Monika Turner - MPhil in Writing – 300 Word Abstract

Threads of Influence:

Greek Tragedy and its Relevance to the Contemporary Novel,

With Specific Reference to Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*

And my Novel, *The First Seven Years*

This MPhil concerns the contemporary literary novel and how it has been influenced by the Golden Age of Greek tragedy. It comprises of three parts: the thesis and the novel, hereby presented, and the journal of creative experiences, which was observed at viva.

My thesis examines the historical development of Greek tragedy and its structure. It further explores how tragedy has influenced writers through the ages, culminating in the literary tragedy of today. The methodology of tragic form is investigated in the works of writers educated in Greek tragic structure, and also those with no classical background. This thesis aims to show how novelists without a classical education have accessed the tragic form, via threads of literary influence, and utilised it successfully, albeit often unconsciously.

My novel, ***The First Seven Years***, is a work of contemporary tragic fiction. It tells the story of one woman's attempts to do the best for her child. Trapped between raising her young son, Alfie, and caring for an increasingly frail elderly relative, Kate becomes emotionally and physically stretched. When she discovers Alfie has been badly bullied in his failing state school, her attempts to change schools have tragic consequences.

Finally, my journal, presented at viva**,** compiles my creative thoughts, notes and research for both novel and thesis in one portfolio. My original notebooks show much of my novel's planning and I have included visual images used of characters, buildings, locations, Kate's photography and Martha's pottery. Factual research is also integrated; investigating peripheral neuropathy, school league tables and admissions criteria. Thesis research includes relevant newspaper cuttings, programmes to *Oedipus Rex* and *Phèdre,* readings by DBC Pierre & Jeanette Winterson, and an interview with David Guterson. This journal has proved invaluable throughout my MPhil, both as an inspiration and an aide-mémoire.

Threads of Influence: Greek Tragedy and its Relevance To the Contemporary Novel, With Specific Reference to Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, And my Novel, *The First Seven Years*

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January 2010

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1. Introduction

> The noble poets of Greece, who knew how to depict heroes, did not at all mind letting them weep when they were in the grip of pain. 'Tears are a sign of goodness in a man,' they used to say. I will not live with people whose hearts are stony and whose eyes are dry! I curse those who are happy and who want the unhappy only for a spectacle.
> (Goethe, Elective Affinities [1809] 1999, p.112)

In this thesis, I wish to explore Greek tragedy from its source through its development, looking particularly at how contemporary authors of literary novels use the methodology of Ancient Greek tragedy today. I want to discover whether tragic methodology is used intentionally by authors with a classical education or background. For those authors who do not, but have still adopted the essence of Greek tragedy in their work, I am interested in how they have acquired this particular form and style.

Writers have always been readers first. The classical education offered to many authors throughout the history of western literature will have instilled a familiarity with the ancient Greek drama from the fifth and fourth centuries BC, especially the works of the three great playwrights, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. (A chronology of Ancient Greek events relevant to this thesis can be found in Appendix III.) English and Classics students may also have studied Aristotle's seminal theoretical work on the understanding of tragedy, entitled *Poetics*. Even though it is less common for writers of our generation to have benefited from a classical education, many still produce novels with distinctly tragic sensibilities.

Today, literary novels are rarely marketed primarily as 'tragedies'. Tragic literary fiction has no specific shelf space in our bookshops, and the words 'tragic', or 'tragedy' may only appear in the blurb, on the back cover, if at all. Shop assistants may helpfully lead you to rows of books under the discrete generic title of 'tragic life stories', but these are melodramatic memoirs, not literary fiction. These memoirs, based loosely on fact, tell of an innocent victim, usually a child, who has been subjected to a catalogue of horrors by a close relative. The protagonist has had a sad life, but not a tragic one in classical sense. As a victim, they have had no choice and no active role to play, but have passively endured. This is very different from tragic literary fiction, which gives us complex arguments and emotions, and explores *why* things happen, rather that *how*. After all, the ancient audience would know the endings to their myths, but *why* things

happened the way they did, well, there lay the interest. Tragic novels are satisfying for the reader and therefore remain popular.

Literary fiction today still contains tragedy based on the classic tragic model: the hero is likeable but has faults, he makes some bad decisions, the story goes from good to bad - the hero sees the errors he has made and watches his world collapse around him - the hero usually dies, and if he doesn't, by the end of the novel, he probably wishes he had.

My novel, *The First Seven Years*, was inspired by a news story, which told the 'heartbreaking tragedy' of a Japanese mother driven to kill a neighbour's child just to secure a nursery place for her own. I was working as a researcher in the BBC's News and Current Affairs department, and therefore was quite hardened to reported tragedy, but this particular news story struck home. Although not geographically close to me, the Japanese story was particularly relevant as my first-born daughter was approaching the age of the murdered child. One day, whilst monitoring images of flood victims stranded on rooftops, I started wondering: if I were on that rooftop and had to choose between saving my daughter's life, and that of a neighbour's child, could I do it? How would such a decision affect me, and how would my community respond? Would I be forgiven, given the magnitude of the disaster and the awfulness of the choice? More interestingly, could I forgive myself? I could almost comprehend a mother making this choice, given a situation as drastic as a tsunami, but, looking back at the Japanese case, I was stuck again by the question: how could any mother kill a child just for a school place?

These thoughts germinated into the central theme of my novel, *The First Seven Years.* My daughter was growing up, starting pre-school nursery and struggling to learn in a failing inner-city school. I began to be very aware of the efforts British women make in the order to do the right thing for their child. Those wealthy enough need only purchase a house in the right catchment area, or else select private education for their children. But other families, without that financial comfort, are often forced to twist their own beliefs for the sake of their child, or else contend with an often-poor education. Some families make the house move that they can't afford, or move into temporary accommodation near the desired school. There are those who develop a sudden devotion to a religion they have all but disowned previously, in order to qualify for the few good church school places available. Still others find mild medical reasons, and exaggerate them in order to persuade the authorities that their child fulfils the

special educational needs quotient that gives them preference at their chosen school. Are these people bad, or just desperate?

I became fascinated by the concept of one woman following a path into tragedy that she cannot see coming, of which we, as readers familiar with the concept of literary tragedy, are all too aware. My likeable, but flawed, protagonist begins her story with good intentions for both her own child and that of society, but soon finds that life-happenings (fate) combined with her own personal determination to see her child happy and well-educated continue to affect the decisions she makes until she commits her own particular *hamartia* or tragic mistake (the murder of her best friend's child). As I wrote, I became aware that my novel was following fairly standard lines of Greek tragedy. Why? Given that this had not been a conscious intention at the start, I began to ask: had a lifetime of reading subtly influenced my own ideas?

Whilst researching and writing my novel, *The First Seven Years*, I focused on modern contemporary books that had tragedy as a central theme. Many of these are included in Appendix IV, entitled 'Chronology to Present', such as Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*, DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*, Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, and Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones.* Were these authors aware of, and influenced by classical tragedy?

David Guterson was featured on the BBC's World Service Book Club. Since I was studying tragedy for my MPhil, the BBC invited me to be a member of the audience. This enabled me to ask the author a question relevant to my thesis – did Mr Guterson have the tragic form in mind whilst writing *'Snow Falling on Cedars'*? He replied:

> I did not specifically have the structure of Greek tragedy in mind, you know, as it is sort of formally construed say in, a classic's class where hubris is on the line and the Gods and fate operative. But the question of fate and chance and accident, and the way that forces can conspire against us because of chance or accident, maybe because of God or the gods, we don't know, I was interested in that. …I had a sort of tragic notion in mind that we live in a universe that can, in fact, conspire against us and we are called upon to be better than we might be because of that, that there might be an element of the tragic in that.
> (Guterson, BBC World Service Book Club, 07.02.09)

This programme was recorded on 14.10.08, broadcast on 7.02.09 and can be found transcribed in Appendix VI.

Guterson holds degrees in English Literature and Creative Writing. He taught English to High School students, where he discovered a renewed passion specifically for Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet.* There

can be little doubt that his own education and personal reading have influenced his works.

Donna Tartt is also cognisant of classical tragedy. I have chosen to examine her novel, *The Secret History,* in greater detail for several reasons. Firstly, it stands out due to its sheer readability, meticulous research and wonderful story telling, but also because Tartt, at her core, is a classicist, and so too are her principal characters. The novel leans heavily on the classics in several respects. Her subject matter, murder in a small community, closely reflects that of my own novel and these facts make *The Secret History* particularly rewarding for me to study.

The Secret History has sold millions of copies, both in the USA and abroad, as have those other contemporary novels mentioned above. It appears that I am not the only one who likes good tragedy. Other people's misery sells, it seems. Which begs the question, what makes tragic novels so successful? How much does a modern tragic novel take from the ancient Greek dramatic tragedy? Does my novel fulfil these criteria and hence could it be classified as tragic? If the answer to this last question is 'yes', will my novel succeed in engendering the interest, empathy and the ultimate feeling of *katharsis* in my readers, that makes a tragedy so powerful?

2. Tragedy: Definitions

What is a tragedy? The Concise Oxford Dictionary gives the following definitions:

Tragedy	**1**	a serious accident, crime or natural catastrophe.
	2	a sad event, a calamity.
	3a	a play in verse or prose dealing with tragic events and with an unhappy ending, esp. concerning the downfall of the protagonist.
	3b	tragic plays as a genre (cf. COMEDY).

[Middle English via Old French *tragedie* and Latin *tragoedia* from Greek *tragōidia,* apparently from *tragos* 'goat'+ *ōidē* 'song']

(The Concise Oxford Dictionary 1996)

The first two definitions of tragedy, namely *'a serious accident, crime or natural catastrophe'* and '*a sad event, a calamity'* are represented by the basic story we hear every evening on the ten o'clock news. Terry Eagleton says:

> In everyday language, the word 'tragedy' means something like 'very sad.'
>
> (Eagleton 2003, p.1.)

Tragedy requires plot, as well as 'sadness'. For example, it **is** sad to hear that the woman next door has died. But, if one then learns that she was ninety-four, and surrounded by loving relatives, then surely this is not tragedy? If the woman is thirty-six, and leaves behind a shell-shocked husband and three distraught children, then it is certainly tragic in the common sense. The death of the younger woman might lead to relocation, or family collapse with children in care, or remarriage and maltreatment from step-parents - the permutations in the family's fate are endless. EM Forster says of tragedy:

> …this is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development.
>
> (Forster 1987, p87).

Indeed, the death of a wife/mother or husband/father is such an awful concept for us to contemplate that we would be happy to help in any way necessary, be it Tupperware meals, offers of child minding, school runs etc. Whether this is entirely altruistic, or done from the point of view that one day, we too might need this kind of support, is immaterial. The fact is, we sympathise:

> Tragedy is more important than love. Out of all human events, it is tragedy alone that brings people out of their own petty desires and into awareness of other humans' suffering. Tragedy occurs in human lives so that we will learn to reach out and comfort others.
>
> *(Lewis, C. S., public lecture, Oxford, 1958, courtesy of Professor Kip Wheeler)*

When we feel pity or sadness for another's misfortune, as the hypothetical neighbour above, or as consumer of theatrical tragedy or the tragic novel, we present what Aristotle found most noble: *pathos*. We benefit from the deep, vicarious grief of

debating the slings and arrows of another's misfortune, whilst we remain safe, knowing that the suffering is not, presently, ours. This is the principle of *katharsis*, translated as purgation or purification, and is necessary for tragedy. Please note that throughout this thesis, all Greek terminology is italicised and Greek spelling conventions followed. A glossary of useful Greek terminology can be found in Appendix I.

Pathos and *katharsis* are the essence of tragedy and form the basis of Aristotle's definition:

> Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; **effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions**.
>
> (Aristotle [384-322 BC] 1996, p10)

Please note that *Poetics* has no definable date of publication, since it is a collection of works written throughout Aristotle's life. Hence in all quotes, from here onwards, I have given Aristotle's lifespan, [384-322 BC], as well as the publication date of the contemporary edition that I have been working from, translated by Malcolm Heath.

2.1 Tragedy is Dead - Long live the Tragic Novel

The dictionary definition of tragedy i.e., as a genre, performed on a stage using actors and words, in either verse or prose, and dealing with an unhappy event leading to the downfall of the hero, is remarkably similar to Aristotle's own definition, written over two thousand years ago and cited above. But does this stage version of tragedy still exist? The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) believed that tragedy died with the ancient Greeks.

Nietzsche received a superb education in classical studies at the Pforta Lutheran boarding school, where, at the age of fourteen, he discovered a love for Plato and Aeschylus. Nietzsche read the classic texts in their original Greek then went on to study theology and classical philology. In his groundbreaking work of 1872, *The Birth of Tragedy,* Nietzsche argued that tragedy developed because of the unique combination of dark, instinctive, Dionysian forces and the clear-thinking classical restraint of Apollonian society at that time, but was later destroyed by Socratic rationalism. In the philosophical circles in which Nietzsche moved, ancient Greek culture and ideals influenced law, medicine and the arts. Nietzsche's ideas, therefore, were tantamount to blasphemy.

Although Nietzsche believed that tragedy was dead, (with the possible exception of Wagner's operas), he was also convinced that tragedy was due for a massive rebirth. The human race had a need and desire for tragedy though we were not yet ready. Nietzsche was convinced that mankind needed to lose its fascination with the scientific and return to the ecstasy of Dionysian Primal Unity, or universal oneness, where individuals could forget their differences and behave as a community, through the ecstatic joy brought on by Dionysian excess. Nietzsche believed that mankind was on the cusp of such a change:

> In the midst of this exuberance of life, sorrow and joy, Tragedy sits, in sublime ecstasy; she listens to a sad song, far away – it tells of the Mothers of Being, whose names are Wahn, Wille, Wehe. [Whim, will, woe.] – Yes, my friends, have faith with me in the Dionysian life and the rebirth of tragedy. The time of the Socratic man is past: crown yourselves with ivy, take the thyrsus in your hand, and marvel not if tigers and panthers lie down fawning at your feet. Dare now to be tragic men, for ye shall be redeemed!
>
> (Nietzsche, [1872] 1995 p. 75)

Today it is hard to judge this claim without remembering the influence of Nietzsche's thought on later Nazi ideology.

