



---

## READING MACBETH THROUGH ARISTOTELIAN POETICS

MS. NAYNA B. JADAV  
(M.A., M.Phil., NET, G-SET, Ph.D.)  
ASST. PROFESSOR

JAFARI ARTS & COMMERCE COLLEGE, SHEKHPUR (GUJ.) -384325

EMAIL: [nainajadav724@gmail.com](mailto:nainajadav724@gmail.com)

---

### ABSTRACT:

The framework for comprehending tragedy as a dramatic genre that arouses sympathy and terror and leads to catharsis, or the audience's emotional cleansing, was laid by Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle listed numerous components, including story, character, language, thought, music, and spectacle. However, the tragic hero's collapse because of hamartia is still a crucial part of the cathartic experience. Despite being written in an Elizabethan setting that is far different from Aristotle's classical framework, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has a strong resonance with the Aristotelian idea of tragedy.

With a focus on the catharsis process, this paper analyzes *Macbeth* from the perspective of Aristotelian poetics. *Macbeth* is the epitome of the tragic hero: a nobleman whose uncontrolled ambition, fueled by outside influences like Lady Macbeth and the witches, ultimately brings him to ruin. While his soliloquies offer close access to the psychological aspects of his hamartia, his journey exemplifies key Aristotelian concepts like peripeteia (reversal of fortune) and anagnorisis (realization of truth).

The present study claims that by fusing fear of unbridled ambition with sympathy for a man trapped by his own desires, the play effectively induces catharsis in viewers. Shakespeare heightens emotional engagement by enhancing this effect with striking images of blood and gloom. In the end, *Macbeth* shows how Shakespeare reinterprets classical ideas to create a tragedy that reaffirms Aristotle's timeless idea of catharsis while spanning time and cultural barriers.

**KEYWORDS:** *Aristotle, Poetics, Shakespeare, Macbeth, Catharsis, Tragic Hero.*

### INTRODUCTION:

Aristotle's *Poetics* has been the primary source for defining the characteristics and purposes of tragedy in literature for a long time. Aristotle defined tragedy as a replica of a severe and comprehensive action that catharizes such feelings by arousing fear and pity. Anagnorisis, or the moment of recognition; peripeteia, or the reversal of fortune; catharsis, or the purging of emotions; and hamartia, or the tragic flaw, are some of the fundamental ideas that form the tragic experience within this framework. Despite not intentionally adhering to the rigid classical unities described in the *Poetics*, Shakespeare, who wrote in the Elizabethan era centuries after Aristotle, frequently echoes Aristotelian ideas in his plays by depicting tragic heroes and their certain demise. Among his greatest tragedies, *Macbeth* is notable for its



portrayal of the psychological anguish of guilt, the devastating force of unbridled ambition, and the difficulties of moral decision-making. The audience is compelled to feel both sympathy for Macbeth's wasted brilliance and fear of the results of human weakness in addition to witnessing the dramatic collapse of a gallant warrior into tyranny and sorrow. In order to demonstrate how Shakespeare reinterprets classical concepts to create a tragedy that cuts beyond time and cultural barriers, this article will analyze *Macbeth* through the lens of Aristotelian poetics, with a focus on the catharsis process.

## ARISTOTLE'S CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY:

Aristotle provides the first systematic definition of tragedy in his *Poetics*, which has influenced literary theory for centuries. According to him, tragedy is "the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude," portrayed in dramatic form as opposed to narrative, and accomplishing the catharsis, or purgation, of such emotions by arousing terror and sympathy. According to Aristotle, tragedy is an art form that involves the audience's mind and emotions and leads them to a deeper moral and psychological awareness rather than just being a kind of amusement. In order to explain the construction of tragedy, he identifies six key elements: plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle. Among these, plot retains the highest place, for Aristotle considers it as the soul of tragedy, the framework through which the fall of the hero and the journey towards catharsis are achieved. Character is the second most significant factor, defining the decisions, actions, and moral traits of the tragic hero, while thought refers to the ideas and arguments embedded in the play. Melody is the melodic or choral aspect of Greek play, spectacle is the stage presentation and visual elements, and diction is the language and style used to tell the story.

