

From 'Imitation' to 'Spectacle': An Overview of the Form of Tragedy from Classical to Contemporary

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Abstract. Tragedy is the least noticed and talked about in contemporary literature. Tragedy was born as a genre when Aristotle constructed the theoretical premises upon which tragedy is based. Perhaps, as argued by some, the rise of novel marked the death of tragedy. However, it is found that tragedy did not die rather was re-born (Steiner, 45; Brockmann, 23) to suit the modern life. This paper traces the growth of the poetics of Tragedy from Plato to the contemporary period, and postulates that from Renaissance to the present day, the literature in English has shifted piecemeal and ultimately revolted against Aristotle's definition of Tragedy.

Keywords : Tragic literature; Aesthetic appeal; human alienation.

All perform their tragic play,
There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
That's Ophelia, that Cordelia;
Yet they, should the last scene be there...
Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.
Though Hamlet rambles and Lear rages,
And all the drop-scenes drop at once
Upon a hundred thousand stages,
It cannot grow by an inch or an ounce.
("Lapis Lazuli"- W.B. Yeats)

The Art of Poetry: Classical Criticism

In Book X of *The Republic* Plato illustrates his ideas on the art of poetry, "As it is imitative in nature", according to Plato, poetry" is twice removed from reality. Poets create a world far from reality and therefore it is detrimental to society because the audience can be easily taken into the grip of such misrepresentation and thus be swayed away from their moral and social behaviour". (Plato, 277) Aristotle, however, differed from Plato in this regard, "that people feel pleasure when reading tragic literature" because of its aesthetic appeal and "not because they want to experience the exact same emotions" (Nightingale, 44). Both Plato and Aristotle take into consideration the impact of poetry on the reader. Plato locates this impact against the socio-political-historical-educational background and Aristotle situates this in the realm of aesthetics and pleasure. Later Philip Sidney in "An Apology for Poetry" strikes a balance between Platonic and Aristotelian point of view by stating "not say that poetry abuseth man's wit, but that man's wit abuseth poetry" (32). So it is not the poetry that is corrupt but the poets. Sidney conforming to Aristotle hails poetry as greater than philosophy and history. The concepts of Philosophy can be understood only by its learner, but

poetry can explain philosophy to any common man, "Philosophy is directly concerned with universal truths whereas Poetry has indirect connection with it" (Heath, xviii). Sidney adds to his definition of Poetry the Horatian idea "to instruct" and "to delight" as expressed in *Ars Poetica*, "Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation ... with this end to teach and delight" (Sidney, 9).

Aristotle's *Poetics*: On Defining Tragedy

Aristotle's definition of tragedy is found in Chapter VI of *Poetics* :

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (Aristotle, 10)

In addition to the definition Aristotle highlights the basic "six elements" of tragedy—namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Song and Spectacle. Out of these Plot and character are of prior importance. Aristotle unfolds that "Plot is the imitation of the action," "the arrangement of the incidents". He says that since tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, therefore character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. He says, that there can be a tragedy "without character" but there cannot be one "without action". Besides, the most important elements of tragedy which are responsible for catharsis—Peripeteia, Recognition and Suffering—are parts of the plot. "The Plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy" (Aristotle, VI). Aristotle believed that character should represent some values. They are agents to which certain qualities are ascribed. In Chapter XV he explains that character should "manifest moral purpose," have propriety, and must be consistent with probable actions. Likewise Aristotle believed that the change of fortune in the plot should be able to produce pity and fear resulting in catharsis. In Chapter XIII he gives his theory of tragic hero. A tragic hero must be "neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly bad but a mixture of both" (Abrams, 322). There should be some "hamartia" / "error of judgment" or, tragic flaw" which should cause the change of fortune and the downfall of the hero.

Types of Tragedies: Classical to Modern

John Orr in his book *Tragic Drama and Modern Society: A Sociology of Dramatic Form from 1880 to the Present* (1989) broadly categorized three modes/phases in the development of tragedy- Classical tragedy in ancient Greece, Renaissance tragedy in England and France, and Modern Tragedy since 1880. He holds that the tragedy conveys "the predicament of human alienation" (Orr, xii). According to Bennet and Royle, "Tragedy is exposure to death" (107) for the characters acting on the stage, as well as, for the audience watching the play. The

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great writers of classical tragedy include: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes. Some of the famous classical tragedies include Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Euripides' *The Trojan Women* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. In the Middle Ages tragedy lost its notion of performance. Medieval tragedy was "simply a story which ended unhappily, offering a warning that, if one were not careful, a final unhappiness would be one's own lot too" (Leech, 15).

