

The Gladiator

A Roman Style Tragedy

Roman Tragedy

Based their work off the Greeks. Often, Greek scripts were re-written by Roman writers.

Frequently placed more emphasis on the 'spectacle' of the tragedy- circus, gladiators, battle

Often less philosophically oriented than the Greek works. Instead, observations about the human condition were expressed in sententiae.

One key work of literary theory from this time: *Ars Poetica* (Horace)

Characters dominated by a single passion – obsessive (such as revenge) – drives them to doom

Characters are less inclined to experience a “mind” tragedy. The journey of tragic hero often arises out of a situation and is continued through actions they do/do not take.

Horace

Quintus Horatius Flaccus (8 December 65 BC – 27 November 8 BC)

Ars Poetica - The Art of Poetry

"exercised a great influence in later ages on European literature, notably on French drama"- Howatson, M.C. *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*

Ars Poetica

The following is a brief outline of the main subjects of the work:

(a) A poem demands unity, to be secured by harmony and proportion, as well as a wise choice of subject and good diction. Meter and style must be appropriate to theme and to character. A good model will always be found in Homer (ll. 1–152).

(b) Dramatic poetry calls for special care – as to character drawing, propriety of representation, length of a play, number of actors, use of the chorus and its music, special features for the satyric type, verse-forms, and employment of Greek models (ll. 153–294).

(c) A poet's qualifications include common sense, knowledge of character, adherence to high ideals, combination of the dulce with the utile, intellectual superiority, appreciation of the noble history and lofty mission of poetry, and above all a willingness to listen to and profit by impartial criticism (ll. 295–476).[10]

Ars Poetica

"Many of...[the] apt phrases [of the *Ars Poetica*]...have passed into common literary parlance." Four quotations in particular are associated with the work:

"in medias res (l. 148)", or "into the middle of things". This describes a narrative technique of starting the story from its middle point. According to Horace, this entices the audience into the plot by making everyone curious about the characters' previous paths and their future destinies. The technique appeared frequently in ancient epics, and remains popular in modern narratives.

"ab ovo (l. 147)", or "from the beginning". As Homer did not initiate his epics about the Trojan War from the conception (thus, the egg – "ovo" in Latin) of Helen, poets and other story tellers should do something likewise: in other words, starting a story from its commencement will bore and fatigue audiences that may not be interested in a plot that is tediously inclusive. For another explanation of this mention of an egg, see Leda (mythology).

Ars Poetica

"**quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus** (l. 359)" or "sometimes even good Homer nods off". Today this expression is used to indicate that 1. even the most skilled poet can make continuity errors and 2. long works, usually epics (such as the Iliad or the Odyssey), may have their faults without that detracting significantly from their general quality. In context, however, Horace even censures Homer for such lapses. It reads "et idem | indignor quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus"; (I even castigate the good Homer for the same [fault of technical errors] whenever he nods off).

"**ut pictura poesis** (l. 361)", or "as is painting so is poetry", by which Horace meant that poetry, in its widest sense meaning "imaginative texts", merits the same careful interpretation that was in his day reserved for painting.

Recap- Vocabulary

Use each of the words below to write an accurate sentence or short paragraph about *Gladiator*.

Protagonist

Characteristic

Inciting Incident

Hamartia

Hubris

Catharsis

'in medias res'

Peripeteia

Anagnorisis

The Plot

Aristotle places a great emphasis on the importance of the plot. He believed that this was what the audience became engaged by and that the characters of the story were secondary to the storyline itself.

While Aristotle believed the entire story should be told, Horace believed we should begin 'in medias res', as the audience grows bored of hearing the backstory of a hero.

To what extent does *Gladiator* adhere to 'in medias res'? What film techniques are used to ensure we are familiar with the character of Maximus after only a short introduction?

“The Unity of a Plot does not consist, as some suppose, in its having one man as its subject. An infinity of things befall that one man, some of which it is impossible to reduce to unity; and in like manner there are many actions of one man which cannot be made to form one action. . . . The truth is that, just as in the other imitative arts one imitation is always of one thing, so in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole. For that which makes no perceptible difference by its presence or absence is no real part of the whole.”- Aristotle, ‘Poetics’

Aristotle believed that the plot was the single most important element in a tragedy. The above extract from Poetics essentially says that the tragedy can have a multitude of characters and events but the key is that each event must unite to create a single storyline.

Do you believe that the plot of the film adheres to Aristotle’s rule? Justify your response with evidence from the text.

