

Shakespearean Tragedy

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was an English poet and playwright, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. His surviving works, including some collaboration, consist of about 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, two epitaphs on a man named John Combe, one epitaph on Elias James, and several other poems. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

Shakespeare is perhaps most famous for his tragedies. Most of his tragedies were written in a seven-year period between 1601 and 1608. These include his four major tragedies Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth, along with Antony & Cleopatra, Coriolanus, Cymbeline, Julius Caesar, all of which are immediately recognizable, regularly studied and frequently performed.

Following are the salient features of his tragedies.

1. Tragedy is concerned primarily with one person – The tragic hero.
2. The story is essentially one of exceptional suffering and calamity leading to the death of the hero. The suffering and calamity are, as a rule, unexpected and contrasted with previous happiness and glory.
3. The tragedy involves a person of high estate. Therefore, his or her fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire.
4. The hero undergoes a sudden reversal of fortune.
5. This reversal excites and arouses the emotions of pity and fear within the audience. The reversal may frighten and awe, making viewers or readers of the play feel that man is blind and helpless.
6. The tragic fate of the hero is often triggered by a tragic flaw in the hero's character.
7. Shakespeare often introduces abnormal conditions of the mind (such as insanity, somnambulism, or hallucinations).
8. Supernatural elements are often introduced as well.
9. Much of the plot seems to hinge on "chance" or "accident".
10. Besides the outward conflict between individuals or groups of individuals, there is also an inner conflict and torment within the soul of the tragic hero.

The Hero, A Person Of High And Noble Birth

In Shakespearean tragedy, the hero is always a man of outstanding social status. He may be a king (as in King Lear and Julius Caesar), a prince (as in Hamlet), and a very high official (as in Othello and Macbeth)

etc. In his conception of tragic hero, Shakespeare conforms to the tradition of the ancient Greek tragedies of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides and Roman tragedies of Seneca, and even the tragic conception of the Middle Ages. Bradley says:

‘The advantage of Shakespearean conception of the tragic hero is that his fall is more bewildering and conspicuous as contrasted to his former prosperity. Moreover, his fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire, therefore his tragedy is more enveloping and widespread.

Marlow’s heroes are also extraordinary personalities but they are from humble parentage. Both Marlow and Shakespeare use the name of the hero as the title of the play. Moreover, unlike Shakespeare’s, in Marlow’s tragedies there is an absence of female characters.

Sufferings and Death

These heroes undergo a series of sufferings and hardships and torture. In the early tragedies, the form of this suffering is physical but in the later stages, it is not merely physical torture but mental upheaval which sways and rocks them. The hero, under the stress of these sufferings, appears shaken in spite of his greatness and heroic capacity for suffering. Hamlet by his mental torture is virtually laid on the rock. Othello experiences a tempest in his very soul. Lear turns mad. Macbeth loses all interest in life and is obliged to characterize it as

A tale told by an idiot,

Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Character Is Destiny

In Shakespearean tragedy it is the character of the hero which becomes the important factor to decide his destiny. In fact character is destiny. However, exaggerated this may seem to some critics, it is a fact that it is the character that moulds the action of the play. This fact becomes more important because in the Greek tragedy, it is the plot which becomes most important factor but in Shakespearean tragedy, it is first the character that is significant. After all there is hardly any action in Hamlet yet it is one of the most fascinating tragedies in English literature.

Hamartia/Tragic Flaw

There is a certain tragic flaw in the character of the hero, which Aristotle termed as “Hamartia” and which provides the ground for the calamity which eventually overwhelms him. Bradley observes:

‘Lear’s tragedy is the tragedy of dotage and short-sightedness, Othello’s that of credulity, Hamlet’s that of indecision, Macbeth’s that of ambition, Antony’s that of neglect of duty and so on’.

In Shakespeare, we find a variety of tragic flaws, while in Marlow’s tragedies, the Hamartia is common and that is “Uncontrolled Ambition”.

The Conflict

The conflict is of two kinds, both of which generally go on simultaneously in Shakespearean tragedy. Antony's mind is torn between the opposite pulls of love and duty; Macbeth's between those of ambition and duty. In *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard II*, the conflict is almost entirely external. A lot of bloodshed is generally found in Shakespearean tragedy.

In Marlow's tragedies, the conflict is only internal, within the mind and heart of the hero. Further, he didn't pay much importance to chance happening.

Role of Chance

Chance plays an important role in the tragedy of the hero. In *Romeo and Juliet* it is by chance that the hero does not get the Friar's message about the potion, and the heroine does not awake from her long sleep a little earlier. In *Hamlet* it was a chance that Hamlet's ship was attacked by the pirates and he was back in Denmark to face the tragic end. Some people think that the introducing the element of chance is to manipulate the action of the play to suit one's own purposes. But this is not correct because chance or accident is as much of a real life as any normal happening. But where Shakespeare has proved superior to many other playwrights is that he keeps the role of chance within the probable limits. He does not allow even chance or accident to take more importance than the character of the hero.

Supernatural Elements

Shakespeare's plays give a large place to the supernatural. This is because he wrote for an audience which had a liking for the fabulous and the marvelous.

There are Witches in *Macbeth*, Ghost in *Hamlet*, Hautboy music in *Antony and Cleopatra*. These have a close relation with the abnormal conditions of minds of the protagonists. Hamlet's mobility of mind is connected with the appearance of ghost in the first act and in mother's closet. Macbeth's lust for power is aroused by the witches.

No Poetic Justice

In the region of poetic justice where virtue is rewarded and vice punished, Shakespeare has his own laws which are the laws of the living world and not of a theory. In Shakespeare's tragedies, we find that it is not only the evil that is punished but along with it the good and virtuous has to suffer. Yet it is true to nature that Shakespeare knows once the evil is afoot it will also take in its train goodness too.