

The Formation And Theoretical Interpretation Of The Category Of The Tragic In Ancient Aesthetics

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Abstract: This article examines the formation and interpretation of the category of the tragic in ancient Greek aesthetic thought. Greek tragedy is recognized as the earliest artistic expression of the tragic. The views of Plato and Aristotle are analyzed and comparatively examined with regard to their approaches to tragedy. Plato considers tragedy primarily as a socio-ethical issue concerning the education of citizens and the state, and therefore rejects literary works that arouse excessive pity and fear. Aristotle, by contrast, defines tragedy as a genre that represents a serious and complete action through human speech and action, emphasizing catharsis as a purifying emotional process and an important pedagogical factor. In classical tragedies such as Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound, and Euripides' Medea, the tragic manifests itself through themes of fate, error, guilt, and inevitable catastrophe. Modern scholars (G. N. Pospelov, A. F. Losev, and others) have further analyzed the role of tragedy within aesthetic and axiological frameworks. The findings demonstrate that in ancient aesthetic thought, the tragic emerged as a fundamental category expressing ontological contradictions between human beings and fate, articulated through various literary forms.

Keywords: Tragic, tragedy, catharsis, Plato, Aristotle, Greek tragedy, ancient aesthetics.

Introduction: The category of the tragic is one of the most ancient, multilayered, and theoretically complex concepts in the history of world aesthetic thought. It does not merely denote a literary phenomenon; rather, it represents a philosophical-aesthetic category through which humanity interprets its relationship with being, finitude, and necessity. In ancient thought, the tragic articulated the confrontation between the human being and the cosmic order (kosmos), the tension between fate (moira) and free will, knowledge and limitation, guilt and responsibility. In this sense, the tragic emerged in ancient Greek intellectual culture at the intersection of aesthetic experience and ontological conflict.

In early Greek civilization, tragedy initially developed within a religious and ritual framework, particularly in the dithyrambic hymns associated with the cult of Dionysus. Over time, it evolved into a dramatic form capable of representing, through staged action, the vulnerability of human beings before cosmic law. Within this transformation, the tragic was not

understood as mere sorrow or misfortune, but as a dialectical tension between necessity and freedom, knowledge and punishment, moral choice and inevitable consequence. The downfall of the tragic hero was never accidental; it resulted either from the violation of cosmic order or from an internal error—hamartia—stemming from ignorance or misjudgment. Consequently, the tragic incorporated ethical and epistemological dimensions alongside its dramatic function.

In ancient aesthetic reflection, the concept of the tragic occupied a central place not only in theatrical practice but also in philosophical discourse. Considerations regarding the nature of tragedy, its structure, and its psychological effect on the audience—particularly the arousal of pity and fear leading to catharsis—contributed to the elevation of the tragic into an independent aesthetic category. From this perspective, tragedy was regarded as the most serious and intellectually demanding artistic form, one in which human beings confront the limits of their existence,

acknowledge their guilt and responsibility, and recognize their conflict with destiny.

METHODS

This study aims to provide a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the formation of the category of the tragic in ancient aesthetic thought. Given that the tragic constitutes a complex category encompassing ontological, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions, the research methodology is designed as multi-layered and integrative. Several interrelated methodological approaches were employed to ensure conceptual depth and analytical coherence.

1. Historical-Typological Analysis

First, the formation and development of the concept of the tragic were examined through a historical-typological approach. This method enabled the tracing of tragedy's evolution from its mythological and religious origins to its full articulation within classical Greek drama and philosophical aesthetics. Particular attention was paid to the transformation of Dionysian ritual performances into a dramatic genre and to the subsequent reinterpretation of the tragic in the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Moreover, this approach facilitated the analysis of how the tragic was ultimately systematized in Aristotle's aesthetic theory. The historical-typological method allowed for the identification of distinct yet interconnected types of the tragic: the cosmic-legal model in Aeschylus, the ethical-epistemological model in Sophocles, and the psychological model in Euripides. By examining both continuity and transformation across these stages, the internal logic of the tragic's evolution in ancient thought was clarified.

