

Aspects of tragedy: Text overview – The Poetry Anthology (Tragedy)

This resource is an explanation of some of the ways this text can be considered in relation to the genre of tragedy. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning in that it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of tragedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

The Poetry Anthology: Tragedy – a series of snapshots of the genre

The Poetry Anthology: Tragedy has been put together to exemplify 'aspects' of the genre. There is no attempt to claim that each individual poem is itself an example of a complete 'tragedy'. However, as a collection, this anthology provides students with a range of aspects which together will give an understanding of the wider genre. In teaching this 'text', schools and colleges must realise that all the poems need to be taught because together they offer a multidimensional vision of tragedy. Students could be asked to write about one named poem, or refer to one or two others in their response, and must therefore study all poems. The question will target an 'aspect' and, therefore, students will need to select wisely to ensure they are making the best use of the 'text'. The key is to select relevant poems in terms of the question that is being asked. Although the anthology contains a number of pre-1900 poems, because it also contains post-1900 poems this 'text' does not count as a pre-1900 text. Therefore for A level, it cannot be studied for examination if the drama choice is *Death of a Salesman*. However, schools and colleges might choose to study some of the poems as an introduction to Aspects of tragedy and in doing so it could also be good preparation for the poetry for the NEA, though schools and colleges are reminded that students cannot use any of the set poetry texts from the examined units in the NEA.

Extracts from *The Prologue to the Monk's Tale* and *The Monk's Tale* – Geoffrey Chaucer

Those who seek to define tragedy, frequently draw on this section of *The Prologue* and *Tale* for a Middle Ages literary definition of the genre – or perhaps

more appropriately Chaucer's or the Monk's. According to Chaucer (or his Monk), it is about men of 'heigh degree' and 'in greet prosperitee' who fall into 'myserye and endeth wrecchedly'. The Monk, at this point in *The Canterbury Tales* is engaged in merry banter with the host and promises to tell the story of the life of St Edward (likely to be Edward the Confessor) after he has told of some tragedies, of which he has a hundred in his cell. Interestingly the Monk then offers his definition of tragedy.

Despite the darkness of the content (men falling into misery, ending their lives wretchedly), the Monk's tone is light-hearted, suggesting perhaps that tragedies should not be taken too seriously – at least not for the pilgrims on the journey. More interestingly still, the Monk highlights the literary form and nature of the genre by saying that usually tragedies are written in prose or verse. The layers of irony here are significant. The Monk, who is Chaucer's fictional creation, is himself outlining what constitutes a tragic narrative. He frequently reminds his audiences that he is a story teller, one who might not always remember the correct historical order of the tragic stories which he is about to tell.

In the extract from the tale, there are brief potted accounts of two heroes from high degree who were brought by Fortune to 'hire adversitee'. In his introduction, the Monk offers a moral instruction to his audience: man should not 'truste on blynd prosperitee'. He speaks generally and didactically of the power of Fortune and the harm she can bring. The purpose, therefore, in citing the stories of the tragic figures is to warn others of what might befall them if they trust fortune. It is interesting that Chaucer chooses to let his rhymes fall on key words related to tragedy: tragedye/no remedye/ adversitee/ prosperitee, clearly suggesting the connection between them and the inevitability of the tragic experience.

The two stories are those of Lucifer and Adam. The stories are recounted in eight lines each and it is clear that the purpose in giving such brief accounts is just to provide examples. There is no emotional attachment from the Monk. The heroes are not characterised beyond Lucifer's being the 'brightest of aungels alle' and Adam's ruling in 'Paradis, saving o tree'. What is perhaps most interesting is that, having established Fortune to be fickle and responsible for the tragic fall of men, for both of these figures, the Monk specifically says that Fortune is not to blame here, but Lucifer's 'sinne' and Adam's 'misgovernaunce'. Their tragic falls are therefore presented as the result of free will.

This extract, then, offers an overview of tragedy from a medieval perspective, but this text can help to ground the aspects of tragedy that are evident in the other poems.

