

GREEK THEATER TERMS

Compiled by Michael J. Cummings

Study the following vocabulary terms. There will be a matching quiz sometime during the Greek Tragedy Unit.

Anagnorisis - Startling discovery; moment of epiphany; time of revelation when a character discovers his true identity. Anagnorisis occurs in *Oedipus Rex* when Oedipus realizes who he is.

Antagonist - Chief opponent of the protagonist in a Greek play.

Attica - Peninsula in southeastern Greece that included Athens. According to legend, the King of Athens, Theseus, unified 12 states in Attica into a single state dominated by Athenian leadership and the Athenian dialect of the Greek language. The adjective Attic has long been associated with the culture, language and art of Athens. The great period of Greek drama, between the Sixth and Fourth Centuries, B.C., is known as the Attic Period. Drama itself was invented by an Attic actor, Thespis, who introduced speaking parts to accompany choral odes.

Catharsis - In literature and art, a purification of emotions. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) used the term to describe the effect on the audience of a tragedy acted out on a theater stage. This effect consists in cleansing the audience of disturbing emotions, such as fear and pity, thereby releasing tension. This purgation occurs as a result of either of the following reactions: (1) Audience members resolve to avoid conflicts of the main character—for example, Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex* and Creon in *Antigone*—that arouse fear or pity or (2) audience members transfer their own pity and fear to the main character, thereby emptying themselves of these disquieting emotions. In either case, the audience members leave the theater as better persons intellectually, morally, or socially. They have either been cleansed of fear or pity or have vowed to avoid situations that arouse fear and pity. In modern usage, catharsis may refer to any experience, real or imagined, that purges a person of negative emotions.

Chorus - Bystanders in a play who present odes on the action. A *parode* (or *parados*) is a song sung by the chorus when it enters. A *stasimon* is a song sung during the play, between episodes of action. The chorus generally had the following roles in the plays of Sophocles: (1) to explain the action, (2) To interpret the action in relation to the law of the state and the law of the Olympian gods, (3) to foreshadow the future, (4) to serve as actor in the play, (5) To sing and/or dance, and (6) to give the author's views. In some ways, the chorus is like the narrator of a modern film or like the background music accompanying the action of the film. In addition, it is like text on the film screen that provides background information or identifies the time and place of the action.

Deus ex machina - (god from a machine), to describe a contrived event in a literary work or film. A contrived event is a plot weakness in which a writer makes up an incident--such as a detective stumbling upon an important clue or a hero arriving in the nick of time to save a damsel in distress--to further the action. The audience considers such events improbable, realizing that the writer has failed to develop the plot and the characters in such a way that their actions spring from their motivations. The term (pronounced DAY ihz ex MAHK in uh or DE ihz ex MAHK in uh) is usually used adverbially, as in *The policeman arrived deus ex machina to overhear the murderer admit his guilt to his hostage.* However, it can also refer to a character who becomes the "god from the machine." Derived from **Machine or Mechane** – Armlike device in an ancient Greek theater that could lower a "god" onto the stage from the "heavens."

Dramatic irony - Failure of a character to see or understand what is obvious to the audience. Oedipus, for example, was unaware early on of what the audience knew: that he was married to his own mother, Jocasta.

Dionysus - Patron god of Greek drama; god of wine and vegetation. Dionysus, called Bacchus by the Romans, was the son of Zeus and one of the most important of the Greek gods. Dionysus died each winter and was reborn each spring, a cycle his Greek devotees identified with the death and rebirth of nature. He thus symbolized renewal and rejuvenation, and each spring the Greeks celebrated his resurrection with ceremonies that eventually included drama contests. The most prestigious of these festivals was the Greater Dionysia, held in Athens for five days and participated in by playwrights such as Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides. Festivals held in villages and small towns were called the Rural Dionysia.

