

Aristotle's Definition of Tragedy

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.

--Aristotle. *The Poetics*, Part VI.

Translated by S. H. Butcher

"**Imitation**" (Greek μίμησις, *mimesis*) is the attempt to capture the essence of reality in artificial form.

"**Pity**" (Greek ἔλεος, *eleos*) is the feeling of pain one experiences when watching another suffer.

"**Fear**" (Greek φόβος, *phobos*) translates much like the modern English "fear," the sense of panic or loss of self in terror.

"**Purgation**" (Greek κάθαρσις, *catharsis*) translates as . . .

- (1) **purification**, as when metal is purified to remove trace elements so that only one material remains (this reading implies that tragedy "purifies" pity and fear so that we feel only those two emotions);
- (2) **purging** or cleansing, as when something harmful is forcefully removed (this reading implies that tragedy "purges" harmful emotions like pity and fear from the body);
- (3) and **distillation**, as when alcohol is distilled to make it stronger (this reading implies that tragedy distills and purifies pity and fear so that they become even more intense for the audience).