

E-CONTENT

by

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B.A. (Part II)

English Literature

Paper II

(Drama)

Unit I

Tragedy

Drama is a type of composition that is intended to perform in a theatre. This is a form of literature where actors take the role of the characters, perform the specified actions and utter the written dialogue just as we see in the contemporary web series, movies and tele serials.

Like all other literary genres' drama is written in various forms and Tragedy is one of the most popular form of English drama. Tragedy refers to the dramatic representation of serious actions which eventually ends into a disaster for the protagonist or the chief character of the drama.
(misswaferling.weebly.com)

In 4th century B.C. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher gave a detailed and precise description of this form on the basis of his study of the Greek dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. He defined Tragedy as “the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude,

complete in itself “. He stated that the medium must be poetic and presentation must be dramatic not narrative. He concluded that the end of the tragedy must be so crafted that the actions of the drama must arouse “...pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis emotion”. (*Glossary*.p.408)

However, the term Catharsis has been variedly described by various critics and although it may be said that the word implies “purgation” or “purification” yet it remains a matter of great dispute. There are two points that most of the critics seems to agree and they are that Aristotle propagated that the tragic representations of suffering and defeat leave an audience not depressed, but relieved, or even exalted. Secondly Aristotle uses this typical effect on the reader, which he states as “the pleasure of pity and fear”, as the basic way to discriminate the tragic from comic or any other forms of drama. (*Glossary*.p.408-9) Aristotle believes that dramatist’s only motive is to produce this effect in the highest degree because these are the only principle that determines the choice and the morality of the chief character. These also works as the best tools for organizing a tragic plot.

The Greek philosopher specifies certain conditions that helps in creating the above stated emotions and they are as follows:

- i) The tragic hero must not be too good or bad but a mixture of both.
- ii) He must be better than ordinary men by all standards.

When such a man suffers due to *Hamartia* which means “error” “mistake of judgement” the audience is moved to feel pity for the man and fear because they recognize similar possibilities of error in their smaller and imperfect selves.

While discussing the structure and plot construction of a tragedy Aristotle clearly states that successful tragic plots are those in which events develop through complications to a *Catastrophe* or calamity that leads to the misfortune of the chief characteristics. An effective

tragic plot must have *anagnorisis*, that means discovery of the facts and a sudden *peripeteia*, or reversal in hero's fortune from happiness to disaster. (literarycriticismjohn.blogspot.com)

Among the earliest known famous tragedies are the Senecan Tragedy which were however written to be recited rather than acted. The English playwrights were highly influenced by Seneca's style and they wrote the tragedies in his style. They followed his style of writing play in five acts with a complex plot and an elaborately formal style of dialogue. They also copied the use of chorus and usually constructed the plays according to the rules of three unities that is: unity of Action, Place, and Time.

In 16th and 17th centuries the critics of the drama in Italy and France added to Aristotle's Unity of Action two more unities, and constituted the rules of drama as "three Unities", (ird.yahooapis.com) one of the most prominent examples of such drama is *Gorboduc* (1562) written by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton.

To satisfy the appetite of the contemporary audience the dramatist of the Elizabethan age mastered Revenge play or Tragedy of Blood. They incorporated Seneca off stage favourite material of murder, revenge, ghost mutilation and carnage on stage and thus came into existence plays like *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd, (1586) Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew Of Malta* (1592) and Shakespeare's early play *Titus Andronicus* (1590). William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and John Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612-1613) are some of the better and classic versions of such prototype.

Between 1585 and 1625 writers like William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlow, George Chapman, John Webster, Sir Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher and Phillip Massinger wrote tragedies of universal appeal. The distinguishing feature of these tragedies are that these dramatists deviate radically from the Aristotelian models, especially his concept of tragic hero and plot. Plays like *Macbeth* and *Richard III* are best examples of such deviations where we

see that the protagonists are not goodmen, their purpose are also malign, but they arouse admiration because of their courage, self -insight, intelligence and imaginative powers. Elizabethan tragedies especially Shakespearean depart radically from Aristotelian pattern by presenting scenes of Comic Relief. Most of the times these scenes of comic relief enhance the tragic effect of the play and they are so well written that they somehow seem relevant to the tragic plot.

In the 17th century specifically between 1660s and 70s writers wrote Heroic Tragedies. These dramas are a curious mixture of epic and tragedy. John Dryden's *Conquest of Granada*, in two parts serves as an apt example of a heroic tragedy. (*Glossary*.p.409)

18th century witnessed a major change in the field of tragedy. The protagonists of the play now are no more men of high ranks. *Bourgeois* or *Domestic* tragedy became popular, they were written in prose unlike the tragedies of the Elizabethan age and the protagonist of the plays were from the middle or lower social rank. These tragedies unfold a commonplace or domestic disaster as we find in *The London Merchant* (1713) by George Lillo. (*Glossary*.p.410)

This major change in the subject and writing pattern of tragedy continued and in 19th century the Norwegian playwright Henrick Ibsen wrote some of the famous tragedies of English literature in prose many of which concerns themselves with general social and political issues like *A Doll's House*, *Ghost*, *An Enemy of the People*.

Arthur Miller's The Death of a Salesman (1949) is an excellent piece of modern tragedy. In this play the character of Willy Loman, represents ordinary men whose ambitions reflect the fake values of the commercial society and thus the audience is compassionate and feels to witness his tragic fate. Tragedies of the recent times projects no heroism rather they unfold pettiness, ignominy, passivity, clownishness and dishonesty.

World war I introduced innovativeness into the field of tragedy. Experimentation with new versions of ancient tragic forms are projected in plays like *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) by Eugene O'Neill which is an adaptation of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. T.S. Eliot's *The Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) is an apt example of adaptation. It is written in verse form and it has a chorus like Ancient Greek tragedies but it also incorporates medieval *morality* and *miracle plays* and thus becomes a unique piece of art. (*Glossary*.p.411)

Web Links

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