Aristotle's philosophy revolves around the concept of the tragic hero, a person who is capable of greatness and has lofty stature but is neither completely good nor completely bad. Such a hero's demise results from *hamartia*, a tragic defect or poor decision that brings about catastrophe, rather than sin or depravity. *Anagnorisis*, the moment of realization or self-discovery, frequently follows this mistake, which causes the hero's *peripeteia*, or reversal of fortune. The spectator is intended to experience catharsis as a result of this downfall, not to take pleasure in the hero's pain, but rather to feel sympathy for his unmerited fate and apprehension that anybody could experience such tragedy. Aristotle thus presents tragedy as an ethical and artistic medium that teaches while it unfolds, leaving its viewers emotionally and ethically cleansed.

## SHAKESPEARE AND ARISTOTELIAN TRADITION:

Shakespeare's plays frequently exhibit remarkable similarities with Aristotelian ideas, despite the fact that they were written during the Elizabethan period, over two millennia after Aristotle developed his theory of tragedy. Shakespeare was not constrained by the unities of time, location, and action that Aristotle had highlighted as characteristics of a well-written narrative, in contrast to the inflexible classical dramatists of ancient Greece. Rather, he gave



himself more latitude, extending the timeframe of events, combining subplots, and enlarging locales to heighten the dramatic impact. However, Shakespeare's tragedies often reflect the spirit of Aristotle's *Poetics* in terms of character development, moral conflict, and the evocation of catharsis. His plays depict noble characters who lose their greatness due to a combination of personal failings and outside forces, and they constantly evoke sympathy and terror in the audience—fulfilling Aristotle's fundamental criterion of tragedy.

Shakespeare's use of the Aristotelian model, albeit deviating from its structural guidelines, is particularly evident in *Macbeth*. The play spans several weeks and several Scottish places, defying the rigorous unity of time, and includes supernatural elements—like the witches—that Aristotle could have considered overly dramatic. However, the Aristotelian concept of tragic causality is consistent with the internal logic of *Macbeth*'s ascent and decline. His demise is not random; rather, it results from his own hamartia, or excessive ambition, which causes a turnabout in events and, eventually, his demise. Anagnorisis, or epiphanies, occurs throughout the play as *Macbeth* realizes the pointlessness of his quest for power and the meaninglessness of existence in general.

Thus, *Macbeth* accomplishes what Aristotle believed to be the ultimate goal of tragedy—the stimulation of fear at the catastrophic effects of human weakness and pity for the hero's wasted potential—despite Shakespeare's imaginative license. Shakespeare reimagines classical concepts within the cultural and dramatic framework of Renaissance England, thereby serving as both an innovator and an heir to the Aristotelian tradition.

### **MACBETH AS A TRAGIC HERO:**

Many of the characteristics that Aristotle attributed to the tragic hero are embodied by the character of *Macbeth*. He is presented as a man of great stature, a valiant general, and a devoted subject of King Duncan. For his bravery in battle, he is named Thane of Glamis and thereafter Thane of Cawdor. Duncan affirms his excellence by praising him as “O valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman!” (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene ii, line 24). Aristotle's requirement that tragedy portray the fall of a noble character is met by this early portrayal of *Macbeth* as a man of honor and loyalty, which establishes the high position from which he must unavoidably fall.

However, *Macbeth* is not perfect; his overzealous desire, which ultimately leads to his downfall, is his hamartia, or tragic fault. Encouraged by Lady *Macbeth*'s taunts and tempted by the witches' predictions, he lets his ambition for kingship triumph over his moral sense. When he confesses, “I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself / And falls on th' other—” (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene vii, lines 25–28). This highlights the core of his terrible weakness: ambition unbridled by reason or conscience.

As the play goes on, *Macbeth*'s flaw causes peripeteia, or the reversal of his fortune, as he becomes a tyrannical ruler consumed by guilt and fear. His later recognition (anagnorisis)



occurs when he realizes the futility of his quest for power and declares life to be “a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (*Macbeth*, Act V, Scene v, lines 26–28). At this point, the audience feels both pity for a man destroyed by his own ambition and fear of the destructive potential of human weakness, thus fulfilling Aristotle’s vision of tragedy.

## ARISTOTELIAN ELEMENTS IN MACBETH:

The oldest and most significant foundation for comprehending tragedy in Western literary tradition is found in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Aristotle defined tragedy as an imitation of a serious, comprehensive, and somewhat large deed that is portrayed in dramatic rather than narrative form and has the power to evoke feelings of terror and sympathy in the audience. He lists six fundamental components of tragedy: plot, character, thinking, diction, melody, and spectacle. Of these, he believes that plot is the most important because it is the essence of tragedy. Though important, the arrangement of happenings always takes precedence over the role of character and thought because the tragic emotions are created through the plot’s development.

