall, making their failure a result of their character and choices.

## **What role does hamartia play in the tragic hero's downfall according to Aristotle?**

Hamartia, or tragic flaw, is central to Aristotle's view as it is the personal error or weakness that precipitates the hero's failure, emphasizing the importance of character in tragedy.

## **Can external factors cause the tragic hero's failure according to Aristotle, or is it solely their own fault?**

While external factors may contribute, Aristotle emphasizes that the tragic hero's failure is primarily due to their own hamartia, highlighting personal responsibility in tragedy.

## **Why does Aristotle consider the tragic flaw essential to a proper tragedy?**

Aristotle considers the tragic flaw essential because it provides the moral and psychological depth to the hero's failure, allowing audiences to understand and sympathize with their downfall.

## **Additional Resources**

### **According To Aristotle, What Should Cause The Tragic Hero's Failure?**

In the realm of classical tragedy, few thinkers have had as profound an influence as Aristotle. His seminal work, *Poetics*, remains a cornerstone in understanding the mechanics of tragic drama, especially in relation to the tragic hero's downfall. Central to Aristotle's conception is the idea that a tragic hero's failure is neither random nor solely a matter of external forces; rather, it stems from internal flaws intertwined with fate, circumstance, and moral judgment. This article delves into Aristotle's nuanced perspective on what causes the tragic hero's failure, exploring key concepts such as hamartia, peripeteia, and anagnorisis, and analyzing how these elements coalesce to produce

tragedy.

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## Understanding Aristotle's Concept of the Tragic Hero

Before dissecting what causes the tragic hero's failure, it is essential to grasp Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero itself. According to Aristotle, the tragic hero is a person of noble stature who is neither wholly good nor wholly evil. The hero's downfall results from a hamartia—a tragic flaw or error in judgment—that leads to peripeteia (reversal of fortune) and ultimately evokes catharsis in the audience.

Key Characteristics of the Tragic Hero:

- Noble stature or high social standing
- Possession of a hamartia—a flaw or mistake
- Experience of peripeteia, a sudden reversal of circumstances
- Recognition (anagnorisis) of their mistake or flaw
- Suffering nemesis, or divine retribution, aligning with moral order

Aristotle emphasizes that the tragic hero's downfall is not due to wickedness or moral depravity but rather a combination of virtue and hubris that leads to a tragic misstep.

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## The Role of Hamartia in Causing Failure

At the heart of Aristotle's explanation for the tragic hero's failure is the concept of hamartia, often translated as a tragic flaw or error in judgment. This flaw is not necessarily a moral failing but can be a

mistake arising from ignorance, overconfidence, or a misinterpretation of circumstances.

## **Distinguishing Hamartia from Vice**

While hamartia is frequently associated with moral weakness, Aristotle clarifies that it is more nuanced. For instance, a hero's excessive pride (hubris) may be hamartia—a tragic overreach—rather than simple arrogance. Similarly, a misjudgment born of ignorance, such as Oedipus's failure to see his role in his downfall, exemplifies an error rather than inherent evil.

## **Common Types of Hamartia in Tragedy**

- Overconfidence or Hubris: Excessive pride leads the hero to challenge divine or natural order.  
Example: Oedipus's defiance of prophecy.
- Ignorance: Lack of knowledge about crucial facts results in misguided actions. Example: Oedipus's unawareness of his true parentage.
- Impulsiveness: Acting rashly without fully considering consequences.
- Moral Flaws: Such as greed, jealousy, or stubbornness, which can catalyze downfall.

## **Implications of Hamartia**

Aristotle suggests that the hero's hamartia is often an inherent part of their noble nature—traits that make them admirable but also vulnerable. This duality ensures that the failure is tragic rather than simply deserved punishment.

## How Hamartia Leads to Peripeteia and Anagnorisis

The tragic failure unfolds through a sequence of events: the hero's hamartia precipitates peripeteia, a reversal of fortune, which is often accompanied by anagnorisis, a recognition or insight into the mistake.

