



# Shakespeare's Tragedies: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)

By Stanley Wells

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Tragedy, including grief, pain and suffering, is a common theme in Shakespeare's plays, often leading to the death of at least one character, if not several. Yet such themes can also be found in Shakespearian plays which are classed as comedies, or histories. What is it which makes a Shakespearian tragedy, and what dramatic themes and conventions did the bard draw upon when writing them?

In this *Very Short Introduction* Stanley Wells considers what is meant by the word 'tragedy', and discusses nine of Shakespeare's iconic tragic plays. He explores how the early definitions and theoretical discussions of the concept of tragedy in Shakespeare's time would have influenced these plays, along with the literary influence of Seneca. Wells also considers Shakespeare's uses of the word 'tragedy' itself, analysing whether he had any overall concept of the genre in relation to the drama, and looking at the ways in which the theatrical conventions of his time shaped his plays, such as the use of boy players in women's roles and the physical structures of the playhouses. Offering a critical analysis of each of the nine plays in turn, Wells concludes by discussing why tragedy is regarded as fit subject for entertainment, and what it is about tragic plays that audiences find so enjoyable.

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#### Review

... probably never - against the backdrop of so much literary, and other noise, today - has there ever been a greater need for short summaries of such works in an attempt to reach new audiences. So, from King Lear, to Antony and Cleopatra to Macbeth and Hamlet, et. al, the rudiments of all ten tragedies are condensed into just half a dozen pocket-sized pages each. Probably not for the connoisseur but much more likely for reluctant newbies still mystified by all the fuss. \* Screentrade Magazine \*

#### About the Author

**Stanley Wells** is Honorary President of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Professor Emeritus at the University of Birmingham, and the author of a number of books about Shakespeare, including *Shakespeare, Sex, and Love* (OUP, 2010), *Shakespeare and Co* (Penguin, 2007), and *William Shakespeare: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP, 2015). He is General Editor of the Oxford Shakespeare and Penguin Shakespeare and the co-editor of *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

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