2. Comparative-Aesthetic Method

The comparative-aesthetic method played a significant role in the study. Through this approach, different interpretations of the tragic among ancient thinkers were systematically compared. In particular, Plato's critical stance toward tragedy in *The Republic* (Book X) was examined alongside Aristotle's theory of catharsis in the *Poetics*. Furthermore, the dramatic construction of the tragic hero in the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides was comparatively analyzed with regard to concepts such as hamartia (tragic error), moira (fate), moral responsibility, and the tension between free will and necessity. This method made it possible to distinguish the genre-specific, dramatic, and philosophical layers of the tragic and to demonstrate how each playwright reshaped its aesthetic function.

3. Textual and Contextual Analysis

The principal analytical foundation of the study lies in close textual analysis. Selected passages from canonical

ancient tragedies were examined in order to reveal the structure of tragic conflict, the inner contradictions of the hero, and the ethical implications of their choices.

Specifically, the following works were analyzed:

-Prometheus Bound – the problem of cosmic justice and rebellion;

-Oedipus Rex – the tragic consequences of knowledge and self-recognition;

-Medea – the conflict between passion and reason;

-Poetics – the structural principles of tragedy (mimesis, peripeteia, anagnorisis, catharsis).

The texts were consulted in authoritative academic editions and reliable translations. Quotations were interpreted within their broader dramatic and philosophical contexts. This approach allowed the tragic to be examined not only as a theoretical abstraction but also as a concrete artistic process embedded in dramatic structure.

4. Philosophical-Hermeneutic Approach

A philosophical-hermeneutic perspective was employed in order to interpret tragedy as a symbolic representation of the human condition. Rather than treating tragic narratives merely as dramatic events, this approach understands them as ontological models of human existence. Through hermeneutic interpretation, concepts such as hamartia were analyzed not simply as plot devices but as expressions of the limits of human knowledge and existential paradox. For example, Oedipus' process of self-discovery was interpreted as an existential crisis of identity, while Prometheus' punishment was examined as a metaphysical conflict between divine law and human benefaction. This approach deepened the analysis by linking dramatic structure to philosophical meaning.

5. Source Base

The theoretical foundation of the research consists of the following fundamental sources:

Aristotle's *Poetics* – the classical model of tragedy theory;

Plato's *Republic* – philosophical critique of poetry and tragedy;

Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*;

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*;

Euripides' *Medea*.

In addition, modern studies on ancient aesthetics were consulted, particularly the works of A. F. Losev and G. W. F. Hegel, whose interpretations of classical aesthetics provide valuable methodological perspectives for understanding the tragic as both an

aesthetic and philosophical category. Through the integration of these methodological approaches, the study offers a systematic and conceptually grounded account of the tragic as it developed within ancient aesthetic thought.

RESULTS

The genesis of tragedy as a genre is inseparable from ancient Greek religious rituals, particularly the cult of Dionysus. Aristotle himself traces the origin of tragedy to the dithyramb:

“Tragedy developed gradually out of the leaders of the dithyramb.”

[Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449a]

The term *tragōidia* (“goat song”) is associated with sacrificial ritual and choral performance, indicating that tragedy initially possessed a religious and ritualistic character. However, as ritual song gradually transformed into staged dramatic action, the tragic evolved into an aesthetic means of representing the conflict between human beings and cosmic forces.

In the ancient worldview, fate (*moira*) was conceived as a cosmic law superior to human will. Consequently, the earliest form of the tragic emerged in the confrontation between human agency and unavoidable necessity. At this stage, the conflict was not yet individual or psychological but fundamentally ontological in nature. In the tragedies of Aeschylus, the tragic is interpreted in relation to cosmic justice and divine law. In *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus proudly declares that he has granted humanity knowledge and hope:

“I gave them blind hopes.”

[Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 250–252]

Prometheus’ transgression lies in granting humanity fire and knowledge in defiance of Zeus’ authority. His punishment is not merely personal but a consequence of disrupting cosmic order. Here, the tragic manifests as a paradoxical conflict between benefaction and divine law: Prometheus is morally noble, yet guilty within the hierarchy of the cosmos. Thus, in Aeschylus, the tragic is not an ethical error in the conventional sense but a cosmic-legal contradiction. The hero’s suffering restores divine equilibrium; his downfall functions as the reaffirmation of cosmic order. In Sophocles, the tragic is elevated to an ethical and epistemological level. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus insists upon uncovering the truth:

“The truth must be revealed, however terrible.”

[Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, around line 1075]

Oedipus’ catastrophe results not from moral wickedness but from his relentless pursuit of knowledge. Aristotle regards this tragedy as a model of

perfect dramatic construction (*Poetics*, 1453b). Oedipus’ *hamartia* is not deliberate crime but self-ignorance. The moment of *anagnorisis* (recognition) coincides with *peripeteia* (reversal): he recognizes himself as the source of pollution and blinds himself. Here, the tragic acquires ontological and psychological dimensions: the attempt to escape fate paradoxically leads to its fulfillment. Human action, intended to avoid catastrophe, becomes the very means through which destiny is realized.

In the tragedies of Euripides, the tragic shifts from cosmic necessity to inner psychological conflict. In *Medea*, the heroine declares:

“I know the evil that I am about to do, but my passion is stronger than my reason.”

[Euripides, *Medea*, 1078–1080]

These lines represent one of the clearest articulations of psychological tragedy in ancient literature. Medea consciously commits her crime, yet her passion—fueled by betrayal and rage—overcomes rational deliberation. The tragic thus arises not from external fate but from internal division within the self. Euripides deepens tragedy anthropologically, portraying the human psyche as the primary locus of conflict.

Aristotle provides the first systematic theoretical articulation of the tragic in the *Poetics*. He defines tragedy as:

“An imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude... through pity and fear effecting the catharsis of such emotions.”

[*Poetics*, 1449b]

Within this framework, Aristotle identifies the structural elements of tragedy:

mimesis — imitation of action;

hamartia — tragic error;

peripeteia — reversal;

anagnorisis — recognition;

catharsis — emotional purification.

For Aristotle, the tragic does not produce emotional disorder but aesthetic balance. Through the experience of pity and fear, the spectator undergoes catharsis and achieves emotional clarification. Tragedy thus serves not as a threat to reason but as a means of psychological and ethical harmonization.

By contrast, in Book X of *The Republic*, Plato writes:

“Poets nourish and strengthen the inferior part of the soul.”

[Plato, *Republic*, 605b]

Plato regards art as a third-order imitation of reality

and considers tragedy a stimulus to irrational emotion. In his ideal state, works that excessively arouse pity and fear should be excluded because they weaken rational control. Aristotle, however, refutes this position by demonstrating that tragedy performs a constructive psychological function. Thus, within ancient aesthetics, the tragic developed along two opposing theoretical lines: the critical-philosophical rejection of tragedy (Plato) and its systematic aesthetic justification (Aristotle). These divergent interpretations laid the foundation for subsequent philosophical debates concerning the moral and aesthetic value of tragic art.

DISCUSSION

Within the framework of ancient aesthetic thought, the category of the tragic emerged not merely as a dramatic phenomenon but as an aesthetic model articulating the fundamental contradiction between human beings and existence itself. The results of this study demonstrate that the tragic evolved through a coherent and historically structured process in which each stage expanded and deepened its conceptual scope. At its earliest stage, the tragic appeared as a mythological-religious experience. Ritual performances associated with the cult of Dionysus transformed humanity's vulnerability before cosmic forces into a collective dramatic experience. At this stage, the tragic did not yet function as an individualized psychological conflict; rather, it expressed the communal relationship between humankind, nature, and divine powers. Tragedy was still embedded in sacred ritual practice and had not yet become an autonomous aesthetic system.

