

Shakespeare's Conception of Tragedy

Date _____
Page _____
Shailesh Rajan

The truth is that Shakespeare never bothered himself with any theory of Tragedy, nor did he invent a tragic conception for himself. He got the clue of high tragic conception from eminent classical scholars like Aristotle, to which he added his own grandeur and lustre. He expressed his idea of life in his tragedies, representing its terror and mystery as he observed in actual life. Yet in spite of his universality and variety, he employed much the same effects in different plays to serve the same or similar ends.

• **Melodramatic** :- The first main point common to all Shakespeare's tragedies is that the theme of all his tragedies are essentially stirring and of ten melodramatic. The ghost, the madness or semi-madness of Ophelia, Hamlet and Lear; the graveyard scene in Hamlet; the witches, ghosts, apparitions and numerous murder in Macbeth; the drunken scene and riots in Othello, the blinding of Gloucester - these all are sensational and melodramatic scenes common to all his great tragedies.

• **Conflict** :- Entering in to the inner spirit of the Shakespearean tragedy, we find that they present conflict between good and evil. Shakespeare seems to believe that evil does exist - evil that is in perpetual conflict with good. This conflict between good and evil involves sacrifice of the good and also punishment to the evil. It brings us in to the very root of things

that confront us with the deepest mystery of life. Having enlarded our deepest emotions so far, Shakespearean tragedy offers no final solution and leaves us in a solemn atmosphere of awe, mystery and wonder.

Abstract Theme :- Each play is, then, a symphony on some definite abstract theme. We may call Othello a drama of deception or self deception; Macbeth a drama of ambition, Lear a drama of headstrong passion and false pride; Hamlet a drama of indecision; Coriolanus, a drama of social pride; and Antony and Cleopatra, a drama of unlawful love. This abstract notion of human life is given a tangible and concrete shape in the Shakespearean tragedy. Shakespeare follows the example of the great Greek tragic dramatists in this point.

Tragic Hero :- Though the Shakespearean tragedy brings before us a considerable number of persons, it is predominantly a story of one person, the hero, or at the most of two - the hero and the heroine. Shakespeare's heroes, one and all, are as a rule, men of high nobility and eminence, ending in destruction caused by a failing, a fatal flaw, in their own characters. Lear is a noble king, Macbeth a great general, Othello an unchallenged warrior and Hamlet a noble prince. The tragic hero,

Date _____
Page _____

says Aristotle, "should be someone of high fame and flourishing prosperity." With the fate of a king or emperor is attached the fate of the millions and therefore his fall implies the fall of a whole nation. This gives a vivid impression of universality of appeal to a Shakespearean tragedy.

Fate: - Shakespeare adds an element of fate and supernatural powers to make the tragedy possible and complete. The tragic trait, though not very great in itself, becomes fatal to the hero in the circumstances in which he is placed. Hamlet in Othello's place and Othello in Hamlet's place would have led to no tragic action. Bradley says - "Shakespeare's conception of tragedy involved over and above character, the suggestion of fatal forces, operating on the actions of mankind, placing these men of power, nobility, strength and courage, in just those situations with which they are incapable of dealing." This element of fate so subtly introduced is intensified by other more supernatural elements. In place of the "character is destiny" theory Shakespeare suggests the doctrine of "character and destiny". The ghosts in Macbeth and Hamlet, the many references to the divine in King Lear, the free use of tragic irony in Othello - all call forth visions of the supernatural agencies operating on the actions of man. Fate appears above the stage like an invisible actor, playing a primal role, cheating, deceiving, betraying and watching with a grim smile the blundering actions

of the miserable hero.

Spiritual Tragedy :- The Shakespearean tragedy is, above all, a drama of conflict. The conflict is both internal and external. The inner conflict exists along side the outer conflict, but rarely coincides with it. The conflict may be between two individuals or two groups or between two principles, passions or ideals animating the two groups. The inner conflict is psychological, moral or spiritual and it takes place in the hero's soul or mind. The mind or the heart of the hero is made an arena of powerful and torturing opposite thoughts and passions. Who cares for the fight between Macbeth and Macduff? That Macbeth will be defeated is a foregone conclusion. But Shakespeare has laid before us his soul torn by inner conflict and we know not whether to hate Macbeth or pity him. Othello is torn between powerful passions of love and suspicion and Lear between Pride and filial ingratitude out of him.

Thus, Shakespearean tragedy ultimately leaves two kinds of feelings in the heart of readers - the feelings of awe and of sympathy. We feel awe at the fall of the great hero while the feeling of sympathy is evolved in the way in which the hero meets his end. When a Shakespearean hero dies "a medley of emotions is left in our heart, pain at his tragedy, admiration for the noble qualities in him and the promise of better things to come."