

Student Name: _____

Tragedy

Vocabulary

comprehension - n - understanding
divine - adj - heavenly
authority - n - power
ornate - adj - highly decorated
seer - n - a person who predicts the future
scenery - n - backdrop

Reading

The most famous Greek dramas are tragedies, plays in which a hero tries, but fails, to overcome a problem. There are several features that are characteristic of most Greek tragedies. Tragedies have a conflict, a struggle between two opposing forces. The struggle may be between two persons, a person and society, or a person and him/herself. The hero of the play is sometimes referred to as the protagonist. The person who stands in his or her way is the antagonist. The antagonist is not necessarily a bad person, just one who opposes the hero.

It is not always easy to identify the protagonist, but that does not affect the audience's comprehension of the play. In fact, it can make the story more interesting if there is no obvious "bad guy." What is more important is how the characters behave under times of great stress, not necessarily who is right or wrong.

In Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, it is not clear whether the hero is Antigone, a young teenager who risks her life to honor her dead brother, or her uncle, Creon, the powerful king she defies. The two characters are caught up in a struggle that has no simple solution. Antigone believes that honoring family is most important. Creon believes that enforcing the law and setting a good example for everyone else is most important. Antigone declares that she is obeying divine law, doing what the gods want. Creon argues that he has a responsibility to protect the entire community, and to do so he must enforce the law. Which one is right? There is no obvious answer. *Antigone* is such a powerful play that 2500 years later people still have strong opinions about it, just as they probably did when it was first performed.

Tragedy showed ordinary people doing extraordinary things. When a person, particularly one with little or no power such as Antigone, challenged authority to defend her beliefs, the audience rooted for her. At the same time the audience was aware of the dangers faced by the hero and felt pity and fear. The hero was sometimes reckless and often pushed the limits of what was acceptable. This was exciting for the audience; they were watching someone who did what they might not be brave or bold enough to do. Even though plays were based on familiar stories, and everyone knew the ending, the audience could not stop watching. Why? The hero was human just like them. When the play ended the audience felt a sense of relief. In different circumstances what had happened to the hero might have happened to them. Tragedy made people think about what was important to them, to society, and why people behaved as they did.

Greek drama depended a lot on imagination. There were only two or three male actors. They had to play all of the parts, male and female. The actors changed costumes and switched roles in a tent called the skene. To make it easier for the audience to identify the characters, actors wore brilliant, ornate costumes and large masks with exaggerated features. By putting on a mask an actor could become anyone, a king returning from the Trojan war, a teenaged girl, or a blind seer. The masks were probably made of a lightweight material such as cork so that they would not be too heavy for the actors. They were brightly painted so they could be seen from a distance. Actors wore platforms on their feet to make them taller and more impressive.

Actors spent years learning to project their voices. Theaters were large and performers had to have powerful voices to be heard by everyone. The theater in Athens where the Great Dionysia took place held 15,000 people.

Greek theaters had no scenery. The audience had to draw on its imagination to visualize the setting, but it was made easier by the fact that most plays took place during a single day and within a small area. The language of the playwrights was so clear and so powerful that the audience understood where the actors were, and what they were doing. The Chorus, 15 actors who spoke as a group, and the Chorus Leader also helped people to understand the play by speaking to the characters, questioning their behavior and motives, and commenting on events.