Dr Monika Smialkowska, Northumbria University
(monika.smialkowska@northumbria.ac.uk)

# Tragedy

Identity

Tragedy tears us apart, it shatters our sense of ourselves and the world.
>Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 5th edn (2016), p. 118

Revealing secrets

Tragedy [...] openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue [...] [It] teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded.
>Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), ed. Geoffrey Shepherd, p. 98

Tragedy makes the unconscious public.
>Bennett and Royle, p. 119

Tragic inevitability and justice

[T]he downfall or death of the central character should be felt by the spectator or reader to be both inevitable and 'right' but at the same time in some sense unjustifiable and unacceptable.
>Bennett and Royle, pp. 119-123

The individual and society

[W]hat is misrecognised as a flaw of 'character' [*hamartia*, tragic flaw] is, in fact, a projection of something which has its roots, not in the inner psychological life of the protagonist, but in the larger domain of culture, and even in communal fear or desire.
>John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler, 'Introduction', in *Tragedy*, eds. Drakakis and Liebler (1998), p. 8

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## James Sherwood Westmacott, *Chryseis* (1867)

Context: the Trojan War and its aftermath.
Relevant literary works: Homer, *Iliad*; Euripides, *The Trojan Women*; Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*; Euripides, *Hecuba*; Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*

Key events
Paris (a Trojan prince) seduces and brings to Troy Helen, the wife of a Greek ruler Menelaus. The Greeks go to war against Troy. As they besiege the city, they take some prisoners, among them two beautiful women: Chryseis (the daughter of Chrysos, the priest of Apollo) and Briseis. The leader of the Greek army Agamemnon (Menelaus' brother) takes Chryseis, and the Greek hero Achilles takes Briseis. Chrysos offers ransom for his daughter, and when he is refused, he gets Apollo to send a plague on the Greeks. The Greeks persuade Agamemnon to

give back Chryseis, but he takes Briseis from Achilles as a compensation. Achilles is furious
and refuses to fight in the war, which leads to serious losses for the Greeks.
Start at the point where Agamemnon, son of Atreus,
that king of men, quarrelled with noble Achilles.
Which of the gods incited these two men to fight?

That god was Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto.
Angry with Agamemnon, he cast plague down
onto the troops—a deadly infectious evil.
For Agamemnon had dishonoured the god's priest,
Chryses, who'd come to the ships to find his daughter,
Chryseis, bringing with him a huge ransom.

Homer, *Iliad*, Book I, trans. Ian Johnston, http://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/homer/iliad_title.html
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### Evelyn De Morgan, *Medea* (1889)

Context: Greek myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece
Relevant literary works: Euripides, *Medea*; Seneca, *Medea*; William Morris, *The Life and Death of Jason*

Synopsis
Jason is the rightful heir to the throne of Iolcus, which had been usurped by King Pelias. Pelias
promises that he would return the throne if Jason brings him the Golden Fleece, which
belongs to King Aeëtes, in far-away Colchis (today Georgia), and is guarded by powerful
magic. Jason and a group of the followers (the Argonauts) go to Colchis on the ship called
Argo. Aeëtes' daughter Medea (a powerful sorceress) falls in love with Jason and helps him to
defeat the magical creatures. She helps Jason to escape with the Golden Fleece, betraying
her father and killing her brother in the process. She also uses trickery to get Pelias killed. She
lives with Jason in Corinth and they have two children. However, Jason abandons her for
Glauce, the King of Corinth's daughter. Enraged Medea gives the bride a garment soaked in a
potion that makes it burst into flames when Glauce puts it on, killing her. Medea also kills her
own and Jason's children and escapes from Corinth.

In his [Jason's] false heart fair Glauce's loveliness
Seemed that which he had loved his whole life long,
And little did he feel his old love's wrong.
[…]
Long time she [Medea] tried to shut her eyes to this,
Striving to save that fair abode of bliss;
But so it might not be; and day by day
She saw the happy time fade fast away;
And as she fell from out that happiness,
Again she grew to be the sorceress,
Worker of fearful things, as once she was […].

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William Morris, *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), pp. 322-324

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**William Maw Egley,** *The Lady of Shalott* (1858);
**John William Waterhouse,** *Study* for *The Lady of Shalott Looking at Lancelot* (1894)

Context: the Arthurian legend of the Lady of Shalott
Relevant literary works: thirteenth-century Italian romance *Donna di Scalotta*; Alfred
Tennyson, 'The Lady of Shalott'

Synopsis
The Lady of Shalott lives alone in a castle on an island near Camelot. She is under an
unspecified curse – something horrible will happen if she looks directly at Camelot. She
spends her days weaving on her enchanted loom and seeing the world in her enchanted
mirror. One day she sees Lancelot's reflection in the mirror. She turns away from the loom
and looks at Camelot. The mirror cracks and the curse takes effect.

**Exercise**

Read the extract from Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott', describing the events leading to and
immediately following her looking at Camelot. Look at the two paintings depicting that scene.
Once you have the gist of the poem and an overall impression of the pictures, complete the
following tasks:

1. Find a detail in the poem that relates to any feature of tragedy.
2. Find a detail in the painting(s) that relates to that feature.
3. What are the similarities and differences in the poet's and the painter's treatment of
   the feature of tragedy that you have identified?
4. What do you think the curse on the Lady of Shalott was?
5. What do you think will happen to the Lady of Shalott after the curse has taken effect?
   Come up with a plausible tragic ending.