The next to gain importance were Renaissance tragedies. According to M. H. Abrams the Renaissance tragedies can be divided into two types, based on the influence and divergence from Senecan model of tragedy. First were Academic Tragedies which were very closely built on the Senecan model followed the rules of the three unities and made use of a chorus. *Gorboduc*, the first English tragedy is a good example of academic tragedy. The second were Revenge Tragedies/ Tragedy of Blood based on generating violence and horror through murder, revenge, bloodshed, mutilation and revolving around gory incidents. Some of its examples are Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1586), Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1592), Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1590) and *Hamlet*, and John Webster's plays of 1612-13, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*.

There can also be added a third category of Shakespearean Tragedies as Shakespeare introduced his own scheme in writing tragedies. He shifted his focus from plot to character. Regarding poetic justice in tragedies of Shakespeare, R. L. White writes:

In Shakespeare's tragedies... [that] the rules of poetic justice[are not only] operating in a superficial manner but also decisively broken. As well as the villains and the flawed tragic heroes, he gives us people who are patiently virtuous and even lovable, killed for no real fault. (4)

Bennett and Royle point out the theme of meaninglessness of human existence evident in them, "Shakespearean tragedy might be said to be modern to the extent that it seems to dramatize the terrible revelation of a secular and arbitrary world, a purposeless universe of suffering death" (109). However, in their article on "Aristotle: Tragedy and Comedy," Wimsatt and Brooks contend, "A shift of interest to character historically as a thing somehow appearing apart or prior to plot is associated with the rise of romantic criticism and the drama of soul analysis through reverie and soliloquy" and which has resulted in overlooking of the "central Aristotelian principle" of plot in the tragedy (37).

Owing to the birth of the novel in the eighteenth century, drama receded into the background and so did tragedy. However, the elements of tragedy were then incorporated into the form of the novel but this also marked a deviation from Aristotelian principle of tragedy in 'language dramatic not narrative.' Consequently,

"since the development of novel by Richardson the themes and structure in a novel could be compared to a tragic drama" (Leech, 30). Novels like Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* (1747–48), Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and *Billy Budd* (1924), Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1875–76), Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900) and *Nostromo* (1904) and Albert Camus *L'Etranger* (1942) and *La Peste* (1947), innately carry on the seeds of tragic plot, tragic-hero, with the trajectory of reversal of fortune. They are not "tragic plays but can appropriately be called as tragic novels (31).

Modern Tragedy marked the shift from the primacy of plot to the complexity of character, and not only that it also revolted against the Aristotelian notion of tragic hero being a noble man. Therefore the modern tragedies are essentially a "proletarian tragedy" and "tragedies of social alienation" (Orr, viii-ix) as they revolve around the lives of common people. This led the modern novel to "introspective method of the interior monologue" which resulted in "Ibsen's use of symbols, Stindberg's dream plays, Chekhov's use of surface dialogue" in the field of drama (Esslin, 530). As Jonathan Dollimore argues in the context of Renaissance tragedies "to what extent, aesthetic discourse has a 'democratic and radical potential'" (xxv), the modern drama addresses the long established Platonic concern of the usefulness of poetry on social, moral, educational, psychological and emotional grounds. There emerged the concept of "meta-theatre" (Fletcher and McFarlane, 505) in which the world not only becomes a stage, it becomes a predicament for the modern man, the suffering does not remain confined to the tragic hero like the Shakespearean tragedy "other people suffer as well" (White, 4), life becomes a tragedy. The modern theatre "showed how tragedy could underlie what proclaimed itself to be comedy" and the dramatists and the novelists brought us face to face "the thing we shall finally know, the last *anagnorisis*, but do it quietly, letting the end come in" (Leech, 80-81).

As Albert Camus writes, "To the actor, as to the absurd man a premature death is irreparable" (61). John Orr says that historical tragedies are still written but they are "superseded by the tragic drama of contemporary life" (xiv). The modern drama indicates this utter disillusionment with the social order. It becomes apparent in modern tragedies that "poetic injustice may be just as instructive in drama as in life" (White, 4). The modern tragedies show how the lives of ordinary people are "bound up, determined and constrained by broader social, economic and political realities" and it is "something humanly engineered and happening in a world in which something could and should be done" (Bennett and Royle, 110). The modernist drama revolted against Aristotle's notion of "language dramatic" which extended to incorporate the "linguistic territory that was previously neglected or even despised" and, thus began a trend of "prose plays about contemporary problems" (Fletcher and McFarlane, 499).

The development of Epic Theatre, Expressionist theatre, and Theatre of Absurd further marked the deviation in terms of structure, plot and characterization in context of Aristotelian notion of tragedy. Epic theatre introduced the concept of non-linear progression whereby the scenes shifted to and fro in past and present. It also blurred the boundary between the audience and the stage by making a character on the stage interact directly with the audience or by bringing some characters from the audience to the stage. Primary focus of epic theatre was to generate social awareness and thus it departed from impacting catharsis in the audience. As a result the characters on the stage remained conscious of the fact that they were real persons and not characters whose parts they are performing. Similarly, audience was kept attentive and conscious as to what was happening on the stage was merely a performance and not reality. Epic theatre tends to become anti-cathartic, as it is primarily the consciousness which is targeted and not the emotion. It shows an inclination towards Plato's stand against tragedy, by breaking the emotional connection among the artists performing on the stage, between the audience and the characters, between the stage and the real world, making them conscious of the current reality rather than indulging their faculties into the aesthetical world of the dramatist.

