"What is a Tragic Hero?"

According to Aristotle, the function of tragedy is to arouse pity and fear in the audience so that we may be purged, or cleansed, of these unsettling emotions. Aristotle's term for this emotional purging is the Greek word *catharsis*. Although no one is exactly sure what Aristotle meant by *catharsis*, it seems clear that he was referring to that strangely pleasurable sense of emotional release we experience after watching a great tragedy. For some reason, we usually feel exhilarated, not depressed, at the end.

According to Aristotle, a tragedy can arouse these twin emotions of pity and fear only if it presents a certain type of hero, who is neither completely good nor completely bad.

Aristotle also says that the tragic hero should be someone "highly renowned and prosperous," which is Aristotle's day meant a member of royalty. Why not an ordinary working person? we might ask. The answer is simply that the hero must fall from tremendous good fortune. Otherwise, we wouldn't feel such pity and fear.

. . . the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: For this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: For nothing can be more alien to the spirit of tragedy; . . . it neither satisfied the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves . . . There remains, then, the character between these two extremes—that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty . . .

"Aristotle, from the Poetics, translated by S.H. Butcher

Critics have argued over what Aristotle meant by the tragic hero's "error or frailty." Is the hero defeated because of a single error of judgment, or is the cause of the hero's downfall a tragic flaw—a fundamental character weakness, such as destructive pride, ruthless ambition, or obsessive jealousy? In either interpretation the key point is that the hero is on some level responsible for his or her own downfall. The hero is not the mere plaything of the gods—the helpless victim of fate or of someone else's villainy. By the end of the play, the tragic hero comes to recognize his or her own error and to accept its tragic
consequences. The real hero does not curse fate or the gods. The real hero is humbled—and enlightened—by the tragedy.

Yet we, the audience, feel that the hero's punishment exceeds the crime, that the hero gets more than he or she deserves. We feel pity because the hero is a suffering human being who is flawed like us. We also feel fear because the hero is better than we are, and still he failed. What hope can there be for us?