



TRAGIC HERO VS. MAIN CHARACTER

In modern literature, we sometimes call our main character the *protagonist*. Generally, modern readers identify the main character by applying some or all of the following criteria:

- ❖ He/ she is the character whose interests and fate are the central focus of the work.
- ❖ He/ she is the character who is involved in the main conflict of the story.
- ❖ He/ she is the character who learns a lesson or changes as a result of the conflict.
- ❖ He/ she is the character who appears with the most frequency in the work.

IMPORTANT CAVEAT: The protagonist or main character *does not* necessarily have to be good, noble, or heroic. If a work is primarily about the career of a villain or criminal, that criminal can be the protagonist. Sometimes a protagonist who is not heroic or is alienated from society is referred to as an *anti-hero* (e.g. Dexter). Protagonists who are anti-heroes are very common in modern literature.

In the dramas of the ancient Greeks, the protagonist in a tragedy was often called a *tragic hero*. Aristotle identified some of the key qualities of a tragic hero:

- ❖ He/she (usually it was a he) is a person of status (powerful, usually royalty).
- ❖ He/ she is generally a good person, but does possess a character flaw (the *tragic flaw* or *fatal flaw*), such as arrogant pride (called *hubris*) or stubbornness.
- ❖ He/she suffers a great loss because of his/her tragic flaw—usually the loss suffered seems excessive.
- ❖ He/ she often learns a painful lesson and gains in self-knowledge (moment of insight is often called the *epiphany*).

Good Source for additional information:

<http://vccslitonline.cc.va.us/tragedy/aristotle.htm> (for tragic hero)