If tragedy is generally defined as a play, how does it present itself within a novel? Clifford Leech states that *'the novel has used a theme and a structure comparable with those of tragic drama.'* (Leech, 1969 p.31) Leech goes on to cite Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and Camus' *L'Etranger* (1891) as *'…novels which have given to our time a sense of what it is to live in a tragic situation.' (Leech, 1969 p.31)* Leech argues that these classics cannot be described as tragedies, but instead should be referred to as tragic novels:

> It may well be that at some future time it will be the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel that is recognised as embodying more profoundly, in certain cases, the tragic spirit than the drama of these years has done.
>
> (Leech, 1969 p31)

George Steiner, in his classic critique *The Death of Tragedy* (1961) suggests that the embodiment of tragedy in the novel is partially to blame for the death of true tragedy as a genre, i.e. theatrical tragedy:

> The history of the decline of serious drama is, in part, that of the rise of the novel.
>
> (Steiner, 1961 p118)

Leech argues that this transferral of format is understandable because the serious dramatist has always been in search of the largest audience possible, and with the proliferation of the written word, the greater audience belongs to the novel. More recently, Terry Eagleton, in *Sweet Violence – The Idea of the Tragic* suspects that there is something *'inherently un-tragic about the novel-form'* (Eagleton, 2003 p180), partially because the novel often deals with the mundane, whereas tragic drama requires action and crisis:

> The novel on this view is a matter of chronos, of the gradual passage of historical time, whereas tragedy is a question of kairos, of time charged, crisis-racked, pregnant with some monstrous truth.
> (Eagleton, 2003 p181)

It should be remembered that the novel not only tells a story over a period of weeks or even years, but also is read over a period of time. *The Secret History* spans a time frame of three/four years, and at six hundred plus pages takes the average person a few weeks to read. Racine's play, *Phaedra,* (based on Euripides' Hippolytus and following Aristotle's principals of dramatic theory), is a slim work of eighty pages that in production lasts just two hours. Racine's *Phaedra* follows the rules of Three Unities: It has one principal story, has only one location, and it spans a time frame of just one day, which, according to Aristotle, is the ideal time frame for a play:

> Tragedy tries so far as possible to keep within a single day, or not to exceed it by much.
> (Aristotle [384-322 BC] 1996 p 9)

Eagleton is right to say that *kairos,* or time charged, is missing from the tragic novel, but I feel that it is important to stress the layers of emotion that can be built up during the reading of a book. A reader is also able to think about the situations presented to him in between sittings and analyse his own emotions, as well as those of the characters. As a result, the climax of emotion achieved in a novel can often exceed that of a play, and possibly last much longer. I believe that tragedy - the ability to produce the *pathos* and *katharsis* that is the essence of Greek tragedy - exists as much today in the novel as it does the play.

3. A Brief History of Greek Tragedy

In order to keep clear the distinction between the classical forms of tragedy and the looser sense described above, the key text will be Aristotle's *Poetics*. This in turn needs setting in the context of the early development of tragedy.

3.1 Dionysus and the Goat Songs of Ancient Greece

The origins of ancient Greek tragedy are obscure, but it has been possible to glean a few hints of how this *tragōidia*, or 'goat song' came about. Some historians believe that this name derives from the death-cries of goats at sacrifice, others from the payment of actors with goats, or goats being awarded as prizes for the winning song.

The ancient Greeks worshipped the god Dionysus, (known to the Romans as Bacchus) the god of wine, who also represented agriculture, civilisation, law and theatre. His purpose was to encourage mortal man to be freed from his normal self, by wine, madness or ecstasy. Dionysus was an earthy creature, represented by the bull, the serpent, ivy and wine. Ruled by gut feeling and emotion, he was honoured by the ancient Greeks in form and whilst accompanied by satyrs in the heavens, on earth he was often worshiped through ritual processions led by men dressed as satyrs, with much feasting and drinking, debauchery and the sacrifice of animals, usually goats, though sometimes also human. The frenzy was called a *bakkheia* and its celebrants were the *Bacchae*.

In *The Secret History*, a bacchanal is recreated by an elite group of classicists. The consequences of their joyous freedom become deadly when, after many attempts to achieve the correct mental state, they finally succumb to a true bacchanal trance, in which state they accidentally kill a farmer. The narrator, Richard, was excluded from the bacchanal but hears about the event later:

> 'Uncomfortably, I thought of the Bacchae: hooves and bloody ribs, scraps dangling from the fir trees. There is a word for it in Greek: *omophagia*.'
>
> (Tartt, 1992 p.204)

This ritual *bakkheia* eventually became known as a *tragōidia*, or goat song. Although these Dionysian rites stretched back to seventh century BC and beyond, by the fifth century, they had developed into a more structured form, called the Dithyramb.

3.2 The Dithyramb

Dithyrambs formed the major part of the festival in honour of Dionysus, called the Dionysia, which was held for five days in March. They were composed by poets, who usually recounted some tale from the life of Dionysus. This formed a competition, where tribes would each enter two teams, one of men and another of boys. This competition was performed on stage by a chorus of twelve to fifteen singers, though sometimes as many as fifty, using both song and dance and often wearing masks, possibly to amplify sound.

3.3 From Dithyramb to Tragedy

The dithyramb gradually developed to allow one singer (or choragus) to establish a solo part, differentiating him from the rest of the chorus. Now the choragus could sing lyrical questions to the rest of the chorus, which then answered him together as a group. Though still in song, this was the basis of a conversation and the beginning of drama, as we know it.

This new form of drama became popular and the winning groups were publicly noted and praised, though the poet who had written the piece remained largely unknown. Aristotle recounts how:

> [Tragedy] arose from the leaders of the dithyramb… Tragedy was gradually enhanced as people developed each new aspect of it that came to light.
>
> (Aristotle [384 -322 BC] 1996, p8)

Aristotle tells us that the dithyramb developed into something new, the tragedy, and that although the dithyramb continued in its original form for some years, the new tragic dithyramb, or tragedy, was very popular with audiences. Gradually, this developed into a bigger event, although still a competition, in which three playwrights showed three tragic dithyrambs and one comedic satyr play each, followed by another competition of five comedies. Three playwrights dominated tragedy between the 6th and the fifth century, namely Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Aristotle holds them all in great standing. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides received recognition for their works, which were performed at the Dionysia. These works in themselves became cherished items, being scribed and bound and sold to wealthy individuals and public libraries. It is largely thanks to these manuscripts and their avid collectors that we have so much evidence of Ancient Greek literature.

3.4 Aeschylus

Aeschylus (525-456 BC) has been called the father of tragedy as he was the first of the three great playwrights to write for the Dionysia, and was also the first to change the structure of the dithyramb, as stated below by Aristotle:

> The number of actors was increased from one to two by Aeschylus, who also reduced the choral parts and made the spoken word play the leading role…
>
> (Aristotle [384 -322 BC] 1996, p8)

By adding an extra actor to the piece, Aeschylus allowed the choragus and second actor to converse without involving the chorus, whose role became steadily smaller, being used mainly to move the plot forward and supply necessary back information. The choragus and second actor now spoke their parts, with only the chorus singing.

It is believed that Aeschylus wrote over seventy plays, of which only seven complete tragedies have survived including: *The Persians, The Supplicants, Seven Against Thebes, The Oresteia* (made up of three individual plays: *Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers and The Eumenides)* and *Prometheus Bound*. Aeschylus won his first victory at the city Dionysia in 484 BC and he continued to win prizes until 458 BC.

Tragedy had now become an altogether more dignified and fulfilling experience.

3.5 Sophocles

Sophocles (496 BC – 406 BC) was the second of the three great tragedians, writing more than one hundred and twenty-three plays during his lifetime of which only seven have survived: *Philoctetes, Oedipus at Colonus, Electra, Ajax, Antigone, The Trachiniae*, and *King Oedipus*.

Sophocles further developed the art form of tragedy:

> The third actor and scene painting were introduced by Sophocles. In addition, the magnitude increased from short plots, and in place of comic diction, as a consequence of a change from satiric style, tragedy acquired dignity at a late stage...
>
> (Aristotle [384 -322 BC] 1996, p8)

This had a huge impact. The extra actor allowed greater character development and conflict could now be explored in depth. Female characters, such as Antigone, Oedipus's daughter, brought life and relevance to the stage, and the added dignity of its

new language took tragedy to an elevated level. It allowed the audience the chance to spy on the lives of people greater than themselves, and to sympathise with their plight.

Aristotle believed that Sophocles's *King Oedipus* was an example of perfect tragedy. It is at this point that tragedy developed its reputation for being a story about higher orders, of gods and royalty, an underlying instinct that still holds sway today. Indeed, Aristotle was probably correct. Sophocles's perfect tragedy, *King Oedipus,* has done rather well, with a play-run of over just over twenty-four hundred years, since its first production c. 430 BC, to its recent sell-out at the National Theatre, London, in October 2008.

3.6 Euripides

Euripides (c.480-506 BC) was the last of the great tragic poets so admired by Aristotle. Eighteen of his possible ninety-five plays have survived, including *The Bacchae, Medea, Hippolytus, Electra* and *Alcestis.* Euripides first entered the Dionysia in 455BC, a year after the death of Aeschylus, but was not as successful as the old man, or Sophocles for that matter. Euripides rarely pandered to the tastes of the judges, even satirising the heroes of Greek mythology, which was either brave or foolhardy for that time

Euripides liked his women characters, such as Medea, to be strong, and three-dimensional. They had flaws and could make mistakes. They were not all of royal birth, nor daughters of gods. Euripides also cast slaves in his works, but not just as dumb servants. These slaves had thoughts and feelings, and had a proper part to play in his works. One can understand what a shock this must have been to the Greek audiences at the time, when women and slaves were so subjugated in real life. Aristotle said that Sophocles liked to portray men as they *'ought to be'* whilst Euripides portrayed them *'as they were'* and concluded that the plays of Sophocles were superior to those of Euripides for this reason. In one case, however, he did rewrite when his play *Hippolytus* caused offence to the Athenian concepts of ideal womanhood. Euripides had originally cast Phaedra as a shameless and wanton adulteress with a passion for her stepson. The play flopped until Euripides rewrote the character of Phaedra to be a plaything of the gods, hence partially exonerating her from her crimes. Euripides' general refusal to pander however meant that he won a mere five victories at the Dionysia, the last after his death. However his style of writing was so ahead of his own times that Euripides grew hugely popular in posterity.

4 Aristotle and his *Poetics*

Much of our knowledge of ancient Greek tragedy comes from the fourth century philosopher Aristotle, (384-322 BC), to whom I have already referred, but I believe deserves further consideration. Aristotle was the son of a king's doctor and, as a member of the aristocracy, was extremely well educated. He studied at Plato's Academy in Athens, before becoming personal tutor to Alexander the Great. He was a fervent admirer of the classic tragedy developed by his near contemporary poets of the fourth and fifth centuries, namely Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Aristotle thought that he had seen the highest state that tragedy could attain in their works. As a result, tragedy could not be improved upon:

> After undergoing many transformations, tragedy came to rest, because it had attained its natural state.
> (Aristotle [384 -322 BC] 1996, p8)

4.1 *Poetics* as Inspiration

Aristotle intended his *Poetics* to inspire poets, both of his time and those in the future, and to encourage them to learn, understand and maintain the standards set by their predecessors. It was for this reason that he explored and expounded the idea of tragedy being made up of various component parts, now commonly known as Aristotle's Benchmarks of Tragedy. These were the tools of the trade, the *tekhnê* of dramatic art - a craft or skill that had to be learned, and although Aristotle believed that the true artist would also have an innate artistic instinct, it was essential for students to study the basic skills.

4.2 The *Tekhnê* of Tragedy

Aristotle's study of technical aspects of tragedy forms the bulk of *Poetics.* Not only does he examine the history and development of tragedy as an art form, but he focuses particularly on how the dramatic elements succeed in producing fear and pity in an audience. Aristotle believed that this produced the best type of tragedy and that, in order be effective, a tragedy needed to be:

> … an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration…
> (Aristotle [384 -322 BC] 1996, p10)

A tragedy had to be performed on a stage and by actors, not read or declaimed. The story needed to be simple and complete, and refer to powerful people and emotions. The element of surprise was also essential.

Aristotle also developed theories that went on to be known as the Classical Unities and these became fundamental rules of drama. They were the Unity of Action, i.e. that plays should have one main storyline and Unity of Time, where the action should take place within one day and night. In the Renaissance, the Unity of Place, where plays are set in only one location, was added to the Classical unities, and henceforth the rules were also known as the Three Unities. The Rules of Unity were important to Aristotle, but he also believed that rules should serve drama and not vice versa.

Aristotle believed that the ideal tragedy comprised of various aspects essential to its form and quality:

> 'So tragedy as a whole necessarily has six component parts, which determine the tragedy's quality: i.e. plot, character, reasoning, diction, spectacle and lyric poetry.'
>
> (Aristotle [384 -322 BC] 1996, p11)

Aristotle ranked these six parts in strict order of importance, and henceforth plot, character, reasoning, diction, song and spectacle have become known to us as Aristotle's Benchmarks of Tragedy. The first two component parts of the tragedy, namely plot and character, were of paramount importance to Aristotle, and, to this day remain, equally important to the contemporary novelist.

4.3 Plot

Aristotle believed that the best plot or *mythos*, was a single one, i.e. fortune going from good to bad and *not* then returning to good again (which would be a double plot). The best plots must also be complex. By complex, Aristotle required plots to be:

> 'depending entirely on reversal (peripeteia) and recognition (anagnorisis)'
>
> (Aristotle [384 -322 BC] 1996, p29)

Peripeteia is the important reversal of circumstances, or turning point, in a story. It is also the point in a drama where the action changes dramatically and irreversibly, before moving on to its denouement. For example, in *King Oedipus*, the hero Oedipus, knowing that he has been cursed to kill his father and sleep with his mother, leaves his parents in Corinth and travels to Thebes, where he believes he will avoid his family and thereby his fate. He does not know, however, that his parents had adopted him at birth. On his journey, he meets his true father, King Laius, at a crossroads and falls out with

him over the rights to a chariot crossing. During the argument, Oedipus kills Laius, his true father, thereby causing the *peripeteia* or reversal of fortune to occur.

He is now condemned to follow the path set out by the oracle, and later meets and marries the widow of King Laius, (Queen Jocasta, his true mother) and with whom he later fathers children. The prophecy is fulfilled, but tragedy still requires anagnorisis, or recognition and this is achieved when Oedipus discovers his true parentage and that he has indeed killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus is so distraught and disgusted with his behaviour that he dashes out his own eyes and is cast into the desert. The tragedy is now complete.

Aristotle's plot structure was therefore laid out in the manner of a see-saw, with the set-up and complication of a plot, the *desis*, balanced on one side of the climax or *peripeteia,* and the unravelling and resolution, or *lusis*, on the other. His structural analysis was much studied, and used as a guide or rulebook for dramatic structure henceforth.

4.3i Structure of a Greek Tragedy

We are fortunate that enough Greek manuscripts have survived intact to enable us to study and analyse the full structure of the Greek tragedy. Texts like Sophocles' *King Oedipus* allow us to see that the Greek tragedy was much less like a modern play and more akin to opera. This is no surprise since Italian opera was created specifically to reflect Greek drama (though mastered in form by Wagner, according to Nietzsche). Although Greek tragedy contained dialogue, it also contained music and dance, which unfortunately have not survived the passage of time. We do however know the structure of a classic tragedy, and, though not entirely the same as a typical Shakespearean five-act play, it has distinct similarities. The prologue and *parados* are similar in design to Freytag's description of Act One or exposition. The Greek first to third episodes make up the equivalent of Acts Two to Four and the final *episode* and *exodos* were broadly equivalent to Freytag's final act or resolution:

Prologue: This was a monologue or dialogue explaining the subject of the tragedy and laying out the argument or plot and moral of the play.

Parodos: This was the entrance of the chorus, (named after the *parodi*, or side-paths, which formed the entrances to the stage for the chorus). The *parodos* consisted of chanting and dancing in a marching rhythm and was further divided into the *strophê,* or turn, the *antistrophê,* or counter-turn and the *epode* or after-song, where the chorus

stood still whilst chanting. The *epode* was often left out or only used at the end of the *parodos*, and was in a different meter to the *strophê* and *antistrophê.*

Episode: There were three to five *episodes* in which the actors interacted with the chorus. These told the story of the play in full, from the start of the story, on to the *peripeteia* and finally to the *anagnorisis* and resolution of the play. The speech and dialogues tended to be iambic hexameter though rhythmic anapests were also sometimes used. Each episode ended in a *stasimon*.

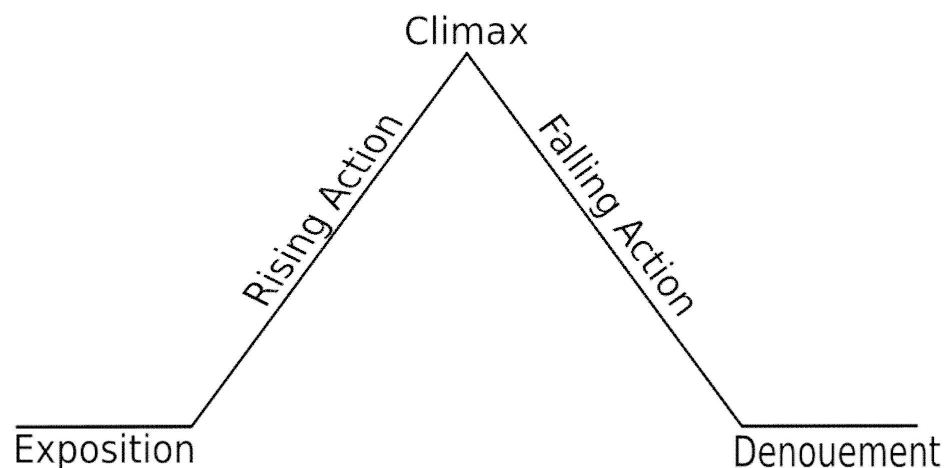
Stasimon: The *stasimon* was a song chanted by the chorus whilst stationary on the stage. This song would comment on the action of the *episode* it followed.

Exodos: This was the final song sung by the chorus (and sometimes the actors too) and would bring the play to its conclusion.

4.3ii Freytag's Analysis of Greek Tragic Form

Gustav Freytag, (1816-1895) the eminent German philologist, wrote a study on the construction of drama entitled '*Technique of the Drama*' which focused primarily on classic Greek Dramatic structure and how that applied to Shakespearean drama. His analysis of plot structure is still used in lecture halls today and, though it is based on the principal of the five-act play, it is often used to analyse film and literature as well. Freytag took Aristotle's see-saw structure of *desis*, *peripeteia,* and *lusis,* elaborating it to the familiar pyramid form that can be seen in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1 Freytag's Pyramid



(Freytag, [1899], 2005, p.392)

As can be seen in Fig 1, Freytag's Pyramid consists of five parts, the exposition, the rising action, the climax, the falling action and the denouement:

Exposition: The first act, the Exposition, provides the background story. The Exposition introduces the protagonist, the antagonist, the setting and the basic conflict. It ends with the inciting moment, where an action occurs that sets the play in motion and without which there would be no story, for example: Oedipus hears about the prophesy that he must kill his father and marry his mother. It sets him in action to leave home, in order to avoid his parents and hence his fate.

Rising Action: The second act contains the rising action, where the basic conflict is complicated and obstacles are put in the way of the protagonist's goals. This complication is called *desis* by Aristotle.

Climax: In the third act, the climax or *peripeteia* occurs. This is the point at which the story makes an irreversible change, with the fortunes of the hero turning from good to bad (see above).

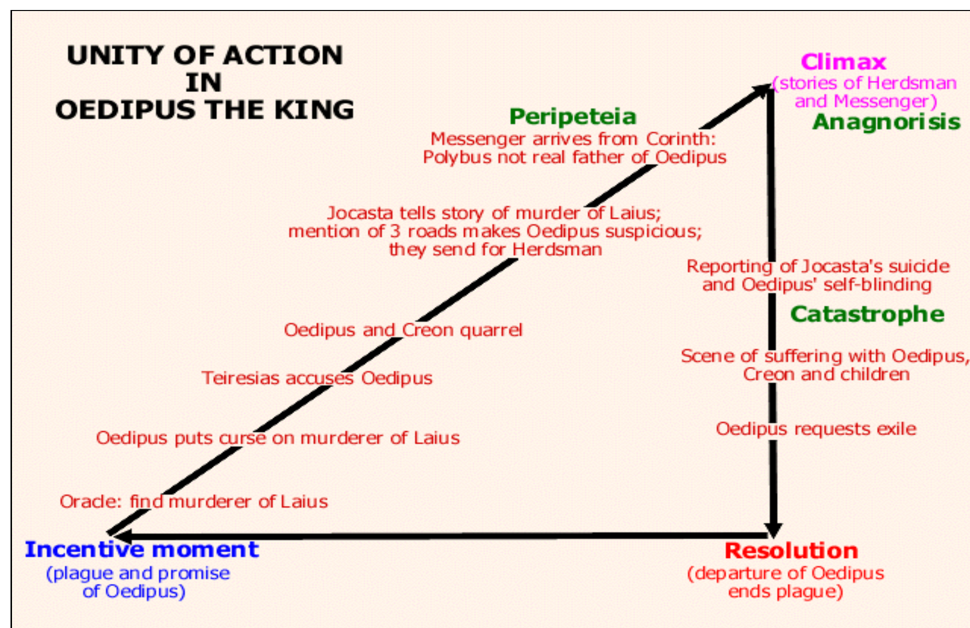
Falling Action: The fourth act, which follows directly from the *peripeteia*, was called the unravelling or *lusis*, by Aristotle, and the falling action by Freytag. Here the story shows the protagonist's world begin to collapse, often losing in major conflicts with the antagonist.

Resolution, Dénouement or Catastophe: The fifth act ends the play, and so is involved in resolving all conflicts, taking our hero from his final catastrophe, such as Oedipus gouging out his own eyes, to the *anagnorisis* or regognition of his own culpability or mistakes.

Barbara McManus from the College of New Rochelle (New York, Nov. 1999) has combined Fretag's Pyramid with Aristotle's language to produce the following:

Fig 2 Freytag's Triangle Elaborated

It is particularly useful to see the analysis in action. Here, in Fig 4, McManus has applied the principle to *Oedipus The King*:



4.4 Character

Aristotle believed four things were necessary to create a tragic character:

i. **Goodness:** Tragedy will not work if the protagonist is evil. We are not moved to see bad things happen to bad people. Our sense of natural justice is wronged when we see good things happen to bad people. We are most satisfied when we see bad things happen to good people. Therefore, our hero needs to intend to do good, even if he makes bad decisions and hence does bad things, unwittingly. Oedipus intends to avoid murder and incest by leaving Thebes. He is distraught when he discovers his own mistakes. That is what makes his character tragic.

ii. **Appropriateness:** It is essential characters behave in a manner appropriate to their status. A woman may be courageous by committing suicide rather that live in shame, but she may not bear arms in battle. Euripides had difficulty in having his plays accepted since he often broke this rule.

iii. **Likeness:** Characters should be true to type, and true to human nature. A wise person will tend to be old; a rash person will tend to be young, a mother tends to be nurturing and a father protective.

iv. **Consistency:** Once a character has been established, they must remain consistent in their personality and behaviour.

After **Character**, Aristotle put **Reasoning** as the next most important aspect of tragedy, being:

> …the speech which the agents use to argue a case or put forward and opinion.
>
> (Aristotle [384 -322 BC] 1996, p11)

Then came **Diction**, i.e. '*language sensuously attractive*…'and after **Song**, by which Aristotle meant *'language made pleasurable'*, and involved the use of rhythm and melody, particularly as performed by the chorus, whilst the *'separating of species'* was the interspersing of spoken verse with this song. Finally came **Spectacle**, which Aristotle considered the least important aspect of the tragedy, being the production of visual effects, such as the *ekkyklêma*, or the *deus ex machine*. These effects were contrived by the property manager not the poet, and Aristotle them considered to be:

> *…very inartistic and least germane to the art of poetry.*
>
> (Aristotle [384 -322 BC] 1996, p11)

4.5 The Use of a Chorus

Found in most Greek tragedies, the chorus added back-story to the action and commented on themes. The chorus represented the population, in contrast to the kings and gods of the main plot. Generally their lines were sung or spoken in unison, though sometimes directors have allowed individual lines from different members of the chorus to be thrown together to create an overlapping barrage of opinion:

> One should handle the chorus as one of the actors; it should be part of the whole and should contribute to the performance – not as in Euripides, but as in Sophocles.
>
> (Aristotle [384 -322 BC] 1996, p30)

It would be useful therefore to see an example of typical chorus usage, and I have chosen an excerpt from Sophocles' *King Oedipus.* In the prologue, we meet Oedipus on the steps of the Royal Palace, surrounded by the chorus of Theban elders. The individual members of the chorus are arranged around the stage dressed as citizens of Thebes, in states of prayer and supplication. They are not dressed uniformly, nor do they stand together in a regimental fashion, as with the common concept of a chorus today. Oedipus addresses a priest and the chorus in a paternal fashion:

> Oedipus: Children, new blood of Cadmus' ancient line -
> What is the meaning of this supplication, ….
> These prayers for the healing of pain, these lamentations?
> I have not thought it fit to rely on my messengers,
> But am here to learn for myself – I, Oedipus,
> Whose name is known afar.
>
> (Sophocles [c.468 – c.401 BC] 1983 p.25)

The priest explains how the citizens of Thebes are suffering, with crop failures, disease, citizens dying and stillborn babies. The chorus reinforce this message:

> Chorus: On barren earth, and barren agonies of birth -
> Beyond all telling, the city
> Reeks with the death in her streets, death bringing.
>
> (Sophocles [c.468 – c.401 BC] 1983 p.30)

The chorus of Theban elders has an important role in the play. It shows the audience how the people of Thebes feel, and in this particular incidence, how they have suffered since the murder of Laius (Oedipus's true father), which has gone unpunished. They are elderly, and verbose, but ultimately very human. They inform the audience throughout the play of further detail in the story, and they close the play in the *exodos*, watching the self-blinded Oedipus being led away:

> Chorus: Sons and daughters of Thebes, behold: This was Oedipus…
>
> (Sophocles [c.468 – c.401 BC] 1983 p.68)

4.6 Inconsistencies in Poetics

When reading *Poetics*, it must be remembered that this work was never intended for publication, but consisted mainly of written papers that Aristotle had compiled for his own use, possibly as lecture notes or for the use of his students. *Poetics* is not a complete work, but rather a collection of ideas written at different times and hence at different stages in the process of Aristotle's thinking. When reading *Poetics*, one is often frustrated by frequent contradictions and omissions, especially as only sections of the original have survived. This has left Aristotle's work open to many heated debates since his theories can be interpreted in quite diverse ways.

The issue of translation compounds this complexity, since one word of Ancient Greek may have a plethora of different meanings in English. For example, *agon* can mean a religious, cultural or sporting contest, or a god-like personification of this contest, or even a struggle between characters in a drama. Perhaps it is this ability to remain undefined or concrete that allows Ancient Greek, (whether in the format of a play by Aeschylus or a commentary by Aristotle) to remain an intellectual treasure trove. Richard Papen, narrator and protagonist in *The Secret History* espouses the beauty and starkness of the Greek language:

> 'Pur: that one word for me contains the secret, the bright, terrible clarity of ancient Greek. How can I make you see it, this strange, harsh light which pervades Homer's landscapes and illumines the dialogues of Plato, an alien light, inarticulable in our common tongue? …what I love about Greek, that language innocent of all quirks and cranks, a language obsessed with action and with the joy of seeing action multiply from action…in a long straight rank of cause and effect toward what will be inevitable, the only possible end.'
>
> (Tartt, 1992 p.224)

Despite the difficulties in translation and interpretation, Aristotle remains an intelligent and reflective witness of Greek Tragedy and so it is always worth going back to his original texts.

5. Influence of Greek Tragedy on Writers through History

The Greek classics and Aristotle's *Poetics* were directly in Roman culture, but what happened next? As a child I was taught that culture and indeed civilization disappeared from the western world with the demise of the Romans. Was this true - and if the Dark Ages were really so dark, how is it that these texts have survived? It is obvious to us now, that there has never been a black hole of culture. Pockets of civilization, whether religious or academic have always existed. In order to understand how we, as modern novelist are able to access the methodology of Greek tragedy, I believe it is useful to see how tragedy has managed to be kept alive through the ages.

5.1 Roman Tragedy

Roman theatre mostly favoured comedies, but where tragedies did occur, they were greatly influenced by Greek tradition. The plots were often adapted from the Greek myths and legends, such as the great Roman tragedian, Seneca the Younger's (c.4BC – AD 65) version of *Phaedra,* which was a retelling of Euripides' *Hippolytus.* The nine tragedies of Seneca, and most other Roman works, were predominantly designed to be read, rather than acted on the stage. The tragic play had mutated in form to five acts, which was another major change from Greek theatre though it did still contain a chorus.

