

# Shakespeare's Conception of Tragedy

classmate

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A Tragedy is essentially a tale of death or suffering. Shakespearean tragedies are also powerful tales of death and suffering. But the Shakespearean tragedy is something more than a mere story of death and suffering. In the words of Dowden, 'Tragedy as conceived by Shakespeare is concerned with the ruin or restoration of the soul and of the life of the man. In other words it is subject to struggle of good and evil in the world.' Shakespeare's play is not a tragedy merely because it brings before us the moving pictures of the hero and the heroine entailed in the coils of death and suffering. Its characteristic motive is the exhibition of the man in unsuccessful conflict with circumstances."

Shakespeare has left behind a number of tragedies such as Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and King Lear. Among the Roman tragedies Coriolanus, Antony and Cleopatra and Timon of Athens are quite remarkable.

Shakespeare's tragedy is concerned with the fate of persons of 'high degree' often with kings or princes, and with leader in the state like Coriolanus, Brutus and Antony. The dramatist does not concentrate on the lives of ordinary persons nor does he recall the sufferings of the layman. In modern drama, tragedy is essentially the story of sufferings borne by the common man. But Shakespeare was medieval in his conception of tragedy. In his tragedies he made conspicuous persons suffer so that the tragedy may have powerful effect on the reader's mind.

Though in Shakespearean tragedy there are a number of persons, yet the tragedy is pre-eminently the story of one person, the hero, or utmost the two the hero and the heroine. The concentration is on the hero and the heroine who generally come to the bitter end at the end of the play. The story leads up to and includes the death of the hero.

The suffering and calamity that fall to the lot of the hero are not of the ordinary type. The hero has to

pass through thorns of excruciating pain and suffering. The suffering is of such a powerful nature that it staggers and shakes the man and the hero writhes in the coils of insufferable agony. Hamlet in the state of his vacillation is literally on the rack. Othello in the disturbed state of mind finds a house divided within himself. King Lear in the afflicted state of his insanity raves and Macbeth feels the pang of murdering the king deep down in his heart till he feels that life is meaningless for him and it is all a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing.

The cause of tragedy in Shakespeare's plays is some fatal fatal flaw in the character of the hero or the heroine. In the medieval conception of the tragedy, fate plays an important part in bringing about the tragedy, but Shakespeare made man responsible for his own action and he believed in the principle, 'character is destiny'. In each of his tragedies the hero is presented in the grip of some fatal flaw in his character, which in spite of external circumstances, leads him to his fatal doom. Hamlet meets his tragedy because of his vacillating nature. Macbeth meets his end due to his overweening ambition. Othello is overcredulous and Lear is too rash. In the character there is a fatal flaw which ultimately brings about the tragedy. Apart from it, there are following additional factors —

(a) Abnormal Conditions of mind :-

Shakespeare represents abnormal conditions of mind such as insanity as in the case of Lear, hallucinations as in the case of Macbeth when he sees the air drawn dagger, somnambulism as the scene of sleep walking in Macbeth. These abnormal states of the hero and the heroine deepen the gloom of the tragedy. They are not expressive of character.

### b) Introduction of the supernatural element -

Shakespeare introduces some form of supernatural agents such as ghosts and witches which are placed in closest relation with the main character. Supernatural agents play their own part in influencing the life of the hero. The supernatural agents give a confirmation and distinct form to inward movements and inner workings of the hero's mind. The witches in Macbeth and the ghost in Hamlet mould the character of the hero to some extent and prepare him for his tragedy.

### (c) Conflict and Struggle :-

In the Shakespearean tragedy there is always a conflict and struggle. The conflict takes two forms. Firstly, there is the hero with the external circumstances; and secondly, the external and the inner conflicts have their significance in bringing about the tragedy. In Romeo and Juliet the conflict is external. It is centred in the hatred of the two houses represented by various other characters. In plays like Othello, Macbeth, Hamlet and Lear conflict is both internal and external. Macbeth is divided in his own soul before he murders King Duncan. Thus, Shakespeare creates the psychological tragedy of the hero by presenting the moral conflict within his soul resulting in his death. The hero is entailed in the great crisis of his life and falls a victim to his own inner conflict of the soul.

A Shakespearean tragedy, in spite of its tragic end never depresses us. Though there may be heart-rending suffering for the hero, yet all through he leaves upon us the impression of greatness. Macbeth in the last Act of the drama of his life redeems his character and makes the readers think highly of him. Thus the spectacle of the Shakespearean tragedy is never depressing. The most confirmed

Cynic ceases to be a cynic while he reads these plays.

The Shakespearean tragedy produces two feelings: the feelings of awe and pity. The manner in which the hero meets his tragic doom produces a feeling of awe in the hearts of the readers, when we find Macbeth meeting his end in an encounter with Macduff, we are all awe-stricken at his fall.

Though there may not be strict poetic justice in the Shakespearean tragedy, yet our moral sense is never given a shock. The villains are generally punished for their evil deeds. Macbeth, who had murdered King Duncan and had been responsible for many other murders, meets his tragic end in the end. Lady Macbeth also suffers because she had crushed her own nature. Thus, villainy is punished in the Shakespearean tragedy. It is very difficult for a villain like Iago and Edmund to escape unpunished.

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