In the dramaturgy of Aeschylus, the tragic acquires a cosmic-legal dimension. Human guilt is not primarily moral but consists in the violation of divine or cosmic order. In the figure of Prometheus, the paradox between benefaction and divine authority becomes central: ethical nobility conflicts with cosmic hierarchy. The tragic thus functions as a mechanism of cosmic justice, restoring equilibrium through the hero's suffering. At this stage, the tragic possesses a distinctly ontological and cosmological character. In Sophocles, the tragic shifts toward an ethical and epistemological dimension. In *Oedipus Rex*, the central conflict no longer unfolds between humanity and external cosmic forces but within the process of knowledge itself. Oedipus' catastrophe arises not from moral corruption but from his unwavering determination to uncover the truth. The tragic paradox lies in the fact that knowledge does not lead to liberation but to self-destruction. The tragic therefore begins to move from a cosmological contradiction toward an existential problem grounded in self-recognition and human limitation. In Euripides, the tragic becomes increasingly psychological. The

locus of conflict is no longer external fate or ignorance but internal division within the human psyche. In *Medea*, passion overwhelms reason, and tragedy arises from emotional extremity rather than divine decree. The tragic thus acquires anthropological depth: the human soul itself becomes the battlefield of contradiction. This transformation marks a decisive step toward the internalization of tragic conflict.

The logical culmination of this evolution is Aristotle's theoretical systematization in the *Poetics*. Aristotle articulates the structural principles of tragedy—*hamartia*, *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, and *catharsis*—within a coherent aesthetic framework. For the first time, the tragic is elevated to the status of an independent aesthetic category. Through *catharsis*, tragic suffering becomes a process of emotional clarification and purification. Tragedy is thereby transformed from sacred ritual into a philosophical-aesthetic system grounded in rational analysis. Thus, the evolution of the tragic in ancient thought can be summarized as follows:

Mythological-religious experience (Dionysian ritual)

Cosmic-legal tragic (Aeschylus)

Ethical-epistemological tragic (Sophocles)

Psychological tragic (Euripides)

Philosophical systematization (Aristotle)

Through this developmental trajectory, the tragic became an ontological, ethical, and aesthetic category. In antiquity, it functioned as an aesthetic model revealing the limits of human existence and the dialectical tension between freedom and necessity.

This ancient conception profoundly influenced later European aesthetic theory. Hegel interpreted the tragic as a conflict between ethical forces; Nietzsche reconceived it as the dialectic of Apollonian and Dionysian principles; Lukács connected it to historical and social contradictions. The continuity of these interpretations confirms that the ancient theory of the tragic established a foundational paradigm for subsequent aesthetic philosophy.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that the category of the tragic in ancient aesthetics developed from ritual-mythological origins into a fully articulated philosophical-aesthetic concept. Its formation reflects a gradual internalization of conflict: from cosmic confrontation to ethical awareness and finally to psychological depth.

In Aeschylus, the tragic is grounded in cosmic law; in Sophocles, it becomes a problem of knowledge and moral responsibility; in Euripides, it assumes a

psychological dimension rooted in inner contradiction. Aristotle synthesizes these developments into a systematic aesthetic theory, defining tragedy as a structured imitation of serious action culminating in catharsis.

As a result, the tragic in ancient thought emerges as a multidimensional category encompassing ontological necessity, ethical responsibility, and aesthetic experience. It articulates the human condition as one marked by finitude, limitation, and the inevitable tension between freedom and fate.

Therefore, the ancient conception of the tragic constitutes not only the theoretical foundation of tragedy as a literary genre but also one of the essential pillars of global aesthetic thought. Its enduring relevance lies in its capacity to model the fundamental contradictions of human existence in both philosophical and artistic terms.

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