Aristotle also explores the idea of the tragic hero within this framework. This character is someone of lofty height and moral worth who is neither completely good nor completely bad. Hamartia, or some sort of error or weakness, is what ultimately brings the hero down, not vice or depravity. The audience feels a profound sensation of catharsis as a result of this defect, which causes a reversal of fortune (peripeteia) and is frequently followed by recognition or realization (anagnorisis). Catharsis, according to Aristotle, is the purging or purifying of the feelings of terror and sympathy, allowing the audience to exit the theater with a restored sense of emotional equilibrium. This emotional process emphasizes tragedy’s ethical and psychological implications in addition to giving it power.

## APPLICATION OF ARISTOTLE’S THEORY TO MACBETH:

Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is often regarded as one of the greatest Aristotelian tragedies. It justifies nearly every requirement listed by Aristotle in his *Poetics*.

1. The Plot: According to Aristotle, the story is the soul of tragedy, and *Macbeth*’s plot is cohesive and comprehensive. Macbeth’s meeting with the witches at the start of the play sows the seeds of ambition. A logical chain of cause and effect governs the main action, which is his ascent to power via regicide and eventual fall from grace. When Macbeth transforms from a renowned warrior to a despot driven by guilt and terror, the play illustrates peripeteia, or reversal of fortune. The sad arc is brought to a serious, somber, and devastating conclusion by the climax and resolution.

2. Character: Macbeth is the perfect example of Aristotle’s tragic hero. He is a man of great character who falls prey to a terrible weakness—his unbridled ambition—rather than being wholly good or wicked. Although he is admirable for his valor and loyalty, his thirst for monarchy drives him to kill Duncan and turn into a despot. Lady Macbeth also exemplifies



Aristotelian character qualities because, despite her own descent into madness and guilt, her persuasive role reveals human vulnerability.

3. Hamartia: His excessive ambition and vulnerability to outside forces like the witches' predictions and Lady Macbeth's taunting are Macbeth's fatal flaws. He commits regicide as a result of this hamartia, which starts the sad series of events that ultimately lead to his demise.

4. Peripeteia and Anagnorisis: When Macbeth's trusted prophesies fail to materialize, he undergoes a glaring reversal (peripeteia). He discovers (anagnorisis) too late that the witches' statements were misleading—they were riddles rather than promises. When Macduff discloses his odd birth and Birnam Wood appears to move, his trust crumbles. His terrible destiny is sealed by these accolades.

5. Catharsis: The drama effectively arouses terror and sympathy, as Aristotle suggests. The spectator fears the repercussions of moral weakness and unbridled power and feels sorry for Macbeth, who is misled by his ambition and duped by others. By the play's end, the audience has undergone catharsis, and the tragic resolution has cleansed their emotions.

6. Diction and Spectacle: Witches, apparitions, and visions are examples of supernatural elements that contribute to the spectacle, which Aristotle saw as a supporting but peripheral component of tragedy. Shakespeare's poetic language, which is full of images of blood, darkness, and the supernatural, intensifies the play's impact and sad mood.

## CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, despite being enhanced and altered by the playwright's own brilliance, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a magnificent representation of Aristotle's theory of tragedy. The drama satisfies all of the fundamental Aristotelian requirements: unity of action, hamartia's role in the downfall of a noble protagonist, arousal of dread and sympathy, and, finally, catharsis. Shakespeare, however, transcends the traditional framework by giving Macbeth more psychological depth, revealing not just his external demise but also his internal suffering, guilt, and moral breakdown. Shakespeare's examination of human psychology combined with Aristotelian framework results in a tragedy that is ageless and universal. The audience faces difficult issues of ambition, power, morality, and fate in addition to experiencing the purging of emotions. Therefore, *Macbeth* not only supports Aristotle's theory but also shows how Shakespeare broadened the definition of tragedy to guarantee its timeless relevance across all eras and cultures.

## WORKS CITED:

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by S. H. Butcher, Penguin Classics, 1996.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason, Arden Shakespeare, Bloomsbury, 2015.



---

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Thomas Marc Parrott, American Book Co., 1904. The Library of Congress

Arden Shakespeare: Scholarly Editions. "Arden Shakespeare," *Wikipedia*, retrieved Aug. 2025. Wikipedia

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Riverhead Books, 1998.

McAlindon, Tom. *Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.