5.2 Byzantium

The Byzantium Empire lasted from 667 BC to 1453 AD and we have their diligence to thank for the safekeeping of much Greek and Latin Literature, during the Dark Ages of Europe. Firstly, the Byzantine Empire was a safe haven for scholars when the Greek and Roman empires collapsed. These scholars brought with them their treasured manuscripts, which were valued, respected and studied in turn by the Byzantine scholars. Secondly they changed the way manuscripts were preserved, moving away from the traditional rolls of either papyrus or parchment wrapped around a central pole and stored in boxes or parchment covers. These were fragile and hard to browse. The Byzantine scholars instead developed the codex, an arrangement of single sheets of text bound between covers, in other words, a forerunner of the modern book. These codices could be stored much more easily, took up less space and were simpler to access. Thirdly, we have to be grateful to Emperor Constantine VII (905-959 was AD), known

as the ‘Scholar Emperor’ for his program of manuscript collection and restoration, which undoubtedly saved many vital texts from deterioration and eventual loss. Eventually the Byzantine Empire succumbed to the Ottoman Empire during the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, and once again the manuscripts crossed the Mediterranean, returning this time to Italy and for many, sanctuary within the Vatican Library.

5.3 Tragedy in the Dark Ages

As mentioned before, playwrights in the Early Middle Ages had no knowledge or access to the Greek tragedies, nor to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Greek Literature had all but disappeared from common European knowledge, (though, as we have seen, it still was treasured in the Middle East, in particular in the Byzantine Empire) and writers instead studied the works of Romans such as Seneca (Rome 4BC to AD 65) and Horace (65BC to 8BC). Geoffrey Chaucer adopted Roman style with *Troilus and Criseyde*, a poetical tragedy completed c.1380, also designed to be read, rather than acted. Chaucer had been greatly influenced by Boccaccio, an Italian Early Renaissance author and poet, himself influenced by Dante, who in turn was a devotee of the Roman poet Virgil.

Staged plays at this time tended to be mystery plays held in churches, performed in Latin by the clergy and telling stories from the Bible. They became popular, moved into the market place and were performed in the vernacular. Eventually the church decided it was too undignified for its clergy to be seen performing on the street so allowed their mystery plays to be re-enacted by groups of players that travelled from town to town, or by guildsmen. Indeed the name ‘mystery plays’ comes from the Latin *‘misterium’* meaning ‘occupation’, as in big cities the performance of these plays was entrusted by the church to guildsmen, e.g. tailors. Each guild enacted a separate story. Morality plays developed from the mystery plays and tended to be non-biblical, but with a strong moral viewpoint and aimed at the common man. They became popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Both mystery and morality plays were not tragic in their form or structure, since they were didactic by nature and did not want the audience to sympathize with wrongdoers.

5.4 The Renaissance

Two things happened in the fifteenth century that dragged Western civilisation into a much-needed renaissance and restored the concept of Greek as opposed to Roman

tragedy to western civilisation. Firstly, the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 caused many Byzantine scholars of Greek to flee to Italy, from whence their knowledge and copies of their manuscripts spread to the rest of Europe. Secondly, the invention of printing by Johann Gutenberg (circa 1455), brought literature, information and education to the masses, where previously only nobility and clerics had been able to access the incredibly valuable and rare handwritten books that existed up to that point.

By 1500, works by Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes were widely available in Europe. *Poetics* appeared in an Italian version in 1570. The Italian Medieval tragedy *Sophonisba*, by Gian Giorgio Trissino, written c. 1524, was arguably the first renaissance tragedy based on classic lines. Trissino had been trained in the classics and remained heavily influenced by Aristotle. Sperone Speroni's tragic play *Canace* was based on a Greek legend of incestuous love, handed down through the Latin poet, Ovid in his *Heroides*. Giovanni Battista Giraldi (Cinthio) wrote many tragedies, but the best known remains *Orbecche,* produced in 1541.

In England, Renaissance theatre saw a moving away from morality and mystery plays. Company players, who were sponsored by the nobility, now performed both in their residences but also in the new private and public theatres. One of these groups was the Lord Chamberlain's Men, part owned by William Shakespeare, who both wrote and performed for his company.

5.5 Elizabethan Tragedy

Thomas Kyd, along with Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare formed the backbone of Elizabethan tragedy. The revenge tragedy was very popular at this time, with Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and later, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* being outstanding examples of this format. *The Spanish Tragedy* was based on Senecan tragic theory, with distinct stoic values - the heroes suffered, and put up with this suffering for a very long time before being compelled into action. Think of Hamlet, with his endless procrastinations before he eventually takes his revenge against Claudius. Revenge tragedies had certain rules to be followed, namely: the murder of a good king by a bad one; a visit from the ghost of the murdered king to his young relative; a period of intrigue whilst the murderer and avenger plot against each other and kill anyone in their way: madness or feigned madness in the hero, a final catastrophe where nearly everyone dies, including the hero. *The Spanish Tragedy* was written over thirty years

before Shakespeare's first play came into production and it has been said that it was a major inspiration to the bard.

Shakespeare was educated at his local grammar school in Stratford and so had a working knowledge of Latin, though apparently he was not a natural Greek scholar. Ben Johnson commented that Shakespeare had 'small Latin and less Greek' and considered that the bard had failed as a playwright since he did not respect the Unities of time, action and place as Johnson himself did. Whilst Shakespeare had access to the classics and the teachings of Aristotle as part of the standard education of that time, he may well have chosen to ignore the unities of time and place if they did not fit in with his vision. He did, however, hold on to the principles of unity of action, normally sticking to one major theme or idea in each of his twelve major tragedies. He also stuck with the Aristotlian principals of having a high-born hero dealing with a single conflict or problem, who, in the process of fulfilling this personal goal falls from grace and is destroyed, as are those close to him.

As a working actor before his own writing career took off, Shakespeare would also have come into contact with many other works of the time, and been influenced by them, including those of Christopher Marlowe, such as the *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. This play was itself based on a German pamphlet, one of many European literary influences that were beginning to flood into England. Doctor Faustus, a character considered to be a man of great learning of his time, himself desires to *'live and die in Aristotle's works.'* (Marlowe, [1604] 1989 p.5)

Another influence was the brand new Italian art of Opera, spawned from the ideas of Girolamo Mei, a theorist who studied ancient Greek music theory and also the works of Aeschylus and Euripides. The Florentine Camerata, an intellectual group prevalent in Florence in the sixteenth century, believed that music, as a reflection of society, was corrupt and that a revival of the art and music of the ancient Greeks could purify their society.

One of their members, Jacopo Peri, produced the first opera, *Dafne,* in Florence in 1598, which told the story of Apollo and the nymph Dafne and, though different in some respects from true Greek tragedy, was hugely successful. Opera was here to stay.

5.6 Neoclassical Tragedy

Although the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides had spread slowly through Europe, by the seventeenth century their impact was noticable. In France, Pierre

Corneille (1606-1684) became the foremost tragedian, with works such as *'Médée'* and *'El Cid'.* Corneille argued that Aristotle's rules might be adapted where necessary, and indeed, this is in agreement with Aristotle's own words. One of Corneille's greatest rivals was Jean Racine, who was heavily influenced by Sophocles and Euripides and took Greek classic tragedy as his muse. Racine redefined tragedy on the French stage by simplifying plot-lines, and insisting on incorporating the Three Unities of Time, Place, and Action within his work, as can be seen in his masterpiece *Phaedra.* As such, Racine became a model for seventeenth century French dramatists, and was all but worshipped as a master of his art. Later, however, French dramatists turned on Racine, frustrated by the constraints of the Three Unities. Goethe also found his work too courtly and restrictive and attempted the art form himself with works such as *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and *Faust,* (published in 1808). However, Racine's work has been revived much of late and deserves his place in the history of tragedy, inspiring many other writers, including Proust and AS Byatt.

The seventeenth century saw many changes to British Drama, most importantly because of the political upheaval of the times. The Civil War and Interregnum between 1642 and 1660 saw all theatres closed, and playwrights of this era turned to other formats, notably the novel, the poem and the closet drama, which become a popular form of entertainment. These small productions were designed to be read or enacted in the private home and began to differentiate the 'highbrow', intellectual written word such as Milton's tragic dramatic poem *Samson Agonistes,* (1671) and Lord Byron's tragedy *'Sardanapalus'* (1821) of the eighteenth century from the lowbrow melodrama, pantomime and later music hall offerings.

5.7 Victorian Novelists

With the decline of serious theatre, the novel became the foremost medium of literary excellence in Victorian Britain and the tragic theme abounded. This was very much a matter of burgeoning social conscience, with writers like Charles Dickens producing works such as *Bleak House* (1853), *Little Dorrit* (1857) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). George Eliot, a great admirer of the Greek tragedy, produced her own, deeply heartfelt works, describing social exclusion and small-town persecution. These included *Middlemarch* (1871), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and *Adam Bede* (1859). Thomas Hardy, a master of the tragic novel, produced *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles,* (1891), amongst many

others. These novelists attempted to reflect in their works the problems they saw around them. This social conscience was also active in writers throughout Europe, Russia and America. In Russia, Fyodor Dostoyevsky produced *Crime and Punishment* (1866), a study on moral dilemmas - can killing a bad person ever be a good thing - and examining the concepts of free will and merciless guilt. In France, Stendhal, Balzac and Flaubert were also busy writing tragedy and in the USA, Herman Melville wrote the deeply moving *Moby Dick* (1851). The tragic novel as a format had found masters of unrivalled brilliance and it has been said that if Shakespeare had been alive in the nineteenth century, then he, too, would have been a novelist.

6. The Threads of Influence

From the Greeks to Shakespeare, from Racine to Dickens, it is easy to see how the threads of inspiration and influence have led us to the modern tragic novel. We see how the Greek classics have formed an knot, with the many threads of influence spreading down and out through the generations, to form a massive pyramid of literary culture, with the writers of the last century forming a broad baseline. Orwell, Huxley, Heller, Greene - the list of modern tragic writers goes on and on, each passing on their knowledge of tragic methodology to the next generation.

Donna Tartt writes from this baseline. In her internet interview in the *The Secret History*'s Reading Group Guide (Tartt, 16.03.06), Tartt cites influences such as: Austen, Poe, Wilde, Stevenson, Kipling, Dickens, James (both William and Henry), Tolstoy, Conan Doyle, Conrad, Nabokov, Flannery O'Connor, Evelyn Waugh, Salinger, and Borges amongst many others. Even as a student, Tartt was well known for dropping Nietzschian quotes into everyday conversation. In this interview, almost as an afterthought, she adds: *'Obviously, I'm also interested in classical Greek literature and philosophy'*. Indeed *The Secret History* makes references to many Greek works, including, Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Poetics*, Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Homer's *The Iliad*, Euripides' *Bacchae*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*, as well as classics such as Dante's *Inferno*, TS Elliot's *The Wasteland,* Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Tartt honours her literary forebears through *The Secret History,* with the Latin: *'Nihil sub sole novum'*. (There is nothing new under the sun.)

We can follow another thread from Tartt directly to Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*; indeed Tartt quotes Raskolnikov's admission of murder in *The Secret History*. Follow this thread still further and we find that Dostoyevsky was himself influenced by Shakespeare, Pascal, Hugo, ETA Hoffman and Friedrich Schiller. Schiller was influenced by the classics, Rousseau and Goethe, whilst Goethe was inspired by Shakespeare and the classics, particularly Homer. With all this cross-referencing, our many threads now resemble a woven blanket of blurred influence. Where exactly a writer has got his inspiration from may not always be apparent, but ultimately, we always seem to come back to the Greeks.

What happens when we look at the background of an author who is neither classically trained, nor university educated? How have they been influenced and inspired? I was introduced to the novelist DBC Pierre, author of Booker Prize winning

Vernon God Little, at a reading on the South Bank. Pierre was kind enough to agree to an email interview, the transcript of which can be found in Appendix V. In this interview, I asked Pierre whether he believed that *Vernon God Little* was a modern day tragedy and whether that had been intentional. He replied:

> I did imagine Vernon a tragedy as I wrote him, but without a notion of form. In a way then, to the extent it might reflect any classical influence whatsoever, I'm a good guinea-pig for you, because I never read a Greek tragedy before writing it - and so any influence comes purely from culture.
>
> (Pierre, email interview, 2009)

Pierre stated that he read little, had never been to college and had taken most of his cultural references from television and film, but that his formative reading in his teens had had a great impact on him. He cited only four books including Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman.* By choosing Miller as a major influence, Pierre has found a very short and direct thread to link him to the Greeks. Miller studied Journalism, English Literature and Classics at university and was drawn to the Greeks for their *'magnificent form'* and *'symmetry'*, which he emulated in his two-act tragedy, *Death of a Salesman*. This beautifully balanced play has a perfect *desis, peripeteia, lusis* format. In *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller,* the playwright speaks of Greek tragic structure: *'That form has never left me; I suppose it just got burned in'.* (Miller, [1966] 1994 p.266)

Death of a Salesman, so admired by DBC Pierre, is a modern day tragedy dealing with all the magnitude of emotion that one would expect from a Greek hero of great social standing but translated into the feelings of a common man. Miller has here encapsulated the formative change in tragedy of the twentieth century - the acceptance of the common man, both as Hero on the stage and as a member of the audience:

> …if the exaltation of tragic action were truly a property of the high-bred character alone, it is inconceivable that the mass of mankind should cherish tragedy above all other forms, let alone be capable of understanding it.
>
> (Miller, [1949] 1994 p3)

In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman's wife Linda says: *'A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man'*, (Miller, [1949] 2000, p. 44). Indeed, this small man is a hero and he does inspire pity and fear: it is rare for an audience to observe Loman's exit without feeling that overwhelming *katharsis* so desired and revered by the Greeks.

Miller would be proud of the hero that DBC Pierre has created in his eponymous novel *Vernon God Little,* for Vernon is as common a man as one could find. The son of trailer trash, Vernon has many faults: he is faecally incontinent, gawky and a social

misfit, indeed he holds few of the qualities one would expect to find in a hero. But, like Willy Loman, Vernon struggles against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and, as a reader, one is drawn into caring about his fate.

Our threads of influence have brought tragedy from the lofty heights of kings and gods down to the common man, but tragedy has not been lessened by this descent, it has merely been made more accessible.

