## Shakespeare’s plays

The plays of William Shakespeare are often grouped according to type. They are grouped according to whether they are:

* comedies
* histories
* tragedies.

These types of plays have existed for centuries in literature from many different cultures. Shakespeare’s plays draw on some of the conventions or rules from earlier Greek, French and Italian literature.

**The tragedies**

Shakespeare’s tragedies do not all follow exactly the same pattern or conventions, but they have many characteristics in common. A Shakespearean tragedy is a play that has a serious theme and a main character or protagonist whose life ends due to their own actions as well as the forces of fate.

The main character is focused or obsessed by one aspect of their life, such as revenge, power or love, to the point that this is all they focus on. This leads to the character becoming isolated from their family or friends or society. The main character’s actions and choices during the course of the play lead them to disaster. There is a sense that the disaster cannot be avoided. The main character or characters usually die near the end of the play. *Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra* and *Macbeth* are examples of Shakespearean tragedies.

**It’s a tragedy…**

In everyday life, the word ‘tragedy’ is used very differently from the way it is used in a Shakespearean play. It is often used to refer to a sad or dreadful event or disaster. We see examples in the news all the time of events that are described as being tragedies.

* **Consider three recent events that you have read or heard about in the news that have been described as ‘tragedies’.**

Sometimes the term ‘tragedy’ is used as a way of exaggerating an event or experiences that is inconvenient or unexpected and is used to describe situations that are not “life and death”. Example: *The way she dressed was an absolute tragedy.*

* **Read the following statements about tragedy and in your own words write a few lines (no less than 5) on what the speaker may have meant by them.**

**Quotations on tragedy**

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| Stalin: *A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.* |
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| Goethe: *The conflict on which a tragedy is based must ideally be one where there is no possible resolution*. |
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| Tom Stoppard: *The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means.* |
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| Thomas Hardy: *A plot, or tragedy, should arise from the gradual closing in of a situation that comes of ordinary human passions, prejudices and ambitions, by reason of the character taking no trouble to ward off the disastrous events produced by the said passions, prejudices and ambitions.* |
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**Who were they?**

**Joseph Stalin** or Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin was the de facto leader of the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953

**Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** was a German writer and politician. His body of work includes epic and lyric poetry written in a variety of metres and styles; prose and verse dramas; memoirs; an autobiography; literary and aesthetic criticism; treatises on botany, anatomy, and colour; and four novels.

**Sir Tom Stoppard** is a Czech-born British playwright, knighted in 1997.He has written prolifically for TV, radio, film and stage, finding prominence with plays such as *Arcadia*, and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. He co-wrote the screenplay for *Shakespeare in Love*,. Themes of human rights, censorship and political freedom pervade his work along with exploration of linguistics and philosophy.

**Thomas Hardy**, OM was an English novelist and poet. A Victorian realist, in the tradition of George Eliot, he was also influenced both in his novels and poetry by Romanticism, especially by William Wordsworth.