The Tragic Hero

Maximus is a tragic hero, by Roman and Greek definitions. Not that these definitions differed overmuch. Some of the common indicators (characteristics or plot lines) are:

Hero must suffer more than he deserves.

Hero must be doomed from the start, but bears no responsibility for possessing his flaw.

Hero must be noble in nature, but imperfect so that the audience can see themselves in him.

Hero must have discovered his fate by his own actions, not by things happening to him.

Hero must understand his doom, as well as the fact that his fate was discovered by his own actions.

Hero's story should arouse fear and empathy.

Hero must be physically or spiritually wounded by his experiences, often resulting in his death.

The hero must be intelligent so he may learn from his mistakes.

The hero must have a weakness, usually it is pride.

He has to be faced with a very serious decision that he has to make.

From this list, select the three that you feel are **most vital** to the development of a character into a tragic hero. For each of your three, briefly explain how Maximus demonstrates or experiences it. Support your answer with references to film techniques that Scott uses to communicate this characteristic or experience to the audience.

The 'Tragic' Villain

Someone mentioned in class that they felt Commodus (the young emperor) is like a 'tragic villain'. I am interested to know what you think of this concept as it was not coined by Aristotle. The 'tragic villain' has become an accepted figure in literature who "is a character, usually an antagonist that does not truly intend to be a villain. They are perhaps misled or not entirely in control of their feelings and/or actions or pursuing morally ambiguous logic. This archetype originates as an antithesis to the more classic tragic hero of Aristotelian tragedy which continued into use as a basis for Shakespearean plays. In modern comic books and graphic novels, the character is sometimes referred to as a sympathetic villain." (World Reference Forum)

When we think about our villains in King Lear (Edmund, Goneril, Regan), what similarities can you draw between them and Commodus? What are their motives? Any particular actions or language that they do/say that are similar?

Thought- Ideas

Gladiator explores the concept of 'justice', just as *King Lear* does. Tragedy often causes the viewer to feel as though the 'evil' of the world triumphs, that there is a lack of justice that we so desperately, as humans, cling to.

Justice is often overlooked as a basic human need but our humanity dictates that we must see the scales balanced. It can become a need that people obsessively need to fill.

“It is a truism that justice is pre-eminently a matter of significance for everyone, no matter their current stage in the life-cycle, social circumstances or nationality. It assures personal and communal security, and is manifest in the way countries deals with crime, civil conflict and social strife within their borders or by agreement beyond.” - AJW Taylor

Let's talk about why Justice is important. Children inherently understand this concept but the explanation below helps turn this abstract concept into a concrete one.

Any society – whether the family, the community, a nation, or the world – benefits from having justice as a prevailing virtue. Such a society is dedicated to the notion that all of its members should benefit, and no one person or group should have a greater benefit or rights than another. Conversely, no person or group should be denied similar benefits to those that another group enjoys.

Justice means punishing actions or words that are wrong and upholding things that are good. This helps ensure that wrongs will be ended and rights will be upheld thereby leading to a safer society for everyone.

It would seem sometimes that children have a keen internal sense of justice. “That’s not fair!” is a common cry from children who feel that they have somehow been cheated out of something they want or believe they deserve, or when children are punished for something they feel did not deserve punishment. Often, this really means that a child didn’t get his way, and he verbalizes his protest by saying that something is “not fair.”

Achieving justice is more complicated and difficult than it might seem at the outset. The human being’s innate sense of what is or is not fair seems to continue into adulthood. Like their children, adults often either don’t get what they want or are punished for something they don’t feel they deserve. For example, if a person wants something in a limited quantity, he may feel it is “unfair” or unjust if he misses a deadline or cut-off by just a little. Similarly, he won’t think it’s fair to get a speeding ticket if “everyone was going faster than I was” – even if he was, in fact, speeding also.

On a larger scale, justice in society is often reflected poorly in the way people treat others of a different race, linguistic background, national origin, or religion. The fear of such differences seems to cause many minor and major problems, and justice is not served when minority groups are disproportionately punished for crimes for which majority groups are not similarly punished. Having and valuing a diverse society is dependent on justice to ensure that all citizens are treated fairly and impartially.

- Quora Digest (an interesting opinion forum).

Melody and Spectacle

Naturally, given that the text is a film, the visual and verbal techniques communicate the key ideas around every other element of the text.

They also help to position the viewer to consider the story from a particular angle, allowing the director to manipulate our thoughts, feelings and responses.

Explore the significance of the following features of the film. Determine the effect the director intended each to have on the viewer. Decide if Scott was successful in this.

- The animal motif
- Costume
- Flash forwards
- Parallel scenes