The Plot Structure of Tragedy

“According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, tragedy involves a protagonist of high estate, referred to as the tragic hero(ine), who falls from prosperity to misery through a series of reversals and discoveries as a result of a tragic flaw (hamartia), ‘generally an error caused by human frailty.’”

1. Exposition
In the exposition, the background information that is needed to understand the story is provided. Such information includes the protagonist, the antagonist, the basic conflict, the setting, and so forth.

EXAMPLES FROM THE PLAY:

The exposition ends with the *inciting moment* (point A), which is the single incident in the story’s action without which there would be no story. The inciting moment sets the remainder of the story in motion, beginning with the second act, the rising action.

EXAMPLE FROM THE PLAY:

2. Rising Action
During the rising action, the basic *conflict* is complicated by the introduction of related secondary conflicts, including various obstacles that frustrate the protagonist’s attempt to reach his or her goal. Secondary conflicts can include adversaries of lesser importance than the story’s antagonist, who may work with the antagonist or separately, by and for himself or herself.

EXAMPLES FROM THE PLAY:
3. Climax
That third act is that of the climax, or reversal or peripeteia (point B), which marks a change for the worse in the protagonist’s affairs. In tragedy, circumstances which have previously been good for the tragic hero will now begin to turn bad. According to Aristotle, the change of fortune for the hero should be an event that occurs contrary to the audience’s expectations and that is therefore surprising, but that nonetheless appears as a necessary outcome of the preceding actions. This leads to a recognition (point C).

EXAMPLES FROM THE PLAY:

4. Falling Action
During the falling action, the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist unravels, with the protagonist (tragic hero) losing against the antagonist. The falling action presents the recognition or anagnorisis (point C)—the moment of comprehension. This recognition means that the protagonist comes to understand his place in the scheme of things. This leads to a final catastrophe, and may contain a moment of final suspense, during which the final outcome of the conflict is in doubt.

EXAMPLE FROM THE PLAY:

5. Denouement
The tragedy ends with a catastrophe in which the protagonist is worse off than he or she was at the beginning of the narrative and is inevitable given the circumstances of the plot. In tragedy, the plot typically ends with the death of the tragic hero(es). The Greeks believed tragedy provided a catharsis (katharsis) or “purgation of emotions” in the denouement, but this is not necessarily true of the tragedies of the Renaissance.

EXAMPLES FROM THE PLAY: