

Anagnorisis

In his *Poetics*, as part of his discussion of peripeteia, **Aristotle** defined **anagnorisis** as "a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune" (1452a). It is often discussed along with **Aristotle's** concept of catharsis.

Anagnorisis, Greek meaning "recognition", in a literary work, the startling discovery that produces a change from ignorance to knowledge. It is discussed by [Aristotle](#) in the *Poetics* as an essential part of the [plot](#) of a [tragedy](#), although anagnorisis occurs in comedy, [epic](#), and, at a later date, the [novel](#) as well. Anagnorisis usually involves revelation of the true identity of persons previously unknown, as when a father recognizes a stranger as his son, or vice versa. One of the finest occurs in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* when a messenger reveals to Oedipus his true birth, and Oedipus recognizes his wife Jocasta as his mother, the man he slew at the crossroads as his father, and himself as the unnatural sinner who brought misfortune on Thebes. This recognition is the more artistically satisfying because it is accompanied by a [peripeteia](#) ("reversal"), the shift in fortune from good to bad that moves on to the tragic [catastrophe](#). An anagnorisis is not always accompanied by a peripeteia, as in the *Odyssey*, when Alcinous, ruler of Phaeacia, has his minstrel entertain a shipwrecked stranger with songs of the [Trojan War](#), and the stranger begins to weep and reveals himself as none other than Odysseus. Aristotle discusses several kinds of anagnorisis employed by dramatists. The simplest kind, used, as he says, "from poverty of wit," is recognition by scars, birthmarks, or tokens. More interesting are those that arise naturally from incidents of the plot.

Anagnorisis is a moment in a [plot](#) or story, specifically a [tragedy](#), wherein the main [character](#) either recognizes or identifies his/her true nature, recognizes the other character's true identity, discovers the true nature of his situation, or that of the others – leading to the [resolution](#) of the story.

Aristotle discussed anagnorisis in his *Poetics* in detail. He defines it as "a change [that] occurs from ignorance to knowledge, creating love or hate between the individuals doomed by the poet for bad or good fortune." Simply, it is a startling discovery, which brings a change from ignorance to knowledge.

For instance, in [William Shakespeare's](#) "The Winter's Tale," a recognition scene occurs in the final act, which reveals that Perdita is the daughter of the king, and not a shepherdess – the reason that she is suitable for a royal lover.

Example #1: *Oedipus Rex* (by Sophocles)

In "Oedipus Rex," anagnorisis occurs when a messenger comes and reveals to King Oedipus his true birth. Oedipus then recognizes his queen, Jocasta, as his real mother, and the man whom he has killed at crossroads as his real father, as well as himself as an unnatural sinner, who has caused the disaster in the city of Thebes. Oedipus'

recognition is artistically satisfying, as peripeteia (reversal of fortune) accompanies it. Here peripeteia is a reversal of fortune from good to bad, moving to a tragic [catastrophe](#).

Example #2: *Macbeth* (by William Shakespeare)

One such moment in “Macbeth” occurs in the final scene when Macbeth, on the battlefield, encounters vengeful Macduff, who declares that he is not “of woman born,” but instead “untimely ripped” from the womb of his mother – which is now called a C-Section. This is the moment when Macbeth learns that the prophecy of witches is about to come true, and that Macduff would kill him. Though Macbeth realizes that he is destined, he continues to fight with Macduff, who eventually kills him.

Example #3: *Othello* (by William Shakespeare)

There is another example in another [play](#) “Othello.” Othello believes only what others tell him, especially those who come to see him first. He believes in the story of deceit of Iago, though it is based on words and a handkerchief, yet he does not trust Desdemona, his wife. The moment of recognition occurs when he realizes that he has wrongly killed his beloved wife. Therefore, he kills himself too.

Function of Anagnorisis

The use of this literary device is very common in plays and novels. It is a very important part of the plot in a tragedy, in which the [protagonist](#) recognizes his [tragic flaw](#). This happens at the [climax](#), leading to his eventual downfall. The end of anagnorisis leads to [catharsis](#) in the readers. The ideal moment for this device to happen is the moment of peripeteia, a reversal of fortune, where the protagonist realizes some important insight or fact, human nature, his own situation, or a truth about himself. It, in fact, unravels all the major complexities of the plot.

(NB) Students are asked to write examples of this answer as per their time span. One or two examples are sufficient.