7. The Influence of Greek Tragedy on *The Secret History*

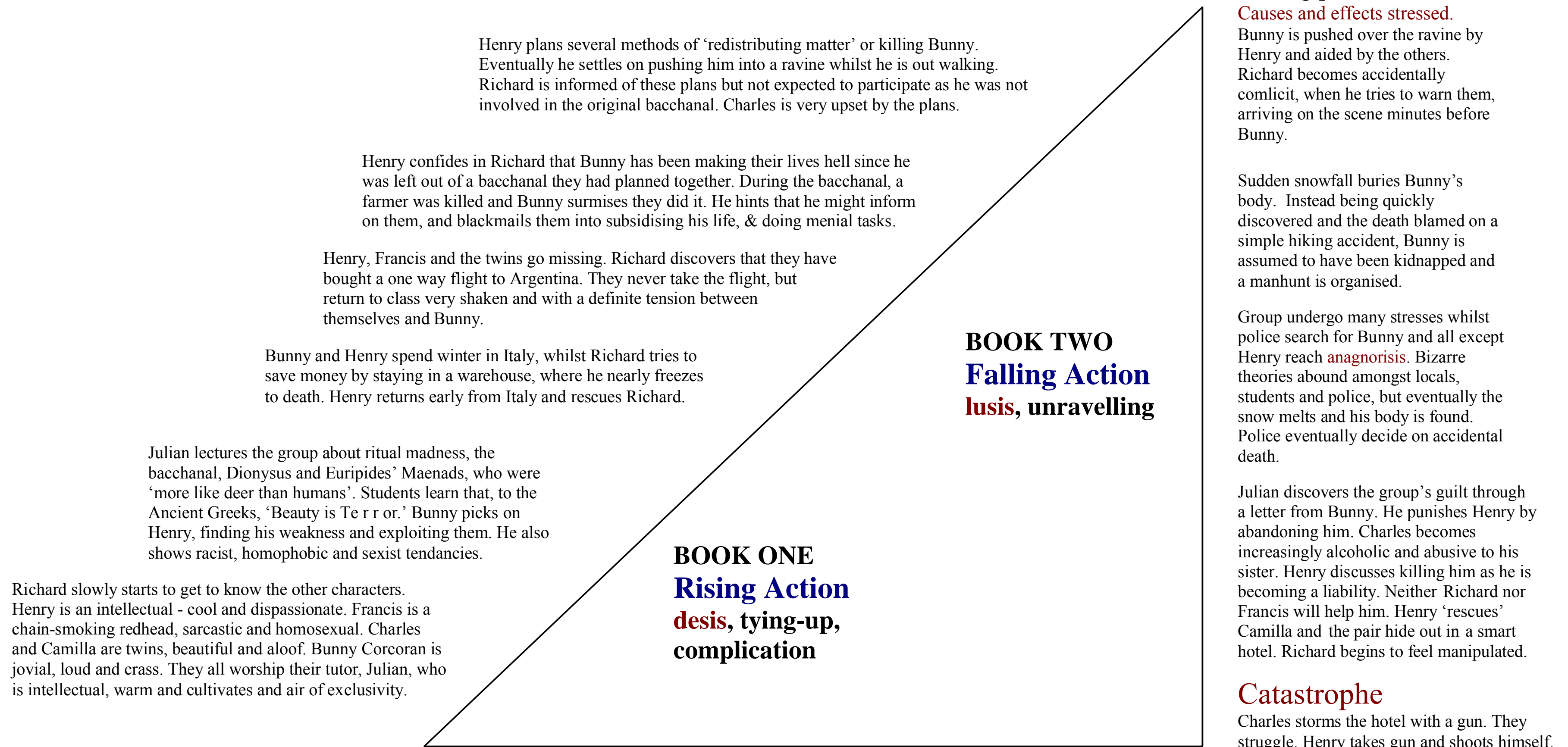
Donna Tartt is an ideal candidate for a study on the use of Greek tragedy in the modern novel. She studied classics and creative writing first at the University of Mississippi, then at Bennington College, a small liberal arts college in Vermont. Tartt began *The Secret History* whilst still at Bennington and chose to focus on classical ideas for her first novel, a story about two murders perpetrated by a group of classicists in a New England college, not too dissimilar from her own college.

In an interview with Pam Lambert in *Newsweek*, Tartt recalls how she told Bret Easton Ellis that it could never be a commercial success because: *'The book's got Greek phrases'*. (Lambert, 04.10.92) Nevertheless Tartt still aimed *The Secret History* at a non-classically trained audience: *'I wanted to write a book that really did have a wide appeal, a literary book, but not an elitist book and I've really been surprised at the wide variety of people it has appealed to.'* (Lambert, 04.10.92)

The Secret History has a simple, but complex Aristotelian plot line, as can be seen in the application of Freytag's Analysis in Fig. 5. Through this analysis, it is possible to see how elegantly Tartt has balanced her novel. Indeed, *The Secret History* has been split into two books. Book One, portrays *desis* or tying up, and is full of complications as Richard aspires to join the select clique and becomes an unwitting tool in their hands. The *peripeteia* forms a pivot, or climax, between the two books, where Bunny's murder becomes a point of no return for Richard. Book Two, shows *lusis,* or unravelling, where Richard is drawn further into the guilt-ridden world of his friends, with all the distrust, confusion and hubris that involves. The eventual *catastrophe* comes when Henry turns a gun on himself and commits suicide. At this point the group reaches *anagnorisis*, or recognition, of their awful crime and natural justice occurs.

As a reader, I did not find this structure at all unnatural, but was gripped throughout by the power of the narration. As a writer, observing and critically commenting on Tartt's structure, I can now, in retrospect, marvel at her brilliance. At no point does the form feel forced or stretched in order to reach the set points, and though the novel took her ten years to write, I believe that this time has been justified by the depth of thought and skill that has gone into its creation. Freytag's Analysis of ***The Secret History*** can be found in Fig. 5, on the next page:

Fig. 5 Freytag's Pyramid : *The Secret History*



Exposition Causes downplayed – effects stressed.

Narrator Richard leaves Plano, California and working class parents to pursue a privileged education in Hampden College, Vermont. Insecurities lead him to lie about his background, feigning elite boarding schools and rich, loving parents.

Inciting moment: Richard is obsessed with a group of classic students taught by Professor Julian Morrow, who will not accept Richard into his select class of five. Richard stalks the students until one day he is able to help them solve a grammatical problem, which impresses them, leading to acceptance within the clique and also, eventually, Julian's class.

Denouement, resolution Causes stressed, effects down-played.

Without Henry, the group disintegrates. Richard realises that Henry, his hero, probably set him up to be a fall -guy if things went wrong. Rejected by Camilla and isolated from Francis and Charles, he still manages to finish his degree. He withdraws from life, adopting a dry academic life researching *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Camilla attempts to look after her brother, but Charles' self-destructing alcoholism and depression force him into rehab, and a relationship with another alcoholic. The pair run off. Camilla having lost touch with her brother, retreats from life to care for her grandmother. After a failed suicide attempt, Francis is forced into a straight marriage by his grandfather. The students have literally 'got away with murder', but suffer natural justice worse than prison.

The Secret History uses many techniques favoured by the Greek tragedians and is also interwoven with extracts and references from the classics. Indeed Tartt's prologue uses the classic device of commencing a story in *medias res,* i.e. in the middle of the action. Her *medias res* is perfectly extracted from precisely midway in the storyline, at the end of Book One and the beginning of Book Two, where Bunny Corcoran is murdered. In her prologue, Tartt also gives the ending away, by naming both the victim and the murderers. This is another classical technique, as the ancient Greeks were much more interested in the 'Why?' than the 'What?' Indeed Richard Papen narrates the novel in the first person as a confessional memoir. He tells us, right from the start, that he has murdered and avoided justice, as have his friends.

The novel then progresses into Book One, as Richard jumps back in time, (as is typical of a story commencing with *media res*) to relate the story of how he first met the other principal characters. Then the plot travels forward in a linear fashion (though with occasional flashbacks), until we find out that Bunny Corcoran was murdered to prevent him informing the police of a previous manslaughter committed by his classmates. Book Two continues linearly to its conclusion and epilogue, where the story is neatly wrapped up, with all consequences explained.

As with Aristotle, Tartt appears to find **Plot** of greater importance than **Character**. Her plotting is near perfect, as we have seen from the detailed analysis above, but Tartt has been criticised for having somewhat flat and stereotypical characters. Perhaps this is because more thought has gone into these characters as 'classic types' than is, at first, obvious. Aristotle believed that heroes should show **'goodness'**, ie they should not intend evil – none of the group do (except possibly Henry), as the bacchanal was accidental, and the death of Bunny justified as the only way out. Henry further justifies his actions to Julian, by saying that Bunny *'…wasn't a happy person in those last months…'* (Tartt, p.574) as if putting him out of his misery was actually a kindness. If the characters do appear stereotypical, then Tart has possibly intended them to be so. Aristotle also stated that characters should be **true to type** and behave in a manner that is **appropriate to their status**. They should also remain **consistent**. The very aspects that could label them as flat, in a modern sense i.e. their unchanging characteristics so typical of their type - Camilla's goodness, Francis's homosexuality, Charles' alcoholism, Henry's brilliance and Bunny's awful crassness - these characteristics are precisely the aspects that would make them successful in a Greek sense.

Richard, the principal character, is not a great or powerful man, but otherwise he is a typically Greek tragic hero. He is likeable and yet slightly flawed. He never intends murder, but gets drawn into it by his desperate desire to belong to this elite group, and so be better that the *οι πολλοί*, or common people. This is his *hamartia*, or fatal flaw. Were he not so anxious to belong, he might not have made some of the decisions he did, nor be so easily led and manipulated by Henry. Richard's story goes from good to bad - he starts off as an able student setting out on his university career, and ends up in a rut of self-recrimination, an embittered, insomniac academic with ulcers, emotionally destroyed and unable to face people or life. Richard is stuck in his own personal Jacobean cloak-and-dagger tragedy, always aware of the necessity to watch his own back, for even at this stage in his life, new evidence may yet turn up.

Tartt's other characters are based more on those from Euripides than Aeschylus or Sophocles. For a start, she has allowed one principal female character, the twin Camilla. Had Aeschylus or Sophocles inspired Tartt, then the classics group would have been an all male clique. It is also Euripidean that Richard, Camilla and her brother, Charles come from fairly normal backgrounds. They are not nobility, nor the great men of a classic tragedy. However, the classicists have developed a cult of elitism, and are distinct from the rest of the university student body as a result. Henry has achieved greatness through the brilliance of his mind and Francis does really come from a high society family. Bunny, the eventual victim of the group, is also very well connected, though actually poor. His character is set up from the start as an irritant. Bunny is famous around campus for being a party animal, and is loved by everyone, except those who actually know him. He has a knack for finding each of his so-called friends' pressure points: like a bloodhound, Bunny sniffs out Richard's shame in his nondescript Californian background and then belittles him at every opportunity. Bunny is a shameless sponge, but insists on calling Henry 'tight'. Homosexuality and incest are common Greek themes and Bunny regularly picks on Francis as a homosexual, whilst Charles and Camilla are needled for their incestuous love. It is almost as if Bunny's irritating and cruel character demands the murder.

The Secret History has been compared to Hitchcock's film '*Rope*', in which two men hold a party directly after a murder, which has been undertaken as philosophical experiment. One character remains dispassionate, whilst the other displays his guilt and crumbles under the strain. Members of Tartt's clique are similarly split - Camilla

and her brother are so shaken by the farmer's murder that she becomes an elective mute whilst he starts to drink excessively. Francis and Henry are less bothered:

> 'It is a terrible thing, that we did,' said Francis abruptly. 'I mean, this man was not Voltaire we killed. But still. It's a shame. I feel bad about it.'
> 'Well, of course, I do too,' said Henry matter-of-factly. 'But not enough to go to jail for it.'
>
> (Tartt, 1993 p220)

Francis does however eventually crumble and even the clinically cold Henry has some difficulty dealing with his friends' emotional breakdowns. For some reason, though, the reader is left fascinated by Henry, rather than horrified, despite the fact he has orchestrated all the crimes committed by the group. Perhaps this is because, of all the characters in this novel, Henry embodies Dionysian spirit – he is able to release the rational part of his mind to follow a theoretical Apollonian argument to its ultimate conclusion. We never truly believe Henry to be immoral, and therefore cannot hate him nor see him as a monster. Perhaps the fact that he is amoral, and genuinely believes he is correct in his intellectualising of the situation, allows us to forgive him his actions. We also share with Richard that yearning for a special friendship with someone so obviously above us in intellect, personality and demeanour. Like Richard, we almost do not care that we are being manipulated, tricked into liking a murderer. The fact that we, as readers, may share page space with the Apollo-like Henry, is enough.

Julian Morrow is tutor to the protagonists. This character seems heavily based on Aristotle, but also appears to have similarities to an elitist Classics teacher, Claude Fredericks, who taught Tartt at Bennington. Reminiscent of Aristotle, Julian is considered by his protégés to be almost otherworldly in his intellect and they have a quasi-religious respect for him. Julian himself, rather vainly, compares his one tutor-one student method of teaching to that of Plato/Aristotle or Aristotle/Alexander. When the students' world collapses and Julian abandons his faculty, Richard hears a rumour: Julian has been appointed as royal tutor to the crown prince of Suaoriland, East Africa. Richard fantasizes:

> What better fate for Julian than someday being the power behind the Suoari throne, than transforming his pupil into a philosopher-king? I like to think that he - as Aristotle did - would bring up a man who would conquer the world.
>
> (Tartt, 1992 p626)

Richard has failed to acknowledge that his hero is actually a weak man, who, in reality, has inspired five students towards a murderous bacchanal and then another murder to cover up the first: these are hardly the results of a great mentor. Julian, however, takes no responsibility for his students' actions, and appears horrified when he learns of their actions. Anxious to save his own reputation, Julian withdraws and this hurts Henry far worse than if his mentor had turned him in to the police. Henry loved Julian *'more than anyone in the world'*, (Tartt, p.586) and is devastated.

Perhaps by the end of the novel, Julian has realized that his influence on his protégées was more that of Seneca (private tutor to Nero) than Aristotle. One can only hope that Julian himself turned down the Suoariland tutorship, for fear of creating one final uber-monster, a 'Henry' with absolute power - able to cause destruction on a national or international scale.