### Sequence of Tragedy According to Aristotle

1. Hamartia: The hero commits a mistake or reveals a flaw.
2. Peripeteia: Circumstances reverse, often catastrophically.
3. Anagnorisis: The hero recognizes their mistake or the true nature of their situation.
4. Nemesis: The retribution or punishment aligns with the moral order.

This sequence underscores that the hero's failure is rooted in internal

flaw coupled with external circumstances—an interplay that Aristotle considers essential for a genuine tragedy.

## The Interplay Between Personal Flaw and External Factors

While hamartia is internal, Aristotle acknowledges that external factors—fate, societal pressures, or divine intervention—can influence the outcome. However, these external forces are not the primary causes of failure; rather, they serve to illuminate the hero's internal flaw.

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## The Moral and Philosophical Underpinnings of Failure in Aristotle's View

Aristotle's perspective on tragedy is deeply rooted in his ethical

philosophy, particularly his belief in moral causality and the importance of virtue. The tragic hero's failure is thus seen as a consequence of their own moral shortcomings and the internal conflict between virtue and hubris.

## The Concept of Moral Responsibility

Aristotle emphasizes that the tragic hero is morally responsible for their downfall because their hamartia—though perhaps rooted in ignorance or overconfidence—is ultimately a choice or flaw that leads to their tragic fate. This moral responsibility makes the tragedy meaningful and instructive.

## Fate, Free Will, and Internal Flaw

Although fate plays a role—especially in mythic narratives—the hero's internal flaw determines how they respond to fate's challenges.

Aristotle advocates that tragedy arises when a noble character's error or flaw causes their downfall, highlighting the importance of free will and moral agency.

## Balance of Virtue and Flaw

A key point in Aristotle's theory is that the tragic hero is neither wholly virtuous nor wholly evil. Their hamartia often stems from a virtue carried to excess—such as courage turning into recklessness—which leads to failure. This balance makes the hero's downfall tragic yet relatable.

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## External Forces and Their Role in Causing Failure

While internal flaws are central, Aristotle recognizes that external

forces can exacerbate or trigger a hero's downfall. These include:

- Fate: The predetermined course of events, especially in mythic narratives.
- Divine Will: Gods or supernatural forces intervening in human affairs.
- Societal Structures: Political, social, or familial pressures that influence the hero's decisions.

However, Aristotle's stance is that external forces alone do not cause failure; instead, they interact with hamartia to produce tragedy. For example, Oedipus's downfall is precipitated by his hamartia but also influenced by fate and divine prophecy.

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## Implications for Modern Interpretations of Tragedy

Aristotle's analysis of the causes behind a tragic hero's failure remains influential. Contemporary critics and playwrights often explore the

complex interplay of internal flaws and external circumstances.

Modern tragedy recognizes that failure can stem from systemic issues, psychological flaws, or moral dilemmas—echoing Aristotle’s emphasis on internal hamartia.

In summary:

- The tragic hero’s failure is primarily caused by their internal hamartia—a flaw or error in judgment.
- External forces, such as fate or divine intervention, serve as catalysts rather than primary causes.
- The hero’s internal flaw is rooted in their nobility and moral complexity, making the tragedy not just a downfall but a reflection on human vulnerability.
- Recognizing hamartia and peripeteia fosters catharsis, allowing audiences to confront the tragic aspects of human existence.

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**Conclusion**

In Aristotle's vision, the cause of the tragic hero's failure is intricately tied to internal flaws—hamartia—that lead to a reversal of fortune (peripeteia) and subsequent recognition (anagnorisis). These internal errors, often compounded by external circumstances, underscore the tragic tension between human virtue and hubris. Aristotle's insights continue to influence how we understand tragedy, emphasizing that failure is not merely punitive but a profound reflection of human frailty, moral choice, and the complex nature of fate and free will. The tragic hero's downfall, thus, becomes a mirror to our own vulnerabilities, reminding us that greatness is often accompanied by the potential for error—a core truth at the heart of tragedy.

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