Elements of a Tragic Hero (by Aristotle in Poetics)

1. The tragic hero is a person of noble stature
   - He has one outstanding quality (often a prince or king)
   - He is great not primarily by virtue of his nobility but by possession of extraordinary powers, by qualities of passion or aspiration, or nobility of mind (he’s really smart, incredibly brave)

2. Though the hero is great, he is NOT perfect.
   - Combined with strength, there is a vulnerability (he’s a liar, he’s insecure)
   - His fall is caused by this tragic character flaw
   - His vulnerability leads to his downfall

3. The main character (hero) always falls from his place (death, banishment)

4. The hero’s downfall is therefore, partially his own fault
   - A result of free choice, not pure accident or villainy

5. Nevertheless, the hero’s misfortune is not wholly deserved.
   - The punishment exceeds the crime
   - Audience feels there is a waste of human potential

6. Yet the tragic fall is not pure loss.
   - Before the death there is some increase in awareness, some gain in self-knowledge (change from ignorance to knowledge)

7. Though the tragedy arouses solemn emotions (pity and fear), it does not leave the audience in a state of depression.
   - With the fall of the hero and his gain of self-knowledge, there is, besides the sense of human waste, a fresh recognition of human greatness
   - Though the hero may be defeated, he at least has dared greatly and gains an understanding from his defeat

Additional tragedy terms to know

HAMARTIA---The error in judgment that a tragic protagonist makes which brings about his own suffering or demise.

METABASIS---The Greek word used by Aristotle in THE POETICS to mean “change of fortune.” In tragedy the change of fortune is always for the worse.

PERIPETIA---A metabasis which is accompanied by “reversal of intent” is called peripetia. Reversal of intent means that the choices and actions of a character aimed at bringing about a specific result ironically bring about the exact opposite of what was intended. In THE ILIAD Hector intends to drive the Greeks into the ocean and save his city by camping outside the walls of Troy but instead he gets many of his comrades killed and himself killed and thus guarantees the fall of Troy

PATHOS---Suffering. This Greek word is close to the English.

ANAGNORISIS---Recognition, specifically of the hamartia.

CATHARSIS---Aristotle says that the aim or purpose of tragedy is the catharsis of pity and fear. Catharsis is usually translated as “purification.” According to Aristotle a successful tragedy must first arouse pity and fear in its spectators. Aristotle says we feel pity for someone whose misfortune is undeserved. We feel fear when we see someone like ourselves in character and humanity undergoing a misfortune. After a story or play or novel has aroused pity and fear in a reader, those unpleasant feelings are purged. How? The English philosopher D.D. Raphael argues that catharsis occurs when pity and fear are replaced in the mind of the reader by admiration for the greatness of soul of the tragic protagonist. The further implication is that if a basically good tragic character can show integrity and responsibility even after making a horrible mistake, other human beings can rise to that nobility of spirit too. This is how tragedy becomes uplifting.
Greek Theater Conventions

Use of dramatic irony—Since the audience was already familiar with the plots, taken from well-known myths, they always had more information about the action than the characters on stage did. The suspense, then, was in how the well-known events would transpire and in the audience’s actually watching the events unfold before their eyes in “real time.”

The plays were acted in the daytime, with minimal sets and props. Actors were all male. They wore masks, wigs, and high-heeled boots, which increased their visibility to the audience and added to the formality of the experience.

Due to the religious intent and dignified style, no violence was shown on stage. The messenger ran on stage and spoke to the audience of any deaths or killings.

Role of the Chorus

A Chorus was used to present exposition and to provide commentary on the action and characters: Approx. 15 to 20 men who represented the citizens. They were always on stage, and they frequently sang and danced. They always had a leader who carried on a dialogue with the main characters or with the rest of the chorus.

The function of the chorus was to:
- set the tone
- give background information
- recall events of the past
- interpret and summarize events
- ask questions
- offer opinions
- give advice, if asked
- stay objective, (did not disagree with the leading character)
- act like a jury of elders or wise men who listened to the evidence in the play and reached a moralistic conclusion

- strophe – the first part of a choral ode or kommos, during which the Chorus moves from left to right, or east to west, across the stage.
- antistrophe – the part of a choral ode or kommos that follows the strophe and during which the Chorus performs its return steps from right to left or west to east.
- epode – the third part of a choral ode, following the strophe and antistrophe and completing the Chorus’s movement.

Tiresius, Blindness, and "Seeing"

Tiresias, a blind prophet, appears in many Greek myths. Several tales account for his blindness. One tells that he was struck blind as a boy when he saw Athena* bathing. Later Athena felt sorry for Tiresias but could not restore his sight. Instead, she gave him the gift of prophecy and the ability to understand the language of the birds.

In another myth, Tiresias came across two snakes mating. He killed the female snake and was transformed into a woman. Seven years later, he again saw two mating snakes; this time he killed the male snake and became a man. Because he had been both man and woman, Zeus* and Hera* asked him to settle an argument: Which of the sexes enjoys love more? When Tiresias replied that man gives more pleasure than he receives, Hera struck him blind. To make up for this deed, Zeus gave Tiresias the ability to foresee the future and allowed him to live an extraordinarily long life.

One of Tiresias 's gifts was that his spirit could still utter prophecies in the underworld. In the Odyssey*, the hero Odysseus goes to the underworld to seek advice from Tiresias. In the story of Oedipus*, Tiresias revealed that Oedipus had killed his father and married his own mother. In Antigone by Sophocles, Tiresias warns Creon against punishing Antigone for burying her brother. In yet another tale, Tiresias warned Pentheus, the king of Thebes, to pay tribute to the god Dionysus*. Pentheus, however, refused to listen to Tiresias and was torn to pieces by a group of Dionysus's followers called the Maenads.

Source: http://www.mythencyclopedia.com/Sp-Tl/Tiresias.html#ixzz4XYK1uAop