On the contrary, Expressionist theatre transformed into a monodrama, "a theatre of cries, a theatre of ecstasy, or at least frenzied intensity" (Esslin 535). It projected the frightening aspect of "the disillusionment on contact with reality" and "which turned into violence" leading to tragedy (542). The basic idea in expressionist theatre remains to convey the internal reality, emotions and suffering by shifting the focus to the central character. Other characters are reduced to bare minimum or are just a sort of extension of the central character. It projects the frightening aspect of "the disillusionment on contact with reality" and "which turned into violence" leading to tragedy (542).

"Aesthetics of Silence" became the hallmark of modern stage as it revolted against Aristotle's theory of diction. That there can be a drama without words, goes completely against the conventional notion of stage performances. As Soren Kierkegaard writes in *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, "The tragic hero does not know the terrible responsibility of solitude. In the next place he has the comfort that he can weep and lament with Clytemnestra and Iphigenia—and tears and cries are assuaging, but unutterable sighs are torture" (Kierkegaard 205). Tendency of Beckett's plays "to lapse into wordlessness," the helplessness in Pinter's plays pointing at "impossibility of communication," the hysterical explosion resulting in the "spectacle of language breaking down" in Chekhov's plays and Ionesco's "veiling of erotic tensions under language"—all mark "the inarticulacy" and "non-verbal means" used by the dramatists to convey "the spoken" through "the unspoken" (Fletcher and McFarlane, 507-508).

'The Theatre of the Absurd' intensified the whole idea to look at tragedy in modern times. It made evident that the trap in which modern human being finds itself becomes the most tragic spectacle. Sometimes transforming into the comic through temporary interludes or ridiculous actions, Theatre of the Absurd points at deep philosophical questions lying at the heart of human existence since antiquity. As Brockmann writes, if "Aeschylean tragedy is about murder, modern drama is about suicide" (39). It may present a "physical suicide" and if not a physical suicide then a "philosophical suicide" (Camus, 22). The modern tragedy has shifted from the formal notion of tragedy to the tragic notion of life in general as a result of which, the tragic is shown on stage as something trivial. The horrors which were earlier marked in tragedies alone have crept into the everyday lives of the common people. When the modern social and cultural life shifted from royal courts to four walled houses and flats, drama too shifted its setting to "the drawing room" (Fletcher and McFarlane, 510). Thus, the modern tragedies become the drawing room tragedies.

Conclusion

There are three major shifts in the contemporary drama that go against the Aristotle's theory of tragedy, 1) The Expressionist drama, Theatre of the Absurd and the Epic theatre, all of them made use of episodic plots which were considered untenable by Aristotle. 2) The renunciation of the notion that tragedy/drama operates in its own realm of imagination and that it exists purely for its aesthetic appeal. Thus, apart from existing as literature it should also be able to touch the wider socio-political reality. 3) Modern drama tends to become anti-cathartic or pseudo-cathartic generating emotions but also an awareness about the predicament of contemporary life. 4) Aristotle stated that spectacle is the most alien element in the writing of tragedy because it is outside the control of the writer. He says:

The spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet. (Aristotle, VI)

Wimsatt and Brooks in "Aristotle's Answer: Poetry as Structure," point out, "in the *Poetics* Aristotle alludes to the dramatic element of *opsis* or spectacle in a slighting way, as a matter of machinery and costuming rather than poetry, hardly a matter of criticism" (27). For the modern dramatists 'world is a stage' but to Aristotle the world and stage remained separate entities. On the other hand, by blurring the

boundary between the stage and the world, the post/modern dramatist creates an intermediary space and at the same time adopts the role of the stage manager. He takes both the script and the organisation of spectacle in his hands.

More recently, the use of "spectacle" in the Aristotelian sense has been replaced by the Marxist notion of "Spectacle" as developed by Guy Debord. He uses the idea of the spectacle to analyse the role of commodity in post-industrial economies:

...the alienation of the spectator which reinforces the contemplated objects that result from his own unconscious activity, works like this: The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere. (16)

His idea of the spectacle is broadly an updated version of Marx's concept of alienation with theatrical concerns.

Thus, 'the least artistic' of all parts, had become all the more significant to convey the sense of 'tragic and absurd' through imposed reality, surreality, alternate reality or hyper-reality in contemporary times. A dispensable element in Aristotelian *Poetics*, spectacle found its way into live performances/ cinema/ the visual media; and through cinema into literature. In current times Spectacle has superseded the elements of plot and character. In fact it has become the most gripping element of contemporary art, theory and criticism.

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