Extract from *Paradise Lost* – John Milton

If Chaucer is dispassionate in his account of Lucifer, the same cannot be said of Milton in his portrayal of Satan in the extract from *Paradise Lost*. Here Milton shows the tragic figure of Satan, in all his fallen glory, after he has been cast out of heaven. In his conversation with Beelzebub, Satan is reflecting on his situation now in the depths of hell. There is certainly sadness in the tragic realisation of his loss. However, there is ambivalence in Milton's creation of the character. Satan is portrayed as an over-reacher whose pride and arrogance are central to his fall. It is possible that readers will feel contempt for his arrogance, as he claims that his 'reason' is equal to God's and that God is only a victor because 'force hath made [him] supream/ Above his equals'. Yet, as Blake observed, Milton was of the devil's party without knowing it, because he felt that Milton unconsciously encourages readers to sympathise with Satan as a tragic hero. There is something noble about Satan as he courageously wants to take up 'once more with rallied Arms' against God. His defiance, as he justifies his position in Hell to Beelzebub, also contains elements of tragic grandeur:

"Here we may reign secure, and in my choice

To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:

Better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heav'n."

The repetition of the word 'reign' is significant. What this extract does is show an insight into a character – Satan – who is both tragic villain and tragic hero.

Tithonus – Alfred Tennyson

In this rather unusual narrative, where the speaker is eternally experiencing the consequences of his tragic actions, Tennyson focuses specifically on Tithonus' suffering in the narrative present. Other aspects of tragedy (the tragic hero's pride and arrogance) are present in his backstory. The young Tithonus seemed 'To his great heart none other than a God!' when he asked the gods to grant him immortality. In his thoughtless enthusiasm he forgot to ask for everlasting youth. Therein lies his tragedy. Tithonus, an ever-aging figure, is locked into eternal life. His lover Eos, the goddess of dawn, can forever renew her youth and beauty and his shame at the contrast in their situations makes him long again to be mortal and have the power to die.

The poem's story is a fragment of a larger story which Tennyson took from Greek mythology; presumably he chose this section because he saw the potential in writing about the consequences of man's greed, his desire to become a god, to be more than he is. At the heart of the story is the tragic concept of life in death and the terrible realisation that Tithonus is responsible for his tragic fall. He wonders now "Why should a man desire in any way/To vary from the kindly race of men". There is some suggestion too that he is a victim of the gods who grant

him immortality and will not revoke their gift: his request for immortality was granted “with a smile,/ Like wealthy men who care not how they give”, suggesting the gods were more knowing than Tithonus. He is also a victim of time, whose “strong Hours indignant work’d their wills”, beating him down, marring and wasting him, leaving him maimed “To dwell in presence of immortal youth”.

Interestingly in the Greek story, the gods take pity on Tithonus and turn him into a cricket without the scourge of everlasting life, but Tennyson chooses not to engage with this part of the story and leaves his Tithonus locked in tragic misery, begging to be released and restored to the earth.

Although Tithonus as the narrator focuses on his own tragic plight, embedded in the tale is the sense that Eos is also a victim. It is clear that she loved Tithonus in the time that is past and continues to grieve now. Listening to his sad reflections her “eyes... fill with tears”, and as he tells of their passionate love, the sense of loss is heightened for both of them as her glow crimson while he is forever cold and wrinkled. The overriding feeling in the poem is sadness, set up in the haunting opening where the woods decay and fall and the swan dies after many a summer while Tithonus alone is consumed by “cruel immortality”. The ending is also bleak. He longs to be restored to the ground, desiring to forget the “empty courts” of his lover, but always sad by what has passed and his inability to relive the past with the body of his youth.

Jessie Cameron – Christina Rossetti

Jessie Cameron’s death by drowning is an aspect of tragedy, not least of all because she is young and spirited (“A mirthful maiden she and young”) and her death is untimely. Her end is marked by “sobs and screams” and by a bereft mother who will never see her daughter again. However, Rossetti also suggests through Jessie’s story that rather than Jessie simply being a victim of a horrible accident she is more a victim of the male dominated world in which she lives. She is shown to be trapped by the persistent advances of her neighbour’s son who will not accept that she does not want to marry him.

It could be said that Jessie’s death is her punishment for challenging the unspoken laws of her society (a society that may well represent Rossetti’s own 19th century society), for being alone with a man at the sea shore. Her death could also be her punishment for having a voice that tells her male suitor that she is not for him (“Good luck go with you, neighbour’s son,/But I’m no mate for you”). Rossetti bestows upon Jessie the tragic aspect of pride – pride which is in “her tongue” and her “lifted head” and she has an “angry eye”, suggesting perhaps that Jessie is in some way responsible for her own death.

But she is also heroic in her defiance, uninhibited by men of any social class (outspoken to both earl and churl). Rossetti seems to value Jessie’s voice as she

asserts her right not to be bullied into a marriage alliance. Jessie has other plans than to marry her neighbour's son and claims that he would be better advised to marry Madge or Cis or Kate, because he is 'not good for' her. In this respect, then, Jessie is a tragic victim.