Dithyramb - Choral hymn that praised Dionysus, god of wine and revelry, and sometimes told a story. In his great work *Poetics*, Aristotle wrote that dithyrambs inspired the development of Greek tragic plays, such as those of Sophocles. The first "play" supposedly took place in the 6th Century B.C. when Thespis, a member of a chorus, took the part of a character in a dithyramb. The action shifted back and forth between him and the chorus.

Hamartia - Character flaw or judgment error of the protagonist of a Greek tragedy. Hamartia is derived the Greek word hamartanein, meaning to err or to make a mistake. The first writer to use the term was Aristotle, in *The Poetics*.

Hybris or Hubris - Great pride. Hybris often is the character flaw (hamartia) of a protagonist in Greek drama. Pride was considered a grave sin because it placed too much emphasis on individual will, thereby downplaying the will of the state and endangering the community as a whole. Because pride makes people unwilling to accept wise counsel, they act rashly and make bad decisions.

Mask - Face covering with exaggerated features and a mouth device to project the voice. Greek actors wore masks to reveal emotion or personality; to depict the trade, social class or age of a character; and to provide visual and audio aids for audience members in the rear of the theater.

Ode - Poem sung in a play or a festival.

Parode (or parados) - is a song sung by the chorus when it enters.

Peripeteia - In a tragedy, sudden reversal of fortune from good to bad.

Poetics - Important work by Aristotle written about 335 B.C. It analyzes Greek theater and outlines its origin and development. One of its theses is that literature and other forms of art imitate the activity of humans. Tragedy is the higher form of the playwright's craft, Aristotle says, because it imitates the action of noble persons and depicts lofty events. Comedy, on the other hand, focuses on ordinary humans and events.

Prologue (Prologos) - Introduction of a play that provides background material.

Protagonist - Main character in an ancient Greek play who usually interacts with the chorus. In a tragedy, the protagonist is traditionally a person of exalted status--such as a king, a queen, a political leader, or a military hero--who has a character flaw (inordinate pride, for example). This character flaw causes the protagonist to make an error of judgment. Additionally, the typical protagonist experiences a moment of truth in which he or she recognizes and acknowledges his or her mistakes, failures, or sins.

A Stasimon - is a song sung during the play, between episodes of action.

Theater - Greek Open-air structure in which plays were performed. The stage faced the afternoon sunlight to illuminate a performance while allowing the audience to view the action without squinting. A Greek theater consisted of the following:
Skene: Building behind the stage. First used as a dressing area for actors (and sometimes an entrance or exit area for actors), the skene eventually became a background showing appropriate scenery. **Paraskenia**: Extensions or annexes on the sides of the skene. **Proscenium**: Acting area, or stage, in front of the skene. **Orchestra**: Ground-level area where the chorus performed. It was in front of the proscenium. **Parados**: Passage on the left or right through which the chorus entered the orchestra. **Thymele**: Altar in the center of the orchestra used to make sacrifices to Dionysus **Theatron**: Tiered seating area built into a hillside in the shape of a horseshoe **Machine**: Armlike device on the skene that could lower a "god" onto the stage from the heavens.

Thespian - Noun meaning actor or actress; adjective referring to any person or thing pertaining to Greek drama or drama in general. The word is derived from Thespis, the name of a Greek of the 6th Century B.C. who was said to have been the first actor on the Greek stage.

Tragedy - Verse drama written in elevated language in which a noble protagonist falls to ruin during a struggle caused by a flaw (hamartia) in his character or an error in his rulings or judgments. Following are the characteristics of a Sophocles tragedy: (1) It is based on events that already took place and with which the audience is familiar. (2) The protagonist is a person of noble stature. (3) The protagonist has a weakness and, because of it, becomes isolated and suffers a downfall. (4) Because the protagonist's fall is not entirely his or her own fault, the audience may end up pitying him or her. (5) The fallen protagonist gains self-knowledge. He has a deeper insight into himself and understands his weakness. (6) The audience undergoes catharsis, a purging of emotions, after experiencing pity, fear, shock and other strong feelings. The people go away feeling better. (7) The drama usually unfolds in one place in a short period of time, usually about a day