History of Greek Drama

Ancient Greek dramas had their origin in the *dithyramb*, the choral ode sung and danced as part of the worship of Dionysus. Brought to Athens in the sixth century BC, the dithyramb was performed in competitions in the Dionysian festivals once a year by a select group of men.

Dithyramb—

According to tradition, an actor and producer of dithyrambs named Thespis (from whom our word *thespian* comes) separated one member from the chorus who then entered into a dialogue with the remaining members. This is generally regarded as the beginning of drama. The new form rapidly developed, and a separate competition was established for tragedy at the Dionysian festivals. Competing playwrights had to submit four works, a tetralogy, consisting of three tragedies and one satyr-play. Judges selected three tetralogies for performance and awarded the select three playwrights.

Satyr-play—

Over time, this format was modified to include two actors and a chorus. The Greek playwright Aeschylus commonly used this form. Sophocles added a third character and worked with a chorus of fifteen members. By this time, Greek tragedy was fairly fixed. Since the storylines of the Greek tragedies were known to the audiences, interest was centered on the development of situation and character, and on the way these illuminated the human condition. Plots were based on myth and legend.

Tragedy—

The legend of the phoenix in Greek mythology describes a magnificent bird born from fire and ashes. It is a strange concept, strength and life rising from destruction. This conception was carried by the Greeks into an art form, the tragic drama, recognized as one of the most difficult yet enriching experiences of western culture. The subject of tragedy is the downfall of the hero, usually ending in their death or destruction. The reader or playgoer who submits themselves to tragedy shares the emotions of the tragic character. This emotional tension increases almost to a breaking point. Then, as the hero faces the final, horrible truth, the audience experiences a release, a release not granted to the hero of the play. This release is reminiscent of the phoenix, since from the ashes of devastating emotion there rises a feeling of calm, a sense of harmony in the universe. The Greeks called this emotional effect…

Catharsis—

Theories abound about tragedy, most of which stem from the great Greek critic and philosopher Aristotle (324-383 BC). He examined the Greek tragedies and described them in *Poetics*. His definition included five tenets:

1. Tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear. The reader or viewer ponders their own fate or considers the fate of all humans because of the paradox of pity and fear.
2. A tragic hero must be a man or woman capable of great suffering. These heroes are often kings, queens,

warriors, persons of spirit and high position, higher than common man. They are not noble, but decent, solid, or trustworthy.

3. Tragedy explores the ways of God to man. Men have always been disturbed about why God permits his creatures to suffer, often from a human point of view, so needlessly.
4. Tragedy purifies the emotions in the audience. It purges the baser emotions so that the better ones shine forth. This is the doctrine of *katharsis* as well.
5. Tragedy shows how man is brought to disaster through choice, not a flaw. Each person's nature is composed, not only of the noble, the dignified, and the godlike, but also of the base, the ignoble, the bestial.
6. Tragedy stirs wonder because some assumption or opinion has been knocked away.

Hamartia—

Hubris—

List examples of literary, historical, and biblical figures:

Greek Theater

Once spring rains were over and the weather was clear, performances were given outside in an amphitheater. The term derives from the ancient Greek *amphi-*, meaning "around" or "on both sides" and *théātron*, meaning "place for viewing" (Hoad 14, 489). The seats of the spectators were on a slope that commanded a distant view, usually of the sea. The theater was usually more rounded, as opposed to the semicircular Roman seating. Seats were concentrically arranged and were cut into wedges by aisles that went up from the orchestra like the fingers of a spread hand. The stage was a slightly-raised platform in the open area directly on the ground. All details of the Greek theater aren't fully known, but scholars believe the stage was backed by a structure with pillars and columns, which could represent a palace or the walls of a city.

All actors were men who wore masks. The masks may have contained built-in megaphones to send their voices throughout the theater area. Platform shoes gave added height.

The Dionysus theater in Athens lay on the south-east slope of the Acropolis with seating for 17,000. Front row seats were reserved for state dignitaries, with the priest of Dionysus having the seat of honor in the middle of this row. Since the free population of Athens in the decades before the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) probably numbered 100,000, nearly all of the male population of the city could and did see the plays.

Hoad, T.F. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Etymology*. Oxford University Press, 1996.