Jessie's suitor, though in part himself a tragic victim of love (he is also drowned), is ambivalently presented. His pursuit of Jessie is unnerving. He is an outsider ("Some say that he had gypsy blood" – a negative characteristic by 19th century standards) and his grandmother was claimed to be a "black witch from beyond the Nile". He is also scheming ("in his heart was guile") which certainly increases sympathy for Jessie. There is also a suggestion that he may have murdered Jessie, by hindering her escape from the tide which "hemmed them round".

In Jessie's tragic story, there is also a sense that fate and nature are against her: the sea keeps "moaning, moaning nigher" and the oncoming tide is relentless, signalling perhaps the inevitability of her death.

The Death of Cuchulain – W B Yeats

Although written at the end of the 19th century, the tragic elements in this poem are more akin to those of 17th century tragic drama than other modern texts.

Yeats' poem tells of the antique tragic story of Cuchulain, a mighty warrior who unknowingly kills his son, and then gives up his life to the sea. At the heart of the poem is the idea that wisdom and knowledge go hand in hand with disillusionment and misery. Cuchulain's world, while glorious and attractive on one level, is also malevolent and mysterious. Yeats suggests that Cuchulain is ultimately in the grip of the mystical world that destroys him. Cuchulain's tragedy can be seen in classical terms. He has status and is respected as a warrior: "Not any god alive ...has slain so mighty armies ... nor won the gold that now Cuchulain brings". He is strong and successful both materially and romantically (his sweet-throated lover is more attractive than the bitter wife he has abandoned) and he is capable of compassion and sympathy. But Cuchulain is guilty of pride and anger and his flaws, including perhaps the abandoning of his wife and son, lead to his downfall.

Finmole is a tragic victim of his parents' enmity. He is summoned by his mother to fight his father ("There is a man to die/You have the heaviest arm under the sky") and he is then defeated by that father who breaks his shield and pierces him with his sword. Finmole is an innocent, one who sings sweetly and lives a natural existence (he strays through the woods, driving his deer). He is caught up in the "dooms of men" which are in "God's hidden hoard". Emer can also be regarded as a tragic victim, yet her status is less clear cut. She is a disappointed wife, whose husband has deserted her world of comfort for a strange world of ideals. She is clearly hard working, but she is also vengeful. She beats the

messenger who brings her news of her husband's new lover and then sends her son to his doom.

The tragic centre of the poem is Cuchulain's realisation that the young man who challenges him and whom he slays is "Finmole, mighty Cuchulain's son". Yeats secures Cuchulain's tragic status through the consequences of that realisation. Cuchulain broods and despairs. His fellow Druids read this as dangerous and "cast on him delusions magical". The result is that Cuchulain wars for four days with the bitter tide "and the waves" flow "above him" as he dies.

The Convergence of the Twain – Thomas Hardy

This poem is an unusual take on tragedy; for though the real historic event – the sinking of the Titanic – on which the poem is based, is unquestionably tragic, Hardy's writing about it is very impersonal and detached and there is a conspicuous lack of feeling. The poem was written on 24 April 1912 and was published in a souvenir programme of the Matinee in aid of the *Titanic Disaster Fund* given at Covent Garden, London, on 14 May 1912. Although the fund was to support the human survivors of the disaster, Hardy chooses not to focus on the human tragedy – the loss of over 1500 lives. Instead he focuses on the backstory of the disaster and sees the tragic circumstances in terms of the "Spinner of the Years" who authorises the collision of the fatal iceberg and the luxury liner.

Thus the key tragic aspects of Hardy's poem are fate and inevitability. In there being no "mortal eye" who could see what was to happen, there is a clear sense that "the intimate welding" of the later history of the smart ship and the iceberg, was being planned by the "Immanent Will".

Although Hardy writes dispassionately in terms of the disaster, he shares with the many who later criticised the opulence of the ship, a sense of outrage at the vanity that led to the ship's creation – he calls the ship the "Pride of Life", speaks disparagingly of the jewels in the design which were to "ravish the sensuous mind" and dismisses the sunken ship as "this vaingloriousness". In that these characteristics might well be found in a tragic hero, like Lear, Hardy is clearly suggesting that humankind with its ambition and arrogance is itself tragically flawed and self-destructive.

Another aspect of tragedy that is present in this poem is the wry humour which throws into relief the tragic downfall of the ship. Hardy uses the voices of "moon-eyed fishes" to comment on the sunken ship; they ask "What does this vaingloriousness down here?" and while the fish ask the questions, the sea-worm crawls over the opulent mirrors "slimed, dumb, indifferent". In blending tragedy with humour, Hardy offers an interesting perspective on an event which shook the belief of those who believed that the ship was unsinkable.

