

Introduction to Tragedy

Tragic universe allows only limited free will, although more free will in Elizabethan than in Greek drama. Still a pre-ordained pattern - Shakespeare sometimes shows this through supernatural devices to show future events eg *Macbeth*. Tragedy relies on causation ie act - consequence; human will is powerless to change chain of disasters.

2 tragic models: Christian morality plays and Classical tragedy - no tradition of secular tragedies in England.

Morality Plays

Morality tradition implies an ordered universe; it is essentially optimistic. There is a divine order and man can relate to it. Morality plays charted the spiritual progress of a central figure representing mankind such as Everyman, dramatising man's daily moral struggles eg *Macbeth* debates things with himself knowingly. It's a tragedy of choice: if the protagonist chooses evil, he becomes a villain eg *Macbeth*; not a complete tragic mood because evil is defeated.

Comedy and tragedy are closely aligned in this tradition; Elizabethan playwrights often mixed the two eg porter's scene in *Macbeth*. For Elizabethan dramatists the essential difference between tragedy and comedy was the outcome eg tragedy caused by stumbling to sin.

Four Medieval virtues: prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. In Morality tradition the focus is on the psychology of the protagonist eg *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*.

The Vice figure delights in 'skill' in evil games, often engaging in an elaborate pretence to be the victim's friend. Vice figures share the clever and manipulative speech of stage 'Machievels'.

In *The Prince* (1513) Machiavelli discussed appropriate strategies for those in power who wanted to retain authority at all costs. Machiavelli embodied the devil to many Elizabethans. Machiavellian figures eg Iago usually torment and victimise good characters by manipulating those who are essentially good but a bit naive eg Cassio or by using the weak eg Roderigo to do evil deeds.

The early 17thc saw a crisis in values: conflict between the religious traditions of the Middle Ages and the secular bias of the Renaissance, between social order and individualism. A general corruption of social values seemed to have set in, a universal egotism confirming the dark legacy of Machiavelli. Francis Bacon commented in 1605: 'We are much beholden to Machievel and others...that write what men do and not what they ought to do.'

Classical tragedy

Senecan tragedy (classical tragedy highly regarded by Elizabethans)

Senecan tragedies were originally written for recitation (NB Shakespeare and his contemporaries weren't aware of this) so although the stories were very violent, audiences didn't see the violence. Their very violent stories translated well onto the Elizabethan stage, adapting easily to an audience which wanted action and entertainment. Seneca focused on man's social and political relationships rather than his spiritual progress to salvation or damnation as in the Morality plays.

For Seneca, tragedy is precipitated by a well meaning act that goes wrong eg Oedipus marrying his mother, Lear dividing the kingdom or Brutus killing Julius Caesar. It's not a question of sin and judgement as in *Macbeth* but errors with unforeseen (and unforeseeable) consequences eg Cordelia in *King Lear*: 'We are not the first, / Who, with best meaning, have incurr'd the worst' (V, sc.iii). Characters can't make the right decision because they don't know the facts eg Oedipus marrying his mother. Once the error has been made, a kind of tragic logic follows.

Senecan tragedy implies a hostile universe with no benevolent deity to give order and meaning; characters feel the gods are laughing at them eg Edgar in *Lear*: 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, - / They kill us for their sport' (IV, sc. i). The gods may intervene more directly than in Elizabethan tragedy but there's no assurance of justice and their actions can be terrible because they are indifferent to humans.

Aristotle (NB Shakespeare would have known about Aristotle's theories of tragedy even if he hadn't read them).

Aristotle, writing the *Poetics* some 2500 years ago, argued that the hero should be neither wholly good nor wholly bad - the one would make his fate intolerable to us, the other would remove him from our sympathy. He should be rather like us, albeit rather better, and of sufficient status for his downfall to involve others as well as himself. This should arouse pity in the audience because we feel his misfortunes are not entirely deserved but also terror for we can imagine ourselves in his place.

The tragic hero suffers a change in his fortunes from happiness to misery which is caused by a fatal error of judgement (HAMARTIA). The tragic error was generally attributed in Greek tragedy to overweening pride (HUBRIS) which offended divine justice (DIKE). The hubris brought upon itself the judgement of the gods (NEMESIS). The tragic plot moved from a beginning, through complication, to a catastrophe or tragic reversal, both of intention and fortune. This reversal (PERIPETEIA) becomes apparent to the audience before the hero is aware of it and thus produces an element of dramatic irony which is sustained until his tragic recognition (ANAGNORISIS) of the real situation.

Aristotle advanced the theory of catharsis (from KATHARSIS, a medical term) to counter the arguments of Plato, who argued that watching violence and wickedness on stage would encourage the audience to behave likewise. Aristotle argued that witnessing events which in reality would produce horror and pain, in dramatic form give us a release, even pleasure. However, although Aristotle believed that catharsis was a product of tragedy, he did not believe it to be its end; its purpose, he argued, was intelligent pleasure.

Evanthius (writing in late Roman times)

'in comedy the characters are of moderate estate, the passions and dangers are mild, the outcome of the action is happy; but exactly the opposite is true of tragedy: the characters are great, the dangers severe, the conclusion sad. Furthermore, in comedy things are upset at the beginning and peaceful at the close; in tragedy things take place in the reverse order. Tragedies express the view that life should be rejected, comedies that it should be embraced. Finally, the events of comedy are always fictitious, those of tragedy are often true and taken from history.' Cited in *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, ed. Laurence Lerner, Penguin, 1970, p.299.

Chaucer

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie...
Of him that stood in greet prosperite
And is y-fallen out of heigh degree
Into miserie, and endeth wrecchedly.
Prologue to *The Monk's Tale*.

Sir Philip Sidney in *Apology for Poetry* (1585) endorsed the Medieval concept of tragedy as the fall of the mighty, a story of 'prosperity for a time that endeth in wretchedness', reflecting the way in which tragedy had ostensibly become more moral but also more political. Sidney praised plays which 'teacheth the uncertainty of this world.'

George Chapman (1560-1634) argued that the purpose of tragedy was 'material instruction, elegant and sententious excitation to virtue'.

Nietzsche

'There is a rich, an over-rich pleasure in one's own suffering, in making oneself suffer.' Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Tragedy 'has been exempt since its beginning from the embarrassing task of copying actuality'. Yet it expresses 'a reality sanctioned by myth and ritual'. 'Sophoclean heroes ... are the necessary productions of a deep look into the horror of nature.' Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).

Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

'Revenge is a kind of wild justice...a man that studieth revenge, keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal, and do well' (*Of Revenge*).

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