If a chorus exists in *The Secret History* – and seeing the care with which Tartt has constructed this book I cannot believe she would not use this device – then I feel that it takes the form of the few minor characters that look out for Richard and give him good advice, whilst representing the wider college community. One, a tutor called Georges Laforgue, tries to deflect Richard from his decision to study under Julian, where he fears Richard will become isolated. 'Nice-but-dim' student, Judy Poovey, warns Richard of Henry's violence, after Henry breaks Spike Romney's collarbone for coming onto Camilla at a Frat Party. Judy may be stupid, but she has an instinctive fear of the danger Henry presents, and that Richard is too reverential to notice. Judy also encourages Richard to eat and sleep, and attempts frequently to reintegrate him into college life. Judy and LaForgue, reflect the views of the rest of the college, and in doing so, act as a chorus.

It is interesting to note that of the two murders, the first, of the farmer who was accidentally killed in the Bacchanal, is treated off stage, as was typical of Greek tragedy. Traditionally, this was done in order to prevent the stage, as a holy place, from being sullied by death. A cart would then pull the bloodied corpses back onto the stage. This device was called *ekkyklêma*, and allowed the audience to appreciate the full effect of the tragic death. In *The Secret History,* we hear about the farmer's murder in a reported fashion, as Henry involves Richard by telling him past events. However, Henry had considered taking the body with him in his car (or ekklêmic cart), but then rejected the idea as too dangerous.

The second murder is a more twentieth century style killing. It is selfish and pre-planned. We, as readers, observe the murder actually happen and this forces us to feel almost complicit in the guilt of Bunny's death. Interestingly, this murder really does utilize the ambulance to brings back Bunny's body in ekkylêmic style, and hence brings fifth century drama and immediacy to an almost trivial modern murder.

Donna Tartt rounds off her novel with an epilogue summarising the fates of all principal characters. Generally, the minor players live and prosper, having committed no major sin worthy of punishment. Judy Poovey becomes a cable TV celebrity with her own aerobics class. Frank and Judd buy out The Farmer's Inn and turn it into a very popular, college drinking haunt. Cloke Rayburn straightens himself out enough to graduate from law school and ends up working for Hugh Corcoran. Dr Rowland retires to after-dinner speaking, but not before almost destroying Richard's chances of going to graduate school by writing a recommendation for him in which he calls him 'Jerry' throughout.

The outcome is different for the main characters. Now that Henry is dead, Charles, Camilla, Francis and Richard drift apart, *'as if some thread which bound us had been abruptly severed.'* (Tartt , p614) In order to fulfil ancient Greek tragic form, it is necessary for them to be punished for their misdeeds and so, despite evading the law and criminal justice, they each sink into their own private worlds of despair and suffer an almost more vicious form of natural justice.

Richard manages to scrape though his final year at college, gaining a degree in English Literature. Though not the most academic of the group, he is the only one to graduate, and specializes in the cheerless genre of Revenge tragedy. He moves back to 'godforsaken' California, the living hell he had tried so hard to leave as a young innocent student just a few years back.

Francis attempts suicide when his homosexual activities are discovered by his wealthy grandfather. When this fails he agrees to be married for the sake of his trust fund. The woman is a pretty blonde, cruelly nicknamed the 'Black Hole' by Francis's cousins, because *'the conversation turns into a vacuum whenever she walks into the room.'* (Tartt, p. 617) For Francis, this represents conscious emotional and intellectual suicide. Charles sinks, rather predictably, into a world of drink and drugs. His twin, Camilla, tries cares for him at their grandmother's home in Virginia until he runs away and loses touch with his family and friends. Camilla can no longer embrace life with the guilt she carries, so she rejects finishing her studies in order to

care for her Nana, thereby effectively burying herself alive in the mausoleum that is the old lady's Virginian house.

We are left with only one question. What happens to Henry? We know that he struggles with Charles when the latter has tried to shoot him. Henry then turns the gun intentionally on himself and shoots. Though he is dead, the group cannot quite imagine life without him. Camilla admits that she loved him and still does. She cannot love Richard as a result. Francis intellectualises that Henry was too intelligent to simply die and that he must therefore have contrived an escape in a manner inspired by Sherlock Holmes. Francis and Richard keep dreaming of Henry and seeing his ghost in the shadows. Ghosts are a popular tool of the tragic, from the ghost of the dead king Darius in Aeschylus's *Persians* to that of Hamlet's father, so it is no surprise to see Tartt employing the idea of a ghost in her novel.

As well as Henry's ghost, Tartt makes use of another classic Greek solution for her novel's ending. The characters want to see Henry again, as do her readers. He is, after all, the most enigmatic and exciting player in the cast. Euripides was famous for solving problems at the end of his plays by winching down a god from a crane *(deus ex machina)* who could magically solve any issues left unresolved. Aristotle believed this to be a poor ending to a classic tragedy and thought Euripides much the worse for this contrivance. Aristotle believed that the story should provide the solution that fit with its own internal logic, not a quick fix from the gods at the end of the play.

Donna Tartt uses a typically Euripidean ending. Unable to give modern readers more than the suspicion of a real ghost, Tartt uses the convention of a dream sequence to allow for some acceptable unreality in her epilogue. Richard experiences a surreal dream, set in a futuristic building in a war-torn city. A group of men observe a machine on a plinth, which slowly rotates, allowing the observers to see how the machine changes every few seconds, metallic parts clicking in and out to reveal first an Inca temple, then the Pyramids, and finally the Parthenon. Henry appears, with powder burns and the bullet hole still on his right temple. *'I am not dead,'* he says. *'I am only having a bit of trouble with my passport.'* (Tartt p.628). Richard asks Henry if he is happy and Henry replies, *'Not particularly,'* he adds. *'But you are not particularly happy where you are, either.'* (Tartt p.629). The dream has allowed Tartt to show that both characters have reached the state of anagnorisis – they are aware of the awfulness of their deeds and their own personal guilt. Happiness is no longer an option for either of them. The tragedy is complete.

8. The Influence of Greek Tragedy on *The First Seven Years*

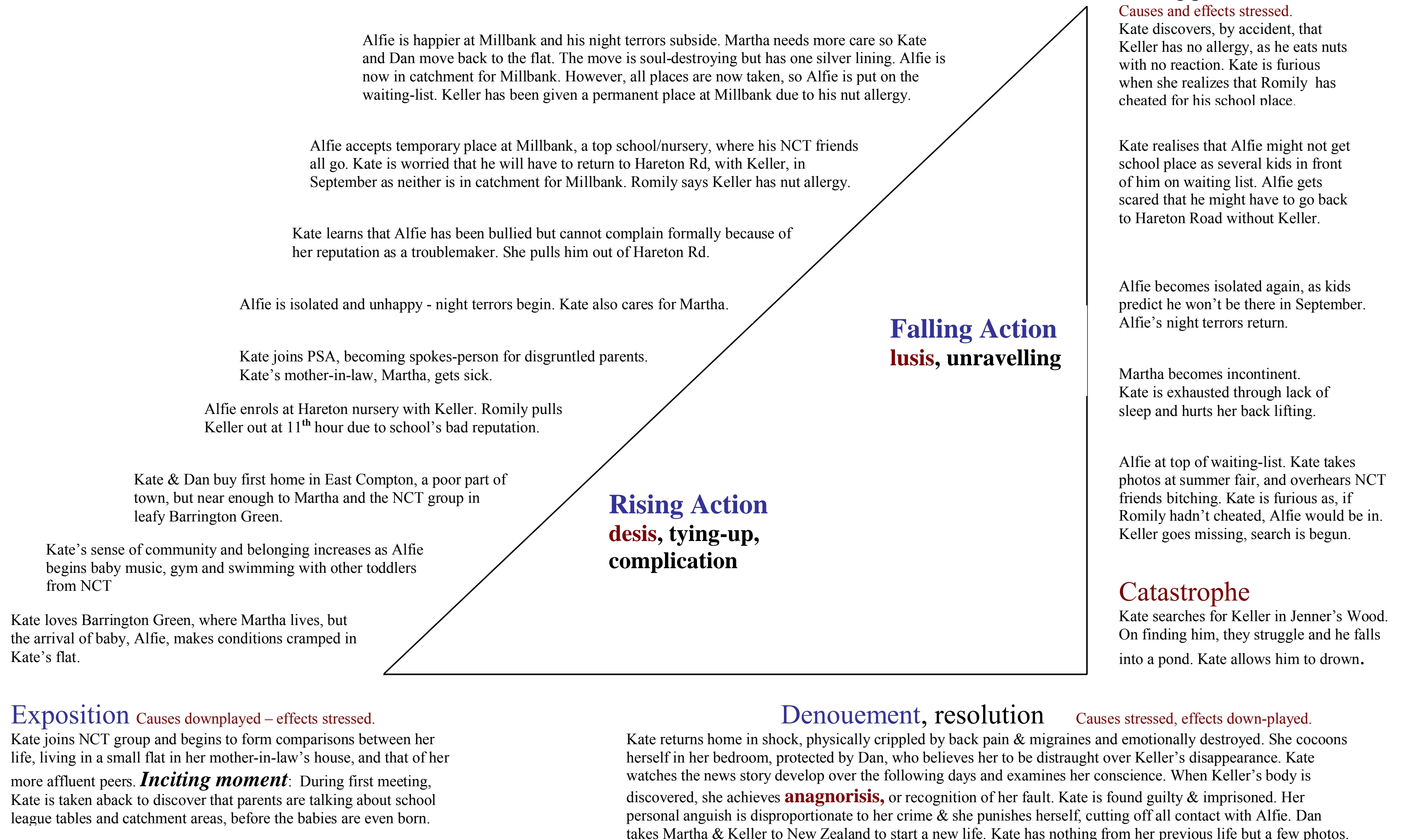
I have studied Latin up to 'O' Level, but have not been taught Greek classic literature or language. The classical knowledge I possess comes through personal reading, theatre trips or from tiny smatterings picked up in 'A' Level English. My first degree was in the sciences where my Latin proved most useful. Therefore, like DBC Pierre, I appear to have picked up a sense of the tragic through the cultural references around me: theatre, television and literature.

As a reader, I began to enjoy books with a powerful tragic theme in my early teens, when a particularly inspiring English teacher guided me to the works of Dickens, Orwell, Greene, Golding, Huxley, Steinbeck and Harper Lee. I liked the fact that these books put my own personal problems into perspective but still allowed me to express that sense of drama inherent to all teenagers. Primarily, tragic novels gave my younger self someone to identify with. When complications arose in the plot, I would fight back an urge to shout at the character to stop, right there, and not do whatever it was that seemed so necessary but was, in fact, so terribly wrong. When my hero's world collapsed, I could cry with pity, and then feel stronger myself, more able to face my own private demons without following such a treacherous path. The desire for good tragedy has remained with me.

Perhaps that is why, when I set out to write my own novel, a tragic theme seemed natural. At that point, I had not started the research for this thesis, and had no formal knowledge of Greek tragedy, nor of Aristotle's *Poetics*. I had no conscious concept then of tragic form. However, it is interesting for me now to see the parallels that occur between my novel, written in the twenty-first century, with classic tragedy from the fifth century BC.

On applying Freytag's Analysis to my novel, *The First Seven Years*, I was amazed to see how easily the plot structure fits. It has become apparent that my novel not only naturally achieves *desis*, *peripeteia* and *lusis,* but also fulfils Freytag's five point criteria. Comparisons with Tartt's novel are also easier now. My structure is not so elegantly balanced and arranged. My climax is not as violent as hers - Tartt chooses Bunny's death for her climax but Henry's suicide for her Catastrophe. Kate's realisation of Romily's cheating is a natural point for my climax and Keller's murder for my catastrophe. But fundamentally, the novels are similar. They both fulfil the tragic form. Below you will find my application of Freytag's Analysis in **Fig 6**:

Fig. 6 Freytag's Pyramid : *The First Seven Years*



Exposition Causes downplayed – effects stressed.
Kate joins NCT group and begins to form comparisons between her life, living in a small flat in her mother-in-law's house, and that of her more affluent peers. ***Inciting moment***: During first meeting, Kate is taken aback to discover that parents are talking about school league tables and catchment areas, before the babies are even born.

Denouement, resolution Causes stressed, effects down-played.
Kate returns home in shock, physically crippled by back pain & migraines and emotionally destroyed. She cocoons herself in her bedroom, protected by Dan, who believes her to be distraught over Keller's disappearance. Kate watches the news story develop over the following days and examines her conscience. When Keller's body is discovered, she achieves **anagnorisis,** or recognition of her fault. Kate is found guilty & imprisoned. Her personal anguish is disproportionate to her crime & she punishes herself, cutting off all contact with Alfie. Dan takes Martha & Keller to New Zealand to start a new life. Kate has nothing from her previous life but a few photos.

The First Seven Years employs a prologue, which begins not quite in *media res,* ie in the middle of the action, but rather towards the end of the action. Effectively, the prologue tells us what has happened, i.e. that a mother is imprisoned for killing a child, but does not tell us much more. We are left curious. The prologue establishes that Kate has a great love for her son Alfie, from whom she is now separated since she is living in prison. Kate's life is effectively ended and she deals with the remorse, guilt and sadness caused by her own actions in the recent past. This treatment reflects the way Tartt deals with her protagonist, Richard. The Ancient Greeks would quite often kill their protagonists, but the end effect is the same for both my novel and The Secret History: the reader knows, right from the outset, that this story will end unhappily. Like the Greek classics, he has the rest of the play, or in this case the novel, to establish how and why these events occurred. I have realised, however from the study of the Greek dramas and also *The Secret History*, that perhaps the novel would have been stronger had I balanced the novel a little more and employed *media res* more centrally as Tartt did – so giving Kate a longer period of time to repent after the catastrophe.

The First Seven Years does follow the principals of the Three Unities. Using the *Unity of Action*, the plot tells the story of one woman's attempt to get her child a good education. Through the *Unity of Place*: the greater scope of a novel allows more diversity here, but although the action happens in several scenes, all but one scene occur within a three-mile radius. I found a definite difference with the *Unity of Time*: Aristotle desires a time frame of a single day whereas I have utilised seven years. However I consider this to be quite fitting since my time frame is one stage of a person's life, or to be more specific, the childhood of young Alfie, seen from the point of view of his mother.

In his preface to Euripides' *Bacchae*, Richard Rutherford states that '*myth exaggerates and tragedy dramatizes'*. In *The First Seven Years*, I have exaggerated the urban myth of parental cheating and dramatized this myth. Fate is the cruelty of impartial red tape, such as governing bodies and catchment areas.