'Out, out -' Robert Frost

The title of Frost's poem connects the story directly with *Macbeth* and therefore with the tragic genre. The child who dies is a brief candle which is snuffed out. Frost does not tell of a noble character here in the way Chaucer does, but rather of one who is seemingly insignificant (he is unnamed), one who has more in common with Willy Loman – though even Willie is mourned at his passing. The child's death in Frost's poem is simply recorded and then the world moves on.

The circumstances of the tragedy are simple: a young boy dies as a result of an industrial accident. At the end of the day, having used a buzz-saw to cut wood, the boy, distracted by his sister's call to supper, loses concentration and the saw leaps at the boy's hand. The boy is clearly terrified and it seems suffers a heart attack. In the same way that Hardy writes with detachment, Frost also shows no overt sympathy.

The saw – a symbol perhaps of industrialism – is the obvious villain in this story. It is personified from the start and its vicious animalism is highlighted as it leaps at the boy's hand sensing a ready meal. However, the human characters who show no emotion are possibly worse. Frost implicitly criticises the society that engages in the child labour market and lets a boy work long hours when it might have given him the half hour that would have spared his life. Those who go back to their daily round at the end of the poem are perhaps also condemned in the understatement, though it is also possible that Frost is simply showing that life must and does go on.

Miss Gee – W. H Auden

The fate of Miss Gee is not unlike that of the boy in Frost's poem in that her death is unmourned. In both stories, doctors, who ought to be caring, are detached, though here they mock Miss Gee's tragic end when she is cruelly struck by cancer.

A key tragic aspect of her story is loneliness. Miss Gee is a spinster somewhat remote from society and at odds with her own sexuality. She is a victim of an uncaring world and of an oppressive religious system that makes her feel she is a sinner because of her unconscious desires. Only in her dreams can she find some escape when she becomes the Queen of France and when the Vicar of St Aloysius asks her majesty to dance. But such dreams result in Miss Gee's guilt – exemplified when her dreams turn to nightmare and when she prays in the church side-aisle not to be led into temptation.

Despite the comic tone, the poem is actually set to the blues tune of St James's Infirmary, perhaps showing Auden's ambivalence towards his protagonist. Although the medical world is unsympathetic, seeing the cancer as an outlet for Miss Gee's foiled creative fire (the disease of childless women), she clearly is a

tragic victim. The obvious villain is cancer described as a hidden assassin waiting to strike its unsuspecting victim.

Miss Gee is also a victim of the clinical modern world which sheds no tears for her death. Significantly, the moment of her death is not even recorded in the poem. The focus instead is placed on those who are engaged in medical research: in the Department of Anatomy the Oxford Groupers dissect her knee. In presenting Miss Gee's story in this way Auden, like Frost, is offering a modern dimension to the concept of tragedy.

Death in Leamington – John Betjeman

Betjeman's twentieth century poem offers a similar insight into tragedy. Like Auden, Betjeman focuses on the death of an old woman. This death, however, is more private than public as the woman dies alone at home and her death is unnoticed. Betjeman's concern is the tragedy of old age. Even though a nurse comes to attend the old lady, the nurse is so caught up in her own world that she initially fails to realise the old woman is actually dead. There is surely a deep sense of sadness in the fact that the nurse goes about her daily round with her false cheeriness. Yet while it might be easy to criticise the nurse for her obliviousness, the tragedy of the story extends to the nurse whom Betjeman is careful to point out is herself half dead and half alive.

Although no tears spill at the old woman's death, the narrator describes it somewhat elegiacally. She dies in her upstairs bedroom and the reference to the evening star suggests that nature might honour her passing even if human beings do not. The Leamington evening at least seems respectful.

Yet there is a tragic finality in the old woman's death. Like her decaying Victorian house, she has declined in an unnoticed way and passed out of life. The nurse's closing of the window and unrolling of the blind are symbolically significant yet ironic in that at the point of the nurse's actions, the death has not been discovered.

A key tragic aspect of this poem is that the modern world seems to be in a pre-dead state. Nothing seems to have value. The nurse who ought to be a carer is mechanical in her duties and when she does see the grey face before her she simply moves the table of bottles, tiptoes to the stairs and turns down the gas in the hall. There are no positives that emerge in this poem. The tragic vision that Betjeman presents is bleak.