

Conventions of Greek tragedy

- The tragic genre is perhaps the oldest genre in literature, dating back to the ancient Greeks. Interestingly, tragedy evolved out of ancient Greek celebrations of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility. A great deal of ink has been spilled over why the god of life would be celebrated with tragedy. Aristotle claimed that tragedy elicits a certain kind of "pleasure" from the audience, an interesting issue we will have to discuss.
- Tragedy held a central role in the political, social and religious life of the ancient Greeks. Tragic plays, particularly in the 5th century BC, were held in Olympiad performances annually and were mandatory.
- Unlike today's theatre, Greek drama was performed as part of a non-commercial, public, religious celebration. In Athens, state-sponsored dramatic performances appeared twice annually at festivals in connection with the worship of the god Dionysus, the god of wine and the harvest.
- Performance conventions in the Greek theatre included the wearing of masks by the actors, who typically presented more than one role. The masks were large and painted to represent the general character of the person being portrayed. By around 300 BCE, a knowledgeable audience member might recognize as many as 28 separate masks. It is possible, as well, that the masks were designed to serve as megaphones, making the voices of the actors more audible to persons at considerable distances from the stage.
- There were two conventions to Greek tragedy on stage with regards to violence: that the audience must never witness any act or occurrence that impinged on a human or animal body so as to be the proximate cause of a death, and that in tragedy, the audience must not witness any person inflicting a blow on any other person. The first convention was based on religious considerations, and was unbreakable; the second was based on artistic considerations (or perhaps just on generic tradition).
- There are certain resemblances between the greatest of Shakespeare's tragedies and the greatest Greek tragedies. There is, in a few of Shakespeare's plays, for example King Lear, a unity of theme. Then the language of Shakespeare's loftiest tragic vein has many turns of thought and metaphor which are surprisingly like the Greek. Then, too, both theatres are intellectual. Every idea is articulated into words. If a person has a pain or sees someone coming he says: "I have a pain," "I see someone coming." The thoughts and purpose of the characters are thus metaphysically presented, and are often expounded with a rhetorical power which the stage functions of the characters do not suggest.