The First Seven Years uses a type of chorus in its plot structure: namely the NCT group of mothers. This chorus was intentional in function from very early in the novel's conception. My NCT women appear regularly as a group, and follow the story through from the beginning to the end. In *King Oedipus* the chorus opens the play with the Theban Elders and in *The First Seven Years* we also meet the chorus in

the very first scene, when Kate is introduced to the women at their first NCT meeting. The mothers serve a dual purpose - they are characters in their own right but it is through their group discussions that we get to understand the sensibilities and values of modern women and the pressures and strains on them as they raise their children. This chorus is not made up of elders, as would be found in the Greek tragedy. Instead, it consists of young, vibrant mothers, with careers behind them and plans ahead. For the level-headed, 'been there, done that' approach, Kate is reliant on Martha, her mother-in-law, who is a generation older, but most of her ideals and beliefs are influenced by the mother and baby group. This is, I believe, a reflection on our society, in that we do not value the opinions of our elders as was done in the past. It is also indicative of the *hubris* of our modernity, that our generation knows best and has nothing to learn from our elders.

The protagonist, Kate, fulfils many of Aristotle's criteria for the ideal tragic heroine. Primarily, she is a character with whom one can identify: she has good intentions and tries hard to do the right thing. Unlike the Greek heroines, her life is not controlled by the gods, but she has a force almost as powerful controlling her strings. In Kate's life, the idiosyncrasies of state bureaucracy control her actions and reactions, though blind Fate also plays its part in Kate's downfall.

Initially, Kate believes that she has a choice regarding her son's choice of school. She suffers from *hubris*, or overweening pride, in that she believes that her own personal efforts will overcome any problems that her child faces. Kate desires the best for her son and this belief develops into her own *hamartia*, or fatal flaw, whereby Kate feels that the education given to a child in their first seven years will influence that child's character for life. The primary years of learning are crucial to Alfie's future happiness. When she discovers that she has in fact no choice, but must take the only school near to where she lives, despite its failing reputation and the bullying her son receives in the nursery there, Kate is driven to extreme measures.

Layers of Fate attack Kate. First she finds her husband becoming both physically and emotionally distant as his heavy work hours take him away from home. Then the support of her best friend is removed when Romily decides the local nursery is not good enough for her son. Alfie is left at a failing school with no best friend and gradually becomes the victim of bullying. Kate's next blow of fate is when her Mother-in-law gets ill and she is forced to take on the demanding role of carer. Finally, Kate's own physical deterioration with chronic pack pain due to lifting and

caring for Martha, along with the bureaucracy of local councils with their catchment areas and admissions criteria, increase the pressures on Kate. Blinded by her *hamartia,* she finally snaps, and kills/allows to drown, Keller, the son of her best friend Romily. It is this act that causes Kate's *peripeteia* or reversal of fortune to occur, her point of no return. Life will never be good again for Kate.

At this stage in the novel, one cannot help but feel sympathy for Kate, despite the despicable act she has committed. This is the principle of *pathos*, of deep sympathy for a flawed but originally well-meaning character. Had Kate revelled in her misdeeds, or profited by them, with her child receiving the school place that the murdered boy had vacated, then this novel would fail as a tragedy. But Kate's actions cause both her, and her family, to suffer greatly. She returns home, bedraggled and destroyed, electively mute with misery and guilt. Her husband supports her, believing her to be anxious about the disappearance of young Keller, and allows her to hide away from friends and family. Kate lies in bed, watching news bulletin after bulletin that charts the progress of the police, first in their hunt for a missing child and then, once the body has been dragged from the pond, Kate watches as the television reports switch in tone to a murder investigation. During this time, the full horror of what she has done begins to dawn on Kate, and she eventually gives herself up to the police - in full knowledge that she will never see her child again.

The First Seven Years closes without the bloodbath of a Greek tragedy. Corpses do not litter the stage. Instead there is only one death - that of the child, Keller, son of Kate's friend and rival, Romily. Romily's family will probably never get over this, and the tragedy will change forever the dynamics of trust within the NCT group, the school and the local community. However, in the style of classic tragedy, the ripples from this one death will have a particularly cumulative and devastating affect on Kate and her family. Kate, we already know, is imprisoned more in her own agony than one created by Her Majesty's Prison service. Her actions have destroyed her family unit, and caused her son to be taken abroad. Poor Alfie, whose mother loved him too much, will have lost not just his mum, but also his best friend, his school and his homeland. Dan, Kate's husband, is thrown into the role of a single parent in a foreign country, struggling to raise his son and earn a living, and with the awful shame of his wife's behaviour shadowing his every action. Now the reader has reached the end of the novel and Kate's story, he/she feels an intense surge of emotion: pity, disgust and

an almost physical sense of purging. This is the principle of *katharsis*, which remains as powerful today as always.

I feel that the nub of tragedy is justice and acceptance of justice. The tragic hero is often trying to seek justice for his or her loved ones, but in doing so often goes too far, and instead becomes the wrongdoer. It is imperative that he is also judged and punished accordingly. If this is not done, then the tragedy has no substance. Whether this judgement is through the legal system or through a more natural justice, is not really important. The hero must suffer for his crime. Oedipus lost his mother and father though his own misdeeds, albeit unintentional. He therefore punished himself by gouging out his eyes. His brother-in-law compounded Oedipus's suffering by having him outcast into the desert and separated from his children. My protagonist, Kate, is imprisoned, but her biggest punishment is the self-inflicted distancing from her child. As the detective Porfiry says, in Dostoyevsky's *'Crime and Punishment'*:

> Whoever has a conscience will no doubt suffer, if he realizes his mistake. That's his punishment – on top of penal servitude.
> (Dostoyevsky, [1866] 1972, p.281)

Were Kate to demand to see her son in prison, it would be a sign that she still felt she deserved his love, but she does make this demand. She severs all ties and takes her punishment. This is the *anagnorisis,* or recognition of culpability that is essential to tragedy, and which Raskolnikov in *'Crime and Punishment'* also embodies. This stage could be expanded in a redraft of the novel, as I believe it could increase the power of Kate's downfall.

It is hoped that my readers will weep at my tale, but also that they go away thinking. The flaws in our education system have been discussed ad nauseam, but we appear to be paralysed into inaction. The ancient Greeks, however, believed in action and I would like to think that my tragedy might bring this about.

9. Conclusion

Tragedy is one of the seven original stories of the world. This concept can be found in Christopher Booker's well-known book *'The Seven Basic Plots'* (Brookner, 2006). He is not the first to come up with the basic plot theory, but he has achieved widespread recognition because he explains an idea that seems obvious: all stories, no matter how complicated, boil down to one of a few fundamental plots.

I believe that Tragedy remains the most important of these. This is because tragedy fulfils a fundamental human need to feel compassion for our neighbour. *Pathos* or sympathy for another person - whether seen as an inbuilt part of human nature, of the soul, or of our genetic makeup as a social species - plays a part in the storytelling of cultures, be that Western Civilisation with its roots in Greek Tragedy, or oral aboriginal stories, Chinese fables, or African folklore. Tragedy, in this broad sense, is part of all human make-up. Greek Tragedy, to my mind, is simply pure human tragedy but with added rules specific to its Western fifth century BC *tekhnê* or art form.

Much argument has been made as to whether a novel can be a true tragedy (which in our culture will always hark back to the ancient Greek tragic play), but I have argued that so long as the format - be it play, novel or poem - portrays the tragic story and follows certain rules of form, then it has the ability to produce the *pathos* and *katharsis* that is the essence of tragedy. If it is truly necessary to pigeonhole works such as Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, then I believe the simple category of tragic novel, or tragic literary fiction, would do very well, as long as this did not become confused with the recent genre of '*tragic life story'* memoirs.

We have already seen in depth how the use of prologues, epilogues, choruses, *desis, lusis*, *anagnorisis, hamartia* and *hubris* all combine in the modern novel to produce the effect of *pathos* and *katharsis* in the reader. At the beginning of this thesis, I questioned whether the modern novelist was aware of Greek tragic form when such tragedies were being written. I have established that some writers, such as Donna Tartt, are very aware of Greek tragedy and have used the format and methods consciously.

Writers like David Guterson, who are familiar with the ideas and formats but do not set out to use them, often find that they have appeared in their work. Other writers, such as DBC Pierre, who have had no tertiary education and negligible

contact with classical texts, still achieved tragic form. Awareness is obviously no barrier to usage.

Writers are influenced by their surroundings, society and reading. I have found it fascinating to follow the threads of influence in the author's own reading material to see how they may have picked up such methodology – as in the case of Arthur Miller's *'Death of a Salesman'*, which had such a big impact on DBC Pierre. I have also become aware that cultural references may be picked up through many different sources, whether it be novels read, plays seen, films viewed, or television watched.

DBC Pierre is an enthusiastic advocate of popular culture. In my email interview, Pierre said:

> I would very much suspect that classical comedy and tragedy have not only influenced the history of theatrical and narrative output up to the current day, but even that they've become inherent forms in informal human expression. In the way we weave our life's drama in our minds, for instance; and in the way we hope, fear or expect unfolding events to manifest. I wouldn't be surprised to find that our lives' stories unconsciously reference classical plots, and are perpetuated by media in condensing and retelling the stories of others.
>
> (Pierre, 2009)

Television drama that extracts elements of classic tragedy can also be extremely successful. Take, for example, the series '*24*' - all the action occurs within a time-span of twenty-four hours. Is this not an illustration of the dramatic effect of the Unity of Time? Another American TV drama, *The Wire,* makes no bones about basing its plotlines on Greek tragedy. Director David Simon called it:

> 'a *Greek tragedy done in a modernist urban way, with the city as the main character'*.
>
> (Variety site posted 07.03.08)

Donna Tartt, despite her fierce literary knowledge, also admits that popular culture may influence writers. In her Internet interview with Robert Birnbaum posted on 11.12.2002 she says:

> It's impossible to be a novelist in the 21st century and not be influenced by media. For us, seeing is believing. Our enormous visual sophistication as a people and as a culture has infiltrated us in every way, not just in the writing of novels and the reading of novels.
>
> (Tartt, Birnbaum, 2002)

This appreciation of the visual allows Tartt to writes in a filmic way, but, precisely as Aristotle recommends, Tartt's plotting is always superior to her albeit excellent spectacle. Literature remains Tartt's first love, as is also the case with Harper Lee, the

author of *To Kill a Mocking-Bird*, a novel that inspired a whole generation of writers, including David Guterson. Like Tartt, Lee was precociously well-read as a child. Also like Tartt, this love of books has never left her. Lee rarely gives interviews, but in a recent letter to Oprah Winfrey about her love of reading, she said:

> Now, 75 years later in an abundant society where people have laptops, cellphones, iPods and minds like empty rooms, I still plod along with books.
>
> (Lee, The Independent, 28.06.06)

The bright threads of influence that lead an author like myself to the novels of Tartt, Guterson, Shriver and Pierre, can so easily be followed back to the works of Lee and Miller, Greene and Dickens, Goethe, Racine, Marlowe and Shakespeare. When we follow these threads we seem always to come back the source of tragedy, the great poets Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

In my introduction, I asked whether my novel fulfilled the criteria of tragic form and, if so, could it be classified as tragic? Following the analysis of my own text, I was surprised to find how many of those criteria have been fulfilled. As to whether *'The First Seven Years'* succeeds in engendering the interest, empathy and the ultimate feeling of *pathos* and *katharsis* in my readers, that makes a tragedy so powerful, well, I am afraid I am not in a position to answer that myself. It would feel a little too much like hubris.

I leave the last words on the subject of tragedy to Arthur Miller:

> And it is curious, although edifying, that the plays we revere, century after century, are the tragedies. In them, and in them alone, lies the belief - optimistic, if you will, in the perfectibility of man. It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possible lead in our time - the heart and spirit of the average man.
>
> (Miller, [1949] 1978 p.3)

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Finally, I would like to clarify the sourcing of the CS Lewis quotation on page nine. I originally found this on Professor Wheeler's Classical Literature site, but was unable to source further in any of Lewis' published works. I therefore got in touch with Professor Wheeler, who kindly gave me the following response:

> The quotation comes from a public lecture C.S. Lewis gave in Oxford in 1958 while he was working on *The Discarded Image*. It was recounted to me by one of C.S. Lewis's former students, Richard Murphy (who is himself now something of a well-known poet). Murphy recounted it to me when he came to visit Carson-Newman College for a poetry reading in the spring term of 2003. As far as I know, the quotation does not appear in any of Lewis's published work, though sentiments vaguely similar to it appear less succinctly in his other theological writings.
>
> Kip Wheeler
> Assistant Professor of English
> Carson-Newman College
> 05.04.07

Appendix I

Glossary of Greek Terminology

This glossary incorporates Greek terminology used in this thesis and other terms that are useful to the development of tragedy.

agon	i) contest or challenge of a religious or cultural festival, or sporting event.
	ii) a god-like personification of this contest.
	iii) the struggle between characters which provides the basis of the action.
anagnorisis	recognition, usually of hero's own culpability, or mistake.
amathia	recklessness, deep ignorance of self leading to excess and impatience.
bakkheia	frenzy inspired by Bacchus/Dionysus.
chthonios	subterranean, usually in regard to spirits from the underworld.
chronos	passage of historical time
deinos	wonderful, terrible, awesome, sacred, dread.
desis	complications within a plot, that develop the story line prior to the peripeteia.
deus ex machina	'god from a box'. The contrivance of solving plot dilemmas with unexpected mechanical devices, implying intervention from the gods
dianoia	thought, theme or idea.
diegesis	telling, recounting, of a story by a narrator.
dithyramb	a choral singing competition that told Dionysian tales. Forerunner to tragedy.
eleos/oiktos	pity, visceral intensity, compassionate grief.
ekkyklêma	the use of a cart to pull onto stage the bloodied victims of fate.
ekstasis	literally: astonishment, meaning: trance or hypnotic state, being out of oneself.
epikairekakia	schadenfreude, pleasure in another's misfortune.
ethos	characterisation or setting, or custom/habit.
hamartia	tragic misjudgement or flaw, error committed through ignorance.
hoi polloi	(οι πολλοί) the masses or common people.
hubris	excessive pride or arrogance, that may lead to fatal retribution or nemesis.
kairos	specific time charged with crisis – a moment of opportunity.

katharsis	the release of pent up energy or emotion in an audience after watching a tragedy. Stems from the Greek for purification or purgation. Different translations allow different interpretations: purification equates to external cleansing such as with holy water whilst purgation implies the more guttural internal purging as with caster oil. *Katharsis* could occur on stage, within the action or off stage in the soul of the spectator
lexis	the delivery of words, be it through speech or literature.
lusis	the unravelling of events in a storyline, following the peripeteia.
melos	the element dealing with the tonal, musical aspect of literature.
mimesis	an imitation of the world around us. An actor presenting himself as someone else, and using action to show events happening.
mythos	plot.
nemesis	a painful response to another's undeserved good fortune. Named after Nemesis, the ancient Greek goddess of retribution
omophagia	the eating of raw flesh, as seen in *The Bacchae* and later in *The Secret History*.
opsis	the element dealing with visual aspects of literature.
pathos	suffering, but also 'a calamity'
peripeteia	reversal of circumstances or turning point. The point in a drama where the action changes dramatically before moving on to its denouement.
pthonos	painful response to another's good fortune, whether deserved or not. Envy.
tekhnê	craft, skill, or art, instinct.
tragōidia	the goat song, a forerunner of the dithyramb

Appendix II

Gods and Mortals of Greek Tragedy

An alphabetical list of the mythological figures mentioned in this thesis, and others relevant to the development of tragedy.

Agamemnon	A mythical hero, king of Argos, husband to Clymenstra and father of Orestes, Electra and Iphigenia.
Antigone	Daughter of Oedipus.
Aphrodite	Goddess of Love and Beauty. Spitefully caused Phaedra to fall for Hippolytus, in revenge for his preference to Artemis.
Apollo	God of Light and Sun, medicine, truth and prophecy. Associated with intellect and rational Athenian thinking.
Ariadne	Daughter of King Minos, she gave Theseus a sword to kill the Minotaur and a ball of thread to help him find his way back through the Labyrinth.
Artemis	Goddess of hunting, forests & hills and fertility.
Athena	Goddess of warfare and heroic endeavour. Patron of Athens.
Bacchae	Followers of Dionysus/Bacchus, called Maenads in Greek.
Clytemnestra	Wife of Agamemnon and his murderer.
Dionysus	God of wine & society, inspiring ritual madness & ecstasy.
Electra	Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, brother of Orestes. She encourages Orestes to murder their mother.
Eumenides	Meaning 'the kindly ones'. These cruel spirits of the underworld punish those who commit evil deeds, particularly matricide or patricide.
Iphigenia	Daughter of Agamemnon, sacrificed by him to appease Artemis.
Jocasta	Queen of Thebes, mother and wife to Oedipus.
Maenads	Meaning 'raving ones'. Female followers of Dionysus.
Melpomene	Daughter of Zeus, she was one of the nine muses and represented tragedy.
Oedipus	Meaning 'swollen-footed'. Oedipus was the mythical king of Thebes who fulfilled the prophesy of murdering his father and marrying his mother.
Orestes	Son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, avenges his father's death by murdering his mother. His is pursued by the Erinyes and saved by Athena.
Phaedra	Wife of Theseus. Falls in love with her stepson Hippolytus and, when rejected, accuses him of rape. She repents after his death and kills herself.
Theseus	King of Athens, wife of Hippolyta, then Phaedra, father to Hippolytus.
Zeus	King of gods and ruler of Mount Olympus. God of the heavens and thunder

Appendix III

Ancient Greek Chronology

A brief digest of dates relevant to figures mentioned in this thesis and the development of tragedy.

BC	
534	First tragedy produced by Thespis.
525	Aeschylus born.
496	Sophocles born.
495	Pericles born.
490	First Persian invasion: Battle of Marathon.
484	Aeschylus wins his first Dionysian competition.
480	Second Persian invasion.
480	Euripides born.
472	Aeschylus, *Persians*.
469	Socrates born.
468	Sophocles wins his first Dionysian competition.
467	Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes*.
463	Aeschylus, *Suppliants (Libation Bearers)*.
458	Aeschylus, *Oresteia*.
456	Aeschylus dies.
449	Prize for best tragic actor introduced.
440	Euripides wins his first Dionysian competition.
440s	Sophocles, *Ajax, Antigone*.
438	Euripides, *Alkestis*.
431	Euripides, *Medea*.
431	Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens.
430	Plague.
430-28	Sophocles, *King Oedipus*
429	Pericles dies.
428	Euripides, *Hippolytus (Phaedra)*
427	Plato born.
425-13	Sophocles, *Elektra*.
415	Euripides, *Women of Troy*.
413	Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Tauris*.

408	Euripides, *Orestes*.
406	Sophocles dies.
406	Euripides dies.
405	Euripides, *The Bacchae* posthumously produced.
404	Athens defeated by Sparta.
403	Athens endures civil war. Democracy restored.
401	Sophocles, *Oedipus at Kolonus* posthumously produced.
399	Socrates executed
387	Plato's Academy opens.
384	Aristotle born.
384 - 322	Aristotle's *Poetics.* There is no consensus of agreement on this date.
356	Alexander the Great born.
347	Plato dies.
343	Alexander commences his studies under Aristotle, aged 13.
323	Alexander the Great dies.
322	Aristotle dies.
04 AD	Seneca the Younger, Roman philosopher and dramatist, is born.
20-65 AD	Seneca writes *Phaedra, Medea, Thyestes, Agamemnon* & *Oedipus*.
65 AD	Seneca the Younger dies.

Appendix IV

Chronology to Present

A digest of dates relevant to the post-classical and modern tragedies that have been mentioned in this thesis, and some others that may also be of interest.

AD	
1343	Chaucer born.
1380	Chaucer starts work on *The Canterbury Tales*.
1385	Chaucer writes tragic poem *Troilus and Criseyde*.
1388-1400	*The Canterbury Tales* published.
1400	Chaucer dies.
1550-60	Thomas Kyd writes *The Spanish Tragedy*.
1564	William Shakespeare born.
1564	Christopher Marlowe born.
1586	Christopher Marlowe writes *Dido, Queen of Carthage*.
1587-8	Christopher Marlowe writes *Tamburlaine Parts I & II*.
1589	Christopher Marlowe writes *The Jew of Malta*.
1589	Christopher Marlowe writes *Dr Faustus*.
1590	Shakespeare writes *Titus Andronicus*.
1591-95	Shakespeare writes *Romeo and Juliet*.
1593	Christopher Marlowe dies.
1598	The first Opera, Jacopo Peri's *Dafne*, is produced in Florence.
1599	Shakespeare writes *Julius Caesar*.
1599-1601	Shakespeare writes *Hamlet.*
1603	Shakespeare writes *Othello*.
1603	Shakespeare writes *Troilus and Criseyde*.
1604	Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* published.
1603-06	Shakespeare writes *King Lear*.
1603-06	Shakespeare writes *Macbeth*.
1606-07	Shakespeare writes *Anthony and Cleopatra*.
1607-08	Shakespeare writes *Coriolanus*.
1607-08	Shakespeare writes *Timon of Athens*.
1609-10	Shakespeare writes *Cymbeline*.
1616	Shakespeare dies.
1623	Shakespeare's First Folio published.

1635	Pierre Corneille's *Médée* is produced.
1642	British theatres closed due to Civil War
1660	British theatres re-opened after Civil War
1670	Jean Racine's *Berenice* published.
1671	Milton's closet-drama, *Sampson Agonistes,* published.
1808	J W Goethe's *Faust, Part I* published.
1808	J W Goethe's *Elective Affinities* published.
1821	Lord Byron's closet-drama *Sardanapalus* published
1832	J W Goethe's *Faust, Part II* published.
1837	Queen Victoria ascends to the throne.
1851	Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* published
1853	Charles Dicken's *Bleak House* published
1857	Charles Dicken's *Little Dorrit* published
1859	George Elliot's *Adam Bede* published
1860	George Elliot's *The Mill on the Floss* published
1865	Charles Dicken's *Our Mutual Friend* published
1866	Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* published.
1871	George Elliot's *Middlemarch* published
1872	Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*
1874	Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* published.
1886	Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Castorbridge* published.
1891	Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* published.
1902	Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* published.
1960	Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* published.
1912	George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* published.
1939	John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* published.
1949	Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* produced.
1993	Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* published.
1995	David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars* published.
1999	Alice Sebold's *Lucky* published
2002	Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* published
2003	DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little* published
2005	Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* published

Appendix V

DBC Pierre Interview

The following e-mails were part of an on-line interview that I conducted with DBC Pierre, author of *Vernon God Little*. This interview followed an introduction with the author, after a reading held at the London Literary Festival, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank, on the 14th July 2009. Mr Pierre kindly gave me permission to quote him in my thesis.

From: Monika Turner Sent: 25th July 2009 19:56

Dear DP,

I hope you have recovered from the great excitement of the Oxfam book launch/ London Literary Festival, held at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on the 14th July. Do you remember, I mentioned that I was citing Vernon God Little as an example of tragedy in the modern novel? That is why I was so glad to meet you in person. I felt Vernon was the perfect tragic hero, not too perfect and with definite flaws, but actually well-meaning and with an ability to do the wrong thing, but for the right reason… I would be really grateful to be able to quote you in my thesis. Any chance you could give me an answer to the following question:

> *'To what extent did you have the Greek tragic form in mind and did you intend the novel to be seen as a tragedy?'*

I am also interested in what writers have read that has influenced their work. Do you have anything in particular that changed how you see the world, and may have influenced your writing? I have an inkling that without necessarily being classically trained we have all picked up classical ideas. I have had no literary or classical teaching at all, but find elements of Greek tragedy cropping up in my own, as yet unpublished novel, written as part of my MPhil.

Anyway, I hope this doesn't take up too much of your time, and if you are too busy I quite understand. I have a feeling we could have chatted for quite some time on the subject, but that would have been selfish!

Best wishes,

Monika

From: DP Sent: 25 July 2009 21:03

Monika,

Cheers, as to your question: I am not classically trained, so as to whether Vernon follows a classical tragic form I can't say. But I would very much suspect that classical comedy and tragedy have not only influenced the history of theatrical and narrative output up to the current day, but even that they've become inherent forms in informal human expression. In the way we weave our life's drama in our minds, for instance; and in the way we hope, fear or expect unfolding events to manifest. I wouldn't be surprised to find that our lives' stories unconsciously reference classical plots, and are perpetuated by media in condensing and retelling the stories of others. Whether such plots are patterns in nature identified by Greeks, or whether we have absorbed them due to their powerful formats, you would have to say.

I did imagine Vernon a tragedy as I wrote him, but without a notion of form. In a way then, to the extent it might reflect any classical influence whatsoever, I'm a good guinea-pig for you, because I never read a Greek tragedy before writing it - and so any influence comes purely from culture. Note that Vernon himself guides his life according to narrative routines from TV, and lives forever between the tragic downfall and happy ending. The book in itself is an illustration of what I say to you - a management by reference to existing plots in the surrounding culture.

Before starting to write, and as a basic fascination of my life, I was interested in the relationship between comedy and tragedy - particularly in how closely they live together, or indeed whether they form one master quality in the end. I found certain themes from life too harsh to retell in any form but comedy - and in choosing that form, knew immediately that I was toying in some way with tragedy. You're in the better position to see how any of these ideas come to bear on the work, and in what measure they might reference a formal tragedy. I worked purely from instinct.

Hope there's something in there you can use!

All best,

DP

From: Monika Turner Sent: 27th July 2009 18:44

Hi DP,

Many thanks for the very prompt email. Your comments were excellent and will be integrated into the whole tomorrow. It has been said that there are only ever 7 stories to be told, everything else is just a twist on one of these tales. The first story is tragedy, and the second

comedy. I am glad you didn't 'have a notion of form' before you started writing. I loved Vernon God Little when I was reading it because it was so fresh and original.

You are a perfect guinea pig, it is true. Having not been to college, your Classical references will have been entirely through indirect influence. On the other end of the scale, I am also looking at Donna Tartt (The Secret History). She had a proper classical training and reflected it in her novel. Funnily enough, I recently found out that Jim Morrisson (of The Doors) worked on a production of Oedipus Rex when he was a student and hence came out with the rather dodgy lyrics in 'The End'. (Father, Yes Son, I want to Kill You, etc) That was a surprise.

You said you were interested in comedy and tragedy as a basic fascination of life, were any of these in book form? What do you read? Do you have one book, above all others that you loved when you were in your teens, or twenties? (I had a big thing for Steinbeck then.) Finally, how long did it take you to write Vernon God Little? (My novel took two years, but I was distracted!) Thank you so much for your help with my thesis.

Take care,

Monika

From: DP Sent: 27 July 2009 19:56

Monika,

To your question, it's easy to find my influences, I didn't read too much in my teens, but what I did mysteriously had great impact on me. Rarely if ever read more than one work by the same author. In order of appearance, my memorable reading was:

Miller - Death Of A Salesman (Vernon even makes a small tribute with a mention of Simonizing the Studebaker), Waugh - Decline & Fall, Vidal – Duluth, Kerouac - On The Road

Vernon took me about 20 months to write. 5 weeks for first draft, and the rest trying to straighten it out!

Good luck, hope that's helpful

DP

Appendix VI

David Guterson Transcript

This is a transcript of a question I was invited to pose to David Guterson, author of *Snow Falling on Cedars,* for a recording of BBC World Service Book Club. I applied to the BBC to be included in the Book Club audience as Mr Guterson was one of the novelists whose work I was researching as part of my MPhil. Because of my background and interest in Tragedy, the producer asked me to contribute to the programme with a question, of my choice, sent in advance of the recording. This meant that Mr Guterson was able to read and mull over his response, before answering it on air. His reply was thoughtful and quite pertinent to my thesis. The BBC producer gave me permission to use the following excerpt from the unedited Master tape in my thesis. I was gratified that the question I asked Mr Guterson, and his excellent answer, remained intact, and included, in the final broadcast.

Recorded: 14th October 2008 at Broadcasting House
Aired: 7th February 2009 worldwide on BBC World Service

Monika Turner:

Q: 'Snow Falling on Cedars' is a beautiful novel full of sad events caused by a combination of culture clash, human cruelty and sheer bad luck. To what extent did you have the Greek tragic form in mind and did you intend the novel to be seen as a tragedy?

David Guterson:

A: Well, thank you for the question. I did not specifically have the structure of Greek tragedy in mind, you know, as it is sort of formally construed say in, a classic's class where hubris is on the line and the Gods and fate operative. But the question of fate and chance and accident, and the way that forces can conspire against us because of chance or accident, maybe because of God or the gods, we don't know, I was interested in that.

I was interested in the fact that forces are arrayed against us to such a great extent in life anyway, that human beings are really called upon not to make any contribution to it through their own moral carelessness. Things are bad enough without human beings adding to it by virtue of their own moral laxity and so to that extent, perhaps in that way I had a sort of tragic notion in mind that we live in a universe that can in fact conspire against us and we are called upon to be better than we might be because of that, that there might be an element of the tragic in that.